

Davis A. Young, *John Calvin and the Natural World* (University Press of America, 2007). Pp. 260. Reviewed by John A. Battle

Davis A. Young, Professor Emeritus of Geology at Calvin College, has for many years been interested in the intersection between science and theology. In this book he combines both interests in an unusual way. It is an interesting compilation of the statements made by John Calvin throughout his life that have anything to do with the natural world. Davis has done a mammoth job of research. He has worked through all of Calvin's commentaries, his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, selected sermons on Job, and selected other, shorter works and correspondence that deal with science in one way or another. This is a monumental task, and we can thank Young for his efforts in an area of Calvin studies neglected before.

The chapters of the book catalog Young's findings by topic. The first chapter is general, showing Calvin's overall position on science, the arts, and learning. While Calvin is justly famous for placing Scripture in the principal position and basing his theology on Scripture alone, he also recognized the importance of other spheres of God's revelation in nature, and particularly in the natural sciences (in his day often referred to as "philosophy"). He also recognized that non-believing scholars brought glory to God by their discovery of the laws of his creation and the magnificence of the heavens. These gifts of the scientific discoveries of his and previous days he attributed to the grace of God, and were to be received with appreciation and praise to God. Calvin had no time for those who despised secular learning and were willfully ignorant of the arts or science. His attitude in this regard is consistent with his founding the Academy and the College of Geneva, which continues as the University of Geneva.

Subsequent chapters take up the subjects within natural science as they are discussed by Calvin. These are the heavens (astronomy), physics and the atmosphere (meteorology), the earth (geology), living things (biology), and the human body, medicine, and origins (anthropology, anatomy). These five chapters comprise the bulk of the book.

It is important to realize that Calvin lived before the Copernican Revolution in astronomy and the development of modern science (Calvin died the same year that Copernicus was born). In his day the scientific theories of Aristotle prevailed in scientific circles, and it is apparent that Calvin accepted those theories. For example, he believed that, since earth was heavier than water, that water would be located higher than the earth. However, for us to live on land required that the waters be held back, even though the oceans would actually be higher than the land. Calvin believed therefore that God miraculously continually held back the higher oceans from flooding over the dry land (he noted that, standing on the shore, one could observe that the water was higher than he was—and indeed, it does look that way). As a result Calvin interpreted several verses about the bounds of the oceans as miraculous providences of God. Young suggests, and it does seem probable, that, if Calvin had understood the physical laws that now are common knowledge, he would have interpreted those passages as examples of God's ordinary providence.

The seventh chapter shows the general philosophy that is evident in Calvin's writings when he deals with scientific subjects. In general, Calvin used scientific knowledge to help him

interpret passages of Scripture. When there appeared to be a contradiction, Calvin often attributed it to the Scripture's use of the language of accommodation. God was accommodating his communication to our understanding, so as not to confuse or distract from the main point. For example, one science that was progressing in Europe during Calvin's time was astronomy. Young points out that, contrary to modern popular opinion, Calvin never condemned the theory that the earth traveled around the sun. In fact, Calvin knew of and accepted the scientific theory that the planet Saturn was larger than the moon, even though it appears to be smaller, due to its greater distance from us. In his commentaries he mentioned that the Scripture seems to regard the moon as greater than Saturn and the other planets, listing it before them and giving it priority over the night. He explained this as the language of accommodation, what today we might call the language of appearance. In this way he interpreted Scripture in the light of the scientific knowledge of his day. Young points out other examples of this procedure in Calvin's writings. It is clear that Calvin opposed the idea of interpreting Scripture in isolation from the world and from our knowledge of the world; this is the major point Young wishes to make.

The final chapter of the book is devoted to Young's application of Calvin's approach for modern scientists. Young himself accepts not only the current scientific consensus that the earth is very ancient, but also that our present life forms originated through biological evolution. Obviously, Calvin lived centuries before these theories were advanced in Christian countries, and had nothing to say about them. Young believes, however, that Calvin would have accepted evolutionary theory and would have used that same argument of the language of accommodation to explain those Scriptures that commonly are used to oppose it. Many biblical interpreters might argue with Young over this point. Since Calvin does not live today, it seems idle to speculate on what he might have written. There is a point at which Calvin could well have said that the science is not yet convincing, and that we need not alter our interpretation of Scripture on that point. Since this chapter of Young's book interpolates Calvin into the present, it is less reliable than the other chapters, which are based on Calvin's actual statements.

Young has provided an abundance of documentation in footnotes at the end of each chapter, and in two indices at the end of the book. Every reference to Calvin is footnoted, thus providing a very helpful source for the study of Calvin and his thinking regarding secular learning and the natural world.

In spite of the more speculative nature of the final chapter, Young's book is extremely valuable in filling in a major gap in Calvin studies. We can be grateful to him for the massive labor it represents. Calvin loved science and learning of all sorts. He saw all fields of study as means to discover and promote the glory of God. He himself obviously spent much time in such study, and was well acquainted with the science of his day. He appreciated the findings of science and incorporated them into his study and interpretation of Scripture. Of course, he always held Scripture to be supreme. By his sane and balanced hermeneutics and exegesis, he has set a high standard for the best biblical interpreters ever since. Young's labors should help us all appreciate not only Calvin as an interpreter of Scripture, but also the glory of God in the natural world.