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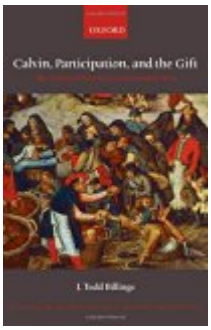

J. Todd Billings. *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. x + 218 pp. $120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-921187-6.

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A number of years ago a colleague and I organized a conference panel in the hopes of finding common ground between historical theologians and historians of the Reformation. While the panel was well attended and the papers were followed by lively and at times impassioned discussion, the overall experience demonstrated to both of us that considerable work remains to be done to bring many historians and historical theologians to a fuller and more productive appreciation of one another's work. J. Todd Billings's *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift* is a substantial contribution to this effort, as well as a demonstration that the frequent lack of communication among different types of religious scholars is further complicated when one recognizes the additional division between historical and contemporary theologians.

In this work, his first book (he has since published a second, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* [2010]), Billings explores the significance of the concepts of "participation" and "gift" in John Calvin's theology. As he explains in the first pages of the book, his intention is to provide a corrective to the current theological discussion centered on the Gift, in which "Calvin's view of God has become pigeon-holed as the textbook example of a 'unilateral gift'--a one-sided gift that evacuates human agency as it claims the receiver" (pp. 1-2). Billings asserts that participants in the Gift discussion rely on the "well-worn" "reading of predestination as the 'central dogma' of Calvin's theology" (p. 2). Billings presents his own critique of both that traditional reading and the related dismissive attitude toward Calvin found among Gift theologians, building a strong and effective argument that an active participation in the life of Christ, not merely the passive reception of God's freely given grace, lies at the heart of Calvin's understanding of what it means to be a faithful Christian. While he states his intention to enter into conversations with "Calvin scholars and sixteenth-century specialists," it is clear that Billings's overriding goal is to challenge Gift theologians' views of Calvin's theology, which he does

explicitly and effectively throughout his book (p. 23). Nevertheless, a great strength of this work is that even scholars unfamiliar with the current theological Gift debate will find Billings's analysis of Calvin's theology useful and pertinent to the study of Christian communities in the early modern world.

Billings divides his book into six chapters. The introductory chapter discusses the ideas of the key contributors to the contemporary Gift discussion, focusing particularly on their views of Calvin. Billings provides a concise and useful overview of the development of the notion of the Gift in twentieth-century anthropological and historical scholarship (especially Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida, and Natalie Zemon Davis) and then explains how, over the last fifteen years, theologians have built on this scholarship and adopted the category of Gift to theological discussions. Considering the works of theologians, including Stephen H. Webb, John Milbank, and a number of other so-called Radical Orthodox theologians (Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, and Simon Oliver), Billings explains their commonly held criticisms that Calvin's theology makes God the only gift giver, disallowing any reciprocity between God and Christian believer; that it reduces the role of the faithful Christians to complete passivity; and that it empties the word "participation" of any significance in terms of the Christian life and the Christian relationship to Christ. "What has been lost in these contemporary discourses," Billings says, "is the distinctive voice of Calvin and Calvin's possible contribution to an ongoing theological discussion. An analysis of Calvin's theology of participation in Christ reveals it as a compelling, yet enigmatic, aspect of his theology" (p. 15). Later, he goes on to state: "In this book, I seek to show not only that Calvin's theology is not subject to the common critiques of the 'unilateral gift,' but also that his nuanced Trinitarian account of God's saving relationship with humanity is much more complex and multivalent than allowed by the categories of 'gift,' 'exchange,' and 'reciprocity.' Thus, the present work can serve as a cautionary tale about the reductive dangers of Gift categories for theological discourse" (p. 17). In his final chapter, Billings presents a brief conclusion in which he reiterates his key points, summarizing clearly and concisely how he has dismantled the problematic view of Calvin held by Gift theologians and has replaced it with a more positive and more productive interpretation of Calvin's understanding of the active Christian life.

In the four intervening chapters, Billings lays out his arguments carefully and convincingly. In the second chapter, Billings reconstructs Calvin's intellectual context, highlighting some of the scholarly disagreements raised by the lack of information about Calvin's educational background, but at the same time asserting clearly that Calvin cannot be identified as the disciple of any single medieval philosophical tradition (i.e., Calvin was not strictly a Scotist, Thomist, or Palamite). For Billings, Calvin's eclectic use of theological ideas and earlier sources is critical to the development of his notions of "deification" and "participation." Billings argues that Gift theologians misinterpret Calvin partly because they want to attach him to a particular medieval school of thought, when in fact Calvin read widely and incorporated many different ideas as they appeared applicable to him. Furthermore, as Billings explains, a common critique of Calvin among Gift theologians is the accusation that Calvin's theology keeps Christians separated from God (and Christ), precluding any type of union with the divine or any "deification" of human beings. According to such Gift interpretations, the emphasis Calvin placed on God's judgment and free granting of salvation leaves no room for Christians to participate in Christ or God. In contrast, Billings argues compellingly that Calvin built on a variety of theological approaches in developing his arguments that God's judgment and freely given grace are the prerequisite for a Christian life in union with Christ, a primary purpose of which is ***participation***--in Christ and in the earthly Christian community. Billings emphasizes

the notion of a "differentiated unity," an important distinction which allows him to demonstrate that for Calvin the eternal inequality of human beings and God does not mean that human beings are eternally separated from God (p. 26).

Having laid out Calvin's ideas regarding union with Christ and the importance of participation in the Christian life--both in opposition to the views of Gift theologians--Billings uses the next three chapters to develop and defend his interpretation of Calvin along three trajectories: the development of Calvin's theology of participation over the course of his lifetime; the role of prayers and sacraments in Calvin's vision for the active Christian life; and the roles of the law in Calvin's concept of the active Christian life. In chapter 3, Billings asserts that a key weakness of Gift theology is its tendency to look at Calvin's theology as a single, immutable body of work, represented by the *Institutes* of 1559. To counter this problem, Billings devotes this chapter to a comparison of the 1536, 1539, 1543, 1545, and 1559 editions of the *Institutes*, focusing on the theme of participation in Christ. In addition, Billings examines Calvin's commentaries as well as the treatises he produced in the 1550s during his dispute with Joachim Westphal over the Lord's Supper and the unity of the Swiss Reformed churches. Billings argues that Calvin's thinking regarding "participation" developed between the 1530s and his death in 1564, and particularly during his debates regarding the interpretation of the Lord's Supper. While Calvin backed away from emphasizing Christians' participation in Christ as part of his negotiations with Zurich's Heinrich Bullinger, ultimately, Billings asserts, Calvin returned to his insistence that the Supper was a ritual of participation that "involves a communion of mutual interpenetration and indwelling" between believers and Christ (p. 103).

Having explored the various iterations of Calvin's language of participation and the chronological development of this theme in his thought, Billings moves on in chapter 4 to examine the importance that Calvin placed on the active role of Christian believers, specifically in terms of prayer and the Lord's Supper. In this chapter, Billings focuses primarily on the *Institutes*, with some discussion of commentaries, as well. He highlights Calvin's insistence that while "right prayer" is a gift of the Holy Spirit, believers must put forth the effort to "seek such aid of the Spirit" (p. 115). The majority of the chapter focuses on the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Here Billings ties Calvin's notion of piety to the conviction that the sacraments are "about receiving in such a way that believers can render a voluntary response of gratitude in 'willing service'" (p. 118). Given the fallen state of humankind, such a voluntary response is enabled only by the preceding gift of God's grace. Billings goes on to grapple with the tension between Calvin's theology of participation and the practice of infant baptism--that is, the question of how baptized infants might actively participate in the Christian community. As Billings notes, this issue was fundamental to sixteenth-century debates between Anabaptists and mainstream reformers such as Calvin. Ultimately, as have many scholars before him, Billings merely determines that the tension exists and then turns to the Lord's Supper as the outstanding example of the vital role of participation in Calvin's theology. Here Billings demonstrates especially well how, for Calvin, being united with Christ necessarily entailed actively seeking to care for the surrounding, earthly Christian community.

After considering the key religious rituals in the Reformed church, Billings turns in chapter 5 to the topic of the role of the law in Calvin's theology of participation. Here Billings is taking on arguments that Calvin's "theology of love," if it exists, is too legalistic, and that Calvin leaves no room for "loving exchange" between God and humanity (p. 144). To challenge these stereotypes of Calvin, Billings "explores the deep and multivalent ways in which the law is connected with human participation in God and the participation of

believers in Christ" (p. 145). In this discussion, Billings distinguishes between the law of the church, which is based on mutual love among Christians and voluntary participation, and the law of the civil government, which has the authority to enforce external obedience by coercion. As Billings explains, the notion that regeneration by the Holy Spirit stirs Christians to acknowledge "the law as guidance for ... living a holy life" is fundamental for Calvin (p. 156). Based on examination of the *Institutes*, Calvin's *Sermon on the Ten Commandments* (1555), and some of his commentaries, Billings argues forcefully that for Calvin, obedience to God's law is in fact "voluntary love of God and neighbor" (p. 185). In other words, Calvin has not left out the gospel of love: he has put it at the center of Christian life.

As a social and cultural historian of the Reformation, one of the things I find most striking about Billings's overall discussion is that his key assertions about Calvin's vision for a Christian society and the importance of an active Christian life seem obvious to me. I say this not to detract in any way from Billings's project, but rather to emphasize the significance of the historical-theological divide as well as to assert the usefulness of Billings's discussion for historians interested in exploring the connections between theology and practice in the creation of Reformation-era churches. A primary goal of Billings's work is to tie Calvin's theological ideas back to their historical context--the context of Calvin's intellectual development, insofar as it can be traced, as well as, to some extent, the context of Reformation Geneva and the creation of a functional church there. Billings's review of the Gift discussion makes it clear that at least some contemporary theologians are working with understandings of Calvin's theology that are strikingly divorced from Calvin's own context or experience of those ideas. This may be partly the result of the many ways that Calvin's thought has become conflated with the variety of theologies and practices now labeled "Calvinist," a topic that was much discussed during the 2009 celebrations of the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth.[1]

In contrast to the theologians addressed by Billings, for early modern historians who study the development and dynamics of Reformed churches in Geneva, France, the Netherlands, and Scotland (among other places), the fundamental notion of acting on one's love for God in order to create a better society (no matter how imperfectly this may have been carried out) is an idea that is not only familiar but also critical to understanding the appeal and influence of Reformed Christianity in its first century or so. Billings's work presents a valuable opportunity to push forward our understanding of this dynamic, providing historians with a new tool to investigate the connections between Calvin's theology and the construction of Reformed communities. While many works on Calvin, such as Randall Zachman's recent *John Calvin as Teacher, Pastor, and Theologian* (2006), make it clear that one of Calvin's main preoccupations was helping the members of the Christian community figure out how to live their daily lives faithfully in Christ, Billings is the first to specifically address the topic of "participation," which required pulling together a topic that is widely diffused throughout Calvin's writings.

For historians, this book is a call to further research; in a focused discussion such as this, an author can only scratch the surface of the implications of his or her own work. For example, as noted above, one of Billings's key strategies in challenging Gift theologians is to examine the development of the *Institutes* and to look at the way Calvin revised and developed various passages relevant to the issue of participation between the first publication of the *Institutes* in 1536 and his final edition of 1559. When he turns to the activities of participation--chapters 4 and 5--Billings understandably sets aside this consideration of the development of ideas through the various editions of the *Institutes*. Such a discussion would have transformed this into a different project alto-

gether; however, it seems to me that it would be a fruitful undertaking for future scholars. On a related note, in chapter 5, Billings expands his source base to sermons, particularly Calvin's ***Sermon on the Ten Commandments***. While he makes excellent use of this sermon, its appearance also underlines the potential enormity of the topic and raises the possibility of further research to flesh out the comparisons among Calvin's ***Institutes***, scriptural commentaries, and delivered sermons in terms of how he presented and emphasized the significance of participation in the Christian life.

Billings's discussions in chapters 4 and 5 bring me back to the issue of history and theology. Billings has made a significant contribution to bridging the gap between these two fields, and as a historian I greatly appreciate his insistence on looking at Calvin's theology in its own context. His discussion of Calvin's vision for the ideal Christian community, founded on voluntary love of God and neighbor, sheds light on the operation of actual sixteenth-century Reformed communities. At the same time, the historical study of such communities, especially Geneva, potentially complicates the clear analysis of Calvin that Billings lays out. Here I am thinking particularly of the strong distinction Billings makes between the church and the civic government in his discussion of Calvin's understanding and uses of the law. As noted, Billings asserts that one of Calvin's fundamental ideas is that participation in the church community is voluntary, and only the civil government has the authority and responsibility to impose order by force. While Billings addresses the rite of the Lord's Supper as one of the key examples of participation in Calvin's understanding of Christianity, he does not deal with two critical--and law-related--components of the Reformed church as it developed in Geneva: excommunication and the consistory (the disciplinary body, sometimes called a "morals court," consisting of lay elders and pastors, headed by one of the four elected leaders of the city government). A defining characteristic of Calvin's first two decades in Geneva (mid-1530s to mid-1550s) was the struggle between the pastors and the city council regarding which body, church or city, had the authority to impose full excommunication. This, I think, problematizes Billings's clear distinction between the church's reliance on voluntary obedience to the law and the civil government's authority to enforce external obedience. And even beyond matters of excommunication, while submission to the authority and discipline of the consistory was key to Calvin's vision of a well-ordered Christian community peopled by faithful but still weak and depraved human beings, study of the consistory records suggests the need for caution in viewing all dealings with the consistory as strictly voluntary (see, for example, Raymond A. Mentzer and Françoise Moreil, eds., ***Dire l'interdit: The Vocabulary of Censure and Exclusion in the Early Modern Reformed Tradition*** [2010]).

All of this, I hope, suggests just how thought provoking and fertile Billings's discussion is. He has presented a well-constructed, persuasive, and interesting argument that makes a much-needed contribution to discussions and debates on Calvin's theology. The audience for this book will be primarily graduate students and scholars, theologians as well as historians. While it is not aimed at undergraduates, I strongly recommend this as useful reading to anyone who will be teaching undergraduates about Calvin's theology and its implications for constructing Christian communities.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Richard Muller, "Was Calvin a Calvinist?" (paper presented at the H. Henry Meeter Center for Calvin Studies, Grand Rapids, Michigan, October 15, 2009), http://www.calvin.edu/meeter/new/publications/lectures/2009_muller_lecture.htm.

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