

REFOCUSING THE IMAGE: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, REFUGEES, AND
THE *IMAGO DEI* IN JOHN CALVIN'S PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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The doctrine of the image of God—*imago Dei*—is a doctrine of utmost practical significance. This is evident especially in how this doctrine has been applied to issues of social concern. Concerning the sick, medical historian Gary Ferngren writes that the early Christians “cared for those who were sick because ‘every stranger in need was a neighbor who bore the image of God.’”¹ When it came to unwanted infants the early Christians not only refused to participate in infanticide but actively rescued and cared for abandoned babies, precisely because of their belief in the *imago Dei*.² The fight for the abolishment of slavery in the United States was also grounded in this same doctrine. Richard Willis explains

More than the secular rationale could admit, freedom had a moral quality that grew out of a theological worldview that sought to articulate what it meant to have been created in God's image . . . It was this theological idea that rallied the social resistance against the forces of slavery so all those created in God's image might be included in ‘We the people.’³

John Kilner summarizes the practical significance of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* well when he declares that, “where the status of

1. Ferngren, *Medicine*, 145.
2. Amundsen, *Medicine*, 50–69.
3. Wills, *Martin Luther King Jr.*, 13, 15.

everyone as created in God's image has been embraced, the poorest and weakest people have usually benefited the most."⁴

Given the fact that the *imago Dei* is widely recognized as a doctrine with significant practical entailments it is odd that John Calvin's doctrine of the image of God, a doctrine that has been historically significant among Protestants, has not been mined for its practical significance, much less its pastoral significance.⁵ This is especially odd given Calvin's exemplary status as a pastor-theologian who not only did theology for the sake of the church but was also engaged in pastoral and public theology. Instead, most recent scholarly works on Calvin's doctrine of the *imago Dei* have focused on a core set of questions, including:

(1) Is the image of God found in all creation or only in humans?

(2) Does the term "image of God" refer to the soul and body, or just the soul?

(3) Does the image of God refer to reason or piety, natural gifts or supernatural gifts?

(4) Is the *imago Dei* a substantial capacity essential to humans or something present only in dynamic relation with God?

(5) Is the image of God completely destroyed in humans or merely defaced?

(6) Should the image of God be interested solely in its restored state in Jesus Christ, or can the knowledge of the *imago Dei* be gleaned from unrestored humans?⁶

Recent works by Calvin scholars such as Torrance, Engel, Shih, and Van Vliet have been more concerned with such questions, and the overarching question, "What is Calvin's doctrine

4. Kilner, "Special Connection," 136.

5. Regarding the significance of Calvin's doctrine of the *imago Dei*, see the following systematic theologies which are commonly used as textbooks at a number of evangelical institutions: Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 523; Grenz, *Theology*, 170–72; Horton, *Christian Faith*, 392–96; Kärkkäinen, *Creation and Humanity*, 3:274–77; Plantinga et al., *Introduction to Christian Theology*, 187–88.

6. See Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology*, ix.

of the *imago Dei*[?]"⁷ There has been less work done to answer the question: "As a pastor how does Calvin use the doctrine of the *imago Dei*?"⁸ Because of this gap there is a need to refocus on the pastoral elements of Calvin's doctrine of the *imago Dei*. This essay does precisely this. By examining Calvin's sermons, lectures, and commentaries we will show how Calvin applied the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to two issues of pastoral significance that he and his pastors in training faced. The first issue is a quotidian pastoral concern: violence (especially domestic violence). The second issue is an occasional pastoral concern: the influx of refugees to Geneva. By examining both of these concerns we will see how Calvin's pastoral theology of the *imago Dei* was applied to his flock and the future flocks of pastors in training.

This essay proceeds as follows. In part one we turn primarily to the *Registers of the Consistory of Geneva* in order to provide a snapshot of the kinds of violence Calvin would have come across as a pastor in Geneva. This sets us up to discuss how Calvin applied the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to issues of violence in his sermons and lectures. In part two we provide an account of the influx of refugees into Geneva as well as reactions to these refugees. Providing a snapshot of Geneva during this period helps to make sense of how Calvin's preaching and teaching on the *imago Dei* would have fallen upon the ears of his fellow Genevans. We conclude by making the case that an examination of Calvin's pastoral theology of the *imago Dei* is no mere antiquarian interest; rather, it is of the utmost practical significance for key issues the church is facing today.

7. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*; Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology*; Shih, "Development"; Van Vliet, *Children of God*.

8. For other recent studies which exemplify this trend see for example: Douglass, "Image of God in Women," 236–66; Anderson, "*Imago Dei* Theme," 178–98; Thompson, "Creatura ad Imaginem Dei," 125–43; Zachman, "Jesus Christ," 45–62. One exception to this trend is O'Donovan, "Human Dignity," 121–36. Here O'Donovan turns to Calvin's doctrine of the *imago Dei* for the sake of developing the moral foundation of public justice and secular egalitarian rights. Thus, the purpose of the essay, while possibly having pastoral implications, is primarily to develop a political theology.

A Quotidian Concern: Violent Homes and the Imago Dei

Upon his return to Geneva—after being expelled in 1538—Calvin insisted that he be able to establish a system of church discipline in Geneva. Thus, one of the first things Calvin did upon returning to his former home was to draft a set of ecclesiastical ordinances that would be used in the city and its surrounding rural areas. These ordinances included provisions for the creation of a disciplinary institution made up of elders and pastors that would be responsible for guiding the behavior of the citizens of the city. This institution was the Consistory.

Calvin, however, experienced opposition to this proposed system of church discipline. Surprisingly, this opposition came at the hands of his fellow ministers.⁹ Apparently some ministers felt as though too much power had been given over to the hands of the city's pastors and that the Small Council—a committee of twenty-five citizens that met almost every day and was the primary governing body of the city—ought to be wary of giving power away that belonged properly only to itself. These pastors believed that this shift in power would result in “disorder and revolt.”¹⁰ Yet, at the end of the day, Calvin and his followers were able to institute this system of church discipline. The ecclesiastical orders were finally ratified by the Small Council on 25 November 1541. The consistory began to operate on 6 December 1541, with a total of twenty-five members: twelve elders (elected each year) and all the pastors of the city.¹¹ Its president was one of the four syndics of the small council. It also had an officer whose duty was to summon people before the Consistory and a secretary who transcribed minutes in its weekly sessions.¹² The

9. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 56.

10. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 56.

11. As with any committee, members were often absent. For example, Robert Kingdon writes that in the first session for which a record survives (16 February 1542), the normally presiding syndic was absent and was replaced by a former syndic. Furthermore, there were only five pastors in attendance: Calvin and four others. Nine elders were missing. Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce*, 15.

12. For an apt description of the structure of the Consistory see Watt, “Reconciliation and Confession,” 105–20.

worries of Calvin's opponents were assuaged by the fact that the Consistory could not impose secular penalties on those appearing before it. This was the prerogative of the Small Council.¹³ Thus a balance of power was maintained. The Consistory, in turn, exercised influence by imposing disciplines which would lead to holy behavior. This was done either by referring those deemed guilty for criminal sentencing to the small council or by imposing church discipline. Church discipline in Geneva came in various forms. Jeffrey Watt argues that the Consistory's true power laid in the fact that they "had direct influence over the rank and file" to deny the right to participate in the Eucharist. Among those infractions which merited suspension from the Eucharist, the most common were violence and sexual sins. Given that violence, and the more specific form labeled "mauvais ménage" (literally, "bad household"),¹⁴ is our primary concern in this essay, it would be helpful to provide examples from primary texts which give a glimpse of the type of pastoral issues Calvin and his fellow ministers dealt with in Geneva. For such examples we now turn to the Consistory records.

The Consistory records indicate violent behavior in Geneva was commonplace.¹⁵ Among the examples provided are minister's children getting into fights with knives, people threatened with daggers,¹⁶ and refugees being beaten by mobs.¹⁷ Not only was the public square a dangerous and violent place, many households in Geneva were troubled and violent. Manetsch's careful examination of the Consistory records reveals reports of

13. Watt, "Reconciliation and Confession," 105.

14. Manetsch, *Calvin's Company*, 201.

15. In addition to the Consistory records, even on his death bed, Calvin bears witness to rampant violence in Geneva. Thus, he says, "Here I have lived through wondrous battles. I have been saluted outside my door by fifty or sixty arquebus shots. You may well imagine how this would astonish a poor timid scholar such as I am and always have been I confess . . . Once I was going to the Council of Two Hundred during a fight . . ." Cited in Monter, *Calvin's Geneva*, 95–96.

16. Cahier and Campagnolo, eds., *Registres de la Compagnie*, 160; Kingdon et al., eds., *Registers of the Consistory*, 337.

17. Roset, *Les Chroniques de Genève*, 346, 372–73.

vicious arguments, abused wives, neglected children, and mistreated servants. He writes, “Arguments often spilled out of the house into the streets and fields. Genevans attacked their spouses and neighbors with fists and feet, with scissors and swords, with batons and baguettes, with bowls of pottage and wooden plates.”¹⁸ One report speaks of an angry butcher using the head of a dead goat to beat his wife.¹⁹ Rather than providing generic accounts of violence, however, it would be helpful to examine specific accounts of violence, and more specifically, domestic violence, that came before the Consistory.

One episode from the 1561 Consistory records the Consistory’s dealings with man named Jean Pardaire.²⁰ According to the records, six witnesses testified to this man’s abuse of his wife. Apparently Pradaire not only verbally abused his spouse; he pinched her thighs with burning hot tongs, hit her in the stomach and face, and strangled her. These past infractions were superseded by what he was currently being tried for: striking his wife on the head with a board and knocking her unconscious. The woman, at the time of the meeting, was recovering in bed from a cracked skull. The Consistory deemed that Pardaire should be excommunicated from the church—the most severe punishment available to the Consistory—and that he should not mistreat his wife again. The Consistory, however, did not limit its denouncement of his behavior to the ecclesial sphere; they sent recommendations to the city’s magistrates that he ought to receive additional corporal punishments. In this way ecclesiastical punishment was paired with civil punishment.

Another case in which the Consistory involved the civil authorities was the case of Jean Clemencin, who threatened to kill his wife if she ever reported his abusive behavior to the Consistory. Upon hearing about his threats the Consistory took several actions. First, they demanded that he stop beating his wife. Second, they suspended him from receiving the Eucharist. Finally,

18. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company*, 201–2.

19. Cited in Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company*, 102.

20. Cited in Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company*, 217.

they sent him to the magistrates for punishment.²¹ Manetsch writes that this was a paradigm case of how the Consistory worked together with the civil magistrates. He explains that “in cases where misbehavior was not only sinful but criminal, the Consistory functioned as a de facto advisory board to civil justice both by gathering evidence about the crime and by recommending appropriate punishments, whether fines, imprisonment, beatings, or banishment.”²² As a result, a man who beat his wife was liable to several forms of discipline: spiritual sanction, the social shame of being banned from the eucharist, and civil punishment.

The most common form of domestic violence between spouses were cases of husbands beating wives; on some occasions violence went both ways. The records of the Consistory for 6 and 13 April 1542, provide a glimpse into François Mermiez’s violent relationship with his wife. Apparently François’s wife had a pattern of violence. His wife did “nothing but fight with other women.” This woman, who is not named, apparently had been fighting with other women several weeks before the hearing. François became upset with her and her tendency to fight, so he picked up a stick, not to hit her, “but for another purpose”—a purpose which François does not explain.²³ François claims he did not beat her, but François’s wife testifies that “for a long time they have done nothing but beat each other in their quarrels.”²⁴ The registers of the Consistory for 5 July 1543, record another case of violence by a wife towards her husband. According to the testimony provided in the registers, Hieronime Aygre was not earning his wages and he often took money from his wife Jana. Eventually Jana became fed up with Hieronime’s behavior so, she “hit him twice with a stone and took him by his member, pretending she would cut it off, and did him great injury.”²⁵

21. Cited in Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company*, 196.

22. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company*, 197.

23. Kingdon et al., eds., *Registers of the Consistory*, 40.

24. *Ibid.*, 34.

25. Kingdon et al., eds., *Registers of the Consistory*, 260–61.

In addition to domestic violence among adults, the Consistory records also testify to violence against children.²⁶ One especially gruesome account, retold by Manestch, was the case of a widow named Jean Claren. In 1589, the Consistory tried her for abuse of her ten year old niece. Jean Claren's treatment of this child was horrific. "She regularly burned her head with live coals, kicked her in the stomach, beat her to the point of blood, and forced her to beg through town."²⁷ The ministers suspended the woman from receiving communion, advised the magistrates of the situation, and then placed the girl in the city hospital at the expense of her aunt.

Most cases of child abuse that the Consistory addressed, however, did not result in suspension of communion or reporting to the magistrates. Thyven Mathe and his wife were charged with beating one of their children excessively for losing a brand-new coat. Instead of suspending or reporting them, Thyven and his wife were admonished to punish their children "more sweetly."²⁸ Berthelemy Blanchon admitted that he had beaten his son, but not as harshly as the Consistory believed. He too was admonished to punish his children less severely.²⁹ Another, Claude Galleys, responded to claims of excessive violence against his child by stating that "no one could prevent him from punishing and beating his child."³⁰ In her study of how children were raised in Reformed Geneva, Karen Spierling notes that the Genevan Consistory "preferred to remind parents of their responsibility to care for their children and send them back to their families to do just that."³¹ This parallels practices in Reformation-era Scotland where, according to Margo Todd, "unless a child's life seemed to be in imminent danger, sessions generally joined with magistrates in giving stern admonition and warning at the first

26. For other examples of domestic abuse, verbal and physical, committed by husbands against wives see: Kingdon et al., eds., *Registers of the Consistory*, 109, 253, 334, 365.

27. Cited in Manestch, *Calvin's Company*, 215.

28. Cited in Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, 208.

29. Cited in Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, 209.

30. Cited in Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, 209.

31. Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, 209.

offence.”³² There were exceptions of course: the case of Jean Claren mentioned above, the case of Claude Gardet who beat her child excessively,³³ and the case of François Vigneron and his wife Spirite who nearly beat their son to death. The above cases resulted in an admonition, suspension from the Lord’s Supper, or excommunication. These consistory cases confirm Spierling’s thesis that overly strict punishment, especially excessively violent punishment, was an abuse of parental authority that the Genevan authorities saw as problematic.³⁴

The above accounts provide only a brief glimpse into the nature of violence in Genevan households. If one were to imagine that such cases of violence were exceptions to the peaceable norm, one would be mistaken. The fact that *mauvais ménage* (often involving violence) was a common problem is evident in the list of reasons for suspension from the Lord’s Supper in Geneva. From 1542–1609, 25.4 per cent of suspensions from the Lord’s Supper were due to *mauvais ménage*.³⁵ In the rural areas around Geneva the suspension rate for *mauvais ménage* was 16.4 per cent.³⁶ The suspension rate within Geneva goes up even higher between 1570–1609: nearly 33 per cent.³⁷ Thus Manetsch explains that after the time of Calvin one of the main concerns of the Consistory was to pacify violent households, or as the Genevan minister Charles Pinault put it in 1605, “the goal of the Consistory is to appease discords so that all might live in peace and harmony.”³⁸

How did Calvin, who would have been familiar with cases like those described above, use his role as pastor and teacher to help reduce violence, especially domestic violence, in Geneva? What did Calvin do to help mold Geneva into a more peaceable

32. Todd, *Culture of Protestantism*, 302.

33. Cited in Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, 210.

34. Spierling, *Infant Baptism*, 208.

35. Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company*, 201. Calvin dies in 1564. While the statistic quoted here extends beyond his death, it does cover twenty-two years of his life and ministry in Geneva.

36. *Ibid.*, 207.

37. *Ibid.*, 211.

38. Cited in Manetsch, *Calvin’s Company*, 211.

society? One action involved his role in the Consistory. As a pastor in the Consistory he was involved in admonishing, correcting, and rebuking parishioners who came before him and his fellow pastors and elders.³⁹ He was also involved in the Consistory's work in helping quarreling parties achieve reconciliation. This was especially true in cases of marital conflict that he encountered as a member of the Consistory.⁴⁰ When couples came before the Consistory presenting marital problems, Calvin's goal was to help foster "harmonious, permanent marriages" that the "Genevan reformers envisioned for this community."⁴¹ As permanent Moderator of the Company of Pastors he also had a permanent position in the Consistory.⁴² As a result of his position, it was usually the case that admonitions delivered by the Consistory were communicated through the voice of Calvin.⁴³ Kingdon notes that in cases involving marital breakdowns Calvin often dominated proceedings.⁴⁴ He explains that Calvin, "was always scrupulous about acknowledging that he was but one of a number of members of a collegiate body and that all decisions reached were collective, not his personal decisions."⁴⁵ Still, the Consistory tended to defer to Calvin in many cases. A second action involved preaching, specifically preaching which chastised immoral actions and encouraged moral actions. Parker, for instance, explains that Calvin at times verbally chastised sinners through his sermons. He notes that even though Calvin never hesitated to call out the sins of the congregation (not individuals), in his preaching "there is no threshing himself into fever of impatience of frustration, no holier than thou

39. In the above mentioned case of Hieronime and Jana Aygre, for example, the Consistory admonished them to "live in peace," "agree together," "return [to live] together," and "frequent the sermons every day." Kingdon et al., eds., *Registers of the Consistory*, 261.

40. The Consistory increasingly condemned domestic abuse in the late 1540s and 1550s.

41. Corretti, "Marital Conflicts," 198.

42. Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce*, 14.

43. Kingdon et al., eds., *Registers of the Consistory*, xxx.

44. Kingdon, *Adultery and Divorce*, 16–17.

45. *Ibid.*, 17

rebuking of the people.”⁴⁶ Thus Calvin approached sermonic reproof and exhortation in a gracious manner. That Calvin’s desire to approach church discipline was in a gracious manner is further evidenced in his *Institutes*. Calvin explains that, “great severity is not to be used in lighter sins, but verbal chastisement is enough—and that mild and fatherly—which should not harden or confuse the sinner, but bring him back to himself, that he may rejoice rather than be sad that he has been corrected.”⁴⁷ Later in the *Institutes*, Calvin writes that severity of discipline ought to be joined with “a spirit of gentleness” which is fitting for the church, thus agreeing with the spirit of a question posed by Chrysostom, “If God is so kind why does his priest wish to seem so rigorous?”⁴⁸ Calvin’s view was that Church discipline ought to confirm God’s love for the sinner, and its intent should be to lead the sinner to repentance.⁴⁹ In addition to preaching for chastisement, Parker explains that Calvin preached in order to encourage specific actions. He writes, “Calvin frequently said it was useless for the preacher merely to declare the truths of the Bible and leave the congregation to accept them or not without more ado.”⁵⁰

This use of preaching exemplifies Calvin’s role as a pastor and teacher in proactively encouraging peace and discouraging violence. Although Calvin preaches on a variety of biblical and theological themes to dissuade violence, our interest here involves his references to the *imago Dei*. As we survey examples below it will be helpful to remember that Calvin went beyond preaching about this theme. He also wrote and taught future pastors, about the *imago Dei*, all with a purpose of encouraging peace in Geneva.

46. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 119.

47. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.6.

48. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.12.8.

49. *Ibid.*, 4.12.13.

50. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 114.

Violence and the Imago Dei

Many of Calvin's appeals to the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to discourage violence and encourage peace can be found in his Old Testament sermons and lectures. For example, in two sermons on Gen 4, Calvin recounts the story of Cain murdering his brother Abel and God's response. Calvin explains that the voice of Abel's blood crying out from the ground (Gen 4:10) signifies that, "the earth itself reacts in horror when these evil deeds are committed, when a man rises against his neighbor, who is the image of God, when he sheds innocent blood on earth."⁵¹ The destruction of one who bears the image of God is such a "monstrous" and "damnable" thing that even the earth which is "an insensible creature" cannot help but react.⁵² Still speaking of Gen 4, Calvin explains that the Lord made Cain to "feel a hundred deaths every day" because of his sinful deed. Moreover, Calvin advises his congregation to "be advised that God will not tolerate the shedding of human blood, for in that act his image is violated."⁵³ In another sermon on Genesis, this time treating Gen 9 (the Noahic Covenant), Calvin explains why God told Noah not to eat flesh with blood in it: eating the blood of animals is not a humane act. When humans accustom themselves to acting humanely, and with restraint, they "will help one another and inflict no violence or injury."⁵⁴ Calvin thus explains that "as long as the image of God is to enjoy that kind of honor and reverences, so also must the life of humans be held sacred, for God is offended when some wrong or violence is done to them."⁵⁵

51. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, 416.

52. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, 416.

53. *Ibid.*, 450.

54. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, 732. See also Calvin's commentary on Gen 9:4, "For if it be a savage and barbarous thing to devour lives, or to swallow down living flesh, men betray their brutality by eating blood. Moreover, the tendency of this prohibition is by no means obscure, namely, that God intends to accustom men to gentleness, by abstinence from the blood of animals; but, if they should become unrestrained, and daring in eating wild animals they would at length not be sparing of even human blood." Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, 1:293.

55. Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis*, 732.

Calvin's appeal to the *imago Dei* to restrain violence also appears in his other treatments of the Pentateuch. In addressing the sixth commandment, Calvin says "God would have the remains of his image, which still shine forth in men, to continue in some estimation, so that all might feel that every homicide is an offence against him. He does not, indeed, here express the reason, whereby He elsewhere deters men from murder, i.e. by asserting that thus his image is violated."⁵⁶ If there is some ambiguity as to whether it is only murder (not violence in general) that is an affront to God and his image, Calvin clarifies by saying that it clearly is the case that "under the word 'kill' is included by synecdoche all violence, smiting, and aggression."⁵⁷

In a sermon preached on Deut 5:13–15 Calvin undertakes an extended meditation on the implications of the point "that we are united together in one flesh and we are all made in the image of God."⁵⁸ He questions his congregation, saying that if indeed we all share in God's image, "ought we behave like savage beasts toward each other?" Of course the answer is no; we should not. He hammers home his point, saying, "the image of God is engraved in all people. Therefore, not only do I despise my [own] flesh whenever I oppress anyone, but to my fullest capacity I violate the image of God."

In his lectures and sermons on the minor prophets Calvin makes the same point: violence against other human beings is an attack upon the image of God. Speaking of the sailors who threw Jonah overboard, Calvin says,

And we know also the reason why God undertakes to protect the life of men, and that is, because they have been created in his image. Whosoever then uses violence against the life of man, destroys, as far as he can, the image of the eternal God. Since it is so, ought not violence and cruelty to be regarded by us with double horror?⁵⁹

Preaching from Mic 2:1–3, he tells his congregation,

- 56. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses*, 3:20.
- 57. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses*, 20.
- 58. Calvin, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 260.
- 59. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, 3:60–61.

Did the Lord put us in this world to be crueler to one another than are savage beasts? We are all created in the image of God, so I cannot look at a man and not see there God's image. Should we not, then love one another, and not fight like cats and dogs, as the saying goes? Very few men today stop to consider this point.⁶⁰

Calvin makes a similar point in a sermon on Mic 7:4–7, explaining that “the word humanity means that we are all one, for the Lord has created all of us in his image. The wolves and other savage beasts do not harm one another; for they realize that they are all of one and the same nature.”⁶¹

Our final example of Calvin's use of the *imago Dei* to promote peace comes from his commentary on 1 John 4:20. Calvin says that the apostle, in speaking to the church, takes it for granted that “God offers himself to us in those men who bear his image.”⁶² The fact that all persons bear the image of God should “allure us to mutual love, except we are harder than iron.”⁶³ Furthermore, Calvin explains that when John writes, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” [1 John 4:20 ESV], John “meant to show how fallacious is the boast of every one who says that he loves God, yet loves not God's image which is before his eyes.”⁶⁴

Summary

Geneva had a significant problem of *mauvais ménage*, especially cases involving violence between spouses and between parents and children. As a pastor and leader in society, Calvin had an interest in reducing violence as much as possible. He sought to accomplish this primarily through discipline meted out by the Consistory and the magistrates as well as through his preaching and teaching. As we have seen above, one of the ways that Calvin

60. Calvin, *Sermons on Micah*, 77.

61. Calvin, *Sermons on Micah*, 410.

62. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 249.

63. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 249.

64. *Ibid.*

encouraged peace and discouraged violence was by appealing to the image of God in people. To harm another human being, Calvin argued, whether by murder or some other physical harm, is to attack the image of God himself. While we have not here established that Calvin directly applied the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to cases of *mauvais ménage*, it is clear that Calvin applied the doctrine to thinking about violence in general, as an issue that was rampant among households in Geneva.

An Occasional Concern: Refugees and the Imago Dei

In the 1550s Geneva witnessed an influx of French refugees into the city. William Naphy argues that this influx was the cause of the single most common complaint in Geneva during this period.⁶⁵ The refugees came in two waves. The first wave primarily consisted of the poor, the second of foreigners who were more well off. All were fleeing Roman Catholic oppression. Geneva's city hospital—which was nothing like a modern hospital, but rather served as a place of refuge for itinerant travelers and the poor who were homeless—bore much of the responsibility of taking care of these refugees.⁶⁶ Prior to this refugee crisis the hospital in Geneva, the Hôpital Général, primarily helped meet the needs of children (three-fourths who were orphans and one-fourth who were either illegitimate or abandoned), the aged, and those who were infirm (blind, crippled, weak, physically or mentally ill).⁶⁷ In addition to these ministrations, the hospital had a bread baking ministry in which bread cooked in the hospital ovens was distributed weekly to the poor in their homes.⁶⁸ The second branch of the hospital, the Hôpital des Passants, served poor wayfarers in Geneva. This branch of the hospital was severely taxed when massacres and persecutions against Protestants began in Savoy, France, and Italy. Naphy notes that from October 1538 to October 1539 the hospital assisted 10,657

65. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 121.

66. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 14.

67. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 130–31.

68. Olson, "Calvin and Social-Ethical Issues," 164.

strangers passing through the city. This number does not even include Genevans who had been attended to by the hospital.⁶⁹ Innes estimates that during this influx of refugees, the hospital housed 30 refugees per night.⁷⁰

Where were these refugees coming from? The vast majority of these religious refugees came from French speaking lands. Of approximately five thousand refugees who were registered for residence in Geneva between 1549–1560, 350 came from non-French speaking lands; 200 of them were Italians.⁷¹ Yet even this number is misleading, as the five thousand registered during this period were just men. Thus the number could have easily exceeded seven thousand people.⁷² Given that Geneva was a city of approximately 10,000 people, this would have been overwhelming.

In studying Geneva's response to the refugees Naphy notes that a clear pattern began to emerge between the city and the refugees. Geneva was willing to help strangers when able to do so, but when sources were strained the city pulled back on giving direct help. It seems as though the lack of resources (originally provided by the city hospital) was filled by several *Bourses* or funds created by the foreign residents of Geneva in order to take care of the poorer refugees entering the city. These funds were formed by French, Italian, and German ethnic groups. Writing with respect to the French *Bourse*, Olson writes that Calvin "had a direct hand in its formation . . . [being] regularly involved through his contributions and recommendations to poor people to seek out the fund for help."⁷³ Additionally, Tuininga notes that in the early years of the *Bourse* Calvin was the most generous single contributor to this fund.⁷⁴ He writes that the work of the *Bourse* "presents a clear example of the type of work that Calvin believed the church was called to do for the needy."⁷⁵ Robert

69. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 122.

70. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 145.

71. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 206.

72. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 207.

73. Olson, "Calvin and Social-Ethic Issues," 165.

74. Kingdon, "Social Welfare," 64.

75. Tuininga, "Good News," 244.

Vosloo makes a similar observation when he writes that “Calvin saw no duty as more pleasing and acceptable to God than the Scriptural obligation to be kind and dutiful to fugitives and exiles, and especially to believers who are banished for their confession of the Word.”⁷⁶

It seems that Calvin preferred to work alongside the *Bourse* as opposed to working with the hospital officials—the *procureurs* and *hospitalliers*—to care for the poor. Calvin was convinced that the church has failed to fulfill its duty if it does not relieve the plight of the poor, even if in this case they were foreign refugees. Thus, Calvin says, “we must begin at the end, that is to say, there must be ministers to preach the doctrine of salvation purely, there must be deacons to have care for the poor.”⁷⁷ Tuininga argues that Calvin believed that care for the poor is actually a requirement of natural law. He argues that Calvin interprets relief for the poor as a requirement of nature’s law of equity. This law is grounded in the order of creation.⁷⁸ Thus Calvin can say, “this is the dictate of common sense, that the hungry are deprived of their just right, if their hunger is not relieved.”⁷⁹ Calvin’s application of this principle to the poor refugees, however, was not shared by all people in Geneva. There was widespread anti-refugee sentiment on the banks of Lac de Genève.

Two episodes illustrate anti-refugee sentiments in Geneva. One episode occurred in 1551. In *Les Chroniques de Genève*, Michel Roset explains, “That year many insolences were made by young people, against which the ministers continually cried, and Calvin was called to the Council because of it and advised because of his temper. The foreigners were hated openly and watched by them, such that they were beaten at night in the streets.”⁸⁰

76. Vosloo, “The Displaced Calvin,” 43.

77. Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*; Calvin, *Sermons Sur La Premiere Epitre a Timothee*, 53:291.

78. Tuininga, “Good News,” 227–28.

79. Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, 4:234.

80. “Ceste année furent faictes plusieurs finsolences par les jeunes gens, contre lesquelles les prescheurs crioient incessamment, Calvin en fut appellee au Conseil & advert de fa colère. Les estrangiers estoient ouvertement hays &

The second episode, also described by Roset, occurred on Thursday, 16 May 1555. A group of men—upset at the fact that the Small Council had recently granted French refugees the right to be admitted into the bourgeoisie—spent the evening drinking. At the end of the night they began to carouse through the streets of Geneva. A confrontation ensued in which the drunk men drew swords on a Councilman for being sympathetic to French refugees. A Syndic apprehended one of the attackers, while his drunk friends cried out “To the French traitors, kill them, kill them.”⁸¹ His friends kept crying out “The French are ruining the city.”⁸² The gathering degenerated into a mob. Roset explains that “The sedition turned into cries to run out, pillage, kill, and hang the foreigners and their supporters.”⁸³

In addition to these two episodes there were other individual cases of violence that seem to have been motivated by anti-refugee sentiments. For example, Philibert Berthelier, a member of the Perrinist anti-refugee party, was reprimanded by the Consistory for striking a foreigner.⁸⁴ Jean Bapiste Sept, another Perrinist, was imprisoned for striking one Andre Vindret.⁸⁵ Even Calvin himself was subject to anti-French attitudes, receiving a death threat.⁸⁶ These and other incidents eventually led the Small Council and the ministers to publicly express concern about the increasing violence in the city against the French refugees.⁸⁷

These anti-refugee attitudes can be explained by several causes. First, the foreigners were putting a strain upon Geneva’s limited resources. The poor refugees produced overcrowding,

notez par ceux-là, tellement qu’on en battoit de nuit par les rues.” Roset, *Les Chroniques de Genève*, 346. [The translations from this text are my own.]

81. “Au taître, François, tue, tue.” Roset, *Les Chroniques de Genève*, 272.

82. “Les François saccagent la ville.” Roset, *Les Chroniques de Genève*, 272.

83. “La sedition passé en ceries, de forager, piller, tuer & pendre les estrangiers & leurs fauteurs.” Roset, *Les Chroniques de Genève*, 273. Despite these calls to action no damage was in fact done to the city.

84. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 187.

85. Ibid.

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid.

threatened disease, and put financial strain on the hospital. Thus, it was for pragmatic reasons (not a hatred towards the French in general) that the Genevans resented their new neighbors. In order to relieve the strain that these refugees put upon the city, the magistrates ordered the refugees to leave quickly; they even threatened them with beatings.⁸⁸ Furthermore, laws were passed in order to make sure refugees would not overstay their welcome. For example, Genevans were not allowed to rent a room to a stranger without a license. Fines were imposed for breaking this law.⁸⁹

Another reason refugees were resented was that they increased competition for Geneva's trade opportunities, jobs, and even spouses.⁹⁰ Regarding jobs, Innes explains:

Economic opportunities also became limited, as the city unquestionably had more cobblers (181 immigrants listed that as their population), other leatherworkers (83), and builders (249) than could ever find employment. Many, especially the peasants, left Geneva for the Pays de Vaud, Lausanne, and other less crowded communities where they could find use for their farming skills.⁹¹

Beyond competition for jobs and resources, resentment was also caused by refugees' accumulation of political power. Political factions like the Perrinists feared the influence that these new refugees had upon the city, especially given that Calvin was himself a French refugee. Perrin and his followers wanted a Geneva free from foreign, especially French, influence.

While the Genevans were hesitant to provide care for refugees (for pragmatic and political reasons), Calvin was not. After all, taking care of the poor was part of the natural law of equity. But how was this law of equity to be enforced? It was supposed to be enforced by civil rulers and authorities. Thus, Calvin

88. Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 123.

89. *Ibid.*

90. Naphy explains, "What must have disturbed the native Genevans was the extent to which these newcomers failed to mix. Of the 440 Frenchwomen who married in Geneva prior to 1557, only sixteen married local men." Naphy, *Calvin and the Consolidation*, 129.

91. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva*, 210.

argues that “a just and well-regulated government will be distinguished for maintaining the rights of the poor and afflicted.”⁹² Governments are charged with taking care of the poor and needy. If a government fails to perform its obligations to the poor they are liable to God’s judgment. Not only this, but they are worthy of criticism of the church; something which Calvin was not hesitant to do when governments failed to take care of the poor. Heiko Oberman, in “*Europa Afflicta*,” provides Calvin’s rationale behind his criticism of civil governments.⁹³ According to Oberman, Calvin did not serve a parish, territory, or country.⁹⁴ Rather, Calvin saw himself as being called to minister by God, not by city council or king. He believed that he had the authority and responsibility to seek the welfare of all Christians. This remained the case even if it brought him into conflict with those in power or with crowds harboring anti-refugee sentiments.⁹⁵

So far we have seen that Calvin was convinced of the necessity of taking care of the poor. If civil authorities failed to do so, the church was not free to shirk its duty. For Calvin, taking care of the poor was a matter of natural law, something which reason reveals. However, for Calvin it was more than that. As we shall now see, taking care of the poor is closely related to the doctrine of the *imago Dei*.

The Imago Dei and Helping Those in Need

That Calvin’s belief that the doctrine of the *imago Dei* provides grounds for taking care of the poor, e.g. poor and refugees, is evidenced in a number of his commentaries, sermons, and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

92. Tuininga, “Good News,” 230.

93. T. H. L. Parker also notes that Calvin was not hesitant to critique civil magistrates. The exception to this sort of behavior comes when Calvin dealt with injustice and opposition to the gospel. For example, in *Calvin’s Preaching* Parker notes that Calvin specifically indicts some of the Genevan Judges for acting contrary to God’s justice. Parker, *Calvin’s Preaching*, 120.

94. Oberman, “*Europa Afflicta*,” 103.

95. Oberman, “*Europa Afflicta*,” 105.

For example, in his commentary on Galatians, he writes that “Thou shalt love thy neighbor. He who loves will render to every man his right, will do injury or harm to no man, will do good, as far as lies in his power, to all.”⁹⁶ The key phrase here is “to all.” Calvin emphasizes the scope of doing good when he explains that, “the word neighbor, includes all men living; for we are linked together by a common nature.” What is this link? The image of God. Thus, Calvin explains, “the image of God ought to be particularly regarded as a sacred bond of union; but for that very reason, no distinction is here made between friend and foe.”⁹⁷ In his commentary on Philemon, Calvin makes a similar point, saying that Paul does not limit the call to love to the saints alone, rather, “we should honor the image of God which is engraven on our nature, undoubtedly it includes all mankind.”⁹⁸ He makes the point again in his commentary on Colossians, saying, “True love, therefore, will extend to mankind universally, because they are all our flesh, and created in the image of God.”⁹⁹ Calvin’s use of the *imago Dei* in these three commentaries reveals that he thought there was a demand to love others simply because they are made in the image of God. Calvin’s use of Jas 2:13 reveals that he believed the *imago Dei* grounded the love of others in a different way as well. Here he argues that if we show “kindness and benevolence” towards our brothers, God will be merciful to us.¹⁰⁰ How does this relate to the *imago Dei*? Calvin believes that in showing kindness and benevolence, we “bear and exhibit his image on the earth.”¹⁰¹

In addition to these commentaries, Calvin’s sermons illustrate how he applied the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to works of mercy.

96. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 160.

97. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, 160 (see also 181).

98. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, 349.

99. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 138.

100. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 308.

101. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 308.

In a sermon on Mic 6:12–16 preached on 6 January 1551, Calvin explains, “If we wish to prove we are true and faithful servants of God we must be fair and just with our neighbors.”¹⁰² Calvin tells his congregation that “the word Micah uses here means merciful or full of pity.”¹⁰³ He emphasizes the point by saying that to show mercy and pity to those in need “is the major characteristic that Scripture attributes to the Children of God.”¹⁰⁴ This is because “nothing is more like God than to be kind and helpful to others.”¹⁰⁵ Calvin then turns this idea—that to be kind and merciful, especially to those in need, is God-like—into an exhortation. “If we wish to be in the image and likeness of God,” says Calvin, “. . . we must be merciful and full of pity.”¹⁰⁶

Calvin’s sermon on Deut 5:13–15 also applies the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to taking care of the needy. In a section of this sermon in which he mentions the image of God three times, he decries cruelty against neighbors that comes from being “intoxicated with our comforts.” He further decries those who “no longer have compassion for [their] neighbors, or all that they endure” because they have forgotten their “human poverty” and that others are made in the image of God.¹⁰⁷ Calvin reminds those in attendance that “we are blindly in love with ourselves . . . and hardly think of those who are suffering and in want.” How are Christians supposed to overcome this tendency to be turned in on themselves and instead focus on the needs of others? First, they need to be reminded of “the Lord’s call to help those in need.”¹⁰⁸ Second, they are to remember the fact that all human beings are made in the image of God. Thus, Calvin says, “let us practice this doctrine all our life.”¹⁰⁹ The result of putting the doctrine of the image of God into practice is that:

102. Calvin, *Sermons on Micah*, 398.

103. *Ibid.*

104. *Ibid.*

105. *Ibid.*

106. *Ibid.*

107. Calvin, *Writings on Pastoral Piety*, 261.

108. *Ibid.*, 261.

109. *Ibid.*, 261.

When we are guided by that thought, certainly we will be touched by humanity to aid those who are in indigent and in need. We will be moved to compassion, seeing them suffer, so much that if we have the means and capacity to help and assist them, we will use it.¹¹⁰

One final example will serve to illustrate how Calvin used the *imago Dei* to provide reasons for helping those in need. Here we quote a famous passage from Calvin's *Institutes*:

The Lord commands all men without exception "to do good." Yet the great part of them are most unworthy if they be judged by their own merit. But here Scripture helps in the best way when it teaches that we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honor and love . . . Therefore, whatever man may meet you who needs your aid, you have no reason to refuse to help him.¹¹¹

Calvin proceeds to provide three hypothetical objections people might raise against his claim that one has no reason to refuse any human being help. The first objection is that, "He is a stranger." Calvin responds by appealing to image of God, "the Lord has given him a mark that ought to be familiar to you, by virtue of that fact he forbids you to despise your own flesh."¹¹² The second objection is that, "He is contemptible and worthless." Calvin replies, saying, "but the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image." The final objection is that "he does not deserve even your least effort for his sake."¹¹³ Calvin provides his most forceful reply to this objection: "But the image of God, which recommends him to you, is worthy of giving yourself and all your possessions."¹¹⁴

Summary

With the massive influx of refugees fleeing persecution, Geneva had to decide whether, and to what extent, to help these people in

110. *Ibid.*, 261.

111. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.6

112. *Ibid.*

113. *Ibid.*

114. *Ibid.*

need. Given the city's scarce resources and anti-refugee sentiments, Calvin and his supporters needed to make a persuasive case for why Genevans—either through civil, ecclesial, or private resources—ought to take care of those in need. We have provided a few examples of how Calvin used the doctrine of the *imago Dei* to argue for the necessity of Christians doing acts of mercy. We have not shown that he uses the *imago Dei* to make a case for specifically taking care of the refugees. Yet, given that a significantly large number of those in need in Geneva were refugees, it is not difficult to imagine that Calvin had these foreigners in mind when he spoke of caring for the poor and needy.

Calvin's Doctrine of the Imago Dei and Its Contemporary Significance

Retrieval theologies look to the church's past theological reflection and practices in order to resource the contemporary church's constructive theology. They look back in order to look forward.¹¹⁵ The project we have engaged in here—describing two pastoral issues Calvin faced and how his doctrine of the *imago Dei* spoke to those issues—is a sort of retrieval project, in the sense that it looks back to Calvin's theological reflection and practice. Our goal, however, was not to do “constructive theology.” Rather, our goal was to uncover a neglected aspect of Calvin's doctrine of the image of God so that the contemporary church could hear again what one among the “great cloud of witnesses” has to say about challenges it is facing again today.

Consider briefly the following two issues. First, there is the challenge of how church leaders have handled domestic abuse (both verbal and physical).¹¹⁶ Calvin and the Consistory's actions and words may provide a resource for careful reflection on how best to handle these kinds of challenges. Calvin and the Consistory were not hesitant to enact church discipline when a spouse was being abused. They also did not hesitate to turn the abuser over to the civil authorities. Furthermore, Calvin actively

115. Buschart and Eilers, *Theology as Retrieval*, 12.

116. Bailey, “Southern Baptist Leader's Advice,” [2 May 2018].

spoke against violence towards any bearer of God's image; a message which surely would have convicted anyone who harmed their spouse. Second, there is the issue of how the Church, especially in America, should respond to refugees.¹¹⁷ A recent survey conducted by the Pew Research Center has shown that Evangelicals are the group least likely to believe there is a duty to help refugees.¹¹⁸ While one could debate what the term "Evangelical" actually means, the issue still stands: many of those who call themselves Christ followers believe that the duty to help certain people in need does not apply in this particular case. The church might do well to reflect upon Calvin's words and deeds regarding this topic. Calvin, we have shown, believed the civil government had a duty to aid the refugees fleeing into Geneva. When the government failed to perform this task, he actively took part in organizing relief efforts for the refugees in need. His actions speak loudly, and given his actions, his words speak more loudly still. When Christians oppose helping someone, because "he is a stranger," Calvin's response is that this does not matter; the stranger is made in the image of God.¹¹⁹ When people oppose helping a group of people by saying that the group "is contemptible and worthless" or that, "these aren't people, they are animals," Calvin would respond by saying, "the Lord shows him to be one to whom he has deigned to give the beauty of his image."¹²⁰ Because even the most "contemptible" person has the image of God, he is "worthy of giving yourself and all your possessions."¹²¹

Surely, much more needs to be said about how the Church might apply Calvin's wisdom to recent issues involving spousal abuse and the treatment of refugees. Those interested in that wisdom will discover that his references to the *imago Dei* are far

117. It should be noted that there is significant continuity and discontinuity between refugee situation in Calvin's Geneva and the United States at present. One needs to be mindful of these similarities and differences as one attempts to apply Calvin's insights to contemporary situations.

118. Bump, "Group Least Likely," [24 May 2018].

119. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.6

120. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.6

121. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.7.6

richer than this article could possibly portray. Space does not permit us to explore the issues further. Nevertheless, we believe that Calvin's pastoral theology of the *imago Dei* holds promise for helping Christians to live out their call to care for all those who bear God's image.

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