

CALVIN AND THE POOR



In Calvin's time, Geneva was a city of about ten thousand people. It was one of a number of European cities that became commercially important at the end of the Middle Ages.

The economic situation had changed. People were freed from the agrarian serfdom of the feudal period, when an illiterate and downtrodden workforce supported the lord in his castle. In the new cities that grew up after the Black Death (bubonic plague) in the fourteenth century, a new, literate middle class was becoming apparent. It was this class that became protestant.

In Geneva, the citizens became republican and protestant at the same time, when they cast out the last prince-bishop. Committed protestants could read their own Bibles and listen intelligently to Calvin's sermons.

The Genevans who reformed the church also reformed the state. Calvin did not pretend to offer a universally applicable system for looking after the poor. The urban poor and the numerous refugees who crowded into Geneva needed a system of care.

If Calvin was suspicious of great wealth, he saw no virtue in being poor, except for the fact that the poor were subject to fewer temptations. Private charity was discouraged since the Genevans believed that it was the duty of society as a whole to glorify God. This duty included eliminating poverty.

In the same week that the church in Geneva was reformed in 1536, two important social institutions were founded. One was the department of public education and the other was the hospice. Education was to be universally available and free to all *boys*, including orphans. The sick and destitute were to be cared for.

The Genevans were thus continuing the work of the monasteries in their new, secular and protestant

society. They went further by instituting an order of deacons, one of Calvin's four "ministries", whose role it was to look after those that could not look after themselves.

Hard work was seen as a virtue in Calvin's time. Moral regeneration and Christian character were forged through social institutions. Personal responsibility was preached and the poor were regarded as being responsible. To help them improve their lot a number of mechanisms were put in place – notably that the poor could not be charged interest on loans. The idle and the drunken were, naturally, condemned.

CALVIN AND THE BIBLE (2 THESSALONIANS 3.10, PSALM 128.2 AND PROVERBS 10.4)

Calvin had a great liking for a text that seems harsh when read in today's context – "anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thess 3.10). In his commentary on the text, Calvin relates it to Psalm 128.2, "you shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands; you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you", thus taking the positive interpretation and setting aside any notion of starving the lazy.

Calvin also promoted the protestant work ethic by quoting Proverbs 10.4, "the hand of the diligent makes rich". Thus the dignity of labour is asserted and, by implication, the rights of the workers to take pleasure in and profit from their work. This could be the beginning of a theology of workers' rights.

Calvin did not believe that people who do not work have the right to profit from the work of others. This has nothing to do with the poor, but everything to do with the lazy. Calvin asserts that idleness is cursed by God, whereas the poor are to be looked after by deacons, to be helped financially through interest-free loans, and to benefit from the



churches liquidating goods to help them. Poor children were to be educated without cost.

Calvin interprets the text as an instruction to the people of Thessalonica not to encourage idleness by sharing their resources with those that do not work and have no need of them. He denounces those who live by the sweat of others, but who do nothing to help people. He is not talking about the poor as such, nor about the unemployed, but about those whose role it is to care for their family.

How does this help us to define our response to God's will for the problems of our time?

QUESTIONS

1. CALVIN MAKES A CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO WORK AND PEOPLE WHO PROFIT FROM THE WORK OF OTHERS. HOW DOES THIS RELATE TO THE ECONOMIC SYSTEM IN YOUR COUNTRY IN TERMS OF CHRISTIAN JUSTICE?
2. IN CALVIN'S TIME THE POOR WERE NOT CHARGED INTEREST ON THEIR DEBTS AND ORPHANS WERE EDUCATED FOR FREE. IS THIS TRUE OF YOUR SOCIETY AND IF NOT, WHY? HOW IS YOUR CHURCH WORKING FOR JUSTICE IN PRACTICAL WAYS?
3. DOES YOUR CONGREGATION FAVOUR INDIVIDUAL ALMSGIVING OR COMMUNITY ACTION? WHICH DO YOU SEE AS BEING MORE TRUE TO THE REFORMED TRADITION?
4. IT IS TRADITIONAL REFORMED PRACTICE TO MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE BY TAKING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY RATHER THAN BY GIVING LESSONS TO OTHERS. HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LIFE?

PRAYER

O Lord, we give thanks for all the good things you have given us.

May we share them generously with others.

Help us to know that all we do is important in your eyes.

May we live our lives according to the teaching of your gospel

– and not be mere theoreticians.

Help us take responsibility for the problems of this world

– transforming ourselves to become agents of change.

Help us to seek the kingdom of God and God's justice before all else

– and may we become effective witnesses to your transforming grace

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

AUTHOR

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