

ADFONTES

A JOURNAL OF PROTESTANT RESOURCEMENT

A DAVENANT TRUST PUBLICATION

ISSUE 1.5 • JANUARY 2017

PRAGMATISM AND PRINCIPLE: JOHN CALVIN AND FEMALE GOVERNMENT | DAVID TALCOTT

Calvin's views on women in government are not as notorious as John Knox's. This is perhaps surprising given his strong, principled opposition to female rulers. In a letter to Sir William Cecil, a chief political adviser to Queen Elizabeth I, Calvin said female rulers were "a deviation from the primitive and established order of nature" and "ought to be held as a judgment on man."¹ Likewise, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians he wrote "unquestionably, wherever even natural propriety has been maintained, women have in all ages been excluded from the public management of affairs. It is the dictate of common sense, that female government is improper and unseemly."²

John Knox, in his *First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, made a similar argument. But he drew the further conclusion that female government is inherently illegitimate and therefore a justification in itself for revolution. Here Calvin differed from Knox: he thought female government ill-advised, not illegitimate. Simply by being female a queen does not forfeit her power. Female power is still legitimate power, and hence revolution is not justified.

We can see this at work in Calvin's letters. Calvin's international correspondence is large and includes many letters to noblewomen across

Europe. In some cases, these women faced persecution for their Protestant faith, in others, they had political power that Calvin hoped to turn to the benefit of the church. The overwhelming tone of these letters is pastoral – Calvin was a shepherd of souls, and this shepherding

CALVIN...THOUGHT FEMALE
GOVERNMENT ILL-ADVISED,
NOT ILLEGITIMATE. SIMPLY
BY BEING FEMALE A QUEEN
DOES NOT FORFEIT HER
POWER. FEMALE POWER IS
STILL LEGITIMATE POWER.

in on full display as he encourages, consoles, and exhorts these women. He shows real familiarity and genuine concern for their spiritual well-being. In some cases, he exhorts them to be resolute, remaining in difficult situations despite persecution, willingly suffering for the Kingdom just as Christ suffered in His redemptive work.³ In other cases, Calvin encouraged women to leave their homelands and come to Protestant Geneva, where their faith could be freely expressed.⁴ In still other cases, Calvin emphasized the good which their positions could permit them to do; to Renée of France, Duchess of Ferrara through her marriage to the grandson of Pope Alexander VI, for example, Calvin wrote that that

because of her "high rank which he has vouchsafed you among men,"⁵ she had many valuable opportunities to serve God's kingdom.

Calvin's correspondence includes several letters addressed indirectly to Queen Elizabeth I, through her close advisor Sir William Cecil.

3. See, e.g., *Letters*, Volume 2, "CCXXXII—To Madame de Cany," January 1549, p. 201.

4. See, e.g., *Letters*, Volume 2, "CLXXXIII—To Madame de Bude," 1546, p. 90. For more on Calvin's letters to noble women see Charmarie Jenkins Blaisdell, "Calvin's Letters to Women: The Courting of Ladies in High Places," *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3 (Autumn, 1982), pp. 67-84.

5. *Letters*, Volume 1, "LXXIX—To Madame the Duchess of Ferrara," October 1541, p. 295.

1. *Letters of John Calvin*, Jules Bonnet, Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1858, Volume 4, "DXXXVIII—To William Cecil," May 1559, p. 47.

2. *Calvin's Commentaries Volume XX: I Corinthians & II Corinthians*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1974. p. 468.

These letters were not, as was the case with some others, warm and intimate, but rather were occasioned first by Elizabeth's succession to the throne after Mary, Queen of Scots, and then later by Elizabeth's response to John Knox's notorious *First Blast of the Trumpet*. When Elizabeth ascended and began re-establishing the Protestant church, Calvin wrote to encourage her to continue the reformation. He wrote to Cecil that he should encourage her "to scatter the superstitions of popery which have overshadowed your land for the last four years, and to cause the uncorrupted doctrine of the gospel and the pure worship of God again to flourish among you" and "having once entered upon the right path, she should unflinchingly persevere therein."⁶



JOHN CALVIN. ATTRIBUTED TO HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER, 1550S

Only a few months later Calvin wrote again, this time to defend his reputation. His association with Knox meant that his own works were receiving an icy reception by the Queen. Elizabeth was, perhaps unsurprisingly, not favorably disposed toward John Knox's arguments against women in civil government, and particularly unhappy with his arguments for rebellion.

Thus Calvin, concerned for the peace and survival of the church, wrote to clarify his opposition to revolution. Mary Queen of Scots had been a terrible persecutor of Protestants. But Elizabeth was helping, not hindering, the church. Calvin therefore strongly advocated submission to Elizabeth's reign, for the peace and protection of the Protestant churches.

Here is Calvin at his most pragmatic: Civil governments are not to be overthrown for light reasons, or even weighty ones, if that revolution would bring still greater danger to the church. Many imperfections in existing regimes should be suffered so long as the gospel is permitted to be preached and the sacraments rightly observed. Calvin recognized that Elizabeth "has been raised to the throne in a wonderful manner by the hand of God."⁷ He did not doubt the legitimacy of her reign.

Of course, this does not change Calvin's opposition to female government in principle. As we have seen above, Calvin agreed with Knox that it was improper and unwise. Still, he thought Knox's position intemperate, because of the political dangers facing the church. He admitted all this openly to Queen Elizabeth within a few years of the publication of Knox's book. He wrote in a letter to Cecil:

"Two years ago John Knox, in a private conversation, asked my opinion respecting female government. I frankly answered that

.....

6. *Letters*, Volume 4, "DXXII—To William Cecil," January 1559, p. 15, 17.

7. *Letters*, Volume 4, "DXXII—To William Cecil," January 1559, p. 16.

because it was a deviation from the primitive and established order of nature, it ought to be held as a judgment on man for his dereliction of his rights..."⁸

Years earlier he had recounted the same conversation in a letter to Bullinger. There he wrote:



THE ERMINE PORTRAIT (ELIZABETH I AS *REGINA*). WILLIAM SEGAR, 1585

"About the government of women I expressed myself [in response to Knox] thus: Since it is utterly at variance with the legitimate order of nature, it ought to be counted among the judgments with which God visits us.... But though a government of this kind seems to me nothing else than a mere abuse, yet I gave it as my solemn opinion, that private

persons have no right to do any thing but to deplore it. For a gynaeocracy or female rule badly organized is like a tyranny, as is to be tolerated till God sees fit to overthrow it."⁹

Pastoral and pragmatic commitments prevented this strong opposition to female government from leading Calvin to the revolutionary conclusions of John Knox. Rather than seek to overthrow the government, we ought rather to "ask God for a spirit of moderation and prudence, to stand us in aid in the critical moment, than to agitate idle enquiries."¹⁰

Calvin continually keeps his eye on the ultimate goal: God's glory. God will be glorified as his kingdom is spread throughout the earth. Many imperfections must be suffered within that process. Where reform is possible, we must reform. Where it is impossible, we must suffer. Where the church is endangered, we must be wise as serpents and survive, always being faithful to our King, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Holy One of Israel, the Lamb who was slain.

David Talcott is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at The King's College in New York City. He earned his Ph.D. in philosophy from Indiana University — Bloomington after majoring in philosophy at Hillsdale College. David resides in Plainfield, New Jersey with his wife, Anna, and six children. He is an Elder at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Millburn and Short Hills, a congregation in the Presbyterian Church in America.

.....

8. *Letters*, Volume 4, "DXXXVIII—To William Cecil," May 1559, p. 47.

9. *Letters*, Volume 3, "CCCXLVIII – To Bullinger," April 1554, p. 38. It seems that either the dating of one of these letters is off, or Calvin is misremembering how many years earlier he discussed the matter with Knox.

10. *Letters*, Volume 3, "CCCXLVIII – To Bullinger," April 1554, p. 38

JOHN OWEN: PRAYER AS POLITICS BY OTHER MEANS

DANIEL HYDE

Carl von Clausewitz, the 19th century Prussian military theorist, famously described war as “the continuation of politics by other means.” Widely appropriated, the aphorism continues to pop up in pop culture and political analysis alike; I believe I ran across it first in the classic 1995 political thriller *Red Dawn*.¹ In studying the liturgical theology of John Owen, I can’t help but tweak this trope for my own use: for Owen, prayer was politics by other means.

PRAYER IN OWEN’S THEOLOGY

Too often in academic as well as popular approaches to John Owen, he is only read theologically. In his liturgical theology worship is summed up as communion with the Triune God in heaven.² In particular, his view was that public prayer was the gift of the Triune God by means of the ascended Christ³ through the Holy Spirit⁴ in and through ministers. It was concerning that pneumatological work that he wrote his 1682 *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer* (1682).⁵

PRAYER IN OWEN’S POLITICS

Owen cannot, however, be read purely theologically. We need to break out of viewing him as if he were, as one recent journal article describes him, Owen the “super theologian, leaping quodlibetal questions in a single bound.”⁶ Why Owen said what he said about prayer was deeply influenced by the political realities of his day. A Non-Conformist (which at the time meant an

Anglican who ignored some of the rubrics of Anglican practice, regarding them as tinged with Romanism) and later Dissenter outside the re-established Anglican church, Owen accentuated the individual minister’s spiritual gifting for public prayer; this emphasis was in deliberate contrast to conforming Anglicanism’s focus on the Book of Common Prayer. His position was born from a particular politico-eschatological outlook; it was not simply the result of biblical exegesis.

Owen’s Early Eschatological Outlook

While in his first parish ministry in 1643, Owen described his early eschatological vision:

The glass of our lives seems to run and keep pace with the extremity of time. The end of those ‘ends of the world’ which began with the gospel is doubtless coming upon us... Much sand cannot be behind, and Christ shakes the glass; many minutes of that hour cannot remain; the next measure we are to expect is but ‘a moment, the twinkling of an eye, where we shall all be changed.’⁷

At that early point, Owen viewed the end of human history as imminent. He went on to claim that more error had crept into the English Church from the Roman during the previous sixteen years than had entered the church in the hundred years before that.⁸ Sixteen years: this meant 1628, the year William Laud became Bishop of London. In that first country parish, then, Owen sat back and saw the English Civil War, which had begun in 1642, the year before he wrote, as a precursor to the end of history.

PUBLIC PRAYER BY INDIVIDUALLY GIFTED MINISTERS WITHOUT THE USE OF THE PRELATIC PRAYER BOOK... WAS A MANIFESTATION OF A NEW AGE OF THEO-POLITICS.

The Shift in Owen’s Eschatological Outlook

At some point, though, his eschatological view seemed to shift. He began to look towards a future golden age.⁹ As Martyn Cowan says, “he eagerly anticipated another turn of the hourglass.”¹⁰ It’s my conjecture that this change reflected his own improved prospects: as a disappointed parish pastor in the country Owen looked for an imminent end to history;¹¹ once he reached the halls of power as a Parliamentary preacher, his view shifted.

1. “War is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse, with a mixture of other means.” Gen. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Colonel J.J. Graham, 3 vols. (London: Kegan Trench, Trübner & Co., 1908), 3:121.

2. See “The Nature and Beauty of Gospel Worship,” *Works*, 9:77–78. Cf. Ryan M. McGraw, *A Heavenly Directory: Trinitarian Piety, Public Worship and a Reassessment of John Owen’s Theology*, Reformed Historical Theology 29 (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht), 2014; “The Liturgical Theology of John Owen” (Th.M. thesis: Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, 2010); “The Fire That Kindleth All Our Sacrifices to God: Owen and the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” in *The Ashgate Companion to John Owen’s Theology*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Mark Jones (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), 249–270.

3. *A Discourse Concerning Liturgies*, *Works*, 15:11; cf. *Works*, “Sermon IV,” *Works*, 9:442.

4. “Discourse Concerning Liturgies,” *Works*, 15:11; cf. “Sermon III,” *Works*, 9:431–441.

5. On this treatise, see Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 224–231.

6. Tim Cooper, “State of the Field: John Owen Unleashed: Almost.” *Conversations in Religion and Theology* 6 (2008): 237. See also Martyn C. Cowan, “The Prophetic Preaching of John Owen from 1646 to 1659 in its Historical Context.” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2012), 188.

7. “The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished,” *Works*, 13:5.

8. “Duty of Pastors and People,” *Works*, 13:27. See the discussion in Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of Defeat* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 59–60.

9. Cowan, “Prophetic Preaching,” 20–21.

10. Cowan, “Prophetic Preaching,” 21.

11. See his comment about their ignorance in “Two Short Catechisms,” *Works*, 1:465.

His view of prayer, too, wasn't developed merely as he knelt in his personal prayer closet, but as he walked the halls of power. In 1649 and then in 1651 he recorded this change in writing: this coming age, he wrote, would be characterized by peace, multitudes of converts—especially of the Jews—and the special presence of Christ to administer the ordinances of worship with power and purity.¹²

What was his explanation of the change? Owen would look back in 1672 and say that some forty years earlier “God enabled me to observe...that God had a controversy [that is, a dispute] with the nation” and that he had felt himself, in his change in perception about the eschatological implications of this controversy, “like a man out of a dead sleep that lifts up his head, and rubs his eyes for a time.”¹³ That controversy was rooted in the tyranny and idolatry of the Roman spirit of antichrist that had entered the English Church.¹⁴ Owen's eschatology was theo-political.

The Place of Prayer in Owen's Eschatological Outlook

As his spiritual eyes began to be cleared, Owen saw four apocalyptic events being fulfilled in his time. First, he applied “the vengeance of the temple” (Jer. 50–51), that is, Babylon's destruction by the Medes in retribution for the destruction of Israel's temple, to the defeat of both the Laudian party, who set up “an outside, formal worship, in opposition unto the spiritual worship of the Gospel”¹⁵ and of rigid Presbyterianism.¹⁶ Second, he read the “measuring of the temple” (Rev. 11) as the restoration of true worship: “the full casting out and rejecting of all will-worship, and their attendant abominations” would be replaced by “purity and beauty of ordinances and gospel worship.”¹⁷ Third, he began to read the dissolution of the heavens and earth and ushering in of a new heavens and earth (2 Peter 3; Rev. 21) as not the eternal state, but as a future state of the church in its renewed condition when “God would have his tabernacle with men” (Rev. 21:3), meaning, God's presence would be known in gathered churches of visible saints.¹⁸ Even the promise of “no more sea” (Rev. 21:1) was reinterpreted to be fulfilled in there being no more “pretended clergyman from all nations into general councils”¹⁹ while the apocalyptic imagery of gold, the sea of glass,

12. “The Advantage of the Kingdom of Christ in the Shaking of the Kingdoms of the World,” *Works*, 8:334; “The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth,” *Works*, 8:259. On the conversion of the Jews, see “An Exposition of the Epistles to the Hebrews,” *Works*, 18:79, 181, 316, 324–325.

13. “Discourse III,” *Works*, 9:366.

14. On idolatry, see “A Vision of Unchangeable, Free Mercy, in Sending the Means of Grace to Undeserving Sinners,” *Works*, 8:28.

15. “Providential Changes, an Argument for Universal Holiness,” *Works*, 9:155.

16. “The Advantage,” *Works*, 8:325.

17. “The Advantage,” *Works*, 8:334; “The Nature of Apostasy from the Profession of the Gospel, and the Punishment of Apostates Declared,” *Works*, 7:226, 228. Cf. Gribben, 131–134.

18. “The Branch of the Lord the Beauty of Zion,” *Works*, 8:300.

19. “The Shaking and Translating,” *Works*, 8:255–256.

and the precious stones was prophetic idiom for the purity of gospel ordinances.²⁰ Finally, the shaking of the heavens and earth (Heb. 12) he interpreted as the shaking of the political heights of power in the First Civil War.²¹ This was “not to the last and final judgment of the world, but of that utter desolation and destruction that was to be made of the Judaical church and state.”²²

In April 1649 Owen wrote that the end of the Papal antichrist was “nigh at hand, even at the doors.”²³ In 1657, in the devotional work, *On Communion with God*, he said that God would “in these latter days pour out upon the Antichristian world” the seven bowls of God's wrath of Revelation 16.²⁴ Cowan argues that Owen believed he was living in the time of the fifth bowl that brought darkness not only on the Papacy but on all episcopacy as a tool of antichrist.²⁵ Unlike the pessimism of his 1643 parish ministry, this was an optimistic apocalypticism: “These are the times wherein the Spirit of grace and of supplications is promised to be poured out upon the Jerusalem of God.”²⁶ Public prayer by individually gifted ministers without the use of the prelatist Prayer Book, therefore, was a manifestation of a new age of theo-politics.



THE DISSENER'S DREAD: A WOODCUT SHOWING THE BODY POLITIC AS HALF-PAPIST AND HALF-CAVALIER. ANONYMOUS.

CONCLUSION

The popular view of Owen as pious champion of “free” prayer and the “regulative principle of worship” against overly formalistic kinds of worship is not the whole story. Public prayer was politics by other means because it was directly linked to his eschatology of a glorious age of gospel purity in worship. As we consider John Owen's change of mind, surely one lesson we can learn is to beware of attaching our theology too closely, or at least too exclusively, to the political ups and downs of one particular State at one particular time.

Daniel R. Hyde is the Pastor of Oceanside United Reformed Church (Carlsbad/Oceanside, California), Adjunct Instructor of Ministerial Studies at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, and Adjunct Instructor of Systematic Theology and Missions at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary. He is currently writing his Ph.D. on John Owen's liturgical theology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

20. “The Branch of the Lord,” *Works*, 8:290.

21. “A Display of Arminianism,” *Works*, 10:6–7; “Shaking and Translating,” *Works*, 8:247–279.

22. “Providential Changes,” *Works*, 9:134; “Shaking and Translating,” *Works*, 8:254, 260; “Spiritual Strength;—Its Reality, Decay, and Renovation,” *Works*, 17:518.

23. “Shaking and Translating,” *Works*, 8:270.

24. “Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” *Works*, 2:146.

25. Cowan, “Prophetic Preaching,” 16–18. “Christ's Kingdom and the Magistrate's Power,” *Works*, 8:373.

26. “Duty of Pastors and People,” *Works*, 13:46.

JOHN OWEN ON THE USE OF THE PRAYER BOOK

EXCERPTED & EDITED BY DANIEL HYDE

The following is an excerpt of John Owen’s “Preface to the Reader” in his treatise *A Discourse of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer*, which was published in 1682, one year before his death.

Owen’s treatise gave expression to the pre-1662 Non-Conformist/post-1662 Dissenting principle of free prayer *contra* the imposed Book of Common Prayer. This principle was of central importance to Owen: “Hence I know not any difference about religious things that is managed with greater animosities in the minds of men and worse consequents than this which is about the work of the Spirit of God in prayer; which, indeed, is the hinge on which all other differences about divine worship do turn and depend” (*Works*, 4:254).

I have added major section headings in **bold** and sub-headings in *italics*. I’ve modernized spelling but left the wording as is to reflect Owen’s way of expression. The full “Preface” can be found in the Gould edition as well as the Banner of Truth reprint of volume 4 of Owen’s *Works*, pages 237–249.

Centrality of Prayer

It is altogether needless to premise any thing in this place, concerning the necessity, benefit, and use, of prayer in general. All men will readily acknowledge, that as without it there can be no religion at all, so the life and exercise of all religion doth principally consist therein...all errors which either pervert its nature, or countenance a neglect of a due attendance unto it, are pernicious in religion...in a matter of the highest importance unto the glory of God and the salvation of the souls of men...

Purpose of the Treatise

...There is in the Scripture a promise of the Holy Ghost to be given unto the church as a Spirit of grace and supplications...there are particular operations ascribed unto him. Mention is likewise frequently made of the aids and assistances which he affords unto believers in and unto their prayers...

Those Who Rely on the Spirit in Prayer

Of the want of these aids and assistances to enable them to pray according to the mind of God some do profess that they have experience...Accordingly, these regulate themselves in this whole duty in the expectation or improvement of them.

Those Who Rely on the Prayer Book

And there are those who, being accommodated with other aids of another nature...which they esteem sufficient for them, do look on

the former profession and plea of an ability to pray by the aids and assistances of the Holy Spirit to be a mere empty pretence.

The Strife Between These Two Kinds of Ministers

And in the management of these different apprehensions, those at variance seem to be almost barbarians one to another...Hence those who plead for prayer by virtue of supplies of gifts and grace from the Holy Spirit do admire that the use or necessity of them herein should be contradicted...Some, on the other side, are so far from the understanding of these things, or a conviction of their reality, that with the highest confidence they despise and reproach the pretence of them. To “pray in the Spirit” is used as a notable expression of scorn...

Principles

[Principles 1–3 say it is the duty of every-one to pray for himself, the duty of some to pray for others, and for all to do so as best as they are able]

4. In our reasonable service, the best wherewith we can serve God, consists in the intense sincere actings of the faculties and affections of our minds...If men can take it on themselves, in the sight of God, that the invention and use of set forms of prayer...are the best that he hath endowed them withal for his service, they are free from the force of this consideration.

5. There is no man but, in the use of the aids which God hath prepared for that purpose, he is able to pray according to the will of God...

6. We are expressly commanded to pray, but are nowhere commanded to make prayers for ourselves, much less for others...

7. There is assistance promised unto believers, to enable them to pray according unto the will of God; there is no assistance promised, to enable any to make prayers for others...

8. Whatever forms of prayer were given out unto the use of the church by divine authority and inspiration, as the Lord’s Prayer and the Psalms...are to have their everlasting use therein, according unto what they were designed unto...

...Wherefore...neither these principles...are engaged to condemn all use of set forms of prayers as sinful in themselves, or absolutely unlawful, or such as so vitiate the worship of God as to render it wholly unacceptable...for God will accept the persons of those who sincerely seek him, though through invincible ignorance they may mistake in sundry things as unto the way and manner of his worship...And

where any do worship God in Christ, with an evidence of holy fear and sincerity, and walk in a conversation answerable unto the rule of the gospel, though they have manifold corruptions in the way of their worship, I shall never judge severely either of their present acceptance with God, or of their future eternal condition...

[What follows is an excursus on the historical problems introduced through the development of forms of prayer: corruption of doctrine, addition of ceremonies, civil punishments, and cessation of ministerial gifts.]

Summary

1. No persons, no churches, are obliged by virtue of any divine constitution, precept, or approved example, to confine themselves in their public or private worship, unto set or humanly devised forms of prayer...

2. There is a promise in the Scripture...made and belonging unto the church unto the end of the world, of the communication of the Holy Spirit unto it...in prayer.



JOHN OWEN. JOHN GREENHILL, D. 1676

3. It is the duty of believers to look after, to pray for, those promised aids and assistances in prayer...

4. This they are commanded to do, and have blessed experience of success therein...

5. Beyond the divine institution of all the ordinances of worship in the church...there is nothing needful unto the due and orderly celebration of all public worship in its assembly...

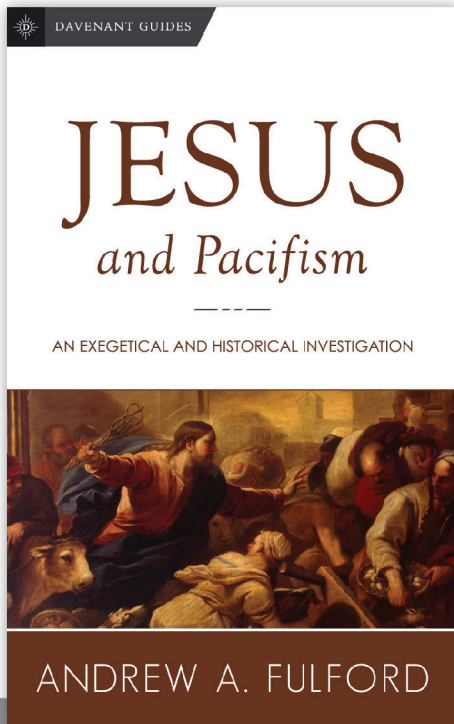
6. For the preservation of the unity of faith, and the communion of churches...they may express an agreement...in a declaration of the material and substantial parts of worship...

7. Whereas the differences about prayer under consideration concern Christian practice in the vitals of religion, great respect is to be had unto the experience of them that do believe...

8. That the best expedient to compose these differences amongst us, is for every one to stir up the gift and grace of God that is in him...



DAVENANT GUIDES



WAS JESUS A PACIFIST?

"In this concise little book, the author does more than merely refute the case for Christian pacifism. He also shows that special revelation coheres with general revelation and that natural law (which results from God's creative work) coheres with the Bible (which is inspired by the Creator). . . . This little work is highly recommended for anyone who is struggling with this issue."

—Dr. Craig A. Carter, *Professor of Theology,*
Tyndale University College, Toronto, Ontario

WWW.DAVENANTTRUST.ORG/JESUS-AND-PACIFISM

AMERICAN APOSTLES: WHEN EVANGELICALS ENTERED THE WORLD OF ISLAM

BY CHRISTINE LEIGH HEYRMAN

HILL AND WANG, 2015

REVIEW BY MILES SMITH

Historians, religious scholars, and laymen maintain enthusiastic interest in the history of nineteenth century American religion. But this interest has recently been rather narrowly circumscribed. While historians like Richard White, John Demos, and others have researched nineteenth century contacts between American Evangelical Christians and non-Christians, those have often been accounts of American missionaries among Native Americans in the Far West, or the occasional account of an early American missionary to the South Pacific. Christine Leigh Heyrman's *American Apostles* is therefore an innovative and welcome work. She focuses on the initial efforts by American Evangelicals to proselytize in the Islamic world, bringing to light a new facet of the history of American Evangelicalism.

American Apostles tells the story of American Evangelicals, almost exclusively from the New England states, who traveled to territory then under the sovereignty of the Ottoman sultan. They aimed to convert an Islamic territory back to Christianity, and to tell their tales afterwards. By doing so, these self-identified Palestine missionaries hoped to further the cause of Christ while simultaneously inspiring national pride and piety in the United States. But the reality encountered in the Levant rarely conformed to the missionaries' expectations, and the drama of this contrast between expectation and reality is the heart of Heyrman's narrative.

The author situates the initial push to evangelize the Islamic world not within the broader context of Christianity, but within post-Enlightenment intellectual modernization. Evangelicalism, modernity, and American nationalism appear in parallel and intertwined in Heyrman's first chapter. The Evangelicals she identifies as furthering this strand of American religious and intellectual thought practiced what she describes as "unbending Calvinism" and were generally from small farming hamlets in New England: people she labels as "self-righteous, tribal hicks." The particular religious movement that bred the missionary disposition in American Evangelicalism was the so-called New Divinity, a largely heterodox movement within New England's informally established Congregational Church.

Heyrman argues that American fascination with the Wonders of the East was driven by conjoined wanderlust and Evangelical fervor. British missionaries visiting the United States from India, Central Asia, and Palestine regaled crowds with accounts of exotic peoples

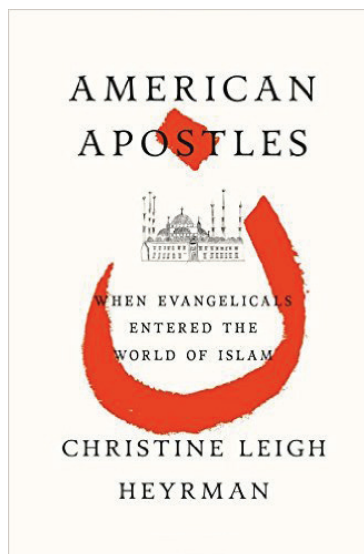
and places, and also of abject spiritual darkness. These Evangelicals brought converts, on occasion, to New England from Central Asia and India; their sensational accounts of their conversions to Christianity fascinated the rural denizens of New England.

Christian fascination with martyrdom played a powerful part in motivating Evangelicals to leave their lives in the United States and become missionaries. Heyrman sees this less as a disposition to emulate historical Christian martyrs and more as a product of the growing influence of Romanticism in the United States. New England's Congregationalists imbibed British Romanticism more thoroughly than did the magisterial Protestants who dominated the intellectual high culture of the Mid-Atlantic and Southern states. As a result, Unitarianism and transcendentalism took root in New England as they did not in other sections. And the more-orthodox Congregationalists too were drawn to Romanticism-influenced evangelism in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The Calvinism that propelled these early Near Eastern missionaries was not that of the previous three centuries.

The work's narrative follows a now well-worn path in the historiography of American Evangelicalism. Heyrman is quick to point out the missionaries' almost total ignorance of the beliefs and cultures of those they sought to convert. She also points out that the self-perceived cultural superiority of the American missionaries vanished when they finally reached the cities of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman (in Heyrman's reading, Islamic)

architecture, social norms, and morality all proved surprisingly impressive to the expatriate Americans.

The cultural and social surprise experienced by the missionaries is evident in the published record of their time in the Levant. But this surprise does not always take the same form. Rather, differing responses displayed two conflicting dispositions: a cosmopolitan disposition that seemed to understand and admire the best of Islamic culture, and a crusading disposition that sought to convert Muslims and increasingly to conform Islamic societies to Christian norms. In Heyrman's account, two missionaries serve to exemplify these two dispositions. The writing of Pliny Fisk, one of the young missionaries, showed his private tendency to follow his cosmopolitan impulses. His comrade Jonas King, meanwhile, never lost his crusading drive.



Neither King's crusading, nor Fisk's cosmopolitanism, enabled these missionaries to find success in their attempts to proselytize Levantine and Palestinian Muslims. This was not because of any lack of effort. Fisk enlisted the help of local notables to help him learn the niceties of Islamic theology, and to learn the Arab language in order to be more familiar with the Qur'an. Increased familiarity in the end brought no new converts, and the missionaries left a record of insecurity and failure.

As an addition to American religious history, *American Apostles* is welcome: a monograph that reads well and attempts to give an honest recounting of Americans of the early National period trying to understand their world. The work is, however, in many ways hampered by the author's lack of familiarity with Christian orthodoxy and especially with the history of Protestantism. What she terms "unbending" Calvinism was in many ways a "Calvinism" that was more bent than anywhere else in the Western World. New England's cities and hamlets bred many deviations from not just traditional Calvinist formulations, but also from broader Protestantism. Heyrman treats New England's austere "New Divinity" as the norm of Reformed thought; she is uninterested in – or perhaps unaware of – the continental European Reformed tradition, the magisterial Church of Scotland, and the powerful Presbyterian Church in the United States.

By omitting the broader religious context of New England Congregationalism, Heyrman treats the missionaries as Calvinist exemplars. Instead, New England's missionaries were very much deviants from the broad Protestant tradition. The religious insecurity she attributes to the missionaries being overawed by Islam's preeminence cannot be understood outside of the context of their lack of familiarity with more historically rooted Christianity. Much of the architecture the missionaries encountered in Ottoman Greece and Palestine, for example, was influenced by and had often even been built by late Classical Christians. As a history of Early Republican

American culture colliding with Islam, Heyrman's work is excellent. As an acute reading of orthodox Christianity's interaction with Islam, the work is lacking.

Miles Smith is Assistant Professor of History at Regent University. His academic interests include the history of the US South, the Atlantic World, and US intellectual and religious history.

WHAT SHE TERMS "UNBENDING" CALVINISM WAS
IN MANY WAYS A "CALVINISM" THAT WAS MORE
BENT THAN ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE WESTERN
WORLD. NEW ENGLAND'S CITIES AND HAMLETS
BRED MANY DEVIATIONS FROM NOT JUST
TRADITIONAL CALVINIST FORMULATIONS, BUT
ALSO FROM BROADER PROTESTANTISM.

How to SUBSCRIBE

Want to read more from
ADFONTES?

SIGN UP FOR THE PRINT EDITION. JUST \$5 PER MONTH.
Learn more at: www.davenanttrust.org/ad-fontes.

Better yet, become a **DAVENANT PARTNER** and receive it for free as you support our work of renewing Christian wisdom for the contemporary church.

Or, if you particularly enjoyed this issue, you can show your gratitude by making a **ONE-TIME DONATION** to enable us to keep it going.
www.davenanttrust.org/support-us.



WWW.DAVENANTTRUST.ORG

2040 South Street, Lincoln, NE 68502 • j.meador@davenanttrust.org

Ad Fontes is a monthly journal published by Davenant Trust. Co-editors: Joseph Minich and Susannah Black