Celebrating Calvin

Ten Ways Modern Culture Is Different Because of John Calvin

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3. Ethics and Interpretation of the Moral Law: The Decalogue

Calvin's interpretation of the Ten Commandments as ethical pillars was widely influential for generations of character development. In his discussion, he argued that this moral law was necessary; for even though man was created in God's image, natural law alone could only assist in pointing toward the right directions. Although acknowledging conscience as a "monitor," Calvin knew that depravity affected such conscience and people were "immured in the darkness of error." Thus, mankind was not left to natural law alone, lest it be given over to arrogance, ambition, and a blind self-love. The law, then, was as gracious as it was necessary. Such a fundamentally positive view of God's law would become a distinctive ethical contribution of Calvinism.

The law also shows people how unworthy they are and leads them to distrust human ability. Calvin frequently used phrases such as "utter powerlessness" and "utter inability" to make the point that people are dependent on God's revelation if they are to do well. The law is a "perfect rule of righteousness," even though our natural minds are not inclined toward obedience.

Calvin noted that the law is full of ramification, and that it should not be limited to narrow applications. There is always, he wrote, "more in the requirements and prohibitions of the law than is expressed [literally] in words." Each commandment also required its opposite. If one was not to steal, then he also should protect his and others' property. If one was not to lie, then he was to tell the truth, and if one was not to commit adultery, then he should support marital fidelity. Calvin believed that we must reason from the positive command to its opposite in this way: "If this pleases God, its opposite displeases; if that displeases, its opposite pleases; if God commands this, he forbids the opposite; if he forbids that, he commands the opposite." This wide application of the moral law created the basis of an ethical theory that spread in time throughout the West, and it also exhibited a sophistication that was not always present in some theologies.

Calvin believed that the law had many practical functions: it convinced like a mirror; it restrained like a bridle; and it illumined or aroused us to obedience. Another chief design of God's law, however, was to guide and remind believers of God's norms.

Calvin's commentary on sexuality (when discussing the seventh commandment) spans less than a thousand words in the *Institutes*, but is ever so profound. His discussion of "thou shalt not steal" was rich with texture, calling for a person not only to avoid theft but also to "exert himself honestly to preserve his own" estate (II, 8, 45). These and other commentaries formed the Protestant work ethic. Similarly, when he spoke of the internal scope of the commandment prohibiting false testimony, he noted that it was "absurd to suppose that God hates the disease of evil-speaking in the tongue, and yet disapproves not of its malignity in the mind" (II, 8, 48). While those expositions may be brief, they are excellent and so worthy of consulting that most Protestant confessions thereafter did just that. Some of the codifications in various Puritan contexts would follow Calvin's train on the need and proper use for the law.

Calvinists, then, were not legalists but admirers of the perfections and wisdom of God's law, which they trusted more than themselves. Calvin's followers regarded their own native abilities with such low esteem and God's revealed law in such high esteem that they became the creators and supporters of constitutionalism and law as positive institutions. Moreover, charity was the aim of law and purity of conscience would be the result.

4. Freedom of the Church: The Company of Pastors

Calvin labored extensively to permit the church to be the church-and culture was impacted by a robust, vibrant church. Less than two years after Calvin's arrival, he was exiled from Geneva. The struggle was an important one, involving whether the church and her ministers could follow their own conscience and authority, or whether the church would be hindered by state or other hierarchical interference.

In 1538, Calvin and William Farel (who pastored the Genevan churches of St. Pierre and St. Gervais respectively) declined to offer communion to the feuding citizenry, lest they heap judgment on themselves. In return, on April 18 of that year, the City Council exiled them for insubordination. In 1541, however, Calvin was implored to return to Geneva.

When he returned, rather than seeking more control for himself over church or civic matters, he sought to regularize a republican form of church government. One of Calvin's demands before returning to Geneva in September 1541 was that a collegial governing body be established of pastors and church elders from the area. When it came time to replace ineffective centralized structures, rather than opting for an institution that strengthened his own hand, this visionary reformer lobbied for decentralized authority, lodging it with many officers. He also insisted that the church be free from political interference-separation of jurisdictions, not a yearning for theocratic oppressiveness, helped also to solidify the integrity of the church-and his 1541 *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* specifically required such a separation.

The first priority of Calvin and Farel upon their reengagement in Geneva was the establishment of the protocols in Calvin's *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, a procedural manual that prescribed how the city churches would supervise the morals and teaching of their own pastors without hindrance from any other authorities. The priority that Calvin assigned to this work shows how important it was for him that the church be free to carry out its own affairs, unimpeded by the state. The sovereignty of the ministerial council (Consistory) to monitor the faith and practice of the church was codified in these 1541 *Ordinances*. They were later revised in 1561, just prior to Calvin's death, and provided enduring procedures for a free church. Obviously, this arrangement marked a departure from the traditional yoking of political and ecclesiastical influence under Roman Catholic auspices. The Genevan innovation also differed slightly from the current practices in Bern and Lausanne, both of which were also Protestant.

In nations or regions where the civil government has ever or often sought to influence the church to change its views, this Calvinistic signature is greatly appreciated. A church free from external, hierarchical, or civil control was a radical and lasting contribution that Calvin made to the modern world. When the church is effective at promoting her God-given virtues, that free church is a powerful influence for society's good.

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1 [Back] Henri Heyer, *Guillaume Farel: An Introduction to His Theology*, trans. Blair Reynolds (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 60

2 [Back] Arthur David Ainsworth, *The Relations between Church and State in the City and Canton of Geneva* (Atlanta: The Stein Printing Company, 1965), 15, reports that the unrest began with a minister denouncing the political government from the pulpit, which led to his arrest.

3 [Back] Theodore Beza, *Life of John Calvin* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1997), lxxvi.

4 [Back] The first Consistory in 1542 was comprised of twelve elders elected annually by the magistrates and nine ministers. By 1564, the number of ministers grew to nineteen. The Consistory met each Thursday to discuss matters of common interest and church discipline. Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993), 111. Since Calvin insisted so strongly on this institution after his Strasbourg period, some believe that he imitated the practice of Bucer (McGrath, 13).

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