

## Calvin and Today: Breaking Out of the Iron Cage

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### *Introduction*

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I begin with two frank confessions or admissions or assumptions about my country, the United States. You will have to judge whether it applies to Portugal, as well. I call the first an assumption, because it is not very surprising. It is simply rarely put into words: the United States of America is a place where power, wealth, and socioeconomic position matter. These realities matter because of the comfort they provide, a comfort which is defended idolatrously: by politicians; by the wealthy from their various positions of influence; and by the middle class with its desire for stability and security.

My country is so filled with this spirit that the election of Barack Hussein Obama as President was a surprise, his status as a Nobel laureate, unthinkable. The same country which placed a Texas oilman and baseball team owner into the presidency somehow found the moral will to choose Mr. Obama.

The second admission is about the state of the church in the United States. Retired Anglican Bishop John Shelby Spong has argued that people in my country attend church for comfort or security, rather than for truth.<sup>1</sup> As a result, Christians in the United States must fight against certain magnetic forces drawing them to the idol of comfortable “security”: the first are club-churches like my own congregation in which devotion to traditionalism emphasizes being members in a club, rather than being disciples of Christ; the second are rightest evangelical churches claiming that their message of rigid moralism is the exclusive truth; the third are ones which I call PAC-churches, liberal and conservative churches acting as Political Action Committees, preaching

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<sup>1</sup> John Shelby Spong. Speech. *Opening Doors, Opening Hearts*, Peace United Church of Christ. Duluth, Minnesota. March 20, 2009.

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their politics — their political agendas — as the exclusive truth. Thus, the economic idolatry of the broader culture and the specific idolatries of church culture attest to Calvin's assertion that human nature is a perpetual factory of idols.<sup>2</sup>

Today, I will first address Max Weber's argument about what got us to this position and then remind you of what Calvin called the church and society and political system to be: Calvin's word on the life-giving, humanizing impact of the Spirit which must purify the churches and which can bring about more just societies, creating what Paul Tillich called social holiness.<sup>3</sup>

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# I.

## *Weber's The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

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*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, written in 1904-1905, is but a part of Max Weber's larger project to determine the impact of religious thought on economic systems. Rather than making value judgments, his particular concern was to establish objectively "the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Weber's work in *The Protestant Ethic...* is a contribution to a much broader discussion of the relationship of ideas to existence. As Anthony Giddens puts it, Weber's approach is probably best understood as contributing to the debate over the economic determinism of Karl Marx or some interpretations of Marx's thought.<sup>5</sup> Weber does not argue that Protestantism brought about capitalism. He does say that a particular type of capitalism has significant roots in a particular line of Protestant thought. Against Marx, Weber believes in the power of ideas in the movement of history. With Marx, he takes both economics and the potentially pathological impact of religion upon economics quite seriously.

In *The Protestant Ethic...*, Weber observed the distinctively rationalized Western capitalistic process and the characteristically ascetic cap-

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1960), I.xii.8.108.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957), 56.

<sup>4</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribners, 1958), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Giddens, "Introduction," *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, by Max Weber, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Scribners, 1958), 8-9.

italist. He interpreted statistics from sociological studies of his day to show the repeated tendency of Protestants of a particular ilk to dominate the capitalist enterprise.<sup>6</sup> He argued that areas of Europe functioning under “the most absolutely unbearable form of ecclesiastical control of the individual which could possibly exist” – Calvinistic Protestantism – tended toward greater economic development – “economic rationalism” – than other Protestant and Roman Catholic regions.<sup>7</sup> He saw Benjamin Franklin as the archetype of the capitalist produced by this inner-worldly as asceticism of Puritan Calvinism: “The ideal of the honest man of recognized credit, and above all the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself.”<sup>8</sup> Such a capitalist “seeks profit rationally and systematically,” rationalism in the sense of a practical, systematic strategy.<sup>9</sup> Accumulation of capital is combined with a renunciation of consumption and ostentation.<sup>10</sup>

Weber was compelled to ask, “What was the background of the ideas which could account for the sort of activity apparently directed toward profit alone as a calling toward which the individual feels himself to have an ethical obligation?”<sup>11</sup> To answer this, he turned to Luther’s concept of vocation. For Luther, the “fulfillment of worldly duties is under all circumstances the only way to live acceptably to God.”<sup>12</sup> Weber noted Luther’s conservative treatment of “calling” as adaptation to the status quo into which the individual is born. He rather cynically dismisses Luther’s notion of vocation as “the outward expression of brotherly love,” calling this view “highly naïve, forming an almost grotesque contrast to Adam Smith’s well-known statements on the same subject.”<sup>13</sup> A footnote offers this quote of Smith: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love; and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 35-40, 43.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53, 71.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 212, note 7.

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Weber argued that Lutheran thought was inadequate for providing a basis for modern capitalism. It required Calvinism – its doctrine of predestination, the ongoing need to convince oneself of one's salvation, and the consequent efforts to control the self and the world – to provide the theological energy needed to fuel the "intense worldly activity" of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> The result was a perpetual accumulation of capital. While "the full economic effect...generally came only after the peak of the purely religious enthusiasm was past...the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to utilitarian worldliness."<sup>16</sup> Weber's famous conclusion was this:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so....[I]t did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of individuals....[I]n Baxter's view the care for external goods should lie on the shoulders of the 'saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment.' But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage.<sup>17</sup>

I will not take time to go into the psychological roots of Weber's perspectives, his history of depression, and his family's history of mental illness, but it is interesting to note that this was his first work after he had been disabled by depression for four years.

In 1957, a half-century after Weber's book, Swedish scholar Kurt Samuelsson wrote a book highly critical of Weber's thesis: *Religion and Economic Action*. Samuelsson's very strong criticism of Weber is wide-ranging. He saw Weber as wrong in interpreting both scripture and Calvin as connecting material well-being to the confirmation of one's election.<sup>18</sup> He interpreted Weber as arbitrary in privileging Puritanism with the qualities of thrift and diligence, failing to see these as "the moral outlook of mercantilism" preached across confessional lines.<sup>19</sup> He believed Weber misapplied those qualities to true capitalists and, therefore, mischaracterized small, symbolic acts of frugality in the context of a profound pattern of which has come to be called "con-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 98-106, 111-15, 117-19, 121.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 155ff.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>18</sup> Kurt Samuelsson, "Religion and Economic Action," in *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Social Science: The Weber Thesis Controversy*, ed. Robert W. Green (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1973), 110-11, 112-13.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 113.

spicuous consumption”.<sup>20</sup> Samuelsson wrote of the irrelevance of virtue to the accumulation of the vast sums garnered by capitalists:

[G]reat fortunes are, and for the most part always have been, the product of ‘fortunate speculations,’ of vast profits from vast risks and vast luck – in short, of speculation and capital gains usually in association with extensive structural changes and innovations in economic life....[I]n the real world...virtuous work and assiduous saving are clearly among the less usual and less effective [means of capital accumulation].

He pointed to Belgium and Portugal as examples of Roman Catholic countries who had flourished economically in history and the relative lateness of economic expansion in Reformed Switzerland, Scotland, and (across the Atlantic) New England and “the Puritan South”, all contrary to Weber’s thesis.<sup>21</sup> He noted the representation of Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in schools, trades, investment activity, rather than Protestant dominance in any area.<sup>22</sup> He argued that the inadequate definition of the factors Weber measured – Protestantism, the spirit of capitalism – made them faulty bases for measuring anything.<sup>23</sup> Finally, he was mystified that Weber believed that a single factor could have anything close to robust explanatory value for an immense phenomenon such as capitalism over a period of several centuries.<sup>24</sup> All of this rendered “untenable the hypothesis of a connection between Puritanism and capitalism in which religion motivated economics.”<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, Dr. Ronald H. Stone has commented positively on Weber’s thesis – understood in all of its subtlety – in his case study on the American city of Pittsburgh, published as the book, *Reformed Urban Ethics*. Stone saw the legitimacy and impact of Weber’s provocative book in this way:

Weber’s attempt to correlate a tendency of certain Calvinists with a particular type of capitalism has been criticized heavily, and it still continues to produce volumes of commentary and further research. If, however, the thesis is read in the subtle, care-

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 115-17.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 121-22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 122-31.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 131-33.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 135.

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ful way that Weber often protected it, it survives as a subtle correlation and mutual reinforcement of the two ideal types of the Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism. He was afraid that the values of liberal humanism influenced or engendered from Protestantism and the enlightenment were threatened in the world emerging before and immediately after World War I. The combination of bureaucracy, capitalism, and the waning of religion was producing a technologically, bureaucratically organized society in which humanity was in danger of being lost. The decline of Protestantism was denying the culture its soul and the disenchantment of the world engendered by the Protestant reforms was leaving humanity naked in the bureaucratic world which he labeled, 'The iron cage.'<sup>26</sup>

## II. *Calvin's Word*

In his *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah, Volume 2*, John Calvin commented on the prophet's understanding of God presented at the opening of chapter 46. Verses 3 and 4 of Isaiah 46 read as follows:

Listen to me, O house of Jacob,  
all the remnant of the house of Israel,  
who have been borne by me from your birth,  
carried from the womb;  
even to your old age I am he,  
even when you turn gray I will carry you.  
I have made, and I will bear;  
I will carry and will save.

Calvin wrote the following about the last phrase of verse 3, "carried from the womb":

This is a very expressive metaphor, by which God compares himself to a mother who carries a child in her womb... [A]s God did not only begin to act as the father and nurse of his people from the time when they were born, but also 'begat them' spiritually, I do not object to extending the words so far as to mean, that they were brought, as it were, out of the bowels of God into a new life and the hope of an eternal inheritance.

<sup>26</sup> Ronald H. Stone, *Reformed Urban Ethics: Case Study of Pittsburgh* (San Francisco: EM Text, 1991), 9.



If it be objected, that God is everywhere called “a Father,” (Jeremiah 31:9; Malachi 1:6,) and that this title is more appropriate to him, I reply, that no figures of speech can describe God’s extraordinary affection towards us; for it is infinite and various; so that, if all that can be said or imagined about love were brought together into one, yet it would be surpassed by the greatness of the love of God. By no metaphor, therefore, can his incomparable goodness be described.<sup>27</sup>

Those are remarkable and refreshing words to hear from a man of the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. While Calvin’s teaching on power and economics are not as earth-shaking as these words on the nature of God, they can be sensitive and practical and, on occasion, helpfully progressive as well.

### A. Calvin on Politics

In Part IV, Chapter xx of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin argued for the legitimate, God-ordained role of civil government. It is to keep the peace, protect property, allow for public discourse, be both a safety net for basic human needs and a protector preventing “idolatry, sacrilege against God’s name, blasphemies against his truth, and other offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people.” It does so through laws entrusted to the oversight of the magistrates for the benefit of the people.<sup>28</sup> Calvin called civil authority “the most sacred and by far the most honorable of callings...” It punishes people who violate the law and defends their territory from outside encroachment, all as the instrument of God.<sup>29</sup> The first concern of magistrates is piety.<sup>30</sup> Any laws implemented are to be for the benefit of their society and must conform to the love commandment and the Golden Rule.<sup>31</sup> Lawsuits are permitted within limits, that is, if the plaintiff is “undeservedly oppressed either in his person or in his property...and seeks what is fair and good...treat[ing] his adversary with the same love and good will as if the business under controversy were already amicably settled and composed.” Defendants are to defend themselves “without bitterness, but only...to defend

<sup>27</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, Volume 2 (Albany, Oregon: Books for the Ages/ AGES Software, 1998).

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.xx.11.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.xx.9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.xx.15.

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what is [theirs] by right".<sup>32</sup> Rulers – good or bad – are to be obeyed. The good are models and the bad are punishment for the people, both ordained by God. The specific exceptions to this come at the conclusion of the chapter where magistrates are directed to stand against despots who oppress "the common folk" and where the command to obey – and have respect for – kings faces one limit: one does not heed commands that conflict with obedience to God.<sup>33</sup> The people are, frankly, fairly passive in the face of civil authority, required to trust the wisdom of governing to the magistrates.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the teaching on blasphemy leads the reader to recall its application to Servetus, the heretic sought by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, regarding whom Calvin's reputation was marred, given his unenviable position of motivating his trial for heresy and his death at the stake.<sup>35</sup> It points to the present-day question of how to keep religion from being the motivation for violent disputes. The teaching aimed at political leaders is the obvious place for stepping into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with Calvin, given its emphasis on the responsibility of leaders not to oppress the vulnerable, as well as their direct accountability to God for the quality – the justness – of their leadership.

## B. Calvin and the City

The city of Geneva was the context for politics for Calvin. Before characterizing his work in Geneva, it can bear fruit to turn to his biblical thinking on the matter. Here, we begin at the beginning, the pattern of Cain, son of Adam and Eve. In interpreting Cain's construction of a city upon his banishment from Eden, Calvin saw Cain as having two motivations: fear and arrogance. The fear was understandable. After all, God had even chosen to mark Cain in order to protect him. Calvin saw arrogance ("ambition", as he puts it) in Cain's naming the city after a member of the human race (Enoch, his son). Calvin thought that Cain "ought rather to have chosen that his name should be buried forever."<sup>36</sup>

Calvin heard an echo of this sin in the story of the tower of Babel

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., IV.xx.18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., IV.xx, 31, 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., IV.xx.22-24, 29.

<sup>35</sup> François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth Press, 1963), 93-99.

<sup>36</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis: Volume First* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), 216.



in Genesis 11. He criticized the people there because “their cares and pursuits tend to no other end than that of acquiring for themselves a name on earth.”<sup>37</sup> He explained God’s response to the builders of Babel in this way: “Since, then, God declares that he is at perpetual war with the unmeasured audacity of men, anything we undertake without his approval will end miserably, even though all creatures, above and beneath, should earnestly offer us their assistance.”<sup>38</sup>

Calvin was cognizant of this human weakness for worldly power as he interpreted Jesus’ response to the tempter’s third temptation in Matthew, challenging us to undertake the daily battle of repelling this temptation, offering this warning: “Though we set our defense, our resource, our supply upon God’s blessing alone, yet our senses are continually titillated and seduced into finding extra means from Satan, as if God alone were not enough. The great part of the world, refusing God’s right and rule over the earth, imagine themselves that Satan is the giver of all good.”<sup>39</sup>

As for the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah as presented in the midst of the Abraham accounts, Calvin explicated God’s intent in this way:

The Lord was about to see whether they were altogether desperate, as having precipitated themselves into the lowest depths of evil; or whether they were still in the midst of a course, from which it was possible for them to be recalled to a sound mind; forasmuch as he was unwilling utterly to destroy those cities, if, by any method their wickedness was curable.<sup>40</sup>

He noted that this same Sodom and Gomorrah were used in II Peter as the third in a string of illustrations of ungodliness, the sins of the fallen angels and the pre-flood world of Noah’s time being the first two. Calvin wrote that the destruction of the cities was to provide a clear, graphic, and harrowing example (*hupodeigma*) of where ungodliness will get you.<sup>41</sup>

Calvin made an interesting proposal regarding the building of Pithom and Ramses by enslaved Israelites in Egypt. Telling us that the term *mis-cenoth* was sometimes used to refer to “cellars and granaries, or repos-

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), 142.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Genesis, I*, 485.

<sup>41</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948).

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itories of all things necessary as a provision,” he pointed out that the same word is used for fortresses or prisons, noting that this is “not an unsuitable meaning,” for “they were commanded to build with their own hands the prisons which might prevent them from departing.”<sup>42</sup>

In the book of Numbers, Calvin understood the forty-eight cities of the Levites and their function as “so many schools, where they might better and more freely engage themselves in teaching the law, and prepare themselves for performing the office of teaching.”<sup>43</sup> This gave the cities the potential to serve as “lamps shining into the very furthest corners of the land” and “like watch towers in which they might keep guard, so as to drive impiety away from the borders of the holy land.”<sup>44</sup> Calvin noted that the designation of six of the cities as cities of refuge performed the practical functions of controlling boundless bloodshed, promoting the prudent ascertainment of the truth in possible cases of murder, and protecting the wrongly accused. Here, the human construct of the city functioned not simply as human graciousness but as a practical and concrete instrument of mercy (refuge in the cities) that was a part of God’s larger merciful action of giving humanity access to God through the levitical institution (through abiding in the forty-eight cities).<sup>45</sup>

There are two helpful insights in Calvin’s commentary on Jonah and Jonah’s encounter with the city. First, he suggested the possibility that God emphasized the size of Nineveh as a kind of moral support:

Now the Lord, by speaking expressly of the largeness of the city, intended thus to prepare him with firmness, lest he should be frightened by the splendor, wealth, and power of that city: for we know how difficult it is to take in hand great and arduous undertakings, especially when we feel ourselves destitute of strength. When we have to do with many and powerful adversaries, we are not only debilitated, but our courage wholly vanishes away. Lest, then, the greatness of Nineveh should fill Jonah with terror, he is here prepared and armed with firmness.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony: Volume First* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950), 28-29.

<sup>43</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony: Volume Second* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950), 249-50.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony: Volume Third* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950), 62-63.

<sup>46</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets: Volume Third* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950), 24.

Second, Calvin interpreted the prophet's bitterness over the repentance of the Ninevites in an empathetic way: "We now then understand how God often works by his servants; for he leads them as the blind by his own hand where they think not...[W]e think that our labor will be useless and without any fruit, or at least attended with small success. But the Lord will let us see what we could not have expected. Such was the case with Jonah."<sup>47</sup>

The mourning of Jeremiah (in Lamentations 1) and of Jesus (in Luke 19) over the physical and spiritual destruction of Jerusalem held poignancy for Calvin. Speaking to Jeremiah's perspective, Calvin wrote that "they must be void of all feeling who are not seized with amazement at such a mournful sight."<sup>48</sup> As for Jesus, "...when He considered that it had been divinely chosen as the sacred abode...He could not help grieving bitterly over its destruction. Nor is it any wonder that He could not hold back his tears when He saw the people who had been adopted to the hope of eternal life perishing wretchedly by their ingratitude and malice."<sup>49</sup>

Through this brief examination of the range of Calvin's biblical commentary, one gets a sense of his knowledge of the frailties of the city as well as the possibilities for the city, not to mention the unpredictability of ministry in the urban setting.

### C. Calvin on Society and Economics

W. Fred Graham's book, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact*, addresses the socio-economic dimensions of Calvin's work in Geneva. Graham summed up Calvin's understanding of how society should be organized like this:

[T]he Fall of man has broken the original tie of love and equality among [people], but in Christ God has begun the restoration of right relations between [one another]. And since the church is the visible society of those united to one another in Christ, the church must see to it that its life exhibits wholeness, justice, and love. The Consistory's task was mainly to admonish Christians to be Christian.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>48</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1950), 303.

<sup>49</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of Gospels*, 295.

<sup>50</sup> W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1971), 54-55.

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Thus, the workings of city and church life – understanding that “in Geneva, as in all of Europe, church and state were co-terminus...all citizens were by birth members of both societies” – were to further the “sacred bond of fellowship” binding together the entire human race.<sup>51</sup> While this thinking did not challenge authority and subordination *per se*, it did call for “authority without oppression and subordination without shame.”<sup>52</sup>

Calvin saw the sacraments as more than symbols or suggestions of the grace of God. According to Graham, “Calvin saw them actually aiding the process of mutual love.” In his own words, “when one receives them properly, we have by this means hope of a good means and aid to make us grow and profit in holiness of life, and especially in charity.”<sup>53</sup>

As alluded to in the discussion of church and government in the *Institutes*..., Calvin saw the church’s role in relation to the state as four-fold: first, praying for political leaders; second, encouraging the government to protect the powerless from the powerful (“for Calvin it was the treatment of the weak in society that really determined the value of the political regime,”); third, the self-preserving tasks of asking the government to guard the purity of the faith and to back the church’s discipline; and, fourth, warning rulers when they are in error.<sup>54</sup> Calvin would have perhaps agreed with Shakespeare in putting these words into the mouth of Pericles: “..heaven forbid that kings should let their ears hear their faults hid!”<sup>55</sup>

Unlike Luther and many other predecessors in the Christian tradition, Calvin found nothing uniquely evil about commerce. Graham wrote, “Where Luther views with alarm the evidences of evil in the commerce he sees, Calvin grimly assumes that *all* human enterprise is tainted with evil—a safe assumption—and sets about to make the gospel relevant to the city of commerce in which he lived and labored.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 55, 61.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 61-63.

<sup>55</sup> William Shakespeare, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, I.i.61-62. A little earlier, through another character, Shakespeare expressed a similar sentiment: “They do abuse the King that flatter him, For flattery is the bellows blows up sin, The thing the which is flattered, but a spark, To which that gives heat and stronger glowing; Whereas reproof, obedient and in order, Fits kings as they are men, for they may err.” I.i.38-43.

<sup>56</sup> Graham, 77, 79.

However, for Calvin, people were to work motivated by their desire to obey God, not primarily for wages. Their wages were to be understood as a manifestation of God's grace. However, the payment of wages are to be understood as a reflection of the Golden Rule, making adherence to a legally minimum wage almost always inadequate. Graham argued that Calvin would have stood squarely against Adam Smith's notion of an Invisible Hand directing an economy ruled by *laissez-faire* capitalism. He wrote, "[I]t is certain that Calvin himself would have regarded such a state of affairs as unchristian, inhuman, and to be addressed as quickly as possible by all the outside influences (mainly, the state) that could be brought to bear."<sup>57</sup>

Up until the Middle Ages, the church had rejected any theological justification for usury – the lending of money at interest – based on passages in Deuteronomy 23 and Luke 6. Calvin, on the other hand, interpreted these passages to be tied to the cultural context of the scriptures or to be placing limits on – without absolute rejection of – usury. He plainly disagreed with the Aristotelian idea that money is barren. But lending with interest is permitted only within limits. Of chief concern among these limits are the following: the Word of God, principally the Golden Rule; a prohibition against charging interest to the poor; and the realization that that which is legal may be unchristian and, therefore, prohibited.<sup>58</sup>

Calvin's view regarding wealth and poverty was that material blessing is not an endorsement of righteousness, but a call to right and equitable distribution. Quoting Calvin, Graham wrote, "'God distributes unequally the frail goods of this world in order to investigate the goodwill of [people]; [God] is examining [humanity].'"<sup>59</sup> Calvin supported neither gluttonous hoarding nor ascetic anti-materialism. Rather, he believed that "wealth comes from God in order to be used to aid our brethren."<sup>60</sup> We do this in response to need, even if the giver must sacrifice. In short, his understanding of the distribution of wealth was "a middle way between communism and individualism...private property meant to be used for the common good of society."<sup>61</sup>

In a chapter entitled, "Geneva's struggle for a Decent Life," Graham described the efforts of the deaconate in Calvin's Geneva as they ad-

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 83, 84, 85.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 91-92.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 66, 67, 70,

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 69, 73.



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dressed basic human needs: overseeing finances, the hospital, and the poor. He wrote, “[T]he church under Calvin was not content to have its weight felt in the social arena through the efforts of good [people] acting as individuals. Instead, church and state cooperated as one in concern for the poor.”<sup>62</sup> The influx of refugees created a significant burden on the city. Graham noted that “even providing subsistence living must have strained the resources of the tiny republic. In this light, the work of [the deacons]...is now seen as nothing short of heroic.”<sup>63</sup> Lifting the poor out of impoverishment was the goal. He concluded that the success and vigor of the Christian community of Geneva in responding to the needs of the vulnerable “was due to the iron will and careful concern of their chief pastor[, John Calvin].”<sup>64</sup>

After this consideration of Calvin’s biblical exegesis and his efforts to practice social holiness in Geneva, the inseparable tie between faithfulness and justice becomes clear: in social life, in general; in economic life, in particular. The key for liberating modern society from the iron cage lies here.

I am primarily a scholar in the thought of Paul Tillich. It was my privilege to make the pilgrimage required of any Tillich enthusiast to the Tillich Archive at Harvard Divinity School in May of 2003. One of the interesting events during my week-long stay was hearing the University Minister Peter Gomes preach at Harvard’s Memorial Church. I was a bit disappointed, and my wife and pastoral colleague, Robyn, persuaded me to write to Rev. Gomes. It was an interesting opportunity to think about the frequent interrelation of economics, politics, and Christian ethics. I wrote my letter on May 19<sup>th</sup>. Here is some of what I said:

Dear Rev. Gomes:

I appreciated hearing you preach in Cambridge on May 11....It was helpful to hear your contrast between the Good Shepherd of John 10 and the shepherds who “fleeced their flocks” of Ezekiel 34.

I appreciated your insightful comment that Harvard is a place of shepherds and that people come to Harvard in order to become “shepherds” rather than sheep. Therefore, it is a difficult matter for such a constituency to hear that they must learn to be sheep. Yet, that is precisely what they must learn to do in rela-

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 100, 101.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 114-15.



tion to the one Good Shepherd in order to be faithful. Clearly, your message was apropos for Harvard: John's gospel seems to speak specifically to that relationship. However, I think Ezekiel demands that we take this further.

It struck me that the Ezekiel passage and the present world situation fairly begged for highlighting our double position — especially that of your Harvard constituency and our political leadership — as sheep and shepherds. While John 10 can be arguably limited to the personal piety of sheep toward their Shepherd, I don't think there's any way to limit Ezekiel 34 in that way: Ezekiel is surely about faithful stewardship of vast resources by power-holders, the shepherds of a nation.

In the days prior to your sermon, I noted a story in your local paper, *The Boston Globe*, showing Iraqi oil fields, the repair of which would come under the care of the company formerly shepherded by Vice President Dick Cheney. This kind of situation is hardly new news. At the least, it points to the varied stakes which various political leaders may have had in this latest Gulf War, the possibility of competing and conflicting stakes, and at least some striking coincidences between business opportunities and our government's foreign policy. In a word, it's one of those situations regarding which our earthly shepherds have to be kept accountable. Given the fact that the leaders of our nation are given stewardship not only of nation, but international and transnational resources, we cannot let them forget that we expect them not to fleece their incomprehensibly large flock.<sup>65</sup>

My letter went on from there, even quoting the line from Shakespeare's *Pericles*... cited above, for I had seen the play that same Sunday afternoon. Three days later, on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, Peter Gomes penned this response:

Thank you so much for your letter...I found your response helpful, stimulating, even provocative, and I only wish I had thought to do what you suggested in linking the two lessons together in such a creative and thoughtful way. Indeed the indictment of bad shepherds is a lesson we all need to hear, especially when we are in the midst of such bad shepherding. Thank God for other occasions in which to preach.<sup>66</sup>

I don't think I've ever received a response with that much class.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew Lon Weaver, Letter to Peter Gomes, May 19, 2003.

<sup>66</sup> Peter Gomes, Letter to Matthew Lon Weaver, May 22, 2003.

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## *Conclusion*

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I offer my conclusion beginning with two brief stories illustrating the dynamics of power and economics, of institutions and ethics at play.

The first story centers on corporate leadership. My sister is the chief medical officer for a health insurance company. She has related her repeated experience of discussing corporate decision-making with another member of our family. When an issue of controversy within the corporate world arises in the news, the other family member invariably denigrates the faceless corporation, opining in a manner which assumes a sort of economic determinism. My sister's regular response is that concerning any news involving her corporation, she can place faces upon – and put names to – the party or parties who freely chose to make the decisions involved. She can testify to the level of interplay between ethics and economics in such decisions, and she can speak to the degree to which courageous (or cowardice) freedom conquered (or deferred to) corporate, economic determinism. If we remain within the iron cage, corporate leaders risk becoming invisible to the public as moral agents.

My second story involves a well-known individual who was a victim of the schemes of the now notorious financier, Bernard Madoff: the Holocaust survivor and Nobel laureate, Elie Wiesel. Wiesel not only lost the resources of his charitable foundation to Madoff's crimes: he lost his personal investments, as well. I saw a very sad interview of Mr. Wiesel, months after Madoff's arrest. At one point in the interview, the reporter commented, "Mr. Wiesel, given your renown the world over and your many relationships and friendships, many people must have come to your aid." Shockingly, Mr. Wiesel responded, "No, actually that didn't happen. That kind of help never arrived. It was strangers who offered support. I remember a little boy who gave me his Chanukah gift and compelled his parents to match it with their own gift. People like that little boy were the ones who came forward." If we remain within the iron cage, the corporate world, the finance system, and the world they create collapse as a realm of moral agency.

Rather than surrendering cynically to imprisonment within such an iron-cage of inaction, I suspect that Calvin's words to exploitative power-holders and to churches which had lost their ways would have been rooted in his sensitive and demanding theological anthropology. As such, they would have come close to those written by the apostle Paul to the Galatians:

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked.  
 You shall reap what you sow.  
 Those who sow to please their sinful nature will reap destruction;  
 Those who sow to the Spirit will reap eternal life." (6:7, 8)

Informed by Calvin, we are called to be faithful stewards of wealth and, thus, to use it to benefit the vulnerable of the world, to stop creating misery for God's children through neglect, to break out of the iron cage of economic determinism, and, thereby, to offer a glimpse – however fragmentary – of eternity.

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