

Jason Van Vliet, *Children of God: The Imago Dei in John Calvin and His Context*. Reformed Historical Theology, 11 (Goetingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009). Hardcover € 95.00. 285 pp. ISBN 978-3-525-56918-4. Reviewed by Richard J. Oosterhoff, Ph.D. (cand.) in History & Philosophy of Science at the University of Notre Dame.

The thousand-franc note of Switzerland, where the French reformer Jean Calvin spent most of his adult life, bears the bust of the nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt. If Leopold Ranke is the father of modern history as an academic discipline, then Burckhardt — who attended Ranke's lectures in Berlin during the 1840s — is the father of the specialty of Renaissance studies. Though he trained to follow his father as a Calvinist minister, Burckhardt was seduced by Ranke's history and fifteenth-century Italian art, and so left religion to study the culture and sources of this art. In 1860 Burckhardt published *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, which set in place how the Renaissance is taught today, be it in high school classrooms or the *Renaissance Quarterly*. This is significant for how we consider the *imago Dei*, because Burckhardt's book centred on the following idea: the Renaissance turned its back on the Christian Dark Ages, which was all about God, to face a new modernity — sourced in pagan antiquity — which is all about Man.¹ Ever since, the terms “Renaissance and Reformation” have been taught as a pair in which Renaissance is about humanity, and Reformation is about God — and John Calvin comes off as a party-pooper, showing up with a particularly sour view of totally-depraved humanity in hand. Of course, most specialists know better than to follow this picture without qualification, but the broad outline remains irresistible outside of Reformed communities and scholarship. This picture also demands evaluation of its basic elements, a task Dr. Jason Van Vliet takes up in this study of Calvin's doctrine of humanity created in God's image.

Children of God shows how Calvin's doctrine of man appears within the chronological, polemical, and contextual changes in the early French reformer's writings. Van Vliet, who teaches dogmatics at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary in Hamilton, ON, initially wrote this book as a doctoral dissertation for the Theological University of Apeldoorn, in the Netherlands. He is modest about his topic's significance, so it falls to the reviewer to gesticulate a little more wildly. Notions of human nature influence how historians of the Reformation tell their tales. Protestant and Catholic historians have emphasized different parts, for example, of Luther's colourful life. The Protestant Reformation, most Protestant scholars say, is fundamentally about a shift away from a medieval heterodoxy of salvation on man's terms, driven by human works, to an emphasis on Christ's work on the cross.² The key moment is when Luther nailed to a door in Wittenberg some 95 Theses, often imagined as a list attacking medieval ways to heaven by coin, works, or illicit negotiation.³ On this image, the Reformation takes aim at a Pelagian view of

1 It is not coincidental that Burckhardt wrote another book, almost as influential, on *The Age of Constantine the Great* (1853), which argued that Constantine (and Christianity) were the end of all that was good about antiquity, creating the Dark Ages. This thesis was not new. Burckhardt had read the decisively influential Edward Gibbon's *Fall and Decline of the Roman Empire* (1776-1788), and the phrase “Dark Ages” (*saeculum obscurum*) was first applied by the Catholic historian Cesare Baronio in the very early seventeenth century. Still, Burckhardt gave the argument new force.

2 Specialist works, especially since the influential teaching of Heiko A. Oberman, have tried to nuance this image, for example, by observing that sixteenth-century reformatory preachers drew on precedents set by fifteenth-century German town preachers, who in turn drew on the begging orders of friars. See David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings: From Geiler von Kaysersberg to Theodore Beza*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3 See popular-level histories, such as Glenn S. Sunshine, *The Reformation for Armchair Theologians* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). The classic position among nineteenth-century Protestants was delineated with characteristic charm and insight by Lucien Febvre, “The Origins of the French Reformation: a badly-put question?,” in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Lucien Febvre*, ed. Peter Burke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 44-107.

human nature, which includes a hidden perfection that allows people to do meritorious works. Catholic historians answer that the more representative Reformation moment was in 1521, at the Diet of Worms, when Luther is supposed to have said “here I stand; I can do no other.”⁴ There Luther took up the office of conscientious objector, instead of church doctor, by defying the ordained church authorities with his view that the Holy Spirit guided individual men — not curia, councils and conclaves — to divine the Bible’s meaning. Catholics think that here another sort of anthropological problem is to blame, where a single man thinks he can claim for himself the reliability and wisdom of the ordained church. If Protestants have wanted to indict man-centredness in Roman Catholic soteriology, Roman Catholics are quick to point out man-centredness in how Protestants think about authority, whether in reading scripture or nature. These are hardly precise examples, and lifetimes have been spent arguing whether they are valid; but they indicate how deeply theories of human nature shape how we see the world.⁵ Christians affirm the basic truth that humanity is created in the image of God, and Calvin offers a fundamental place to begin understanding that. But what did Calvin actually say about the image of God in humanity?

The Book in Outline

Calvin is “notoriously pessimistic” about human nature, according to much scholarship. In response to this claim, Van Vliet sets out to answer the following questions: is Calvin’s view of humanity consistent, biblical, or fair to both genders; and does it differ from ancient and medieval theology? That is, does Calvin enrich or restrict the theological tradition? To answer these questions, Van Vliet proposes a “contextual approach,” one which looks at the chronological development of Calvin’s writing on the *imago Dei*, and places it alongside historical and contemporary expositions of the same doctrine. To make these comparisons, Van Vliet employs the rubric of creation, fall, and redemption. For example, most early church fathers and medievals held that God created humanity in the divine image within the human soul. That is, people are in God’s image because they were created able to reason and will. At creation, Genesis 1:27 says, God made humanity in his “image and likeness.” Most early and medieval theologians thought that these two qualities were different. For example, Aquinas sees the *imago Dei* in the gifts of cognition (the abilities to perceive, judge, remember, and imagine), while arguing that the *similitudo Dei* is the added gift of original righteousness (39-40). Clearly God had honoured humanity with the divine image in creation. The effects of Adam and Eve’s fall into sin were more difficult to categorize. Most medievals agreed that the image of God was somehow obscured or partially lost by the fall into sin, but Van Vliet is surely right: “It is one thing to say that the image of God was not entirely obliterated and that some vestiges remain. However, it is quite another thing to accurately describe *what* those remnants are and to circumscribe *how much* humans can, or cannot, achieve with them” (54).

All theologians before Calvin, from the Church Fathers to the medievals, agreed that redemption restores the divine image in humanity. But consensus on what restoration means is hard to find. Does Christ draw out and heal these remaining vestiges of God’s image, fixing the damage sin had caused? Or is the entire image of God replaced in Christ — transplanted, that is?

4 See also Kenneth Howell’s characterization of Calvinism as “centrifugal” (that is, divisive) because of its approach to scripture, in *God’s Two Books* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002). Richard Blackwell, in *Galileo, Bellarmine, and the Bible* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), argues that concern about this individualistic view of reading scripture was a major reason why the Vatican condemned Galileo, who offered his own interpretation of the Bible and the earth’s movement in his *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina* (1615).

5 Peter Harrison has written a widely-reviewed book on the topic (which does not make it into Van Vliet’s bibliography): *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Van Vliet observes that some Fathers, mostly in the Greek-speaking world east of the Mediterranean, found “dabbling with deification” attractive (58-60). Deification suggested that redemption eventually means union with God in some sense of participation. Perhaps for the sake of clarity, Van Vliet avoids deep interaction with this tradition, where “language becomes fuzzy; concepts become vague,” even though it would have a deep impact on Calvin’s interlocutors, many of whom were, like Calvin himself, animated by the Western rediscovery of Greek Fathers.

Calvin’s own view of the *imago Dei* is a moving target, Van Vliet makes clear, since it emerged in a variety of genres, polemical contexts, and at different points in his intellectual development, from 1534 when Calvin wrote against French radical anabaptists who thought that the human soul simply died with the body, to Calvin’s deathbed will of 1564.

First, Calvin’s view of the image of God at creation. Unlike medievals, Calvin did not differentiate between the *imago* and *similitudo Dei*. Like medievals, he taught that the *imago Dei* was primarily seated in the human soul, and in its faculties of cognition as well as its attributes (such as justice, wisdom, holiness, goodness, immortality, and so on). But this last similarity changed somewhat over time. The older Calvin got, the more he was open to the idea that some of these attributes of God’s image might also be found in the human body, though he hesitated to specify how. Perhaps surprisingly for Neocalvinists, Van Vliet finds the notion of dominion attached to the *imago Dei* only late and haltingly in Calvin’s life. For Van Vliet, the most important innovation is Calvin’s description of the image in the language of Father and children. Humans — men and women both — are God’s children, already at creation.

At the fall, humans lost that image. There is much to say here, but one of the most interesting discoveries Van Vliet has made is that Calvin modified this language as he addressed pastoral concerns and controversies: “Calvin’s challenge is to stress the devastating effects of the fall, thereby closing the door to synergism, while at the same time acknowledging the lingering remnants, so as to head off the charge of fatalistic determinism” (122). Roman Catholics had identified Calvin with radical Protestants who embraced determinism as a proof that humans had no moral freedom, and thus could be held responsible for nothing. Calvin responded that fallen humans still have “the conscience, the light of nature, the sense of justice, the appreciation of beauty, and the desire for stability” (122). These hint at past, created perfection. Nevertheless — in continuity with the Augustinian tradition of thinking about the *imago Dei* — Calvin repeated that these hints of former perfection are not enough to merit salvation.

For redemption and restoration of the image of God, Calvin turns to Christ, who is “the lively and express image of God” (123). Christ restores both the likeness of God’s attributes in mankind, including renewal of mind, and renews human relationships to God as his children.

Although Van Vliet flags the polemical contexts that stimulated Calvin to write and sometimes change his views, he does not analyze Calvin’s contemporaries until the last three chapters of the book. He selects a generous slate of seven thinkers — not all theologians. The first three represent “Renaissance humanism,” moving back in time to the generation before Calvin. As Van Vliet chooses to use the word, “humanism” does not mean a specific interest in antiquity and the classical liberal arts. In these senses Calvin is undeniably a humanist. Instead “humanism” here means a philosophical sensibility or mood (my word, not Van Vliet’s), which tended to be optimistic about human nature. As the young Italian philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola put it in the 1480s: “Man is a great miracle!” (139).⁶ Van Vliet looks to Pico, then to the Dutch philologist Desiderius Erasmus, and finally to the Picard polymath Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples. Van Vliet judges that these “humanists,” drawn by an affection for Plato and other ancients, saw the

6 Compare Calvin’s *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1974), ii, 167, where he says that man is a “microcosm...because he is above all other creatures a token of God’s glory, replenished with infinite miracles.”

world as a cosmic struggle of the soul. Van Vliet calls this an *ontological* emphasis, in which the soul is torn between desire for the sacred (higher ethical and theological truths of the spirit) and the profane (base lusts of the body). In contrast, Calvin saw the soul as traveler through sacred history, in which the soul, defiled by sin after an original state of perfection, is to be restored in Christ. To put it another way, the humanists desired an ontological same-ness between God and humans (deification), while Calvin avoided that by talking about Father-children relationships.

The last chapters bring the story back to Calvin's own time, focusing on two of Calvin's colleagues and two of his opponents. The colleagues, Heinrich Bullinger and especially Philip Melancthon, had humanist skills and friends, but wanted the same reform of doctrine, liturgy, and piety as Calvin desired. Melancthon and Bullinger held views very close to Calvin's, with a couple of exceptions: Melancthon thought secular dominion was a part of the *imago Dei*, and Bullinger spoke of how the human body hints at the divine image. Bullinger also maintained that the likeness (*similitudo*) of God is higher than the image (*imago*). And neither highlighted the language of God-children relationships like Calvin did (though Melancthon sometimes came close).

Finally, Van Vliet turns to Calvin's opponents: the Lutheran professor at Königsburg, Andreas Osiander, whose rhetorical indiscretions already disgusted Calvin at the Colloquy of Worms in 1541; and Michel Servetus, the inflammatory humanist physician eventually burned for heresy in Geneva in 1553. Both of these tempestuous writers liked visual definitions of the *imago Dei* (the word is "image," after all), so that the human body became for them a key part of the *imago Dei*. Osiander defined image and similitude as mentioned in Genesis 1 differently, such that not only was Christ present on the cross as image, but he appeared throughout the Old Testament as similitude, as the Angel of God. Calvin rejects this notion, because Osiander potentially could make Christ's archetypical presence in sacred history (for example as the Angel of God bearing news to Abraham) more important than Christ on the cross. As for Servetus, Van Vliet describes how he expanded on the old idea of deification, combining it with pantheism and a denial of original sin — as a result, making Christ unnecessary as the unique second person of the Trinity.

The last two chapters add weight to the argument that Calvin was the first to describe the relationship between God and mankind as the relationship between Father and children. At the same time, the chapters offer some motivations for why Calvin developed that language. It allows him to keep his Christocentrism also cross-centred; to affirm the dignity of humanity, without making it divine; to hold a thorough doctrine of original sin, without admitting determinism. The distinctive strength of Van Vliet's method is that it shows how Calvin gained these motivations, and his distinctive language, in pastoral and polemical contexts. I remain puzzled, however, as to what motivated Calvin over time to allow that the human body reflects God's image. Is there a sense in which this reflects sensibilities of the time; were these questions set by sixteenth-century philosophical trends, or did Calvin give greater weight to exegetical reasons?

Above I noted the questions Van Vliet set out for himself to test whether in fact Calvin espoused the gloomy view of humanity his notoriety suggests. To wrap up, Van Vliet offers some answers, which should be restated here in summary:

- Ultimately, the soul is the seat of God's image; though over time Calvin becomes cautiously open to hints of God's image in the human body. Van Vliet thinks these aspects of Calvin's thought are based outside scripture, in tradition and philosophy.
- The *imago Dei* is primarily described, however, as a Father-child relation, established through adoption, in union with the crucified Christ. This is novel, yet pastoral and biblical, language.
- Men and women both possess God's image, in line with scripture and against most of the theological tradition available to Calvin.

- In contrast to contemporaries, Calvin says little about the image of God involving dominion over creation (which may surprise some Neocalvinists).

Calvin's Context: Three Criticisms and a Reflection on Polemics

All authors, including reviewers, face agonizing decisions on what to include and what to chop out. You can't say it all. But does evidence exist that might counter or improve the author's case? To argue for the novelty of Calvin's language about God relating to humanity as a father to children, and to argue — as Van Vliet does — that Calvin's language is more orthodox and insightful than some contemporary options, it is crucial to make just the right comparisons. Melancthon and Bullinger are excellent points of contrast, pinpointing Calvin's viewpoint with respect to the centre of the Lutheran and Reformed wings of the Reformation. But where are contemporary Catholic theologians, such as Cardinal Sadoletto, Johannes Eck, or especially Albertus Pighius, whom Calvin debated on questions of soul and free will? And why not Ficino, the Renaissance humanist philosopher who wrote more — and more influentially — on the soul than all the other people this book describes? As for villains, Andreas Osiander and Michael Servetus were good choices — though it would have been helpful to see earlier in the book how Calvin's polemics with these colourful figures developed.

A second, related criticism concerns this book's structural rhetoric. The fault lies in part with methods in historical theology, which vacillates under the burden of two masters. Should it answer to history first, and so get lost in the details of human and intellectual relationships? Or should a work of historical theology ultimately answer to the systematic theologian, who would tear doctrinal propositions out of time to reorder them into a logical whole? Van Vliet knows the importance of chronological shifts in Calvin's thought, and he has a fine eye for distinguishing the shades of Calvin's tones, as he spoke in sermons, letters, and treatises. But since polemics exerted a major influence on these shifts, it might have been more helpful to explain the polemical opponents at the same time as narrating shifts in Calvin's thought. Van Vliet repeats that Calvin did not flesh out a systematic view of this topic, which helps explain why not all questions get neat and simple answers (for example, why Calvin eventually conceded that the body might also be in God's image). But Van Vliet uses a systematic metaphor to narrate how Calvin developed his thought: Calvin first "lays the foundations," and "builds, expands, improves" the structure, before the "finishing touches." The metaphor of building suggests a much more systematic approach than the sources indicate. Although the evidence shows beautifully that Calvin evolved and refined his thinking in the fire of controversy, the way this book presents that evidence — polemic at the end — minimizes the narrational development of Calvin's thought. Considering this criticism constructively, one might note that this book might be an excellent basis on which to build a future exploration of the *imago Dei* in a systematic, Calvinist mode.

My third criticism is to alert the reader to what seems to me the shakiest part of the book, namely its consideration of philosophical context. The question of Calvin's relationship to Renaissance humanism is a good one, and Van Vliet capably outlines the basic shape of an old issue in Calvin scholarship: how much was the Genevan Reformer influenced by philosophy, ancient and contemporary? (See 24-27, *inter alia*.) Since Calvin and his contemporaries primarily located the image of God in the soul, the issue is important. Calvin may have written his first reflections on the *imago Dei* in 1534 as a response to learned materialist ideas of the soul then in vogue at Paris — and not only as a polemic against anabaptists, as Van Vliet assumes.⁷ Basic

⁷ On this possibility, see Bernard Roussel, "François Lambert, Pierre Caroli, Guillaume Farel, et Jean Calvin (1530-1536)," in *Calvinus servus Christi: Die Referate des Congrès International des Recherches Calviniennes, vom 25. bis 28. August 1986 in Debrecen*, ed. Wilhelm H. Neuser (Budapest: Presseabteilung des Ráday-Kollegiums, 1988), 42-43.

features of Renaissance philosophy needed to adjudicate Calvin's connection to philosophy are missing, such as the debate on the immortality of the soul, and Aristotle's place in that debate. Since the first centuries of the Christian era, theologians have drawn on Greek philosophical language to describe the soul. Because Plato viewed the soul as immortal, Augustine, Aquinas, Pico, Erasmus, Calvin, and a great many other Christian thinkers preferred him on matters of the soul.⁸ Nevertheless, Aristotle was important because Scriptures say very little about what the soul exactly is and how it relates to the body. Aristotle gave the clearest terminology with which to speak about the soul. Therefore, in natural philosophy — specifically, psychology — Renaissance writers thought that Aristotle's view of the soul was useful, although he held the soul to be mortal. And even though this discussion had many implications for theology, it was primarily an issue of natural philosophy. Therefore, it is not at all clear how to understand the comparison Van Vliet makes between Calvin and the philosophical humanists. They were not always involved in the same intellectual project, so why should they be held to the same standard? For an example of how this creates problems, we may observe with Van Vliet that Lefèvre cited four levels of the soul, a vision of the soul which looks much like the "ontological" understanding of the *imago Dei* found in other philosophical humanists (157-158). Lefèvre wrote this in a popular introduction to Aristotle's natural philosophy. That is, he was writing a science textbook on psychology, not a dogmatic treatise on theological anthropology. Van Vliet uses this example as part of his cumulative contrast between the philosophers, who "encourage their readers to ascend the ladder of *dignitas et humanitas* by intellectual and moral exertion," and Calvin, who gave an anthropology based on the redemptive history of creation, fall, and restoration (165). As I've mentioned above, Van Vliet simply uses without argument the lens of creation, fall, and redemption to understand his subjects. But here is a case where that lens might distort. After all, these philosophers weren't doing theology, never mind Calvinist theology. So is it valid to use a theological lens to understand their project? By analogy, I suppose that it would be unfair to fault this book, which makes a substantial contribution to the discipline of historical theology, for not offering very insightful cognitive psychology. This does not mean that Calvin cannot be compared to philosophers of his time; much more work must be done, however, to know what the comparison tells us — or if Calvin even disagreed with these philosophers, insofar as natural philosophy was concerned.

On reflection, perhaps some of the contrasts between Calvin and his contemporaries may arise from being read differently. While Van Vliet often lets Calvin's meaning float to the surface without the benefit of a thesis to drive the reading, Calvin's contemporaries tend to be understood through a more selective lens. In part this is because Calvin holds centre stage. But since he is on the faculty of a conservative Calvinist institution, Van Vliet's example also raises an interesting and important point for reflection among Christian academics: is it ever appropriate to indulge in hagiography? This book does not idealize or flatter Calvin, but in nearly every case where other historians have shown Calvin in a slightly darker light, Dr. Van Vliet adds a sentence or two of defence. After an observation that Calvin's workload and frequent ailments led to some inconsistencies in doctrine, he demurs: "Neither should anyone expect such infallibility from a mere mortal" (119, cf. 126). Or when Calvin's polemical furor led to rash statements of dogma, the blow is softened with "Yet this is also part of the normal process of maturation through which all people, including theologians, go" (128). All this is true. But why is it necessary? One very good reason in favour of Van Vliet's approach is that Calvin scholarship of the last half century has been preoccupied with de-hagiographizing Calvin. We can sympathize with the reaction to some

8 Calvin noted at *Institutes*, I.15.6, that Plato, beyond other Socratic philosophers, "advanced still further, and regarded the soul as an image of God." This might mean that at III.25.3, the "many philosophers" in favour of the soul's immortality were from the school of Socrates, as Calvin viewed the history of philosophy.

degree: since the days of Eusebius, church history has been as much an instrument of polemic as a truth-telling narrative. When a new breed of church historians — no longer churchmen — flooded the discipline in the twentieth century, nothing seemed more necessary than to demythologize Calvin. As a powerful, passionate, and politically astute player in Geneva's backrooms, Calvin was a tempting giant to cut down to size.⁹ That attitude, veering to sneering, has become *de rigueur* in Calvin studies. But how should those who find theological nourishment from Calvin's ideas deal with this?¹⁰ I wonder if defensiveness, or "yes-buttery" will gain a sudden realization that Calvin really was a theological wonder — or instead will it just provoke reaction? Calvin himself presumably has Christ as his defender, in another court. Does the modern Calvinist gain anything from trying to defend his mistakes, as humanly understandable to a "man of his time" as they might be? I'd like to think that Calvin would desire a follower to be the hardest on his mistakes. And simply dwelling on what is worthwhile in Calvin, while observing unflinchingly when he was wrong, will probably earn more respect from his modern detractors. As it is, those detractors justify ignoring orthodox churchmen at the slightest whiff of hagiography. Historians can't change other historians' hearts (as it happens, neither can theologians).

Thinking about polemics matters, and but for the occasional bit of defensiveness, Van Vliet seems to agree. Throughout the book he keeps a close eye on how Calvin — like all sixteenth-century humanists — wrote out of an embattled existence of endless controversy. Anecdotally, one hears of historians who moved away from sixteenth-century studies because the perpetual angry rhetoric and pamphleteering depressed them. That only escalated towards the 1560s, when the French Wars of Religion made religious strife daily life.¹¹

Evaluation and Invitation

Van Vliet ends on a pastoral note: "[a]ccording to Calvin, the preacher of St. Pierre's church, the image of God conveys that we were created to be children of God. From that vantage point every pilgrim can survey a theological vista that is not only unforgettable but also uplifting" (269). These closing words draw attention to a side of Calvin that is often forgotten: Calvin as theologian is impossible to separate from Calvin as preacher.¹² Time and again Van Vliet shows that Calvin's novel extension of the relational attributes of God to the *imago Dei* in the language of Father-children is stimulated by pastoral concerns, in sermons, letters, and ecclesiastical advice. This side of Calvin is sometimes missed in some biographies of Calvin, which try to humanize the extremely busy preacher, editor, exegete, controversialist, pastor, and international humanist, by focusing on his anxious nature, his manipulation of colleagues, and his supreme confidence in his own intellect and correct judgment. Moreover, this study will make it hard to make unqualified statements about Calvin's pessimistic view of human nature.

9 For an influential biography with this sort of emphasis, see William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). A much more balanced portrait has been established by F. Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

10 Cf. the outstanding example of Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

11 For a window into a burgeoning literature on this topic, see Luc Racaut, *Hatred In Print: Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity During the French Wars of Religion*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). The statement that "this is also part of the normal process of maturation through which all people, including theologians, go" does get at a truth about human life. It trivializes, however, the exceptional, unusual violence of intellectual and social life in the second half of the sixteenth century — a violence which in 1618 exploded into the Thirty Years' War. See Mack Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and see the forthcoming book by Brad S. Gregory from Harvard University Press.

12 There has certainly been more attention to this side of Calvin in recent decades. For a hint at this, see Van Vliet's dissertation supervisor's popular biography: Herman J. Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, trans. Albert Gootjes (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

Yet some people will find reasons to avoid this book. In the manner of many European dissertations, it went swiftly from dissertation to book. It is expensive. It deserved a more attentive copy-editor, to weed out some of the more repetitive prose, slightly purple alliterations, and typographical errors in the footnotes. A highly involved organization, in which numbered sections and subsections are recapitulated in numbered conclusions, means that individual sections are quite clear, but the literary whole is choppy and repetitive. Hopefully these superficial handicaps — in part a difference between European and North American academic culture — do not discourage readers, because the book has much to offer. First, it is valuable because of what it says. Van Vliet shows a perceptive familiarity with Calvin's own writings, and has demonstrated the unique contribution Calvin made to a question central to all thought. In attending to Calvin's contemporaries and the sermons, tracts, letters, and commentaries Calvin wrote besides the *Institutes*, Van Vliet easily outpaces earlier studies on the *imago Dei*, setting a new standard for comprehensiveness.

This book is also valuable because it invites and permits further study. The first challenge will be to connect Calvin's teaching on the image of God with other aspects of his theology, for example Calvin's view of the *sensus divinitatis*, a certain innate sense of God's existence deep in human nature which is much discussed among adherents of "reformed epistemology." Current debates over atonement might welcome a consideration of Calvin's Father-children language as the basis for adoption. Recent debates about Neocalvinism might also benefit. What did Klaas Schilder have to say about Karl Barth, who thought (along with most contemporaries) that Calvin's designation of the soul as the seat of the *imago Dei* was far too narrow? Theologians such as David Van Drunen (Westminster Theological Seminary California) have raised the question of natural law and two-kingdom language in Calvin, ultimately arguing that the Neocalvinist mantra (all things equally under Christ's dominion) wrongly implies that there are no differences between sacred and secular.¹³ The implications of Calvin's view of the cognitive and moral glimmers of created perfection are crucially related to these questions! So too is Calvin's lack of "dominion" language. Van Vliet shows how, in Calvin's sermons on Corinthians, the reformer distinguished between doctrine and order. He told the Genevan citizens that women's headdresses in church, as well as Paul's statement that man "is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man," are culturally relative, belonging to the general principle of order, such as deciding a good hour for the worship service (101-103). But can the unregenerate know this, and does it map on to two-realms language (cf. 72-3, 79, 83, 88)? I suspect the truth is stranger and more complicated (more than Van Drunen recognizes too), and Van Vliet provides a foundation for new answers to this current topic in Reformed circles.

In sum, this is a learned, demanding book, which uncovers new aspects of Calvin's thought. Most importantly, these findings include Calvin's use of the language of Father and children to describe how humanity is created in God's image. No less significantly, Calvin depended on a traditional understanding of the *imago Dei* being seated in the human soul — that is, human thought and will — but occasionally he vaguely hinted at the importance of the human body.¹⁴ Finally, this book makes clear that to understand Calvin we must read the pastoral and polemical works, as well as the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. These neglected works witness to the pastoral and polemical contexts which made Calvin reconsider and refine his teaching. Van Vliet's book merits both constructive and critical attention.

¹³ David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

¹⁴ This topic has immense current relevance in Christian ethics, e.g. Joel Shuman and Brian Volck, *Reclaiming the Body: Christians and the Faithful Use of Modern Medicine*, 1st ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006).