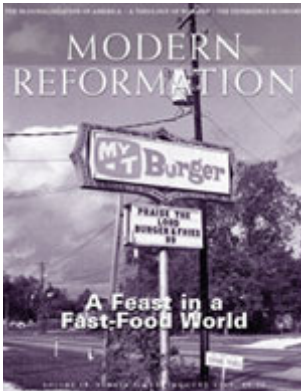


Celebrating Calvin

Ten Ways Modern Culture Is Different Because of John Calvin

David W. Hall



7. Parity Among all Professions: The Doctrine of Vocation

Another of the culture-shaping aspects of Calvin's thought was his emphasis on the sacredness of ordinary vocations. Before Calvin and the Protestant Reformation, the doctrine of vocation or calling was thought to be exclusively for the clergy. However, his view of work as inherently dignified by our Creator elevated all disciplines and lawful vocations to the status of holy calling. One could, after Calvin, be as called to medicine, law, or education as a clergyman was called to serve the church.

Calvin's call for hard work did not necessarily equate success or prosperity with divine blessing. His views, though, did have a persistent tendency of ennobling various areas of human calling and labor. Business, commerce, and industry were all elevated by Calvin's principles, and those who adhered to these became leaders of modern enterprise. Max Weber and others are correct to identify that Calvinism dignified work and callings of many kinds.

Prior to his time, many workers felt little sense of calling unless entering the priesthood. Due primarily to the priestly emphasis of the Roman Catholic Church, prior to the Reformation "calling" or vocation was largely restricted to ecclesiastical callings. Calvin taught that any area of work—farming, teaching, governing, business—could be a valid calling from God, every bit as sacred as serving as a minister. This was a radical change in worldview, which would ultimately alter many economies, cultures, and human lives.

The formation of the Genevan Academy under Calvin called for general education (not only in religious studies), and it provided for studies in law, medicine, history, and education. Calvin and other Reformers helped retire the sacred/secular distinction. He realized that a person could serve God in any area of labor and glorify him. Calvin counseled with many leaders, entrepreneurs, printers, and merchants in his time, and he did not revile any lawful calling. The character of Calvinism ennobles all good work. Despite its faith in the afterlife, Calvinism called its adherents to be leaders in all fields.

His commentary on the fourth commandment in Exodus 20 also underscores the dignity of work. Just as God commanded people to rest on the seventh day, so the Lord expected them to work six days. Work was vital for all people made in God's image, and for Calvin, thus, all callings were important. Calvin's doctrine of work was further underscored—not to mention widely popularized—by his explanation that the fourth commandment that mandated rest on one day out of seven equally called for work during the other six.

Whether we eat or drink, as Calvin agreed with Paul in the New Testament, we do all to the glory of God. That is why the great post-Reformation composer Johann Sebastian Bach signed each of his original scores with the initials "SDG." Those letters stood for the Latin phrase *sola Dei gloria* ("to God alone be the glory"). Bach knew the character of Calvinism and applied it to his craft. Some of the finest Christians in history have also applied the Lordship of Christ to their own vocations and served as leaders in fields for the glory of God.

Economics and Profit: The Invisible Hand

Of interest to historians, both sympathetic and unsympathetic to Calvin, whatever Calvin was doing during this time transformed Geneva into a visible and bustling forum for economic development. With a growing intellectual ferment, evidenced by the founding of Calvin's Academy and the presence of modern financial institutions (e.g., a Medici bank), Geneva became an ideal center for perfecting and exporting reform.

Wherever Calvinism spread, so did a love for free markets and capitalism. If one valid measurement of leadership is its impact on its immediate environment, one might well compare Geneva before and after Calvin. The socioeconomic difference between *before* and *after* Calvin may be noted by comparing three key occupational segments. In 1536, prior to Calvin's immigration, Geneva had 50 merchants, three printers, and few, if any, nobles. By the late 1550s, Geneva was home to 180 merchants, 113 printers and publishers, and at least 70 aristocratic refugees who claimed nobility.

It is certainly erroneous to think, however, like Max Weber in his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), that Calvinists equated material success with a sign of being the elect. To rebut that idea, one may simply consult Calvin's teaching on the eighth commandment. On this commandment that forbade stealing, Calvin interpreted that the holding and protecting of personal property was by implication perfectly normal. In fact that commandment, properly understood, called for avoidance of greed for what others have, and it required every person to "exert himself honestly in preserving his own [property]." He warned believers not to squander what God providentially gave and also to care for his neighbor's well-being. He also saw this commandment as calling for contentment with:

our own lot, we study to acquire nothing but honest and lawful gain; if we long not to grow rich by injustice, nor to plunder our neighbor of his goods...if we hasten not to heap up wealth cruelly wrung from the blood of others; if we do not...with excessive eagerness scrape together whatever may glut our avarice or meet our prodigality. On the other hand, let it be our constant aim faithfully to lend our counsel and aid to all so as to assist them in retaining their property.

A prayer by Calvin makes Weber's oft-repeated confusion fall to the ground more rapidly. The commonly mistaken caricature of Calvin as a crass capitalist should be contrasted with the prayer he suggested before beginning work, which is included in the 1562 Genevan Catechism. In that prayer, he led the people in asking God to bless their labor, noting that if God failed to bless it, "Nothing goes well or can prosper." He prayed for the Holy Spirit to aid workers in this calling "without any fraud or deception, and so that we shall have regard more to follow their ordinances than to satisfy our appetite to make ourselves rich." Along with this, Calvin prayed that workers would also care for the indigent and that the prosperous would not become conceited. He prayed that God would diminish prosperity if he knew the people needed a dose of poverty to return them to their senses. Far from callousness toward the less fortunate, Calvin prayed that workers would "not fall into mistrust," would "wait patiently" on God to provide, and would "rest with entire assurance in thy pure goodness."

He also asserted that any endeavor that ceased to have charity as its aim was diseased at its very root. Elsewhere, Calvin warned that luxury could incite great problems and produce "great carelessness as to virtue." Moreover, he warned against "eagerly contend[ing] for riches and honors, trusting in our own dexterity and assiduity, or leaning on the favor of men, or confiding in any empty imagination of fortune; but [that we] should always have respect to the Lord." Lest Calvin be misunderstood, he also called for a "curb to be laid on us" to restrain "a too eager desire of becoming rich, or an ambitious striving after honor." Although Calvin advocated reliance on God and not wealth, the prosperity ethic that followed his time in Geneva is one of the wide-ranging effects of his thought and practice.

1 [[Back](#)] Several studies detail Calvin's Geneva. Among the best are: E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967); *Calvinism in Europe, 1540-1610: A Collection of Documents*, eds. Alistair Duke, Gillian Lewis, and Andrew Pettegree (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988); J. T. McNeill, "John Calvin on Civil Government," *Calvinism and the Political Order*, ed. George L. Hunt (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 22-45; William A. Dunning, *A History of Political Theories: From Luther to Montesquieu* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 26-33; W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin, His Socio-Economic Impact* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1975); and

William G. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1994). Two other biographies also add to our understanding: William Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

2 [[Back](#)] Monter's numbers, of course, may be challenged. It is possible that records were kept better after 1536, which could explain some of the rise of the merchant class (Calvin's Geneva, 5.). Even if that should be established, however, the astronomic rise of printers and nobility is certain. Nobles, mainly from France, fled to Geneva since adhering to Protestantism at home could have meant their death.

3 [[Back](#)] *Calvinism in Europe, 1540-1610: A Collection of Documents*, 34.

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