Calvin and Commerce: The Transforming Power of Calvinism in Market Economies

David W. Hall and Matthew D. Burton

Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009 (256 pages)

This book is the fifth of eight planned entries in The Calvin 500 Series. The book series is one element of the broader Calvin Quincentenary, an international, multidisciplinary, and nondenominational celebration of the life and work of John Calvin, corresponding to the five-hundredth anniversary of his 1509 birth.

The volume shares two authors. The first, David W. Hall, is senior pastor of Midway Presbyterian Church in Powder Springs, Georgia, and is the general editor of the Calvin 500 book series. His coauthor, Matthew D. Burton, is the president and founder of Narwhal Capital Management in Marietta, Georgia.

The authors' main thesis is that capitalism is biblically sound and that viewing Scripture through the eyes of Calvin himself can only reinforce that notion, leading to the conclusion that capitalism is not only biblically sound but also quite reasonable from a practical point of view. The manuscript is organized around the following six themes, each constituting one chapter: creation, fall, redemption, philanthropy, sanctification and service, and eschatology.

In the creation chapter, the authors consider the creative role of man by examining Calvin's *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses* and Calvin's perspective on the creation accounts found in Genesis. In their view, man is both a creation of God and a creator through one's vocation. The authors work hard to undo the caricature, attributed to Max Weber and his 1905 book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, that one's accumulated wealth served to signify one's election.

At the same time—and thus perhaps working at cross-purposes with themselves—the authors return often to Jesus' restatement of Deuteronomy 15:11 during his anointing at Bethany: "The poor you will always have with you" (Matt. 26:11 TNIV). Throughout the book, the authors use this as a reminder that God's providence calls some to wealth and others to poverty and that we are to be at peace regardless of our present circumstance. While the authors marvelously make the case that caring generously for the poor is impossible without creating the wealth necessary to do so, they do not paint a hopeful picture for the long-term plight of the poor. It may well be the case that they are merely arguing that *inequality* will always be with us, but, if so, they should have made that argument much more explicitly.

In one of the most surprising sections of the first chapter, the authors craft an extensive case for Sabbath observance as practiced generations ago. Their view is that God models for us the correct balance between work and genuine rest in the creation narrative.

In the fall and redemption chapters, the authors consider how the roles of work and creation have changed since God's ideal for both became broken with original sin. In

light of the Fall, society must be guided by two pillars: a strong legal and moral system and unrestricted prices, wages, and employment decisions. These pillars work together to ensure that all of us are treated equally within the system: that is, that we all must abide by the same rules of the game. These two pillars are not different from Robert Nozick's "minimal state," articulated in his 1974 *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Man's role in this minimal state, according to the authors, is to redeem wealth and property for good uses, practicing his calling with joy, rejoicing in God's providence, and exercising his personal freedom to choose wisely. A believer's actions in the marketplace can indeed be an extension of his worship, and even financial investments may be viewed as a redemptive process. Yet, charity cannot be forgotten. As a wonderful exclamation point, the authors quote—in a book about Calvin—one of *John Wesley*'s sermons to drive home their point: "Having, first gained all you can, and, secondly saved all you can, then give all you can" (92).

The book's philanthropy chapter details well the charitable institutions of Calvin's Geneva, including Calvin's Academy and the *Bourse française*, the organized treasury of the deacons of the church. The *Bourse* served as a key source of humanitarian aid and welfare promotion in Geneva. The services provided by the *Bourse* were wide-ranging, including medical care and housing for orphans. In each instance, however, the *Bourse*'s managers carefully discriminated between the deserving poor and those thought to be lazy and therefore undeserving. There were no guaranteed handouts from the *Bourse*: The hope was that in most cases its aid would be temporary, necessary only until the person in its care had been restored.

The sanctification and service chapter is certainly the most unusual. The authors draw a parallel between one's ongoing sanctification process and long-term economic growth. Their argument is no Keynesian one. Instead, they see downturns as opportunities to renew resources for good and thereby continue upward in pursuit of the more abundant life that economic growth promises. Again, there is little concern for the plight of the poor beyond the notion that economic growth can lead to still greater wealth accumulation and that wise investment of our wealth can enhance our ability to give generously to those in need. It would be very interesting to know whether the authors believe that economic growth is unambiguously good for the poor because the empirical evidence is overwhelming and affirming: though there has been increasing inequality within individual nations, global inequality is on the decline due to the phenomenon of economic growth.

In the closing eschatology chapter, the authors emphasize Calvin's focus beyond the temporal to the afterlife. We keep better perspective on our worldly existence when we remember that it is a mere prelude to our eternal lives with our creator.

Readers familiar with Calvin's thought, and certainly those who are not, can gain much from this book. Given the book's unabashed free-market tone, at times one wonders whether the authors are seeing Calvin's thought as it really was, or merely finding ways to make Calvin fit their preconceived worldview. In any case, I recommend the book to anyone who is pondering whether caring for people in need is best left to the state or should be administered on a more personal level. Here there is no doubt: Calvin's writings call for

one to give personally and selflessly. Calvin himself left money in his will not only for his family but also for a boys' school and for poor strangers. Charitable giving comes with good cheer—something that simply cannot be accomplished through an impersonal system of taxes and expenditures.

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Autonomy and Food Biotechnology in Theological Ethics

Cathriona Russell

New York, United States: Peter Lang, 2009 (290 pages)

Too often, environmental theologies gravitate to abstract concepts (e.g., global warming, environmental degradation) and in doing so tend to unfairly portray perspectives different from their own. Thankfully, Russell avoids that error by grounding environmental ethics in the practical question facing Ireland's policymakers, namely, should genetically modified (GM) crops be allowed to be grown? Her scientific training certainly enables her to navigate the confounding and highly technical issues involved in this issue. Her review of this complex topic is masterfully done. Her explanations of the economic and scientific issues (chapter 1) are comprehendible and fair to all sides of the debate but also commendable for their brevity. Those looking for a quick review of the difficulties facing policymakers regarding GM crops should consider reading this chapter. More importantly, as stated above, Russell's decision to engage the GM crops debate grounds readers in practical issues, while they struggle with the important and abstract aspects of environmental ethics that follow.

In chapter 2, Russell considers four ethical frameworks used by Christians to navigate complex moral questions. She begins with divine-command morality, noting that it downplays the role of human reason and freedom in favor of God's instructions as revealed in Scripture. Russell observes that Scripture plays a dual role with divine-command morality. On the one hand, Scripture provides Christians with a recognized source of authority to help adjudicate disputes. On the other hand, the benefits Christians gain from Scripture are dispersed because of disagreements over interpretation. The second ethical framework is called Christian communitarian or ecclesial ethics. Christian communitarianism deemphasizes individualistic and deontological ethics, in favor of virtue-based ethics. While commending communitarian ethics for its helpful corrective to individualistic ethical systems, Russell concludes that communitarian ethics still needs to properly account for secular reason as well as the dignity of the individual. She then turns to consider natural-law ethics and its revisions. Russell gives natural-law ethics high marks for its appeal to reason, recognition of objective morality and the common good, and respect for the givenness of the human situation. Although Russell finds much value in the natural-law perspective, she believes that an autonomy framework provides a better alternative.