

Calvin Today

REFORMED THEOLOGY AND THE FUTURE
OF THE CHURCH

Edited by

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Chapter 14

PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY – INTRODUCTION

Michael Welker

Calvin and Reformed theology have had a huge impact worldwide on politics, law, scholarship and the organization of life in society and civil society. This has been remarked and commented on with a mixture of enthusiasm and amazement. Part 3 of this book will give examples of this *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which is still going on.

Dirkie Smit sheds light on what is perhaps the most problematic chapter in the recent history of Reformed thought: the partly disastrous, partly liberating role of the Dutch Reformed churches in the history of apartheid in South Africa. He describes the endeavour to provide a biblically founded justification of apartheid from a 'love of neighbour', focused especially on 'self-love' ('Love your neighbour as yourself' [Mt. 19.19] – links the 'love-command' with a central motif of self-preservation). In so doing, Smit shows how this first led to a horrifying hard-line ideology. But, he also shows how this ideology of self-preservation (*selfhandhawing*) was cracked open by resistance based on Calvin's exegesis, Reformed theology and the struggle for appropriate interpretation of scripture. It is a dramatic story of combating false prophecy and the right discernment of the spirits! Smit shows that problematic approaches, such as Niebuhr's famous distinction between 'moral man and immoral society', can become dangerously attractive. On the basis of exegeses by Calvin, of theological precursors of the Belhar Confession (1982/86) and works by the Reformed philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff, he distinguishes between a eudaemonistic and a compassionate self-love, one that is motivated by the quest for personal happiness and one that cannot be defined without protection of the neighbour's welfare. Finally, he recalls the future tasks posed by that age of political and moral failure in Reformed churches, but also the way in which Reformed theology is calling for public responsibility in the present day.

Fulvio Ferrario considers Calvin's eschatology in terms of its power to guide theology and social ethics. The eschatological perspective is largely blocked out in societies that concentrate on metaphysics and inwardness, if

they have any religious orientation at all. People wish to live as long as possible and die as fast as possible. Ferrario shows how Calvin sees faith as able to accept the transience of life and fear of death, and wishes to enhance this ability. A basic feeling of modern humans, feeding on 'fear of death and the urge to move' (Dieter Henrich), could be purified by *meditatio futurae vitae* (meditation on the future life) and perhaps thus directed towards greater serenity and accountability. Ferrario touches on substantive theological questions (resurrection, redemption) without enlarging on them. His chapter makes clear, however, that we cannot deal with burning issues of social ethics and cultural critique without considering their religious and theological contexts.

In his study of Calvin's interpretation of the church, Peter Opitz illuminates the great importance of professing faith, organizing life and celebrating the sacraments in Calvin's 'practical ecclesiology'. For Calvin's teaching and practical church leadership, there is no faith without confession of faith, and confession requires spiritual formation, taking into account individual abilities. The confessing community is a 'teaching and learning community', from spiritual upbringing in the family to religious education at the Geneva collège (school) and theological training at the Geneva académie. Calvin was a man of great learning in the humanities, law, exegesis and theology, and he and his colleagues strove for a type of education that not only touched the heart, but also met the highest academic standards.

For Calvin and for Reformed teaching, lifestyle is a function of community life, which develops on the pattern of the 'body of Christ'. Although Calvin often uses firm, schoolmasterly language and although his practice of church discipline, particularly the excessive use of excommunication, rightly met with vehement criticism in his own time, many of his main ideas on building the 'communion of the saints' still make rewarding reading today. According to Opitz, his concentration on 'the ministry of the Word of God' and celebrating the sacraments is an indication that the church 'in keeping with its "invisible" divine destiny, [...] is moving forward on the way from the invisible election by God in Christ towards an audible and socially visible "communion of the saints"'.

The contribution of Michael Welker shows how the life and work of Calvin and the Reformers in favour of the separation of powers and a differentiated, non-hierarchically integrated interplay of religion, politics, law, scholarship and education pave the way towards modern, liberal societies. Calvin was confronted not just with the tension between the Roman Church and the Reformation movements. He also had to overcome the tensions between traditional education based on speculation and metaphysics and education guided by scripture. He constantly strove to strike the right balance between the competences of spiritual and secular government.

The uncertainty associated with this balancing of power – often challenged by both sides – and the animated search for effective countervailing action may explain many of the unattractive features of the 'Genevan Reformation'.

Welker shows how, in the last chapter of his magnum opus, Calvin develops a 'teaching on civil government' that is still highly relevant today. His broad biblical, legal and humanist education allows him to take a multi-contextual view, combining a clear theological and ethical stance with contextual sensitivity. Here, with all his trenchant rejection of anarchic developments, he developed an impressive doctrine of the right and even the *duty* to resist governments that constantly prevent and crush Christian worship, the exercise of justice and the protection of the poor. It becomes clear that the Reformation did not just spark off a liberating educational revolution – it also created the sensibility needed to form a liberal church patterned on the body of Christ and a community that follows, fosters and affirms this way of life, and is ready to learn from it.