# *THE CONSTRUCTIVE REVOLUTIONARY* REVISITED

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*The Constructive Revolutionary* was published in 1971 and since then has gone through two extra printings by John Knox Press and one by Michigan State University Press (1987). It has never been revised, but if it is, much of the revision will begin with the notions that my present assignment has given me, or that you suggest to me today. It is not hard labor for an author to revisit his work; I think most writers like to re-read what has cost them so much. But it has made me aware of all the work that has been done in the last two decades on Calvin and on Geneva in the sixteenth century, and aware of some of the directions that revision would have to take.

The book was deliberately intended to take the place of Georgia Harkness's book on Calvin as the typical book that would be assigned students in a college or seminary class, where the emphasis would be biographical rather than theological, and—like Harkness's work—where interest in economics and the Weber Thesis concerning Calvin and Capitalism were studied. I don't know whether it did supplant her book or not, but it has been bought by 5822 satisfied customers and has earned its author $3,468.21 in royalties, which includes $150 of the $300 I was supposed to receive for allowing it to be translated and published in Korean. I have no idea how it has been greeted by readers there. I received a check for $150 through John Knox Press, and later found in my mail two copies of a book that I presume translates my work into that language. But there was no address for me to inquire about its reception, or about the rest of my money!

Its most obvious lack is an index. I, of course, assumed it would have one and had begun to work on one from the galley proofs, when I was informed by an anxious editor that no index was mentioned in the contract. Thus a scholarly book lacks a major characteristic of a scholarly book—a way to dig into it without reading the whole tome. If it is ever revised, the index will be there.

Its next most egregious error lies in the never-before-mentioned fact that I referred to the psychologist Erich Fromm as "the late Erich Fromm" in 1971. My report of his demise was mistaken, but prophetic, for he died in 1980. I have had this nightmare where scholars several hundred years in the future are arguing about the first edition of this pivotal work, and one triumphantly proves that the book cannot have been published in 1971, as the one extant copy lists its own publication, because this one piece of internal evidence clearly demonstrates that it could not have been written before 1980. All kinds of theories of who-influenced-whom are torpedoed by this revelation, and I am accused (post-mortem, of course) of having plagiarized William Innes's book and not giving him even the credit of a footnote, let alone a bibliographical reference.

I am going to list only three real concerns with the work, concerns that would give me a good deal of pain were it to be revised. These are in order, from the easiest to the hardest, and also from the most likely revisions to the least likely. The first has probably occurred to a number of people here, certainly to Elsie McKee and Jeanine Olson. These two, together with their unofficial mentor, Robert Kingdon, have all done yeoperson work on the concept of the diaconate and on the diaconate itself in Geneva. (I call Kingdon "unofficial mentor," not to minimize the guidance of Edward Dowey, Elsie's major professor, or Lewis Spitz, Jeanine's, but simply to call attention to the person who has done the most for Calvin and Geneva studies in the sixteenth century.) To see that my book gives less than two pages to the problems set before Geneva by its flood of refugees is to see what Olson's work on the *Bourse française* has accomplished. And to note that there is not even a discussion of Calvin's understanding of the office of deacon in my book is to indicate what McKee has done with her study. I mention the diaconate in passing, as an office where church and state combine their efforts on welfare among the citizenry. I translate the part of the Church Ordinances that Calvin wrote to guide their work, and then launch into a discussion of where the revenues came from, how the hospital was organized, two pages on the refugees, and then go off to other topics.

Having said this, I think it would be relatively easy to incorporate their work into mine. Just as Andre Biéler mined Calvin's writings to produce an outline of Calvin's social and economic thought, which I used with great benefit in my work, so the Kingdon, McKee, Olson studies do not challenge my study, but are complementary and supplementary to it. I will say, in passing, that if people in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches were to take seriously the work these folks have done and the light shed on Geneva's helping its needy, it might position the diaconate in a more officially important role in our churches. I am at least partially convinced that one of the serious problems in my Presbyterian denomination is related to ignorance on the part of the church's upper-level hired personnel of just how much socially significant work is done by local churches, usually through the Board of Deacons. This ignorance they translate into an anxious over-concern that the church *sound* relevant through making official pronouncements about every ill under the sun—at least those Jacques Ellul denotes as "popular" causes. A greater acquaintance with the *present* high level of diaconal, direct action for human needs *could* lessen the anxiety of board secretaries that the church is irrelevant to society's needs because they have never taken the diaconate seriously and thus know little of what goes on wherever local churches minister to community needs. I also think that boards of deacons in local churches might more effectively think through their work if they knew their roots, recognized their importance vis-à-vis the elders, and regarded themselves as integral and essential aspects of Reformed ecclesiology.

The second area of concern relates to my use of Biéler's *La pensée économique et social de Calvin*, particularly in the three early chapters where he guides me and I guide the reader through a discussion of Calvin's writings on the church's concern for social issues such as wealth and poverty, wages, usury, and the like. His book is a massive study, running something over six hundred large pages. I remember Alain Dufour complaining about the relative size of Biéler's large book on Calvin's social and economic thought and William Monter's little book on sixteenth-century Geneva: "big books on little subjects and little books on big subjects" was his terse summary.

I would like to re-do all of that and to do it in two ways. First, I now know much more about what can conveniently be called biblical economics than I did when I was doing my book. What I should do is to dig deeply into those passages where the Bible most seriously engages economic life. It never occurred to me then that Deuteronomy 15, with its cancellation of debts and freeing of slaves, and Leviticus 25, the Jubilee Year, when property reverted to its ancient owners, were such important keys to an idealized legal code. So I followed Biéler rather blindly wherever he led me (dutifully checking everything in commentaries and sermons), and I wrote out Calvin's interests and directions on a myriad of economic concerns. But I would be a much better informed searcher of Calvin on my own today, just because in depth and in context I know my Bible better.

Secondly, a brief re-look at Biéler does not reveal any hermeneutic for interpreting what Calvin did write in this area. What I mean by this is that surely Calvin had reasons for emphasizing some parts of the biblical message and for skimming or skipping other things. By what criteria did he measure relative value of prophetic pronouncement, or legal items, of Psalmist's song, or Pauline utterance? For example, by what biblical criterion did he argue against using the brief Christian socialism described in Acts 4 as a norm for Christians later?

By bringing this up, I am assuming something that may not be true—namely, that Calvin had an over-arching principle to help organize his thought in these areas. This is a corollary to the question of whether he had such an organizing principle or principles for his more strictly theological writings. If the theologians cannot agree on such a hermeneutical key for his theology, perhaps there is none for his economic thought, either. I think there are several principles, but no self-conscious guide to the social order, and that Biéler and I use them but do not adequately underline their centrality.

The third issue is the one brought to our attention so sharply by William Bouwsma and—had anyone read her slightly earlier work—Suzanne Selinger. Bouwsma argues that some of the irreconcilable tensions in Calvin's pronouncements are rooted in his psyche. How could Calvin speak so glowingly of God's gift of the mother's womb for the nurture of the fetus, but also regard the womb with such horror? Why did his dislike of opposition express itself sometimes as downright hatred? Selinger is less concerned with these oppositions within Calvin than she is for his passion, his boldness of utterance, his power as a public figure when he obviously was not cut out psychologically for the open forum. Both authors have been dismissed as purveyors of psycho-history, a form of scribbling dementia that qualifies them for total exclusion from dialogue with serious scholars. But neither can be dismissed so easily; both are powerfully impressed by Calvin's accomplishments and by using tools most of us historians are suspicious of—mainly those of the literary critic or literary biographer—they arrive at conclusions that make us uneasy.

When I first began to read Selinger in manuscript form—her publisher sent me two revisions of her work to comment upon—I was struck by what I considered the inadequacy of evidence undergirding her analysis. She was intent on using his childhood with its traumas, and placing him on what I considered the procrustean bed of Freudian oedipal analysis and Jungian personality theory. And then I thought of Chapter X of my own work. That chapter comes along after the main work of the book. Calvin's social and economic thought has been set forth, following Biéler. Then I trace the ways in which that influences life in Geneva during his pastorate there, focusing mainly on ways in which Geneva's community appears to have been bettered by the efforts and influence of its chief pastor. But always there are those areas where he appears to have been less than helpful, at least from our perspective, and sometimes even in the eyes of friends like Bucer or Haller. Individual rights were often not protected. The affair of Pierre Aneaux, card maker and critic of Calvin's sermons, is but one of too many illustrations of Calvin's bitterness and self-blinded over-righteousness that made—as Karl Barth put it—Calvin's Geneva such a gloomy affair. And I saw that she and I were after something similar: a clue as to the personality of this reformer, so admirable but with traits that cried out for explanation.

So I scurried around reading all the biographies, only to find that his best biographers tended to smooth over the difficulties—folks like Williston Walker, Doumergue, Wendel. (The same will be true later of Thomas Parker, with Ronald Wallace's recent work more ambivalent.) I actually got my clue from Barth, who argued that Calvin's understanding of the true humanity of Jesus was flawed by what John Leith has called his Antiochene

Christology, which keeps the two natures strictly separated. (I called it, less felicitously, a "leaning toward Nestorianism.") Of course, the alternative that classical theology has left us is the Alexandrian Christology, which tends to allow the human to be swallowed by the divine, which I presume would also have been unhelpful in explicating a theology of true and complete incarnation of the Son of God. The point I was trying to make I sum up with these words:

> What it [that is, his Christology] means in practical terms is that God has only hesitantly entered into the place of sinful men; he is only *somewhat* involved with the human process, with human presumption, pride, anger, stupidity, and ignorance—all of what received such short sympathy in Calvin's Geneva. . . . Calvin was thus able to force into his theology a non-human rigor which is absent in the Garden of Gethsemane or at the Cross. Because Calvin saw God as withdrawn from man at man's worst moments, Calvin could also be withdrawn. . . . (182).

Now, there may well be a relationship between Calvin's Antiochene Christology and his harshness toward some sinners in Geneva, just as there may be a connection between the fact that when Calvin was six his father, recently widowed, remarried—between that betrayal and Calvin's personality type—which Selinger denotes as "introverted thinker," using Jungian language—and a connection between that personality type and his tendency to divide the world into trustworthy and hostile elements, leaving insufficient room for gradations in between. The point is that I was not convinced by Selinger's argument that is based on a presumed etiology of his personality. So why should I be convinced by my own argument, that there was a causal connection between Christology and too much rigor in putting down wickedness in Geneva?

Now, what is new in all of this is that writers have tried to go behind the superficial remarks of past commentators—remarks like "he had a passion for order," or "he was still much a medieval man"—and have tried to explore deeper causes for his harshness, which (as his friend Haller said) was so severe that had he been St. Paul, he would have excommunicated everyone in the church of Corinth. Mine was, I now think, a clumsy attempt at this. Selinger may be right, but psychoanalysis across the centuries is so fraught with problems, especially when the client is so reluctant to tell the therapist about his childhood, that she must intuit his feelings from a bare description of the circumstances in which he was raised. Or, as someone said about Erik Erikson's exposure of Luther's terrible anger against his father and Erikson's use of that as explanation of Luther's hatred for the pope: "But every German boy had a father like Hans Luther, and most German men were constipated too, so why was there only one Martin Luther?"

The point I am making—I think!—about my book and how I would work at rewriting Chapter X—is that if my analysis of why Calvin fails (at least in our eyes) is weak, I at least make more of an attempt than Doumergue, Wendel, or Parker. And Selinger goes far beyond me, although she may be off-target. Before I look at the deepest investigation of Calvin's psyche—that of William Bouwsma—let's look briefly at a less psychological analysis, that of Harro Höpfl. A re-write would at least need to pay attention to his study of Calvin as political actor and political thinker.

I will only give his work a paragraph, although it is worth much more. Höpfl believes that Calvin was better at the practice of politics than he was as a theorist. One of the nice things about his work is that he follows Calvin's thought as it gets published and correlates that with the experiences Calvin goes through. The key word to describe Calvin's understanding of the role of church and state in building up the christian community is the Latin *aedificatio*, "upbuilding," that combination of zeal and piety which is the key to a godly state or a godly person. Höpfl has many positive things to say about how Calvin envisions the ordering of the church, which he codified in Geneva's Ecclesiastical Ordinances; and how magistrate and minister should work together for the *aedificatio* of the community and the bridling of the unbeliever. But where Calvin fails is where he can see no recourse for the beleaguered believer in an ungodly and oppressive state under a persecuting ruler, except to pray and obey. His theory, says Höpfl, and I agree, goes no further than his own experience in Geneva and does not imaginatively connect with the suffering of Protestants in France. Even the massacre at Vassy in 1562 did not cause him to alter his teaching about the duty of Huguenots to obey a Catholic ruler. It is far from surprising that less than a generation after Calvin's death the Huguenots in France had not only published an argument for assassinating tyrants, but had even made some strides toward doing just that!

But Höpfl's explanation for Calvin's lack of empathy for suffering believers is not much better than my christological explanation for Calvin's lack of empathy for suffering unbelievers and sinners in Geneva. I have covered this in another paper, so shall simply repeat it here. He writes: Calvin counseled obedience because, "anabaptists and apostates are a much graver menace than papists, and divisions amongst the custodians of purity of doctrine are graver than either." Now, Höpfl admits, that is not a very creative aspect of Calvin's thought, for it puts an ungodly ruler, a Henry II or Charles X, in the role of custodian of the true church—i.e., the Protestant—which they abhor and which they persecute. It is as though Calvin had no way of overcoming a hatred for disorder except for a cure worse than the illness—at least from a modern point of view, and surely a point of view taken by contemporary Huguenots as well.

The point of what must have seemed a digression on weaknesses in Calvin's political theory is to underline one point: When Calvin is wrong, it is always on the side of order, and he does not appear to have empathy for people to help him overcome his attachment to order at all costs. An additional point is to say that Höpfl, despite his masterful analysis of Calvin's changing teaching and practice in the area of church and state polity, doesn't get us very far into Calvin's psyche. Perhaps it is a hopeless search.

The one contemporary writer who does not think it is hopeless is Bouwsma. I shall not give a précis of his whole thesis, but what he is doing is trying to catch the "personal flavor" of Calvin and to see through him something of that "tense, driven, fundamentally incoherent" century "riven by insoluble conflicts that were all the more serious because they were as much within as between individuals and parties" (4). I'll forbear describing Bouwsma's Calvin poised between medieval philosophy and humanism, between the labyrinth of suffocation from past traditions and the abyss of teetering on the edge of a new normless world, and turn only to Chapter 4, where Bouwsma discusses ways in which Calvin's inheritance from medieval tradition and its philosophy carried an overconfidence in reason: confidence that the human mind is capable of knowing what exists as it really is. This idea is absolutist and authoritarian, so that differences of opinion can only be interpreted as deficiency of mind or as perversity. A good example of the excesses Calvin gets into, based upon this assumption, is the awful length he goes to to vilify the Lutheran Westphal, using language that still makes the reader recoil, almost all of it directed against the mental and moral state of his opponent on sacramental theology. Six hundred times, Westphal wrote, Calvin had called him "Thou fool!" thus ignoring Christ's dire warnings about what happens to people who call their brothers fools. (I found this citation in Wallace, 286). Bouwsma comments about the primacy of the intellect in that philosophy and in Calvin, that it led Calvin to want truth to be free of all ambiguity, and "is suggested by the harshness with which he treated those who disagreed with him: Dissent made him anxious and impatient, and in this condition he was inclined to identify his own views with God's" (101). This concern for certainty, says Bouwsma, sometimes suggests that the Lord speaks less to announce the Good News than to relieve doubt (101). And, of course, it was just this philosophy whose power was waning in the century of Calvin. Indeed, Calvin himself was more at home with his rival, rhetoric, more in love with humanism than ever with formal theology. So part of the opposition to his medieval inheritance is found within, which only makes his intention of maintaining the truth more vehement, his desire to maintain boundaries and keep order more insistent.

Now, there are objections one can make with the Berkeley historian's work on Calvin. I wish, for example, that he had tied the changing thought of Calvin to his biography, as Höpfl did with his ecclesiastical and political thought. I wish also that he had tried to find some other polarities besides labyrinth and abyss. Francis Higman has suggested the metaphors of Lighted Path versus various figures about wandering off the road, lost and in darkness, are just as expressive in Calvin's writing. It might be that choosing other metaphors Calvin uses would change the analysis.

Now, in one way we haven't gotten anywhere. If Calvin's over-dependence upon medieval philosophy is responsible for bitterness in speech, his almost helpless temper tantrums when crossed, and (my extension) into over-legislation, harshness of punishment for offenders against Genevan laws, an inquisitorial tinge to his desire for "upbuilding" the Christian community, then frankly we are precisely where older, more superficial analyses placed the blame: on his medieval legacy.

Let me finish with two observations: First, as I have suggested elsewhere, the whole problem may be more of a result of his having to live with the great bodily pain that Dr. Charles L. Cooke described two years ago at this conference, and illustrated so graphically with slides. I shall not soon forget the uric acid splinters that eat into the bone, muscle, and nerves of the sufferer with gout!

The other observation is that I began my analysis in Chapter X of the book by finding a causal connection between Calvin's Christology and the negative side of his personality, arguing that our Lord's divine nature was withdrawn from human beings in our worst moments, so Calvin could also be withdrawn, unsympathetic to erring and sinning human beings living "in the stink of filthy flesh." But might it not be more accurate to go the other way? Perhaps Calvin's personal biography made it difficult for him to empathize with sinners, and he then projected that absence of empathy upon God. Although neither Selinger nor Bouwsma quite puts it that way, it is an extrapolation from psychological projection-theory that both of them are attracted to, Selinger using it rather wildly and Bouwsma hinting at its possible aid in explaining Calvin. It is in a similar context that Selinger observes that "the introvert's God will be foremost a tyrant" (89).

So, in conclusion, what shall I do with Chapter X if I ever get the chance to revise my book? I might simply delete it. But my book so praises the Genevan Reformer that simple justice requires some evaluation of the negative. Perhaps it would amount to no more than I have done here, the perusal of the literature, followed by the admission that it is impossible, really, to analyze a figure who will not submit to our questions. Besides, as Erikson's errant study of Luther shows, you do not explain a man; you can only explain a type. And like Luther, Calvin was a man in the grip of God, and that goes beyond explanation.

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