

**“... they had all things in common”:
Calvin’s exposition of the community of goods
in some key texts in Acts**

Erik van Alten
Jonathan Edwards Centre,
University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

Abstract

In an interesting text that has survived as the result of one of their regular Friday meetings (*congrégations*), the pastors of Geneva officially declared their position on the sensitive issue of the community of goods. After close examination it is clear that Calvin’s own position on this matter is completely in line with the pastors’ declaration. In this article Calvin’s commentary and sermons on Acts 2:43–45, 4:32–37 and 5:1–6, in which he elaborates on his position, are investigated. During the Reformation these passages were deemed key texts regarding this issue.

In his discussion of these passages, Calvin positions himself against the attitudes and actions of four groups, namely the Anabaptists, the rich (of Geneva), the poor, and the monks. These four groups, drawn from his own context, represent the extreme positions which Calvin seeks to avoid. In order to find the *via media* between these extremes, Calvin identifies four important concepts in Scripture that shape his own view on this matter. These are love, order, ability and need. They are intricately connected and give Calvin’s position the balance he strived for.

Introduction

Are the properties of Christians their own or are they communal?

All individual Christians must so possess their properties that, while they keep them available to everybody and nonetheless put the fruit to use for the need of everyone and so take pleasure in their own [parts], nothing is regarded as solely for themselves.

*The properties of Christians are thus communal and still everyone’s own.*¹

This is proposition 13 of a list of 40 such propositions found in an appendix to the first volume of the *Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs de Genève au temps de Calvin* (RCP I:167-182).² Following the *congrégations* on Friday mornings, held in French and open to the public, a closed session of the pastors was held in Latin in the afternoon. It was during these private afternoon sessions that propositions (on doctrinal, ethical and ecclesiastical issues) were put forward, by each minister as it was his turn, and discussed by the company of pastors (De Boer, 2012:71). The final text of each proposition presents a unified and reformed position. Proposition 13 was put forward by Nicolas des Gallars (De Boer 2012:284).

It seems impossible to determine whether Calvin himself was present during this specific meeting.³ However, after studying what Calvin himself wrote on this topic in some key passages in his commentary and sermons on the book of Acts – Acts 2:43–45, 4:32–37 and 5:1–6⁴ – it is clear that the wording of this proposition is a good summary of the Reformer’s own position on the community of goods. Therefore, either he was present during this meeting, in which case he most probably influenced the final wording of the proposition, or he was absent, in which case he certainly would have concurred with its content.

After all, the conclusion to proposition 13 – “the properties of Christians are thus communal and still everyone’s own” – is exactly the kind of *via media* that Calvin tries to find in his discussion of this topic in his commentary and sermons on Acts. Both in his commentary and in his sermon on Acts 2:43–45, probably the most important passage on this topic, Calvin warns his readers against taking an extreme position,⁵ and for that

¹ Translation from De Boer (2012:284).

² For more on this neglected text with propositions, see De Boer (2012:71–92 & 273–301).

³ The date of the meeting is unknown. Only three of the 40 propositions are dated (propositions 36 and 38 are from 7 April and 31 July 1551 respectively, and proposition 39 is from 8 January 1552). However, from the introduction to the text with propositions it is known that the practice of propositions was started in 1545 and continued until 1552, when it was either stopped or no longer recorded (De Boer, 2012:79–81). Incidentally, it was during the latter half of this period that Calvin preached and commented on the Acts of the Apostles, which will also be the focus of this article.

⁴ These passages deal with the subject directly and are used as the classical proof texts for the community of goods. For Calvin’s commentary on Acts the text as edited by Helmut Feld (2001), COR XII/1, will be used; for the sermons the text found in *Supplementa Calviniana*, volume 8, edited by Willem Balke and Wilhelmus H. Th. Moehn (1994), will be used.

⁵ ... hic duo extrema cavenda sunt (COR XII/1, 90, 15-16); ... afin de ne point tomber en nulle extrémité (SC 8, 51, 23-24).

reason this passage needs a sound exposition and these words need to be weighed carefully (COR XII/1, 90, 11–16; SC 8, 51, 23–24).⁶ In another context, but still on the same topic, he again warns against extremity. When teaching his congregation that they should exercise prudence and discernment in distributing their goods, Calvin advises them to guard against extremity in probing for information (SC 8, 122, 19–21).⁷ It is clear from these citations that Calvin wants to avoid extreme positions in the matter of the community of goods.⁸ In the rest of this article it will be shown what the extreme positions were that Calvin had in mind, and how he goes about in achieving the *via media*. Paragraph 2 analyses with whom Calvin discourses in order to find the *via media*, and paragraph 3 shows the concepts which form the parameters for this balance. Finally, in paragraph 4 some conclusions will be drawn.⁹

Which positions not to take?

When one thinks about the community of goods in the time of the Reformation, the Anabaptists, of course, immediately come to mind. Some groups among the Anabaptists, especially the Munsterites and the Hutterites, were well known for their extreme position on this matter (Balke 1973:278; Farley 1982:107).¹⁰ It is therefore no surprise when Calvin explicitly mentions the Anabaptists in his commentary and sermons on the relevant passages in the book of Acts. What is striking, however, is that, in addition to the Anabaptists, he repeatedly mentions and warns against the attitude and conduct of three other groups, namely the rich, the poor and the monks. Together, the attitude and conduct of these four groups represent the positions that Calvin wants to avoid in dealing with the subject of the community of goods. Each of these groups will subsequently be discussed in more detail.

The Anabaptists

It would be an unfair generalisation to say that all the Anabaptists were in favour of a community of goods. Some of the Anabaptist leaders, like Balthasar Hubmaier and Menno Simons, explicitly denied the accusation that they taught the community of goods and that Christians were not allowed private property (Sommer 1954:208–209; Estep 1963:89; Balke 1973:278). It seems that Calvin was aware of this denial but rejected it. In his treatise against the Anabaptists published in 1544,¹¹ Calvin remarks that it is the aim of these people to bring everything into disorder by establishing a community of goods.¹² Immediately afterwards he adds: “Although they would strongly and firmly deny this” (CO 7:87).¹³ Calvin’s rejection of this denial is implicitly upheld in his commentary and sermons on Acts where he makes no effort to distinguish between certain groups of Anabaptists. Instead, he refers to the Anabaptists in general terms, sometimes explicitly (in his commentary on Acts 2:44 and 4:34), and sometimes implicitly (in his commentary on Acts 5:4 and in his sermons on Acts 2:43–45 and 4:32–37). This generalising tendency should be kept in mind when discussing Calvin’s critique of the Anabaptists.

It is clear from what Calvin says in his commentary and sermons on the relevant passages in Acts that he deems the Anabaptist position to be the most extreme of all the positions. This can be seen from the names he calls the Anabaptists. Twice he denounces them as “fanatical spirits” (COR XII/1, 90, 11)¹⁴ and “fanatical people” (COR XII/1, 136, 31–32).¹⁵ In addition, anyone who claims that the faithful are not allowed to have any property of their own – exactly the position of at least some of the Anabaptists – he condemns as “completely mad” (COR XII/1, 139, 27–29)¹⁶, and those who desire that everything is held in common he refers to as “crackpots” (SC 8, 52, 12).¹⁷

These pejoratives may create the impression that Calvin is merely intent on name-calling. However, this is not the case. He gives a solid basis for resisting the Anabaptist position on the community of goods. Calvin’s argument is that the Anabaptists are wrong in extracting a binding law from Luke’s accounts of the practice of the early Church (COR XII/1, 136, 33–34; COR XII/1, 139, 23–24). In his commentary on Acts 4:34, where

⁶ ... sana expositione (COR XII/1, 90, 11); ... il nous fault bien poiser ces motz, afin de ne point tomber en nulle extremité (SC 8, 51, 23–24).

⁷ Il est vray que nous ne devons point estre trop extremes en ceste inquisition la (SC 8, 122, 19–21).

⁸ Cf. Bouwsma (1989:197).

⁹ See also Schulze, L.F., 1985, *Calvin and ‘Social Ethics’*, Pretoria, Kital for more on this topic.

¹⁰ For more on the Hutterite position, see David Joris’ ‘The building of the church’ (1537), in Waite (ed. 1994:179), as well as Ulrich Stadler’s ‘Cherished instructions on sin, excommunication and the community of goods’ (1537), in Williams (ed. 1957:272–284).

¹¹ *Brieve instruction pour armer tous bons fideles contre les erreurs de la secte commune des anabaptistes* (CO 7:45–142).

¹² Interestingly, Jacob Wiedemann, an early leader of what would later become the Hutterites and a strong proponent of the community of goods, himself once said that this practice was at that time characterized by “grosse unordnung” (Estep, 1963:91).

¹³ Combien qu’ilz le nient fort et firme (CO 7:87).

¹⁴ ... spiritus fanaticos (COR XII/1, 90, 11).

¹⁵ ... Anabaptistae et fanatici homines (COR XII/1, 136, 31–32).

¹⁶ Unde patet, omnino freneticos esse, qui fidelibus licere negant quicquam habere proprium (COR XII/1, 139, 27–29).

¹⁷ ... fantasticques (SC 8, 52, 12).

Luke relates “the actions of men in whom the Spirit of God was manifest with singular efficacy and power” (referring to Barnabas and others), Calvin is quick to add that Luke does not speak generally, as if to imply that someone who did not sell his possessions was not considered a Christian (COR XII/1, 136, 35–137, 2).¹⁸ Although Calvin concedes that this verse could be understood as applying to everyone, he deems the context clear enough to conclude that there were many who did not sell their possessions, adding that it is a common custom in Scripture to attribute the actions of a part to the whole (COR XII/1, 135, 28–29).¹⁹

From the subsequent history of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, Calvin comes to a similar conclusion. After all, there was no necessity that drove Ananias to sin. He had the right to keep his land as well as the money, and had he done so, he would not have been seen as less faithful. “From this we gather that there was no law binding a man to alienate his goods” (COR XII/1, 139, 20–27).²⁰ Therefore, while Calvin accepts the value of the examples given by Luke, keeping in mind that one of the examples was of a hypocrite, he does not agree with the conclusion drawn by the Anabaptists. A definite rule, indicating whether someone should give and how liberal he should give, cannot be imposed – this is the Reformer’s conclusion in his sermon on Acts 5:1–6 (SC 8, 12 & 22–23).²¹

On the basis of the argument that the Anabaptists are wrong in extracting a binding law from a few examples given by Luke, Calvin subsequently accuses them of heaping all things together and letting each person decide for himself what to take, thereby overthrowing the order that God has instituted and even making this practice constitutive for the existence of the Church (COR XII/1, 90, 12–15 & 18–19; SC 8, 52, 14–15).²² Calvin therefore rejects the Anabaptist position that there should be no form of household government²³ and that Christians are not allowed to have private property (COR XII/1, 90, 27–28; COR XII/1, 136, 32; COR XII/1, 139, 27–29).²⁴

In his sermon on Acts 4:32–37 Calvin draws what he deems the logical consequence of such a view. He does this by comparing Scripture with Scripture. He says that if Christians were to possess nothing in this world, as the Anabaptists claim, God’s command that man must work with his hands in order to eat, would be meaningless (cf. 1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:10). For how is a person supposed to eat and drink if he does not have lands or possessions? Calvin immediately continues his line of argumentation from God’s promise that the gospel will be preached universally and that Holy Scripture will be extended to all. If that indeed happens, who would then own anything? No one. And the result would be that all fields and vineyards would be left uncultivated, and we would have no food to sustain us (SC 8, 119, 17–28). Several questions arise from Calvin’s intriguing line of argumentation. Is it really true that if Christians didn’t have any private possessions, they would not be able to eat? Stated differently: are lands and possessions a prerequisite for working with your hands and subsequently being able to eat? And does Calvin really mean to imply that the promise of the universal preaching of the gospel would also result in a universal Christendom, as a result of which all fields and vineyards will be left uncultivated? Or might it be that Calvin is merely carrying the Anabaptists’ position to its absurd conclusion?

Whatever the case may be, it is quite clear that Calvin deems the Anabaptist position on the community of goods detrimental to our reading of Scripture, which in turn has a negative impact on the Church and believers. Firstly, it is detrimental to our reading of Scripture, as it changes Scriptural facts into binding laws without taking the rest of Scripture into account. Subsequently, it has a negative impact on the Church as it overthrows the order given by God and it introduces a new, unwarranted mark of the Church. And finally, believers are burdened with a yoke which God Himself does not impose on them.

¹⁸ Nam neque hic universis legem praescribit Lucas, quam necesse habeant sequi, dum recitat, quid egerint illi, in quibus singularis quaedam Spiritus Dei efficacia se exeruit; nec sine exceptione de omnibus loquitur, ut possit colligi, non fuisse pro Christianis habitos, nisi qui sua omnia venderent (COR XII/1, 136, 35–137, 2).

¹⁹ Et certe probabile est fuisse multos, qui possessiones suas non attigerint, idque ex contextu potest colligi... Neque hoc abhorret a communi Scripturae usu (COR XII/1, 135, 28–29). This ‘common custom’ is called *synecdoche*, and is a style figure often used by Calvin.

²⁰ Caeterum, hinc colligimus, nulli fuisse impositam legem sua alienandi (COR XII/1, 139, 23–24).

²¹ Au reste on ne peut pas imposer loy certaine quant a cecy, combien ung chacun s’eslargira ou non ... Voila, dy je, comme on ne peut pas imposer certaine loy pour commander jusques a quelle mesure ung chacun se doitb eslargir (SC 8, 12 & 22–23).

²² ... quemadmodum hoc seculo tumultuati sunt Anabaptistae, quia nullam putabant esse Ecclesiam, nisi in commune acervum congesta essent singulorum bona, ut inde promiscue omnes sumerent ... quia vellent omnia confusa (COR XII/1, 90, 12–15 & 18–19); ... en premier lieu il ne fault point penser que les choses fussent la mises en ung monceau comme pour en prendre par ou il eust semblé bon a ung chacun... (SC 8, 52, 14–15).

²³ Ita communitas ista, quam Lucas commendat, non tollit oeconomiam (COR XII/1, 90, 27–28)

²⁴ Unde patet, omnino freneticos esse, qui fidelibus licere negant quicquam habere proprium (COR XII/1, 139, 27–29).

The rich

The second group with whom Calvin discourses in the passages on the community of goods is the rich, more precisely defined as the self-interested.²⁵ After all, it need not only be rich people who are self-interested, although in the passages discussed in this article Calvin clearly focuses his attention on the rich.

Whereas the Anabaptists are accused of overthrowing civil order, the rich are accused of abusing civil order to keep all their possessions for themselves. This seemingly neutral and innocent position is not accepted by Calvin, and he describes it as the one extreme, the Anabaptist position being the opposite extreme (COR XII/1, 90, 15–19). It is not enough to think that one is righteous before God as long as you have not wronged anyone and not taken another man’s possessions (COR XII/1, 90, 16–18; SC 8, 53, 32–34).²⁶ For Calvin this position amounts to self-interest (SC 8, 51, 24–25; SC 8, 120, 9), and a self-interested person is far from helping his neighbor and the poor (SC 8, 51, 24–25; SC 8, 53, 2–22; SC 8, 119, 4–5).²⁷ To make things worse, self-interest is not just content with jealously retaining personal possessions, but it often leads to other excesses, like usury, robbery, violence and extortion (COR XII/1, 136, 14–15; SC 8, 119, 9–11).²⁸ Consequently, Calvin describes the actions of the rich and the self-interested in colorful terms: “they snatch greedily among themselves and cheat one another, looking like they want to consume everything” (SC 8, 53, 21–24), “insatiable mouths gluttonously consuming their goods and substance alone, unwilling to help their neighbors with a single scrap even if they were dying of hunger” (SC 8, 123, 35–124, 2).²⁹

Calvin rigorously applies these points to the situation in Geneva. The rich in the congregation are criticised fiercely, and several times Calvin says that the Genevans are far removed from the life of the congregation and the believers in Jerusalem (SC 8, 119, 3 & 15–16).³⁰

A particularly interesting contextual remark is found in his sermon on Acts 4:32–37: “... if a man has twice as much wheat as he needs, he will never be satisfied until he amasses even more” (SC 8, 119, 7–8).³¹ This remark should be read with the date of the sermon in mind – Sunday, 1 June 1550. This was the time of the year when, after the winter, wheat supplies were low and the next harvest was months away. The hoarding of wheat and driven-up wheat prices typically occurred during this time of year (Moehn 1996:177).

This was the case not only in Geneva, but also in many other towns and cities in those times. Taylor (1992:151) makes mention of sermons by a Franciscan preacher, Michel Menot (d 1518), in which he complains that, in times of scarcity, the rich sell wheat for twice the price even though their barns are full. Rich men would rather see their wheat rot than feed the poor. These words could easily have come from Calvin himself, as he did not shy away from criticising speculation in grain. In a sermon on Deuteronomy 20:16–20 Calvin says that grain speculation is against the purpose for which God let the grain grow (CO 27, 639). It must be said, however, that the Council of Geneva did take measures against usury and the hoarding of wheat. Unfortunately, during the bulk of Calvin’s time in Geneva (1536–1560) there were a few merchants who, due to their financial resources and useful connections, had a monopoly on the wheat trade in the city (Moehn 1996:177).

What is clear from the above is that the Genevan context contributed to the poignancy of Calvin’s commentary and sermons on the relevant passages in Acts. Indeed, the unrestrained “communism” of some Anabaptist groups was a serious threat to the Church, but the unrestrained self-interest of the rich of Geneva was no less of a threat. The Anabaptists might have taken the ideal of the early Church too far, but the rich and the self-interested of Geneva did not even come close to that ideal.

In order to bring the rich closer to the ideal, Calvin wants them to realise that the Lord does not put us in this world for ourselves, but to contribute to our neighbor’s welfare insofar as we can (SC 8, 120, 9–11).³² The rich should be lead to understand that they are only the distributors of the goods which God has placed in their hands. Furthermore, they need to realise that the poor are also members of Jesus Christ, sharing in the same

²⁵ Cf. sermon on Acts 2:43–45 (SC 8, 51, 24–25) and the sermon on Acts 4:32–37 (SC 8, 120, 9).

²⁶ Nam multi politiae praetextu intus supprimunt, quicquid habent, pauperes defraudant, seque bis iustos esse existimant, modo non rapiant alienum (COR XII/1, 90, 1618).

²⁷ Car nous en voyons aucuns qui sont tant adonnez a leur proffict particulier, que tant s’en fault qu’ilz subviennent a leurs prochains... (SC 8, 51, 24–25).

²⁸ ... nos hodie non contenti maligne supprimere, quod in manu nostra est, aliena crudeliter rapimus (COR XII/1, 136, 14–15); et encores ne se contente on point de cela, mais il n’est question que d’usures, de rapines, de violence et extortion, on pillera l’un, on desrobera l’aultre (SC 8, 119, 9–11).

²⁹ Or tant s’en fault que beaucoup aydent a leurs prochains de ce qu’ilz ont, que mesmes, comme j’ay desja dict, ilz en attrappent de tous costez a torz et a travers et sur l’un et sur l’aultre, tellement qu’il semble qu’ilz veullent tout engloutir (SC 8, 53, 21–24); ... plus qu’il ne seroit de besoing, qui sont des gouffres insatiables, gourmandans leur bien et leur substance apart, et n’en voudroient pas ayder d’ung morceau a leurs prochains, voire et deussent ilz mourir de faim (SC 8, 123, 35–124, 2).

³⁰ Cf. Calvin, SC 8, 113, 13–14; 116, 4; 116, 7–9.

³¹ ... quand ung homme aura deux foyz autant de bled qu’il luy en fault, il ne sera jamais saoul s’il n’en amasse encores davantage (SC 8, 119, 7–8).

³² Car au lieu que nous sommes trop adonnez a nousmesmes, il fault que nous congnoissions que nostre Seigneur ne nous a point mys en ce monde pour nousmesmes, mais qu’il fault que nous procurions le bien de noz prochains entant qu’en nous est (SC 8, 120, 9–11).

grace and the same spirit, and therefore they are allowed to share with the rich in the same material goods (SC 8, 124, 31–35).³³

The poor

Although the community of goods has as one of its primary purposes the relief of poverty, the poor do not therefore escape Calvin’s criticism. He accuses the poor of being partly to blame for the evil of the self-interested rich. Several attitudes of the poor hinder and extinguish both the desire and the ability of the rich to do well (COR XII/1, 136, 24 & 28–29).³⁴ What are the attitudes of the poor that Calvin deems harmful for the right relationship between rich and poor?

According to Calvin, some of the poor are so ungrateful and greedy that they offend the rich. Whatever they receive and however much they are given, they can never be satisfied. Others are presumptuous – they grumble and fret and fume if not everything is done according to their wishes. They would preferably demand alms like a robber in the woods. In addition, some are guilty of hypocrisy, pride or sloth (SC 8, 124, 15–21; COR XII/1, 136, 26–28).³⁵ All these attitudes create in the rich an aversion to helping the poor.

What Calvin wants to see instead is that the poor are content with the little they have and that they work in order to earn a living. They should walk in uprightness and equity in their poverty, and be resigned to what God is pleased to give them. In this way God will open the closed hearts of the rich to help them (SC 8, 124, 23–25 & 124, 35–125, 2).

However, Calvin does not describe the wrong attitude of the poor in order to excuse the rich. The rich cannot use the ingratitude and deceit of the poor as an excuse before God. The rich should focus on God’s command; not on the deceit, perversity, ingratitude and presumptuousness of the poor (SC 8, 124, 27–29). It is clear that, for Calvin, the attitude of the poor determines that of the rich to a certain extent.

The monks

A very interesting and final group with whom Calvin discourses in the relevant passages in Acts is the monks. In order to put Calvin’s discussion of the attitude and conduct of the monks in perspective and prevent the impression that he is against the monastic institution *per se*, it might be useful to briefly look at what Calvin writes about them in his *Institutes*. In the 1543/45 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin specifically added a chapter on vows and monasticism (De Greef 2008:187). In this chapter Calvin gives one of the longest word-for-word citations in the whole of his *Institutes*. He quotes Augustine’s description of the monastic life. Without going into detail, some aspects of Augustine’s description of the lifestyle of the monks will be mentioned:

No one possesses anything of his own; no one is burdensome to any man. With their hands they earn that which may feed the body ... Then they take bodily nourishment, enough for health and well-being; each one restrains his desire in order not to take too much ... Whatever remains over and above necessary food ... is distributed to the needy with greater care than that with which it was procured by those who distribute it. For in no way do they make it a business to have a surplus ... (CO 2, 931–932).

In the following paragraphs of his *Institutes* Calvin uses this description of Augustine to show the contrasting lifestyle of the monks of his day (*Inst.* 4, 13, 10 & 15). Keeping Augustine’s description in mind, Calvin’s discourse with the monks in the relevant passages in Acts also paints a stark contrast.

Calvin is irked by the fact that the monks teach the apostolic life and pretend to lead such a life themselves (COR XII/1, 91, 2–3; SC 8, 52, 21–22; SC 8, 120, 1–2) while they do exactly the opposite. They do not put their teachings into practice (SC 8, 120, 6–7). They call nothing their own (COR XII/1, 91, 4)³⁶ – mark the similarity with Augustine’s description of the lifestyle of the monks – and they will talk about “our cape”, “our cap”, “our cowl” and “our hood” in order to show that they have everything in common (SC 8, 52, 24–25; SC 8, 120, 4–5).³⁷ But in the meantime, they are not willing to share anything.

The only interest they have in the principle of the community of goods is that they are well provided for, and that they can live according to their own pleasures (COR XII/1, 91, 6–7; SC 8, 120, 7–8). This they do by devouring what the poor have struggled to accumulate – Calvin alternately calls this the blood or the sweat of

³³ ... que les riches connoissent qu’ilz ne sont que dispensateurs des biens que Dieu leur a mis entre les mains. Et que puisque ainsi est que les pauvres sont membres de Jesuchrist, participans d’une mesme grace et d’un mesme esprit, qu’il fault qu’ilz leur communiquent de ces biens desquels ilz n’ont que l’administration en ce monde, comme j’ay desja dict (SC 8, 124, 31–35).

³⁴ Quanquam pars huius mali in ipsis pauperibus residet (COR XII/1, 136, 24).

³⁵ ... tantum in multis reperitur superbiae, vel ingritudines, vel ignaviae, vel rapacitatis, vel hypocriseos (COR XII/1, 136, 26–28).

³⁶ ... quia nihil nomen proprium (COR XII/1, 91, 4).

³⁷ Ilz auront leur “nostre chaperon”, “nostre bonnet”, “nostre cecy”, “nostre cela”. Tout sera commun, ce semble (SC 8, 52, 24–25); ilz diront bien: “Nostre froie”, “nostre chaperon”, pour pretender une communeaulté entre eulx (SC 8, 120, 4–5).

the poor (COR XII/1, 91, 5–6; SC 8, 53, 1; SC 8, 120, 6).³⁸ A few times Calvin compares monks to ‘pigs at a trough’ (SC 8, 53, 1; SC 8, 120, 3) and calls them ‘idle bellies’ (COR XII/1, 91, 5; SC 8, 52, 23).

From the above it is evident that Calvin sees a chasm between the monastic life of Augustine’s days, although it was certainly not perfect, and the monastic life of his own times. According to the Genevan Reformer the monks of his day certainly did not live the apostolic life they claimed to live, and were not worthy to be called the successors of the apostles.³⁹

Summary

The Anabaptists, the rich, the poor and the monks – these are the four groups with whom Calvin discourses in some key passages in Acts regarding the community of goods. In the process of determining his own position on this issue, the attitude and conduct of these groups form the extremes Calvin seeks to avoid. It is interesting to see that the practices of his time display these extremes. However, when Calvin wants to teach his readers and listeners the correct position, Scripture plays a much more prominent role. Scripture provides the concepts which form the parameters of Calvin’s position, a position balanced between the extremes of his own context. Which concepts are key to the Reformer?

Calvin’s parameters for the community of goods

Love

“At that time love made each man’s own possessions common property for those in need” (COR XII/1, 136, 20–21). Love is for Calvin the guiding principle when speaking about the community of goods. However, “he is not just talking about love in its everyday sense” (SC 8, 115, 25–26).⁴⁰ Calvin gives a very precise definition of love:

Now there are two phases to that love. First, there is the love we have for one another when we realize that we are children of God through Jesus Christ, the love that teaches us to help one another and live together in peace and unity. Second, we are not to be so concerned for our individual interests that we fail to share liberally with our neighbors. That is what love is about. When I said there are two phases to love, I meant that we must understand what love is in itself and that it must bear fruit (SC 8, 117, 1–8).⁴¹

In this definition one can identify, first, the acknowledgement of being children of God through Jesus Christ. From this divine initiative of love follows the bond of brotherly love that believers have with one another. These two form the inner attitude of the believer, of which Calvin says that we must understand what love is in itself. And from this follows the actions of love; love must bear fruit, and giving alms is the most common form of love (Moehn 1996:168–169, 172; COR XII/1, 135, 2–5). Someone who says that he has brotherly love but does not demonstrate it in action, can be rebuked for lying, because love is not a lifeless entity. It must be made known by its outward fruits, although outward works unveil nothing if we do not have love (SC 8, 115, 8–12). For this last statement Calvin twice refers to 1 Corinthians 13:3 (SC 8, 50, 25–26; SC 8, 115, 12–14).

However, love is not only defined from the perspective of the divine, redemptive initiative, but also from the perspective of our common creation in the image of God. With the help of Isaiah 58:7 Calvin shows that we cannot look at another human being without seeing ourselves. And if we deny him our help, we are in fact denying it to ourselves (SC 8, 51, 30–33; Moehn 1996:170–171).

In the actions of the first believers Calvin sees a striking example of love. He wants his readers to learn from this that we are to relieve the poverty of our brothers from our own abundance (COR XII/1, 90, 9–10). In those days love made each man’s possessions common property for those in need (COR XII/1, 136, 20–21). The children of God are to be joined together with such love that no one suffers from poverty without being helped. In this way we resemble our heavenly Father and are truly his children. Calvin calls this love-at-work a “mark of

³⁸ ... pauperum sanguine (COR XII/1, 91, 5-6); ... la sueur des pauvres (SC 8, 53, 1).

³⁹ Cf. Biéler (2005:313, 360–361).

⁴⁰ Car il ne parle point seulement de la charité en tant qu’elle a son usage envers les hommes (SC 8, 115, 25–26).

⁴¹ Et ceste charité consiste en deux choses. Il est vray que pour la diffinir en ung mot: c’est l’amour que nous avons l’un a l’autre, nous connoissans enfans de Dieu par Jesuchrist, que nous sommes enseignez par cela de subvenir les ungs aux aultres et de vivre ensemble en bonne paix et union. Et puis que chacun ne regarde point tant a son particulier, qu’on ne s’eslargisse mutuellement envers ses prochains. Voila que c’est de la charité. Mais quand j’ay dict qu’elle consiste en deuz choses, il fault entendre quelle est la charité en soy, et puis il fault qu’elle se declare en toute la vie de l’homme et qu’elle ne produisse ses fruitz, aultrement ce ne seroit point charité (SC 8, 117, 1–8).

the children of God” (SC 8, 121, 9–13).⁴² The absence of this love and the presence of self-interest are as incompatible with godly love as fire is incompatible with water (SC 8, 117, 21–23).⁴³

Order

In the discussion of the extreme positions held by the Anabaptists and the rich reference was made to Calvin’s words in his commentary on Acts 2:44, in which he, on the one hand, accuses the Anabaptists of creating a community of goods whereby all civil order is overturned and, on the other hand, accuses the rich of abusing the civil order as an excuse for keeping all their possessions to themselves (COR XII/1, 90, 15–19). From this it appears that order is an important concept in Calvin’s view on the community of goods.⁴⁴ Even when Luke says that “they had all things in common”, Calvin is quick to add that it is not Luke’s intention to confuse us by suggesting that civil order has ceased to exist⁴⁵, but rather to show us how we are to use our goods to help our neighbors (SC 8, 118, 9–10).

Love and compassion for our brothers (see 3.1) must, according to Calvin, be balanced by prudence and discernment as we dispense what God has given us, so that there will be no confusion (the opposite of order) and everything will be done according to God’s will. That is the reason why there has always been order and procedure⁴⁶ in the Christian Church. With ‘always’ Calvin immediately refers back to the apostles, whose actions he deems as the prime example of order and procedure in the Church (SC 8, 123, 1–6).

From the example of the apostles Calvin concludes that there was no amassing of goods and no disorder⁴⁷ arising from everyone taking what they wanted (SC 8, 118, 25–26). Rather the distribution was orderly⁴⁸ and everyone was helped according to his need (SC 8, 122, 4). Through the supervision of the apostles there was such good order and such practical love that no one lacked anything (SC 8, 52, 19–20).⁴⁹ This order, whereby everything is well arranged, helps every believer to fulfill his individual responsibility towards his neighbor (SC 8, 113, 23–24).

Ability

In addition to love and order, Calvin subtly adds another important concept to guarantee that he avoids extremes, namely the concept of ability. Believers are not expected to give away everything they have, for that will result in themselves falling into poverty (COR XII/1, 136, 1–2). Especially in his sermons on the relevant passages from the book of Acts, Calvin stresses that believers are to help their neighbors “according to their ability” (SC 8, 120, 25–26; SC 8, 122, 18; SC 8, 123, 2–3), “in proportion to the means God provides” (SC 8, 121, 14–15; SC 8, 118, 18–19), “as much as we can” (SC 8, 122, 1–2), and “insofar as we possibly can” (SC 8, 120, 10–11).

It can be said that Calvin is in favour of proportionate giving.⁵⁰ Therefore, “let us consider what God has put at our disposal, and let it be our disposition that the more we have received from him, the greater is our obligation to provide for the needs of the indigent” (SC 8, 122, 32–35).⁵¹ Without exempting the less affluent from giving, Calvin clearly shows the added responsibility of the rich to give from their abundance. However, as has already been seen (see 2.3), Calvin also indicates that the poor can hinder and extinguish the ability to do well (COR XII/1, 136, 28–29).

Need

The last important concept introduced by Calvin in his discussion of this matter, is the concept of need. The poor are people in need. This need drove the first believers in the book of Acts to help them: the rich “sold what was theirs rather than see the children of God in need” (SC 8, 53, 6–8). But just as Calvin previously qualified the act of giving by the ability of the giver (see 3.3), so he also qualifies it by the need of the receiver. From the example of the apostles Calvin concludes that selection was made in the distribution of the goods, and that this

⁴² ... marque des enfans de Dieu (SC 8, 121, 9)

⁴³ Car ce sont choses incompatibles comme le feu et l’eau qu’un homme soit adonné a son proffict particulier, et que cependant il ayt ung tel amour a ses prochains comme il doit (SC 8, 117, 21–23).

⁴⁴ For more on the civil order, see Biéler (2005:297).

⁴⁵ Car saint Luc ne veult point icy introduyre une confusion, et qu’il n’y ait plus de police... (SC 8, 118, 9–10).

⁴⁶ ... ordre et police (SC 8, 123, 5).

⁴⁷ ... confusion (SC 8, 118, 25).

⁴⁸ ... mais qu’il y a eu ordre (SC 89, 112, 4).

⁴⁹ Ainsi donc il n’est pas dict que toute police fust ostee de ceste communion, mais au contraire il y avoit si bon ordre, et la charité y estoit tant bien exercée, que nul n’avoit faulte (SC 8, 52, 19–20).

⁵⁰ Cf. Biéler (2005:296–297).

⁵¹ Regardons a ce que Dieu nous a mis en main, et pensons que tant plus nous en avons recue de luy, que de tant plus nous sommes obligez a proveoir a la nécessité des indigentz (SC 8, 122, 32–35).

was done according to the needs of the poor (COR XII/1, 90, 20 & 23–24; COR XII/1, 135, 25–26).⁵² This need, he says in his sermon on Acts 5:1–6, is the current need⁵³ of the poor (SC 8, 122, 12), and should be determined with prudence and discernment, while not being too extreme in probing for information (SC 8, 22, 19, 123:3).⁵⁴ Thus, Calvin is against indiscriminate giving, which he deems not motivated by love but as a show motivated by ambition (SC 8, 112, 6–7).

Calvin sees interplay of ability and need. In his commentary on Acts 4:34 he says that Luke does not mean that the believers sold all their possessions, but only in as far as need required (COR XII/1, 135, 33–34).⁵⁵ The well-to-do diminished their possessions as necessity required (SC 8, 123, 16).⁵⁶ There was therefore no indiscriminate selling of goods as some Anabaptist groups required, but it was rather a wise and discreet assessing of the needs of the poor and a faithful reaction to those needs.

Conclusion

Against the four extreme positions which Calvin seeks to avoid, he puts four Biblical concepts (love, order, ability and need). It is possible to argue that the four concepts directly correspond to the four extreme positions. The rich would then be opposed and corrected by the concept of love, the Anabaptists would be countered by the concept of order, the monks would be shown their ability to help, and the poor would be instructed to expect gifts that are in correlation to their need. However, this correspondence between the extreme positions and the Biblical concepts should not be overstated, as almost all of the concepts can also apply to one or more of the other extreme positions.

What is clear is that Calvin explains these key passages from the book of Acts against the backdrop of what he sees around him. In this manner Scripture is contrasted with the extreme and crooked practices of the sixteenth century. However, reform is not to be found in the concrete context; it can only be found through Scripture itself. Calvin’s application of the practice of the early Church to his own times is therefore thoroughly Scriptural.

By way of the Biblical concepts of love, order, ability and need Calvin provides a balanced view on the community of goods. A view that was either influenced by, or more probably had an influence on, the view of the company of pastors. It is a view that seems to have been wholesome for Genevan society, and can achieve the same when it is applied to our own day and age. On the one hand it avoids extremes whereby society is pulled apart, and on the other hand it provides the tools whereby all groups in society are shown their task and responsibility.

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⁵² ... in distribution habitum fuisse delectum ... ut iuvarentur pauperes, prout quisque indigebat (COR XII/1,90,20 & 23-24). See also SC 8, 118, 8 & 26-27; SC 8,122, 4 & 12; COR XII/1.

⁵³ ... la nécessité du temps (SC 8, 122, 12).

⁵⁴ ... prudence et discretion (SC 8, 122, 19; 123, 3).

⁵⁵ ... sed quantum exigebat necessitas (COR XII/1, 135, 33–34).

⁵⁶ ... selon que la nécessité le requeroit (SC 8, 123, 16).

“... they had all things in common”: Calvin’s exposition of the ...

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