

John Calvin: In Search of a Just Society

by

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There are many caricatures abroad about John Calvin. Some caricatures have been sustained as much by friend as foe. Recent historical studies are doing much to destroy the caricatures, i.e. that Calvin was a cold, heartless, humourless and ultra-logical tyrant. In contradiction, he has been shown in a recent study, L'Humanite de Calvin by Richard Stauffer, to have been a compassionate friend, a devoted pastor, and a husband with a bit more romance in his soul than some of us!

One of the most exciting discoveries of recent years about John Calvin is that far from being an inflexible predestinarian, or a legalistic high churchman, he was a social revolutionary and one of the most advanced social thinkers of his time.

It strikes me that there are three major approaches to the thought of John Calvin:

(1) The Classic Interpretation. This dates back to the 17th Century and stresses Calvin's predestinarian thought to the point of distortion. The Dutch have contributed more than their share to this interpretation, although the English Westminster Confession of Faith runs a close second. On this continent this classic interpretation is best seen in the Princeton Theology which featured such stars as Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield.

(2) The second approach I call the Scottish interpretation. This view places stress on Calvin's view of Church, ministry and sacraments. This more recent view, somewhat coloured by the thought of Karl Barth, may be associated with Professor Thomas Torrance of Edinburgh, his brother-in-law Ronald Wallace, and his friend T.H.L. Parker. (An American equivalent which never gained much credence in America, and a bit earlier than the Scottish, may be seen in the Mercersburg Theology whose stars were the renowned church historian Philip Schaff, and John Nevin of the German Reformed Church.

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(3) The third approach I call the Swiss-French interpretation. This is also of recent origin. This approach is concerned with Calvin's social, political and economic thought. In 1959 a young Geneva pastor, André Biéler, wrote a doctoral thesis entitled, La Pensée Économique et Sociale de Calvin. (Ironically enough it was written under the supervision of a Roman Catholic professor of Economics in the University of Geneva founded by Calvin.) This thesis underlined and documented the fact that Calvin's political and social thought was not only revolutionary and far-reaching but germane to his theological thought. Now significant studies based on this thesis are beginning to appear, i.e. Professor W. Fred Graham's, The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and his Socio-Economic Impact. Again, we may find a slightly earlier American equivalent in the brothers Niebuhr. To discover the source of their socially oriented Calvinism I suspect one would have to examine the thought of certain professors in Eden Seminary, St. Louis. Now this is a broad analysis of schools of Calvinistic thought. There are probably exceptions, or those with feet in more than one camp, but I think the analysis holds true. I have introduced the analysis here to indicate the position taken by this paper and to indicate the source of my thinking.

I personally am indebted to the Swiss-French school for the position adopted in this paper, and in particular to André Biéler and, to a lesser extent, W. Fred Graham.

I. Calvin's Theological Undergirding of the Just Society

Calvin's theology, as Prof. Brian Gerrish has pointed out, is one of thankfulness.¹ Man was created by God for fellowship with Himself; to respond thankfully, joyfully and lovingly to the One in whom all his good consists. Man was made in God's image; that is, he was given the capacity to enter into personal relations with this Beneficent Father and to hold communion with Him as a rational, initiating, willing and responsive being. Since this image resides in all other persons as well, it follows that men are made for fellowship with one another, as well as with God. It is the image of God within us which permits us to enter into truly human and satisfying relationships

¹ Brian Gerrish: Reformers in Profile. Fortress Press (1967) p.153

with others. True humanity thus involves a triangular relationship involving God, my neighbour and myself.

But the Fall, argues Calvin, has ruptured that relationship. Love (which is the essential element in the imago dei relationship) instead of going out to God and to one's neighbour, turns in upon itself (incurvature) and in consequence both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with the neighbour is disrupted, distorted and fractured. The human dilemma involving dissension, divisiveness, destructiveness and death takes its rise from this fundamental rupture in the created order.

The extraordinary intervention of God, as recorded in the history of salvation is, according to Calvin, calculated to remedy the disruptive effects of self love in which one is content to live without God and without neighbours; and to re-establish the joyful, thankful, responsible and loving relationships originally intended by God to be the fabric of a just society.

The image of God is restored, refurbished, (or better) rendered operative by the spirit of regeneration explicit in the hearing of the gospel. To hear the gospel is to be entered upon a new and true relationship with God through Christ, and at the same time to be entered upon a new and true relationship with one's neighbour. Responsibility towards one's neighbour is at once an imperative and a possibility through the regenerative powers inherent in faith in Christ. Not even moral turpitude on the part of one's neighbour relieves men of responsibility towards the neighbour.

"Whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. Say, 'he is a stranger' but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you ... Say, 'he is contemptible and worthless' but the Lord shows him to be one to whom He has deigned to give the beauty of His image. Say that you owe nothing for any service of his, but God, as it were, has put him in His own place in order that you may recognize toward him the many and great benefits

with which God has bound you to Himself. Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God which recommends Him to you is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions." (Institutes III, vii; 6)

Here is the origin of Calvin's radical social ethic. Our neighbour bears the image of God; to use him, abuse him, or misuse him is to do violence to the person of God who images himself in every human soul, the Fall notwithstanding. We are, Calvin argues, responsible for each other and because of our common humanity grounded in the image of God, we are particularly responsible for the weak and indigent who have suffered in any way through the vicissitudes of life. The church for Calvin was a kind of "pilot project" of a restored and renewed community. That is why it was so important for the Christian church to engage in serious social service and be in the vanguard for the realization of social justice.

The demands of piety as expressed through religious exercises can never diminish this responsibility to honour God as he images himself in all men. Indeed, to engage in religious exercises without fulfilling responsibilities to one's neighbour is the worst form of hypocrisy. Listen to this comment:

"I recognize that piety toward God comes before love of our brothers; therefore to observe the first table is more precious before God than to observe the second. But since God is invisible, our piety cannot be seen by our fellow men. It is true that religious ceremonials were established to give evidence of piety; but men's observance of them is no proof of their godliness; for it often happens that nobody is more diligent and zealous in going through ceremonies than the hypocrites. God, therefore, wanted to test our love for Him by enjoining us to love one another as brothers. For this reason, love is called the perfection of the law (not only here, but also in Romans 13:8) not because it is

better than the worship of God, but because it is the convincing evidence of it. I have said we cannot see God; He therefore presents Himself to us in our brothers, and in their persons demands from us what we owe to Him. (Calvin Commentaries, LCC Vol.23)

It is clear from this that the "religious" man who is only interested in the salvation of his own soul is a selfish man and is as yet unredeemed. The test of true religion for Calvin is to be determined less by individual piety and more by social ethics. To claim to love God and to hate one's neighbour is a theological contradiction.

This brings us now to Calvin's concept of the solidarity of mankind. That solidarity is grounded in the fact that we all bear the image of God. "The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are unworthy of it. But Scripture enjoins a most excellent reason when it tells us that we are not to look to what men themselves deserve but to attend to the image of God which exists in all and to which we all owe honour and love." (Institutes III, vii; 6) God then is the substance and hence the motivation of all human community. Commenting on Matthew 5: 43-46, Calvin says:

"Therefore God testifies that any man whoever he may be is our neighbour, in order to keep us in the bonds of brotherly love with which we are bound one to another by our common nature: for it is necessary that whenever I see another man, who is my flesh and bone, I see myself. Even though men, most often, break away from this holy society, their depravity does not remove the order of nature; for we must remember that God Himself is the Maker of this union. It follows that the precept of the law which commands us to love our neighbour applies to all men."

We are all responsible for each other, and we are particularly responsible for the weak, the indigent and those who have suffered

grievously through the trials and vicissitudes of life. The Church, as I have already intimated, must be a pilot project and point the way to a renewed and restored community. That is why it is so important for the Christian Church to engage in serious social service, to decry social inequities and to be in the vanguard of the quest for the just society. The Church is doubly responsible because within her has taken place and is taking place the work of re-creation and regeneration. Jesus Christ, the Head of, and Example to, the Church has in a very dramatic and costly way demonstrated what it means to love one's neighbour. This is one of the deeper meanings of the Cross. Thus the Christian who is predestined to conform his life to the perfect image of God in Christ cannot be unconcerned about any area of life where human welfare is at stake.

"We must recognize that God has wanted to make us like members of a body. When we regard each other in this way, each will then conclude: I see my neighbour who has need of me and if I were in such extremity, I would wish to be helped; I must therefore do just that." (Sermon on I Tim. 6: 17-19)

II. Homiletical Implications of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei for Calvin.

Now this powerful teaching about the imago dei and human solidarity had radical implications for the content and thrust of Calvin's preaching. Never forget that Calvin was fundamentally a preacher of the word and it is the thrust of his insight into the nature of the imago dei that gives to his preaching a prophetic quality reminiscent of the Old Testament prophet Amos.

There has been much nonsense written about Calvin being a tyrant at Geneva, a dictator who imposed his iron will upon the lives of unwilling and unhappy citizens of Geneva. Calvin was not even a citizen of Geneva until 1555 -- nine years before his death -- and many of his cherished ecclesiastical reforms were never realized because of the opposition of the City Council. But Calvin nevertheless had a moral

authority. Directly across from his pulpit in La Cathedral de Saint Pierre were the seats of the syndics and councillors who, after hearing his powerful pulpit utterances and biblical expositions and applications, were often influenced to legislate during the week following in terms of the preacher's imperatives of equity and social justice.

Now in spite of his grand conception of a transformed and restored humanity, Calvin was nevertheless a realist. He knew that creeds and deeds were often at variance, and practice and principle frequently were far apart in the Christian community. His preaching then was geared to bring them into alignment. Seated in his congregation at Geneva were professing Christians who were not above exploiting their neighbours; living within Geneva, officially committed to the gospel, were persons whose pursuit of wealth was without compassion; whose desire for gain made them ride rough shod over the rights of individuals, and whose greed made them impervious to the rights of the poor and defenceless. Calvin did not spare them or gloss over their ugly covetousness.

Wealth to Calvin's mind possessed peculiar dangers and involved serious responsibilities. "Let us then that have riches . . . consider that their abundance was not intended to be laid out in intemperance or excess, but in relieving the necessities of the brethren." (Comm. II, Cor. 8:15) Those who sought monopoly control of staple items he publicly lambasted, for example those who stored up wheat in anticipation of shortages which would permit them to raise prices. "These people," he thundered, "entomb the grace of God, as if they warred against His bounty and against the paternal love which He displays towards everyone." (Sermon 96 on Deut. 15: 16-23)

On another occasion he called wheat cornering operators, "murderers, savage beasts, biting and eating up the poor, sucking up their blood." (Comm., Matt. 3:9-16) Another concern on which Calvin expressed himself was the charging of interest. Lending for risk capital was permitted provided one charged no more than 5% interest, but one must charge no interest when lending to the poor, indeed it would be better in the face of the

distress of the poor to give them the necessary money outright. Moreover, one must not neglect the responsibilities of charity in order to have money to lend to the business entrepreneur. Furthermore, what society permitted legally by way of lending rates if unjust was prohibited to the Christian.

III. The Outworking in the Life of the Church of Calvin's Radical Social Ethic.

The outworking of Calvin's understanding of responsibility for one's neighbour brought about a most exciting social welfare program in Geneva. In the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, Calvin called for four orders of ministry: pastors, doctors, elders and deacons. The office of the deacon was to have solicitude for the poor and to minister to their needs. In practice this required a division of the office of the diaconate into two parts, 'procurators' and 'hospitallers'. The procurators were the administrators who received funds and disbursed them, and generally supervised the operation of the institutions designated for the care of the unfortunates. The hospitallers were those who actually cared for the sick and the unfortunate. The procurators and hospitallers were to be elected to office in a manner similar to the elders. (Inst. IV, iii; 9)

The main institution for the care of the unfortunates was the General Hospital (l'Hopital General). There were several departments in the hospital corresponding to the several social service needs of the community. Separate departments existed for the sick, for old people, for those unable to work; for widowed women, for orphaned and illegitimate children, and a special department in a separate building for those afflicted by the plague. In addition there was a kind of outpatients department, or a mobile nursing unit, to care for those not actually hospitalized. The hospital, in addition, provided the services of a physician and a surgeon who not only served those within the hospital institution but also those outside who were brought to their attention by the procurators or the hospitallers.

This far-reaching program of helpfulness was financed in the first instance from the sale of church lands or other properties no

longer needed by the new ecclesiastical regime. In addition, alms boxes were placed at all church doors; annual collections were also instituted, and citizens were encouraged to make provision for the upkeep of the enterprise in their wills. Calvin himself was a regular contributor to the fund although Jerome Bolsec, his uncomplimentary and undesired biographer, suggested he stole from the funds! Whatever was required to make up any deficit after all voluntary resources were exhausted was contributed by direct grant from the council.

Under the administration of the diaconate also was La Bourse Francaise and La Bourse Italienne. Both institutions came into being to assist in the rehabilitation of the refugees from the persecutions raging in France and the Piedmont respectively. Geneva's reputation as a city of refuge takes its rise from this situation forced upon it because of the presence in their midst of John Calvin, the acknowledged leader of the Reformation, and further, because of the willingness of the citizens to organize, administer and finance this significant ministry of helpfulness. The magnitude of the task can be seen when one realizes that Geneva at this time was a mere city of 13,500 and literally hundreds came to her gates for refuge. When the occasion for this kind of refugee service was past, the residue of funds was turned over to the l'Hôpital Général.

Although the ministers were tremendously interested in these projects of helpfulness, and were required to make a quarterly inspection in the company of the chief procurator to ascertain if all was in good order and the goals of the institutions were being achieved, yet it was primarily a lay movement of the Church, administered by the laity and functioning in terms of the imperatives of the gospel which required all Christians to be obedient servants, to emulate Christ's compassion and to love their neighbours as themselves. In their study, Les Diacres de la Ville de Genève, Heyer and Johannot observe, "in the sixteenth century the little nation of Geneva was organized like a large family, the heads of which did not abandon any of its members, small or great, sick or healthy, young or old. All were objects of a touching solicitude."

IV. Christian Vocations and the Realization of the Goal of the Just Society

Now social justice for Calvin was not just a matter of the Church raising a prophetic voice against injustice, and the establishment of programmes of social service. The Christian faith, according to Calvin, was meant to invade every avenue of life. Man's money, property and work, were all meant to be used, not to deprive the neighbour, but to serve him. Work, for example, through Calvin attained a new dignity. It was no longer to be considered a curse occasioned by sin: it was rather a means of serving God and one's neighbour. It was a means of reflecting the imago dei.

(1) Man's work, firstly, was derived from God's work. It involved in a true sense a participation in the Divine Creativity. Man's art, architecture, science, and agriculture, were made possible by the operation of God's creative powers within men.

(2) Work, secondly, was one of the ways in which the beneficent God in His Providence provided for the necessities of man's creaturely existence. The society which would not permit a man to work was depriving him of a basic human right. Through man's work, God provided for the needs of a man and those of his family. To deprive a man of the opportunity to work Calvin declared, dramatically, was tantamount to "slitting his throat". (Sermons on Deuteronomy 24:14-18, cf. Commentaries on Leviticus 19:11-13)

(3) Thirdly, work was a significant means of fulfilling one's responsibilities to one's neighbour. Calvin, as we have already seen, was impressed with the solidarity of human life. Men were not a collection of individuals; they were a community of mutually dependent people. For Calvin the personal ethics must be social ethics, and social ethics must have regard to one's neighbour. The end therefore to which a man devoted his work was of cardinal importance. Work could be an expression of a selfish and acquisitive spirit, or it could be a means of expressing one's new life in Christ, which required not only honour to God, but also love to one's neighbour in whom, however distorted, is reflected the image of God. By work a man was able in the most concrete fashion to show his love to his neighbour. Thus it is obvious that Calvin tied together inseparably the demands of the economic life and those of the ethical and religious life.

I have already mentioned that a man is to receive remuneration for his work. Wages for Calvin carry a spiritual significance. What a man receives by way of remuneration should be seen as a token of the graciousness of God. Wages, says Calvin, are tangible expressions of the gratuitous and unmerited salary with which God honours our labour. They are a concrete indication that God is at work providing for the needs of his children. (cf. Commentaries, Genesis 30:29)

Now this kind of thinking has profound implications for wage scales. When an employer pays an employee he is actually transmitting that which God gives to a man for his work, to meet his own needs and that of his neighbours. To withhold any part of that by underpaying an employee is to dishonour God and to cheat one's neighbour, in this case the employee. Both employer and employee must realize God's part in this matter of income. The employer must realize that the fruit of his industry business or shop is a gift from God even as his employee must realize that his wages (paid by the employer) are also a gift from God. Bearing this in mind, employer and employee ought to be able to work out a suitable wage scale on the basis of common agreement.

This of course, Calvin realizes is a counsel of perfection. Men are not yet fully redeemed and self love does invade the structure of life to disrupt and distort. How does one then make actual wages correspond with the beneficence of God? Wages could be determined by market fluctuations or by government enactment. However mere human standards are never to be completely trusted. For example, the labour market might be oversupplied. Unscrupulous employers, Calvin feared, might use the occasion to drop wages below the amount required to sustain a labourer and his family. "For behold what the rich often do, they spy for occasions and opportunities to cut down by half the wages of poor people who need employment." (Sermons on Deuteronomy 24:14-18) Such action Calvin considered to be cruel and defrauding.

In actual practice Calvin put considerable confidence in the civic authorities in the matter of establishing a just wage. He favoured obviously wage and price controls. Here we can see how political science could be a means of serving the interests of one's neighbour by protecting

him from unscrupulous exploitation, as well as arranging a proper supply of goods and services.

If man's work is to find its true and proper meaning, indeed its original meaning, then man must consciously and personally relate himself to the work of God. In short, he must turn over the management of his work to God. In order to do this he must dispose himself to encounter God's work and be aware of its patterns and goals. To encounter God's work man must engage in Sunday Worship and by this means permit God to renew his life, shape and inform his ethics, and re-define his goals in life. "The Lord", wrote Calvin, "has not simply commanded men to set aside every seventh day as though he took pleasure in idlers. What pleases God is the fact that being freed from all other business, we now apply our minds to recognize and acknowledge the Creator of the world." (Commentaries, Genesis 2:3) Again he wrote, "The faithful must rest from their work in order to let God do His work in them." (Institutes II, viii; 28)

V. Government Action as a Means of Guaranteeing the Just and Free Society.

At this point we ought to speak briefly about the State or the role of civil government in the structure of Calvin's social thought. Unlike Luther who felt that if all men were thoroughly Christian there would be no need for the State, Calvin saw the State as a further expression of the Divine beneficence and the hope for a just society.

(1) Political action, in the first place, served to limit the activities of those whose self love would lead them to exploit the poor, take unfair advantage of the gullible, or profit from other's misfortunes. Interest rates were set by the State to limit the activities of greedy moneylenders; and restrictions were put on monopolists who sought to corner the market on staple goods like wheat and so demand inflated prices. Commenting on Psalm 82:3, (Give justice to the weak and the fatherless, maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute) Calvin observed that:

"a just and well-regulated government will be distinguished for maintaining the rights of the poor

and afflicted...." "It is rare that rich men resort to magistrates for help, except when they happen to fall out among themselves. From these remarks, it is obvious why the cause of the poor and needy is here chiefly commended to rulers; for those who are exposed an easy prey to cruelty and wrongs of the rich have no less need of the assistance and protection of the magistrates than the sick have need of the aid of a physician."

(2) Governments existed in the second place to regulate business and industry so that there might be an equitable distribution of this world's goods and an opportunity for gainful employment. The Geneva Government often under Calvin's probing and sometimes with his assistance set up new industries to help absorb the greatly increased work force occasioned by the influx of refugees.

Governments had the right to tax the people for "public necessity" but they did not have the right to squander the tax revenues or to take more than a fair wage for themselves from the tax revenues. Calvin wrote:

"Princes themselves will ... remember that their revenues are not so much private chests as treasuries of the entire people - which cannot be squandered or spoiled without manifest injustice. Or rather, that these are almost the very blood of the people, which it would be the harshest inhumanity not to spare. Moreover, let them consider that their imposts and levies, and other kinds of tribute are nothing but supports of public necessity; but that to impose them upon the common folk without cause is tyrannical extortion."

(Institutes IV, xx; 13)

(3) Government, in the third place, had a responsibility to help promote the Church and provide her with the freedom to carry on her work under mandate to the Word of God.

"Holy kings are greatly praised in Scripture because they restored the worship of God when it was corrupted or destroyed, or took care of religion that under them it might flourish pure and unblemished.... This proves the folly of those who would neglect the concern for God and would give attention only to rendering justice among men." (Institutes IV, xx; 9)

The Church, in turn, served the best interests of the State by bringing to bear upon the citizen, through worship, teaching, and discipline, the Gospel of Christ which rendered operative the imago dei and underlined the nature of the equity that contributed to the goals of a just society.

However, what happens when the State becomes unjust and proceeds to:

- a) turn its police power against the innocent?
- b) protect and support monopolies?
- c) persecute and destroy those who assemble to worship God and to seek direction for their lives by the clear testimony of Holy Scriptures?

Calvin in the face of an unjust government counselled prayer and patience. God was undoubtedly punishing his people by permitting tyranny and they should seek to ascertain His will in the face of adversity. Calvin feared anarchy. It was a sign of ultimate evil. Tyranny, indeed was to be preferred to anarchy because at least in tyranny there was a modicum of order. Thus Christians were counselled to wait for some intervention, perhaps through a foreign power. Meanwhile they were to examine themselves, and their lives in community, to ascertain where the fault lay. At the same time they were to pray to God for forgiveness, expect deliverance and anticipate the vindication of His cause and that He would show compassion on His poor children.

However Calvin left the door open to more active rebellion.¹ There was in every State a second line of authority subject in obedience to the first line of authority (Prince, King, Queen). If the first line of authority became oppressive, tyrannical and required an obedience that was clearly at variance with God's will then the second line of authority could take action to overthrow the tyrants. John Knox in Scotland, for example, encouraged the nobility of the realm to take up arms against the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise. Théodore Bèze, Calvin's colleague and successor, after the massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day in which the flower of the French Huguenots was cruelly slaughtered upon order of the King, thereafter urged the people to take up arms against their King because he had simply dethroned himself by using legitimate power in an illegitimate way to destroy those whom he was required under God to protect.² Historians have observed the connection between this outlook and that of the French Revolution, and also between it and the Puritan Revolution in England.

However quiescent Calvin himself may have seemed to be with reference to the right of revolution, this fact cannot be gainsaid, "Calvinism taught previously passive men the styles and methods of political activity and enabled them successfully to claim the right of participation in that on-going system of political action that is the modern state."³

Let me say in conclusion that as Calvin saw it, the Christians, reconstructed by the grace of God, empowered by the Spirit of God, guided and goaded by the commandments of God, and functioning fully within Church, State, and the diverse useful vocations of society, were the hope of the new day and the possibility of experiencing here and now the thrust of the Kingdom of God whose outlines would become visible in a just and equitable society.

¹ Cf. Hans Baron, Calvinist Republicanism and its Historical Roots, Church History. Vol. VIII, p.41

² Théodore Bèze, Concerning the Rights of Rulers over their Subjects and the Duty of Subjects toward their Rulers. Translated into English by Henri-Louis Gonin with an introduction by A.A. Van Schelven. Cape Town, Pretoria (1956) p.63

³ W.F. Graham, The Constructive Revolutionary. John Knox Press (1971) p.172