John Calvin Rediscovered

The Impact of His Social and Economic Thought

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Contents

Introduction vii
Edward Dommen

Part 1 Calvin and His Age

1. The Character and Significance of John Calvin's Teaching on Social and Economic Issues 3
Elsie Anne McKee

2. Calvin and Church Discipline 25
Robert M. Kingdon

3. Calvin's View of Property: A Duty Rather Than a Right 33
François Dermange

4. Calvin and the Environment: Calvin's Views Examined through the Prism of Present-Day Concerns, and Especially of Sustainable Development 53
Edward Dommen

5. A General Overview of the Reception of Calvin's Social and Economic Thought 67
Eberhard Busch

Part 2 Calvin's Global Influence

6. Abraham Kuyper's Calvinism: Society, Economics, and Empire in the Late Nineteenth Century 79
James D. Bratt

7. Calvin and Reformed Social Thought in Latin America 93
Eduardo Galasso Faria

8. The Social and Economic Impact of John Calvin on the Korean Church and Society 109
Seong-Won Park

9. Calvin, Calvinism, and Capitalism: The Challenges of New Interest in Asia 121
Christoph Stückelberger

Part 3 Challenges in Translating John Calvin: Texts and Contexts

10. Translating Calvin into English 135
Edward Dommen

11. Translating Calvin into German 143
Peter Opitz

List of Contributors 151

Index 153

Introduction

Edward Dommen

John Calvin lived entirely in an urban environment and was bathed in the atmosphere of nascent capitalism. His parents were bourgeois of Noyon in northern France, where his father was an ecclesiastical administrator. John's early studies were not in theology but in law and letters. When he found it prudent to leave France in early 1535, he went to Basel, a great trading center. When passing through Geneva in mid-1536, at the age of 27, he was induced to stay and organize the Reformed church there. Geneva also was a long-established center of trade and finance as well as manufacturing. When he was forced to leave in 1538, he settled in yet another trading city, Strasbourg, before returning in 1541 to Geneva, where he remained until his death in 1564. In this setting, his everyday contacts called upon him to deal with the moral problems of an urban economy. As a result, he thought more deeply about the subject than the other leading reformers of his time. For instance, he set out his arguments concerning the legitimacy of interest—a key opening the door to the modern economy—in a letter replying to an inquiry the banker Claude de Sachin had addressed to him.[1] There are those who say that Calvin was the father of capitalism. Whether or not one wishes to go that far, there is no denying that he was present at the birth.

Calvin's economic and social teaching was so thoroughly absorbed into the cultural subconscious of Latin Protestants that its particular source was

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1. Edward Dommen, "Calvin et le prêt à intérêt," *Finance & bien commun* 16 (Autumn 2003): 42–58.

generally forgotten. In the Anglo-Saxon world, it was largely swamped within a century or so by Puritanism, a very different system. When Ernst Troeltsch and above all Max Weber were arguing the intimate relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, it was basically Puritanism that they took as their reference.[2] In this regard, Christoph Stückelberger quotes in his essay in this volume an explicit footnote of Weber's: "I may here say definitely that we are not studying the personal views of Calvin, but Calvinism, and that in the form to which it had evolved by the end of the sixteenth and in the seventeenth centuries in the great areas where it had a decisive influence and which were at the same time the home of capitalistic culture."[3]

Weber and Troeltsch were writing before the rediscovery of Calvin's own teachings, which Edmond Perret dates back only to the 1930s.[4] After that the word "Calvinian," which had likewise been forgotten, reappeared in the vocabulary.[5] "Calvinian" refers to Calvin's own teaching and its spirit, as distinct from "Calvinist," which refers to the theology of the Reformed churches and those who follow the teaching of those churches as it has changed with time and place.[6] Edmond Perret illustrates the distinction in terms of the slogan *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*. As he puts it, "Calvinist" refers to the Reformed churches as institutions (*reformata*), while "Calvinian" refers to Calvin as a touchstone in the unending process of reformation (*reformanda*).

A high point in the rediscovery of Calvin was the publication in 1961 of André Biéler's *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*. This monumental work consists of a meticulous compilation of quotations from Calvin's own writings on economic and social issues, inserted into a masterful commentary. Until 1990, however, when it was translated into Portuguese, it remained accessible only to people capable of reading French. Eduardo Galasso's essay describes the context of this event.

The book has at last been translated into English.[7] In order to mark its publication, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the University of Geneva Faculty of Theology, and the John Knox International Reformed Center held an international consultation on "The Impact of Calvin's Economic and Social

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[2] Ernst Troeltsch, "Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen," in *Gesammelte Schriften I* (Tübingen, 1912). ET: *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1931); Max Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus," in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* (Tübingen, 1904–1905). ET: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930).

[3] Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 220n7.

[4] Perret is a former secretary-general of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. He shared this with me in a personal communication.

[5] It was originally invented in 1560 by the French poet Ronsard (*Le Grand Robert*).

[6] See Seong-Won Park's essay in this volume.

[7] *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005).

Thought on Reformed Witness" in Geneva on November 3–6, 2004. This book assembles several of the contributions to the consultation. Others were published in the December 2005 issue of *Reformed World*.

The collection in this volume is divided into three parts. The first presents a set of insights into Calvin's own economic, social, and environmental thought. The second describes the rediscovery of Calvin in different times and places, starting with precursors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It then moves on to describe the splash that was created by Calvin's own ideas landing in the Protestant pond that missionaries, mostly from the United States, had earlier dug in countries in Latin America and Asia. The third section deals with the pitfalls of translating Calvin's ideas faithfully from one language to another, or from the language of one period into that of another, against the treacherous background of the unstated presuppositions of each.

The preparation and publication of this volume were aided by a timely grant from the Center for Christian Scholarship at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Center joins the authors and editors in hoping that this volume will encourage deeper exploration into what Calvin's economic and social teaching has to say to the world today.

PART 1

Calvin and His Age

1

The Character and Significance of John Calvin's Teaching on Social and Economic Issues

Elsie Anne McKee

To grasp John Calvin's teaching on social and economic matters, it is helpful to set it in the context of his wider biblical and practical theology, which shapes and conditions all his other teachings. When that is done, it is evident how social and economic themes are interwoven with the fundamental character of Calvin's theology, and it is also possible to point out practical applications of his teaching and to assess the significance of his ideas for the sixteenth century and later.

CALVIN'S BIBLICAL AND PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

Calvin's Religious Purpose and Audience

The central focus of Calvin's work was to instruct and exhort Christians in the purpose for which they were created, that is, to know and love and serve the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who creates, redeems, and gives faith. This purpose is also the greatest human good, the fulfillment and meaning of human life.[1] The existential entry point into this knowledge of God is effected by the Holy Spirit through faith, making the person chosen by God know and trust God's goodwill in Christ for himself or herself.[2] Calvin assumes that he is addressing believers, people who confess Jesus Christ as their only Savior. Because they know the Redeemer, believers also know their Creator. Because the God they know through the work of the Holy Spirit is the One who loved them enough to die for their sins and grant them full acceptance purely by divine grace, believers also know that this God is constantly watching over them in this life and preparing them for a place in the life to come.

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[1] "The Catechism of the Church of Geneva," in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 91.

In addition to the salvific work of Christ, the Creator has endowed the world and especially human beings with many amazing earthly gifts so that nothing may be lacking for good in all creation.[3] Because of human sin, however, that creation is no longer perfect as God made it, but God's goodness still shines in the universe for those who have the eyes of faith and spectacles of Scripture to discern it (1.6.1). To make sense of Calvin's teaching, it is essential to recognize that what he says about social and economic life is rooted in his understanding of God as Creator but is also conditioned by the fact that he is addressing people who know God the Redeemer. Even though believers share socioeconomic dimensions of life with nonbelievers, what Calvin says about these earthly matters is determined by his understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in Christians.

Axioms, Presuppositions, and the Knowledge of God

Calvin operates with certain axioms, assumptions about truth that require no proof. (This is true for all people, whether they recognize it or not.) One of Calvin's axioms is the conviction that God is good and just and that what God wills is good and right by definition. No evidence is necessary, but explanations may be given so that what is believed may be understood and practiced. Another axiom is that Christ is the sole Savior and that no one can rightly know God without coming to God through Christ. A third axiom is that the Bible is the sole and sufficient revelation of God's will; nothing can be added or ignored, and no speculation may fill in what look to us like gaps. More significantly, this revelation is unified because God is the one original Author. Calvin readily recognizes the roles of the human authors of Scripture and the differences among them, but it is axiomatic for him that all that people need to know for salvation is in the Bible. Moreover, all that they need to practice will be coherently practicable when it is rightly understood.

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2. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.2.7; ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). In some cases where I have quoted from the edition, I have made minor alterations to make the text more easily readable. Subsequent citations are given in the text.

3. Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, trans. J. King (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 1:100.

To put this another way, Calvin believes that God not only wills good to us in Christ but that God's goodwill does not contradict itself in essence, even if it may seem to do so in human sight. Calvin is not a philosopher; he is a very practical theologian who bases knowledge of God on the gift of faith, not independent reason. Not all of God's will has been revealed to us, but we are concerned only with what has been revealed, and the rest is neither necessary for us nor any of our business. Everything that God has revealed must be believed as true, but there are different categories of biblical teaching. Some are the promises on which faith is established and the beliefs essential for salvation (3.2.29). Others are doctrines that are very important but about which amicably expressed differences can be tolerated; these points are not grounds for breaking Christian fellowship (4.1.12). Yet other teachings concern various aspects of life or practice, often expressed as general rules for corporate or personal behavior. In these latter circumstances, Christian freedom plays a vital role, because the precise ways that general rules are to be carried out are not specified.

To summarize: in order to understand Calvin's social and economic thought, one must remember that he is instructing and exhorting Christians, whom he assumes are existentially acquainted with God and therefore know that God is good and that God wills good for them, and that their highest good is to know and serve this good God. Knowledge that leads to salvation is conditioned by the experience of faith, but much social and economic truth can be and is known without saving faith. So it is possible to adapt what Calvin says on socioeconomic matters to address a non-Christian audience. Nonetheless, the presupposition of his teaching is that he is addressing Christians, the elect insofar as earthly sight can determine, and much of the cogency or beauty of his argument depends on accepting his axioms.

SOME DOCTRINES RELATED TO SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE

Understanding the interconnected group of doctrines on law, Christian life, and Christian freedom is important for making sense of Calvin's teachings on social and economic issues. These linked doctrines also illustrate the relationship between general principles or rules given in Scripture and the circumstantial applications that human beings must determine for themselves.

Law and the Decalogue

As is well known, for Calvin the Ten Commandments, which are summarized in Christ's two great commandments (Matt. 22:37–40), express God's unchanging will for God's people. Since the fall, human beings can no longer truly understand or practice the law by their natural abilities, although knowledge of the second table (the love of neighbors) has been less severely damaged than that of the first table (the worship of God). Calvin clearly acknowledges that special talents for social and economic life are part of God's created gifts to all humanity, including "good heathen" (2.2.12–17). Furthermore, he recognizes that honest pagans can keep the letter of the law in such matters as honoring parents, not killing or stealing, and so forth. However, in Calvin's view, neither the worship of God nor the love of the neighbor can be rightly done without the other, and thus real love of the neighbor is only possible for the redeemed who are moved by the grace of the Holy Spirit (3.7.4). Since he is addressing believers, when he explains the social and economic commandments, he focuses on what it means for Christians to fulfill them.

For Calvin, the "third" and principal use of the law is to serve Christians as a pattern for love, as a guide to the right way to love God and their neighbors (2.7.12). This third use is not simply a series of dos and don'ts; it encompasses a whole way of life. The two tables of the law can never be independent of each other, and thus socioeconomic matters are conditioned by, and even subsumed under, the primary service of God. Although the first table, the worship of God, always takes precedence over the second in principle, in actual practice the love of neighbor may be the best evidence for real love of God—better than the finest liturgy offered by a hypocritical heart. Logically, then, Calvin's teaching on the law demonstrates that social and economic behavior is neither an autonomous sphere of human life, nor just an optional addendum; it is a vital part of the Christian worship of God.[4]

The Genevan reformer is always practical, and he works to make it clear to his hearers that what he is saying is immediately relevant to them. To explain how Christians are to understand the law, Calvin gives examples. For instance, in the commandment forbidding murder, he shows what it means to practice the third use of the law:

> All violence, injury, and any harmful thing at all that may injure our neighbor's body are forbidden to us. We are accordingly commanded if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbors' lives, faithfully to employ it: if there is anything that makes for their peace, to see to it; if anything harmful, to ward it off; if they are in any danger, to lend a helping hand. . . . Therefore this law also forbids murder of the heart, and enjoins the inner intent to save a brother's life. (2.8.40)

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[4] See Elsie Anne McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving* (Geneva: Droz, 1984), chap. 10.

Calvin's exposition of this commandment applies it in ways that are not obvious from the literal sense of the biblical text or the viewpoint of independent human reason, yet what he says is plainly in keeping with the intent of Jesus' summary of the law: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Christian Life and Christian Freedom

When Calvin describes the Christian life, one key issue is how believers are to value and use the present earthly life, especially by comparison with the future life. Repeatedly Calvin insists that although the future life is of course better—it is free from sin and the cares and crosses of this world—nonetheless that future glory should never lead the Christian to regard this earthly life as evil. Meditation on the future life should relativize the value placed on this world, but that should not lead to despising the earthly. On the contrary, although by comparison with the life to come the present life is much less good and blessed, nevertheless, because it is the gift of the good Creator who is also the Redeemer, this life is still good and blessed. Calvin, so often pictured as a killjoy, in fact praises the many wonderful things God has given for human enjoyment as well as human use:

> [God] meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer. . . . Has the Lord clothed the flowers with the great beauty that greets our eyes, the sweetness of smell that is wafted upon our nostrils, and yet will it be unlawful for our eyes to be affected by that beauty, or our sense of smell by the sweetness of that odor? What? Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble, with a loveliness that renders them more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use? (3.10.2)

For Calvin, the wonder of God's generosity and the beauty of God's creation, combined with God's will for human good, give us many reasons to delight in that divine goodness which lavishes gifts on all human beings.

The one condition for using and enjoying God's good gifts in this earthly life is that they be used and enjoyed rightly, that is, according to the purposes for which God gave them. Calvin says that God gave us such blessings "for our good, not for our ruin" (3.10.2) and that what constitutes "our good" is, for believers, conditioned by the two great commandments. In the first place, material blessings are rightly used when they serve as means to fulfill the purpose of human existence, which is worshiping God in word and life: "One bridle is put upon [our free use of God's gifts] if it be determined that all things were created for us that we might recognize the Author and give thanks for his kindness toward us" (3.10.3). Right use of God's generosity means both thankfully acknowledging the Giver and demonstrating that gratitude by being responsible stewards of the blessings. If we abuse the gifts, we dishonor the Giver and fail in our earthly vocation: "Where is your thanksgiving if you so gorge yourself with banqueting or wine that you either become stupid or are rendered useless for the duties of piety and of your calling?" (3.10.3).

The second dimension of right use of material things is guided by the second great commandment, employing God's gifts to serve the love of neighbors:

> But scripture . . . warns that whatever benefits we obtain from the Lord have been entrusted to us on this condition: that they be applied to the common good of the church. And therefore the lawful use of all benefits consists in a liberal and kindly sharing of them with others. . . . Let this, therefore, be our rule for generosity and beneficence: We are the stewards of everything God has conferred on us by which we are able to help our neighbor, and are required to render account of our stewardship. Moreover, the only right stewardship is that which is tested by the rule of love. (3.7.5)

In fact, any use of the wealth that God has entrusted to human beings that does not follow these conditions is an offense against both commandments:

> God then, no doubt, is deprived by us of his right, when we are unkind to the poor, and refuse them aid in their necessity. We indeed thereby wrong human beings, and are cruel; but our crime is still more heinous, inasmuch as we are unfaithful stewards. God is more liberal to us than to others so that some portion of our abundance may come to the poor.
>
> God consecrates to their use the things which he has given us so abundantly, so we become guilty of sacrilege whenever we do not give to our brethren what God commands us.[5]

Furthermore, Calvin deals with the cavil that what we have earned is our own possession, as if we had not received it. He insists that whatever we have "is a simple and free gift of God, however it may come to us, even when it would seem to have been obtained by our own skill and diligence, and supplied by our own hands. For it is by his blessing alone that our labors truly prosper" (3.20.44).

In every way, Calvin emphasizes both God's amazing generosity in giving people all that they need for this earthly life and the corresponding sober enjoyment by which Christians show their appreciation for these gifts and never forget either the Giver or the appointed role of the gifts in Christian life. However, says Calvin, Scripture does not give Christians detailed instructions in the use of their material possessions:

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[5] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 586. I have made slight modifications to wording and punctuation for clarity.

> God certainly always commands that we relieve our brethren's necessities, but He nowhere lays it down how much we ought to give, so that we can make a calculation and divide between ourselves and the poor. He nowhere binds us to specific times or persons or places but simply bids us be guided by the rule of love.[6]

The "rule of love" is a rather general guide, so how much should one give? Calvin believes that giving is not limited to sharing our profits or what is superfluous for our own needs: "We are not to spare our capital funds, if the interest available from these fails to meet the necessities [of the poor]. In other words, your liberality has to go as far as the diminution of your patrimony, and the disposal of your estates."[7] On the other hand, the value of the gift is not measured by its amount. While there is no absolute standard of measure, what matters is the attitude of the giver, and when offered in the right spirit, any gift is honored. If "the poor person has a liberal mind, . . . a small gift is looked upon as a rich and generous sacrifice."[8]

By the general rule of love, each Christian has both considerable freedom and inescapable responsibility to decide the day-to-day embodiment of earthly stewardship not in a legalistic way but according to the Holy Spirit's guidance. Implicit here is the idea that one cannot give a certain amount and wash his or her hands of the poor. The rule of love must be held constantly in mind; in each new situation, one must assess what the loving response to the neighbor should be in this concrete time and place. Practical as always, Calvin acknowledges that the scope of the obligation and the personal reach of the Christian may well not be the same:

> There is a general command to relieve the need of all the poor [and not just some]. Yet those who succor the indigence of those whom they know or see to be suffering are obeying this law, even though they overlook many who are pressed by equally great needs, because either they cannot know all or cannot provide for all. (3.20.39)

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6. Calvin, *Commentary on the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail, ed. D. and T. Torrance (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1964), 110.

7. Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. A. W. Morrison, ed. D. and T. Torrance (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1972), 216.

8. Calvin, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles, 1–13*, trans. J. F. Fraser and W. J. G. McDonald, ed. D. and T. Torrance (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1965), 334.

The rule of love is universal; the concrete daily application is immediate and local.

The modern West is most concerned with individual rights and obligations, but in Calvin's own age the West (like many parts of the world today) was more deeply impressed with corporate privileges and responsibilities. Thus, Calvin recognizes that not only do God's laws apply to whole societies as well as individuals, but these societies also have a certain freedom in implementing the corporate application of God's teaching with regard to social and economic issues. Calvin the trained lawyer does not regard the judicial laws of ancient Israel to be obligatory for other societies, but the fundamental principles of equity these Old Testament laws express are universal, and those principles must always be maintained (4.20.15–16). For example, all people know through their consciences that murder should be punished, but the nature of the punishment may vary from country to country or age to age. Different jurisdictions have the right to determine the exact penalty for a crime, but then the individual members of the society are bound to those specific regulations, not by conscience but for order and decency.

In similar fashion there is freedom in the administration of all God's earthly blessings, but Christian societies may use these material goods in various ways. The purpose for which God gave the gifts must always be kept in view, and God's rule of justice ("equity") must be maintained, but details may vary in different places. For example, a government may determine whether to allow usury (loaning money at interest) under certain circumstances and not others. Calvin allows the legitimacy of a 5 percent interest rate in particular business projects where no one's livelihood is endangered; however, no loans at interest may be charged to poor people who must borrow to live.[9] The application of the principle of equity must be tailored to the concrete situation. The principles are universal; the application is particular.

SOME PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN LIFE RELATED TO SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC ISSUES

The discussion of law, Christian life, and Christian freedom gives a good idea of how social and economic issues are interwoven in some of Calvin's fundamental teachings. A second set of doctrines that are significant (though less commonly explained) center on the reformer's understanding of the character of human society.

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9. See Georgia Harkness, *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics* (1931; repr., Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 201–10.

Human Society, Marriage, and Diverse Gifts

One of the basic grounds for Calvin's social teaching is the conviction that Adam and Eve and all their descendants were created to be social beings. His commentaries and sermons on Genesis, especially Gen. 2:18–21, as well as statements in the *Institutes*, repeatedly make this idea clear: "The commencement [of creation], therefore, involves a general principle, that man was formed to be a social animal."[10] Indeed, Calvin takes for granted that human beings cannot be happy in isolation.

> [Even though Adam had the animals,] yet he always remained as if half a person, incomplete [until God created Eve]. . . . For there is nothing more contrary to our nature than solitude, as each one knows. If we had everything we could wish, a table in front of us all day long, our bed ready for us to sleep, if we had both accessories and all necessities; if then each one had an earthly paradise on condition that he live there alone, would that life not be like being half dead? We would do nothing but languish in the midst of such felicities—each one knows that.[11]

The paradigmatic pattern of human society is the companionship of Adam and Eve, the married couple. Calvin praises the happiness and fruits of this "truly celestial order"[12] when it is rightly maintained:

> [If Adam had not fallen,] we would see that God reigns over marriage: He was the author of it, and He blesses everything so that it would be like an angelic melody between husbands and wives. And that would be so not only for a married couple themselves, but neighbors would help each other, and each woman would draw her neighbors and relations to do their duty, and each husband the same. See then, there would be a general covenant [*alliance*] of God's grace in this world, if our father Adam had not sinned.[13]

Despite the fall, Calvin understands marriage, this God-given association, as a basis for human unity because all humans are related—they all came from the same original family:

> God's inestimable goodness and His more than fatherly care is demonstrated in this place, when He did not want man to be alone but wanted him to have company. That order was established in such a way as to warn us by the creation of Eve that, being thus formed from our father

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[10] Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses*, 1:128.

[11] Calvin, *Sermons sur la Genèse chapitres 1,1–11,4*, ed. Max Engammare (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 125–126. Translations by the author.

[12] Ibid., 138.

[13] Ibid., 129.

> Adam and procreated of his seed, we must truly be one. Let each one recognize his neighbors as his flesh and bone, and his very substance.[14]

Marriage and the unity of the human family have been damaged by sin and the fall, but both still remain God's good gifts, and in Christ there is restoration of both marriage and society. It is notable that almost every time Calvin discusses a passage on marriage he includes a reference to the larger community of the human race, and sometimes he gives this "implication" of the covenant of marriage more attention than the relationship between man and woman. Not every person is married, but every person is clearly part of the human family and community.[15]

Human beings were not only intended to live together for their happiness, but they also need each other. In commentaries on various New Testament passages that list diverse charisms (e.g., Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12), Calvin emphasizes that God has given different people different gifts. Here the focus is not material possessions but human abilities. One purpose for this diversity of abilities is to draw people together, so that each might help the others:

> Here . . . [Paul] is instructing individuals to bring what they have as a contribution to the common stock, and not to keep the gifts of God to themselves, which would mean that the benefits of each person's gifts would be restricted to himself alone, instead of being shared with others; but [they are] to work harmoniously together for the edification of all.[16]

The diverse gifts also ensure that every human being needs other people. To put it another way, no one has so much that he or she can stand alone.

> All [people] desire to have enough to prevent them from needing help from their brethren. But there is a bond of fellowship when no one has sufficient for himself, but is forced to borrow from others. . . . To prevent anyone from being grieved that he has not been given everything, [Paul] reminds us that each individual has his own responsibility assigned to him by the good purpose of God, because it is expedient for the common salvation of the body that no individual should be so furnished with the fulness of gifts as to despise his brethren with impunity.[17]

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[14] Ibid., 126.

[15] Ibid., 134, 136, 137.

[16] Calvin, *Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. J. W. Fraser, ed. D. and T. Torrance (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1960), 260.

[17] Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. R. Mackenzie, ed. D. and T. Torrance (Edinburgh: St. Andrew, 1961), 268.

If everyone values and uses rightly both his or her own gifts and those of others, then the community of faith will serve God in harmony. If, though, individuals are not satisfied to use their own (limited) gifts appropriately, the result will be detrimental to the gifts as well as the community:

> All things are not appropriate for all people, but the gifts of God are so distributed that each has a limited portion. Each individual ought to be so intent upon bestowing his own gifts for the edification of the church, that no one may relinquish his own function, and trespass on that of another. . . . All gifts have their own appointed limits, and to depart from them is to spoil the gifts themselves.[18]

As we have seen, in the sermons on Genesis Calvin expresses awareness of the happiness and strength that human beings can draw from God's plan for human association in families and communities. In dealing with the passages on charisms he points out that selfish independence is restrained by mutual dependence, and people truly enjoy their individual gifts when they use them to contribute to the common life according to the purposes God intended. Whether his emphasis is on gratitude or respect for necessary constraints, it is evident that Calvin was convinced that no person could or should live for himself or herself, nor can any solitary person truly fulfill God's will for humanity.

To say that people are created as social beings is not to say that all are equal. Calvin certainly affirms that both women and men are made in God's image and that both masters and servants are among the elect. However, he believed that God established hierarchies for this earthly life, and these mundane differences of rank or authority are therefore right and as permanent as this earth. Thus, women are subordinate to men, children to parents, servants to masters, citizens or subjects to magistrates or kings. Each person is called to live according to God's will in his or her own work, station, or task. That means the exercise of just authority or sincere obedience, and the appropriate use of all gifts according to each one's vocation and estate.

Humanity and Nature

Human beings were created to be stewards of God's world as well as a family made in God's image. Calvin's hierarchical views mean that the nature of dominion is different for women than for men, but it is clear that he considers ruling over nature and caring for it the common responsibility of men and women. The critical issue is responsibility. Susan Schreiner has demonstrated

[18] Ibid.

that Calvin does not confine his attention to nature simply to its relationship to human beings, but that does remain his primary focus.[19]

In one sense, it could be said that Calvin's most immediate interest in the natural world is how that "theater of God's glory" is related to believers. Nature is the most visible arena of God's power. In early modern Europe (as was true long before and still is in many parts of the world today), the power of nature was not always obviously benevolent. In fact, it was and is one source of anxiety and suffering. Thus Calvin, who is speaking to Christians, emphasizes that piety and faith concentrate on the manifestation of God's power for believers' good (3.2.31). The mighty Creator is the same God whom persons of faith know as the Redeemer. And so, because God has chosen to give them eternal salvation, believers know that God's governing care (providence) also is only for their good. None of the accidents of this world, which because of sin they have not learned to manage according to God's intent, can separate them from God. A world that may appear to be out of control can hurt believers in their earthly lives, but nothing can finally or essentially harm those whom God has redeemed and called. That is, Christians who live in this often dangerous world are not in any *ultimate* danger.

That said, the responsibility of caring for all who suffer in this earthly life rests on believers by God's command and gift. The points examined above—Calvin's teaching on the third use of the law as a guide for regenerate Christians, Christian freedom in the life of faith, and individual responsibility to love and serve God and neighbor—all manifest his intense interest in the personal character of each believer's relationship with God and each believer's faithful response to the social and economic teaching of the Bible. However, personal does not mean individualistic. Every Christian is called to live as part of the human family according to God's original intent, a vocation to which believers are restored by Christ's grace. Every Christian is called to exercise right stewardship in all of God's world, sharing with those in need, enjoying God's material blessings precisely insofar as they honor God's purposes, and caring for God's world as good stewards. But individual Christians are Christians only as part of the body of Christ, the church.

CORPORATE ECCLESIAL EXPRESSIONS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC LIFE

The body of Christ visible on earth must also be shaped by God's will for righteousness in social and economic life, and that God-directedness applies to all dimensions of its life—liturgical, structural, and practical.

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[19] See Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1991). The last clause represents my interpretation and not Schreiner's.

Worship

In keeping with the fact that Calvin is addressing Christians, there is an important role for social and economic issues in the context of worship, through individual prayer but also and perhaps especially in the gathered community of faith. In Acts 2:42, the paradigmatic Reformed description of right corporate worship, there are four elements: preaching of the Word, the Lord's Supper, prayers, and *koinonia*. Of these, the last two are directly concerned with social or economic matters in one way or another.[20]

Prayers in the liturgy naturally focus on the praise of God and acknowledgment of personal and corporate sinfulness, including abuse of God's gifts and wrongs done to God's people. The Calvinist confession of sin is too well known to need further attention, but the intensity of Calvin's concern for intercessory prayer is often forgotten and worth emphasizing. Prayers are one of the most important means of remembering and asking for restoration of the social ties of the Christian family, and even for the good of "all people who live on earth," as Calvin says in explaining the Lord's Prayer:

> Now if we so desire, as is fitting, to extend our hand to one another and to help one another, there is nothing in which we can benefit our brethren more than in commending them to the providential care of the best of fathers; for if [God] is kind and favorable, nothing at all else can be desired. Indeed, we owe even this very thing to our Father. Just as one who truly and deeply loves any father of a family at the same time embraces his whole household with love and good will, so it becomes us in like measure to show to his people, to his family, and lastly, to his inheritance, the same zeal and affection that we have toward this Heavenly Father. For he so honored these as to call them the fullness of his only-begotten Son. Let the Christian [person], then, conform his prayers to this rule in order that they may be in common and embrace all who are his brothers [and sisters] in Christ, not only those whom he at present sees and recognizes as such but all [people] who dwell on earth. For what God has determined concerning them is beyond our knowing except that it is no less godly than humane to wish and hope the best for them. (3.20.38)

In the Sunday liturgy, following the instructions of 1 Timothy 2:1, there were formal prayers for all states of humanity: civil leaders; ministers of the church; the sick, needy, and afflicted; and all on earth.[21]

Special evidence for the seriousness with which Calvin regarded repentance and intercession is seen in his creation of the day of prayer service. This established a weekly liturgical reminder of God's providential immediacy in believers' lives and the prayers that Christian brothers and sisters owe on each other's behalf. Daily services also included petitions for the afflicted; those who knew of illness or other problems were encouraged to tell the preacher about these ills so that these sisters and brothers might be mentioned by name. In addition, a model prayer included in the catechism focused on those suffering persecution.[22] All of these forms of prayer—whether naming a sick parishioner, or remembering women and men in captivity for their faith, or asking forgiveness for failures to care for neighbors, or giving thanks for a victory by beleaguered fellow Protestants—were a part of the social consciousness of Calvin's worshiping community.

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[20] See McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate*, chap. 3.

[21] See Calvin, "The Lord's Day Service with Lord's Supper," in *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. and trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 126–31.

The other element of Acts 2:42 that links formal worship with social and economic issues in concrete ways is *koinonia*, or mutual fellowship. The forms that *koinonia* can take are not dictated by the verse, but Calvin's familiarity with Scripture led him to identify almsgiving as the primary liturgical expression of mutual fellowship. He also saw the apostolic kiss of peace as a manifestation of *koinonia* (though apparently not one he wanted to practice in Geneva). The alms offering, money for the support of the poor and needy, was usually associated with the Lord's Supper. It was an expression of thanksgiving to God and of the mutual love that being spiritually fed in Christ's body and blood should nourish among earthly members of his body. The material offerings in worship were not only a form of gratitude to God but also a practical means for God's service in the world. In areas where the Calvinist church was not established, these voluntary collections might well be the only funds available for the work of the diaconate.[23]

Church Constitution and Ministries

It has long been recognized that the Reformed tradition shaped by Calvin includes four ecclesiastical offices—elders, deacons, teachers, and pastors—in its understanding of New Testament church order. Three of these—the diaconate, the consistory, and the office of doctor—were the institutional structures Calvin established to embody the corporate responsibility of the church for social and economic issues. Christian care for the poor, education for this life and especially in the faith, and oversight of the people to build up their confession and life as Christians were certainly not new ideas. However, the way Calvin structured these Christian responsibilities, particularly the two "lay" offices of elder and deacon, was new and distinctive.

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[22] Calvin, "Weekday Worship: The Day of Prayer Liturgy" in McKee, *John Calvin*, 157–177. The importance of the day of prayer service is revealed by the fact that it was the only one besides the Sunday morning service for which Calvin wrote a special liturgy, and the only day besides Sunday that was observed with a partial holiday and services at two different hours so that everyone could attend. For daily services and prayer for the persecuted, see ibid., 152, 215–17.

[23] See Elsie Anne McKee, *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition and Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 31–33.

According to his reading of the New Testament, Calvin believed that the church should have an office of oversight or discipline—what might be called "Christian formation." This task was to be exercised not by one bishop but by a plurality of representative church leaders made up of two kinds of presbyters (pastors and elders) who formed the consistory. The work of oversight was concerned with helping to shape believers in the marks of Christians: the confession of faith, a life which is fitting, and participation in the sacraments of the church (4.1.8). In conjunction with the preaching of the gospel, the consistory was intended to bring to repentance those who disregarded the knowledge and practice of faith, and of morality and justice. As Robert Kingdon has so clearly shown, this discipline was not the harsh series of continual excommunications often caricatured in older accounts of Calvin's Geneva. The consistory was rather what he deftly calls a "compulsory counseling service," which worked diligently to correct and reconcile those who were at odds, for the sake of God's honor and building up the Christian community.[24] In a sense, the elders and pastors together focused on the work of making the earthly society in their charge approximate as closely as possible God's purpose for humanity: to create Adam and Eve and their descendants as social beings whose good it is to live in right fellowship with God and each other.

The diaconate was Calvin's other lay ecclesiastical office. Its responsibility was to care for all those who could not care for themselves, such as orphans, widows, and the handicapped. Calvin's sermons clearly demonstrate his conviction that this office is biblical and normative:

> Sometimes it is considered an office of small importance to serve God by serving the poor. But St. Paul says that it is an excellent rank, indeed a freedom in the faith to those who have walked rightly in this task. Thus, therefore, we can apply St. Paul's passage [1 Tim. 3:8–13] to St. Luke's discussion [Acts 6:1–6], and see that it does not merely tell us a story about what was done once, but it shows us that this ought to be a lasting order in the Church of God. . . . God is informing us what

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[24] Robert M. Kingdon, "Calvin and the Family: The Work of the Consistory in Geneva," in *Calvin's Work in Geneva*, ed. R. Gamble (New York: Garland, 1992), 96. See also other writings by Kingdon and his group of graduates who have worked on Consistory records, such as Jeffrey Watt and Thomas Lambert. For Calvin's theological reasoning with regard to the eldership, see Elsie Anne McKee, *Elders and the Plural Ministry* (Geneva: Droz, 1988).

> government, order, and organization He commands there to be among His people. If we want to be considered His Church we must have what is here proclaimed to us. What the apostles did [in Acts 6] must be a lasting example to us, since we have a general rule about it from the mouth of St. Paul. . . . It is necessary that the poor be cared for, and for this there must be deacons.[25]

The function comes first, then the office and personnel to carry out the task. Care for the poor is one of the responsibilities of the church as a body, and therefore the Holy Spirit led the apostles to establish deacons.

Calvin's diaconate, like the eldership, was made up of a plurality of persons and a variety of functions. (Calvin always prefers corporate leadership, especially in the church. Even when it is applied by one or two people, the authority is always held by a plurality of individuals.) In principle, male deacons were to collect and administer the church's financial aid for the poor, and female deacons were to nurse and tend the afflicted in person. (In Geneva the "nursing" ministry was headed by a man, and Calvin flatly stated that this was not right, but he seems to have concluded that since the function was being carried out, he would tolerate the deviation from the biblically preferred personnel.[26]) The diaconate is concerned with seeing that those who suffer from physical ills are provided with the care that God's children owe to each other as members of the same family. It is also the church's corporate economic and social ministry in the stewardship of material goods for the love of the neighbor.[27]

What is significant here is that these two offices, the eldership and the diaconate, demonstrate Calvin's conviction that the church as an earthly institution has corporate responsibility for social and economic issues. Individuals are to work for right relationships and economic justice in their own lives, but the church itself also has biblically grounded structures concerned with shaping good Christian lives and a just Christian society. That means the church as institution has responsibilities to those who need encouragement or rebuke, and those who need food or shelter or education or medicine, in order that they may receive what they require to honor God and live in truly human fellowship.

The Body of Christ in the Inhabited World

Calvin's commitment to the international, ecumenical character of the church yielded a significant dimension of his thinking about social and economic practice. Several forms of this international church life may be identified briefly. One is Calvin's attention to education, which included the establishment of an ecclesiastical office of doctor or teacher. Although this educational interest may seem to modern Christians tangentially related to the social and economic life of the church, in early modern Europe it contributed significantly to the "multicultural" (or extralocal) social links among Reformed people.[28] The founding of the Genevan Academy was an important part of creating an international network of European leaders, which helped shape a new kind of religious (confessional) connectionalism.

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[25] From Calvin's sermon on Acts 6:1–3, quoted in McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate*, 156.

[26] See the passage from his sermon on 1 Tim. 5:9–10, quoted in McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate*, 215–16.

[27] See McKee, *Diakonia in the Classical Reformed Tradition*, esp. 61–82.

In its own way, this Reformed family of churches replaced the universal structure of Rome with a network of churches, geographically separate, each possessing its own confession. The network was intended to be both mutually supportive and mutually correcting, a family in which there was room for some diversity in a common communion. Something of this sense of community is found in Calvin's description of the purpose of catechisms, which are "public testimonies by which Churches, that agree in Christian doctrine though widely separated in space, may mutually recognize each other."[29] The word "mutually" is significant: one does not dictate to the other, there is a willingness to accept differences on some matters provided these are not held with contentious obstinacy (4.1.12), but there is mutual recognition as fellow members of the faith. This mutuality included consultations among the Reformed churches, and in this as in many other ways, Calvin was building on the work of Martin Bucer and his colleagues. One vital example, begun in the first generation and extending for many years, was the exchange of worship practices and borrowing of liturgical materials and Psalters.[30] The correspondence between Geneva and the Swiss and South German churches in deciding how to handle the Servetus case and the later Synod of Dort provide other examples. Together these illustrate the common Reformed conviction that corporate members of the body of Christ are mutually accountable to each other as corporate groups, just as individual members of Christ are accountable to each other.

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[28] Calvin's doctors were fundamentally concerned with the purpose of keeping the doctrine of the Christian community pure and bringing each new generation up in the knowledge of God. This included both elementary and more advanced levels of humanist learning as well as theological training. The highest rank of doctors, the "public lecturers" who taught theology and philosophy, were recognized as ministers of the church. The primary focus of the ministry of education was providing for the future leadership of the church, though at times (especially after Calvin's day) there might have been some disagreement about whether that meant essentially pastors or also included Christian civil leaders. If the latter, then the element of social sharing would be strengthened even beyond the church. See Robert W. Henderson, *The Teaching Office in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), and Karin Maag, *Seminary or University? The Genevan Academy and Reformed Higher Education, 1559–1620* (Brookfield, NH: Ashgate, 1995).

[29] "John Calvin to the Faithful Ministers . . . ," prefatory letter to "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," 89. There are various collections of Reformed confessions and catechisms, which testify to the desire to respect national, regional, or cultural entities. The contrast with the single Augsburg Confession for all Lutheran churches is striking.

[30] See H. O. Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: TVZ, 1975).

Intra-Reformed church witness is balanced by ecclesiastical witness to the world, particularly in action for justice—individual and corporate service in the political realm as an expression of Christian faithfulness. This can perhaps be likened to Calvin's comments on the use of charisms to serve the common good—gifts that include the power to influence others. For example, religious refugees must be helped, not only with material means to survive and to earn their livelihood but also with political assistance to enable them to find justice. Calvin quite clearly believed that active, forceful resistance to injustice perpetrated by earthly rulers can only be legitimated in a *regular* way when it is led by "lesser magistrates" (4.20.30–31). However, recognizing the honor that should properly be accorded to divinely constituted authority does not exclude individual or corporate political efforts to dissuade persecutors, as Calvin's own example demonstrates.

When the court of Francis I was devastating villages of evangelical believers in southeastern France in 1544–1545, Calvin encouraged the Genevan government to welcome the refugees, care for their sick, and employ the healthy. However, he also made a long journey and wrote many letters to Swiss Protestant governments and leaders in an effort to get the latter to intercede with the French king. As he wrote to Heinrich Bullinger on November 24, 1544, "What can we do, therefore, but strain every nerve that these godly brethren may not, through our shortcoming in duty, become the victims of such cruelty, and that the door may not for a long time be shut against Christ?"[31] In similar fashion he supported the efforts of a Protestant merchant who was seeking to free some Protestants imprisoned in Lyons:

> It is said that they who comfort the children of God in their persecutions which they endure for the gospel are fellow laborers for the truth. Be content with this testimony, for it is no light matter that God should uphold and approve us as His martyrs even though we do not personally suffer, merely because His martyrs are helped and comforted by us.[32]

The same idea is expressed more fully and more broadly in the *Institutes*, where Calvin expands the recipients of Christian intervention from those who suffer religious persecution to all innocent victims of injustice:

[31] See McKee, *John Calvin*, 317.

[32] Ibid., 323.

> I say that not only they who labor for the defense of the gospel but they who in any way maintain the cause of righteousness suffer persecution for righteousness. Therefore, whether in declaring God's truth against Satan's falsehoods or in taking up the protection of the good and the innocent against the wrongs of the wicked, we must undergo the offenses and hatred of the world, which may imperil either our life, our fortunes, or our honor. Let us not grieve or be troubled in thus far devoting our efforts to God, or count ourselves miserable in those matters in which he has with his own lips declared us blessed [Matt. 5:10]. (3.8.7)

These words demonstrate how the biblical injunctions about the right use of everything that God has given (life, fortune, honor), and the right participation in the human family that God created as our earthly community and comfort, should fit together. Defending the faith and protecting the innocent are both expressions of "maintain[ing] the cause of righteousness" and devoting oneself to God, and any suffering incurred should be considered a blessing because it is "persecution for righteousness." This quotation may well sum up these reflections on the dynamic, profoundly religious character of Calvin's teaching on social and economic matters.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CALVIN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TEACHING IN HIS DAY

The Role of the "Mundane" in Calvin's Theology

One of the first points to strike the modern Christian may be the integral way in which Calvin's thought on these apparently mundane issues, such as food for the hungry, economic justice for the poor, stewardship of God's gifts, good family relationships, and so forth, is inextricably interwoven with the fundamental principles of his theology. Social and economic matters are not an addendum to the worship of God; they are part and parcel of right earthly worship. No sixteenth-century persons who followed Calvin's theology would ever be able to separate how they ruled their subjects, nursed their sick neighbors, priced the goods in their shops, or obeyed their parents or disciplined their children from their relationship to God. God always comes first, but the honor owed to God is often most clearly manifested in how believers live their day-to-day vocations. Right worship should be expressed in prayer and praise—hearing God's word, receiving the gift of the sacraments, and giving material aid for the needy. It should also be expressed in the home and the marketplace, in city council and business activities, in care for the refugee and the poor and afflicted, in fair working conditions and just wages and conscientious labor.

To the sixteenth-century European this necessary interrelationship of theology and ethics, of love for God and for the neighbor, would not have appeared strange. What would have been distinctive in Calvin's version of the common biblical teaching was the constructive character and intensity with which he insisted on the indivisible connection between right worship of God and right living as a social and economic being. One of his recurrent phrases is *negotium cum Deo*, "in every detail of life it is with God that we have to do" (e.g., 1.17.2; 3.3.6, 16; 3.7.2). The quasi-economic language is notable, though Calvin does *not* mean bargaining with God. In effect, what he is saying is that there is no moment or facet of believers' existence that is not present to God's sight. Thus, every instant, every aspect of their lives—which they were created to live as social beings in an earthly world—every human relationship and every economic act must be done as in God's presence. That can seem like a constant state of accounting for oneself, but it is also meant as a gift: no person is too humble to belong to God, no act is too small to honor God, no aspect of human life dedicated to God is without meaning.

The energy this teaching gave to Calvinists has led to all kinds of controversy. It is vital here to recognize—and reclaim—how Calvin himself understood the relationship between the service of God and life in God's world, and what he would regard as evidence of success. Calvin recognizes in a matter-of-fact way that the earthly fruit of faith in God might well not look very successful in worldly terms: "For whoever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil" (3.8.1). (In fact, unbelievers will often experience earthly success far more than the elect will.) Enjoying God's good creation is appropriate, having enough for one's daily vocation is good, but those are expressions of earthly blessings, not marks of ultimate success. What faith actually promises the believer is the certainty "that, however many things may fail us that have to do with the maintenance of this life, God will never fail" (3.2.28). Calvin's chief interest is that ultimate success defined as right relationship with God. Such success is measured by faith and love and nothing else.

This revaluing of Christian character had important consequences. The Calvinist conviction that the action of the smallest child or humblest servant, prompted by faith and expressing love, is counted as a worthwhile contribution to God's service, resulted in a dynamic sense of personal and corporate responsibility and power. As long as it was embedded in and conditioned by the teaching that God may grant earthly goods but is primarily concerned with the ultimate good of human beings, this energy could shape Christian life as Calvin envisioned it. For Calvin, having God's goodwill and being engrafted into Christ (his earthly cross as well as his final resurrection) *is* success for the

Christian, and all material wealth and human relationships must be lived in accordance with that criterion of what is good and right and desirable. No one who heard Calvin thundering about human abuses of God's gifts, no one who heard him praying about the eschatological hope in Christ, would easily forget the conditions for the right use of God's great generosity in the present life, and the real character of Christian success.

Church/Corporate Responsibility for Social and Economic Life

Another aspect of Calvin's teaching on social and economic matters that had great significance for his own day and later is the way that Calvin understood these issues to be necessary parts of the constitution and responsibility of the church. His view of the role of education in the larger Christian world led to the establishment of an office of doctors and also helped to rebuild an international, shared consciousness in a fragmented Christendom. More concretely, Calvin's doctrine of the ministries of discipline or oversight and care for the needy led to his formulation of two previously unknown "lay ecclesiastical" offices—the eldership and the diaconate. The view of the activities of oversight and care of the poor as Christian ministries was a common Protestant teaching. The organization of these functions into necessary offices of the church as church, distinct from the civil authority, is a particular contribution of Calvin's (built on the work of Johannes Oecolampadius and Martin Bucer, but strengthened, clarified, established, and made practicable by the Genevan reformer).

In effect, these extraliturgical ecclesiastical offices gave to the Calvinist Reformed church a definite corporate means of expressing the responsibility of the church for the social and economic life of believers and of encouraging intellectual and cultural sharing on a larger scale. Looked at from the inside, how Christians handle human relationships and economic justice is not a matter of individual preference; all believers are necessarily part of a larger body that has the obligation to guide, train, rebuke, encourage, support, and teach each member. Looked at from the outside, the church has the continual responsibility to be actively involved in the social, economic, and educational realities of the world in which it lives. It is the corporate body of Christ on earth, and thus it is necessarily concerned with all dimensions of earthly life as an extension of its proclamation of the gospel.

CAUTION BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

One final note may be useful. In assessing what Calvin says and does not say, it is important to bear in mind the differences between his age and the present. To a modern Western audience, one of the most obvious differences is Calvin's traditional emphasis on hierarchy, between men and women as well as in society generally. (Hierarchical organization continues to be very important in more traditional societies, but almost all communities are affected by the challenge to hierarchy as an ideal.) Another difference is Calvin's limited awareness of the systemic character of economic oppression and intellectual hegemony. What happens today—for example, the unjust stranglehold of North on South in an industrialized global village and the Eurocentric definitions of what constitutes real scholarship—is far removed from the preindustrial and rather insular society of sixteenth-century Western Europe. A third difference is the extent of the havoc human beings have wreaked on God's creation by means of technology Calvin could never have imagined. A fourth difference is the amazing and growing pluralism and secularism of the twenty-first century, which demand that social and economic justice be considered in a religious and intellectual context that might well have horrified Calvin. All these differences must be taken seriously. Yet within its limits, Calvin's thought on social and economic issues, shaped by the conviction that the Redeemer God is also the Giver of the human society and earthly blessings that human beings enjoy and for which they are accountable, still has much to offer to those who read it with religious sensitivity and historical care.