

Calvin, Accra, and Empire: The Reformed quest for social justice

ABSTRACT

The Reformed tradition has a reputation for addressing issues of social justice in critical and controversial confessional statements. This article raises the question whether the Reformed tradition in its advocacy for social justice can claim to have John Calvin at its side. By exploring the example of the Accra confession “Covenanting for faith”, issued by the WARC in 2004, and by comparing this text with Calvin’s *Institutes*, it is argued that both with regard to the role of government and vis-à-vis economic justice a line of reasoning can be identified in Calvin’s thought that emphasizes that the sovereign God can only be served by the practice of justice. Examples are given of Calvin’s own stance on issues of social and economic justice.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the central characteristics of the Reformed tradition is its tendency to produce new confessional statements of faith when it assumes the historical situation demands the Church to speak out. The idea behind this propensity is that God’s Word is continuously new, and therefore needs to be heard and proclaimed continuously in new ways, addressing changing and new historical situations. The new confessional statements do not intend to replace previous confessions but to renew the older confessions in the context of a new situation.

The twentieth century has seen an abundance of Reformed confessional statements from various churches and from all parts of the Reformed world. One collection, for example, counts 33 Reformed Confessions and Statements of Faith published between 1941 and 1981 (Vischer 1982). In all their variation these different statements share “at least one concern: how the Christian faith is related to issues of social and economic relevance” (Ernst-Habib 2005: 312). The historical situations that required the Church to speak out were often situations in which issues of social justice were perceived to be threatened by some form of totalitarian claim. The concept of social justice is understood here as the normative call to care for those who are in some way marginalized or oppressed in society (see Ellingsen 1993, esp. 111-118). The Theological Declaration of Barmen (1934), for example, speaks out against German National-Socialism and its pervasive influence in all areas of society including the Church: “We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church’s vocation as well.” (Art. 5) The Confession of Belhar (1986) takes a comparable position when it claims that the gospel message of reconciliation and peace in and through Jesus Christ “is seriously affected and its beneficial work obstructed when it is proclaimed in a land which professes to be Christian, but in which the enforced separation of people on a racial basis promotes and perpetuates alienation, hatred and enmity” (Art. 3).

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Totalitarian claims similar to the ones addressed by Barmen and Belhar have lately received significant theological attention under the heading 'empire', a concept defined as "massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone" (Rieger 2007: 2). The latest addition to the rich Reformed confessional tradition, the Accra Confession 'Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth' of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (2004), refers explicitly to this concept of empire when it describes the threatening forces it wants to respond to: "(...) We see that the current world (dis) order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral economic system defended by empire. In using the term 'empire' we mean the coming together of economic, cultural, political and military power that constitutes a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests." (Art. 12)

It is exciting and inspiring to belong to a tradition that has the audacity to speak out so clearly and unequivocally on important societal issues. By giving these statements a confessional status the Reformed tradition challenges both those within and outside this tradition to engage critically with the issues at stake (cf. Smit 1984a). However, the statements also raise questions. One of those questions is whether the Reformed tradition, in taking these articulated positions, can find an ally in the founding father of this tradition, John Calvin. The claim is repeatedly made, but is it a justified claim? That is the issue to be addressed in this contribution. For the purpose of brevity we will limit ourselves to the Accra Confession and the issue of poverty and inequity. We will first take a look at the concept of empire and the way it is addressed by the Accra Confession. Then we will turn to Calvin's *Institutes* to see whether and how he addresses issues of poverty and inequity. After a brief comparison we will draw some conclusions.

2. THE CONCEPT OF EMPIRE AND THE ACCRA CONFESSION

The history of Christianity is completely intertwined with the history of various empires. The life of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross are shaped by the context of the Roman Empire, as is the theology of the apostle Paul; the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, where central doctrinal decisions were taken that shaped Christian theology, were controlled by Roman emperors; the global spread of Christianity as a result of the great missionary enterprises of the sixteenth to the nineteenth century cannot be comprehended apart from the history of the colonial empires of early colonialism (Spain and Portugal) and later colonialism (especially Great Britain) – in short: Christianity cannot be understood apart from empire.

Yet the context of empire as the backdrop of the development of Christianity has often been taken for granted; its significance for Christianity and theology has hardly been studied. The relation between Christianity and empire, if at all it was considered as a serious topic of research, was seen either as beneficial to the development of Christianity (the standard assumption comes to mind that the infrastructure of the Roman Empire greatly benefited the spread of early Christianity) or as more or less detrimental to Christianity (a position taken by those who consider Christianity since the Constantinian turn to be no more than a mere function of empire).

Only fairly recently has the concept of empire made it to the arena of public discourse. The publication in 2000 of the book *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri caused something of a stir in academic circles, and in the aftermath of the debate initiated by Hardt and Negri the impact of empire on Christianity made it to the agenda of theological reflection. Joerg Rieger, for example, argues for the need to do theology from a perspective of empire because "Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically – these factors are commonly recognized – but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously". (Rieger 2007: 2) The impact of empire on Christianity,

according to Rieger, is a part of the Christian story that can not be ignored.

The interpretation of the concept of empire as it is offered by Hardt and Negri and by Rieger is taken up by the Accra declaration of faith. Later reflection on the concept of empire, initiated by the WARC and ensuing in the Manila Consultation and Declaration (2006), unfortunately resulted in a more limited interpretation of the concept of empire, referring only to the United States of America under the Bush administration (see Koshy 2006 and WARC 2006). The last part of the definition given by Rieger that is quoted above, namely that the forces of empire “cannot be controlled by any one actor alone”, is very significant. The concept of empire refers to more than just American political, cultural, economic and military hegemony: “The United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the centre of an imperialist project”, according to Hardt and Negri (2000: xiii-xiv). The Accra Confession seems to be based on the broader understanding of the concept of empire.

The Accra Confession ‘Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth, issued by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in its 24th General Council in Accra, Ghana (2004), is the result of a *processus confessionis* that started years earlier, at the 1989 WARC General Council in Seoul (Korea). Calls by Seoul and later by the Southern Africa Alliance of Reformed Churches (SAARC) assembled in Kitwe (Zambia) in 1995 were taken up by the WARC General Council of 1997 in Debrecen (Hungary): the council challenged all member churches to engage in “a committed process of recognition, education, and confession regarding economic injustice and ecological destruction” (WARC 2004: 1). This process resulted seven years later in the Accra Confession.

The whole confessional process not only aims at addressing societal and economic wrongs that are perceived to be threatening issues of social justice; the process clearly aims to do so while “speaking from our Reformed tradition” (art. 16). The declarations of Kitwe (1995) and Debrecen (1997), that are part of the road leading to Accra, even explicitly refer to Calvin and claim the father of the Reformed faith for their cause (see WARC 1995 and WARC 1997). The Accra statement furthermore implicitly situates itself within the Reformed confessional heritage by quoting and extending what is arguably the most controversial element of the Belhar Confession: God’s preferential option for the poor (Smit 1984b: 57). Belhar states in art. 4 that God is “in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor and the wronged”. Accra basically claims the same in art. 24: “We believe that God is a God of justice. In a world of corruption, exploitation and greed, God is in a special way the God of the destitute, the poor, the exploited, the wronged and the abused (Ps 146.7-9).” This statement about who God is, is the theological heart of the Accra statement of faith and provides the key to its interpretation (cf. Ernst-Habib 2005: 322).

The Accra document defines the concept of empire as follows: “The convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks for the purpose of amassing political power and economic wealth. Empire typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful.” (WARC 2004: 6) The definition suggests a direct link between the concept of empire and issues of economic justice and injustice. The confessional statement then goes on to approach the injustices created by empire as an issue of faith: “(...) in biblical terms such a system of wealth accumulation at the expense of the poor is seen as unfaithful to God and responsible for preventable human suffering and is called Mammon. Jesus has told us that we cannot serve both God and Mammon (Lk 16.13)” (art. 14). In no uncertain terms the confession rejects the system of injustice created by contemporary empire and condemns those who support or fail to resist this system of injustice (e.g., art. 25), and calls for confession of sin by those who are complicit in this system of injustice, for example by benefiting from it (art. 34).

Two characteristics of the Accra Confession are important to note. First, the Accra document works with a religious interpretation of the concept of economic justice that is biblically and theologically grounded: it relates the call for economic justice to a covenantal theology where God as the sovereign Lord over all creation has included creation in a covenant that is “an economy of grace” (art. 20). Economic injustice is seen as breaking the covenant by excluding parts of creation (for example, the poor or the environment), and conversely justice is defined as participation: the inclusion of the poor and oppressed at the heart of the community of life. This religious understanding of economic justice in the Confession means that according to Accra economic justice is also social justice (cf. Ulshöfer 2007: 311). The word ‘social’ in this concept of social justice not only refers to society as opposed to individual, but explicitly includes the care for the marginalized in society. In this normative sense the call for economic justice transcends the limits of the economic realm.

Second, the concept of empire utilized in the Accra Confession is very closely linked to neoliberalism as the political-economic philosophy that dominates the current capitalist economies, a philosophy that “de-emphasizes or rejects government or other intervention in the economy; it would allow the market to operate without restraints or protections” (WARC 2004: 6). The fact that economic relations are becoming more and more autonomous from political, societal and cultural controls can be evaluated in various ways: “Some celebrate this new era as the liberation of the capitalist economy from the restrictions and distortions that political forces have imposed on it; others lament it as the closing of the institutional channels through which workers and citizens can influence or contest the cold logic of capitalist profit.” (Hardt and Negri 2000: xi) The Accra Confession clearly is on the side of those lamenting this development.

This use of the concept of empire by a confessional statement lends it a significant theological relevance. The surprising aspect here is that Accra claims to be in line, not only with the Reformed tradition, but with the theology of John Calvin, a theologian who has the reputation of being a conservative defender of the *status quo* and a supporter of early capitalism. Is the WARC, in taking this pronounced position, right in claiming to have Calvin at its side? Is it possible to engage this sixteenth century theologian in what is very much a twenty-first century debate? Is it possible to read Calvin’s *Institutes* in such a way as to allow him to contribute significantly to today’s theological and confessional discussions on issues of social justice?

3. CALVIN ON THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Calvin’s life was significantly influenced by his encounters with the forces of empire in his days. It was for example the oppression of those suspected of Protestant sympathies by the powers that be in his homeland France that forced him into exile, and it were manoeuvres of military troops of the Spanish empire that made him end up in Geneva (Cottret 2000: 73-77, 119; cf. Compier 2007: 216-219). These confrontations have left traces in his theology. The first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, for example, opens with a ‘Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France’ that is reprinted in all subsequent editions. The address asks the king to stop persecuting evangelical Christians in France because their faith is neither new nor subversive but firmly rooted in Scripture and the tradition of the Church.

The encounters with the forces of empire have not turned Calvin into a revolutionary. On the contrary: politically speaking he was a conservative thinker who tried to avoid conflicts with the governing authorities (Compier 2007: 219). In the concluding chapter of the *Institutes*, ‘On Civil Government’, Calvin claims that civil government is ordained by God as an expression of God’s providential care (IV.xx.4): representatives of civil government are to act as “vicars of God” (IV.xx.6). Man is therefore called to obedience to civil government: “Let no man deceive himself

here (...) the magistrate cannot be resisted without God being resisted at the same time (...)” (IV.xx.23). This requirement of obedience is stretched to the limit: “In a very wicked man utterly unworthy of all honour, provided he has the public power in his hands, that noble and divine power resides which the Lord has by his Word given to the ministers of his justice and judgment. Accordingly, he should be held in the same reverence and esteem by his subjects, in so far as public obedience is concerned, in which they would hold the best of kings if he were given to them.” (IV.xx.25) – In short, there seems to be nothing in Calvin’s political views that is critical of the forces of empire or that might be perceived as disturbing the traditional *status quo*.

A closer reading of the text, however, reveals some surprising elements in his thinking. Rieger claims that “where the empire appears to be so powerful as to swallow up everything else, there remains a certain ambivalence that allows for some room where alternative inspiration can grow. (...) [E]mpire can hardly ever control all of our thinking (...), and here lies a very strong reason for hope.” (Rieger 2007: 314) This claim seems to apply to Calvin’s theological perspective on state and government.

Central to the alternative strand in his thinking is the notion that if civil governments are ordained by God this simultaneously means that earthly governments derive their authority from God and are therefore subordinated to God (IV.xx.4); they are called by God “to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence and justice”, and if they fail to live up to this high calling “they are not only wrongdoers to men (...) but are also insulting toward God himself, whose most holy judgments they defile” (IV.xx.6). This emphasis on God’s absolute sovereignty, which is characteristic of Calvin’s entire theology, undermines the absolutist pretences of empire and allows the believer to understand that, behind the façade of imperial authority, ultimately God is in control: in the past God has broken “the bloody sceptres of arrogant kings and (...) overturned intolerable governments”, so “Let the princes hear and be afraid.” (IV.xx.31) Calvin’s emphasis on God’s sovereignty allows for firm critique of the forces of empire (Britz 2008b: 9). In the concluding words of the *Institutes* (a position that, according to the rules of rhetoric, lends these words an additional weight) he claims that with regard to the “obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to God” (IV.xx.32).

Furthermore Calvin takes a rather pronounced and surprisingly outspoken position over against the absolutist rulers of his day and age. In the opening paragraph of the chapter on civil government he writes that one of the reasons to address this topic is the need to set limits to the Machiavellian claims to authoritarian rule of the princes of his day (IV.xx.1). Given a choice between the various available forms of government, Calvin considers the monarchy least desirable because “the fall from kingdom to tyranny is easy”. (According to Calvin the fall from popular rule to anarchy is even easier; he prefers an aristocracy or meritocracy.) The reason for his doubting the positive outcome of the rule of a monarch is that in a situation of authoritarian rule there is no-one to control the ruler, and unfortunately “it is very rare for kings so to control themselves that their will never disagrees with what is just and right; or for them to have been endowed with such great keenness and prudence, that each knows how much is enough. Therefore, men’s fault or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government.” (IV.xx.8) This penchant for collegial forms of government is underlined by Calvin’s consequent choice for a collegial structure of organizing and governing the church, a choice that can be interpreted as an implicit but nonetheless firm critique of the absolutism that was fashionable in his day (Compier 2007: 224).

All of this does not turn Calvin into a liberation theologian who is preaching active resistance against the forces of government. But beyond the dominant strand of his theology that confirms

the *status quo* in issues of politics and government there is a theological 'surplus' that allows or even calls for a critical approach of the forces that abrogate their power by disobeying God's command.

4. CALVIN ON THE USE OF EARTHLY BENEFITS

Based on a popular misunderstanding of the so-called Weber Thesis, Calvin is often considered to be capitalism-friendly, or even to be the father of present-day capitalism. However, although Calvin's positive assessment of the possibilities of commerce is a clear break with the negative attitude that dominated throughout the Middle Ages (Wallace 1988: 86), the current neo-liberal *laissez-faire* approach could not have been further from what Calvin had in mind (Biéler 2005: 454; cf. Wallace 1988: 92-96). Calvin emphasizes first of all that issues of wealth and poverty are ruled by God's absolute sovereignty: prosperity and poverty are not fates allotted by blind fortune, but divinely assigned under God's providence (I.xvi.6; cf. Britz 2008a: 11). He further argues that the economic sphere is particularly a sphere for Christian action and even stewardship; that means that economic activities are always to be regulated by the rule of love (Holder 2004: 261). The earthly things, according to Calvin, "were so given to us by the kindness of God, and so destined for our benefit, that they are, as it were, entrusted to us, and we must one day render account of them. Thus, therefore, we must so arrange it that this saying may continually resound in our ears: 'Render account of your stewardship' [Luke 16: 2]. At the same time let us remember by whom such reckoning is required: namely, him who has greatly commended abstinence, sobriety, frugality, and moderation, and who has abominated excess, pride, ostentation, and vanity; who approves no other distribution of good things than one joined with love (...)" (III.x.5).

The rule of love leads to an assignment that Calvin refers to as "the ministry of the wealthy" to be ministers to the poor (Biéler 2005: 282, 284): the redistribution of wealth. "No surer rule and no more valid exhortation to keep it could be devised than when we are taught that all the gifts we possess have been bestowed by God and entrusted to us on condition that they be distributed for our neighbors' benefit." (III.vii.5) Calvin develops the idea of redistribution on the basis of Paul's well-known image of the body of Christ (I Cor. 12): no member of the body can pretend to live autonomously; all members depend upon each other. This leads Calvin to formulate a basic "rule for generosity and beneficence: We are the stewards of everything God has conferred on us by which we are able to help our neighbour, and are required to render account of our stewardship" (III.vii.5). This rule has to be applied without limit: "(...) whatever man you meet who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him" (III.vii.6).

Calvin emphasizes that the wealthy should regard their ministry to the poor not as an obligation but as a privilege: the poor provide them with an opportunity to grow in Christian love through the act of gracious giving. The gracious redistribution of wealth should therefore be done with a happy and thankful heart, without keeping count or hoping for repayment, and without the act of giving performed in such a way as to demean and disgrace the recipient. Again the rule of love applies: those blessed with material wealth "must put themselves in the place of him whom they see in need of their assistance, and pity his ill fortune as if they themselves experienced and bore it, so that they may be impelled by a feeling of mercy and humaneness to go to his aid just as to their own" (III.vii.7).

The obligation of the wealthy to share what is entrusted to them does not mean that man is not allowed to enjoy the blessings God has bestowed upon him. Calvin has often been caricatured as a dour and cold law-giver who was unable to appreciate the beauty of life and refused his followers this appreciation. What he is concerned about, however, is "the right use of earthly benefits" (III.x.1), sailing between the Scylla of ascetic strictness and the Charybdis of

intemperate laxity: in using our earthly benefits “we must hold to a measure so as to use them with a clear conscience, whether for necessity or for delight” (III.x.1). The general rule, according to Calvin, is “that the use of God’s gifts is not wrongly directed when it is referred to that end to which the Author himself created and destined them for us, since he created them for our good, not for our ruin” (III.x.2). Restriction of the use of physical goods to what necessity requires by living a life of ascetic self-denial is a misinterpretation of the intention of God’s creation: “Now if we ponder to what end God created food, we shall find that he meant not only to provide for necessity but also for delight and good cheer.” (III.x.2) On the other hand, since God bestows all these gifts upon us so that we might recognize who the giver is and thank him for his gifts, overindulgence is also to be avoided, for “where is your thanksgiving if you so gorge yourself with banqueting or wine that you either become stupid or are rendered useless for the duties of piety and of your calling?” (III.x.3)

Similar to what we found above in Calvin’s assessment of the role of the state, his perspective on economic issues contains a number of interesting elements that can be interpreted as resistance against the forces of empire. Calvin questions the classical concept of private property, already found in ancient Roman law, as the inalienable right, to be defended at all cost, of the owner to the use and fruit of his property. He disputes this concept by emphasizing that we are not simply the owners of private property but first and foremost the stewards of God’s gifts, and that we are called to use these gifts to the benefit of our neighbors. The obligation of redistribution is based on a concept of equity that is at the heart of Calvin’s social thought: “Equity directs the implementation of love in the Christian life so that one renders to others what is their due, which is Calvin’s definition of justice. Equity calls believers to show the same love, compassion and self-sacrifice to others that God has shown to them in Christ.” (Haas 1997: 123) Using this concept of equity he attacks the unrestrained greed of the early capitalism of his day by calling it theft, regardless of whether the profit is gained “by fair means or foul”, since it violates the commandment to use God’s gifts to care for others (II.viii.45 and 46). Furthermore, the obligation of redistribution is not just given to the wealthy on an individual basis; it is a structural obligation of both ecclesiastical and civil authorities “to direct the flow of wealth downwards so that it could reach the poor as well as the rich” (Wallace 1988: 90-92). This position does not make Calvin a precursor of Marxist theology (for example, he does not question the right to own private property), but there is in his thinking a theological ‘surplus’ that allows or even calls for critique of certain aspects of economic practices.

5. COMPARISON BETWEEN CALVIN AND THE ACCRA CONFESSION

The brief overview of Calvin’s position allows us to formulate an answer to the question whether the Accra Confession, in taking such a pronounced position vis-à-vis the forces of empire, can claim to have Calvin on its side.

In article 19 the Accra Confession rejects “the current world economic order imposed by global neoliberal capitalism (...), which (defies) God’s covenant by excluding the poor, the vulnerable and the whole of creation from the fullness of life”. Furthermore the article rejects “any claim of economic, political and military empire which subverts God’s sovereignty over life and acts contrary to God’s just rule”. Calvin’s point of departure throughout his theology, as we have noted above, is God’s absolute sovereignty: we are not autonomous rulers over our own life but we are God’s. We are therefore to act, not in accordance with our own desires but in agreement with God’s will in all areas and aspects of life, including the economy. An economic order that excludes the poor and the vulnerable contradicts the calling of the wealthy to be ministers to the poor: all our gifts are bestowed upon us by God on condition that we redistribute these gifts for

the benefit of our neighbour.

The “culture of rampant consumerism and the competitive greed and selfishness of the neoliberal global market system” that is rejected in article 21 is in equally strong terms rejected by Calvin in his call for abstinence, sobriety, frugality, and moderation in dealing with material goods. “Where is your recognition of God if your flesh boiling over with excessive abundance into vile lust infects the mind with its impurity so that you cannot discern anything that is right and honourable? Where is your gratefulness toward God for our clothing if in the sumptuousness of our apparel we both admire ourselves and despise others, if with its elegance and glitter we prepare ourselves for shameless conduct? Where is our recognition of God if our minds be fixed upon the splendour of our apparel?” (III.x.3)

Article 23 of the Accra Confession rejects “the unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth” that is characteristic of the neoliberal economic system. Calvin seems to agree with this rejection: for example, his reflection on the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer (“Give us today our daily bread”) emphasizes the same call for moderation. “The word ‘today’ (...), as well as the adjective ‘daily’, bridle the uncontrolled desire for fleeting things, with which we commonly burn without measure (...). Therefore we are bidden to ask only as much as is sufficient for our need from day to day, with this assurance: that as our Heavenly Father nourishes us today, he will not fail us tomorrow.” (III.xx.44)

Accra’s article 25 rejects “any ideology or economic regime that puts profit before people (...) and privatizes those gifts of God meant for all”. Quoting the apostle Paul, Calvin firmly rejects the privatization of gifts: “If you have received all things, why do you boast as if they were not given to you?” (III.vii.4, quoting I Cor. 4: 7). Everything we have, we have received from God. As we have seen above Calvin understands this to mean that we are the stewards of God’s gifts, and that good stewardship means that we use these gifts to assist our neighbors. His argument is a complete reversal of the principle of profit-before-people: “we shall not only join zeal for another’s benefit with care for our own advantage, but shall subordinate the latter to the former” (III.vii.5).

Finally, the rejection of all forms of prosperity gospel that is formulated in article 27 of the Accra Confession is shared by Calvin. An example is his condemnation of our “immoderate desire to grow rich” as counter to God’s will: “For with what shamelessness does a man trust that he will be helped by God to obtain those things which he desires contrary to God’s Word? Away with the thought that God would abet with his blessing what he curses with his mouth!” (III.vii.9) And this is just one example: according to John McNeill, the editor of the *Institutes*, there are “innumerable passages in his works that counter the unfounded notion that Calvin regarded prosperity in this life as associated with election” (II.x.12, n. 11).

6. CONCLUSION: CALVIN, ACCRA, AND EMPIRE

Calvin was by no means a revolutionary; his theology does not call for actual resistance against the forces of government or other structures of power and authority that God has placed over us. He is a sixteenth century theologian who needs to be interpreted within the confines of his day, a context that is unfamiliar with the discourse of empire that is fashionable today.

However, Calvin’s consequent emphasis of the absolute sovereignty of God implicitly critiques the current cultural, political and economic system that “presents its order as permanent, eternal, and necessary” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 11). Emphasizing God’s sovereignty and responding to the dominant thinking of his day Calvin formulates an alternative based on the Bible that claims to offer justice and equity where the dominant system offers injustice and inequity. He asserts that “the only lawful worship of [God] is the observance of righteousness, holiness, and

purity” (II.viii.2), thus claiming that worship and justice belong together (cf. Smit 2007: 310). This alternative perspective is a comfort for those who suffer and a warning to those who profit from the current status quo: there is a possibility to do justice, and ignoring it equals ignoring God’s claim to sovereignty. The surprisingly bold theology of social justice we have found above represents a central aspect of Calvin’s theology (cf. Biéler 2005: 455), an aspect that is “at least as important as his purely theological thought” (Haas 1997: 2). It has had a significant impact on the Reformed tradition that for that reason has been described as “world-transformative Christianity” (Wolterstorff 1983). Confessional statements like Barmen, Belhar and Accra can thus be viewed as a confirmation of the conviction that “Reformed theology is best understood as a liberating theology that is (...) socially engaged and prophetic in its witness” (De Gruchy 1991: xii), and it is indeed inspiring to belong to a tradition that results in such a witness.

It seems fair to say that the Accra Confession in its rejection of the totalitarian claims of empire can reasonably claim to have an ally in Calvin. Furthermore, this latest addition to an already rich Reformed confessional heritage of rejecting various totalitarian claims of worldly structures of power is a good example of the vitality of Calvin’s theology and its meaningful participation in today’s theological discussions. In a culture characterized by rampant consumerism, unregulated accumulation of wealth and limitless growth, Calvin’s call for abstinence, sobriety, frugality and moderation may sound old-fashioned and out-of-tune with reality. His warning against the pursuit of “superfluous wealth” (III.x.4) however can also be interpreted as an attempt to return to the original logic and inherent sense of the philosophy of modern capitalism, an attempt to understand the aim of capitalism (which is growth of production and consumption for the benefit of all) within the framework of a broader rationality that views man as more than just potential consumers or victims of a consumerist society. In line with Calvin, the Accra Confession claims that in its consequences the neoliberal quest for unrestrained growth is ultimately irrational. The widening gap between rich and poor comes to mind, as well as the disastrous environmental consequences. Moreover, psychological research seems to indicate that further increase of material prosperity does not lead to a further increase in feelings of happiness and wellbeing: good relationships, a meaningful existence, and safety are some of the issues that contribute more to a feeling of well-being than increasing material prosperity does (cf. Nettle 2005). The Accra call for confession and change may very well be a rational piece of advice, criticizing what is only apparently self-evident in our political-economic culture and leading this culture back to its inherent rationalism. Just like Calvin contributed to the rise of early capitalism, so his descendants, faithful to Calvin’s conviction that Christian faith should permeate all aspects of life, can possibly contribute to a highly needed conversion of present-day capitalism as it is represented by the economic structures of empire.

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KEY WORDS

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