

John Calvin and Stewardship

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John Calvin's influence in Geneva and western Europe has been attributed to the fact that he was never corrupted by money. This assessment has merit. While Calvin's critics have been appalled at his power and influence and have called him a dictator and tyrant, his only authority in Geneva was the power of the preached Word to create a godly public opinion and the influence of a highly integrated personality. Corruption by love of money would surely have undercut his best efforts.

Calvin's strength however is rooted in a broader stewardship of his life. His thought and his work were united by the passionate conviction that at every moment humanity has to do with the living God, Creator of heaven and earth. The doctrine of election meant for Calvin that God had chosen him to be the instrument of his purposes in Geneva and western Europe. At a critical moment in his life he declared, "As to my intended course of proceeding, this is my present feeling: had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord. . . . And for myself, I protest that I have no other desire than that, setting aside all consideration of me, they may look only to what is most for the glory of God and the advantage of the Church. Although I am not very ingenious, I would not want pretexts by which I might adroitly slip away, so that I should easily excuse myself in the sight of men, and shew that it was no fault of mine. I am well aware, however, that it is God with whom I have to do, from whose sight such crafty imaginations cannot be withheld. Therefore I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held-fast, to the obedience of God; . . ."

There was a remarkable congruity between Calvin's theology and his life. He was skillful in the use of words but his life is a better embodiment of his theology than his writings. Yet his writings are a reliable clue to the theology embodied in his life and that has governed the style of stewardship in his descendants ever since. One helpful method of discussing stewardship in the Reformed and broader Protestant traditions therefore is to focus attention on those themes in Calvin's writings that shaped the stewardship of his life and that may be helpful clues to stewardship in our time.

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Creation - Gratitude

John Calvin had no doubt that the world was a gift and that there is a Giver. At first glance this does not appear to be a very profound statement. Yet it stands over against prevalent opinion that simply accepts the world as

something that is and that has no awareness of a Giver. The deepest divide in the realm of faith rests between those for whom the world has no purpose as its source or destiny and those for whom it is an expression of purpose. For Christians the purposes of the Giver and the Creator have been embodied in Jesus Christ. This conviction was basic for Calvin who always insisted that God is Creator as well as Redeemer and that a person is creature as well as a child of God.

The doctrine of creation means that the world is good. Even the devil was created good. The world is the work of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet for this same reason, the world is not an unlimited good. It is a created, limited good. For these reasons Calvin rejected all asceticism that is grounded in the notion that the world is evil. He also rejected unrestrained indulgence which made the use of the world the end of life. Rather, Calvin insisted, the world must be accepted as a gift from the Creator and the Redeemer, and therefore the only proper response of humanity to created existence is gratitude to the creator. A clue to the difference that Christian faith makes in life resides in the difference between the apprehension of the world as a gift that mirrors the wisdom, goodness and power of the Giver and that apprehension that grasps the world as a meaningless material or energy for human exploitation (I, 1, 21). Gratitude retrains indulgence.

The right use of world, avoiding undue severity that limits its use to necessities and unrestrained freedom that is indulgence, cannot be specified with precision; but there are guides. The first principle is the end and purpose for which the Author himself created and destined them. Calvin states his position very clearly. "Let this be our principle: that the use of God's gifts is not wrongly directed when it is referred to that end to which the Author himself created and destined them for us, since he created them for our good, not for our ruin. Accordingly, no one will hold to a straighter path than he who diligently looks to this end. Now if we ponder to what end God created food, we shall find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer. Thus the purpose of clothing, apart from necessity, was comeliness and decency. In grasses, trees, and fruits, apart from their various uses, there is beauty of appearance and pleasantness of odor (cf. Gen. 2:9)" (III, 10, 2).

The goal of human existence is not however physical comfort or the satisfaction of human desires for food, drink, clothing or even beauty. The goal of human existence is "eternal life" or the fulfillment of the divine purpose in human life. Thus the aspiration for eternal life becomes a guideline that prevents immoderate use of the world on the one hand and too great asceticism on the other. Those who use this world must use it as though they did not use it. "He who is ashamed of mean clothing will boast of costly" (II, 10, 11). The Christian knows how to be filled and how to be hungry, how to abound and how to suffer want (Phil. 4:2).

A third guideline is accountability. This world's goods are a trust. "All those things were so given to us by the kindness of God, and so destined for our benefit, that they are, as it were, entrusted to us, and we must one day render account of them" (III, 10, 5).

The world and human life are a gift. There is a Giver. Thanksgiving is the only proper response to the gift. The proper use of a gift is determined by the purpose of the giver both for the world and for human existence. Furthermore humans are accountable for everything that they use. The lives of Christians are divine callings through which God's purposes are worked out in history.

Providence-Trust

Providence no less than creation is a fundamental theme of Calvin's theology, and no less than creation it is closely related to the proper stewardship of life. Generosity of the human spirit reflects trust in the Divine Spirit. "The thing that makes us more close-fisted than we should be with our money is that we are too careful and look too far forward at possible dangers that might come upon us and so become too cautious and anxious and work out too fretfully how much we are going to need during our whole life and how much we lose when the smallest part is taken from us." (II Corinthians 8:2)

Example of Jesus - Obedience

The example of Jesus has always been a powerful determinant of Christian life. Certainly this is true for Calvin who emphasized the historical, ethical and personal life of Jesus as the disclosure of the will of God. "Let us learn to choose the kind of life that is consistent with the teaching of Christ so that eagerness for gain may not incite us to take up arms in an impious and wicked battle" (Acts 19:23). Jesus above all demonstrated how to abound and how to suffer want making both poverty and abundance serve the purposes of his life. He was accused of enjoying a good meal and wine and on the other hand he had no place to lay his head.

Allen D. Verhey of Hope College has pointed out that in Book II of the *Institutes* Calvin expounds the moral life in terms of principles and rules. In Book III the principles and rules are not suspended but the argument is different. The starting point is our union with Christ and our participation in his cross and resurrection. The story of his cross and resurrection is the story of our life, the narrative that shapes our character.

A basic assumption of modern society is that an abundance of things is good. This assumption stands over against an ancient and continuous Christian tradition that poverty is a highly appropriate condition for sainthood. The example of Jesus does not fit without reminder either the motif of poverty or abundance. This suggests that in the one life of Jesus there is no single pattern, but the intimation of various patterns of Christian life. The important point is that in every serious discussion of Christian life the example of Jesus is of critical importance and that the example of Jesus must be accepted in its fullness. It is not likely in our day that the justification for the ideal of physical plenty shall be omitted, but there is reason to fear that the ideal of poverty, until now a powerful one in Christian history, shall be forgotten. As Calvin put it, Jesus "sanctified poverty in his own person, so that believers should no

longer shrink from it, and by his poverty He enriched us so that we should not find it hard to take from our abundance what we may expend on behalf of our brethren" (Commentary on Corinthians 2:9).

Communion of Saints - Sharing

The Church is more than an aggregation of individuals. It is a community that lives a shared life. Calvin insisted that "the saints are gathered into the society of Christ on the principle that whatever benefits God confers upon them, they should in turn share with one another (IV, 1, 3). Much of the polity that Calvin developed in Geneva was designed to implement the communion of saints. "For as we are not born for ourselves alone, so a Christian man ought not to live for himself or use what he has only for private purposes" (Sermon on Deuteronomy 8:16-18). The sick were to be visited and cared for. Jobs were to be provided those who needed work. Above all, spiritual gifts were to be shared.

The Mission of the Church and the Diaconate

The diaconate as the church's ministry of compassion is essential to Calvin's understanding of the mission of the church. Elsie Anne McKee in an excellent dissertation has underscored the importance of this function: the deacon is one who cares for the poor and the diaconate as the office for this ministry on the basis of the Reformed exegesis of Acts 6:1-6, I Timothy 3:8-13, Romans 12:8, and the diaconal role of women in the New Testament. (Elsie A. McKee: *John Calvin on The Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving*, 1984).

Election - Vocation

Election has to do not simply with the ultimate destinies of heaven and hell, but with life here and now. The elect person has been chosen to embody the purposes of God in time and space. Vocation, including a person's daily work, is the realization in history of the divine intention. This means that life itself is a trust, a stewardship. Calvin believed that every "individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not needlessly wander about throughout life." All our actions are judged by him (III, 10, 6). All the things are given to us "by the kindness of God, and so destined for our benefit, that they are, as it were, entrusted to us, and we must one day render account of them" (III, 10, 5). This conviction that God calls us to be stewards of his gifts to us, especially time and energy, gives life its glory. "From this will arise a singular consolation that no task will be so sordid and base provided you obey your calling in it, that will not shine and be reasoned very precious in God's sight" (III, 10, 6).

Almsgiving - The Face of the Church

Calvin in his exegesis of Acts 2:42 made almsgiving a mark of the church. He also believed that almsgiving is an integral part of worship (IV, 17, 44).

Style of Life - Simplicity

No theme is more pervasive in Calvin's writings. Calvin abhorred the pretentious, the ornate, the ostentatious, the contrived. These ways of living cover up reality. Simplicity uncovers reality. One reason the later Calvinists continued to oppose bishops was their conviction that it is almost impossible to be a "bishop" and at the same time be simple.

Closely related to simplicity was Calvin's emphasis on moderation as a guide to appropriate Christian living.

Benevolences and Church Finance

Benevolences is a modern term, and in the first half of this century it was given a hallowed place in American church life. Benevolences were spent for the preaching of the gospel, for building churches, for relief of human suffering. A consensus among church members supported these causes. There was no equalization of funds, and there was no "piggy backing" of ideological causes, for which there was no consensus, on benevolences. Organizational costs of the church were minimal. One of the great achievements of American churches was this integration of funds for the entire mission of the church into the worship of the church. Today this whole situation has changed.

Hence there is another word we must hear from Calvin. The solicitation of gifts for the church and in the name of God is a solemn and serious responsibility. The collecting of the offering demands honesty. The gospel, not the enticements of "public relations," is the basis for Christian giving.

How would our offerings fare today if ministers and lay leaders clearly and plainly told congregations the truth, the whole truth, about how their offerings would be spent?

We once knew, and we must learn again, that gifts given in trust must be received in trust and spent or used with integrity.

Calvin believed that church money must be handled with special care and openness. "Nothing is more apt to give rise to unfavorable surmises, than management of public money" (Com. on II Corinthians 8:20). Calvin emphasized responsible stewardship of church resources and gifts in a remarkable but little read chapter of *The Institutes* (IV, 5). A yearly reading of this chapter is good preparation for pastoral leadership in stewardship and church administration.

Calvin was opposed to all parasitic forms of life, especially in church affairs. In the current decline in many mainline Protestant churches the using up of church resources in unproductive enterprises and without replacing them is documentably an increasingly serious problem of stewardship on the congregational as well as national level.

Many problems would be solved if it were demanded that all who hold

positions other than the pastorate would be required as a condition of their employment to have a *specific* role in bringing a sufficient net number of persons into the organized life of the church whose contributions would at least equal their "salary package" and expense accounts!

A second practice also would be helpful. No one should spend more in any year in expenses to board and committee meetings than the sum of one's contributions! Special arrangements could be made for those who for good and documentable reasons are unable to pay their way.

These rules may not be practical, but it is not clear they are not. In any case, stewardship is finally a personal issue and for none so crucial as for ministers. Stewardship has to move from general principles and become concrete. For us in our kind of economy the decisive test is usually a question of money: how we earn it, how we use it and how much we give away. Each of us must ask, Do I use the gift of life, time, energy, resources, for the glory of God? Calvin may have had many faults. One fault he did not have. He was never corrupted by money. Pope Paul IV is said to have exclaimed on the occasion of Calvin's death that this was the secret of his power.

Stewardship for ministers also comes to focus in our service to the community and organization which provide our salaries, perquisites and expense accounts.

Pierre Bayle (1617-1706), the skeptical son of a Reformed minister, wrote in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*: "Calvin has left imitators in so far as regards activity of life, zeal and affection for the interest of his party; they employ their eloquence, their pens, their endeavors, their solicitations in the advancement of the kingdom of God; but they do not forget themselves, and they are, generally speaking, an exemplification of the maxim that the Church is a good mother, in whose service nothing is lost."

Bayle was a critic and did many an injustice, but in reflecting on stewardship we have to ask if his criticism is true. It is too easy within the church to become parasitic, living upon what others have built.