

CALVINISM: A HISTORY by D.G. Hart, Yale University Press, 2013, 339 pages

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Reformed Christianity began in Zurich in 1522, when a priest named Ulrich Zwingli insisted, contrary to church teaching, that Christians could freely eat meat in Lent. D.G. Hart, a professor of history at Hillsdale College, tells the story of Reformed faith through five centuries, beginning with Zwingli and ending with the Confession of 1967.

Of course Calvin appears in these pages. What we know as Calvinism includes the Reformed faith that began before Calvin with Zwingli. Hart uses the terms “Calvinism” and “Reformed theology” interchangeably throughout the book.

Calvinism: A History discusses seemingly every important aspect of Reformed faith. The reader will find disputes about the Lord’s Supper, yearnings for Congregationalist purity, early 18th century revivals in North America and early 19th century revival in Geneva, Old School Presbyterians and New School Presbyterians, the work of Karl Barth. The author achieves this awesome level of thoroughness in just 300 pages (though the type face is small).

Hart combines the story of theological developments with political and institutional history. He emphasizes a “seismic shift” in church-state relations -- a shift from the European churches’ dependence on the “patronage and protection of city councils, princes, and kings” in the early centuries of Reformed history, to the eventual establishment of churches free of government control. Desire for this freedom came in the years after the American and French revolutions, when Europe’s Reformed national churches reached an “informal international consensus . . . on the limitations and even dangers of the church’s participation in political establishments.”

These churches reached no consensus about the importance of missions, in which they long remained uninterested. Hart tells how sentiment in the Church of Scotland held that natives had to be civilized before they could be Christianized. Moreover, the Scots feared the natives would behave immorally after being taught that faith alone and not good works was responsible for salvation.

Not surprisingly, it was a non-denominational missionary group, the London Missionary Society, and not an established church, that sent the first Reformed missionary abroad, in 1798. Thirty years later the Scottish church finally commissioned a foreign missionary, the first Reformed church to do so.

Missions, plus colonialism and migration, made Calvinism into what Hart calls a “global phenomenon.” He describes all three of these global developments, thus writing not just a story, in detail, of Calvinism during five centuries, but also a story, in detail, of Calvinism on five continents. Thus a Presbyterian reader of *Calvinism: A History*, whose Ghanaian cab driver tells her about the many Presbyterians in Accra, can reply that independent missionary societies founded, in Ghana, the two oldest Presbyterian churches on the continent outside South Africa in the early nineteenth century.

What is the point of this painstaking history of Reformed religion? Where does the author find its meaning? Hart suggests two possible theses but quickly discards both of them. No, Calvinism was not a venture in humanitarianism. No, Calvinism did not provide fuel for modernization: “...claims made by the likes of Max Weber, Alexis de Tocqueville, or Robert K. Merton on behalf of Calvinism’s influence on politics, economics, and science can no longer withstand close scrutiny.”

Instead Hart settles on the idea that Calvinism was an “accidental” enterprise. He sees Reformed history as a narrative of “accidental efforts” by “average pastors and lay people.”

Accidental? This is a book about religion, yet its “accidental” thesis leaves out religion as a living force. Was it accidental that John Winthrop set sail for the New World on the *Arbella* in 1630 to practice his religion? Was it accidental that in 1810 a group of Williams College graduates pledged themselves to evangelism on the foreign mission field? Was it accidental that German Reformed pastors in 1934 signed the Barmen Declaration?

No, these were religious actions, not simply accidental political or institutional or theological developments. D.G. Hart, writing a book about religion, treats religion as though it were a non-living object. Twenty-five years ago noted historian of early Christianity Robert Louis Wilken warned against the academy’s habit of equating rationality with detachment when writing about religion. In his presidential address to the American Academy of Religion, Wilken argued that delivering religion into the hands of “scholarly undertakers” would diminish understanding, not increase it. Hart, a Presbyterian, writes as a scholarly undertaker in this book, with Calvinist religion a corpse rather than a living faith of persons of the past.

Hart undertook to write comprehensively about Calvinism’s history. He has done so about political, institutional, and theological developments, yet those developments do not comprehend the religiousness of Calvinism. By detaching himself from the religious aspect of his historical work, Hart limited his readers’ chance to understand his topic, the history of Calvinism. Readers will learn many historical parts and pieces, but about the meaning of the whole they will be left to wonder.