

One New Book for the Preacher

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CHRIST'S CHURCHES PURELY REFORMED: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF CALVINISM by Philip Benedict (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), xxvi + 670 pp.

Around Pentecost each year preachers are looking for a good “beach read” to take on vacation. For this summer let me recommend the latest legal thrillers by Grisham or Turow, which I have recently read, though not near any beach! But when you get back from vacation and want to read a volume of substance, this present work might just be what you are looking for. An alternate selection for at least one of the major book clubs, this recent work functions as a kind of family album for many of the Protestant denominations whose roots can be traced to these early Reformed groups in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

One of the appealing features of the book is the background of its author, Philip Benedict, who is William and Annie McClelland Smith Professor of History and Religion at Brown University. Benedict makes a point of telling his readers in the introduction that he is a non-practicing, agnostic Jew, which makes his portrayal of this period quite out of the ordinary. Most preachers will have cut their historical teeth on church histories written by committed Protestant historians who more likely than not would have been ordained clergy or at least affiliated with a seminary or divinity school. Because of their backgrounds, those church historians have prejudices that will reflect their own particular places on the theological spectrum. Benedict certainly has his biases, which critical historians of the period will no doubt pick up on immediately, but for the non-specialist, it is interesting to read one's family history from someone who has no readily apparent personal stake in the way a given theological practice or belief played out in the early years of the Reformation.

There are two large questions that have dominated the discussion of this material for several generations regarding the relationship of Calvinism to Western culture, both of which Benedict is wrestling throughout the book. They are by no means the only foci of the book, but no history of the period can ignore them and hence are always to some degree on the periphery of Benedict's investigation. The first question is, what is the relationship between the Reformed tradition and the development of modern democracy? There is a long history of analysis going back to Alexis de Tocqueville that makes such a suggestion but which since at least the 1950's has come under increasing attack. The second question is similar to the first: what is the link between the Reformed tradition and the rise of modern capitalism? The idea that such a link existed was most forcefully argued at the beginning of the last century by the German sociologist Max Weber. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argued that the Calvinistic emphasis on the doctrine of predestination acted as a catalyst to sacralize work as a sign of God's election of the individual to salvation (also known as perseverance of the saints), which in turn led to the development of capitalism in the countries where the Reformed tradition became the most dominant form of religious expression. For the most part, when it has come to analyzing the

development of these two features of modernity, democracy and capitalism, the Reformed tradition has gladly accepted responsibility from historians for the former while declining any suggestion of the latter, lest it be tagged with its abuses. Benedict is prepared to accept both claims, but in the end argues that the evidence cannot sustain either one.

Yet even as he arrives at his conclusion that Calvinism was not the primary cause of these two hallmarks of the contemporary West, he argues against the tendency among historians who have arrived at similar conclusions then to ignore religion as a factor in cultural and historical analysis. It does matter whether one was raised as a Catholic, a Lutheran, or as a Reformed Christian. It does matter how one's faith community understood its responsibilities vis-à-vis the magistrate, either in support or in opposition. Likewise, it does matter how one's faith community practiced particular forms of piety as evidence of holding the "true" faith as well as how one's group of people organized itself with pastors, bishops, consistories, or synods both as a means of discipline and as a means of weaving together the congregation and groups of congregations into a community of faith.

It is in assessing these issues of the variegated practices, beliefs, and organizational structures of the Reformed tradition that the book's subtitle as a "social history" can be seen in sharpest relief. The Reformed tradition during the time period in question, Benedict points out, was an amorphous body of believers that can be defined as easily in negative terms by stating clearly who it was not, than by any other means. The Reformed were not Catholic, for reasons too numerous to name; they were certainly not Lutheran, because they could not agree to the real, rather than spiritual, presence in the Eucharist; nor were they Anabaptists, whose rejection of infant baptism made them repugnant to all those who held dear their experience of that rite. But these characteristics derived *via negativa* are hardly definitive. So the boundaries of who considered themselves Reformed were quite fuzzy and shifted frequently, and hence the way of life and thought that characterized them could vary in great degrees. For example, in the choosing of clergy there was a wide range of practice. In some places, the clergy were elected by the people, basically following a congregational model. In other places, synods of pastors appointed ministers to lead local congregations. In still others, the established bishoprics simply moved from the Catholic to the Reformed fold without ceding any authority and hence continued the longstanding practice of episcopal appointment. And in still other lands, various combinations of these approaches prevailed, even under the political leadership of the same magistrate.

Thus the Reformed tent at this time was very big indeed. But even within this largely construed body of believers Benedict has trained a keen eye on the details of the traditions that constituted it. For contemporary preachers whose experience with the history of this period has been limited to analysis of Calvin or the other "great men" of the Reformation and from mostly in and around Switzerland and England, it will be interesting to read a much thicker description of many of the lesser lights from all of the generations between 1517-1700 and from all of the regions into which the Reformed tradition spread.

Benedict's narrative of the social history of Calvinism moves between great heights of faithfulness and great depths of impiety, showing us both the best and the worst of the family history. On the one hand there are examples of great courage, such as when the Reformed, first in France and then elsewhere, established hundreds of

“churches under the cross,” congregations created in opposition to the will of the local magistrate, usually at the risk of the lives of both organizers and participants. The boldness and speed with which such congregations were created (over 1200 between 1555 and 1570 in France alone) causes those of us in more modern times to blush at our own timidity in church planting. Likewise we can only stand back and admire the creativity and wisdom with which the early Reformed organized themselves as bodies of believers in ways which would curb the clerical abuses that gave rise to the Reformation and which would bind the faithful together in communities committed to the right preaching of the scripture and the proper administration of the sacraments. Yet one also cringes as one reads the tales of extremism and abuse that always accompany such revolutionary movements. Benedict portrays for us the story of the headstrong and rash Zwingli, the first great leader of the Reformed cause who died in a foolish attack against a much larger force of Catholics, an event that nearly decapitated the movement in its infancy. He also shares with us the violence with which the Reformed often suppressed dissent in areas in which it gained control, a characteristic it shared with the other traditions of the day but which the contemporary reader cannot excuse for all its commonness.

Even more bewildering to modern sensibilities is the stubborn, uncooperative attitudes that the Reformed and Lutherans displayed to each other, though combating a common Catholic foe. My favorite example of this phenomenon that Benedict relates is the public debate staged between a Lutheran and a Reformed theologian in which it was stipulated at the outset that the one who lost the dispute over the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist would be put to death. That is certainly one model for dealing with church conflict, but thankfully one that, for lack of a better expression, has died out. Such attitudes are behind us, now more than ever with the ratification of the Formula of Agreement in 2000 between the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. But such an agreement was a long time coming and arrived only after many fits and starts.

It is widely acknowledged that the church is in the midst of a realignment of its values, categories, and priorities. Benedict, the non-practicing, agnostic Jew himself recognizes the value of flipping back through the family album at such times of reassessment in order to find the patterns, trends, and tendencies that characterize our heritage, not as an act of backward-looking nostalgia, but rather as an act of forward-looking creativity to find clues about how the next chapter in the unfolding future of the family album might be laid out. When all of our squabbles and arguments have left us at an impasse with each other over how best we should proceed, perhaps a fresh appraisal of our historical rootage and theological parentage might provide us with an equally fresh perspective.