

HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN JUSTICE

THINKING WITH CALVIN ABOUT THE *IMAGO DEI*

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Summary

This article explores Calvin's theological treatment of the Biblical doctrine of humankind's creation in and restoration to 'the image of God', and draws out the critical implications of his treatment for the contemporary elaboration of an 'inherent human dignity' in terms of 'human (subjective) rights' as the moral foundation of a public justice of secular, egalitarian rights. The argument is that Calvin locates the created and restored 'image' in active Trinitarian and Christological relations of divine and human knowing and loving, and not in any immanent or self-standing human structure, quality, or capacity, and in so doing renders theologically problematic an elaboration of 'inherent human dignity' in terms of subjective rights. Moreover, his account of public justice, being rooted in, ordered to, and limited by these divine-human relationships, is incompatible with a secular rights polity.

1. Introduction

Over the last sixty-five years, the term 'human dignity' has proved to be one of the most slippery, as well as pervasive, terms of a global political discourse that has been decisively shaped by the international documents on human rights emanating from the United Nations.¹ The slipperiness of the term, I have argued elsewhere,² has arisen in part

¹ The primary documents are the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, and the subsequent International Covenants of 1966 on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights.

² 'Human Dignity and Human Justice in Theological Perspective' in *The Grandeur of Reason: Religion, Tradition and Universalism*, ed. Conor Cunningham and Peter Chandler (London: SCM, 2010): 144-68. I am summarising this argument below.

from the failure of the primary UN documents to give a determinate conceptual content to ‘inherent human dignity’ independent of the universal human possession of ‘equal and inalienable rights’,³ thereby facilitating (intentionally or inadvertently) the global influence of a western liberal tradition of conceiving the dignity of human persons in terms of their possession of ‘equal and inalienable rights’. The still dominant liberal contractarian tradition of natural rights locates the inherent dignity of the individual in his moral freedom understood as the agent’s ownership and rational government of his own acts, as well as of his spiritual and physical resources. Thus understood, the individual’s moral freedom is the original right of self-disposal through rational choice upon which all other rights depend.

Unsurprisingly, theologians across denominational boundaries have responded to this conceptual vagueness of the UN documents by explicating human dignity in terms of the Biblical doctrine of the *imago Dei*: the doctrine that mankind was originally created in the image of God, and that fallen humanity, corrupted by sin, has been, is being, and will be restored to God’s image in Jesus Christ.⁴ The common appeal of their expositions to relations of humankind and of individual persons to the triune God, as objects of his action, has, however, left considerable scope for disagreement over the implications of these relations for two issues.

The first issue concerns the assessment of non-theological conceptions of human dignity as ‘inherent’ in human beings. The issue is whether the theologian, while regarding divine-human relations as constitutive of the *imago Dei* and of human dignity in its fullest meaning, can also endorse a conception of the *imago Dei* and of human dignity in terms of an immanent or self-standing human structure, quality or capacity, such as self-consciousness, reason, practical freedom, or social relatedness. Are the two accounts to be viewed as complementary or as alternatives?

The second and closely related issue concerns the assessment of the conceptuality of subjective rights as a language of natural and political

³ It is well known that the framers of the 1948 Declaration deliberately left the term ‘inherent dignity’ under-determined in order to obtain universal subscription to it, there being no conceptual clarification which would satisfy all the framers and signatories of the document, not to speak of its subsequent readers.

⁴ See my more detailed elaboration of denominational nuances, with bibliographical documentation, in ‘Historical Prolegomena to a Theological Review of “Human Rights”’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 9:2 (1996): 53-54.

justice. As referring to natural moral powers (as distinct from positive legal powers) to have or to do something, attributable to individual or to collective human subjects, and defensible against all other subjects,⁵ rights are immanent, self-standing human structures, qualities, or capacities, and as such, raise the issue of their compatibility with a theological understanding of human dignity in terms of God's active and ongoing relations with humankind and with persons. Should a language of natural and political justice that deflects attention away from the divine-human relationship be endorsed in addition to, or in lieu of, a language which focuses attention on that relationship?

In bringing Calvin's thought to bear on these anthropological and political issues, I am not about to address, even parenthetically, the range of pertinent scholarly disagreements over the interpretation of his writings. Nevertheless, I hope to convey something of the complexities, tensions, and ambiguities which lie behind these disagreements, and to offer sufficient justification for my own interpretative judgements.⁶

2. The *Imago Dei* and Human Dignity

Let me observe initially that Calvin follows the long theological tradition of taking the biblically-based doctrine of the *imago Dei* as the theological locus for understanding 'human dignity', so far as that term encompasses the peculiar determination, worth, ontological and moral status of human beings, generically and individually, distinguishing them from inferior beings.⁷

The authority of the written word of God itself requires that any theological account of the *imago Dei* coherently relate two sets of core texts within the totality of the Biblical canon. The first set, from the early chapters of Genesis, concerns God's creation of mankind:⁸

⁵ I would argue that to conceive the natural needs of a human subject as rights is to conceive them as natural moral powers of the subject.

⁶ My engagement with Calvin on the *imago Dei* is controlled by two judgements. The first is that his most compelling contribution to the subject lies in the pervasive and shaping themes of his thought rather than in the occasional, isolated, unexpected or disturbing details of particular arguments. The second is that the Biblical commentaries should be given their due weight along with the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*.

⁷ Calvin identifies or aligns human dignity with the *imago Dei* in a number of places, either explicitly or implicitly: e.g. *Institutes* 2.1.3; *Comm. Gen.* 1.26.

⁸ All biblical quotations are from the RSV.

And God said, 'Let us make man in our image (*tselem*), after our likeness (*demuth*); and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'. So God created man in his own image (*tselem*), in the image (*tselem*) of God he created him; male and female he created them' (Gen. 1:26-27). 'When God created man, he made him in the likeness (*demuth*) of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them ...' (Gen. 5:1-2).

Here, the *imago Dei* pertains to humankind as the object of God's intention in his act of creation.

The second set of texts, from the Pauline epistles, Hebrews and the Fourth Gospel, concerns the renewal of the human *imago Dei* in Jesus Christ, and is overtly Christological, soteriological and eschatological. Moreover, the texts present Jesus Christ as the eternal image of God, the eternal Son of the Father, in whom are unified the distinct moments of the Father's imaging of his glory. In the crucial passage of Colossians (1:15-20) Paul teaches that Jesus Christ

is the image (*eikôn*) of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things were created through and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross'. (Compare 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1-2.)

Moreover, Paul teaches elsewhere, it is because God's only Son was 'born in the likeness (*homoiômati*) of men (Phil. 2:7)' that those whom God has elected are 'predestined to be conformed to the image (*eikonas*) of his Son' (Rom. 8:29); so that 'just as we have borne the image (*eikona*) of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image (*eikona*) of the man of heaven' (1 Cor. 15:49).

Here we must, parenthetically, take note of the long theological tradition, indebted primarily to Augustine in the West, of distinguishing between the 'image' and 'likeness' of God, aligning 'image' with created humanity or human nature and 'likeness' with redeemed and sanctified humanity or with the work of grace. The Biblical basis for this distinction is the presence of the two terms, *tselem* and *demuth*, in the Genesis passages, and of the terms, *eikôn* and *homoiôma* in the Pauline corpus. However, Calvin following contemporary Biblical scholarship, rejected this theological alignment,

and modern Biblical scholarship has, likewise, rejected it as unsupported by the texts.

For Calvin, the theological task of relating the human image of God in creation to its renewal in Jesus Christ is governed by two principles suggested by the texts themselves. The first is the ontological and epistemological primacy of the Christological image. The important Colossians passage presents Jesus Christ as the 'first-born' of creation, its unifying, form-giving Word, as well as the 'first-born from the dead', the resurrected perfection of humanity. This means that the human *imago Dei* is one, in its original and in its renewal; so that humanity is never grasped or articulated apart from Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, resurrected and ascended. The second principle is the dynamism of the image as an internally differentiated expression of God's self-revealing. While the 'image' of created humanity is Christologically determined, its determination is not yet that of humanity wholly renovated by the eternal Word of the Father spoken in Jesus Christ, which latter determination is eschatologically imaged or anticipated in the community of Christ's faithful people. For Calvin, there is a dialectical relationship of primacy between the beginning and the end of the history of creation: the end, which is inaugurated by the Father's eternal Word taking on human flesh, comprehends and determines the beginning, as its telos; while the beginning, as original order, is presupposed by its final completion and by its historical dynamic.

This dialectical primacy of beginning and end is observable in Calvin's far-flung treatment of the *imago Dei* in his *Institutes* of 1559.⁹ On the one hand, Calvin follows the sequence of the Biblical testimony to God's Trinitarian acts of self-imaging, from his creation of the world and preservation of it under the wages of human sin, to his redemption and renovation of it. My engagement with Calvin's thought will also follow this Biblical sequence. On the other hand, Calvin's key presentation of the *imago* of *created* humanity in bk. 1, ch. 15 of the *Institutes*, echoing his 1554 commentary on *Genesis* 1:26-27, moves from St Paul's accounts of humankind's eschatological transformation into the image of Jesus Christ to the original bearing of God's image by created humanity, on the principle that the renovated image manifests

⁹ All subsequent references, with one amendment, are to the translation of the 1559 edition by Henry Beveridge: *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2 vols.; London: James Clarke, 1962).

the created image. In both places, Calvin stresses the ontological and epistemological necessity of this direction, owing to the ‘destruction’ or extreme ‘deformation’ of the original image by humankind’s fall into sin. Calvin’s professed method will guide our interpretation of his treatment of the created *imago*, with its attendant ambiguities.

3. Humankind Created in the Image of God

When Calvin inquires into ‘what particulars’ are ‘comprehended in Paul’s portrayal of the renovated *imago Dei* in humanity, he discovers that they are, ‘in the first place, knowledge; and in the second, true righteousness and holiness.’¹⁰ Thus, he infers that these are the salient features of the created image. Calvin curtly dismisses alternative interpretations in the theological tradition that locate the image externally in ‘the dominion bestowed upon man’ over the lower, non-human creation, or internally, in the triadic structure of the human soul’s faculties of ‘intellect, will and memory’ (à la Augustine); and, we may note, he never considers locating the image in the conjugal society of Adam and Eve, as some modern commentators have done.¹¹ Rather, he locates it in the perfections of the individual soul (and derivatively of the body) and in the divine-human relations which these entail. Hence, its well-known definition in the *Institutes* 1:15:3: ‘by this term is denoted the integrity with which Adam was endued when his intellect was clear, his affections subordinated to reason, all his senses duly regulated, and when he truly ascribed all his excellence to the admirable gifts of his Maker’. Let us look more closely at the elements of this definition.

The *imago Dei* is the integrity of the human soul or the right ordering of its powers, the leading power being the intellect. Adam’s intellect ‘was clear’ when it contemplated the infinite perfections of God in and through the finite perfections of creatures in the totality of their ordered relationships. That is, Adam’s ‘clear’ intellect pursued

¹⁰ *Institutes* 1.15.4; I: 164-65; cf. *Comm. Gen.* 1.26: *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* (abbreviated *CO*), ed. W. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss (Brunswick: C.A. Schwetschke and Son, 1863-1900): vol. 23: 26d; tr. J. King (from earlier Latin and French editions, Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847): 95-96.

¹¹ Calvin merely admits an analogy between the generation of Eve from Adam’s surrendered rib and the generation of the church from Christ’s ‘weakness’ (i.e., from his surrendered life).

and attained knowledge (intuitive and reflexive) of the being, nature, action and goodness of finite creatures in their ongoing and absolute dependence on their Maker, so grasping God's general and particular government of his living universe.

Especially Adam's clear intellect reflected on itself and the other 'spiritual' endowments of human nature, on the spiritual end of eternal life for which they were given, on humankind's exalted lordship over the non-human creation which they justified, and on the evident arrangement of the whole creation for their satisfaction.¹² These offered the brightest imagings and surest knowledge of God's perfections: of his eternity and aseity, of his power, wisdom and truth, of his bountiful goodness and loving-kindness.¹³ But beyond the divine revelation through these images, Adam's clear intellect also intuited God's transcendent hiddenness, his invisible being, what Calvin calls God's 'naked majesty', which limits creaturely knowledge of God to what he has chosen to reveal.¹⁴

Moreover, Adam's knowledge of God was a knowing of the 'heart' in which his affections were properly ordered. It was a longing, reverent, adoring, grateful and trusting response to God's self-communication. Above all, it was an obedient knowing which recognised the authority of God's righteous and holy will to command, and issued in humble reception of his general and particular judgements and willing conformity to them in action. Finally, Adam's worshipful knowledge found practical completion in acts of outward worship:¹⁵ in calling upon his Maker, extolling his perfections, in-

¹² *Comm. Gen.* 1.26. Calvin points out that Moses witnessed to humankind's exceptional dignity or excellence by recording, firstly, the distribution of God's work of creation over six days, building up to its climax in the creation of Adam, and, secondly, God's consultation with himself in approaching this most wonderful of works, as contrasted with the 'bare word' of command by which he accomplished his previous works of creation. King: 91-92; *CO* 23: 25a-b.

¹³ I am indebted to Randall C. Zachman's study, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame, IN: University Press, 2007) for demonstrating the controlling role that the related concepts of 'image' and 'mirror' play in Calvin's theology, and so tracing in impressive detail a key Platonic and Augustinian trajectory in his thought.

¹⁴ Hence, Calvin advises that 'in seeking God, the most direct path and fittest method is not to attempt with presumptuous curiosity to pry into his essence, which is rather to be adored than minutely discussed, but to contemplate him in his works, by which he draws near, becomes familiar, and in a manner communicates himself'. *Institutes* 1.5.9; I: 57; *CO* 2: 47d; *Comm. Gen.* 28:12; *CO* 23: 391-92a.

¹⁵ *Comm. Gen.* 2:3 *And God blessed the seventh day*. 'Wherefore', says Calvin, 'that benediction is nothing else than a solemn consecration, by which God claims for

voking his paternal aid, professing trust in and submission to him, and rendering thanksgiving for his abundant benefits and mercies.¹⁶

Calvin conceives the acts of knowledge and obedience in which the created *imago Dei* consists as productions of God's presence to and in the human soul, and not as productions of a self-sufficient human reason and will. They involve the activity of God's eternal Word and Spirit not only in imparting objective intelligibility and life to all finite creatures, but also in illuminating the knowing mind and bringing its spiritual acts to fruition.¹⁷ As importantly, they presuppose God's direct address to his human creature in a word of law and promise, offering the gift of eternal life to those who keep his commandments; and they entail the spiritual response of faith: i.e., of sure and unwavering trust in the truth of God's promises, which is the 'beginning of wisdom', the 'higher knowledge'.¹⁸

Finally, Adam's obedient and faithful knowledge of God carried with it an existential and decisive knowledge of himself, as having his being entirely at God's gracious pleasure and out of his immeasurable abundance; as possessing nothing of or from himself, but enjoying his life and every other good only as deposited in God's word; and as

himself the meditations and employments of men on the seventh day'. King: 105; *CO* 23: 33a.

¹⁶ Calvin takes inward and outward worship as a paradigm for the totality of our conformity to God's will or obedience to his law. 'The duties which we owe to God are innumerable, but they seem to admit of being not improperly reduced to four heads: Adoration, with its accessory [accompanying] spiritual submission of the conscience, Trust, Invocation, Thanksgiving'. *Institutes* 2.8.16; I: 328; *CO* 2: 277.

¹⁷ *Comm.* John 1:4 (1553); *Opera Exegetica Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, ed. Helmut Feld (Genève: Library Droz, 1992–), vol. 11/1: 18, lines 20–23; tr. T.H.L. Parker, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959, 1961) 1: 11: *The life was the light of men*: '... since God effectually illuminates their minds with His light, it follows that they were created to the end they might know that He is the author of such a unique blessing. And since this light streamed forth to us from the Word its source, it should be as a mirror in which we may see clearly the divine power of the Word'. (Cf. *Institutes* 2.2.12) If Calvin is not to be construed as starkly contradicting this in his *Comm.* 1 Cor. 1:21—'The right order of things was surely this, that man, contemplating the wisdom of God in his works, by the light of the understanding furnished him by nature, might arrive at an acquaintance with him'—we must assume that he is not excluding illumination from the transcendent Word. *CO* 49: 326a; tr. J. Pringle, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848) I: 84.

¹⁸ If these acts also entail Adam's personal relationship to Christ as well as to the Father, Calvin leaves this relationship in the shadows. He confines himself to suggesting that, in like manner as the unfallen angels enjoyed Christ for their head, so could he 'by his divine energy preside over men, and by the secret virtue of his Spirit quicken and cherish them as his body, until they were gathered into heaven to enjoy the same life with the angels'. 2.12.7; I: 407.

retaining these blessings only by acknowledging their source in the undeserved generosity of God's Son.¹⁹

From all the preceding, we may conclude that Calvin unambiguously conceives the *imago Dei* of created humanity in terms of *actions* which are both expressive and constitutive of the embodied soul's 'integrity' or 'rectitude', and the divine-human communications entailed by them. This implies, conversely, that he does not countenance the identification of original human dignity with psychological structures, faculties, or purely formal powers, or with individual and collective endowments that are extrinsic or accidental to the soul's rectitude, such as the liberal arts, or manual skills.

Nevertheless, Calvin introduces a margin of ambiguity by occasional remarks suggestive of such identifications, as e.g., when he observes in bk 1, ch. 15 of the *Institutes*, that: 'the many noble faculties [gifts (*dona*)] with which the human mind is endued proclaim that something divine is engraven on it....'²⁰ There is undoubtedly latitude in Calvin's reflections surrounding the Adamic *imago Dei*, owing partly to the diversity of their contexts and partly to the elasticity of his concept of creaturely imaging of the Creator. Nevertheless, the resulting interpretative tensions should, in my view, be handled, and wherever possible, resolved, in the light of his dominant theological intentions. And the latter now require that we consider Calvin's understanding of the implications of human sin and of Christ's saving work for the reality of the human *imago Dei*. Only then can we hazard some conclusions for the work of human justice.

The Image of God Lost and Restored, Ruined and the Renovated

Aligning himself closely, but not slavishly, with St. Augustine's interpretation of the fall, Calvin conceives the primal sin of our first parents as that of faithlessness, apostasy from the word of God. Their disobedience to God's prohibition (of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) cast contempt not only on God's sovereign, righteous, and holy will, but on the entirety of his revealed perfections: most particularly, on the absolute truth and infinite goodness imaged in his dealings with humankind. Doubting the wisdom and benevolence of God's imposing limits on their creaturely

¹⁹ *Comm. Gen.* 2.9.

²⁰ *Institutes* 1.15.2; I: 161; CO 2: 135c.

knowledge, Adam and Eve aspired to equal him in perfect knowledge, beyond their appointed measure. They therein aspired to exaltation beyond God's promise of eternal life, and to power beyond the bond of dependence that he had established.²¹ Their idolatrous pride redirected the affections of reverence, adoration, trust and longing from God's perfections to an inflated image of their own perfections, thereby rendering them disordered and inordinate. This perversion of their hearts and wills reduced their knowledge of God and of themselves to blind superstitions and destructive fantasies, and their moral freedom to impotence to judge and to act righteously, in accordance with God's law.²²

Calvin's central accounts of the consequences of Adam's fall into sin in his commentary on Genesis 3 and the *Institutes* bk. 2 justify his frequent, pessimistic references to the loss, destruction, obliteration, extinction, and effacement of the *imago Dei*. He unequivocally denies to sinful humanity the substance of Adam's created integrity, refusing to admit the persistence of an ordering spiritual reality transcending the negative, anti-human determination of sin. Deprived of a conscious, reflective ordering to the Father's Word by the power of the Spirit, Adam's nature became, in Calvin's view, an anti-human totality of corruption and depravity²³—a mirror of Satan, of death (Paul's message in Rom. 5:12-14).²⁴

Only God's word in Scripture clearly reveals to sinful humanity the extent and depth of this darkness and distortion by anchoring it in God's own refusal to recognise his image in the body of human sinfulness. Everywhere Scripture reveals the corrupted human image as a mirror of God's total judgement on Adam's faithless rebellion. But for Calvin, the final revelation of the scope of human corruption and of God's unwavering intention for his human creatures was the reconciling work of Jesus Christ on the cross, in which God's judgement against human sin was his vindication of human dignity. It is in God's justifying and renovating word spoken to sinners in the

²¹ *Comm. Gen.* 3:1-7; *Institutes* 2.1.

²² *Institutes* 2.2-3.

²³ *Institutes* 2:1, 2; *Comm. Gen.* 3:6-7; *Comm. Rom.* 1 & 2; 7: 13 f.; *Comm. John* 1:5-6; *Comm. Eph.* 4:17-19.

²⁴ *Institutes* 1.14.18; I: 155; *CO* 2: 130: 'For as believers are recognised to be the sons of God by bearing his image, so the wicked are properly regarded as the children of Satan, from having degenerated into his image.' Cf. *Institutes* 2.1.6; 2.16.3; 3.14.2; *Comm. Matt.* 15:26; *Comm. John* 8:44; 17:3; *Comm. Rom.* 9:22.

person and work of his incarnate Son that the image of God resides; for Jesus Christ was, is and ever will be the unsurpassable and transfiguring manifestation of divine and human perfections.²⁵

In his divine and human history (which is also the history of Israel), Jesus overcame the twofold gulf for sinful humankind: between God's incommunicable and his communicable perfections, and between God's communication and humankind's incapacity to receive and respond.²⁶ As incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ revealed the Father's inaccessible majesty, unapproachable righteousness, unbounded power, and blinding light. But veiling these with his lowly, suffering and weak humanity, he revealed the Father's infinitely condescending care for his human creatures, his infinitely self-emptying and self-abasing love for his wayward children, his familiar nearness and openness to their needs, and determination to overcome all the impediments to communion with them.²⁷

Moreover, bearing the infirmities of corrupt human nature and God's just judgement on human disobedience to the point of ignominious death, Jesus manifested the perfectly faithful and obedient human response to the Father's righteous will, thereby removing the enmity estranging humanity from its provident maker, and breaking its bondage to the futility of sin and death. In raising Jesus from the dead, the Father decisively recognised his image in his human creature. In exalting Jesus to his right hand, he invested the human image with heavenly glory. In setting Jesus over the church, to reign through the spirit of sanctification, the Father opened the way for all the elect in Christ to come into their inheritance of renewed humanity. Thus, the *imago Dei* of sinful humanity resides in the lordship of the crucified, resurrected and ascended Son of God and man, who rules through his promise of new life extended to hopeless sinners.

Christ's saving promises are received by faith alone, which wholly fixes on his merits and confidently knows that all the excellences of renewed humanity are available (and only available) by participation in the lordship of Christ, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Calvin emphasises that our exalted Saviour communicates his perfections to his faithful people only as he communicates himself; as he, says

²⁵ *Institutes* 2.9.1; *Comm. Col.* 2:9; 1:15; *Comm. 2 Cor.* 4:4; *Comm. Heb.* 1:3; *Comm. John* 6:46.

²⁶ *Comm. 1 Peter* 1:20; *Comm. John* 6:46-7; 17:22.

²⁷ *Comm. Hebrews* 4:15, 5:7; *Comm. John* 5:22; 11:41; 17:3.

Calvin, 'by a wondrous communion ... becomes altogether one with us'.²⁸

There can be no doubt that humanity, renewed in Jesus Christ, is, for Calvin, a brighter image of God's glory than the Adamic original, because it mirrors God's very heart—the core of his self-giving love. Incorporated into Christ's body through the Holy Spirit, humanity is a more wholly mutual, more perfectly common participation of human beings in the common mysteries of salvation. Calvin views the community of Christ's body as a continual communication among its members of the benefits of the risen life of its head. Indeed, the apostolic ministries and practices of the visible church are nothing other than Christ's especially appointed instruments and modes of communicating his spiritual promises. These are chiefly, the ministries and practices of preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments within the context of the church's public worship. Where the reconciling Word of God is preached and heard, where sins are confessed and God's forgiveness proclaimed and received, where God is humbly approached in prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition, where novices in faith are baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, where Christ's once and for all sacrifice of himself for sinful humanity is celebrated as he commanded, there the word of the Father communicates himself by the effectual agency of his Spirit; and through his self-communication, he conceives, nourishes, protects, strengthens and purifies the faith and the fruits of faith in God's adopted children.²⁹

For Calvin, the singular importance of corporate worship is established by the priority given to it in the First Table of the Decalogue, and by the revelation throughout Scripture of the dependence of human obedience to the Second Table of the Decalogue

²⁸ Thus united to Christ, 'we are in the heart of God—not by our own dignity', Calvin hastens to add, but 'by his dignifying'. *Institutes* 3.2.25; I: 492; CO 2: 419a.

²⁹ *Institutes* 4.2-11, 21-22; 4.14.1-20. By contrast with the primal worship of our first parents, which, in Calvin's accounts, appears strikingly lacking in a social dimension, the post-resurrection church's spiritual worship manifests the intensely unitive and communicative essence of restored humanity, transformed into Christ's image. Admittedly, Calvin does not say as much as he might about how the church's worship in all its aspects displays the mutual sharing of the faithful in the knowledge, love, and freedom of their crucified and risen Saviour—there is a liturgical deficit in his ecclesiology. Nevertheless, Calvin sets forth the church's corporate worship as the womb and cradle of the individual believer's earthly maturation in the Christian life of faith and repentance, Scriptural understanding, prayer and works of charity.

(concerned with love of neighbour) on obedience to the First (concerned with love of God). 'The first foundation of righteousness' says Calvin, 'undoubtedly is the worship of God. When it is subverted, all the other parts of righteousness, like a building rent asunder, and in ruins, are racked and scattered'. And some lines later: 'Without the fear of God, men do not even observe justice and charity among themselves.'³⁰

Human Dignity and the Work of Human Justice

Turning, then, to the work of public justice or civil government, the dependence of this work on the faith, ministries and practices of the worshipping church is clear from Calvin's location of this topic in his *Institutes*, as a minor appendix to his fourth and final book on the church. In Calvin's treatment of civil government here—his only sustained discussion of the subject—its proper purpose, nature, equipment and limitations are defined in terms of God's gracious provision of an external disciplinary aid to the faithful in their earthly pilgrimage toward the heavenly kingdom. This disciplinary aid is made necessary by the continuing persistence of the 'Old Adam', the corrupted *imago Dei*, in a humanity which Christ has already redeemed by his sacrifice on the Cross. It is made necessary by the persistence of this image of death not only in the souls and bodies of unbelievers, but in those members of Christ's body who are, even now, being transformed into the 'New Adam', the restored and perfected *imago Dei*, by the work of the Holy Spirit in the community of the faithful.³¹

In line with the longer western Biblical tradition of understanding the office and practice of civil rulers, Calvin views them as divinely authorised to represent, simultaneously, God's judgement against violations of his law, and his merciful will to preserve the fragile goods of human society from the onslaught of sinful human passions. The external regulation of human manners by the enacting of laws and handing down of court judgements seeks to protect the blessings of creation and of redemption, spiritual and the material, that God continually pours out on sinful human beings. Thus, civil government is concerned with promulgating and coercively enforcing God's laws contained in both Tables of the Decalogue.

³⁰ *Institutes* 2.8.11; I: 324; CO 2: 273c-d.

³¹ *Institutes* 4.20.2.

Given the theologically and morally problematic character for contemporary liberal, democratic and pluralistic thinking of any coercive public enforcement of religious speech and practice, it is important to grasp the extent to which, in Calvin's thought, the church's practices of proclaiming God's reconciling judgement of sinful humanity in Jesus Christ stand in eschatological tension with the practices of civil jurisdiction, disclosing the latter's deficiencies—or at least, their incompleteness—as an image of divine judgement, while assisting them to fulfil their limited, remedial and non-redemptive mandate.

Despite Calvin's high theological regard for civil magistracy, as divinely instituted and appointed, he recognises that the practices of coercive public judgement, being summoned forth from sinful human community by the restraining commands of God's law on human waywardness, can neither bring about nor ensure the participation of undeserving human beings in the objective goods and rights of creation and redemption freely bestowed by the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, coercive public judgement gives only external recognition to these goods and rights, and seeks to remove only the more damaging external impediments to participation in them. It does this chiefly by defining specific deprivations of good, violations of right, harms and injuries committed against God and the (individual or collective) neighbour and degrees of culpability, and by acting to correct and punish the offences.³²

Precisely because public justice, on Calvin's view, operates principally as an institutional response to human wrongdoing that both anticipates it and reacts to it, legal and judicial practices occupy the sphere of alien command, moral condemnation, and involuntary punishment. Their aim is the achievement of peace as external order, the outward harmonisation of wills, the visible correction of wrongdoing and rectification of injustice, the avoidance and

³² In *Institutes* 4.20 Calvin consistently exhibits the purpose of public law as the prevention of violations of God's prohibitions and prescriptions in both Tables of the Decalogue and of assaults on the common goods and rights of human society. E.g., its object, he says, is 'that no idolatry, no blasphemy against the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offences to religion, break out and be disseminated among the people; that the public quiet be not disturbed, that every man's property be kept secure, that men may carry on innocent commerce with each other, that honesty and modesty be cultivated; in short that a public form of religion may exist among Christians, and humanity among men'. 4.20.3; 2: 652-3; *CO* 2: 1094.

termination of strife. Although they may furnish the context and even the external form of correction, although they may induce fear and shame in the sinner and drive him toward repentance, they cannot of themselves bring about the inward moral regeneration, the inward reconciliation and communion of formerly antagonistic wills, promised to those who, by faith, are incorporated into Christ's earthly body, and have available the benefits of his reconciling work.³³

Thus, civil jurisdiction, on Calvin's account, only fulfils its limited and remedial ends when it stands under the church's proclamation of Christ's gospel. When civil magistrates neglect or repudiate their duty of juridical care for the church's doctrine and polity (which potentially involves punitive and corrective judgements against her actual practices), the result will inevitably be the rule of idolatrous tyranny and the corruption of justice among men. This inevitability springs from the controlling intellectual, affective and volitional tendency of sinful human beings to assert their self-standing, self-possession and self-worth independently of and over-against the triune God, resisting his revealed judgements either by lawless disobedience or by the self-vindicating conformity of 'works righteousness' which tries to establish human merit or desert before God.³⁴ Calvin well understood that civil government, commissioned to represent God's judgements to the sinful community, also acts as a catalyst to human self-aggrandisement, even as it acts to restrain and correct particular sins.

³³ Calvin devotes ch. 11, bk. 4 of the *Institutes* to distinguishing the power and practice of ecclesiastical discipline or 'spiritual jurisdiction' from the power and practice of civil jurisdiction. While emphasizing that 'spiritual jurisdiction' is always a pastoral extension of preaching, having the offender's true repentance and amendment of life as its object, even at its extreme limit of excommunication, he suggests that the primary object of secular jurisdiction—judging and punishing violations of the law—neither aims at nor achieves the offender's moral regeneration. Secular punishment may give 'satisfaction... to the laws, the magistrates, and the external tribunal', but the offender will, as likely as not, 'give no signs of repentance, but will rather fret and murmur' under his sentence. 4.11.3; 2: 442; *CO* 2: 894d.

³⁴ *Institutes* 2.3.1; 2.7.7; 2.8.1; 2.16.3; 3.14.15; *Comm. Gen.* 3:6; *Comm. Rom.* 7:15; 8:20; *Comm. 2 Cor.* 10:4. Again and again, Calvin describes sinful human beings' ongoing rebellion against God as their desire and striving to make the image of God's glory their own possession, not being content to receive continually from God's hands the blessings in which the image consists. 'And assuredly', says Calvin, 'whenever our minds are seized with a longing to possess a somewhat of our own, which may reside in us rather than in God, we may rest assured that the thought is suggested by no other counselor than he who enticed our first parents to aspire to be like gods, knowing good and evil'. *Instit.* 2.11.10; I: 231; *CO* 2: 194a.

Passing over the thorny question of what forms the juridical care of civil rulers for church polity might take today, let me conclude by bringing to bear Calvin's portrayal of the perverted *imago Dei* of sinful humanity on our task of assessing the contemporary political ideology of 'equal and inalienable' human rights rooted in the inherent dignity of persons. To my mind, the contemporary ideology mirrors the perverted human *imago* with dazzling clarity. The universal creed of a unique dignity simply inhering in human persons and morally articulated in their possession of rights projects individual (and derivatively, collective) persons as self-standing, self-possessing subjects, privately owning and enjoying their being and resources, over against other (individual and collective) subjects and over against the Divine Subject.

Preoccupied with securing their independent selves, with guaranteeing those conditions indispensable to the sovereign deployment of their spiritual and physical property, rights-bearing subjects are enfolded in a project of self-vindication which is pre-eminently religious, but also social and political. They are enmeshed in calculative and mistrustful, quasi-juridical relationships with other persons and with the divine other, whom they encounter everywhere as unrelenting demand, as alien and unforgiving measure of their own insufficiency. Self-constructed in God's image, they too are centres of moral and political demand, and of private and public judgement on their neighbour's compliance, seeking to impose their righteous will through the instrumentality of governmental and quasi-governmental agencies, and the popular media, which act together as catalysts of a progressive juridicalising of human community.

Captive to the religious project of justification by works of the law, the activity of public justice scarcely images the ordered love of God in his creation, redemption and sanctification of humankind, becoming, rather, an idolatrous and tyrannous bondage of irrationality and injustice that denies human dignity. Calvin's Trinitarian and Christological account of the *imago Dei* suggests that a faithful response to the creedal formulations on human dignity and human rights in the United Nations documents would be one of re-situating the human work of 'freedom, justice and peace' in relation to the community of ordered love, of reverent knowledge and faithful worship, of hearing and speaking God's word, of obedient self-giving to God and neighbour, constituted by the past, present and future action of the eternal Trinity.