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# Re-visiting the relevance of John Calvin's values of self-denial and calling for new Learning Organisations

## Abstract

*Modern organisations are subjected to increasing demands for the space employees and members need to find purpose, meaning and sense in what they do every day. This article aims to connect John Calvin's ideas related to calling and self-denial with the needs of organisations to accommodate staff members' wishes for meaningful engagement with the work they do in the context of the concept of Learning Organisations.*

*This connection between Calvin and the aim of organisational renewal is made by briefly pointing to the disillusionment of postmodern society with modernistic forces of rationalism, linear thinking, bureaucratisation and standardisation which have led to the dehumanisation of organisations and, ultimately, the world of work. The argument is also made that the development of the Learning Organisation as concept is a new trend in organisational thinking. The Learning Organisation represents a break with modern bureaucratic and hierarchical thinking.*

*The aim is to link these relatively new two organisational trends with the principles which John Calvin articulated about the calling or vocation of the faithful and their relationship with their fellow humans.*

*The conclusion is that, for Christian (Reformed) faithful, the Learning Organisation and acknowledgement of their spiritual contribution is an opportunity to claim the workplace as territory to be in the service of others (as explained in Chapter 7 of Book 3 of the Institutes of the Christian Religion) and, effectively in service of God, experience work as a true vocation and calling.*

**Keywords:** Learning Organisation; John Calvin; Organisational Purpose; Calling; Self-denial

## Opsomming:

### Herbesinning van die relevansie van Johannes Calvyn se waardes van selfverloëning en roeping vir bereiking van Lerende Organisasies se doelwitte.

*Moderne organisasies kry te doen met toenemende eise om ruimte te voorsien vir werknemers en lede van die organisasies waarin hulle doel, betekenis en waarde kan sien waarin hulle elke dag doen. Hierdie artikel poog om Johannes Calvyn se idees van roeping en selfverloëning as beginsel te verbind met die behoefte van organisasies om werknemers betekenisvol betrokke te maak in die werk wat hulle doen in die konteks van die idee van Lerende Organisasies.*

*Die verband tussen Calvyn en die doel van organisatoriese vernuwing word getrek deur kortliks te wys op die teleurstelling van die postmoderne samelewing met die modernistiese kragte van rasionalisme, liniêre denke, burokratisering en standaardisering wat gelei het tot die ontmensliking van organisasies en uiteindelik die wêreld van werk. Die argument word ook aangebied dat 'n nuwe beweging in organisatoriese denke ontstaan het wat die ontwikkeling van die idee van die Lerende Organisasie voorstaan. Die Lerende Organisasie verteenwoordig 'n breuk met moderne burokratiese en hiërargiese denke.*

*Die doel is om hierdie relatief nuwe idees oor vernuwing in organisasies te verbind met die*

*sienings wat Johannes Calvyn uitgedruk het oor die roeping van gelowiges in die werkplek en hulle verhouding met die medemens.*

*Die gevolgtrekking is dat Christelike (Gereformeerde) gelowiges die Lerende Organisasie en erkenning van hulle geestelike bydrae as 'n geleentheid kan gebruik om die werkplek as terrein op te eis waar die naaste gedien kan word (soos verduidelik in Hoofstuk 7 van Boek 3 van Calvyn se **Institusie van die Christelike Godsdienst**) in diens van God. Op hierdie manier kan werk ervaar word as 'n ware uitlewingsgeleentheid van hulle roeping.*

**Sleutelwoorde:** *Lerende Organisasie; Johannes Calvyn; Organisatoriese Doel; Roeping; Selfverloëning*

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## 1. Introduction

One of the many consequences of the Reformation was the impact it had on labour as human activity. It dignified and brought Biblical worth to the work people do. The Reformers emphasised the importance of vocation and calling and stressed the need for the faithful to serve fellow man and glorify God through their labour. Much of this spiritual element of labour has been lost with the “de-spiritualisation” of modern society.

This article aims to connect John Calvin’s ideas related to calling and the principle of self-denial with two relevant trends in the evolution of contemporary organisations.

The first of these trends is the disillusionment of postmodern society with the modernist forces of rationalism, linear thinking, bureaucratisation and standardisation, which have led to the dehumanisation of organisations and, ultimately, the world of work. Many people employed by organisations are increasingly asking fundamental questions to make sense of their existence and, consequently, to find meaning in their daily labour.

The second trend towards organisational renewal, which is relevant to the topic, is the development of the concept of a Learning Organisation. This development offers a way out of modernist organisational thinking, and is more than just the logical next step in the evolution of extant organisational thinking. The idea of a Learning Organisation is a break with modern bureaucratic and hierarchical thinking.

In this article, the following questions are investigated:

- Which pressures do organisations experience towards organisational renewal? Moreover, concomitantly, what is the impact of employees’ changing expectations? Finally, how can ideas regarding Learning Organisations accommodate these expectations and pressures?
- How can Calvin’s principles of self-denial and work as calling apply to organisational renewal, and give substance to (Reformed / Christian) employees’ need to be meaningfully engaged at work?

Calvin identified two applicable concepts that focus on the role of the faithful in society. Calvin’s description of the faithful’s relationship towards their fellow humans is investigated, firstly, with reference to the central thesis of Chapter 7 of Book 3 of the *Institutes*, and, secondly, his views about the vocation or calling of ordinary people, taken from a *capita selecta* of his commentaries.

## 2. Relevant contemporary trends in organisational thinking

This section presents a brief exposition of two relevant trends in organisational evolution, before linking it to Calvin's views. Two contemporary trends that are relevant for purposes of this article are the disappointment of employees with the modern organisational setup and the growing interest in Learning Organisations as an organisational outcome.

### 2.1 *Disillusionment with modernist thinking in organisations*

Crone (2015) paints a complex picture of pre-modern society, in which she emphasises that pre-modern people lived in small, close-knit communities with a strong sense of responsibility towards the community, and a pervasive awareness of the need to act both purposefully and in the common interest. Similarly, pre-modern *industrial* organisations (simple industries with limited specialisation) were characterised by a sense of community, with a network of personal relationships based on kinship and direct face-to-face contact, unwritten norms and interdependence (Baran & Davis, 2003). These organisations had to make way for rationally organised modern industries. For purposes of this article, simplification of scholarly views on pre-modern society (or societies) is unavoidable and must, accordingly serve only as a reference point in distinguishing it from modernity.

Van der Walt (2006:68-204) convincingly linked the process of development of modern organisations to the move from societal pre-modernity to modernity. With the arrival of modernity (introduced in organisational context after industrialisation and associated urbanisation, and developed, thereafter, to full consequence in the twentieth century), *scientific* ways of organising and managing replaced those values which had permeated pre-modern society and its organisations. In modern organisations, values like community centeredness, close relationships in organisational context, sense of purpose and meaning, family values and the dependence on good interpersonal relations and communication were neglected (various authors such as Zohar & Marshall, 2004 as well as Bagraim, 2003 explored this in more detail).

Modernism and associated rationalism and linear thinking also impacted negatively on religion and the influence of religion on the place of work. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, Max Weber (1993) referred to the decline of a spiritual perspective on work as a process of disenchantment. The idea of calling and vocation was replaced by *scientific* ways of organising and managing the modern organisation. In her investigation, Van der Walt (2006) uncovered that many organisations were still stuck in principles and operational modes conceived and developed during the first part of the previous century. She demonstrated that where there were attempts to *humanise* the organisation, it was mostly done to serve the interest of the organisation itself – with an eye on improving productivity, cost-effectiveness and the *bottom-line*. The best illustration of this discredited view on the role of employees is the fact that they are still being referred to as *human resources* – on par with the other production elements, like capital (financial resources) and raw material.

Effectively, it means the values and practices that people accept as valid and appropriate in their functioning as members of society (democracy, service delivery, freedom of expression, sense-making and purposeful living, etc.) do not apply to them in their roles as employees in organisations. Organisations have a completely different set of expectations and, in essence, require employees to live compartmentalised lives – detaching their occupational life from how they live as members of society. Du Plessis (2008) argued that, for most populations, at least in the last 150 years or so, people were able to influence their destiny by putting governments in power, exercising their right to free speech, and taking full responsibility for their households and the education of their children. However, many of them, when arriving at work as employees, have to follow orders mechanically – with little autonomy or sense of self-determination.

Researchers such as Whitney (2002) indicate that, in a postmodern world, many people are not satisfied with simply earning a living in organisations which do not make a positive contribution to society. For example, the idea of an organisation aiming at maximising profits, and, in the process, destroying the environment and acting exploitatively, has become discredited. Society expects organisations to be responsible and caring. Similarly, employees increasingly expect their employers to create an environment in which they can find meaning in what they do and to experience that what they do has a purpose and contributes to a better society. Employees are looking for meaning in what they do during most of their productive hours. This was also confirmed by the studies reported in Overall (2002) and Crossman (2007).

In the postmodern environment, there is increasingly a hunger for a sense of purpose and meaningfulness. Kiefer & Senge (1982) argued that the workplace had become the epicentre in the revival of spiritual and teleological (purpose related) questions asked by the employees of organisations. Employees want to make a difference purposefully and have an impact. Many organisations are already aware of this need of their employees but don't have the insight, nor are they willing, to transform to the extent that they could create an environment conducive to bring their employees' spiritual needs to life (Kiefer & Senge, 1982). Pava (2004:84) says "... organisations must become more self-conscious about the fact that they are locations where human beings interpret life's meanings".

What do people see as meaningful? Lips-Wiersma (2002:513) summarises the accommodation of spiritual needs of people in the workplace – where the self is allowed to develop and thrive, unity and community with others are experienced, expression of the self is accommodated, and, ultimately, employees can be of service to others. Such employees also expect the same from the organisation as entity.

## **2.2 The Learning Organisation as a concept**

The Learning Organisation, as a concept, gained momentum in the 1990s with the work of Peter Senge and his colleagues. Senge (1990:14) defines a Learning Organisation as one that learns and encourages learning among its constituent members. It promotes the exchange of information between employees, hence creating a more knowledgeable workforce. He says (Senge, 1990:14) a Learning Organisation is "... an organisation which is continually expanding its capacity to create its future". The result: "... produces a very flexible organisation where people will accept and adapt to new ideas and changes through a shared vision... . The Learning Organisation is one in which people at all levels, individuals and collectively, is continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about" (Senge, 1990:14). Du Plessis (2008) – borrowing from Senge - sees Learning Organisations as:

... those where all sections and staff are encouraged to learn, share institutional knowledge, capture the knowledge and are allowed to independently and in teams innovate and change in response to changes in the environment. In these organisations, the members are driven by purpose, and experience what they do as meaningful.

To describe the ideal new Learning Organisation, the analogy of a sophisticated machine can be applied, where all the different components and functions are (independently) self-adjusting in response to variables that change.

The strong focus on purpose as the main driver of the Learning Organisation creates space in which employees can find meaning and sense in their everyday working life. Organisational purpose is also a source of creativity and innovation for the employees.

However, there are many obstacles to the operationalisation of the Learning Organisation concept. Du Plessis (2015) identified a number of these obstacles, such as insufficient

proper theoretical depth, untested assumptions and a focus on an undefined purpose. One of the conclusions (which is relevant for this article) was that the focus on any purpose in itself is not enough to inspire most employees to see the workplace as an opportunity to make a difference (Du Plessis, 2015). For the purpose of an organisation to be truly inspiring and, accordingly, to allow employees to identify with the organisation and its goals, it needs to be linked to service and care for others and the world. Whitney (2002:79) says that

... now, not only do people want their own life to be full of meaning and purpose, but they also expect the same of their organizations. Awakening people want to work for organizations that care and that are consciously contributing to the planet. People want their organizations to make positive contributions to their communities and to the world, and they want work to enliven them.

If people believe their work does not matter or make a difference, they often experience a feeling of inner poverty, which they may even experience as being worse than economic inequality (Porter & Norris, 2013:429). De Beer (2011, 2012, 2013 and 2014) in a series of articles investigating the loss of *spirit* in society, concluded that the spirit of care and caring were lost and that care and caring for others and the world is what is required to bring new meaning in a postmodern world.

Care and caring for others and the world should, therefore, be a key ingredient when the purpose of an organisation is developed to provide a space for creating meaning for their employees.

### **2.3 Implications of the disillusionment with modern organisations and the new focus on Learning Organisations**

The search for meaning in the workplace and the development of Learning Organisations are linked in this article, as the search for meaning by employees can ideally be accommodated in the Learning Organisation.

In this section, it is argued that the renewed search for meaning and disillusionment with modern organisations can be associated with the development of the Learning Organisation with its strong focus on organisational purpose as the driving force for personal commitment and contributions. However, a purpose in itself can be empty and even dangerous. A singular focus on purpose in itself is associated with the philosophical movement of Teleology – with the emphasis on purpose aiming at the outcomes of actions – which may lead to a view that the end justifies the means. To maximise profit or to be the top / best producer, or to be the best employee, can, for example, also be the purpose of an organisation or the driving force of the individual. Purpose, therefore, needs to be tempered by a spiritual element, namely to be a force for good in the service of fellow-humans – it must be about care to be intrinsically and truly inspirational. Both the organisation and the individual employee have to find purpose in service to others. Many people strive towards finding meaning in the work they do – as a goal. For some of them, it is in doing meaningful work that they find sense in their existence and life-world.

## **3. John Calvin's principles of self-denial and calling filling the void?**

In this section, it is argued that in considering the relevant trends in organisational thinking discussed above, the Reformation and the views of John Calvin can provide a substantive insight into the world of work. As briefly discussed above, people are disillusioned with the promises of the modern organisation and its focus on rationalism, bureaucratisation and hierarchical thinking. Employees are asking fundamental questions about their existence and try to make sense in a postmodern world. It was argued that the search for meaning in the workplace is ultimately linked to care for fellow human beings and the world. Those who

look for meaning want the workplace to provide an environment where service to others and the ideal of making the world a better place, become motivating factors – and that the organisations' purpose should also be linked to serving others in a caring manner.

If purpose in the workplace needs to be linked to care and service to others, Calvin's understanding of the world of work and service to fellow humans can offer an exemplary model for the *content* needed to fill the Learning Organisation's purpose as *empty vessel* (especially for the faithful). Calvin's views on calling and vocation as well as his focus on service to others fit this framework perfectly. For Christians, the Learning Organisation and its focus on purpose in service of others, provide an opportunity to thrive in their calling.

Various authors have investigated and documented Calvin's position on socio-economic issues, which include the world of work. Scholars such as Blanchard (2010 – specifically the first two chapters of her report), Graham (1971), Schulze (1985), Goudzwaard (1980) and Wallace (1988) investigated Calvin's views on social and economic ethics. Perhaps the most prominent of these studies was the one by Bieler (1961) in which he paid specific attention to the "... social and political emphasis of Calvin in his sermons preached Sundays and weekdays in Geneva" (Graham, 1971:55).

Various principles can be identified that Calvin articulated which serve specifically to link Calvin's Reformation to a contemporary phenomenon such as the concept of the Learning Organisation.

### **3.1 The starting point: Calvin's "A summary of the Christian life. Of self-denial"**

For an exploration of Calvin's views on service to others Book 3, Chapter 7 of his *Institutes* (the section entitled *A summary of the Christian life. Of self-denial*) can be considered a starting point. The discussion below against the background of the principle of self-denial focuses on an analysis of John Calvin's views and its meaning for the faithful in terms of calling and vocation in the service of others – and, by definition, as employees in organisations.

In answer to postmodern man's quest for meaning in their work as discussed previously, John Calvin's views offer a possible solution for Christians at work. He placed a great deal of emphasis on the calling of the faithful – a life in service of the Lord. In his *Institutes* (Section 3.7.1 and further) Calvin describes the principle of self-denial as the basis for the Christian life. The point of departure is that the faithful are the property of God and have to put themselves and their belongings in the service of the Lord. This principle of self-denial has, according to Calvin, two dimensions. The first is for the faithful to surrender themselves and what they have to God. Secondly, in order to surrender to God's will, requires in turn to act in self-denial towards others and act in their best interest. The latter means putting themselves and what they have in the service of others.

In Chapter 7 of Book 3 of the *Institutes* Calvin set out the principles for what he describes as "A summary of the Christian life ..."

The point of departure for Calvin (*Institutes* 3.7.1) is that the faithful does not belong to themselves but belongs to God and that this status requires dedication:

Conversely, we are God's: let us therefore live for him and die for him". We are God's; therefore, let his wisdom and will preside over all our actions. We are God's; to him, then, as the only legitimate end, let every part of our life be directed. O how great the proficiency of him who, taught that he is not his own, has withdrawn the dominion and government of himself from his own reason that he may give them to God!

The editors of the specific translation of the *Institutes* summarised the *motive* for doing good (also in the workplace) in the form of a heading for 3.7.2

Since we are not our own, we must seek the glory of God, and obey his will. Self-denial recommended to the disciples of Christ. He who neglects it, deceived either by pride or hypocrisy, rushes on destruction.

In the remainder of Section 2 Calvin shows how, without self-denial to God, people will only do good out of a motive of self-love and "... at least for the sake of praise". With reference to Matthew 6 verse 2 Calvin declares these "hunters after popular applause with their swollen breasts" have received their reward in this world. Unless one is to "... deny yourself, renounce your own reason and direct your whole mind to the pursuit of those things which the Lord requires of you ..." doing good will have a selfish motive rather than doing good for its own sake.

In Section 3 (*Institutes* 3.7.3) Calvin then links this relationship between self-denial to God and good deeds, to sobriety, righteousness and godliness, as the "three things to be followed":

... *Sobriety* undoubtedly denotes as well chastity and temperance as the pure and frugal use of temporal goods, and patient endurance of want. *Righteousness* comprehends all the duties of equity, in every one his due. Next follows *godliness*, which separates us from the pollutions of the world, and connects us with God in true holiness. These, when connected together by an indissoluble chain, constitute complete perfection. But as nothing is more difficult than to bid adieu to the will of the flesh, subdue, nay, abjure our lusts, devote ourselves to God and our brethren, and lead an angelic life amid the pollutions of the world ...

In Section 4 (*Institutes* 3.7.4) Calvin links self-denial to God then directly to the Christian's relationship to other people - in the first instance on how fellow human beings are being perceived. How others and the self are seen already needs to reflect an attitude of self-denial:

For when Scripture enjoins us, in regard to our fellow men, to prefer them in honour to ourselves, and sincerely labour to promote their advantages (Rom 12:10; Php 2:3), he gives us commands which our mind is utterly incapable of obeying until its natural feelings are suppressed. The vices with which we abound we both carefully conceal from others, and flatteringly represent to ourselves as minute and trivial, nay, sometimes hug them as virtues. When the same qualities which we admire in ourselves are seen in others, even though they should be superior, we, in order that we may not be forced to yield to them, maliciously lower and carp at them; in like manner, in the case of vices, not contented with severe and keen animadversion, we studiously exaggerate them. Hence, the insolence with which each, as if exempted from the common lot, seeks to exalt himself above his neighbour, confidently and proudly despising others, or at least looking down upon them as his inferiors. The poor man yields to the rich, the plebeian to the noble, the servant to the master, the unlearned to the learned, and yet every one inwardly cherishes some idea of his own superiority.

A humble self-image should then result in the Christian recognising the "gifts of God" in others and give respect to them (*Institutes* 3.7.4):

Again, we are enjoined, whenever we behold the gifts of God in others, so to reverence and respect the gifts, as also to honour those in whom they reside. God having been pleased to bestow honour upon them, it would ill become us to deprive them of it. Then we are told to overlook their faults, not, indeed, to encourage by flattering them, but not because of them to insult those whom we ought to

regard with honour and good will. In this way, with regard to all with whom we have intercourse, our behaviour will be not only moderate and modest, but courteous and friendly. The only way by which you can ever attain to true meekness, is to have your heart imbued with a humble opinion of yourself and respect for others.

The result will be for Christians to respect other people, treat them in a friendly way and to be modest about themselves.

Up to Section 4 (*Institutes* 3.7.4) Calvin deals with the spiritual requirements for Christians which should eventually be reflected in their attitudes towards others. However, from Section 5 (*Institutes* 3.7.5) onward he also shows how it should manifest materially in behaviour and actual service to others in doing things for them and in kind. Calvin reminds his readers (*Institutes* 3.7.5) that "... the legitimate use of all our gifts is a kind and liberal communication of them with others". God gave his gifts to men on condition it should be applied to the benefit of others. With reference to 1 Corinthians 12, using the metaphor of the human body where every part of the body exists for the benefit of the whole body, Calvin then also claims that everyone together with what they own is in the service of others in a similar way. In 3.7.5 of the *Institutes* Calvin repeatedly speaks of neighbours within the context of the Church, where human relationships are determined according to the bond established by Christ and maintained by his Spirit. Graham (1971:55) confirmed Calvin's view that "neighbour" applies for him indiscriminately to every man and the whole human race is for Calvin united in a sacred bond of fellowship. For Calvin, being human makes that person a neighbour.

In Section 6 (*Institutes* 3.7.6) Calvin takes the idea that everyone and what they own in should be in service of others, even further. He states that God's image should be seen in others. In the first place those sharing the faith, but then extended to everyone else. He formulates the demand as follows (*Institutes* 3.7.6):

The Lord enjoins us to do good to all without exception, though the greater part, if estimated by their own merit, are most unworthy of it. But Scripture subjoins a most excellent reason, when it tells us that we are not to look to what men in themselves deserve, but to attend to the image of God, which exists in all, and to which we owe all honour and love. But in those who are of the household of faith, the same rule is to be more carefully observed, inasmuch as that image is renewed and restored in them by the Spirit of Christ. Therefore, whoever be the man that is presented to you as needing your assistance, you have no ground for declining to give it to him. Say he is a stranger. The Lord has given him a mark which ought to be familiar to you: for which reason he forbids you to despise your own flesh, (Gal 6: 10). Say he is mean and of no consideration. The Lord points him out as one whom he has distinguished by the lustre of his own image, (Isa 58: 7). Say that you are bound to him by no ties of duty. The Lord has substituted him as it were into his own place, that in him you may recognise the many great obligations under which the Lord has laid you to himself. Say that he is unworthy of your least exertion on his account; but the image of God, by which he is recommended to you, is worthy of yourself and all your exertions. But if *he not only merits no good, but has provoked you by injury and mischief, still this is no good reason why you should not embrace him in love, and visit him with offices of love. He has deserved very differently from me, you will say. But what has the Lord deserved?* (Author's emphasis).

Wallace (1988:91) shows that Calvin linked ownership of property and prosperity of the rich directly to "his own poor whom he must also see as placed strategically around him by God. Such poor people belonged to the rich as did their own families". In a sermon on Deuteronomy Calvin specifically referred to "thy poor" and emphasised that God is the receiver of what is given to the poor.

In Section 7 Calvin concludes it is not enough only to do all this because it is your duty, but it can only be done properly when executed with a "... pure feeling of love" (*Institutes*, 3.7.7):

... from Christians something more is required than to carry cheerfulness in their looks, and give attractiveness to the discharge of their duties by courteous language. First, they should put themselves in the place of him whom they see in need of their assistance, and pity his misfortune as if they felt and bore it, so that a feeling of pity and humanity should incline them to assist him just as they would themselves. He who is thus minded will go and give assistance to his brethren, and not only not taint his acts with arrogance or upbraiding but will neither look down upon the brother to whom he does a kindness, as one who needed his help, or keep him in subjection as under obligation to him, just as we do not insult a diseased member when the rest of the body labours for its recovery, nor think it under special obligation to the other members, because it has required more exertion than it has returned.

Everything John Calvin describes as the summary of the Christian life in Chapter 7 of Book 3 has the same message. Surrendering to God ultimately implies self-denial towards others, and for the Christian, it means they have to put themselves and what they have in the service of others. Wallace (1988:94) concludes that "The rich has no right to remain very rich while a deep gulf is maintained between him and the poor around him – he is just a steward of what he possesses. The condition is that it should be shared with the hungry and thirsty."

This is also consistent with what Calvin writes in some commentaries. For example - in his commentary on John 15:12 Calvin says:

True, the love and reverence for God comes first in order, but as the true proof of it is love toward our neighbours, he dwells chiefly on this point. Besides, as he formerly held himself out for a pattern in maintaining the general doctrine, so he now holds himself out for a pattern in a particular instance; for he loved all his people, that they may love each other

Moreover, further in verse 13, he emphasises the root motive:

In this way, too, Christ laid down his life for those who were strangers, but whom, even while they were strangers, he loved, otherwise he would not have died for them.

For purposes of this article the first principle that can be identified in Calvin's views, which relates to the behaviour of members of an organisation, is that true purpose is to put themselves at the service of fellow human beings, based on the foundation of self-denial.

### **3.2 Calling or vocation of the faithful**

The Reformation of the 16th century brought with it the idea of a calling or vocation for the faithful – which also affected the everyday life and activities of those who believe. In other words, calling or vocation also have implications for how people perceive their role in the work they do – as farmers or teachers or whatever they do. For the early Protestants work was not simply a means of earning a living, but a calling in service of God.

Bieler (1961:484) shows that the word and its meaning originates during the Reformation. For the first time, Reformed teaching articulated the principle that the professional activity or social function of work not only precipitated moral laudability, but also contained religious content. The reformers emphasised that it was not the asceticism of the monks which pleases God, but the conscientious devotion of all activities (professional and secular) that man performs every day - and it is that which, accordingly, is meaningful (see the discussion in Bieler, 1961:483 - 485).

A brief selection from Calvin's commentaries gives perspective on the calling of the faithful as ordinary citizens and employees. For example, in the sermon on 1 Corinthians 7:17 he says the following:

The meaning is: "What, then, is to be done, unless that every one walk according to the grace given to him, and according to his calling? Let everyone, therefore, labour for this, and use his endeavour, that he may do good to his neighbours, and, more especially, when he ought to be excited to it by the particular duty of his calling."

The believer should, therefore, see work as a calling and specifically find fulfilment in doing his or her daily task with the motive that this will allow him or her to do good to other people.

In his exposition of verse 20 of 1 Corinthians 7, Calvin gives the following clear understanding of how work should be seen as a calling from God and to be content.

This is the source from which other things are derived, - that everyone should be contented with his calling, and pursue it, instead of seeking to betake himself to anything else. A calling in Scripture means a lawful mode of life, for it has a relation to God as calling us - lest anyone should abuse this statement to justify modes of life that are evidently wicked or vicious. But here it is asked, whether Paul means to establish any obligation, for it might seem as though the words conveyed this idea, that everyone is bound to his calling, so that he must not abandon it. Now it were a very hard thing if a tailor were not at liberty to learn another trade, or if a merchant were not at liberty to betake himself to farming. I answer, that this is not what the Apostle intends, for he has it simply in view to correct that inconsiderate eagerness, which prompts some to change their condition without any proper reason, whether they do it from superstition, or from any other motive.

Calvin then links the idea of calling further to Verse 21 of 1 Corinthians 7 and ask whether the above is true even if one is called as a servant?

We see here that Paul's object is to satisfy their consciences; for he exhorts servants to be of good cheer, and not be cast down, as if servitude were a hindrance in the way of their serving God. Care not for it then, that is to say, be not concerned how you may throw off the yoke, as if it were a condition unbecoming a Christian, but be contented in mind. And hence we infer, not merely that it is owing to the providence of God that there are different ranks and stations in the world, but also, that a regard to them is enjoined by his word.

Moreover, the argument about being content as being a servant continues in verse 22 onward in a similar pattern. Graham (1971:58) points out that Calvin felt that in the relationship of employer and servants (with reference to the master-slave relationships in Ephesians) the civil codes always give masters too much power. Contradicting that, Graham shows that, for Calvin, God allows to masters no power over slaves more than what is consistent with the law of love.

The question about the position of a servant arises again in his discussion of Titus 2:9 where Calvin explains with reference to the calling of servants:

... Accordingly, when he enjoins servants to please their masters in all things, this desire of pleasing must be limited to those things which are proper; as is evident from other passages of a similar nature, in which an exception is expressly added, to the effect that nothing should be done but according to the will of God. It may be observed that the Apostle dwells chiefly on this point, that they who are under the authority of others shall be obedient and submissive. With good reason he does

this, for nothing is more contrary to the natural disposition of man than subjection, and there was danger lest they should take the gospel as a pretext for becoming more refractory, as reckoning it unreasonable that they should be subject to the authority of unbelievers.

Calvin emphasises that it is not only in formal employment that Christians should be exemplary, but they should also set an example in life in general. In his explanation on Matthew 5 verses 13 and 14, Calvin first focuses on the purification of the faithful but then says with reference to Mark 9:50-51

I think that Christ is exhorting his own people to maintain the rigor of faith, which may serve also to purify others. "You must do your endeavour, not only to be salted within, but likewise to salt others." But as salt bites by its sharpness, he immediately admonishes them to regulate the seasoning in such a manner, that peace may be preserved entire with one another

In support of the above Calvin then refers to verses 14 and 15 of Matthew 5 to explain the responsibility of believers towards society:

... A city placed on a mountain cannot be concealed; and a candle, when it has been lighted, is not usually concealed, (verse 15.) This means, that they ought to live in such a manner, as if the eyes of all were upon them. And certainly, the more eminent a person is, the more injury he does by a bad example, if he acts improperly. Christ, therefore, informs the apostles, that they must be more careful to live a devout and holy life, than unknown persons of the common rank, because the eyes of all are directed to them, as to lighted candles; and that they must not be endured, if their devotion, and uprightness of conduct, do not correspond to the doctrine of which they are ministers.

Both Bieler (1961) and Graham (1971) emphasised Calvin's insistence on the "common good" as a prerequisite for economic activity (and by extension, this can be the moral test for any organisation). This motive fits the ideal "purpose" of the new Learning Organisation well.

The second relevant principle that Calvin highlights directly relates to the workplace and responsibility of believers towards society. The work that people do is also service to God, and they have to utilise the opportunity to serve God by serving others.

#### **4. Conclusion: linking John Calvin and the implications of his views for the Learning Organisation**

The disillusionment with the state of the modern organisation has the consequence that many people are asking the old fundamental questions about meaning and purpose for their life. For many of them, this *spiritual need* at the place of work is lacking substantive motivation and is basically directed towards feeling good about themselves because they do good to others. The faithful ask the same questions about meaning and purpose in their lives but follow another route to find answers to those questions. Calvin articulates the answer to the questions about meaning and purpose as self-denial and, therefore, living a life of being in the service of others, as well as having a calling to see the workplace as in service of God.

The new Learning Organisation as a concept is a revolutionary development in organisational context. The focus is on purpose (individually and aligned with an institutional vision and purpose) that becomes the driving force for *self-managed* units and individuals. Motivated employees can critically reflect on what they do, improve, allow others to learn from their experience and solutions to problems and start a new cycle of improvement.

The problem is that purpose (as applied in the Learning Organisation context) can be anything – to be the best at what the organisation does, or to maximise profits etc. Organisational purpose needs to be tempered by a *spiritual* value that links up with care and caring for others (and the world) to optimise the opportunity for postmodern *seekers* of meaning to find meaning in work itself and at the workplace.

John Calvin's principles of self-denial linked to the idea of calling or vocation fit the needs of the *empty* vehicle provided by the Learning Organisation. Self-denial in service to others and to experience employment as a calling will provide substance to the efforts of Christians' in organisations to find meaning and purpose in what they do. This focus on service to and care towards others and the world will also help to put pressure on organisations to serve society with worthwhile goals. For organisations to optimise their purpose, they need to accommodate their employees' search for meaning and sense-making by not only making provision for exercising of spirituality, but by actively encouraging those values to be exercised in a context that is neutral and not prescriptive.

For the faithful, the organisational space for exercising their calling is an opportunity to claim the workplace as territory to be in the service of others (and, therefore, in effect, to be in service of God) and to experience work as a true vocation and calling.

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