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# Boekresensies/Book reviews

**Philip D. Shadd: *Understanding Legitimacy: Political Theory and Neo-Calvinist Social Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017) ISBN: 9781498518963, hbk, £54.95, pp viii+207.**

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In 2008 Andrew Basden wrote: 'Those who believe that explicitly Christian thinking is possible in the scientific disciplines tend to assume that it must be antithetical to the world's thinking'. He goes on to suggest an alternative approach where 'Christian thinking is used to account for and enrich the world's thinking by transplanting it from its current ground-motive (usually that of nature-freedom) into the arguably more fertile soil of the creation-fall-redemption ground-motive.' Shadd uses a similar approach to that outlined above by Basden in this book. Shadd addresses an important but the often-ignored question of the legitimacy of political power. He examines it from a philosophical perspective. By legitimacy he means, in part, what constitutes the use of political power legitimate even if it is imperfectly implemented? To do so he critiques and enriches the approach of justificatory liberalism as epitomised by the work of John Rawls. Justificatory liberalism grounds legitimacy in a version of popular sovereignty. In essence justificatory liberalism holds that coercive power is legitimate if it is based on reasons that all reasonable people can accept.

Shadd critiques justificatory liberalism and develops a fresh perspective utilising the fruitful approach of neo-Calvinism. He proposes that political theorists 'mine neo-Calvinist through for conceptual insights' (4). He sees the neo-Calvinist approach as a 'reservoir of conceptual insights and resources form which political theorists can, and should, draw'. I agree – but I'm not sure that in the current highly polarised political climate such views would be welcomed. It certainly provides a more biblical approach than the almost consensus of justificatory liberalism.

Shadd's key question that he seeks to answer is 'what is the right framework for thinking about political legitimacy?' (76). He finds justificatory liberalism wanting and looks towards the rich resources of neo-Calvinism. He expertly shows the flaws in justificatory liberalism and that it leads to unacceptable consequences. He aims to provide a better philosophical framework from which to understand the conditions that provide for political legitimacy (77, 181).

He provides a helpful general overview of the neo-Calvinist perspective in nine tenets. These provide a useful outline for a neo-Calvinist political framework. The nine tenets are as follows:

Tenet 1 all people are equal, naturally free, and ultimately accountable only to God.

Tenet 2 All are commissioned to sociocultural development, renewal, and transformation

Tenet 3 There is something unnatural about coercive political power. It is only necessary "by reason of sin."

Tenet 4 Sociological renewal ought be pursued along the lines of divine creation order

Tenet 5 The normative creation principles for culture and society are accessible to all (not only believers).

Tenet 6 Society is composed of different spheres, and each ought be free within its respective domain.

Tenet 7 The state ought be superset from the church (and other religious institutions).

Tenet 8 The purpose of the state is public justice.

Tenet 9 All reality is ultimately ordered by God and all human authority ultimately delegated by God.

From these tenets he begins to develop a neo-Calvinist approach to legitimacy and shows that such an approach provides a better understanding of political legitimacy than the one offered by justificatory liberalism.

The state is to uphold laws that protect the basic dignity and interests of all, to prevent basic wrongs, but also to enable basic human flourishing and to represent a normative standard.

Shadd, following Kuyper (and Augustine), sees the role of government as being a post-fall institution – this is seen in his use of the refrain ‘by reason of sin’. My question is, is this really the case? Is there not a place for a creational view of politics? Coercive political power may well be as a result of the fall, but is all political power ‘by reason of sin’? If there had been no sin would there still be the need for politics and government?

This book works on many levels. It provides a brilliant critique of justificatory liberalism, exposing its many flaws, and it illustrates the rich resources of the neo-Calvinist perspective for politics. It provides a great example of how to debate with political theories from a Christian perspective in the spirit of the approach suggested by Basden. I hope it will be widely read and not just by neo-Calvinists.