

## JOHN CALVIN, THE WORK ETHIC, AND VOCATION

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*“Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.”*

John Calvin was a French reformer of church and culture. Protestants look back to him, and note the impact of his great mind in applying the doctrines of predestination. He was one whom God used as a catalyst to assimilate and manipulate the works of the past to change the future. Many may not be familiar with the lasting influences that “predestination” had on vocation and society. His “new” understanding of work and vocation brought freedom, assurance, and joy to all those being sanctified by it.

Work is the first thing that God revealed about himself. “In the beginning God created” (Gen1:1; cf. Ps 8:3). Confirming this idea is Gen 2:2, “And on the seventh day God ended his work,... and He rested.” The penultimate of God’s creation, mankind, was given an occupation at the time of his creation.

In the beginning the work was pleasant and even enjoyable<sup>2</sup> with a mist coming up from the ground to water the earth. Adam and his wife sinned in the garden by eating the forbidden fruit. Soon after, God cursed the ground on account of man’s disobedience. Some have incorrectly applied the curse to ‘work’ and not the ‘ground.’<sup>3</sup>

Then to Adam He said, “Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, ... Cursed [is] the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat [of] it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you [are,] and to dust you shall return.”<sup>4</sup> (Gen 2:17-19)

It seems like work has remained an uphill battle for mankind since the curse. Work in the Bible continued to be necessary, to prevent poverty, hunger, stealing, and as a means of judging character (Prov 6:6; 18:9; 20:11; Eph 4:28). Solomon gave numerous encouragements to avoid sloth, and taught that the accumulation of possessions is futile. The Jewish understanding of work can be further seen in the teachings of the Talmud.

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<sup>2</sup> “... but what before his fall he did with ease and pleasure, was not to be accomplished after it without painful and persevering exertion.” Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (1871), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/jamieson/jfb.i.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “*In opere tuo*” — Vulgate. The Septuagint makes the same mistake: Ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις σου, “in your works,” Charles Christiansen, Carolyn Manville Baum, Julie Bass-Haugen, *Occupational Therapy: Performance, Participation, and Well-being* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.), 3, 26.

<sup>4</sup> NKJV.

Then along came the Greeks. To them work was the curse<sup>5</sup> and was intended only for the lowest class of people, slaves.<sup>6</sup> It was the free men who engaged in art, philosophy, politics, large agriculture endeavors, or war.<sup>7</sup> In classical Greek the word<sup>8</sup> was the word for ‘work’ as well as their ‘god of sorrow.’<sup>9</sup> Aristotle thought to be out of work or unemployed was good fortune,<sup>10</sup> as it freed you up for better things. He also believed that money was unproductive in society.<sup>11</sup> There was a pervasive

belief that a person’s prudence, morality, and wisdom was directly proportional to the amount of leisure time that a person had. A person who worked, when there was no need to do so, would run the risk of obliterating the distinction between slave and master.... Leadership, in the Greek state and culture, was based on the work a person have to do, and any person who broke this cultural norm was acting to subvert the state itself.<sup>12</sup>

Ancient Rome built itself on the back of the Greek ideas, with an even larger slave labor component. In Rome land was king, while free craftsman and small farmers were the source of workers and overseers for the large building projects carried out by the slaves.<sup>13</sup> It was noted, that “the prevalent view among the aristocracy was that wage earnings were sordid, that workshops were low place, and that trades were despised.”<sup>14</sup> “Pagan Rome was for the elite. From it the “masses were excluded, and the vulgar populace was hated.”<sup>15</sup> And work was still a curse.

Augustine Bishop of Hippo influenced many, including Calvin,<sup>16</sup> yet did little to change the perception of work. Augustine was of the persuasion that the monastics and clergy should labor only as it was useful to prevent sin, but that work was a punishment.<sup>17</sup> He continued to

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<sup>5</sup> Maywood, A. G. (1982). “Vocational Education and the Work Ethic,” *Canadian Vocational Journal* 18(3), 7-12, as quoted in <http://www.coe.uga.edu/workethic/historypdf.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> The ancient Greeks regarded the most desirable and the only “good” life as one of leisure. Work, in the sense of supplying the basic necessities of life, was a degrading activity which was to be allocated to the lowest groups within the social order, especially to slaves. Slavery was the social device which enabled the Greeks to maintain their view of work as something to be avoided by a full human being: what human beings “shared with all other forms of animal life was not considered to be human” (Arendt 1959; as quoted in Tony Watson, *Sociology, Work and Industry* [Routledge, 2003], 173-174; see [http://www2.ciando.com/shop/book/readex/index.cfm/fuseaction/-readex/bok\\_id/4038/cat\\_id/194/cat\\_nav/168/bookshow/Sociology-Work-and-Industry/isbnshow/-0203103041,9780203103043/usessl/1/CFID/24228460/CFTOKEN/18971789](http://www2.ciando.com/shop/book/readex/index.cfm/fuseaction/-readex/bok_id/4038/cat_id/194/cat_nav/168/bookshow/Sociology-Work-and-Industry/isbnshow/-0203103041,9780203103043/usessl/1/CFID/24228460/CFTOKEN/18971789)).

<sup>7</sup> *Homo faber: Work through the Ages*, trans. by D. C. Fisher (New York: Harcourt Brace); quoted in Roger P. Hill, “History of Work Ethic,” <http://www.coe.uga.edu/workethic/hpro.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Scheidel, Sitta Von Reden, and Francis Taylor, *The Ancient Economy* (2002), 23, as noted in <http://books.google.com/books?id=31NpSt-yNegC>.

<sup>9</sup> His mother was the goddess Eris (“discord”), who was the daughter of Nyx (“night”), <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponos>.

<sup>10</sup> Aristotle as quoted in R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 110.

<sup>11</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Baker Academic, 2001), 102.

<sup>12</sup> L. Braude, *Work and Workers* (New York: Praeger, 1975), as noted in Roger B. Hill, *Historical Context of the Work Ethic*.

<sup>13</sup> Herbert A. Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (SUNY Press, 1992), 120.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123; Treggiari, citing Cicero.

<sup>15</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 68.

<sup>16</sup> C. Gregg Singer, *John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974), vii.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, trans. by Marcus Dods (T. & T. Clark, 1871), 517.

struggle with pagan philosophy; “it took a long time to see the full implications of his faith in the grace of God.”<sup>18</sup> Monastic life, martyrdom, and the priesthood were things that he and the early church considered heavenly, and all other tasks were lower and worldly. The church’s response to work became “so heavenly minded that they did no earthly good.”<sup>19</sup> It was during this time that the church gained power.

Augustine had perceived the church and secular state to be in a symbiotic relationship for mutual benefit, support, and preservation.<sup>20</sup> As a consequence of the union, the mindset and productivity of the state’s masses would be guided by the oversight of the church. As time progressed the state was no longer independent, but subservient to the church’s supreme ruler, the Pope. Other early church thinkers did not make significant change to the view of vocation either.

A “hierarchy of professions and trades was developed by St. Thomas Aquinas as part of his encyclopedic consideration of all things human and divine.”<sup>21</sup> His ranking had a farmer as supreme, and a merchant as lowest. All these were, however, lower than the works of the church. Luther’s work ethic was a continuation of the status quo and position, with humbleness and patience. He combined this with the feeling that it is not the fruit of labor, but the labor itself that would set you free.<sup>22</sup> So imagine the changes when reformation came to Geneva with Calvin!

It is at this point that I digress a moment to reflect on the man Calvin, on this his 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I would like to draw your attention to some ‘current’ perceptions of him, influences on him, and his ideal plan.

It has been said of Calvin that he was “God-intoxicated” as he lived his life unreservedly before the face of God.<sup>23</sup> Froude noted the unique skill set that God had given Calvin when he said “no eye could have detected more keenly the unsound spots in the creed of the church, nor was there a Reformer...so resolute to exercise, tear out and destroy what was distinctly seen as false... and make truth... the rule of practical life.”<sup>24</sup> And Stickelberger noted “like his thinking, so is his style: not ambiguous, but crystal clear, despising unnecessary flowering language, a mirror of his purity.”<sup>25</sup> Though not perfect, he was a product of and reaction to earlier influences.

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<sup>18</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 103, “Calvin ... saw monasticism as an evil that led to pride, envy, strife,... laziness,... and unhealthy dualism.”

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>21</sup> David Steinmetz, *Calvin in Context* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 188; A. Tilgher, *Homo faber: Work through the Ages*, as quoted in <http://www.coe.uga.edu/workethic/hreferences.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, as noted in George Lundskow, *The Sociology of Religion: A Substantive and Transdisciplinary Approach* (Pine Forge Press, 2008), 101; Howard Kohn, *The Last Farmer: An American Memoir* (University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 102.

<sup>23</sup> Henry R Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 93.

<sup>24</sup> As quoted in N. S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History: Calvin Classics* (Vol. 1; Still Waters Revival Books; Reprint, 1989), 17.

<sup>25</sup> Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life*, trans. by David G. Gelzer (John Knox Press, 1954), 31.

Augustine and Bucer can be seen as an amalgam in Calvin's thoughts on predestination and work ethic.<sup>26</sup> Calvin's belief in the priesthood of all believers was similar to Luther's, although they differed on sacramental views. His views of the state and vocation were different than any before. Also, he had a new vision for the city of Geneva.

Originally just passing through, he was persuaded to stay and help in the church. This initial overnight stay extended into three years. Noting a need for revival and reformation from the Catholic church, he attempted to make Geneva so earthly good that it would be heavenly minded.<sup>27</sup> With Calvin in the pulpit

The church could warn and admonish those guilty.... The council of Geneva would punish those guilty of such offences as being absent from church, dancing or playing cards,...swearing,... giving one's daughter to a Catholic in marriage, arranging a marriage between an elderly woman and a young man,... denying the reality of the devil and hell.<sup>28</sup>

Setting up a theocratic kingdom on earth was not well received when the commitment to it became personal. This theocratic kingdom brought with it many social innovations, such as this: doctors and surgeons would be called back to the hospital to take care of the poor in addition to their other duties (not something done in those days). Hostels were founded for strangers, prisoners were gathered together on Saturdays to listen to sermons, and an infirmary for the local and traveling ill was started.<sup>29</sup> For persistent adultery Calvin favored the death penalty, which was carried out a couple of times. Despite this, there was a reluctance to enact laws against prostitution and blasphemy.<sup>30</sup> "Calvin's aim in this section...was to show what is God's will in the orders that exist...and on the divine will! There can be no Christian freedom without submission to the divine will."<sup>31</sup> This holistic view of predestination prepared the way for his vocational viewpoint.<sup>32</sup>

Calvin vocational idea was that "there would be no employment so mean and sordid (provided we follow our vocation) as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God."<sup>33</sup> Calvin remarked that we are like a "useless block of wood" if we feel "called to laziness," as that is not what God intended. Contrary to Luther, Calvin felt that striving culturally was appropriate as long as your motivation was correct, as Paul writes, "whatever is not done out of faith is sin" (Rom 14:23).

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<sup>26</sup> Francois Wendel, *Calvin: Origins, and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. by Philip Mairet (Baker Books, 1997), 141.

<sup>27</sup> Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life*, 93.

<sup>28</sup> John Calvin: His Roots and Fruits, Singer, C. Gregg, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974, p64

<sup>29</sup> Emanuel Stickelberger, *Calvin: A Life*, 92.

<sup>30</sup> John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 189.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. by Geoffery W. Bromiley (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 207.

<sup>32</sup> "Calvin thus tied his understanding of vocation to his clear doctrine of predestination," William C. Placher, *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 232.

<sup>33</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by John Allen, (6<sup>th</sup> ed.; Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-school work, 1921), 3:10:650.

Van Til notes, “Calvin discusses duty and beauty, vocation and avocation (he allows room for such recreations as golf and sport in general.”<sup>34</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin notes that we are not forbidden to drink wine, enjoy music, laugh, or to have a great meal, but all things are to be done to the glory of God.<sup>35</sup> This seems well and good, but if I am an unregenerate person what do I do?

The good news is that God has a plan for you as well. Wendel notes, “nevertheless, the reprobate sometimes show signs analogous to those of vocation.... The reprobate are occasionally touched almost by a like sentiment as the elect.” His impression of Calvin’s thought was that even the non-believers have a vocation to carry out God’s will. The non-regenerate may “feel” that they are doing the “right thing,” and could not fathom doing anything else, but this false sense of assurance should not be interpreted as a sign of salvation. Calvin’s perception of vocation and his thoughts on predestination have made many lasting changes seen even today.

Although Calvin was not popular with many in his day, his vocational views can be seen impacting culture in Holland, England, Scotland, and even America, where “our Pilgrim and Puritan fathers were inspired with a sense of mission and vocation.”<sup>36</sup> This work ethic has been influential in forming what employers are looking for today.

According to Maywood, employers’ rankings of the attributes most desired in employees consistently confirm that the most desirable employee is one who demonstrates the traditionally valued characteristics of reliability, dependability, pride of craftsmanship, and willingness to learn and who derives personal gratification from a job well done.<sup>37</sup>

Not only did Calvin free people to pursue upward mobility to the glory of God, but he also freed people to enjoy the fruit of their labor.

To Calvin riches were not the “evil” the monastics had thought. Matter and material things are made by God and are to be enjoyed, with temperance, and to forbid such was tantamount to blasphemy. “The poor you have always” is all part of the predetermined plan of God. He even encouraged people to dress up to make good first impressions for the glory of God.<sup>38</sup> So while Luther tolerated the world, Calvin mastered it.<sup>39</sup>

As in all things, Calvin did believe that there was some flexibility to the social ethic. Paul’s admonition in Rom 14:4, “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls,” seems to be in Calvin’s mind when he states, “do not put pressure on others to follow our example, as if it were a rule.... Avoid rashly dictating what others should do.”<sup>40</sup> We should, like Peter, learn John 21:22, “If I will that he remain till I come, what [is that] to you?”

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<sup>34</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 104.

<sup>35</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3:19.

<sup>36</sup> Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, 94.

<sup>37</sup> “Vocational Education and the Work Ethic in a Changing Workplace,” ERIC Digest No. 78; ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Career and Vocational Education Columbus OH; <http://www.ericdigests.org/pre-929/ethic.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> Bouwsma, 196.

<sup>39</sup> A. Dakin, *Calvinism* (The Westminster Press, 1965), 199.

<sup>40</sup> Bouwsma, 192.

You follow me.” And we should do our task to the glory of God and try and not to micromanage what everyone else does.<sup>41</sup> This principle then gives backbone to creativity and independence.

As Christians we are then encouraged to express ourselves in legitimate means and in a prudent manner when being imposed upon. Calvin encouraged prudent discrimination of character by adding, “It would be imprudent and foolish to overlook” traits, that our God-given mind would warn us about.<sup>42</sup> Nor “does [a Christian] knowingly and intentionally allow himself to be imposed on; he does not relinquish his prudence and judgment so that he can be more easily cheated, nor does he forget the difference between black and white.”<sup>43</sup> One must also acknowledge, “God sometimes imposes . . . new and unusual roles”<sup>44</sup> for each vocation. This great freedom does not come without responsibility.

It seems in history that equality and democracy have been found on the side that was Calvinistic. Aristocratic and unequal society tended to be Arminian and Catholic. Bancroft notes that predestination of life and vocation “inspires a resolute, almost defiant, freedom”<sup>45</sup> that is unparalleled by any other method by which man tries to teach equality.

Like a pejorative, “work” is not something many revel in. Many still dread, fight, and avoid work, and count down the days until retirement from their current vocation. Instead, let us look at things the way Calvin did. Do not forget the process that has given us the freedom to pursue any vocation our heart desires. Often, the history that led up to the emancipation of the workers is under-appreciated. Many are negligent in acknowledging God or thanking God for allowing them the opportunity to participate in his plan, which includes our working. We must remind ourselves that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, it should be done to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

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<sup>41</sup> Dakin, 202.

<sup>42</sup> Bouwsma, 192.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.; Bouwsma does a good job with Calvin’s work discussing the Sermon on the Mount; cf. John Calvin’s commentary on Matt 5:39f. This, as argued by Calvin, should also apply on a national level. p193, 35

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>45</sup> As quoted in N.S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History: Vol. 1 of Calvin Classics* (reprinted; Still Waters Revival Books, 1989), 13.