

While this biography is a wonderful contribution to Reformation Studies in general, as well as being a plain ‘good read’ for anyone interested in Calvin, there are nevertheless a few points of contention. As the work’s strength is its comprehensiveness, so its weakness, if we have to find one, is its broad scope. Some discussions require longer treatment in order to be fair to the issues in question. For example, Gordon argues that Calvin showed ‘signs of modifying his position’ on resistance against rulers who persecute. (323 f.) Gordon uses the 1559 *Institutes* as his evidence, which ‘indicates that Calvin was prepared to consider resistance against a tyrant’. (324) However, when it comes to details, Gordon refers only to a single forthcoming article. While Calvin does mention the possibility of resisting a tyrant in the 1559 *Institutes*, the same passage is already present in the 1536 *Institutes*, and moreover, what Calvin encourages is a resistance by a legitimate lower magistrate, and not by individuals. Whether Calvin allows for individual resistance is a question whose answer must be sought in his later writings, and not in the 1559 *Institutes*.

Nevertheless, we do know that one should not seek everything in a book. Gordon’s work is a truly excellent, comprehensive, and at the same time, accessible biography of John Calvin. This work will certainly become one of the definitive Calvin biographies.

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*Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, J. Todd Billings, Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. x, 218, ISBN 978-0199211876. £56.00

Calvin is not very fashionable these days. Scottish poet Edwin Muir (1887–1959) well captures the national antipathy to:

[...] King Calvin with his iron pen,  
And God three angry letters in a book,  
And there the logical hook

On which the Mystery is impaled and bent  
 Into an ideological argument.

(“The Incarnate One” from *One Foot in Eden*;  
 London: Faber & Faber, 1956, p. 47)

In its attempt to do Calvin justice, Calvin scholarship often perpetuates this very caricature. Battle lines are drawn. Defences are fortified. Books and articles are produced at a furious rate on all sides of the debate. And Calvin himself is impaled and bent into an ideological argument.

Todd Billings has entered the scene with his first book, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift* in an attempt to remove one ‘logical hook’ that has impaled Calvinism for too long. He has come to challenge the stereotype that Calvin’s God is systematically opposed to humanity: a tyrant whose power excludes all human initiative and whose ‘grace’ is irresistible to passive sinners. The key word that Billings uses to challenge this passivity is ‘participation’ – a philosophical term with a long history and, perhaps surprisingly, plenty of scope and place in Calvin.

Perhaps this book never would have been written had it not been for the claims of various ‘Gift’ theologians that Calvin and participation are irreconcilable opposites. This piqued the curiosity of Todd Billings, who hitherto had had little interest in Calvin. Gift theologians are concerned with an understanding of salvation as *gift*, and contend that unilateral gifts are essentially destructive in nature. As the Trinitarian model for love is reciprocal and self-offering, so the ‘gift’ of salvation cannot be unilaterally given to the sinful recipient, but *must* involve the dignity of response in some way. Humans, even if we cannot ‘reciprocate’ on the level of divine gifts, are called to reciprocate in the gift of our whole selves. Even the ‘gift’ of the Son of God was ‘actively received’ through Mary’s own response of obedience and self-offering love.

The rather sweeping rejection of Calvin by Gift theologians hinges on a perception of Calvin’s doctrine of imputation in which salvation is a ‘gift’ in the worst possible sense: sinners passively receive a changed status in the divine ledger books, which is carried out on

their behalf. This gift occurs ‘over their head’ with no possibility of their involvement, accomplished as it was through election before the beginning of time. Those familiar with Puritan theologian William Perkins’ ‘Golden Chain’ may remember an elaborate diagram explaining election, in which certain Christians are damned (despite their baptism and participation in Christian fellowship and sacraments) while other hedonists are saved, due to the ‘mysterious working’ of election. A unilateral gift? Indeed – and sometimes forced upon (possibly unwilling) children. However, Billings challenges this view of Calvin’s interpretation of salvation by focusing on Calvin’s thought regarding the activity of believers in receiving salvation and living in Christ.

Many critiques of Calvin begin, Billings notes, with an exaggerated understanding of the influence of nominalism on his early education – particularly that gained in his formative years at the Collège de Montaigu. Such a misunderstanding has led to assumptions about the dialectical nature of Calvin’s thought, ultimately ‘explaining’ Calvin’s inability to hold together divine/human in the incarnation and sign/signified in the Eucharist. In Chapter Two, Billings sets this portrait of Calvin aside, as well as the two-dimensional account of nominalism used to provide the palette. He turns instead to Calvin’s consistent use of the Johannine language of indwelling (most particularly in *Bondage and Liberation of the Will*) and the Pauline language of participation (in *Commentary on Romans*). From these oft-overlooked works, the themes that consistently emerge are those of union, participation, adoption, engrafting, and interpenetration. As a result, Billings endorses a clear pattern of deification in Calvin – Osiander notwithstanding – that is not an imitation or ‘following Christ at a distance’ but a true ontological, objective participation ‘by partaking of Christ, along the Christian path of death, resurrection, and ascension – living lives *en Christo*’. (65)

But how does this square with forensic imputation? Billings turns to the *duplex gratia* to remind us that even as Calvin separates imputation and regeneration, he always binds them tightly together: in fact they are one in the person of Christ. While imputation is ‘logically’ prior to union with Christ, the moment of reception and

the moment of empowerment are one: ‘The wondrous exchange in imputation draws believers into a transforming union with Christ, even as the transformation of believers does not provide the *ground* for this union’. (71) Calvin’s theology of participation is not a contradiction of his ‘nominalist’ formation, but is a true synthesis, drawing from his *ad hoc* patristic readings and his role as Scriptural exegete. While Calvin has been all too often ‘impaled and bent’ just at this point, Billings gives us a treatment of participation that is as deep as it is wide, inseparable from imputation but not impaled by it.

Is this too good to be true? Or is this an hagiographic reconstruction of Calvin? Though motivated by obvious ecumenical intent, Billings’ work on Calvin is, quite simply, outstanding. Chapter Three provides a rich consideration of Calvin’s use of the word ‘participation’, refining and deepening its meaning with attention to subsequent editions of the *Institutes* (always in dialogue, of course, with the *Commentaries* and controversies). I have long been struck by Ford Lewis Battles’ seeming inability to cope with these nuances in his translation of the *Institutes*, such as his rendering of *koinonia* as ‘fellowship’ in even the most explicit of texts. Billings’ work should begin to restore to fullness the flat renderings of these passages, all of which point to a mature doctrine of participation that grew and strengthened over the course of Calvin’s life.

In Chapter Four, Billings is seen at his best, synthesizing all the careful research thus far around the theological *loci* of the believer’s adoption and the sacraments. Prayer – receiving short shrift in many tomes on Calvin – is given its proper place as the activity through which believers both receive their identity and are energized toward moral response. In prayer, both communal and private, believers participate in their adoption, becoming children of the Father by the Spirit, with Christ as their brother, within the larger church family. Here the *duplex gratia* is strikingly apparent, as it also is in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Billings argues strongly that neither in prayer nor in the sacraments are believers ever passive recipients, but rather, that they are called to response through gratitude and piety. Whether or not these ‘actions’ go far enough to satisfy Gift theologians, the divine gift can hardly be called ‘unilateral’ here.

Billings concludes his study with a closer look at Calvin's understanding of the Law as the locus for participation. What is the Christian's relation to the Law, given that they are now forgiven and living under grace? Does the Law serve only to point out moral failure before God? Billings shows that the Law is God's gracious invitation for the believer voluntarily to love God and neighbour, thus 'uniting' humanity to God. Calvin's theology of law displays the 'active, communal, participatory place' (145) of the human being in creation. It is as believers participate in Christ – the Law's fulfilment – that they can once again experience the delight intended for them in creation.

The bottom line is that this book *matters*. Whether or not readers are familiar with the Gift theologians and their critique of Calvin, many Christians stand in an uncertain relationship to their ability to *act*. Some Protestant churches, encamped around Calvin's theology of grace, are uncertain how also to respond to God's gift in Jesus Christ beyond salvation. Billings has broadened our understanding of Calvin as one for whom God's grace and our faithful response form two parts of a whole. Participation is precisely this dynamic reality, whereby one is not following an external standard, but is energized to respond *to* Christ, *in* Christ. It is the 'how' question that naturally follows Bonhoeffer's '*Who*'?

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In the preface to this collection of essays Donald McKim speaks of providing 'a study of Calvin as a biblical interpreter and commentator on Scripture' and comments that, 'while it is now axiomatic in Calvin studies to recognize the importance of his exegesis, we did not have a scholarly resource where we could turn to understand the ways he functioned as a biblical interpreter on major segments of the Bible'.