

Work as a vocation

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Calvin's theology values work. Every Christian is called by God to serve in a particular station, and the conscientious performance of the duties of that station constitutes a form of divine service. The notion of vocation, which Luther had already extended to secular occupations, takes on an active colouring in Calvin: work is a means of serving one's neighbour, of providing for one's family and of contributing to the common good.¹

This valuing of work goes hand in hand with a condemnation of idleness. The able-bodied man who refuses to work fails in his vocation and lives at the expense of others. Begging by those capable of working was punished. The Geneva authorities sought to find work for the able-bodied poor and to train children in a trade.

For Calvin, earthly goods are gifts from God, of which men are the stewards. They must use them with sobriety, give account of them and make them serve their family, the poor and the community. Wealth becomes dangerous when it feeds pride, luxury and indifference to others. Trade is a legitimate activity, provided it is carried on honestly. Gain becomes suspect when it results from fraud, exploitation or speculation on the misery of others.²

This conception of wealth as stewardship has had a lasting significance. It sheds light on the way in which the great Geneva families long conceived of the management of their patrimony: a responsibility handed down from generation to generation, which demands prudence, sobriety and concern for succession. It also explains the importance attached to philanthropy. Contemporary wealth management speaks of *stewardship*; the notion has ancient roots.

The valuing of work and sobriety in spending produce an economic effect that Max Weber would place at the heart of his thesis: accumulation. Individuals who work hard, spend little and avoid luxury accumulate

capital that they can reinvest. The next chapter will examine the scope and the limits of this explanation.

1 Notes

1. André Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, Geneva, Georg, 1959 (reissued Labor et Fides, 2008); presentation (monarchomaque.org): every legitimate profession is a divine vocation and work possesses a spiritual dignity, “What pleases God is not voluntary asceticism” but the conscientious performance of ordinary occupations. ↩
2. *La Revue réformée*, no. 244, “La liberté et l’argent : calvinisme et économie”: “it is God himself, God who [...] lends them to us, for a time, placing us in the position of manager or steward”; André Biéler, *La pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, 1959 (material goods oblige the rich to support the poor). ↩

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