

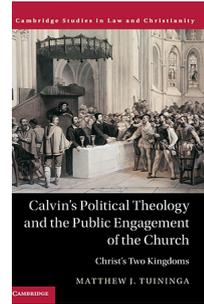
## Book Review

Matthew J. Tuininga.

*Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms* (Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity)

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. hb, xiv, 386, \$110.00. ISBN 978-1-1071-7143-5.

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In this publication of his Emory University doctoral dissertation, Matthew J. Tuininga, Assistant Professor of Moral Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary (Grand Rapids, MI), demonstrates the pervasive influence that John Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine had on his political theology. Through a judicious use of Calvin's own writings—including his principal doctrinal work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and his biblical commentaries and polemical treatises—the author reveals that Calvin's two kingdoms theology enabled him to posit a sharp distinction between church (the earthly manifestation of Christ's spiritual kingdom) and political society (temporal and civil pursuits), yet without treating the ecclesiastical and political affairs of life as “two hermetically sealed realms” (2). Although temporal and authoritative boundaries distinguish church and civil society, the righteous principles of Christ's eternal kingdom place demands on every facet of believers' lives. Thus the overall thesis of Tuininga's book is that Calvin's two kingdoms theology, so often neglected or misunderstood by the church, can (and should) serve as a valuable guide for Christians who wish to participate biblically and effectively in the political life of modern pluralistic liberal democracies.

Tuininga initially sets out to engage Calvin's political theology critically and constructively by providing an intensive evaluation of the reformer's historical context and formal theology. Thus the book begins by situating Calvin against the backdrop of his late medieval and early Reformation political context. The author ably demonstrates that Calvin's struggle to establish principles for the spiritual government of the church, independent from Genevan civil control, sharply distinguished his two kingdoms doctrine from the prevailing political theologies of his day, some of which tended to blur the lines between ecclesiastical and magisterial control, and others of which pushed the distinction too far by inserting a harmful dualism into Christian life and exegesis.

The remainder of the book attempts to establish the foundations of Calvin's two kingdoms theology, including its manifold implications for the relationship between the church as institution and the public, political life of Christians. A crucial point of emphasis in Tuininga's overall treatment of this subject is that Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine is grounded in his eschatological theology. The biblical fact that the eschatological *telos* of all creation is its spiritual transformation into Christ's eternal heavenly kingdom has, for Calvin, profound implications for how church and civil society should relate between “the already” and “not yet.” Existing in this interim period, the church and state ought to remain

distinct but nevertheless related. The church, as the embodiment of Christ's spiritual kingdom on earth, should never seek—by temporal means—to attain the complete renovation of all things in the affairs of this passing age. Civil magistrates alone are tasked by God to take coercive action to promote virtue and restrain vice in society. The church's appointed task, rather, is to preach the gospel, properly administer the sacraments, and exercise church discipline, which are God's normative means for creating faith and transforming sinners into members of the eternal kingdom of Christ. Christians should seek to promote the moral law of justice and piety in civil society, and may pursue public political office in order to stimulate the formation of just laws and polity in accord with the common standards of natural law. But the church as institution is called to advocate individual and social change only by the means proper to the unique task and authority of the church itself, namely, by the official means of grace and the public witness of Christians to the gospel promise of cosmic restoration. In some contexts, civil magistrates might indirectly promote the cause of Christ's kingdom by defending the church's right to preach the gospel and by expunging heresy. In other contexts, Christians may be required to submit humbly to godless rulers while suffering as servants of Christ. In either situation, Calvin's two kingdoms theology served to distinguish properly the unique epochal placement of church and civil society within the broader scope of the eschatological goal of cosmic renewal.

Tuininga concludes his work by arguing that Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine both encourages and guides Christian participation in politically liberal societies. In particular, he proposes that Christians living in American

secular society should strive to build greater moral consistency in societal laws themselves, on the basis of natural law as the common standard for civil government, "rather than seek to override moral pluralism with brute political force, so undermining the publicly recognized moral authority of the law itself" (364). In sum, Tuininga contends that it is Calvin's twofold emphasis on the church's unique task of preaching the word of the kingdom, and the Christian's task to freely serve Christ in temporal, secular society, "that makes his two kingdoms theology so useful for our understanding of the mission and public engagement of the church. It frees the church to proclaim a word to the world that is truly prophetic, even as it frees believers for the sort of political engagement that is truly faithful" (377).

In this well written and engaging study, Tuininga has given us a balanced, contextualized, and exegetically sensitive examination of the unique shape that Calvin's two kingdoms (or two governments) doctrine gave to his political theology. Moving deftly between Calvin's *Institutes* and biblical commentaries, the book offers helpful perspective on how pervasively Calvin applied the two kingdoms distinction to his theological thought as a whole. As the author suggests, Calvin's two kingdoms theology—rightly understood—can help American Christians to keep their political and ecclesiastical activities in proper context: by distinguishing the unique tasks and authorities given to church and state; by prompting a robust public witness to Christ's heavenly kingdom in life's civil affairs; and by helping believers to resist the temptation to use politics as a means of transforming society into the eternal kingdom of God. Moreover, Tuininga's interpretation, specifically by criticizing overly rigid accounts of Calvin's two kingdoms doctrine that deny

the extension of Christ's spiritual kingdom to matters of Christian civil action, and by recognizing the value of Abraham Kuyper's appeals to Calvin's theology in constructing his own distinction between the church as institute and the church as organism, should serve a mediating role amid the polemical heat that has so often characterized debate over Calvin's two kingdoms in the church and in the academy.

An unfortunate weakness of Tuininga's otherwise fine study is the evident lack of critical work in the original languages of his primary sources. Apart from a brief section in chapter 8, which examines part of a treatise of Calvin that remains untranslated into English, the author almost exclusively cites the English translations of Calvin's primary works (with little more than footnote references to their location in the *Calvini Opera*), giving no indication of his own translation or critical

labor in the native language of the texts. He also pays scant attention to foreign language secondary sources on the Reformation and Calvin's theology, and neglects to consult some important primary sources that are particularly useful for constructing and illustrating the often complex implementation of Calvin's vision of church and state in Geneva, such as the *Registres du Consistoire de Genève au temps de Calvin* and the *Registres du Conseil de Genève à l'époque de Calvin*, sources that have garnered renewed scholarly interest in recent decades. Such lacunae represent a noteworthy breach of scholarly standards for a work of its kind. These issues aside, however, Tuininga's contribution offers a cogent and thoughtful extension of the discussion on Calvin's political theology, and it should be required reading for anyone working in the field.

