

The New American Standard Calvin

Bruce C. Wearne¹

Edited by Jan H. Boer

What do North American, and particularly US members of Thinknet, have to say about the significance of the alleged rehabilitation of the reputation of John Calvin...among US evangelicals?

The recent article "John Calvin: Comeback Kid" by Timothy George, senior editor of Christianity Today <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/september/14.27.html> is a good read, but some really important questions of recent "evangelical intellectual history" are left dangling.

I note there is no actual mention of Kuyper, although there might be an oblique reference to the broad streams of "neo-Calvinism", which will be noted by those "in the know", with George's mention of Alvin Plantinga and George Marsden, two prominent American Reformational scholars.

One wonders just how much 20th century American evangelical scholarship under the influence of Max Weber accepted the view that "the neo-Calvinism of Kuyper" was not a genuine successor of Calvin's theology and so, among evangelicals for many decades, Calvin and neo-Calvinism could also be subject to the "in principle neglect" perceptively identified by Marilynne Robinson. But now we are told that American evangelicals are turning to John Calvin as the "wunderkind" of "all spheres of life" among post-Luther reformers. The question I would ask is this: has this "Calvin resurgence" among evangelicals really overcome the previous instinctive evangelical aversion to "Calvin"?

Let me get at this from another angle - in Jim Skillen's 2003 Francis A Schaeffer lectures from Covenant Seminary ("Choosing sides ...") <http://www.resourcesforlifeonline.com/search/?query=Skillen&x=12&y=8>. Here Skillen refers to a meeting he had recently attended, convened by Michael Cromarty, which identified the four major thinkers who had influenced evangelical social thought in the 20th century. They were Carl F H Henry (*The Uneasy Conscience*), John Howard Yoder, Francis Schaeffer and **Abraham Kuyper**. The papers given on that occasion were subsequently brought together in Jay Budziszewski (ed) [Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action](#) (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

¹Bruce C. Wearne is a retired Australian Reformational scholar. He wrote this "off-the-cuff" piece on Sept. 9, 2009, for the benefit of members of Thinknet, an international group of Kuyperian scholars who used this digital forum to challenge each other and to try new theories. Though the contents of this piece mentions Calvin more than Kuyper, it was written more with concern for Kuyper's legacy than with Calvin's. Kuyper can be considered as the "father" of Reformational philosophy that was built on the foundation of John Calvin. He pioneered the new developments that emerged from the neo-Calvinism that has blossomed in the 20th century and continues to spread in the 21st.

So does this renewed interest in John Calvin indicate a greater openness to the Kuyper's notions such as "sphere sovereignty"; Christian democratic political thinking; principled pluralism; the need for distinctively Christian social organisations in welfare, health care, education, political life and industry; and Reformational philosophy? What is this resurgent interest in Calvin on this 500th birthday? Could it simply be another example of what Roger Lundin once dubbed the "evangelical culture lag"? Or is it something else?

And what are the implications, if any, for how this worldview should be promoted in North America?

Bruce Wearne