

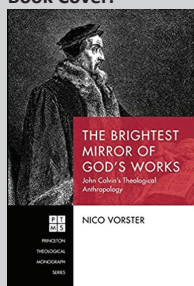
With Calvin, beyond Calvin



Book Title:

The brightest mirror of God's works: John Calvin's theological anthropology

Book Cover:



Author:

Nico Voster

ISBN:

978-1-5326-6025-0

Publisher:

Pickwick Publishing, 2019, R374*

*Book price at time of review

Review Title:

With Calvin, beyond Calvin

Reviewer:

Robert Vosloo¹

Affiliation:

¹Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Robert Vosloo,
rrvosloo@sun.ac.za

How to cite this book review:

Vosloo, R., 2021, 'With Calvin, beyond Calvin', *In die Skriflig* 55(1), a2745. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v55i1.2745>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Over the years Nico Vorster – Research Professor in Systematic Theology at the Faculty of Theology of the North-West University – has done extensive research in the field of theological anthropology. In his 2011 book, *Created in the image of God: Understanding God's relationship with humanity* (also published in the Princeton Theological Monography Series by Pickwick Publications), Vorster provides insightful theological perspectives on the doctrines of the *imago Dei*, sin, and atonement, as well as concomitant ethical perspectives on key notions regarding the status that God bestows on humans, namely human dignity, equality, and freedom. In *The brightest mirror of God's works*, the focus is more specifically, as the subtitle indicates, on John Calvin's theological anthropology.

Drawing on the famous opening sentences of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes*, Vorster too takes his cue from Calvin's remark that human identity and our understanding of God are intimately interwoven. Vorster is aware of the possible shortcomings of Calvin's theological anthropology but argues that it can still provide contemporary Christians with 'resources and impulses to address the systemic problems that modern societies face: human alienation, individualism, collective power abuse, systemic corruption, ecocide, and the fracturing of communities' (p. 2). It is important to note, though, that his claim is situated and developed against the core conviction that Calvin formulated his anthropology in line with his broader theological outlook.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter addresses what is called 'the created structure of the human being'. Here Vorster calls attention to the fact that the human being is not a lifeless *picture* image of God, but rather a living *mirror* image, hence the human being can respond in gratitude. The fact that humans are mirrors of God's glory – or in Calvin's phrase that gave rise to the title of the book, 'the brightest mirror of God's glory' – should encourage self-respect, as well as a sense of calling and responsibility. Besides, it kindles respect for the other and otherness (as God's gift) and can invite ecosensitive perspectives. Chapter 2 deals critically with the question of sin and the bondage of the human will in Calvin, and rightly resists the temptation to separate Calvin's understanding of our depravity from the all-comprehensive nature of God's grace. The point is also underscored that sin does not destroy the human's person *humanitas* and dignity. The focus of chapter 3 is on 'union with Christ', a much-discussed phrase in Calvin's thought. Vorster affirms the constructive value of two analytical tools for this discussion, namely the understanding that the divine and human realities are united but not mingled, and the scheme of descend and ascent that points to a cycle of gift and return that has a divine origin. Chapter 4 focuses on the boundaries of human knowledge and reason, whereas chapter 5 addresses the question how Calvin's anthropology influenced his societal doctrine. The latter chapter strongly argues that Calvin portrays the human being 'as a microcosm of a macrocosmic reality' (p. 123). This is followed by the final chapter that aims at providing an accurate historical interpretation of Calvin's view on the role and status of women in church and society. Vorster concludes that Calvin's stance is in line with the dominant patriarchal and hierarchical views of his time, albeit that he displayed a greater openness to gender equality on some issues than most of his contemporaries.

Most of the chapters in *The brightest mirror of God's works* were previously published in modified or extended form, but the book nevertheless presents a well-integrated whole, as a sustained reflection on Calvin's theological anthropology from various points of entry. Vorster's discussion is informed by meticulous reading and analysis that indicates his dexterity as a Calvin scholar. What I also appreciated about this discussion of Calvin's anthropology, is the author's hermeneutical sensitivity that 'Calvin's social insights developed in a pre-modern, pre-industrial, hierarchical and exclusively Christian setting not yet confronted by the complex processes of pluralization, stratification, differentiation, and secularization that we experience today' (p. 143). And his assertion that Reformed churches, on certain points such as gender,

will have 'to move beyond Calvin himself', taking note of his entire theological corpus (p. 180). This does not take away, however, the book's important core conviction, that the way Calvin's social thought is infused by his theological anthropology can provide rich perspectives for facing the

societal challenges arising in our rapidly changing world today. The vital question remains how this is to be addressed, and for this continuing conversation, Vorster's thorough and timely book provides a welcome and valuable theological impetus and resource.