

Calvin

Calvin:
Ethics, Eschatology, and Education

By

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This book is dedicated to John and Isa Tiesen
so that they may be remembered for their generous spirit
as well as their physical generosity.

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INTRODUCTION

Besides the fact that Ethics, Education, and Eschatology all begin with the letter E readers may find the combination strange. However, the three are important themes in Calvin's works that help to explain the development of western thought and action. Ethics is perhaps the most obvious theme to be found in his work as his first attempt at publication was on ethics; his work on Seneca's *De Clementia*. Other treatises such as "Against Luxury and License in Geneva" reinforce that idea. Calvin's second major work, *Psychopannychia*, demonstrates his concern for the future life. It is only education that does not receive that attention of a book. Yet the three are intertwined in many of Calvin's commentaries, letters, and other theological works so that studying them together in this one work should not be unacceptable.

Ethics is that branch of philosophy that answers the question of how man should live. Such a topic interested Calvin as well as many other Reformers as they saw the necessity of not only reforming the church but society as well. The societies of the 16th century were not so secular as they are today. In fact John Calvin was one of the pioneers in separating church and state. He lost his position in Geneva because he refused to allow the state to force him to give communion to those who were under church discipline.

One of the principles for his discussion of ethics was the idea that actions had consequences. Therefore, if actions were improper or unethical the actor would be punished. The punishment might not come in this life time but would come in the end times, which means that ethics and eschatology would be inter-related. Calvin argues in his *Institutes* III, iii, 7 this very idea that the fear of God and divine judgment restrains lusts.¹

1. William Bouwsma uses Psalms 36:2 to try and support that idea, unfortunately it is rather forced as he translates the verse: "It is said that men have the fear of God before their eyes," instead of, "For he flattereth himself in his own eyes." He then goes on to translate Calvin "When it rules their lives, and wherever they turn, it intervenes and restrains their lusts." Bouwsma, William, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 92-93) Again Calvin is more true to the text as he refers to the lack of restraint on the part of the wicked because they have no fear of God.

For Calvin, it was the task of education to teach how man was to act and the religious principles that determined man's actions. His educational system was innovative because he believed that this meant education should include the liberal arts. All knowledge was from God and even the pagan philosophers could have a certain amount of truth. Man's calling came from God and all occupations that were not opposed to God's law were worthwhile.

Another aspect of the interrelation of ethics and eschatology comes with Calvin's understanding of cosmology. He sees in John 12 and John 5 the end times will culminate with a complete restoration of the world.² With this in mind it is no wonder that he wished to broaden the scope of learning beyond the scholastic system of the middle ages.

Calvin states that, "Religion is the best mistress for teaching us mutually to maintain equity and uprightness towards each other; and when a concern for religion is extinguished, then all regard for justice perishes along with it."³ His educational system could not be divorced from the teaching of religion and his religion was Christocentric, built on the promise of the resurrection. Thus we can see that there is a relationship between Ethics, eschatology and education.

What makes Calvin unique and important in this discussion is that where it can be argued that reform often has a desire to go back to its roots or back to the past,⁴ Calvin was innovative. His roots were still biblical. However, his application was new.

2. I agree more with Bouwsma, that Calvin uses a cosmology that demands an ordered universe and an eschatology that will restore order. *Ibid.* p. 73.

3. Calvin, J. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*. Vol.1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963, p. 196.

4. Durie, M. (February 27,2010) Beware progress. *World*. P.63. Durie argues that church reformers from St. Francis to Luther sought to go ahead by going backwards. My argument is that Calvin was adapting the Biblical roots to the new situation of the 16th century.

CHAPTER I

ETHICS OF JOHN CALVIN

People have different standards of ethics depending on their world view or philosophy of life. For the ancient Greeks ethics was absolute because it was based on an absolute law. For Plato this was a law based on the make up of the mind of man, an ideal. It was confirmed by the common experience and conscience of man. Aristotle did not really change the law or ethical standard but his law was the natural law, something that could be empirically shown to be based on the true premises of man. Thomas Aquinas maintained the view that ethics should be absolute as he brought a spiritual or revelational standard to his philosophy. Although rational, the 10 Commandments were an absolute law that demanded an absolute ethic. Calvin and his contemporaries accepted that ethics was an absolute as they held to a *sola scriptura* view for absolute truth. In fact, looking at ethics as something other than based on an absolute law or truth is a relatively modern phenomena.

Experientialism and rationalism made truth relative to culture. Therefore, ethics could be decided by the majority of the population. As cultures changed so did the ethics of that culture. Existential thought went one step further to make truth subjective. Thus, it has become politically correct to accept the choice of the individual as a popular ethical stand. Calvin would have found that unbearable just as modern society finds some of the ethical positions of 16th century Geneva as unacceptable.

Calvin's writings are foundational to our understanding of Christian ethics because the Puritans, who laid a foundation for American ethical living, took their theological stance from his systematic treatment of Scriptures. Calvin sees that men must struggle because the world will not be perfect before the return of Christ. However there is a positive aspect as the world is continually being reformed it is only when men are reformed by the Gospel that we may enter into the Kingdom.

The ethical and the eschatological are tied together in that reformation.

Prophetic scriptures have application for the past, present, and future. Christ's reign encompasses both the first and second coming. The effect on life is already present in salvation yet the world awaits the future fulfillment.

Calvin has united eschatology and ethics in an exciting manner. He has taken the future life out of the realm of superstition and made it a necessary ingredient of the Christian's life. He has balanced cosmic and individual eschatology to show that the kingdom of Christ is present. Therefore he insists that believer's lives demonstrate that the kingdom is present. They will show that presence by an ethical life style.

Ethics in Calvin's Writings

Calvin shows an interest about ethics throughout his writings and sermons. His first published work, the commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia*, was a work that reflected that concern for ethics. Calvin writes, in his introduction to the text,

The mysteries of nature, belong to that part of philosophy which the Greeks call "physics," he knew to a nicety; but it is when dealing with matters ethical, that he reigns supreme, and runs as it were on his own proper course, having sufficient knowledge of the art of reasoning to maintain a well-ordered style.¹

Hugo notes that the brevity of this comment is rather disappointing. Calvin only mentions Seneca's supreme position in the field of ethics and does not get back to it again.²

This is really to be deplored, for a few more sentences on that subject, from this student, would have been worth all his paragraphs on Seneca's style. One may certainly speculate on the reasons why Calvin was so secretive about a subject which must certainly beyond any doubt, have interested him most intensely.³

Yet Hugo seems to have answered his own puzzlement when he says,

That Calvin's aim is quite simple, to ensure that the reader will understand what Seneca is saying. Only at rare intervals does he permit himself to be tempted into a critical analysis of rightness or wrongness of what Seneca says.⁴

1. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles and Andre Malan Hugo (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), p. 11, (iii).

2. John Calvin Calvin's Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia, trans. Ford Lewis Battles and Andre Malan Hugo (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), P. 125.

3. Ibid. p. 59.

4. Ibid. p. 62.

To have made further comments on Seneca's ethics in the commentary would have detracted from Calvin's purpose. A good interpretation demands that the author should be controlled by the passages he is interpreting.⁵ A theological work could not be expected because Calvin had not had his conversion in 1531, when he wrote this commentary. However, the work did give Calvin a chance to demonstrate his mastery of classical learning, his legal interests, and his ethical insights.⁶

These insights can be classified into three themes: ultimate happiness or pleasures, the comparison of vices and virtues, and the place of emotion. The theme of ultimate happiness is traced in sixteen sects with approval being given to Seneca's view that "virtue is its own reward."⁷ Thus Calvin can write of Seneca, "And finally he who has a good conscience can enjoy the pleasure of it."⁸ When Calvin compares vices with virtues he concludes, "Although the transgressions of all are not equal or similar, still we all have sinned."⁹ Then in book two Calvin explains that there is a place for emotion. He tells his readers to read Augustine as opposed to the Stoics. He feels that pity is a virtue. Proper ethics has a proper attitude that helps one to feel the situation of someone in need. Calvin criticizes improper ethics when he says, "...if at any time such persons come to give alms to a poor man, then as if it were beneath their dignity to hand it to him, they fling it down by way of insult."¹⁰ These themes give an insight into the view that Seneca and Calvin, commenting on Seneca, had concerning the life of man.

It was in 1539 that Calvin introduced "The life of the Christian Man" as the last chapter of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In his 1559 edition Calvin moved the chapter to book three to follow repentance. Such a change is significant as it links ethics with faith. It also places "the life of the Christian Man" ahead of predestination¹¹ which argues against any fatalism: Calvin first explains the necessary life for the Christian man,

5. Ibid. p. 127. Also see p. 3ff. for a discussion of the time in his life when Calvin wrote this commentary.

6. Ibid. p.74,.

7. Ibid. p. 24.

8. Ibid. p. 22.

9. Ibid. p. 128.

10. Ibid. p. 373.

11. "The fact that predestination follows ethics suggests several interesting points. Calvin did not intend to scare people into good behavior by dangling them over the abyss of reprobation. However, he also had no thought of allowing them to credit themselves with their God given graces." E.A. McKee, "Election and Sanctification" (DS 25 Reformation Research Paper, Princeton, May 5, 1977), p. 13f.

then after he explains justification, freedom, and prayer he tells men that they are chosen. It would be more logical for a fatalist to describe the way man acts after telling what causes him to act that way. In the 1559 edition "Law" retained its position before faith as Calvin wanted his readers to know that moral absolutes do exist. Faith was then followed by repentance, life of man, and justification by faith.

The Council of Trent was the key stone of the Roman Catholic Counter Reformation. It dealt with a number of ethical abuses within the church. It tried to eradicate pluralism and the sale of indulgences as well as establishing the promotion of seminaries to train priests. However, it did not address a change theologically. Calvin felt that Trent needed to be refuted for making eternal life a reward for works. He also challenged the idea that someone who had died could still intercede for someone who lives and wrote "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" to explain that if Roman Catholics wished the dead to intercede for them they did not understand the relationship of the present life to the future life.

The idea of the kingdom is used to explain what that relationship should be. In his catechism of 1538 Calvin explains that with the kingdom the Lord adds new believers to His people and pours out His grace "through which he may live and reign day by day more and more in them, until He completely fulfills their perfect union..."¹² This was the kingdom that believers lived in on earth as well as hoped for in the future life.

Thus Calvin did not limit his thought on this relationship to treatises meant for theological discussions. The fact that he dealt with the ethical implications of the future life in his sermons shows that Calvin thought this topic was important for all believers.

...He will cause us to experience His power. He will give us grace to wait with patience for His coming. Although we must suffer in this world many injuries for His name, in the end we shall be re clothed with his glory and His righteousness.¹³

The development of the theme of ethics and the future life can be seen throughout Calvin's works. Even before his conversion the work on *De Clementia* was noteworthy. However, when the philosophy of life which Calvin found in such men as Seneca was added to the solid foundation of the plan of God, to bring men into the kingdom of heaven, Calvin's

12. John Calvin, *Catechism 1538*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Pittsburg: Pittsburg Theological Seminary, 1972) p. 38.

13. John Calvin, *The Deity of Christ and Other Sermons* trans. Leroy Nixon (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950). P. 302.

arguments became more authoritative.¹⁴ The necessity of virtue, the fight against vice, and the understanding of humanity all take on new meaning when seen in light of the future life promised by Jesus. Calvin wrote many of his arguments in reaction to an error of either the Anabaptists or the Roman Catholics. To refute their errors he explains the proper view of the future life and how to react to it. Although *Psychopannychia* was his first theological work Calvin does not change his view of the future life to contradict what he said there. At the same time, his rearrangement of materials, as in the revision of the *Institutes*, indicates his concern for a doctrine of the future life that was practical. Thus, the relationship of ethics and future life can be seen in Calvin's work. From this it is necessary to clarify what he used as a foundation for his ethics.

The Foundations of Calvin's Ethics

Many people have equated ethics with following societal norms or laws. However when Calvin presents his three uses of the law he demands that Christian ethics must begin with Jesus Christ. The first use of the law is to lead believers to the savior. Christ acts as a double mirror. He is the fulfilling¹⁵ of the law for the Jews who looked forward to the coming of their Messiah. Without Him, they could not bear the knowledge of the future life.

The other side of the mirror is the promise of Peter. "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood." Calvin claims that this transposition of Exodus 19:6 intimates that those who know Christ through the Gospel have obtained more than their fathers did. "For all have been endowed with priestly and kingly honor, so that, trusting in their mediator, they may freely dare to come forth into God's presence."¹⁶ Christ adds new meaning to the law. He renews man to life. "...Christ, through whom we return into favor with God, has been set before us as an example, whose pattern we ought to express in our life."¹⁷ He is the foundation of Christian ethics but a foundation who demands a hope in the future life.

In Christ the Old and New Testaments are united in that hope. When the apostle says that the promises of the gospel are contained in it, he proves with utter clarity that the Old Testament was particularly concerned with the future life.

14. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3, 6, 3.

15. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2, 7, 10.

16. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2, 7, 1.

17. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3, 6, 3.

For the same reason it follows that the Old Testament was established upon the free mercy of God, and was confirmed by Christ's intercession.¹⁸

To prove that Christ is central for eschatology, Calvin appeals to the sacraments. He demonstrates that the Apostle Paul "makes the Israelites equal to us not only in the grace of the covenant but also in the signification of the sacraments."¹⁹ Calvin recognized, from Paul, that the manna of Exodus was bestowed as a spiritual mystery.

From this we can conclude with full certainty that the Lord not only communicated to the Jews the same promises of eternal and heavenly life as he now designs to give us, but also sealed them with truly spiritual sacraments.²⁰

These sacraments were full of meaning as long as they pointed to Jesus. They tied the Jews in fellowship with God and gave them hope for the future.²¹ Although Christ could not be an example for the ethics of the Old Testament Jew, directly, He could serve a similar function as an ideal to whom the Jews could look, both for salvation and a way of life.

Calvin's eschatological perspective, "focused on the ascended and presently reigning Christ, moves between the two poles of advent and return"²² With this perspective, Calvin can reject the Chiliast idea that calls Christ to reign visibly on the not-yet renewed earth for a thousand years. Instead Calvin shows that in Christ the world is renewed.²³ Then when Christ appears again it will be the final revelation of that perfected kingdom.

He emphasizes this same point in his sermons on the ascension. "When it is said that He will come just as they have seen Him go up, that is to show that we need to look for Jesus here below until He comes to judge the whole world."²⁴ When Calvin rejects the Chiliast millennium he applies the ethics of the future life to the "renewed" of the present life.

Calvin describes the opposite of the kingdom of God as "the life of men who are given to their corrupt nature."²⁵ The kingdom demands a

18. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2, 10, 3&4.

19. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2, 10, 5.

20. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2, 10, 6.

21. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2, 10, 7.

22. Holwerda, *Exploring the Heritage*, p. 127.

23. Calvin, Isaiah, vol. IV, p. 398. "nor does he mean only the first coming, but the whole reign....Thus the world is (so to speak) renewed by Christ.

24. Calvin, *Deity of Christ*, p. 235.

25. Calvin, *Deity of Christ*, p. 200.

certain ethical standard. "For the Kingdom of God presupposes a reformation."²⁶ That reformation demands that man withdraw his affections from the earth, and with his whole soul aspire to heaven. "Christ states that He ascends on High. Therefore we must ascend unless we want to be separated from Him."²⁷ This does not mean divorce from the world, however, for still in the context of the ascension, Calvin talks about the power that Christ gives to enable His disciples to function in this world. "...He promises them a remedy for their weakness and so rouses them to hope; for he says that he will never leave them."²⁸

This was the power that was exhibited in Stephen. Calvin describes the effect when, "He sees Christ reigning in that flesh in which he had suffered humiliation (*exinanitus*), as victory certainly lodged in this one man." Calvin continues, "It is as if he has said... He [Jesus] will be the defender both of His own cause, and my safety."²⁹ It is this power and hope that enables believers to lead an ethical life.

Fear could be a motivation for ethics but Calvin does not expect men to live in a constant state of fear.

We must come boldly and without fear, but not without respect (for we must be touched with fear in order to adore the majesty of God). But, anyway, let us not be frightened as it were altogether overcome with distrust.³⁰

This godly fear is a true motivation for ethics.

Your part now is to render to the Lord the confession of praise which He demands of you, to exhort yourself to be instant and urgent, to arouse and collect your courage. For the servant of God to give way, especially at such an important crisis of Religion, were most foolish and unworthy. That you may ever and anon call God and His holy angels to witness, that the controversy now agitated is no less than this—How are we to avoid denying Christ before men, so as not to be denied by Him, (as the Apostle threatens, 2 Timothy ii, 12)when seated for judgment on His Supreme Tribunal?³¹

Calvin is quick to point out that it is better to fear the judgment than to fear death at the hands of men. Life is filled with fears and Calvin says

26. Ibid., p. 200.

27. Calvin, *St. John*, vol. 5, p. 200.

28. Ibid., p. 83.

29. Calvin, *Acts*, vol. 6, p. 218-219.

30. Calvin, *Deity of Christ*, p. 191.

31. Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, vol.III, p. 410

that is why it is good to meditate on the future life lest, "from fear of death we resign the hope of eternal life."³² Thus, Calvin is willing to counteract the fears of this world by using fear of the future judgment as an incentive to proper ethics. This is especially true for leaders as often they seem immune from earthly punishment. For people with power and nothing to fear on earth, fear of the future is the only effective restraint.

Another basis for ethics according to Calvin is the example of Christ himself. In the same way, teachers and leaders as Christ's representatives must serve as examples. The phrase, "Do as I say and not as I do," has rationalized the lack of ethical standards among many people. However, for Calvin the teacher is responsible for his actions as well as his words:

The minister ought to behave himself well, in a godly manner; and the people ought to refrain from all kinds of wickedness. The minister must point the way, and set good examples; and the whole body of the church regulate their lives according to what is here [Titus 1] taught them.³³

As members of the kingdom, Christians become examples for the ethics of the world.

By emphasizing the presence of the kingdom Calvin can encourage believers to keep high standards for themselves and others. He insists that men should meditate on the future life; not so that they can leave the world but so that they can live better lives in the world. Yet if one is so much involved in this world that he loses sight of eternity he is brought back to reality by the consequences of such a life. Meditation on the future life is not to be at the expense of the way men live presently.

The opposite is true. Calvin says, "For the Lord has ordained that those who are one day to be crowned in heaven should first undergo struggles on earth." He goes on to describe the earthly life: "It is never to be hated except in so far as it holds us subject to sin; although not even hatred of that condition may ever properly be turned against life itself."³⁴

There is a tension in the "now" and the "not yet" of the kingdom. Christ reigns now keeping His people in obedience. However, this is not a stagnant state. Once men are in His kingdom they do not receive perfection but are "reformed from rebels to citizens."³⁵ They are transformed by the perfection of Jesus Christ and His gift of the Holy

32. Ibid., vol. III, p. 410.

33. John Calvin, *The Mystery of Godliness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), p. 157.

34. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3, 9, 3.

35. Carl Gerhard Kromminga, *Man Before God's Face in Calvin's Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Seminary, 1961), p. 37.

Spirit. Ethics depends on Jesus not only as an example but to work in the lives of men guiding, teaching, and transforming them to His image.

Calvin says that no one can live a perfect life. Therefore, a constant prayer should be that God,

would strengthen us, and sanctify us from day to day by his Holy Spirit, until we wholly cast off all our imperfections and sins: but as this cannot be done so long as we live in this mortal life, that he would bear with our infirmities, until he hath utterly put them away.³⁶

Because imperfection and sin are foreign to God it is necessary to pray that God would forgive man's flaws now as well as taking them away in the future.

The law emphasizes the centrality of Jesus Christ in Calvin's thought and how perfection is not attainable if man is to give the proper glory to God. Thus the law as the unchangeable standard of the new life must be seen with Calvin's view of the proper distance between perfect God and imperfect man. A perfect obedience to the law is impossible as man is still subject to sin and temptation.

...it is a perversity always producing fruits of malice and of rebellion, so that the most holy men, although they resist it, are still stained with many weaknesses and imperfections while they are in this life.³⁷

The Libertines, of Calvin's time, claimed an antinomian type of perfection in this life. They identified objective perfection with the absence of the complaining voice of conscience which put them in conflict with Calvin. Perhaps Calvin saw how society could wear down the conscience by continual abuse of the law so man begins to feel no wrong. Calvin sees many dangers in that position as all men are in need of forgiveness. He finds from Augustine that the highest perfection of the Christian consists in knowing and confessing his sins.³⁸ He sees that the characteristic of perfection which the Libertines did not have was a deep sense of humility.

Calvin also disagreed with the libertine's life style. He would not degrade "a calling" to any pleasing way of life. The more an earthly

36. John Calvin, *A Selection of the Most Celebrated Sermons* (Philadelphia: Charles DeSilver, 1858), p. 185.

37. Arthur Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), p. 148.

38. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3, 17, 15. Calvin quotes Augustine, *Against Two Epistles of the Pelagians*, III, vii, 19.

calling is brought into line with a religious calling the more it appears to be a divine decree.³⁹ Calvin insists that man's calling is imposed by God and cannot be relinquished without guilt. Man's calling is the only legitimate way of life. Thus he is against "the ascetic conception of higher perfection, existing apart from and above the common life,"⁴⁰ Roman Catholic monasticism seemed to seek this higher perfection in self-chosen practices as the monks attempted to gain perfection. Calvin, however, regards moral conduct in one's civil calling as the distinctive marks of Christian perfection.⁴¹ Calvin saw a proper world view as a support for his ethics. However, such a world view demands a willing participation in the future life. Thus Calvin challenged the existing views of perfection and encouraged believers to work toward that future perfection. His conception of the earthly life and the kingdom of Christ (who is ruling even now), demonstrates the importance of belief in a future life for ethics. With a focus on Christ as foundation of his ethics, Calvin concludes that this life is a preparation for that future life where man can finally see perfection.

Calvin encourages believers to meditate on the glory of God, which will be fully revealed in the future and live their lives accordingly. Jesus told His listeners that because the kingdom has come that they must repent. They must forsake every selfish impulse and live for God alone. The kingdom demands an ethic and the future life provides an example and an incentive to live ethically.

Men are inspired to live properly because of the promise of reward and punishment in the future life. Calvin uses "reward" as a synonym for gift. God "is obliged to nobody, but whomsoever He will call He freely calls, and He pays those whom He has called the reward which seems good to Him."⁴² This reward is an incentive to those chosen as they meditate on the future life.

"Therefore, so often as we think of the heavenly crown, it should prick us with ever new incitements so that we should be less slack in the future."⁴³

Calvin sees the reward which believers receive at death as a challenge. He describes women martyrs: "They have not feared to quit this perishable

39. P. Lostein, "Calvin's Ethics" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 37 (1880) trans. Frank H. Foster, p. 44. Also see Roger Spies, "Calvin a-t-il Quelque Chose a Nous Dire Aujourd'hui?" *La Revue Reformee* 30 (Juin 1979):94.

40. Lobstein, Calvin's Ethics, p. 45.

41. Ibid., p. 46.

42. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, p. 267.

43. Ibid., p. 264.

life to obtain a better, full of glory and everlasting."⁴⁴ Thus, he encourages and comforts the women detained in prison in Paris.

Set before you, then, these noble exemplars, both ancient and recent, to strengthen your weakness, and teach you to repose on Him who has performed such great things by weak vessels; and recognize the honour which has been done to you, in order that you may suffer yourselves to be led to him, being confident that he is powerful to preserve your life, if he wishes yet to make use of it, or if it is his will to exchange it for a better, you are most blessed in employing this perishable existence for his glory at so high a price, and with the assured hope of living eternally with him.⁴⁵

Being able to look forward to the reward of the future life is of great comfort to those who are about to die and to those whose loved ones may have died. Thus, they cannot live in a constant state of grief. Their actions must display their belief. There is great comfort in that hope of eternal life which Calvin compares to the fear of death. He is convinced that men who hope in the future and trust in divine protection, "stand invincible by all the powers of death, hell, the world, and Satan."⁴⁶ Such an attitude is seen in Calvin's friends in prison. Although they faced death, they would not give up their faith.⁴⁷ Thus the promise of reward in the future life should be an incentive to all believers. A mind free from worry is more capable of following God's way than one who lives without assurance that his torment will be ended in the future life.

Calvin also sees the punishment of the wicked as an encouragement and a guide to proper action. He writes to the prisoners of Lyons:

We need not doubt that he has a horrible punishment prepared for such as have despised his majesty with such enormous pride, and have cruelly persecuted those who call purely upon his name.⁴⁸

He tells his friends that they can take comfort in the fact that their tormentors will be punished.

Yet Calvin does not put the emphasis on the idea of vengeance but on ethics. "Put into practice, then, my brethren, that precept of David's and

44. John Calvin, *Letters of John Calvin*, trans. Jules Bonnet, 4 vols. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 3: 366.

45. Ibid. p. 366.

46. Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, vol. 3, p. 411.

47. Calvin, *Letters*, vol. 2, p. 406.

48. Ibid., p. 407. Also see the footnote on p. 411. Louis de Marsac wrote to Calvin: "I cannot express to you the great comfort I have received...from the letter which you sent to my brother." *Histoire des Martyrs*, p. 251.

forget not the law of God, although your life may be in your hands to be parted with at any hour."⁴⁹ In fact, "vengeance was as much forbidden then under the law as it is under the gospel, seeing that we are commended to do good even to the least of our enemy."⁵⁰ Calvin would not pronounce damnation on his enemies as hell was too terrible a place. Even regarding the Duke of Guise, who persecuted the reformed church in France, Calvin says,

To pronounce that he is damned, however, is to go too far, unless one had some certain and infallible mark of his reprobation. In which case we must guard against presumption and temerity, for there is none can know that but the Judge before whose tribunal we have all to render an account.⁵¹

Calvin wishes to treat individual cases, like the Duke's, with moderation and sobriety. Again, speculation, about another person's damnation is not to be done. It follows that cursing someone to be damned would also be forbidden for Calvin took the punishment of the future life seriously and did not wish that experience on anyone.

At the same time Calvin had no fear of preaching the wrath of God. He believed the wrath of God demonstrated His greatness and purity. By such preaching, Calvin could minister to the salvation and comfort of his congregation because they would gain comfort in knowing that their enemies would receive their just reward. The wicked would not be able to exist before his holy God. Thus those who are persecuted are assured that justice will prevail. They can live righteous lives with knowledge that a righteous God is in control.

Calvin describes punishment as coming in two parts: God's visitation now, as the judgment by which God brings back the deserters but also the judgment at the last day. The two are interconnected. As the punishment in this world is to bring the lost back to Christ then the fear of punishment in the future life must have a similar effect of turning men to Christ and thus encouraging them to live a proper life. Also when God purposely reserves some punishment for the last day it can be assured that His people are not forgotten even though the wicked may not be getting their punishment on earth. This is an assurance of great comfort, and in conjunction with that comfort it encourages proper behavior here on earth.

There are political implications that come from the assurance that the wicked will receive punishment in the future. Calvin says, "Everlasting

49. Calvin, *Letters*, vol.3, p. 407.

50. Calvin, *Letters*, vol.4, p. 357.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 354.

destruction awaits the wicked; for hell is prepared for them, and not merely for persons of ordinary rank, but likewise for the king himself and the noble."⁵² God will judge the magistrates. Therefore they must properly execute their given office. The leaders of the people must refrain from wickedness. They may feel that no one on earth can harm them but Calvin tells them that God's punishment is also after death and His punishment is eternal.

In his appeal to king Francis Calvin demonstrates how the king is God's servant and should punish according to the law those who break the law. Yet those who are innocent must be protected or the strong hand of the Lord will appear, "coming forth armed to deliver the poor from their affliction and also to punish their despisers, who now exult with such great assurance."⁵³ Here the future life contributes to political ethics as a secondary cause. Because the kingdom is present on earth, leaders must serve as and be treated as God's regents. Because God's laws are the kingdom all citizens including the leaders must follow these laws.

Where the whole law is concerned, the gospel differs from it only in clarity of manifestation. Still, because of the inestimable abundance of grace laid open for us in Christ, it is said with good reason that through his advent God's Heavenly kingdom was erected upon earth.⁵⁴

As the kingdom is a demonstration of the future life, the future life acts indirectly to determine political ethics. The motives of reward and punishment seem to have more of a direct effect in encouraging ethical behavior. The idea of a reward or punishment in the future life was used by Calvin to comfort and guide when death seemed imminent. It is interesting that Calvin did not use the theme of punishment with more of a vengeful attitude when many of those whom he counseled were prisoners because of harsh political systems.

Ethical Applications in Calvin

Reward and Punishment

Calvin makes an appeal that believers live their lives as they meditate on the future life. That does not just mean whether they will be rewarded or punished in the future for their present actions but it also means men

52. Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, vol2, p. 386.

53. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 30, 31 (Prefatory Address).

54. Ibid. 2, 9, 4.

must meditate on the glory of God, which will be fully revealed in the future. It must be remembered how the future life affects ethics. Jesus tells His listeners that because the kingdom has come they must repent. They must forsake every selfish impulse and live for God alone.⁵⁵ The kingdom demands an ethic and the future provides an example and an incentive to live ethically.

Men are inspired to live properly because of the promise of reward and punishment in the future life. Calvin uses “reward” as a synonym for gift. God “is obliged to nobody, but whomsoever He will He freely calls and He pays those whom He has called the reward, which seems good to Him.”⁵⁶ This reward is an incentive to those chosen as they meditate on the future life. “Therefore, so often we think of the heavenly crown, it should prick us with ever new incitements so that we should be less slack in the future.”⁵⁷

Calvin sees the reward which believers receive at death as a challenge. He describes women martyrs: “They have not feared to quit this perishable life to obtain a better, full of glory, and everlasting.”⁵⁸ Thus, he encourages and comforts the women detained in prison in Paris.

Set before you, then, these noble exemplars, both ancient and recent, to strengthen your weakness, and teach you to repose on Him who has performed such great things by weak vessels; and recognize the honor which has been done you, in order that you may suffer yourselves to be led to Him, being confident that He is powerful to preserve your life, if He wishes yet to make use of it, or if it is His will to exchange it for a better, you are most blessed in employing this perishable existence for His glory at so high a price, and with the assured hope of living eternally with Him.⁵⁹

Being able to look forward to the reward of the future life is of great comfort to those who are about to die and to those whose loved ones may have died. Thus, they cannot live in a constant state of grief. Their actions must display their belief. There is great comfort in that hope of eternal life which Calvin compares to the fear of death expressed by those without faith.⁶⁰ Calvin is convinced that men who hope in the future and trust in

55. H.P. Owen, “Eschatology and Ethics in the New Testament,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 15 (1962): 370.

56. Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, p. 267.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

58. Calvin, *Letters*, vol. III, p. 366.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 366.

60. Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises*, vol. III, p. 410.

divine protection “stand invincible by all the powers of death, hell, the world, and Satan.”⁶¹ Such an attitude is seen in Calvin’s friends in prison. Although they face death they would not give up their faith.

That in leaving this world we do not go away at a venture, you know not only the certainty you have, that there is a heavenly life, but also because from being assured of the gratuitous adoption of our God, you go thither as to your inheritance.⁶²

Thus the promise of reward in the future life should be an incentive to all believers. A mind free from worry is more capable of following God’s way than one who lives without assurance that his torment will be ended in the future life.

Calvin also sees the punishment of the wicked as an encouragement and a guide to proper action. He writes to the prisoners of Lyons:

We need not doubt that He has a horrible punishment prepared for such as have despised His majesty with such enormous pride, and have cruelly persecuted those who call purely upon His name.⁶³

He tells his friends that they can take comfort in the fact that their tormentors will be punished. Yet Calvin does not dwell on the idea of vengeance but on ethics. “Put into practice, then my brethren, that precept of David’s and forget not the law of God, although your life may be in your hands to be parted with at any hour.”⁶⁴ In fact, “vengeance was as much forbidden then under the law as it is under the gospel, seeing that we are commended to do good even to the least of our enemy.”⁶⁵ Calvin would not pronounce damnation on his enemies as hell was too terrible a place. Even regarding the Duke of Guise who persecuted the French Protestants and who was “always an avowed enemy of the truth of the Gospel.”⁶⁶ Calvin says,

To pronounce that he is damned, however, is to go too far, unless one had some certain and infallible mark of his reprobation. In which we must

61. Ibid., p. 411.

62. Calvin, *Letters*, vol. II, p. 406.

63. Ibid., p. 407. Also see the footnote on p. 411. Louis de Marsac wrote to Calvin: “I cannot express to you the great comfort I received...from the letter which you sent to my brother.” *Histoire des Martyrs*, p. 251.

64. Calvin, *Letters*, vol. II, p. 407.

65. Calvin, *Letters*, vol. IV, p. 357.

66. Ibid., p. 355.

guard against presumption and temerity, for there is none can know that but the Judge before whose tribunal we have all to render an account.⁶⁷

Calvin wishes to treat individual cases, like the Duke, with moderation and sobriety, again, speculation, about another person's damnation, is not to be done.⁶⁸ It would follow that cursing someone to be damned would also be forbidden for Calvin took the punishment of the future life seriously and did not wish that experience on anyone.

At the same time,

Calvin seems never to have had any fear of preaching the wrath of God. He preached God's wrath in the spirit of love, sincerely believing that such preaching would minister to the salvation and comfort of his hearers.⁶⁹

The wrath of God demonstrates His greatness and purity. There is much comfort in knowing that His enemies will be confounded. The wicked will not be able to exist before His face because He will come in such majesty.⁷⁰ Thus, those who are persecuted are assured that justice will prevail. They can live righteous lives with knowledge that a righteous God is in control. There is no excuse like, "Why Bother? There is no benefit in living right when those who don't seem to prosper."

Calvin describes punishment as coming in two parts: God's visitation now, as the judgment by which God brings back the deserters but also the judgment at the last day. He finds that the two should not be separated.

But if the judgments of God be so dreadful in this life, how dreadful will He be when He shall come at last to judge the world! All the instances of punishment that now produce fear and terror are nothing more than preparation for that final vengeance with which He will thunder against the reprobate, and many things which He appears to pass by He purposely reserves and delays till that last day.⁷¹

As the punishment in this world is to bring the lost back to Christ then fear of punishment in the future life must have a similar effect of turning men back to Christ and thus encouraging them to live a proper life. Also without the future punishment it could appear that God is not in control. However, Calvin sees that as God purposely reserves some punishment till the last day, it is assured that His people are not forgotten. This is an

67. Ibid., p. 354.

68. Ibid., p. 354.

69. Nixon, *Expository Preacher*, p. 77.

70. Calvin, *Deity of Christ*, p. 79.

71. Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, vol. I, p. 335 (Isaiah 10:3).