Calvin and the Laity[1]

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THE PURPOSE of this paper is to underline the significance of the laity in Calvin's thought and practice. The first section of the paper will raise the question of Calvin's own ordination. Was Calvin a genuine cleric or was he but a theologically minded layman? Some consideration will also be given in this section to the role of the laity in the election and settlement of the minister. The second section will set forth briefly the nature of the three lay ministries of the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541. The concluding section will analyse Calvin's understanding of the Christian responsibilities of the ordinary Church member, i.e., the non-office-bearer. In this area is to be found Calvin's doctrine of the laity and also the real explanation of the success of the Reformation in Geneva.

1. Was Calvin a Genuine Cleric or a Theologically Minded Layman?

Some scholars in the face of the difficulty of finding direct proof of Calvin's ordination, and yet unwilling to accept the possibility that Calvin was never ordained, have claimed that since Calvin was originally intended for the priesthood and actually held three benefices he must have received some form of ordination in the Roman church. No evidence can be produced, however, to show that Calvin ever received the tonsure or was required to pass through any of the minor orders to hold these benefices. Calvin's father, who was the secretary-treasurer of the Cathedral Chapter at Noyon, had simply arranged for his son to hold these benefices as a means of paying for his education. Canon law affecting the holding of benefices was in this period of history more often broken than observed.

Two references will quickly dispose of the question whether Calvin was ever ordained in the Roman church. First, Theodore Beza, Calvin's associate, successor, and first biographer, denies categorically that he was ever in priests' orders. "It is certain," he says, in speaking about Calvin's benefices of Pont l'Evêque, "that Calvin though not in priests' orders, preached several sermons in this place before he quitted France."[2]

Conclusive evidence that he was never in priests' orders comes from Calvin himself. Gabriel Saconnay, a priest at Lyons, in 1560 had republished

1. An address given to a joint meeting of the Canadian Society of Church History, the Canadian Theological Society, and the Canadian Biblical Society held at Kingston, Ont., May, 1964.

2. Theodore Beza, *Life of Calvin*, John Calvin's Tracts and Treatises, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1959), p. ix. Cf. *Corpus Reformatorum*, XXI (Brunswick, 1863–1900) ". . . quo loco constat Ioannem ipsum Calvinum, antequam Gallia excederet, nullis alioqui pontificiis ordinibus initiatum aliquot ad populum conciones habuisse" (p. 121).

a portion of the treatise on the seven sacraments written by Henry VIII of England to which he had attached a preface in which he had not only made a scathing attack on the Protestants but he had also claimed that Calvin had once been in priests' orders and had actually celebrated Mass at Noyons. Calvin answered Saconnay in a tract written in 1561 in which he states that "by imagination alone he (Saconnay) had created a priest out of a simple layman" and he adds drily that besides "I have always abhorred the flavour of oil."[3]

We must now turn to Calvin's participation in the life of the Reformed Church and raise the question of his ordination there.

Although Calvin, soon after his formal break with Rome in May 4, 1534, preached sermons, led study groups, gave Christian advice, and wrote two books, we can find no evidence of any kind of ordination until his arrival at Geneva. We must, therefore, agree with Hendrik Kraemer when he suggests that Calvin's first edition of the *Institutes* was written as a layman.[4]

Around the first of September, 1536, after being so forcefully persuaded by William Farel to sist his journey to Strasbourg, Calvin began his work at Geneva. No record exists of any formal or ceremonial introduction into any kind of charge or office. The council minutes for September 4, 1536, inform us merely that William Farel appeared before the council and assured the councillors that the lectures to be given by one, John Calvin, were very necessary and for the well-being of the Church and requested a stipend towards his support. The council acceded to the request, but the clerk failed to note the name of the lecturer, and the first official notice of Calvin in the records of the city of Geneva is *ille Gallus*, "*that Frenchman.*" The next reference to Calvin appears in the minutes of council dated February 13, 1537, when Farel again appeared and pointed out that Calvin as yet had not been paid anything. The council ordered that six écus be paid.

However, Calvin does tell us in his *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet* that in the church at Geneva "I held the office first of doctor and then of pastor." Theodore Beza supports this claim. "Calvin," he wrote in his *Life of Calvin*, "struck with this fearful denunciation, submitted to the wishes of Presbytery and the Magistrates, by whose suffrage, the people consenting, he was not only chosen preacher (this he had at first refused) but was also appointed Professor of Sacred Literature—the only office he was willing to accept.[5]

Nicolas Colladon, a doctor in Calvin's Academy, who also wrote a life of Calvin drawing heavily on Beza's materials, tells us that when Calvin consented to remain in Geneva, he refused to preach but agreed to lecture in theology (*lire en théologie*). "A little while after," he goes on to tell us,

3. *Corpus Reformatorum*, IXb: *Gratulatio Ad Venerabilem Presbyterum Dominum Gabrielem De Saconnay, Praecentorem Ecclesiae Lugdunensis, De Pulchra et Eleganti Praefatione Quem Libro Regis Angliae Inscripsit*, "Hoc vero modo transsubstantionem suam belle confirmat; qui sola imaginatione simplicem laicum ut vocant repente sacrificum creat. At Calvinus quoddam ab utero praesagium attulit, ipsum a vestra sorde fore immunem; quia semper abhorruit a sapore olei" (p. 443). This was written by Calvin in 1561.

4. H. Kraemer, *A Theology of The Laity* (London: Lutterworth, 1958), p. 24.

5. Beza, *Life of Calvin*, p. xvii.

"he *was also elected* (*élire*) pastor. Having been declared pastor and doctor in this church by legitimate election and consent, he thereupon prepared a brief formulation of faith and discipline in order to give some structure to the newly organized church."[6]

It is significant to note that neither Beza nor Colladon uses any form of the words *ordination* or *consecration* to describe Calvin's admittance to the office of pastor. What Colladon calls *légitime élection et approbation*, Beza explains as submitting to the will of Presbytery and to magistrates, with the people consenting. Certainly here was authorization to minister which satisfied Calvin and his reformed associates and fulfilled what was considered in Geneva to be the essentials for entrance upon the office of the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Calvin in his *Reply to Cardinal Sadolet*, written shortly after expulsion from Geneva, as if sensing an implied query about the validity of his ministry, affirms, "In my own defence I maintain, that in undertaking this office I had a legitimate vocation."[7] The expulsion of Calvin and Farel from Geneva could have been an occasion for denouncing them as false or illegitimate ministers but nothing like this appears to have been suggested. The Reformers at Strasbourg, notably Bucer, had no question about the validity of his ordination as a minister of Word and Sacraments.

From the *Institutes* we learn that a genuine call to the ministry of Word and Sacraments ideally involved four things: (i) a secret call from God; (ii) the sustaining of an examination of the candidate's doctrine, piety, and gifts at the hands of those already admitted to the ministry; (iii) the approbation of the people; and (iv) the imposition of hands.

Two modifications in the actual Geneva practice may be noted from this normative procedure. In Calvin's early writings he makes place for the confirmation of election by the civil power. After 1541 upon his return from Strasbourg he is inclined to emphasize the approbation of the people at the expense of the civil authority. Although in practice the civil power always had some voice in the settling of a minister, yet this was not apparently of the *esse* of legitimate ordination.

The second modification from the normative form has to do with the *imposition of hands. The Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances* (1541), prepared largely by Calvin, state: "it is good to use the imposition of hands which ceremony was observed by the apostles and then in the ancient church, providing it take place without superstition and without offence. But because there has been so much superstition in the past and scandal might result, it is better to abstain from it because of the infirmity of the times." But this draft article as amended by the council reads finally: "As to the manner of introduction, since the ceremonies of time past have been perverted into much superstition, and because of the weakness of the times, it will suffice

6. Colladon, *Corpus Reformatorum*, XXI, p. 58.
7. Joannis Calvini, *Opera Selecta*, Vol. 1, ed. Petrus Barth (Monachii in Aedibus: Chr. Kaiser, 1926), "Quod eam provinciam suscepti legitimae fuisse vocationis jure meo contendo" (p. 458).

that a declaration be made by one of the ministers denoting the office to which ordination is being made; then that prayers and petitions be made, in order that the Lord give him grace to discharge it."[8]

Calvin, it is clear, desired the use of the imposition of hands but in the interests of avoiding a possible obscuring of an evangelical meaning of ministry he was prepared to dispense with it until the church was better instructed.

Two things emerge at this point germane to a study on Calvin and the Laity:

1. Calvin was ordained. That he was conscious of a secret call from God can be supported by dozens of references. That his fellow ministers approved of him is also abundantly clear, although it is questionable whether he ever underwent a formal examination at the hands of men who looked upon him as their theological superior. That he received the approbation of the people can also be proved. It is questionable, however, that Calvin ever received ordination by the laying on of hands. It is unreasonable to conjecture that he would insist upon something for himself that he did not require of others "because of the weakness of the times."

2. The approbation of the people is given increasing significance in Calvin's definition of the requirements for a valid ministry. Calvin was never tired of pointing out from the history of the early church those instances where bishops were singled out for consecration by popular acclaim, e.g., Ambrose. Further, on one occasion, when he was consulted about the validity of the ministry of a certain Valeran Poulain, he writes, "I pray you, if a brother comes to ask in a foreign country for a place and permission to assemble a flock belonging to Jesus Christ, whether the inhabitants of the place assembling themselves with him and listening to his doctrine, do not in point of fact elect him, though the customary formalities may have been neglected."[9]

This approbation of the people is an important aspect of Calvin's teaching on the laity. Consent of the people henceforth in all churches influenced by Calvin was to be a major factor in the ordination and settlement of ministers. Two secessions and a major disruption of the Church in Scotland were to be experienced in defence of this crucial principle of lay responsibility in defining and determining the ministerial call.

2. The Nature of the Three Lay Ministries in the Church at Geneva

A month or so after Calvin's return to Geneva from Strasbourg in 1541 *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances*[10] were adopted by the Council. This scheme

8. *Theological Treatises*, ed. by J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, The Library of Christian Classics, 1954), Vol. 22, p. 59.

9. *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), Vol. iii, pp. 241–2.

10. John Calvin, *Theological Treatises* (London: S.C.M., The Library of Christian Classics, 1954), Vol. 22, p. 56.

for the reconstruction of the church at Geneva was one of the conditions under which Calvin agreed to return. The *Ordinances* show among other things the influence of what Calvin had learned from Martin Bucer and from his own experiences with his congregation of French refugees at Strasbourg.

The *Ordinances* are noteworthy for their definition of the four ministries so essential to the Calvinist churches: pastors, doctors, elders, and deacons. The latter three are actually lay ministries and therefore must be discussed in this paper.

Doctors or Teachers

The order of doctor or teacher was sharply distinguished by Calvin from that of the pastor. Pastors, he states in a comment on Ephesians 4:11, are those "who have charge of a particular flock; though I have no objection to their receiving the name teachers, if it be understood that there is a distinct class of teachers, who preside both in the education of pastors and in the instruction of the whole Church. It may happen sometimes, that the same person is both a pastor and a teacher, but the duties to be performed are entirely different.[11]

The distinction between the two offices is further pointed up when Calvin tells us "our teachers correspond to the ancient prophets so do our pastors to the apostles."[12] The pastorate obviously for Calvin always had a more primary and elemental responsibility in the Church.

Doctors were given responsibility for teaching all branches of knowledge but especially biblical subjects. Knowledge of Holy Scripture was important for all branches of knowledge in order that the purpose of each discipline might be seen in the light of God's Will and Purpose, and thereby harmonized with others. Life without theology was, for Calvin, blind. This is God's world, Calvin insisted, created for his glory, and redeemed by his Son. Society, nature, and history, though vitiated by sin, might with the help of Holy Scripture (spectacles) reflect something of the purpose and glory of God. To know the world in which one lived was at once a way of knowing the Creator, and of appreciating the extent of his Goodness and beneficence in life.

Teachers or doctors had the responsibility of teaching the young in the primary schools, and the more mature at the University level. Their qualifications for office included a knowledge of languages, of the humanities, and of course of the Holy Scriptures.

Candidates for this office were examined by the pastors in the presence of two representatives of State. If they successfully sustained the examination, they were thereafter admitted to their office by the ministers. The

11. John Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, 1949).

12. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Battles in two volumes (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.3.v.

examination searched out their academic abilities as well as their doctrinal integrity. The doctors thus appointed had no liturgical, homiletical, pastoral, sacramental, or disciplinary responsibilities. They were pre-eminently purveyors of the truth of Scripture and the truths of life derived from nature, society, and history and harmonized with the former. Their instruction on the one hand was to prepare ministers for their vocation, and on the other, to prepare citizens to take their place in the State as servants of God.[13] Here indeed was a lay ministry directed partly towards the training of the clergy but more largely towards the training of a Christian laity which would be able to participate in the affairs of civil government and other vocations as obedient disciples of Christ.[14]

Elders

The second order of lay officials in the Church according to Calvin is the eldership. It is here that Calvin makes his most significant contribution to Church polity by providing the laity with a large voice in the administrative and disciplinary responsibilties of the Church. It is significant to note that it was just at this point that Calvin experienced the most difficulty in implementing his program of Church reform.

Calvin writes:

> For as no city or township can function without magistrate and polity, so the Church of God . . . needs a spiritual polity. This is, however, quite distinct from the civil polity, it does not hinder or threaten it but rather greatly helps and furthers it. . . . For this purpose courts of judgment were established in the church from the beginning to deal with the censure of morals, to investigate vices, and be charged with the exercise of the office of the keys. Paul designates this order in his letter to the Corinthians when he mentions the office of ruling (1 Cor. 12:28). Likewise, in Romans when he says "let him who rules rule with diligence" (Rom. 12:8), for he is not addressing the magistrates (not any of whom were then Christians), but those who were joined with the pastors in the spiritual rule of the Church.[15]

Calvin thus drew a sharp line of distinction between the rulers of the civil state whose authority extended to civil affairs and the rulers of the Church whose authority extends to what Calvin designated spiritual matters. These spiritual rulers, whose task it was to share with the pastors in the spiritual oversight of the congregation, were to be chosen by the people, according to Calvin's plan. Thus lay people were to choose other lay people of Christian maturity to exercise a watching brief over their discipleship, and if necessary to correct and chastise them. But Calvin failed to gain his point. He could not get the elders chosen by the people, nor those chosen primarily on the basis of spiritual and moral fitness to hold office. The

13. *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances* state that "a college should be instituted for instructing children to prepare them for the ministry as well as for civil government" (*Theological Treatises*, p. 62).

14. For a full treatment of the development of this office and its variations see R. W. Henderson, *The Teaching Office in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962).

15. *Institutes*, IV.11.i.

Council instead fixed the number at twelve and further arranged that the membership be selected as follows: two from the Little Council; four from the Council of the Sixty; and six from the Council of the Two Hundred. Provision was made, however, to have some consultation with the ministers on the subject of suitable personnel. But the elders, instead of being officials of the Church, really were in consequence officials of the state. What Calvin had intended as a court of the Church presided over by a pastor became by this means a Committee of the Councils presided over by a magistrate. So much for the common assumption that the dictator of Geneva was able to impose his will on the city of Geneva!

The consistory, as this committee was designated, was not permitted to inflict any corporal punishment. This was reserved to the magistracy *qua* magistracy. It had recourse only to admonition, censure, and excommunication (banishment from the Lord's Table). The consistory, however, won the right to excommunicate only after much difficulty and sharp dispute. Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, "Therefore in excluding from its fellowship manifest adulterers, fornicators, thieves, robbers, seditious persons, perjurers, false witnesses and the rest of this sort, as well as the insolent (who when duly admonished of their lighter vices mock God and his judgment), the church claims for itself nothing unreasonable but practises the jurisdiction conferred upon it by the Lord."[16] The purpose of this discipline was threefold. First, that they who lead "a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christian, to the dishonour of God, as if His holy Church were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men. . . . The second purpose is that the good may not be corrupted by the constant company of the wicked. . . . The third purpose is that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent."[17]

After the consistory had exhausted its proper powers it was then expected, of course, to turn any offenders over to the civil power. The civil power could then apply whatever restrictions or punishments were necessary to promote the well-being of society or to correct the offender.

As in the case of the doctors, here also Calvin was willing to entrust a significant portion of the Church's responsibility to lay administration, albeit laymen who were noted for their spiritual maturity and moral rectitude.

Deacons

The third order of lay ministry in Calvin's plan of Reform for the Church was the diaconate. 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 unfortunates. The hospitallers were those who actually cared

16. *Ibid.*, IV.12.iv.
17. *Ibid.*, IV.12.v.

for the sick and the unfortunate. The procurators and hospitallers were to be elected to office in a manner similar to the elders. Those designated as deacons were required to take regular counsel together concerning the problems of their office.

The main institution for the care of unfortunates was the General Hospital (*L'Hôpital Général*). 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 and 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, which moved throughout the city to care for those not actually within the institution. 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.

Mendicancy was absolutely forbidden in Geneva and loitering was discouraged. To the diaconate was assigned the responsibility of distinguishing between genuine poverty and poverty occasioned by sloth; between those who could not work and those who would not work.

This far-reaching and exciting 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 Française* 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. When the occasion for this kind of refugee service was past, the residue of funds was turned over to *L'Hôpital Général.*

Although the ministers were tremendously interested in these projects of helpfulness, and were required to excercise a certain supervisory capacity to ascertain if all was in good order and the ends 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 Diaconies 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."[18]

3. Calvin's Understanding of the Responsibilities of the Non-Office-Bearing Christians

Usually when someone is interested in discovering Calvin's thought on the laity he turns to Book IV of the *Institutes*, where Calvin treats of the Church, ministry, sacraments, and the civil power. What he discovers on the subject, of course, is much the same as we find in briefer compass in *The Ecclecias-tical Ordinances*. But this is at best a partial answer. It does not do justice to the full range of Calvin's thought on the subject, nor does it explain Calvin's profound success in transforming Geneva into what John Knox with some justification describes as "the most perfect school of Christ that was ever on earth since the days of the apostles."

To discover Calvin's basic teaching on the laity we must turn rather to Book III of the *Institutes*, where Calvin treats of the appropriation of salvation and the appropriate response to the grace of God in Christ. The life of obedient service is, of course, the appropriate response to the grace of God in Christ. The patterns of obedience are structured either by (i) the imitation of Christ, or (ii) obedience to the two tables of the law, or the Ten Commandments. For Calvin obeying the law and emulating Christ were one and the same thing.

The law for Calvin is a description or definition of the relationships which ought to exist between God and man, and men and men. "God has," Calvin writes, "delineated His own character in it, that anyone exhibiting in action what is commanded could exhibit in his own life, as it were, an image of God."[19] Law is simply what pleases God. It is that which is congruent with his character and is indicative of what he has a right to expect from his creatures. "Law," writes E. A. Dowey, Jr., "whatever its secondary historical form, is the revealed eternal, orderly will of God, the Creator, against which man revolted, so it is the goal toward which reconciliation is aimed."[20]

Law therefore has a positive, instructive, directive significance for the

18. Henri Heyer et Johannot, *Les Diaconies de la Ville de Genève: Leurs Origines et leurs activités de 1850 à 1900 avec le tableau des membres* (Genève, 1901), p. 15. See also the study by Jean-Louis-René Vauche-Mouchon, *Fragments historiques sur les institutions de bien-faisance de la Ville, République et Canton de Genève à dater des Temps anciens jusqu'à nos jours* (Genève, 1847). I am indebted to one of my graduate students, The Reverend A. Zeidman, for drawing these books to my attention. They provide valuable information on the working out of Calvin's plan for the diaconate as set forth in *The Ecclesiastical Ordinances*.

19. *Institutes*, II.8.ii.

20. E. A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin's Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 232.

Christian. That it is a minister of death, a source of condemnation, is accidental to its primary purpose. In his *Genesis Commentary* Calvin writes, "He [the writer of Genesis] does not deny that God imposed a law upon man from the beginning in order to maintain the right due to Himself. If anyone objects with another statement of Paul's where he asserts that 'the law is a minister of death' . . . I reply that this is accidentally and for the corruption of nature."[21]

Christ's work of atonement Calvin sees in relation to the positive and negative aspects of the law of God. On the one hand, Christ fulfilled the law, as man's representative giving honour to God, and rendering perfect service to his neighbour. His life and death were the perfect embodiment of the requirements of the two tables of the law—love towards God and love towards the neighbour. Hence the necessity of the emulation of Christ in Christian obedience.

On the other hand Christ accepted, in man's stead, the judging, punitive aspects of the law. In him the law completed its negative work. Christ by virtue of this vicarious friendship, this act of supreme good neighbourliness, became the possibility of man's righteousness.

"We must seek from Christ what the law would confer on anyone who fulfilled it, or which is the same, that we obtain by the grace of Christ what God promises in the law to our works, which precepts if a man do, he shall live."[22]

We are not saved, however, by contemplating Christ from afar but by being united with him through the Spirit. "So long as there is separation between Christ and us; all that He suffered and performed for the salvation of mankind is useless and unavailing to us. To communicate to us what He received from His Father, He must therefore become ours and dwell within us."[23]

Christ then, Calvin proceeds to tell us, "given to us by the kindness of God, is apprehended and possessed by faith by means of which we obtain in particular a twofold benefit: *first* being reconciled by the righteousness of Christ, God becomes instead of a judge, an indulgent Father; *secondly* being sanctified by His Spirit we aspire to integrity and purity of life."[24] This brings us to the crucial point.

What is integrity and purity of life? It is the imitation of Christ or obedience to the law of God made possible by the renewal of grace. At this point Calvin reminds us of the *third* and *proper* use of the law.

> The third and principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God, that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit from the law in two ways.

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21. John Calvin, *Comm. on Genesis* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1948), Gen. 2:16.
22. *Institutes*, II.17.v.
23. *Ibid.*, III.1.i.
24. *Ibid.*, III.11.i.

(1) Here is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in their understanding of it. . . . Again, (2) because we need not only teaching but also exhortation the servant of God will also avail himself of this benefit of the law: by frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of the transgressor. In this way the saints must press on; for however eagerly they may in accordance with the Spirit strive toward God's righteousness, the listless flesh always so burdens them that they do not proceed with due readiness. The law is to the flesh like a whip to an idle and balky ass, to arouse it to work.[25]

To meet the requirements of the law the Christian must practise self-denial and accept cross bearing. Self-denial means the deliberate defeat of self-love, which prevents on the one hand love to God, and on the other love to the neighbour. Cross bearing involves the willing acceptance of any difficulty, destitution, misery arising from the effort to obey the commandments of God.

Self-denial, for Calvin, is certainly not a negative asceticism. It is a positive demand involving not only the public *worship* of God, but also the public *service* of God. Self-denial acknowledges God's sovereign right to be God over our lives, and the right of our neighbour to be *our* neighbour and to receive from us what God intended us to give. Now, Christ in his life and death demonstrated perfectly the meaning of self-denial. He placed his life completely at the disposal of the Heavenly Father; and in service to his neighbour he offered himself whole-heartedly even unto death.

Thus, whether we take the *imitation of Christ*, or the two tables of the law, for our *exterior* guides,[26] our minds and hearts are immediately focused upon the *honour of God* and the *honour of our neighbour*. Although Calvin would insist that primary attention must be paid to the honour of God, yet he would just as strongly insist that honour to God cannot be conceived of without reference to the honour of God's people. To love God is to love his people: to love his people, in a very real sense, is to love God.

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 was no proof of their godliness; for it often happens that nobody is more diligent and zealous in going through the 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 Rom. 13:8): not because it is better than the worship of God, but because it is the convincing evidence of it. I have said that we cannot see God; He therefore presents himself to us in our brothers, and in their persons demands from us what we owe Him. So then, the love of the brother grows from nothing but the fear and love of God; it is not therefore surprising that our love for our brother, being the sign of the love of God, even though it is a part of the law, stands for the whole of it, and includes the wor-

25. *Ibid.*, II.7.xii.
26. The Holy Spirit for Calvin provides an interior guide. The exterior and interior he expected would correspond.

ship of God. It is certainly wrong to separate the love of God from the love of man.[27]

Here is the crux of the Calvinist ethic. Here also is the meaning of real piety and here is the focus of his doctrine of the laity. The life lived in obedience to God is a life of service to the neighbour. Our love of ourselves and our love of our neighbour are, Calvin reminds us, conflicting dispositions; "our self love produces a neglect of and contempt of others; it produces cruelty, and it is a fountain of avarice, robbery, fraud, and every other kind of pestilence; it drives us to impatience, it arms us with a passion for revenge. Therefore our Lord demands that it be converted to true love."[28] In true Augustinian fashion Calvin, of course, recognized that God gave what he commanded and commanded what he gave.

It follows from this that *personal ethics* for Calvin are *social ethics* and social ethics are only possible by the grace of God. Social ethics, moreover, have as their substance the will of God; and the will of God is directed towards the well-being of his people—and this means all mankind.

> 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 own flesh and bone, I see my own self. Even though most 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.[29]

Now, aggressive capitalism does not emerge from a context such as this, but rather government control of those monopolies which take unfair advantage of the plight and position of any person. Statecraft was precisely a legitimate Christian vocation for Calvin because it was the means of regulating society in such a way as to protect the innocent, care for the unfortunate, and prevent the exploitation of any man by another. Political science students, therefore, to Calvin's mind had need of a course in biblical theology and a hearty dose of the grace of God which made possible and required an ethic of love.

Although it is nonsense to suggest Calvin was the dictator of Geneva, or that Geneva was a theocracy in the sense that the Church ruled the State, yet Calvin did have a profound and extraordinary influence in that little city. In the cathedral of St. Pierre, the seats of the syndics and the councillors were directly opposite the pulpit. Seated there Sunday after Sunday, these men heard Calvin outline, expound, and emphasize the basic truth of his theology of obedience, that honour to God included respect for his people and concern for their well-being in this world, here and now. Society must be so ordered that everyone would contribute to the community according to his capacity to give, and receive from the community according to his need. Thus, on Monday in their council chamber in *L'Hotel de Ville* the

27. *Calvin Commentaries*, ed. by J. Haroutunian (London: S.C.M., Library of Christian Classics, 1958), Vol. 23, p. 326.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 327, on Gal. 5:3–14. 29. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

councillors, having been persuaded by Calvin's exposition on Sunday, sought to regulate society in a manner well pleasing to God.

The ordinary non-office-bearing church member, it is clear, had a Christian mandate which affected every part of his life: his work, his money, his use of property.[30] Work, through Calvin attained a new dignity. It was no longer a curse occasioned by sin; it was rather a means of knowing God and loving one's neighbour. Work was a means of patterning one's life after God, and participating in his Creative activity. Part of God's gracious dealings with men involved making possible this creative application of their powers of mind and heart and body.

Work, moreover, was one of the ways in which 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, the right to work with God and through productive labour to participate in God's providential care of his people.

But work, in addition, was significant and necessary because it was the means of fulfilling one's responsibility to one's neighbour. It was, to put it another way, a means of fulfilling the law of God which demanded in its second table that men seek always their neighbour's well-being. The end, therefore, to which one devoted his work was most significant. It could be the expression of a selfish and acquisitive spirit, or it could be a means of expressing one's new life in Christ, which required at once honour to God and love to one's neighbour.

Similarly for Calvin "economic goods and material wealth are values directly bound to the Christian faith and closely associated with spiritual life."[31] The possession of such is a sign of God's beneficence to his creatures. A man's attitude towards the holding of property and the possession of money is therefore a real test of faith. Does he recognize in the first place that these things are a gift from God? And further, does he recognize that they are also a trust to be used in fulfilment of his responsibility of love towards his neighbour? Money and property can mislead and deceive a man, for they can in a very real way destroy his dependence on God, and in pursuit of them tempt him to exploit rather than help his neighbour.

Material possessions and wealth, moreover, are to be held or used in the interests of the whole of society. The hoarding of goods at the expense of others is to be sharply discouraged; the earning of wealth by the exploitation of the neighbour is to be considered as a sin against God and society. "Life according to God, the social life, is an uninterrupted circulation of goods, concretely expressing men's complementary life and obligatory solidarity."[32] In the society ordered properly according to God's purpose there is a constant exchange of goods. The rich by possessing much are expected to share with

30. For a full and detailed study of Calvin's attitudes on this see André Biéler's exciting and fully documented work *La Pensée économique et sociale de Calvin* (Geneva: Georg et Cie. S.A., 1959). A greatly shortened version of this work is available in English under the title *The Social Humanism of Calvin*, trans. by P. T. Fuhrmann (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964).

31. *The Social Humanism of Calvin*, p. 30.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

the poor. The poor are God's way of providing to the rich an opportunity to use their goods in a lawful and Christian way. The rich man, by disposing of his goods in this manner, is at once delivered from the temptation of Mammon and impelled towards the life of obedient service. By this means, the rich would become less rich and the poor less poor, and a nearer approach made to God's purpose for a harmonious society.

Calvin does not demand, however, an elimination of inequalities in society—he is too much of a realist to fail to recognize that there are obvious differences of capacity and opportunity—but he does demand that the inequalities be not selfishly and deliberately maintained. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 8:16 he writes,

> . . . so we need not doubt that the riches that are heaped up at the expense of our brethren, are accursed, and will soon perish, and that too, in connection with the ruin of the owner; so that we are not to think that it is the way to increase, if, consulting our own advantage for a long while to come, we defraud our poor brethren of the beneficence that we owe them.[33] I acknowledge, indeed, that there is not enjoined upon us an equality of such a kind, as to make it unlawful for the rich to live in any degree of greater elegance than the poor; but an equality is to be observed thus far—that no one is to be allowed to starve, and no one is to hoard his abundance at the expense of defrauding others.[34]

Unfortunately such an idyllic society does not exist. Sin has taken its toll and selfishness in consequence has ravaged economic life: Calvin, therefore, sees the Church as the pilot project in the renewal of society according to God's holy purpose. This is the explanation of the widespread social concern of the diaconate in Geneva, and of the willingness of the citizens of Geneva to provide not only for the poor and unfortunate of their own city, but also for the destitute refugees who poured into the city by the hundreds after escaping the persecution then raging in France and Italy. Christians, possessed of a new life principle grounded in the graciousness of God, were expected to resist the temptation to use property and wealth selfishly, and to show by concrete action and liberality the real measure of their faith.

The State, in addition, according to Calvin must accomplish in the whole of society by legislative action what the Church accomplishes in her membership by good neighbourliness motivated by love and guided by the law of God. The State, for Calvin, it is clear, had a responsibility to intervene in the economic life and to regulate economic relationships. Only in this way could monopolistic tendencies be checked, exploitation of the weak by the strong be prevented, and the true human rights of all citizens be safeguarded.

The Christian laity, therefore, reconstructed by the grace of God, empowered by the Spirit, guided and goaded by the law of God, and functioning fully within the Church, the State, and Society, was for Calvin the hope of a new day and the possibility of experiencing here and now the benefits of the Kingdom of God.

33. "Le secours et assistance" (the help and assistance).
34. *Comm. on Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1948), Vol. II, p. 297.