Implications for a Social Concern in the Theology of Calvin

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ONE of the most emphasized areas of the theological research today concerns the means by which our religious ideas or concepts affect or should affect both the society which accepts the religious teaching (the Christian community), on the one hand, and the society outside the religious context. This is the area of Christian Social Ethics. Today, however, I should like to look at this same concern from the standpoint of Historical Theology. I should like to analyze some of the implications for a social concern which arise out of the thought of the Reformer of Geneva.

That we need to understand interrelations between religious ideas and social organizations hardly seems to need justification in church groups. But, you may ask, why choose Calvin as a theological source? I choose him for several reasons. **First,** of all the reformers, Calvin, and movements stemming from his work, have been most influential in the development of the American way of life — both our religious and our political ideas.[1] **Second,** those of us called Methodist must realize that a large portion of the social concerns of John Wesley—those in which he differed from the Church of England —stemmed from the Dissenting and later Puritan movement in England, which was a derivative from Calvin.[2] But the **third** is the most direct reason for me today. I spent the summer in South Africa analyzing various aspects of their society which, they say, are "Calvinistic" and are derived from the Reformed tradition. When I began studying this culture four years ago I quickly realized that if I planned to analyze South African Calvinism, I had to have some "norm" or some other type of Calvinism with which to compare it. I found that criticism of South African Calvinism was relatively easy—but to make a convincing argument for an alternative was much more difficult. It was in order to explore further my interest in Calvinism and Culture that I spent last summer (1968) traveling and studying in South Africa.

Alas, if this South African way of life, the American way of life, and the Methodist movement all stem in some sense from Calvin, why all the difference? Indeed, there are many aspects of South African society which are totally foreign to either America or Methodism. In addition, our State Department and Methodist leaders both here and in South Africa are critical of South African Calvinism.

As a historian I would be first to admit that any set of theological ideas will develop differently in different social contexts. And even in the same cultural context one generation will not interpret its faith or its society as another generation would do it. Often a cultural context is such that it forces undue changes or modifications in a given religious tradition. Elsewhere I have attempted to an-

[1] See, for example, A. Merwyn Davies, *Foundation of American Freedom* (New York: Abingdon, 1955), where the author analyzes this assumption thoroughly.

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[2] This point was made most comprehensively by the Roman Catholic writer Maximin Piette in his *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (trans. by J.B. Howard, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937). This is also strongly emphasized in George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935). More recently it was embodied in Rupert E. Davies, *Methodism* (London: Penguin, 1963).

alyze the cultural context of South African society, highlighting especially the specific historical situations which modified—or as some would say, warped—the South African interpretation.

Today I will not say very much about later developments either in South Africa or in our country. Before we can evaluate any latter-day development of "Protestant principles"—as we might call them—we must know something of the source of that set of principles from the period of the Reformation itself. Consequently, I should like to analyze some aspects of social concern which are implicit, if not stated, in the works of Calvin himself. I shall use not only his **Institutes,** but his **Commentaries** on selected Biblical passages and some of his **Sermons.** Only then can we proceed to any thorough or systematic evaluation of the theological situation in South African or in any other nation.

INTRODUCTION

As we come to the sixteenth century with questions of social relevance or of a theological basis for social concern, we are confronted with a basic problem. We pose a question of the twentieth century and not of the sixteenth. This is a question of presupposing four centuries of thought in philosophy, sociology and psychology which Calvin's century could not have had. In short, we are asking a question in a form which Calvin did not use, and we will want an answer which that century was not capable of giving. If we want our answer we must be satisfied with an inferred answer, a set of general principles, not a blue print which Calvin expressed in so many words. In all his writings he emphasized the individual's relation to God and the individual's place in God's society—the Church. But a theology of the twentieth century would ask other questions.

Two major questions concerning Calvin's influence in social questions have received much emphasis in the last half century. In 1904-5 the German sociologist, Max Weber, published his book in German **The Protestant Ethic and the spirit of Capitalism.**[3] His follower, the British R. H. Tawney, published a sequel in 1926 **Religion and the Rise of Capitalism.**[4] These set off an academic discussion as to whether or not Calvinism was responsible for Capitalism — or what the relation was between the two. Many critics read too much into Weber's idea to make Calvin the father of **laissez-faire** Capitalism, not realizing that the Capitalistic spirit was at least two hundred years older than Calvin. Likewise, Weber and his followers assumed that they could take English Puritan thought as an authentic reflection of Calvin's own ideas.[5] There was imprecision on both sides — and there still is. Calvin's relation to economic questions has been thoroughly discussed in any case.

The **second** area of intense discussion concerns Calvin's influence in political developments. Did he give encouragement to authoritarianism or democratic freedom?[6] We find that Calvin can be used to support either side. That the Huguenots, the Scottish Presbyterians, the English Puritans, and the Massachusetts Pilgrims along with South Africans all felt their politics were Calvinistic indicates the complexity of this question.[7]

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[3] Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus,* essay in *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik,* XX (1904) and XXI (1905), Trans. by Talcott Parsons as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner's, 1930).

[4] Richard H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1926).

[5] Winthrop S. Hudson "The Weber Thesis Reexamined" *Church History,* XXX (1961), pp. 88-99. See also Robert W. Green, ed., *Protestantism and Capitalisms The Weber Thesis and Its Critics* (Boston: D.C. Heath, "Problems in European Civilization," 1959).

[6] George L. Mosse, ed., *Calvinism: Authoritarian or Democratic* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, "Source Problems in World Civilization", 1957).

[7] John T. McNeill, "Calvinism and European Politics in Historical Perspective," and "John Calvin on Civil Government" pp. 11-22 and 23-45 respectively in George L. Hunt, ed. *Calvinism and the Political Order* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965).

Beyond the questions of economics and politics, I have other questions to ask of Calvin today. For example: Calvin's concern is with God's society, or the Church. But the external church with its membership roll was not synonymous with God's church of the elect.[8] In fact some whose names were on the membership roll were undoubtedly not on God's list, while some scoundrels from the street, or from other disreputable places in Geneva, were among God's chosen. In this situation where you were never sure who were the authentic Christians — who were the elect — how should one act toward his neighbors who were a collection of both saints and sinners? How should one act towards those in poverty, obviously not in a Capitalistic class? Given Calvin's assumption that the political **status quo** was from God, when some were masters and more were servants, what was the meaning of Freedom in Christ? Furthermore, could one use certain obvious attributes of society such as cultural advantage, educational opportunity, or economic progress as proofs of one's favor with God? What is one's Christian responsibility to mankind outside the Christian fellowship — or to those within it who are of a different educational, cultural and racial background? These, I say, are some examples of questions we would ask, but which would have been foreign to the theological framework of the late Middle Ages and likewise foreign to the period of transition into the early modern period where Calvin was living and writing.

ANALYSIS OF MAN AS AN INDIVIDUAL

Calvin argues that the fall of Adam brought original sin to all men which in turn blotted out all possibility that man could fulfill his God-given potentialities or be worthy of his salvation as he was before the Fall. This sin affected all men and made the intervention of God the only avenue of man's escape from this corruption. However, there are some indications in Calvin's thought that even among corrupt men some knowledge of God in society could be ascertained. Let us look at some of these possibilities. His thought concerning social relations among all men would seem to be based on five major premises with several subsidiary assertions.

I. The **image of God in all men (Genesis 1:27)** was not completely obliterated by the Fall of Man. "Even though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was . . . corrupted."[9] To be sure, "among the household of faith" this image is clearer (Gal. 6:10), but it is discernable among all men even outside the Christian fold. But this image of God in another person cannot be seen by looking directly at him. A true understanding of another comes only as one looks to God and sees God's reflection in that other person. God is seen reflected in all his creations, even unworthy sinners, if we but have the correct perspective.

In the third book of **The Institutes** Calvin analyses this when he suggests that "Love of neighbor is not dependent on interpretation of man, but looks to God."[10] Here he gives several illustrations of this Image of God to be seen in all men. "A great part of them [men] are most unworthy if they be judged by their own merit. But here Scripture teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but look to the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love . . . . Therefore, whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him. Say 'He is a stranger' but the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be

[8] Predestination or Election is the subject treated in *The Institutes,* III: XXI-XXIV. The most complete statement of the doctrine, both in exposition and in defense against theological opponents may be found in *De Aeterna Dei Predestinatione* (1552), translated as *Concerning The Eternal Predestination of God,* trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: Clark & Co. Ltd., 1961).

[9] *Institutes,* I: XV, 4.

[10] In*stitutes,* III: VII, 6.

familiar to you . . . . Say 'He is contemptible and worthless,' but the Lord shows him to be one to whom He has deigned to give the beauty of His image. Say that you owe nothing for any service of his; but God, as it were, has put him in His own place in order that you may recognize toward him the many and great benefits with which God has bound you to himself. Say that he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake; but the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of your giving yourself and all your possessions. Now if he has not only deserved no good at your hand, but has also provoked you by unjust acts and curses, not even this is just reason why you should cease to embrace him in love and to perform the duties of love on his behalf . . . . It is that we remember not to consider men's evil intention, but to look upon the image of God in them, which cancels and effaces their transgression, and with its beauty and dignity allures us to love and embrace them."[11] Thus to say the man you meet is unworthy or he is a stranger, or you owe him nothing — this is no excuse. God has put himself in the place of this stranger in need so you will be able to perform for him many of the benefits God has already performed for you.

II. Furthermore, all men share a **common nature** or common fellowship since all are creatures of the same God and subject to the same sins of the same Adam. This is not a revealed truth, but a natural truth. This does not depend on revelation. All you need to do is open your eyes. Hence it is discernable even by those outside the Christian fold. Thus if all men share a common nature every man is a reflection of ourself — and deserves the same consideration we would expect for ourself.

To exemplify this Calvin comments on Matt. 5:43-4. We read in Matthew: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you'." Calvin infers from this that all men share the same sacred fellowship including all the human race. "All men are our brethren, because they are related to us by a common nature." Again, depravity of sin has not removed this fact. Therefore, based on Matthew's verse about loving your enemy, Calvin said: "Whenever I see a man I must of necessity behold myself as in a mirror."[12] He used the same imagery in a sermon on Galatians 6:9-11 where we are admonished to do good to all men. Calvin wrote: "We cannot but behold, as in a mirror, our own face in those who are poor and despised, who have come to an end of their own power to help themselves, and who groan under their burden, even though they are utter strangers to us. Even in dealing with a Moor or a Barbarian from the very fact of his being a man, he carries about with him a looking glass in which we can see that he is our brother and our neighbor."[13]

In other words when I look at someone in need I not only see the image of God which I must serve, but in fact I see a mirror image of myself, and even more I am called to respond. Thus I not only see the image of God in my neighbor, but since we are of one human nature I see myself in my neighbor.

III. If all men still possess the image of God, and if all men share a common nature, then it must follow that **all men are neighbors.** A very useable scripture for this idea is of course the Lukan story of the Good Samaritan. Calvin has not only sermons and commentaries on this idea, but he also includes a summary of his idea of neighborliness in **The Institutes.** There he tells us: "I do not deny that the more closely a man is linked to us, the more intimate obligation we have

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Commentary on Matthew 5: 43:44.

[13] Sermon on Galatians 6: 9-11, in *Calvini Opera,* vol. 51, column 105. Quoted in Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 150.

to assist him . . . . But I say: we ought to embrace the whole human race without exception in a single feeling of love; here there is no distinction between barbarian and Greek, worthy and unworthy, friend and enemy, since all should be contemplated in God, not in themselves. When we turn aside from such contemplation, it is no wonder we become entangled in many errors. Therefore, if we rightly direct our love, we must first turn our eyes not to man, the sight of whom would more often engender hate than love, but to God, who bids us 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."[14] Again, our concern for our neighbor whoever he may be, derives from our prior love for God, and the reflection of God which is seen in all men.

Now Calvin knows very certainly that not all men are really neighborly even to their close associates. He asked why, and in a commentary on Psalm 10:2 he gives us an answer. In this verse of the Psalm we read: "In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes which they have devised". Calvin replies: "They are inflated with pride [and hence] the Psalmist sets forth their wickedness in cruelty vexing the afflicted, for no other reason but because they disdain and despise them, through the pride with which they are inflated. And their cruelty is not a little enhanced from this, that, forgetful of all humanity, they contemptuously triumph over them. Pride is the mother of all wrongs; for if a man did not through pride magnify himself above his neighbors, and through an overweening conceit of himself despise them, even common humanity would teach us with what humility and justice we ought to conduct ourselves toward each other . . . . Let every one, therefore, who desires to live justly and unblameably with his brethren, beware of indulging or taking pleasure in treating others disdainfully; and let him endeavor, above all things, to have his mind freed from the disease of pride".[15]

Now if because of pride or any other reason we refuse to be neighborly to our neighbors, we steal from them something which is their right as human beings. In Deuteronomy 5 where the verse simply reads "you shall not steal" Calvin elaborates. To withhold from our neighbor that neighborly consideration which is due is to steal from him and at the same time to make ourself less than human. When we do not act as human to another, we de-humanize not him but ourself.[16] This is because we have broken the fellowship which binds us into the common body of mankind. In so doing we exclude ourselves from giving due regard to our neighbor and make ourselves as a lion or an ox or a bear.[17] In Job. 31:13-17 we read the following: "If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me; what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make him? If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it . . ." Calvin analyzes this in these words: "Job then has considered two things when he has thus supported his manservant or maidservant in their humanity. The first is that we have a common creator — we are all descended of the same God; and second, there is a common human nature such that we must conclude that all men, of whatever unworthy condition, and however contemptible according to the world, nevertheless there is brotherhood between us. For he who does not consider a man for his brother —he makes of himself an ox, or a lion, or a bear, or some other savage

[14] *Institutes,* II: VIII, 55.

[15] Commentary on Psalm 10:2.

[16] Sermons on Deuteronomy 5, as analyzed by Wallace, p. 151.

[17] Sermon on Job 31: 1-15; *Calvini Opera,* vol. 34, column 655.

beast, and he renounces the image of God which is imprinted in all of us."[18]

IV. Furthermore, true neighborliness and true love for all God's creations involves **complete servitude** to each other and to God. There is no such thing as a person free in certain aspects of life and bound in other areas. All are completely dependent on God, and hence subservient to Him. Consequently, if we fulfill our divine responsibility among men, we are completely subservient to their needs whether they be king, bishop, pope or peasants. Where there is mutual responsibility, there is mutual servitude. In fact, Calvin defined society in his Ephesians Commentary: "Society consists of groups which are like yokes, in which there is a mutual obligation of parties."[19] Perhaps the interrelation of all aspects of society is more obvious to us than to one living in Calvin's day. If so, our mutual obligation and responsibility to each other is that much more necessary. In his Commentary on Ephesians he continued: "God has so bound us to each other, that no man ought to avoid subjection. And where love reigns, there is a mutual servitude. I do not except even kings and governors, for they rule that they may serve. Therefore, it is very right that he should exhort all to be subject to each other. But as nothing is more contrary to the human spirit than to submit to others, he recalls us to the fear of Christ who alone can tame our fierceness, that we may not refuse the yoke, and may subdue our pride, that we will not be ashamed of serving our neighbors."[20]

In so far as one is responsive to his neighbor's need, and subservient to him, he gains here and now a foretaste of the divine Kingdom when all division will cease, and what we now experience only in part will be experienced in its fullness.[21]

V. But following this, Calvin has one further suggestion. Ultimately, and in the sight of God, there are **no distinctions between men** on earth. Some are kings and some are peasants, and this earthly order is a part of God's plan. There are other distinctions such as wealth or intellect. But ultimately Calvin insists there must be "brotherhood between great and small, [and] masters ought to be companions of their servants insofar as both have the same hope of eternal life."[22] None has more hope nor less hope in God's sight. Christ is the head of all divisions of society regardless of rank or position. Yes, even regardless of sex. "Therefore, as the world will come to an end, so also will polity, magistracy, laws, distinctions in order, degrees of honour and everything of that sort. No longer will the servant be different from his master, the king from the ordinary man, and the magistrate from the private citizen. Furthermore, there will then be an end both to the rule which angels exercise in heaven, and to the offices of ministers and overseers in the Church, so that God alone may exercise His own power and dominion through Himself, not through the hands of men or angels."[23]

As though this were not enough to discourage pride based on culture or political rank or wealth, Calvin commented further. In Ephesians we read: "As Servants of Christ . . . [render] service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. Masters, do the same to them, and forbear threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him" (Ephesians 6:7-9). The older translation has it "God is no respector of persons." With this meaning Calvin comments: "A regard to persons blinds our eyes, so as to leave no room for rights or justice: but Paul affirms that it is of no

[18] *Ibid.*, as translated by the author.
[19] Commentary on Ephesians 5:21.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] Sermon on Galatians 3:26-29, in *Calvini Opera,* vol. 50, column 569-70.
[22] Sermon on Ephesians 6:5-9, in *Calvini Opera,* vol. 51, column 808.
[23] Commentary on I Cor. 15:24.

value in the sight of God. By 'persons' is meant anything about a man which is irrelevant to the real case, and which we take into account in judging, as when kingship, beauty, rank, wealth, friendship, and everything of this sort gain our favor, while the opposite qualities produce contempt and sometimes hatred. As these irrelevant feelings arising from the sight of a person have the greatest possible influence in human judgments, those who are invested with power flatter themselves, as if God would countenance such corruptions . . . Paul, on the contrary, asserts that masters are mistaken if they suppose that their servants will be of little or no account before God, because they are so before the world. For God cares nothing for persons, and the cause of the meanest man will not be a whit less regarded by Him than that of the loftiest monarch."[24]

Thus we see five aspects of Calvin's concept of man in society: 1. all men bear the image of God; 2. all are part of a common human nature; 3. all men are neighbors; 4. all must be subservient in love and concern for each other. Finally, in the sight of God there are no distinctions between persons due to rank, race, culture, or human merits. From this short sketch of some of Calvin's ideas we may conclude that one who wishes to be true to the Genevan Reformer's views will find no theological justification for social or cultural distinctions here. There is no theological justification for racial distinctions, nor for cultural snobbery in Calvin's basic writings. Instead, all are children of the same God, have the same needs and capabilities, and have the same eschatological hope after death. In the meantime men are called upon to be neighbors to their neighbors and brothers to their brothers. They are called upon to be human beings in responsible relation to other human beings. Only thus can one maintain his place as a member of God's universal human family. To do less is to become less than human; to do less is to deny the image of God in oneself which is the mark of God which makes us human in the first place.

[24] Commentary on Ephesians 6: 7-9.

MAN IN SOCIETY

We have been considering Calvin's concept of man as an individual in the human family of God, reprobate and elect alike. Here Calvin's understanding seems to be fairly clear. But another question we must raise is: What is man's role in the various structures of society, and what role must he fulfill here — especially if it seems the structures work contrary to the best interests of man? What if the structures themselves seem to counteract, or frustrate, man's attempt to live out the image of God? What if man as an individual is anxious to be a neighbor to his less fortunate brothers, but finds the social order seems intent only on maintaining separation and alienation between brother and brother?

Without going into any detailed analysis of the structure of civil authority in Calvin's thought, we may look at certain aspects of it on the basis of which a social ethic might conceivably be based. Here we have the same distinction within Calvin's thought. There is the most significant aspect of society — that represented by the members of the Church — many of whom are among God's elect. But, in Calvin's thought, those who are God's elect are not known in this life. Consequently he introduces other considerations which deal not with the Elect as such, but with society as a whole. It is these last considerations that I am most concerned with today.

Calvin insists that man needs civil government to keep his unruly nature in line — which shortcoming is accounted for by the concept of Original Sin. Civil order — or civil authority — is a part of God's order. We read this idea in Romans and on the basis of this scripture and other similar passages Calvin built his political theory. Romans 13:1-2,4, reads: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that

exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, he who resists will incur judgment . . . He [the ruler] is God's servant for your good."

In the last chapter of the **Institutes** Calvin elaborates this same general concept that the supremacy of authorities in society is a God-given order that is to be maintained. He includes not only city and state officials as we would conceive civil authorities, but he includes also other this-worldly officials — fathers as heads of their families are in the same position, and teachers in their school are also God-given authorities. Calvin states: "To sum up, if they remember that they are vicars of God, they should watch with all care . . . to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence and justice."[25]

But what of those who choose not to obey such authority figures? We are told: "It is impossible to resist the magistrate without, at the same time, resisting God himself."[26] The South Africans use this idea in their own way. They assume that their way of life is God-given and thus to oppose the **status quo** is to oppose God. To want change is un-Christian. Calvin insisted that man's unruly nature needs this restraint and guidance otherwise man's life will result in utter confusion, greed, immorality — and other equally bad results of man's sinful nature. Thus the first function of civil officials is to police man's negative nature and keep man in line. This is the most obvious aspect of his concept of civil authority, and the one that is most often referred to.

But I ask myself: "Is not Calvin's total system of thought more positive and more constructive than this?" Again I conclude that there are two sides to Calvin's thought. In the first place he emphasizes the negative results of Original Sin. But there is enough of the Humanistic Lawyer's education in Calvin that he must balance this with another attitude as well. It is in this area that it seems to me we are to find the barest hints of a social Ethic in Calvin. Let us merely mention four hints which arise.

1. You will ask: "Are we really to be subservient to political and civil authorities no matter what? " Ultimately Calvin came to a very slight qualification — and I think this small concession was the loophole which helped us develop from a medieval concept of political authority toward a more modern concept — although the real development came after Calvin's death, most noticeably in the Puritan developments in the English Civil War period. Calvin's statement is: "In that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to Him, to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject".[27]

What constitutes forcing you to deny God? And what is meant by this exception — resistance? Calvin did not become specific as we wish he had. Here he leaves his thought in the last edition of the **Institutes** of 1559, five years before he died.

Two years later, however, in 1561, we read another hint along the same line. It was in this period that tempers in France were reaching the breaking point. In March 1562 the French Wars of Religion broke out. The Calvinist organization of Geneva had been supplying ministerial leaders for the "underground" French Huguenot Church for well over a decade. During the 1550's persecution against Protestants had increased in France under Henry II. The idea of not resisting a political authority was sorely tried. As the tension mounted just before this outbreak of war, in 1561, Calvin was engaged in writing a commentary on Daniel. In Chapter 6 he came upon the story of the Lion's den. Daniel had prayed to the God of the Hebrews whereas the law stated that prayers were to be offer-

[25] *Institutes* IV: XX, 6.
[26] *Institutes* IV: XX, 23.
[27] *Institutes* IV: XX, 32.

ed to none but Darius the early king. Daniel although a high official in the court, was apprehended praying to his God and disobeying the earthly king's decrees. In his commentary on this situation Calvin said: "Earthly princes lay aside their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy to be reckoned among the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy them than to obey them." (Actually the Latin reads: we ought **conspuere in ipsorum capite** — we ought to "spit on their heads" rather than to obey them.)[28]

Thus, although it is not very specific, we have one aspect of opposition to a social order on behalf of a higher loyalty. If Calvin had been more specific, perhaps his followers would not have developed so many diverse interpretations of this particular aspect of social protest.

II. Following this idea we note a **second** suggestion arising from Calvin's thought. He implied more than he stated that we ought not to make any nationalism into a divine institution. In classical medieval thought and in Luther and Pietism, the main Christian concern was the salvation of the individual soul. A man might be rich or poor, slave or free, the victim of prejudice or otherwise mistreated in this world. But in the end this had no bearing on his chances of ultimate salvation. On this basis many Christian groups have found accommodation in the most diverse political situations. Perhaps in certain instances this was a valuable concept to allow a group to function in many trying times. However, Calvin goes beyond this at one point in his criticism of what we might call religious nationalism — or idolatry of political or social customs at the expense of theological insight.

André Biéler,[29] a theologian and an economist at the University of Geneva, has analyzed some of Calvin's major conflicts in Geneva as examples of his opposition to this religous nationalism. From the beginning of Calvin's work there and until 1555 he had conflicts with various groups who put their love of their own customs — or of their own city-state — ahead of love for the Gospel as the Reformers understood it. Many of these religious nationalists fled to Berne, which although it was Protestant, was completely dominated by the City Fathers at the expense of Berthold Haller, the Reformer there. Many critics of later generations have suggested that while Calvin said he was democratic in Geneva, actually it was a theocracy. When one looks at the whole approach of Calvin this seems an unjust evaluation. He did not seek personal gain nor profit from any part of his reformation; his political opponents could not make such a claim. Calvin and his associates went into exile once and were on the verge of exile several other times, but they always insisted they would undergo any such punishment for the sake of the Gospel as they understood it. Any placing of nationalism, or tradition, or municipal or personal interests ahead of the claim of the Gospel was idolatry of one type or another. Religious nationalism — a situation in which the church and its faith were used for ulterior motives and concerns — was pure idolatry in Calvin's eyes. He fought this attitude for nineteen years until he was finally victorious. In other words, while the political order was god-given — it was not divine. Any elevating of political or social systems to the status of the divine was ultimately demonic. This was the only answer Calvin could give if he wished to retain sovereignty for God alone.

III. Calvin wrote about the function of civil government which was more than merely policing our unruly sinful nature. Although this is also not very specific, it gives room for interpretation. Calvin wrote in the last chapter of the **Institutes:** "For civil government has as its appointed end, so long as we live among

[28] Commentary on Daniel 6. Translated by McNeill in "John Calvin on Civil Government," pp. 39-40.

[29] André Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin* (Geneva: George & Co., 1961), pp. 104-116.

men, to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with another, and to promote general peace and tranquility."[30]

It seems to me that we must read these ideas against the first section of this lecture — man in the image of God, all men sharing one human nature, all as neighbors. If we interpret broadly enough, we can see this type of statement as a basis for a social ethic for all men — not merely for the elect. I should like to emphasize the last few phrases of this statement: "adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another." Conceivably, these are hints on how a civil order must be analyzed, and the bases on which resistance can arise against an ungodly regime — whether it be a family, an education system, or a political organization.

IV. One further idea comes from Calvin's use of Natural Law.[31] This is the fourth small insight which carries his thought out of the strictly medieval social context toward what became the modern world. By Natural Law we mean the idea that God has written some concepts of right and wrong for example, on the heart of all men. This has no bearing on one's ultimate salvation and the supernatural realm of God. It is, however, very important when we consider human organizations in this-worldly affairs of government and of society. Man's capacity was affected by the Fall, but was not entirely destroyed. By reason alone man can distinguish good from evil. "Since reason, therefore, by which man distinguishes between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is a natural gift, it could not be completely wiped out; but it was partly weakened and partly corrupted." Later in the same paragraph, in relation to the verse from John 1:5, "The light still shines in the darkness, but the darkness comprehends it not," Calvin says: "In man's perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam".[32]

On the basis of this limited use of reason man is by nature a social being. "[Man] tends through natural instinct to foster and preserve society. Consequently, we observe that there exists in all men's minds universal impressions of a certain fair-dealing and order. In this life no man is without the light of reason."[33]

Statements like this led Emil Brunner — not a rash liberal, nor prone to make unstudied comments — to say: "For the unprejudiced reader there can be no doubt of the absolutely fundamental significance of the law of nature (**lex naturae**) for Calvin."[34] I emphasize again, however, that Calvin strictly qualifies this concept. Man's reason, such as it is, has no relevance in the life of the Spirit, and no value to lead him toward salvation. It functions only in earthly society and among men who do not all possess this higher wisdom which comes only from faith and revelation.

These are some hints on which we may get a glimpse into the thought of Calvin which may be related to problems of our own day. Calvin was not basically concerned with a social ethic as we know it, and his world view and social concepts could not have had the benefit of much thought of the past century which we take for granted. Nevertheless, here are at least four aspects of his thought which indicate he was looking toward the future. All four of these have been analyzed and elaborated by his followers in diverse ways in the last four centuries, but so far as I know, these four have never been brought together as a possible basis for a social ethic based pri-

[30] *Institutes* IV: XX, 2.

[31] John T. McNeill, "Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers," *Journal of Religion,* XXVI (1946), p. 168-182.

[32] *Institutes* II: II, 12.

[33] *Institutes* II: II, 13.

[34] Emil Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order* (London: 1945), p. 233; as quoted in McNeill, "Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers."

marily on Calvin's works rather than elaborations of his followers.

To repeat: **First,** even in the context of a givenness of political authority there is a point when man must refuse to serve his political authority in favor of serving God. **Second,** certain questions are raised concerning the deification of any political system, no matter how relevant to social well-being ,to community organization, or to patriotism. This is pure idolatry. **Third,** there are certain admonitions to the earthly authorities which involve ethical valuation — they must help "adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another." And **fourth,** natural reason in man gives him some direction in this life even without any knowledge from either faith or revelation.

CONCLUSION

This analysis of Calvin — our asking questions different from those he asked — leaves us with several problems. Yet it is instructive. In conclusion, let us suggest how this type of analysis of Calvin can give us an insight into the use made of his works by Calvinism of all shades and descriptions since his day — South African, American, Puritan dissenters, and many others.

This diversity has led to many seemingly opposed interpretations or conclusions based ostensibly on Calvin. Calvinism has meant many different things to many different people. For example, the "law and order" mentality of South Africa, coupled with a racist dictatorship, with censorship of press, publishers and radio, and led by Prime Minister Vorster who was an active supporter of Hitler during World War II — this nation calls itself Calvinist. Contrast this Calvinism with that of the underground church of Germany which wrote the Barmen declaration. Many who wrote this considered themselves Calvinists. In 1934, in the face of the rise of Hitler, they said: "Scripture tells us that . . . the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace . . . . The Church acknowledges the benefit of this divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God . . . and the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled . . . [But] We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well."[35]

In our own country we can cite the extremely forward-looking and ecumenical 1967 Presbyterian confession. But at the same time we remember "Presbyterian" Carl McIntyre thinks he speaks for Calvinism in our own day.

Part of the greatness of Calvin — and one of our problems — is that he was brilliant enough to see several sides to most questions. Man is a sinner, but there is an aspect of reason left which functions in spite of sin; political authorities are to be obeyed as God's agents, but at certain points they must be disobeyed; God is disclosed to us completely only in in his revelation in Jesus Christ, but at the same time there is a general revelation so that no sinner can have any excuse not to know something about God naturally; the original righteousness of man was erased at the original fall, but at the same time elements of the image of God in man remain; God works through his revealed law of salvation in Christ, but at the same time, by natural law, man can know some things outside revelation and in the absence of faith.

Why this seeming conflict? The genius of Calvin was great, but not great enough that he could transcend his own century. He was deeply steeped in humanist training and was a leader in the Renaissance in France. His first published work was a commentary on Seneca, the Roman Stoic philosopher. But then Calvin was, as he said, "reduced

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[35] "The Barmen Declaration," in *The Proposed Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: United Presbyterian Church, 1966), pp. 171-174.

to teachableness" — or perhaps converted. He then developed his ideas from deep reflection on the Bible and on medieval theological method and medieval social theory. But these two methods of thought — Renaissance Humanism, and medieval theology — could not be reconciled completely. His intellectual training would not allow him to abandon the forward and new thrust of Renaissance studies; his religious faith would not allow him to abandon his Protestant version of medieval theological analysis. There are several places in his thought which indicate the harmonizing of these two diverse methods was not successful. As a citizen of the sixteenth century he had no alternative but to hold these in juxtaposition although not completely compatible.

Since the days of Calvin there have been many advances and many clarifications which would have simplified his task had he known about them. Many intellectual developments of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have brought us new insights in social organization, in psychological understanding of man, in various other cultural studies. We have also developed several post-medieval theological methods which allow us to use many of these intellectual advances in the service of theology — and we are no longer bound only to Biblical exegesis and revelation as the authoritative sources for religious understanding.

But this very opportunity in modern theological thought is the source of another of our unsettling experiences. In the absence of some type of medieval absolute standard or traditional norm for theology, we are left free to exercise our evaluation, our selectivity and intelligence; or on the other hand, we are free to ignore what modern thought says to us for the sake of some subjective standard, worthy or otherwise.

Here we arrive at the major problem of the meaning of a Calvinistic social ethic in the modern world. It is not only the portion of Calvin's work which is accepted or rejected which determines what a "Calvinistic" approach to culture is. This is only the beginning. What is more important is: What aspects of contemporary knowledge of society are used to elaborate whatever beginning concepts one chooses to take from Calvin?

The "Calvinistic" ethic of South Africa, or America or anywhere else, is not determined by the theology of Calvin so much as is by more contemporary social conditioning. In the case of South Africa, for example, when we look at this **Apartheid** ethic of today we find it is almost an accident that they label themselves "Calvinistic." Much of their social development on their frontier, their isolation from Europe, and their constant reaction against the British, typed their culture much more than the theological terms they used. In effect, their own late eighteenth and nineteenth century history cut them off from all significant intellectual developments of this fruitful period. Hence they approach their problems today largely from the intellectual stance of 1800 and wonder why they are not praised the world over.

Now, while I believe strongly in study of historical theology, it is not necessarily because I think this will give us a blueprint for contemporary social ethics. This only gives us some insights as to how certain men came to grips with certain problems of their own particular era. Their methodology of attempting to relate some theological insights of the past will be instructive for us, but never decisive. Sooner or later we must close the book of history and come to grips with the problem of our day with our methods and insights — and enlightened by the best contemporary thought available. There is no norm from the past which is completely adequate for the evolutionary present. This is both our opportunity and our frustration; our glory and our despair. But it is our challenge and for the Glory of God we must accept it and do our best with it.