

# The social thinking of John Calvin<sup>i</sup>

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## *Abstract*

Calvin's social thought is to be understood within the context of the long tradition of Christian social teaching and also, specifically, in relation to the social teachings of other Protestant Reformers. Within this understanding, there are many points of convergence and continuity between his social thinking and the teaching of the Church in its different traditions. It may rightfully be argued that whatever differences may appear to exist between the two trajectories (that is, his own social teaching and that of the Church in general), they amount mostly to adjustments, re-channeling and different points of emphasis. This conclusion will become evident as various aspects of his social teaching are considered below.

## **Introduction**

Christian social thought is largely founded upon the teachings of the Bible and the Christian tradition inherited by Christians throughout the life of the Church. Inasmuch as the Church in every age looks back to the message of the Bible to glean what it can learn from this message in order to address present-day social problems, so also does it explore the thinking of early Christians to shed as much light as possible on its social mission. It does so specifically in order to gain an understanding of how they interpreted the message of the Bible and how this influenced their approach to the social problems of their times. Certain biblical books and texts have had more significance than others in offering insight into the Christian approach to social problems. In the Old Testament, texts such as the Ten Commandments and the accounts of the prophets have been quite seminal in informing Christian social teaching. In the New Testament, reference is made to the preaching and works of Jesus, such as the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount, the healing of the sick and the feeding of the hungry, as well as to the teachings of the apostles – especially Paul – and the evangelists.

As far as Church tradition is concerned, the teachings and sermons of the Church Fathers are of key significance up to about the thirteenth century. From then onward, Church Councils, the Protestant Reformers, the Popes of the Catholic Church, and the specialised units of the World Council of Churches have all played a crucial role in interpreting and transmitting the social message of the Christian gospel to the people of their time (see Wogaman 1993). Accordingly, much has been written on these sources of Christian social teaching and they provide a rich fountain from which present-day Christians can draw their own nourishment, understanding, and inspiration on how approach the manifold social problems of today. The purpose of this article is to explore only one aspect of this rich tradition of Christian teaching: the social teaching of one of the giants among the Protestant Reformers and father of the Reformed church tradition, John Calvin. Mindful that other articles in this journal already deal with his life and other achievements, I will limit my investigation solely to his social teaching.

Calvin's social teaching, like those of other prominent reformers such as Martin Luther and John Wesley, reflects both continuities and discontinuities with some of the key aspects of the teachings of the Church Fathers on social issues. One of the key issues that the reformers and the Church Fathers agreed on was the need for, and use of, private property – with an emphasis on stewardship. There is also some amount of agreement on the illegitimacy of usury, especially as it affects loans to the poor. The reformers also agreed to some extent with the views of the Fathers on the ultimate goal of government, the separation of spiritual and secular powers, and the extent of secular authority. On the whole, there was also agreement on the need to perform good works. However, Calvin and the other reformers disagreed with the Church Fathers on the question of the source and the merit of such works. The following sections will attempt a detailed study of Calvin's approach to some of the issues just referred to.

## **Personal possessions**

Calvin's view on personal possessions was that, like all possessions, they are given by God. In this he was in agreement with the view of the Church Fathers and his fellow reformers. Unlike the Church Fathers, however, who believed that private property was mainly the result of sin (see Phan 1984:160), Calvin deemed it legitimate for Christians to own private property. He did not subscribe to the emphasis that the Church Fathers placed on the common possession<sup>ii</sup> of property, unless this was done voluntarily. According to him, both riches and poverty were from God. They were part of the natural order of creation. Hence Calvin taught that poor people were to accept their condition and bear it patiently, with the knowledge that it was God "by whose will riches and poverty, contempt and honor, are dispensed" (cited by Douglas 1992:128). Like the other reformers, and the Church Fathers before them, Calvin also believed that social inequalities were legacies of the fall; they amounted to the "deformation of God's creation by sin", and were a reflection of God's punishment for sin (Douglas 1992:128). It is important to note that it was the condition of poverty that was attributed to sin, not the poverty of any particular person or people. Because it was believed that poverty was an outcome of sin and part of the natural order of creation, the general tendency among the reformers was to strive for its alleviation only rather than its elimination, as had the Church Fathers. Of course, there were exceptions to this view.<sup>iii</sup>

Since all our possessions were believed to be from God, there were certain provisos to the way in which they were to be obtained, consumed and disposed of. First, there was a number of conditions to obtaining them; secondly, they were to be used reasonably and not wasted; and thirdly, they were to be shared with others – especially the needy – in stewardship (*Institutes* (Book) 3 VII:14). Calvin also stressed the legitimacy not only of having possessions but also of gaining wealth. However, there was a warning on how not to go about amassing possessions. According to Calvin, we may not gain our possessions "through wiles and wicked arts, and with injury to our neighbor", unconcerned about right and wrong. We must acquire only what we can enjoy with a clear conscience (*Institutes* (Book) 3 VII:14). As far as the use of possessions was concerned, Calvin recommended, without naming him, Aristotle's ethic of the mean (moderation). This was in order to ensure that they assist our progress in this material life, rather than retard it (*Institutes* 3, X:31). He further adopted Paul's principles of sobriety, with an emphasis on temperance and the frugal use of temporal goods, while enduring want patiently; righteousness, the duties of equity and rendering to every person his or her due; and godliness, which, according to Calvin, separates us from the pollutions of the world and connects us with God (*Institutes* 3, VII:9).

According to Calvin, saving possessions also meant self-denial and abhorring pride, show and ostentation. It meant shunning avarice, lust, luxury, effeminacy, and other vices issuing from self love. No matter what our station in life, we are always to bear in mind that "God confers his blessing on [us] for the support of life, not for luxury ..." (McNeill 1950, 1956:34). In contrast to those reformers who argued that all we need to strive for are the bare necessities of life, Calvin seemed to be a little more lenient on the acquisition and use of possessions, as long as this was done within reasonable limits. He believed that earthly goods were to be used both out of necessity and for enjoyment, while excess was to be avoided (Douglas 1992:129). Possessions were to be seen not only as God's works but also as God's gifts. As such, they were not only to be used – as was suggested by Augustine – but also to be enjoyed (Wolterstorff 1992:138). In their enjoyment of God's gifts, Christians were to banish "immoderate cupidity, excessive profusion, vanity, and arrogance; [so] that with a pure conscience they may make a proper use of the gifts of God" (McNeill 1950/56:34). When all our needs as well as those of our family have been met – with moderation – through what we have gained and saved, we are then to give all we can. This is where stewardship and the sharing of possessions come into play.

## Stewardship

To Calvin, the Church Fathers before him and Luther, stewardship was a necessary condition (a *conditio sine qua non*) for the possession of private property. The implicit condition was that private property was to be employed for the common good of the Church. "Church" in this context seems to have been used to refer to the whole society, rather than only to Christians since Calvin goes on to conclude that, "therefore, the legitimate use of all our gifts is a kind of liberal communication of them with others" (*Institutes* 3, VIII:10). Like Luther, Calvin also made the point that failure to share with others in stewardship meant failing in the duties of kinship. Hence such failure represented the "greatest inhumanity" (Wolterstorff 1992:140). The Church Fathers had also used strong words to condemn those who hoarded property while other people suffered in want.

According to the Church Fathers, stewardship was simultaneously and paradoxically, an optionless obligation and a free act of charity. On the one hand, it was a necessary consequence and expectation related to the possession of private property; on the other, it depended on the charitable

disposition of the giver. As pointed out, Calvin also saw stewardship as a necessary condition of private ownership. He went a step further to demonstrate this dual nature of stewardship as both an obligation and a free act of charity. Firstly, as already stated, he saw all the endowments which we possess as divine deposits, entrusted to us for the very purpose of being distributed for the good of our needy neighbours. Thus there was no option but to distribute that which had been entrusted to one for that very purpose. According to Calvin, the rich, in particular, will have to render an account to God of the way they spent their wealth since “God commands that those who have an abundance of possessions always keep their hands open for the poor.” They should see in the poor person the son of God, “to whom it would be a terrible sacrilege to refuse anything.” Hence, if they do not fulfill their obligation of stewardship, they will have to answer for their inhuman actions before the heavenly judge (see Singer 1992:156; Douglas 1992:128).

At the same time, Calvin explained the need for a correct disposition when he stated that “whatever a pious man can do, he is bound to do for his brethren ...” (*Institutes* 3, VII:11). This means that the disposition of a pious person should automatically lead him or her to do what is right for his or her neighbor, as it were. Yet, notwithstanding his or her good-heartedness, he or she is still bound by the demands of neighbourly love and stewardship to help his or her neighbours. All that God has entrusted to us has to be used, willy-nilly, in aid of our needy neighbours.

In the same way as we do not own “our” possessions but are holding them in trust for others, Calvin agreed with reformers such as Luther and Wesley that we are also not created for ourselves alone. For this reason, we also do not own ourselves. Rather, we owe ourselves to our neighbours. This also means that as individuals we do not live only for ourselves. Thus we cannot work for ourselves alone. We are to live and work for all, according to Luther (1961:73), and to sacrifice ourselves freely for others. In other words, as human beings we are “to be useful and helpful to each other” (Douglas 1992:128). For Calvin, this implies that our possessions are to be shared mutually by all. It follows that the only limit to our stewardship and ability to share is the insufficiency of our means. For as long as there is something left to give, we cannot help but give. Further, even our liberty should be used only if it is to the benefit of our neighbour. If not, we should restrict our exercise of it (*Institutes* 3, VII:13; McNeill 1950/1956:38).

### **Good works**

It is obvious from the preceding account that, according to Calvin, fulfilling our obligation of stewardship is one of the main ways in which to engage in “good works” or charity, which is precisely what stewardship stands for. However, Calvin and most of the other reformers did not emphasise this aspect of good works in their writing about stewardship. Nor did they hold the very concept of good works in particular high regard. Rather, their approach to the topic of good works was more polemic than substantive. Above all, they wanted to establish the precedence of faith over good works. This they did by trying to expose the assumed fallacy of the Catholic Church’s advocacy of charitable works; and by emphasising the proposition that justification results from faith alone. Their challenge to the idea of good works may be analysed in three ways. It concerned, firstly, the relationship between faith and works; secondly, the necessity of good works as a product of faith; and thirdly, the nature or type of good works.

The tone of the debate on good works was originally set by Luther as part of his challenge to the “sale” of indulgences.<sup>iv</sup> This debate was picked up by Calvin and the other reformers, who added their own explanations on the relationship between faith and works. Luther’s emphasis on faith to the exclusion of works tended to give the impression that good works did not matter at all. Yet the real point of the debate was that faith paves the way for good works, as became obvious from Calvin and increasingly so from Christian works of charity throughout the ages. In other words, faith was to be understood as coming before works, and so making them possible; not following from them. Faith itself was preceded by God’s grace, through which it was made possible. Notwithstanding our faith, however, for Calvin – as for Luther – justification was ultimately only imputed to the believer because of his or her faith and the practice of its requirements. The meaning attached to imputation was that although the believer does not really earn justification, as implied in the concept of good works, he or she is nevertheless considered justified by God because of his or her faith.

Calvin also stressed the point that our works are not meritorious in themselves and so do not deserve any reward from God. Rewards bestowed for good works presuppose blessings given by God beforehand, thus making the works themselves possible. It follows that everything in our works deserving of praise is owing to divine grace and we cannot claim any single part of it. Thus we cannot attach any merit whatsoever to our own works (*Institutes* 3, XV:92). According to Calvin, our works are evil and unrighteous of themselves. However, through God’s indulgence, he overlooks their

unrighteousness and imputes righteousness on them (*Institutes* 3, XVIII:123). Consequently, although God is the one who makes all good works possible through divine grace, he recognises our faith-inspired efforts, is pleased by them, and also honours God's own gifts which make our works possible (*Institutes* 3, XV:92, 93).

Notwithstanding the purported worthlessness of good works in the eyes of God, such works were still deemed necessary and there can be no excuse for not engaging in them. Thus Calvin insisted that all people are – without exception – commanded to engage in good deeds. As Christians, especially, we have no excuse whatever to deny help to any person, whether he or she be a stranger, worthless and contemptible in our eyes; whether he or she is deemed undeserving of our help; or even whether we feel that we do not owe him or her anything. We are compelled by both the image of God in all people and the nature we share with them to be of whatever service we are capable to them (Wolterstorff 1992:139). From the above, it would thus appear that by good works Calvin largely referred to service to other people.

Unlike Luther, for instance, Calvin's approach to good works was of a more practical nature. In fact, Luther was mostly speculative in talking about the nature of works required of Christians and had nothing more tangible to recommend than "faith in Christ" as "the highest good work", followed by the keeping of the Ten Commandments (see Tappert 1967:106, 121ff). Calvin, on the other hand, together with his deacons in Geneva, was involved in some social welfare projects to improve the social conditions of the people. These projects included care for the sick and the aged, care for travellers and refugees, and campaigns for just wages and for consumer protection (Douglas 1992:130). Other works which Calvin advocated were more church oriented and rather moralistic in their prohibitions. They included abstention from acts such as dancing, the playing of cards, and swearing at and cursing other people (Singer 1992:148).

In addition to his own personal involvement, Calvin described the works worthy of Christians as those which are done in God's honour. His famous motto was *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam* – that is, for the greater glory of God. Such works also included works of charity, which could be exhibited by renouncing oneself and wholly devoting oneself to others (McNeill 1950/1956:130; *Institutes* 3, VII:10). Despite his condemnation of the idea of merit resulting from good works, Calvin envisaged some form of reward for the kinds of works referred to here, but properly understood them as God's own indulgence and condescension. He summed up his position on this matter as follows: "What we give to our brethren in the exercise of charity is a deposit with the Lord, who, as a faithful depository, will ultimately restore it with abundant interest ... But if anyone would leap from the mere kindness of God to the merit of works, his error will receive no support from these passages" (*Institutes* 3, XVIII:125, my emphasis), namely, those he cites in the chapter of *Institutes*.

### **Profit, interest, and the "spirit of capitalism"**

One form of good work under scrutiny by Calvin relates to dealings with neighbours in trade as well as in the provision of loans to assist them. Trade is not only an exchange of one thing for another of equal worth. As understood in the present world, its main objective is profit, which implies selling something for more than its actual worth. In the same way, "official" loans have long ceased to be seen only as a way of helping someone in need to recover from adversity, with the expectation of receiving back the exact amount loaned. Loans are now also a form of investment for profit, called interest. Calvin's views on interest are found mainly in his sermons, commentaries, and private correspondence rather than in special publications on the subject (Douglas 1992:n. 7; 132-133).

Like the other reformers, Calvin was basically in agreement with the Church Fathers regarding the idea of interest-free loans to a neighbour as an act of charity. He distinguished, however, between lending to a neighbour and lending for investment purposes. On loans for investment purposes, a reasonable rate of interest was permissible. The important condition in doing so was that the "rule of equity" – justice – had to be respected. On the whole, Calvin's idea of loans was governed by the following seven restrictions: (1) no interest was to be taken from the needy; (2) some resources were to be set aside for sharing with those in need, and thus were to be separated from interest-bearing goods; (3) the Golden Rule was to be applied in the conditions attached to loans; (4) the interest demanded was to take into account the returns of sales; (5) the public good was to be taken into consideration; (6) rates were to conform to local standards; and (7) the word of God was to be the final standard for what is just and fair (Douglas 1992:132-133).

Calvin's support of the "profit motif" has partly contributed to the view by some social scientists that Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist trajectory, is largely responsible for the development of capitalism in the West. In Max Weber's view (1976),<sup>v</sup> it is specifically the Protestant ethic which has contributed to the "spirit of Capitalism". According to him, as interpreted by Douglas

(1992:132), the “Protestant drive to work hard in a divine calling produced wealth; and Protestant discouragement of conspicuous consumption encouraged saving, capital formation.” Further, the Protestant spirit is believed to have favoured “rational bourgeois economic life” (Douglas 1992:132). While some scholars have welcomed this view without question, many others have questioned its accuracy and true reflection of the genuine “Protestant ethic”.

According to them, this view focuses mainly on the Calvinist motivation for hard work, wealth-creation, and moderate consumption of created wealth, thus resulting in the accumulation of such wealth. It almost completely overlooks the need for stewardship and the sharing of wealth, which are an integral part of the same Protestant ethic. At most, they suggest, only a modest claim can be made for Protestantism, namely that Protestantism “reshaped Western culture in the early modern world” just as “[Protestantism], too, was reshaped to some degree by rising capitalism, colonialism, and other economic social phenomena in the post-Reformation period” (Douglas 1992:132). Equally it may be pointed out that hard work and modest living were ancient virtues of monastic life, giving rise to a motto such as *Ora et Labora* (Work and Pray). Although other objections have been raised against the claims made by Weber and others regarding the Protestant ethic, there is not much purpose in dwelling further on them in this article.

### **Slavery**

Perhaps the most sensitive issue raised in the social teaching of most of the reformers and the Church Fathers before them, was that of slavery. Slavery is almost hardly ever mentioned by reformers such as Luther and Calvin, except approvingly and in passing. They regarded it as one of the orders or stations of creation. The Church Fathers considered slavery to be a consequence of sin and slaves to be a form of property. They normally dealt with the issue of slavery with reference to Romans 13, which exhorts obedience to all authorities because their power is received from God.

Like Luther, Calvin saw Christian freedom as being applicable only to the spiritual nature of a person, not his or her physical nature and applies to the spiritual kingdom rather than to the worldly kingdom. Thus Calvin described Christian liberty as being “in all its branches a spiritual thing” (McNeill [1950]1956:33). He contrasted it to the “yoke of the law,” describing those bound to the law as being like “slaves, who receive daily orders from their masters”. Regarding the stations of life, including slavery, he wrote, “Let all men, in their respective stations, whether of poverty, of competence, or of splendor, live in remembrance of this truth that God confers his blessings on them for the support of life, ...” (see Mc Neill 1950/1956:34-35) Calvin supported this instruction with reference to Paul’s words, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content ...” (Phil. 4:11-12). Consequently, the implication is that one who is a slave must also learn to be content with his situation, believing that it is God’s will that he or she is in that position.

From the foregoing, we can only conclude that Calvin is echoing the traditional view on the matter as he was very much a product of his times and context. His thoughts on slavery reflect the general views held by a society motivated by the economic needs and power of the rich. Insofar as they find support in the Bible, especially in Paul, they can only be said to reflect the human element in the Bible itself and to confirm the Bible’s human origins.

### **On secular government and the Two Kings**

Besides the social issues discussed so far, the status of the Church and State is another matter which bedevilled the Church from its earliest days. The history of the Church was characterised by continual conflict between itself and the State. The main source of this conflict was, to put it simply, power. While the division of powers between the spiritual and the temporal or worldly authorities was generally recognised, the underlying question was, which of the two types of authority was superior. Naturally, the church saw its power as superior to that of the state, as the church was perceived to be directly founded on the word of God. The State, on the other hand, contended for superiority in the belief that its authorities were directly appointed by God (the divine right of kings). In reality, the question of whether – and to what extent – either of the two authorities could interfere in the affairs of the other was at the root of the whole struggle for superiority. In other words, which one of them had final authority, especially in the event of a Church-State dispute or even when addressing the human predicament?

Like the Church Fathers before them, the reformers had special interest in the debate. To be sure, in the case of the reformers, cooperation between Church and State on some issues might not always be to their advantage. A case in point is Luther’s own conflict with the Catholic Church, during which he had to escape arrest from imperial authorities acting on instructions from the Pope on several

occasions. It was clearly in Luther's interest to draw a clear distinction between spiritual and temporal powers, to state their areas of jurisdiction, and to define the limits of each, especially in the case of temporal authorities (see Luther 1961). It is within this context that we are to understand Calvin's conception of the origin, role and limits of secular authority, as well as of the attitude Christians should have toward this type of authority.

Following the popular belief of his times, Calvin – along with the other reformers – also accepted the idea of the divine origin of secular authority; indeed, of all authority. In regard to the ideal form of government, Calvin favoured something between an aristocracy and a democracy. He argued that the vice or imperfection of humanity made it safer for the government to be in the hands of many rather than in the hands of only one person, as was the case with monarchy. In this way, more people would be able to assist in governing and admonish one another against misgovernment (McNeill 1950/1956: 53). Since all rulers received their mandate from God, it followed that not only good rulers were appointed or anointed by God, however. Even bad rulers were appointed by God; they might be regarded as God's judgment on God's people for their iniquities (McNeill [1950]1956:74). In the running of state affairs, Calvin believed that rulers should combine strictness with leniency and understanding. In their application of the law, they should temper its rigidity in extenuating circumstances. According to McNeill ([1950]1956:59), therefore, Calvin's position was that "it is bad to live under a prince who permits nothing, but much worse to live under one who permits everything".

The main reason for appointing rulers was so that they could serve the people. Rulers were not appointed for their own glory or benefit. The most important aspect of their service was the protection of people's life and property. Although Calvin and the other reformers wanted to draw clear lines between Church and State authorities, there were often contradictions in their expectations. For instance, Calvin still saw a role for civil government in curbing idolatry, sacrilege, as well as blasphemies and other offences against religion. At the same time, the government was to help Christians in their spiritual journey by supporting the external worship of God in their jurisdictions, preserving the pure doctrine or religion, and defending the constitution of the Church (McNeill 1992:46-17). Questions that arise from this role ascribed to the State or civil authorities are: Who would be more qualified to advise these authorities on "pure doctrine" or blasphemy in the event of religious differences, as between Rome and the reformers? How would slogans such as *cuius regio, eius religio*<sup>vi</sup> be helpful where the fate of the whole Church was concerned? Also, was it not for the very reason of avoiding such interference by the State that Calvin and the other reformers had found it necessary to state the limits of civil government?

At local level, Calvin also saw magistrates as God's representatives on earth, fully vested with his authority. According to him, they acted as God's vice-regents (McNeill 1992:48). In this sense, the civil magistracy was seen as a calling which was both holy and honourable. It was the responsibility of magistrates to protect civil rights and liberties. They were to promote public tranquility, personal enjoyment of one's property without external molestation, fraud-free and just business transactions, integrity and modesty, and general peace and security in social life (McNeill [1950]1956:46, 47, 55-56). A belief in the power of the sword, so colourfully described by Luther, was also by no means lacking in Calvin. This was because, according to him, the curbing of the various social and ecclesio-spiritual offenses could not always happen without force. Thus Calvin affirmed that magistrates are also armed with the power to suppress crimes and to punish malefactors who disturb the peace. Not only were rulers, in general, there to protect citizens against crime, but they were also under obligation to defend their territories against external aggression – by resorting to war, if necessary. If they fail in their duty, Calvin stated, "they not only injure men by criminally distressing them, but even offend God by polluting his sacred judgments" (McNeill 1950/1956:51).

From the belief in the divine right of kings and the service of rulers *in loco Dei* (as God's representatives), it followed that it was the duty of all people to obey and submit to rulers. There seemed to be no contention about this conclusion. The only question was: what if the rulers were evil, oppressed their people, and denied them access to "true" religion? Were they to continue being obeyed without any challenge? As already seen, according to Calvin even bad rulers were appointed by God. Hence they, too, deserved full obedience from their people (see McNeill 1950:56-57). Nevertheless, there were limits to such obedience especially if it impinged upon matters of faith. As Calvin states, if earthly authorities put themselves in opposition to God, they render themselves powerless and therefore unworthy of being taken seriously. For this reason, they are to be defied, for they wish to usurp not only God's power but also God's throne (Wolterstorff 1992:141). With obvious reference to Acts 5: 29, he goes on to state that suffering an injustice (from unjust authorities) rather than deviating from piety is an act of obedience to God (McNeill [1950]1956:82).

Despite his grave pronouncements against erring governments, Calvin was nevertheless opposed to revolts by people unless they were in political office. This does not mean that he advocated passive

acceptance of government wrongs. According to Woltestorff (1992:141), Calvin himself denounced corruption in the Church, tyranny in government, and inequitable distribution of wealth in the economy. However, notwithstanding there being some justification for disobedience, subjects were not to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with their government by taking matters into their own hands. Instead, they were to refer all such problems to the magistrate, “who alone is authorized to regulate the concerns of the public”. If commanded by the governor, however, they had the authority to act; but they could not do so without such a command (McNeill 1950/1956:73).

Ordinarily, it was only “magistrates appointed for the protection of the people and the moderation of the power of kings” who had the authority to challenge the power of government. In doing so, wrote Calvin, “I am so far from prohibiting them ... to oppose the violence and cruelty of kings” that for them not to do so would be to “fraudulently betray the liberty of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by the ordination of God” (McNeill 1950/1956:81).

The culmination of Calvin’s views on the relationship between secular authority and the Church is best summarised by his idea of the two kingdoms, which Luther also had something to say about. Calvin’s views on the two kingdoms are discussed briefly in his treatise “On Civil Government” (see McNeill [1950]1958). After pointing out that “man” is subject to two kinds of government, namely the spiritual and the civil, Calvin briefly states the significance of the former. The rest of the treatise is devoted to the latter in the way already discussed in this article. Spiritual government is described as the source of the grace of Christ. Grace is normally contrasted to the law as the basis of Christian liberty (McNeill 1950/1956:45). Calvin’s point was that this spiritual liberty may co-exist with civil servitude, which is the human subjection to the law. In its co-existence with civil government, the spiritual government – also referred to as the kingdom of Christ – has no regard for the limitations imposed by the former as well as by our physical condition. For, as Paul (Gal. 3:28) testified, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female. None of this is important. As Calvin wrote, “what is our condition among men or under the laws of what nation we live, as the kingdom of Christ consists not in these things” (McNeill [1950]1956:45). The final implications of Calvin’s position are that the spiritual kingdom should be understood almost literally as *spiritual* – that is, as existing outside the present realm of materiality. For as long as we live in the worldly kingdom, we are completely under its authority – “Render unto Caesar ...” – unless it oversteps its power under the conditions described earlier in the section.

## Conclusion

There is, indeed, a significant amount of congruence and consistency in the social teaching of the Church from the Church Fathers to the Reformers and right down the ages. It can rightly be argued that whatever differences existed between the different sectors of the Church in the evolution of its teaching, they amounted largely to adjustments, clarifications and emphases of one form or another.

Although the Protestant tradition, especially its Calvinist trajectory, has been credited with giving rise to the ethic of hard work, thrift, and the obligatory sharing of private possessions, these qualities were already present in the teachings of the Church Fathers, the monastic ethic, as well as in the many religious congregations of the early Church. At best, what Protestantism contributed to this ethic was to give it a particular slant and emphasis. Calvin’s and the other reformers’ objection to the idea of “good works” was also paradoxical because they also participated in such works through the practice of stewardship. Their main contribution in this regard was to detach the element of meritoriousness from the practice of stewardship and the charitable work involved therein.

Another adjustment made by Calvin to the traditional church ethic concerned the question of loans to one’s neighbours. Whereas the Church Fathers tended to focus on interest-free loans, assuming that only poor people required loans, Calvin recognised that other people, such as traders, often needed loans for engaging in business ventures. Hence he made the distinction between these two types of loan and allowed for interest on loans made for trade purposes. This was another adjustment by a reformer on the teaching of the Church Fathers, perhaps motivated by the spirit of the time. No such adjustment was envisaged on the matter of slavery and, on this, Calvin was apparently caught up in the economic model of his time and its inherent injustice. A final adjustment Calvin made on the traditional church ethic was on the question of secular authority in relation to church authority, which led to the teaching on the two kingdoms. This led to the delimitation of both Church and State authorities, though not without contradictions.

In the final analysis, we can only conclude that, as a living organism, the Church was bound to undergo some of the adjustments and rechanneling rendered by Calvin and the other reformers if it was

to continue delivering a relevant message to its diverse membership in its times and contexts. With his contribution, Calvin made an invaluable contribution to the Church in its pilgrimage on earth.

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### Endnotes

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- 1 This article is an edited adaptation of a chapter from my original study guide, "Theological Ethics (Social Ethics): Only Study Guide for TEA305-G" (Pretoria: Unisa 1996). The chapter was titled "Three Reformers: The Social Thought of Luther, Calvin and Wesley."
  - 2 The Fathers did not necessarily advocate communism. They were resigned to the existence of private property but were more concerned about its distribution, and sharing between the rich and the poor.
  - 3 Among the reformers, John Wesley was one of those who held a different view and did his best to fight for the elimination of poverty and injustice.
  - 4 As part of the Lenten Appeal, Pope Leo XIII had declared a special indulgence to raise money for the rebuilding of St Peter's Church in Rome. An indulgence is an old Catholic practice in which church members request special prayers from the church in exchange for a donation to the ministering parish. It is a practice which continues up to this day. What Luther objected to was the approach adopted by one Dominican Friar, Johan Tetzl, to the promotion of this particular indulgence, which gave the impression that salvation was for sale.
  - 5 See his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, with a new introduction by Anthony Giddens (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976).
  - 6 Literally, "whose region, his or her religion".