

“God’s Operating Instructions”

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

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February 2, 2020

Back in 2009, many Protestant Christians around the world celebrated the 500th anniversary of the birth of the great French thinker and reformer John Calvin. (You know, the guy who founded the “Reformed” movement—what is called “Presbyterianism” in English speaking countries).

Unfortunately, Calvin has been terribly (and inaccurately) maligned. He is seen (by some today) as a severe and repressive bigot. He is associated with a hypocritical attitude to sex, and a dismal dourness.

Indeed, the adjective “*Calvinist*” is used as a catch-all term by some to condemn anything that is *mean-spirited*. And a more universal attack on Calvin's legacy is that he promoted excessive individualism and was an intellectual begetter of aggressive modern capitalism.

This, however, is a lot of nonsense: Calvin was a man who believed above all in community. He was genuinely and compassionately concerned with the welfare of the outcast, the needy, the poor and the weak. He was suspicious of wealth, power and ambition. He believed in social justice.

Calvin, in fact, was almost the polar opposite of the caricature. He was the enemy of the *puffed-up* and of overly strict morality. He was both practical and flexible in dealing with the needs of ordinary folk. He was a pastor as well as a prophet.

He condemned those who pursued personal interests to the neglect of the community. He emphasized constantly human interdependence. He stressed that Christ came “*with the wretched appearance of a beggar, rather than glistening with the regalia of a king.*”

Calvin, you’ll recall, was born in Noyon in northern France in July 1509, and educated in Paris. He was intended for the priesthood, but his father, who was in the process of falling out with the church, told him to switch to the law. Calvin fled from France because he feared religious persecution, although he did not

formally become a Protestant until he had left his native land. He found happiness in Strasbourg where he married, but it was his long and successful ministry in Geneva (a haven for religious refugees) that gave his legacy to the world.

He detested *laziness*, but also admonished those who worked *too hard*. Here he was, indeed, *hypocritical*, as he did not follow this advice himself. In Geneva from 1541 until his death in 1564 he drove himself - despite appalling ill health - ludicrously hard, sleeping just four hours a night and delivering more than 250 sermons a year, as well as constantly dictating letters and pamphlets and revising his theological works and commentaries. He developed *free schooling*, *public hygiene* and much else. He presided over an extraordinary experiment that was religious, social and cultural.

He was a man far ahead of his time on issue after issue. For example, he detested *hunting* and he angrily condemned *slavery*. And far from endorsing aggressive capitalism, he consistently advocated *fairness* in business and *justice* in the marketplace.

John Knox, the leader of the Scottish Reformation, worked with him for a time in Geneva, and admired him greatly, but in many respects Knox was to go his own way. Aspects of the Scottish Reformation - its democratic nature, the emphasis on education, the concern for social inclusion - have their roots in the great Geneva experiment. And these ideas were later exported to North America by way of Scots-Irish immigration.

But in Geneva Calvin also encountered resistance. Shots were fired at him; dogs were set on him. Yet he prevailed, not by force or imposed authority, but by taking people with him.

Was Calvin perfect? No. There was the unfortunate condemnation and execution of the maverick theologian *Servetus*, the problematic doctrine of *predestination*, the absence of *privacy* and the prevalence of *surveillance* in the "*perfect school of Christ*."

But the overall verdict is that this visionary did far more good than harm. And given the marginalization, alienation and social despair that stains so many western societies today, who are we to condemn a man who placed such strong emphasis

on community, on the simple requirement that people should look after each other?¹

Geneva continues to appreciate its historic connection with Calvin (his image is on street signs everywhere). Geneva, along with Zurich and Vienna, are consistently listed as the top three cities in the world to live. And much of this has to do with Calvin's 16th-century legacy: cleanliness, orderliness, community, efficiency, tolerance of diversity, cosmopolitanism, (it's an international center for business and the arts), fair business practices (except for the banks!), extensive public transportation, affordable education, and health care.

I share this with you because John Calvin put into practice in Geneva the teachings of Micah 6 and Matthew 5 (however imperfectly) in his attempt to create what John Knox called, "*the most perfect school of Christ.*" Micah 6 and Matthew 5 weren't just flowery, unrealistic aspirations to Calvin, rather they were the practical stuff of daily Christian living.

You see, *paying attention* to God meant the practice of *compassion* and *justice*. They are God's passion. *Loving God* means *participating* in God's passion.

And the practice of *compassion and justice* is important both within the internal life of the *church* and in the world beyond the *community* of the church. Within the church, *compassion* is to be the *primary virtue* shaping our relationships with each other. [Among other things, compassion means inclusiveness and inclusive caring].

And *justice* is the social or systemic form of compassion. Thus *within* the church, justice means a concern for the structures or systems of the church—church governance and organization. For example, in recent history, the ordination of women was (and is) a justice issue. More recently, the status of gays and lesbians in the church is a justice issue, as is the role of the laity in the governance of the Catholic church.

Beyond the church, the practice of compassion means *both* charity and justice. The distinction between the two is important. About a hundred years ago, a Christian activist and author named Vida Scudder listed *three ways* that Christians can respond to a growing awareness of human suffering: *Direct philanthropy, social*

¹ Harry Reid, *Why We Should Reform our Dour View of Calvin*, Herald Scotland, January 1, 2009

reform, and social transformation. Direct philanthropy means giving directly to those who are suffering; *social reform* means creating and supporting organizations for their care; and *social transformation* is about *justice*—changing society so that the structures do not privilege some and cause suffering for others.

Now, the first two (direct philanthropy and social reform) are about *charity*, the third (social transformation) is about justice. All three are important. Charity is always good and will always be necessary, but historically Christians have been *long* on the first two and *short* on the third. One reason is the *charity never offends*; but a passion for *justice* often does. To paraphrase Roman Catholic bishop Dom Helder Camara from Brazil: “*When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint; when I asked why there were so many poor, they called me a communist.*”²

[I suspect that if John Calvin, Martin Luther, and John Wesley were alive today they would be accused of being communists or socialists, as well, just as many contemporary preachers today are accused of the same thing!].

But taking the *political vision* of the Bible seriously means the practice of social transformation, like Calvin. This is not something to feel guilty about (as if we have been bad again and need forgiveness). Rather, it’s something to do something about!

Friends, (as you are undoubtedly aware!) the world’s need for *systemic transformation* is great, but it is important *not* to become passive or discouraged because the need is so great. None of us is called to be knowledgeable about *all of it* or capable of doing something about *all of it*. As contemporary theologian *Sallie McFague* says, we might think of the task as that like women gathering to make a patchwork quilt. Nobody is responsible for doing the whole quilt; rather, it is the product of a host of people working together. The important thing is for each of us to do our patch.

So the practice of compassion and justice *is central*. It is both something to be done as well as the *primary* fruit of the Spirit. We participate in the passion of God, by loving that which God loves. It is the Spirit becoming *incarnate* in the lives of Christians.

² Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, Harper Collins, New York, 2003, pp. 200, 201, 204

