Calling All Christians! Calvin's Doctrine Of Vocation

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INTRODUCTION

The term *vocation* comes from the Latin, *voco*, which means 'call'. In Scripture it pertains to a divine summons to become part of God's people and to accept the responsibilities that entails. The Greek term *kaleo* too means a call or summons, and it, like the Hebrew *qāhal*, refers to the people of God meeting for worship, that is, called together for that purpose. When the New Testament appeared in Greek, *ekklēsia* became the name for a body of worshipers called together, as the word *klēsis* indicates. *Ek klēsis* signifies people called out of ordinary pursuits to worship God and then to go forth into the world to serve him. In the epistle to the Hebrews (3:1) the members of this assembly are 'partakers of a heavenly calling', which in 2 Timothy 1:9 is a 'holy calling'.[1] This *vocation* comes to all believers in Christ.

In 1 Corinthians 7:17–24, the Apostle Paul admonished his readers to understand that each one had received a calling/vocation with particular responsibilities to fulfil accordingly. In a striking manner he told Christians to accept the status God, in his providence, had assigned to them. To some believers that meant accepting the position of slaves, although he told them to accept freedom, if it became attainable. If emancipation does not occur, they need not fret, because 'he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freeman' (1 Cor. 7:22). In this context calling signifies a status such as being married, being circumcised, or living as a slave or a freeman, etc. Regardless of one's occupation or social standing, he or she is called to serve God.

VOCATION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In the apostolic and early post-apostolic era, Christians at times suffered persecution at the hands of Roman imperial officials, so they scorned

[1] Unless otherwise noted, biblical texts are cited according to the NASB.

some occupations as evil because people within them operated as agents of oppression and adherents to pagan religion. Sometimes the church required converts from paganism to renounce civil and military positions before receiving baptism.

After Emperor Constantine professed Christianity and granted official toleration to the church, Christians supported the imperial government gratefully, and being a Christian gradually became a status symbol of social acceptance. Conditions of life improved considerably, but in this atmosphere of favour many church members became lax in zeal, even in morality. This led devout people to withdraw from society to form enclaves of committed believers who professed a special vocation to live in conformity to *evangelical counsels*, as in subscription to vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Although the first expressions appeared in the third century, the newly acquired favour for Christianity in the fourth century and the corresponding decline in fervour among church members prompted many more people to seek the life of seclusion in religious communities. Those who retreated from the world valued the contemplative life of prayer and meditation over the active life of service to society. A sacred-secular dichotomy developed within Christian circles and gradually became a permanent feature of the developing ecclesiastical establishment.

VOCATION IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH

After Emperor Theodosius II elevated Christianity to the status of the imperial religion in the fifth century, 'Christianity became more worldly and less costly. Christians saw the empire as God's servant.... Monastic movements emerged... partly in response to this comfortable and compromised Christianity.'[2] The gap between clergy and laity became ever wider, until the term *vocation* referred only to priests, monks, and nuns, who were presumed to be members of a *spiritual estate*, separate from and superior to, laymen in a *secular estate*. By the thirteenth century, when Thomas Aquinas (c. 1227–74) became the leading Catholic theologian, the distinction between spiritual and secular living had become entrenched. Thomas urged people who performed manual labour to do so for monks who could then devote themselves to the higher life of scholarship and meditation. The work of the clergy was then more pleasing to God than

[2] Douglas J. Schuurman, 'Vocation', in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. by Erwin Fahlbusch, *et al.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 5, p. 693. This article is an excellent coverage of the topic.

the toil of common people performed with their hands.[3] The modern Roman Catholic Church, although it has adopted new teachings about vocation, continues in practice to apply that term primarily to the clergy.[4] In the document entitled *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church*, Vatican Council II (1962-65) affirmed the traditional view of calling as it relates to the *religious* life. Section forty-three of this statement hails a particular vocation to the religious life. Those who experience such a call 'receive an invitation in faith to manifest the presence of God through their lives as religious, *observing the evangelical counsels by vows or other ties*'.[5] The medieval conception remains prominent in the Catholic Church. There are still communities of monks and nuns seeking to escape the evil world by practicing a contemplative life in chosen isolation from society. In doing this they operate on the premise that God's commands pertain to everyone, but divine *counsels* pertain to the higher life of the clergy, which very devout persons choose, as they pursue their own salvation and pray for that of others.

The church in the Middle Ages often denigrated manual labour for wages as degrading, and it regarded those engaged in such toil as inferior people. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153), for example, viewed monks as living on a higher plane than farmers, an idea which appears to reflect the enduring teaching of Pope Gregory I (r. 590-604), which exalted the contemplative life.

Some medieval teachers mistakenly regarded work (especially manual toil) as a penalty for original sin, a view scarcely better than the classical Greek idea that manual toil was for slaves and the lowest classes of society. It is of paramount importance that Christians realize God directed Adam and Eve to perform manual labour to maintain the order of creation, and he did so before the fall, so work is not a necessary evil but a divinely ordained obligation to be fulfilled within one's vocation.[6] Medieval monks were badly in error when they arrogated the term *vocation* to themselves and maintained only superior believers could fulfil the duties of a divine call. They thought the call to love God entailed separation from society so there would be no distracting worldly associations. As this belief gained credence in Western Europe, *religio* became a term to

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3 A helpful collection of studies of this nature is Paul E. Sigmund (ed.), *Politics and Ethics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988).

4 'Decree on Priestly Formation', in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbot, S.J. (New York: Association Press, 1966), pp. 437-61. (emphasis mine)

5 Ibid., 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church', pp. 14-101.

6 See the fine treatment of this subject in George W. Forrell, 'Work and the Christian Calling', *The Lutheran Quarterly* 8 (1956), 105-18.

identify a member of an order of monks or nuns, each one being known as a *religious*, and the monastic life was known as a *profession*.

Eventually scholastic theologians came to realize that all Christians, regardless of occupation, are called to glorify God, and they may do so in so-called secular work. These scholars tried to connect vocation with secular pursuits, but in doing so they created a hierarchy of categories to assign comparative value to various occupations. Members of the clerical establishment stood at the top of the scale, with lesser occupations below them in descending order. The spiritual elite then had the highest calling. There were perceptive thinkers who saw the error in denigrating the laity, but they continued to extol the clergy as though its members were the religious aristocracy in the kingdom of God.[7] This attitude conflicts sharply with the Apostle Paul's use of *klēsis* in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. There he admonished his readers to 'consider your calling... there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;... so no man may boast before God'. Every Christian receives an effectual call to salvation, and every Christian has a divinely ordained vocation to perform.

VOCATION IN THE REFORMATION

Although medieval writers discoursed about fulfilling the *counsels of perfection* within the clerical and monastic establishments, some earnest students of Scripture discovered a far broader and deeper meaning of vocation, one causally connected with the doctrine of divine providence. Among those who made this discovery Martin Luther (1483-1546) was the pioneer, although a few preceding thinkers had been moving in the same direction. Luther associated vocation with God's creation and ordering of the world, that is, within his providence. Aside from the salvific call to embrace Christ as revealed in the Gospel, Luther directed Christians to focus their concerns on earth and the needs of God's creatures there. He saw vocation as a means to implement God's command to love one's neighbours, thereby to contribute to the proper ordering of society. Believers, in the exercise of their divinely bestowed talents, are agents of providence.

Rather than withdrawing from the world to seek salvation through works of piety, true Christians serve within the world by attending to the needs of others. All believers, regardless of their social standing, are to be engaged in fulfilling the duties of their priesthood, for all are members of

[7] Karl Holl, 'The History of the Word *Vocation*', tr. by Heleu F. Peacock, *Review and Expositor* 55 (1958), 127-40.

the *sacred/spiritual estate*, and the contributions of one are not inherently superior to those of another.[8] To show his disdain for medieval teaching about vocation Luther wrote *The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows*, in which he asked, 'What would the monks and nuns do, if they heard that, in the sight of God, they are not a bit better than married people or mud-stained farmers?'[9]

Following the lead of Martin Luther, John Calvin too denied the traditional doctrine of vocation, and he contended the Roman Catholic exaltation of the monastic life had 'set up a double Christianity' in which 'hooded sophists' comprised a 'conventical of schismatics disturbing the order of the church and cut off from the lawful society of believers'.[10] Luke Luther, Calvin denied emphatically that anyone could either obtain or maintain the spiritual perfection required by the so-called evangelical counsels which monks aspired to achieve. Calvin maintained a dynamic concept of God's providence as of a 'watchful, effective sort, engaged in ceaseless activity..., governing heaven and earth... and he so regulates all things that nothing takes place without his deliberation'.[11] Calvin discouraged speculation about God's essence and advocated that Christians study the divine character as revealed in Scripture, in order to please him. It is not profitable to be concerned about what God is 'in himself'. It is very beneficial, however, to focus on God 'as he is toward us'.[12]

There is not a trace of fatalism in this reformer's thinking. His firm affirmation of God's complete sovereignty did not incline Calvin toward resignation or indolence. It, on the contrary, motivated him to tireless activity in God's service. He rejected meaningless chance and mechanical determinism in favour of benevolent providence that gives meaning to history and calls humans to participate in the progress of God's kingdom on earth. He emphasized God's constant involvement with his creatures whose actions serve his sovereign purpose. Divine engagement with the elect is especially significant, and to them he has granted marvellous privileges, as they become knowing and willing collaborators in his design.

In his *Catechism of the Church of Geneva* (1545), Calvin declared the chief end of human life is 'to know God by whom men were created... because he created us and placed us in this world... to be glorified in us....

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8 'The Judgment of Martin Luther on Monastic Vows', *Luther's Works*, tr. by James Atkinson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 44, pp. 245-400.

9 Ibid., 305.

10 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, tr. by Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.xiii.14.

11 Ibid., I.xiv.3.

12 Ibid., I.x.2; cf. III.ii.6.

Our life should be devoted to his glory.'[13] This being so, all Christians must serve God obediently, and there can be no double standard, as when the medieval church required vows of complete obedience from its *religious* but did not expect that from laymen. Where the Roman Church assigned superior value and merit to ascetic withdrawal from the world, Protestants, Calvin prominent among them, emphasized living within society and there fulfilling the duties incumbent upon their various callings. Christians must be constantly aware that God 'sustains, nourishes, and cares for everything he has made, even to the least sparrow'.[14]

Obedience rendered gladly does not impair human happiness. It, on the contrary, promotes it. A due sense of providence and the role of one's vocation leads to genuine joy and deep contentment, as the people of God enjoy his provisions. When severe ascetics gave directions for godly living, they erred in advising Christians to use only those goods required for survival. Their mistake, as Calvin put it, was to 'fetter consciences more tightly than does the word of the Lord–a very dangerous thing'.[15] In his kindly providence God designed creation to be beautiful and to supply in abundance delights for humans to enjoy. Believers should avail themselves of these benefits which exceed the satisfaction of their basic needs. In accord with their vocation as stewards of their Father's gifts, they must discipline their use of those favours and guard against 'turning helps into hindrances'. An effective way to accomplish this is to remember that God has commanded us to place the needs of others above our own. 'We are stewards of everything God has conferred on us by which we are able to help your neighbour and are required to render an account of our stewardship'.[16] By obeying the divine command to love their neighbours, Christians progress in personal piety, as they discharge the duties of their respective vocations.

Calvin assigned such importance to the concept of vocation that he admonished believers to understand 'the Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling.... He has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life.'[17] As a modern interpreter of the Reformation observed, all Christians have a calling 'to share in the *opus Dei*, to mirror the work of the Creator in their work by establishing human relationships and in creating human community in response to God's

[13] John Calvin, 'Catechism of the Church of Geneva', in Calvin's *Selected Works* II, tr. by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983 rpt. of 1849 edn), p. 37.

[14] Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.1.

[15] Ibid., III.x.1.

[16] Ibid., III.vii.5.

[17] Ibid., III.x.6.

affirmation of human life'.[18] This being so, all honourable occupations are divine callings. It is an egregious error to regard people who perform ordinary jobs, doing only what is necessary for their survival, as being without vocations.[19]

Even unbelievers have vocations, although they are not aware of them. Their work, as well as that of the elect, contributes to the orderly operation of providential arrangements, without which life could not continue. Christians perform the duties of their calling knowingly and willingly, while unbelievers do so in ignorance.[20] Christians must acknowledge the contributions of non-Christians and respect them as bearers of the *imago Dei*, even though sin has distorted that image. They are nevertheless neighbours. In explaining the parable of the Good Samaritan, Calvin said Jesus taught 'the word 'neighbour' extends indiscriminately to every man, because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship'.[21] Christians must regard as neighbours even those who hate them.[22]

In addition to their calling to become disciples of Christ, believers receive other callings relative to the positions they hold in God's providential order for their lives. In all relationships, they must implement the requirements of stewardship, whether they be engaged as employees, employers, spouses, parents, church members, citizens, etc. Being a husband, for example, obligates a man to assist his wife in daily domestic chores, even rising in the middle of the night to attend to a crying infant. Husbands and wives are to be mutually submissive, as circumstances require them to be. Here the 'law of love' must govern their attitudes and actions.[23]

In their role as subjects/citizens their vocation requires God's people to obey, respect, and support civil rulers, even when those officials are unjust. This is not a demand for unqualified obedience, since civil rulers may order their subjects to sin, in which case, disobedience becomes a

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18 Iain Nicol, 'Vocation and the People of God', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), 372.

19 Ibid., p. 365.

20 Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, tr. by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), p. 221. Although hostile toward Calvin's view of theology proper, Brunner expressed appreciation for his concept of Vocation.

21 John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* III, tr. by William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000 rpt.), p. 61.

22 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, tr. by William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009 rpt.), pp. 160-1.

23 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles*, tr. by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2009 rpt.), pp. 147-8.

moral responsibility, a duty incumbent upon their vocation. In contrast with the view of the Anabaptists, Calvin taught Christians to become involved in social and political affairs and to regard them as opportunities to serve God. The reformer cited the biblical Daniel as an example to guide believers when civil disobedience becomes necessary.[24] When rulers become harsh and cruel, Calvin urged their subjects to realize such officials 'have been raised up by him [God] to punish the wickedness of the people.... A wicked king is the Lord's wrath upon the earth.'[25] In case of oppression from ecclesiastical authorities, Calvin cited the papacy, which he assailed sarcastically by saying 'as to the pope himself, it is in his power to condemn the whole world, while he exempts himself from all blame'.[26]

By affirming the duty of disobedience when rulers require their subjects to sin, Calvin showed that believing in providence does not mean passive acceptance of evil. While Christians must bear with patience and humility the abuse of their enemies, they must not regard iniquity with resignation. Stoic resignation is an expression of pride. Christians must refuse to collaborate with evil and patiently await divine deliverance in time or, ultimately, in eternity.[27] In those exceptional instances where Christians exercise civil authority, Calvin admonished them to regard their positions as their calling and to govern fairly, since they hold those positions only by delegation from God, to whom they are accountable.[28]

All who exercise authority in the conduct of their callings should be aware of God's sovereignty over them and so perform their proper tasks with devotion to him and due concern for the well-being of those they govern. As the reformer stated this matter:

> The magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly; the head of the household will confine himself to his duty; each man will bear and swallow the discomforts, vexations, weariness and anxieties of his way of life, when he has been persuaded that the burden was laid upon him by God. From this will arise... a singular consolation; that no task will be so sorid and base provided

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24 Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.32.

25 Ibid., IV.xx.25.

26 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Ezekiel* I, tr. by Thomas Myers (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2009 rpt.), p. 348. A lucid analysis of Calvin's teaching on the duties of subjects appears in William Mueller, *Church and State in Luther and Calvin* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1954).

27 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* IV, tr. by James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2009 rpt.), p. 20; *Institutes*, III.viii.11.

28 Mueller, *Church and State*, pp. 150-2.

> you obey your calling in it that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.[29]

John Calvin believed the faithful performance of one's vocation glorifies God and benefits both society and the person who is faithful. He urged Christians to consider occupations 'which yield the greatest advantage to one's neighbours'.[30] Since believers need not work for salvation, they are free to dedicate themselves to serving others, and that includes all kinds of people, regardless of their social standing or their faith or lack thereof. As Calvin put this matter, 'we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love'.[31]

The elect are 'justified not without works, but not through [by] works', and their vocation is the fruit of their election. The sign of vocation is faith, but the sign of faith is sanctification, that is, good works. The elect will display 'a passion to bear fruit in transforming service to all mankind'.[32] Regardless of how obviously depraved people may be, Christians are obliged to seek their welfare through the ministry of charity. As Calvin remarked, God 'bids us to extend to all men the love we bear to him, that this may be an unchanging principle: whatever the character of the man, we must yet love him because we love God'.[33]

In Geneva this concern led to the practice of special ministries to sick people, prisoners, elderly and infirmed residents, even to foreigners who had fled there to escape persecution in Catholic lands. Officials of church and state considered themselves co-workers with God to support his purpose for the benefit of needy people.[34] They viewed this work as their vocation. Calvin urged Genevan Christians to realize there was nothing they could do for God, who is self-sufficient. He told them therefore, 'since then your generosity cannot extend to him [God], you must practice it toward the saints on earth'.[35]

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29 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.x.6.

30 Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, p. 300. There is a summary of Calvin's teaching about the role of various callings in *Institutes*, II.viii.46.

31 Ibid., II.viii.55.

32 Ray C. Petry, 'Calvin's Conception of the *Communio Sanctorum*', *Church History* 5 (1936), 231.

33 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.viii.55.

34 See Petry, 'Calvin's Conception', and the following essays by Robert M. Kingdom: 'Social Welfare in Calvin's Geneva', *American Historical Review* 76 (1971), 50-69; and 'Calvinism and Social Welfare', *Calvin Theological Journal* 17 (1982), 212-30.

35 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.viii.5.

Calvin, as indicated above, did not restrict the ministry of charity to the saints alone. He understood humanity's most urgent need is, not for physical health and sustenance, but for eternal salvation. Humanitarian aid is not enough. As one modern Calvinist put it, the inadequacy of such assistance is 'it alleviates, but it fails to redeem'.[36] Whether or not the ministry of charity leads to conversion of lost people, Calvin maintained the Christians' duty is the same. He wrote, 'though there are many that are undeserving, while others abuse our liberality, we must not on this account leave off helping those that need our aid'.[37]

One class of people well able to participate in charity were the merchants of Geneva, whose vocation, Calvin said, was an honourable one when they conducted trade honestly and thereby performed a valuable service to the community. Since Geneva was a haven for persecuted Protestants, its merchants had many opportunities to help them. As their pastor, Calvin associated with them and with people of all occupations guiding them in the matter of their social responsibilities, thereby fulfilling their vocational duties.[38] Calvin noted how important work diligently performed is to a healthful economy, and he taught that such labour is part of the creation God intended to continue always, even if the fall had not occurred. In spite of the fall, those who toil honourably will find joy and satisfaction in their labour. Calvin cited Psalm 8:6–8 to show God's providential arrangement for humans to be his vicegerents in developing the assets of the earth—a task which requires continuous work.[39]

In his providence, God arranges the circumstances that determine the callings he has ordained for his creatures, and he equips them with the necessary talents to perform them. Realizing this is so, Calvin and other Protestant reformers promoted education for all classes of people, so all may be prepared to accept their calling to work for God's glory.[40] In Calvin's judgment 'ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries,

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36 J.G. Matheson, 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 2 (1947), 53. This is a rather critical appraisal of Calvin's thinking, but one which duly recognizes his great contributions.

37 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, tr. by John Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2009 rpt.), pp. 358-9.

38 Georges A. Barrois, 'Calvin and the Genevans', *Theology Today* 21 (1965), 458-65 is a helpful study of the reformer's relations with the various classes of Genevan society.

39 Jack Buckley, 'Calvin's View of Work', *Radix* 15 (1984), 8-12; 28. A splendid treatment of vocation is that of Gene Edward Veith, Jr., God at Work (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).

40 Ibid., 17-21.

and the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it'.[41] This is especially relevant when, in the pursuit of their callings, believers encounter cruel opposition and must suffer for their loyalty to Christ. Calvin urged confidence that God has made the care of his people his personal concern. In the reformer's words, 'Faith is certain that God is true in all things, whether he promise or threaten; and it... obediently receives his commandments, observes his prohibitions, heeds his threats. Nevertheless, faith properly begins with the promise, rests in it, and ends in it.'[42] '…God humbles his children under various trials, that his defence of them may be the more remarkable, and that he may show himself to be their deliverer, as well as their preserver.'[43]

VOCATION IN MODERN TIMES

In accord with other Protestant reformers, Calvin rejected the secular humanism of Italian Renaissance scholars, with their emphasis on self-esteem and material rewards for their achievements. The Protestant rebuttal featured the insistence that God determines how and where humans are to serve him. Rather than regard vocation as only a human choice of occupations, the reformers stressed the role of divine calling which is sometimes contrary to human choice. It is interesting to note that the fathers of both Luther and Calvin directed their sons to prepare for careers as lawyers, but God called them to be church reformers and theologians. Calvin himself desired the life of a scholar and had no intention to become involved in the ecclesiastical disputes of his era. God, however, used William Farel (1489-1565) and Martin Bucer (1491-1551) to lead him into the calling the Lord had designated for him. Where the humanists stressed personal choice, the reformers emphasized divine mandates.

Most Italian humanists (and some in northern Europe) were driven by a desire for fame and fortune, but the reformers sought to glorify God by serving the spiritual and material needs of their neighbours. The contrast between these views is especially evident in their different concerns about the goal of education. Duly famous Italian school masters such as Pietro Vergerio (1370-1444) and Vitterino da Feltre (1378-1446) did not envision broad public education but concentrated instead on teaching children of the social elite in exclusive academies. Luther and Calvin, however, sought

41 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.11.

42 Ibid., III.ii.19.

43 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* V, tr. by James Anderson (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1869), p. 204. See too *John Calvin: Suffering: Understanding the Love of God*. Comp. & Ed. Joseph Hill (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005).

to provide at least elementary instruction for everyone, as they realized implementation of the priesthood of all believers required literacy.[44] The extension of education to the public at large came as Protestant churches, often with support from civil rulers, established schools for every level of instruction. The Roman Catholics, of course, could not ignore this progress without losing credibility, so they too enlarged their educational endeavors, especially when the Jesuits promoted them. One of the most enduring contributions of the Reformation to the modern world is availability of education to all socio-economic classes.

The Protestant doctrine of vocation, derived from a proper appreciation for divine providence, has exerted substantial influence upon the economic development of the modern world through its concept of the work ethic. The Protestants sanctified all occupations performed for God's glory, and thereby they elevated even menial tasks to a status of honour and dignity. Calvin in particular urged Christians to discard selfish ambition and quest for fame and to focus on pleasing God through conscientious performance of the work their Lord had prescribed in granting them the privileges of their respective vocations.[45]

Although Calvin was not an economic theoretician and so did not present a systematic program for economic development, he encouraged the ethical growth of commerce and industry in Geneva, and his disciples in France, the Netherlands, and elsewhere became leaders in those enterprises. Calvin stressed the sanctity of private property, and he approved the practice of usury, but only as regulated by the state so as to prevent exploitation of the poor. He did not endorse the *laissez-faire* philosophy now associated with Adam Smith (1732-90) and his free market treatise *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the work of a humanist who assumed the inherent goodness of human nature. The decline of the work ethic in modern times has occurred as even Christians have discarded the Reformation view of vocation and have detached their daily employment from their relationship to God. The effect of this detachment has been the denigration of humans while people ignore the claims of God.[46]

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[44] Coverage of this matter appears in Douglas, 'Talent and Vocation', and in James Edward McGoldrick, 'John Calvin: Erudite Educator', *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 21 (2010), 121-32. A convenient collection of Luther's writings on education is F.V.N. Painter (ed.), *Luther on Education* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928).

[45] See Michael Monheit, 'The Ambition for an Illustrious Name: Humanism, Patronage, and Calvin's Doctrine of Calling', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23 (1992), 267-89 for an excellent study of this topic.

[46] For further information about Calvin's view of economics, see C. Gregg Singer, 'Calvin and the Social Order', in *John Calvin, Contemporary Prophet,*

In early modern Europe, as some church members became prosperous, many lost the sense of calling to serve and instead saw vocation as the pursuit of upward social mobility rather than a summons to charity toward their neighbours. The Roman Catholic Church in this era continued to promote the sacred-secular dichotomy and thereby magnified the role of the clergy and used the term *vocation* to identify adoption of the religious life. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries popes such as Leo XIII (1878-1903) and John Paul II (1978-2005) encouraged laymen to regard their work as a vocation, but popular usage in Catholic circles continues to apply that term primarily to the *religious* life.

In the Bible, God's calling often appears as a summons to action, as for example, when he called Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, and others. Amos received a divine summons even though he had no previous experience as a prophet and no specific training to prepare him for that task. In a very dramatic episode of calling, Saul, a persecutor of Christians, became Paul the Apostle, as God inducted him into Christian service. There is an observable pattern in Scripture, as God made his will known to people he had providentially chosen for specific forms of service. Only a conspicuous few received miraculous calls, but all believers had roles to fulfil in the overall plan to their Creator.[47]

Among Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century, there was unanimous subscription to the priesthood of all believers, so Calvin's view was not exceptional, but he understood clearly the connection between this precious truth and its relevance for ordinary work Christians perform. This reformer regarded all work as a religious activity, and he maintained that everyone should work, even those who do not need the income from wages. Working is a divine command, and those who do not need the income from their labours can use it to aid people in distress.

Calvin was emphatic in denouncing idleness.[48] He therefore warned sternly: 'We are God's; let his wisdom and will... rule all our actions.... [C]onsulting our self-interest is the pestilence that most effectively leads

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ed. by Jacob T. Hoogstra (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), pp. 227-41; Donnio Walters, 'The Reformation and Transformation of Western Culture', *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 2 (1975), 109-14.

47 A helpful treatment of calling is John Hutchison, 'The Biblical Idea of Vocation', *Christianity and Society* 13 (1948), 9-16.

48 The entire matter of Calvin's concern for the social responsibilities of the Christian life has received thorough examination in André Bieler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, ed. by Edward Dommen, tr. by James Grieg (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 2005). A briefer study by the same author is *The Social Humanism of Calvin*, tr. by Paul T. Fuhrmann (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press (1964).

to our destruction'.[49] Believers must never therefore regard commerce, politics, education, etc. as autonomous domains separated from religion. No area of life is secular, and work is an honour, not a necessary evil to be endured. It is a visible way to display the reality of one's saving faith.

One of the great tragedies of modern times is the tendency, even among Christians, to regard providence as operating only in exceptional events. As this assumption has gained acceptance, a corresponding loss of confidence in divine sovereignty has become evident. Without firm belief in providence life is without meaning, and history is just a meaningless series of incidents and accidents. As Shakespeare phrased it, 'Life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'. The biblical cure for this pernicious malady calls all Christians to receive God's call with gratitude and to perform the duties of their respective vocations with the goal of pleasing their Saviour, who has commanded them, 'Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven' (Matthew 5:16). Yes, God is still calling all Christians.[50]

[49] Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.1.

[50] A biographical essay which deals with some of the features of Calvin's thinking about vocation is James Edward McGoldrick, 'John Calvin, Theologian of Head, Heart, and Hands', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29 (2011), 177-95. For a modern explanation of the decline of confidence in divine providence, see Langdon B. Gilkey, 'The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology', *Journal of Religion* 43 (1963), 171-92.