12. John Calvin: Family Design and Shared Identity

William Haines, November 25, 2026

John Calvin (1509-1564) described marriage as “a holy fellowship,” “a divine partnership,” “a loving association,” “a heavenly calling,” “the fountainhead of life,” “the holiest kind of company in all the world,” and “the principal and most sacred… of all the offices pertaining to human society.”

> God reigns in a little household, even one in dire poverty, when the husband and the wife dedicate themselves to their duties to each other. Here there is a holiness greater and nearer to the kingdom of God than there is even in a cloister.[1]

Calvin’s interest in the marriage and the family went beyond the occasional rhetorical flourish or bold claim. He took seriously the design of the institution as a practical issue for society. In the introduction to the first volume of the study *Sex, Marriage, and Family Life in John Calvin’s Geneva*, Robert Kingdon and John Witte write,

> [Calvin] transformed the Western theology and law of sex, marriage, and family life. Building on a generation of Protestant reforms, Calvin constructed a comprehensive new theology and jurisprudence that made marital formation and dissolution, children’s nurture and welfare, family cohesion and support, and sexual sin and crime essential concerns for both church and state. Working with other jurists and theologians, Calvin drew the Consistory and Council of Geneva into a creative new alliance to govern domestic and sexual affairs. Together, these authorities outlawed

[1] This and the preceding brief quotations are taken from Witte 2012, p. 206f., and referenced there.

> monasticism and mandatory clerical celibacy, and encouraged marriage for all fit adults. They set clear guidelines for courtship and engagement. They mandated parental consent, peer witness, church consecration, and state registration for valid marriage. They radically reconfigured weddings and wedding feasts. They reformed marital property and inheritance, marital consent and impediments. They created new rights and duties for wives within the bedroom and for children within the household. They streamlined the grounds and procedures for annulment. They introduced fault-based divorce for both husbands and wives on grounds of adultery and desertion. They encouraged the remarriage of divorcees and widow(er)s. They punished rape, fornication, prostitution, sodomy, and other sexual felonies with startling new severity. They put firm new restrictions on dancing, sumptuousness, ribaldry, and obscenity. They put new stock in catechesis and education, and created new schools, curricula, and teaching aids. They provided new sanctuary to illegitimate, abandoned and abused children. They created new protections for abused wives and impoverished widows. Many of these reforms of sixteenth-century Geneva were imitated and elaborated in Calvinist communities on both sides of the Atlantic, and a good number of these reforms have found their way into our modern civil law and common law traditions.[2]

Today the organization Church & Family Life, formerly the National Center for Family Integrated Churches (NCFIC), is one of several Protestant organizations in the United States whose activities include advocating against church activities that organize participants otherwise than by family, such as Sunday school classes that group students by age. Their director has assembled and published a large collection of quotations from Calvin on marriage and the family,[3] and from this collection I have culled some passages of interest, here referenced to their appearance in Calvin's works.

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2 Witte & Kingdon 2005, p. 1f.

3 Brown 2009.

The community at large is divided, as it were, into so many yokes, out of which arises mutual obligation. There is, first, the yoke of marriage between husband and wife;—secondly, the yoke which binds parents and children;—and, thirdly, the yoke which connects masters and servants. By this arrangement there are six different classes, for each of which Paul lays down peculiar duties.[4]

The design of God in creating the woman … [is] that there should be human beings on earth who might cultivate mutual society between themselves. Yet a doubt may arise whether this design ought to be extended to progeny. … I, however, take the meaning to be this, that God begins, indeed, at the first step of human society, and yet designs to include others, each in its proper place. The commencement, therefore, involves a general principle, that man was formed to be a social animal. Now, the human race could not exist without the woman; and, therefore, in the conjunction of human beings, that sacred bond is especially conspicuous, by which the husband and the wife are combined in one body, and one soul …. God … ordains the conjugal life for man, not to his destruction, but to his salvation.[5]

Every man, by his very nature, loves himself. But no man can love himself without loving his wife. Therefore, the man who does not love his wife is a monster. … To show what man owes to man, Isaiah says, "hide not thyself from thine own flesh" (Isa. lviii:7). But this refers to our common nature. Between a man and his wife there is a much closer relation; for they not only are united by a resemblance of nature, but by the bond of marriage have become one man. Whoever considers seriously the design of marriage cannot but love his wife.[6]

4 Calvin 1948, p. 317.
5 Calvin 1847, p. 128f.
6 Calvin 1948, p. 322.

When a marriage takes place between a man and a woman, God presides and requires a mutual pledge from both. Hence Solomon, in *Proverbs* 2:17, calls marriage the covenant of God, for it is superior to all human contracts.[7]

Christ deigns so to honor marriage as to make it an image of his sacred union with the Church.[8]

God has given to the husband authority over the wife; and a resemblance of this authority is found in Christ, who is the head of the Church, as the husband is of the wife.[9]

A son is bound by an inviolable law of nature to perform his duties toward his father; and when the obligations of a husband towards his wife are declared to be stronger, their force is the better understood. He who resolves to be a good husband will not fail to perform his filial duties, but will regard marriage as more sacred than all other ties. And they two shall be one flesh. They shall be one man, or, to use a common phrase, they shall constitute one person; which certainly would not hold true with regard to any other kind of relationship.[10]

[Commenting on the statement in Gen. 2:24 that "therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh:"[11]] The sum of the whole is, that among the offices pertaining to human society, this is the principal, and as it were the most sacred, that a man should cleave unto his wife. And he [Moses] amplifies this by a superadded comparison, that the husband ought to prefer his wife to his father. But the father is said to be left not because marriage severs sons

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7 Calvin 1950, p. 553f.
8 Calvin 1953b, p. 469.
9 Calvin 1948, p. 318.
10 Calvin 1948, p. 323.
11 Translation taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

from their fathers, or dispenses with other ties of nature, for in this way God would be acting contrary to himself. While, however, the piety of the son towards his father is to be most assiduously cultivated, and ought in itself to be deemed inviolable and sacred, yet Moses so speaks of marriage as to show that it is less lawful to desert a wife than parents.[12]

It is no small or mean honor, that God, who alone is entitled to be regarded as a Father, admits the children of the dust to share with him this title.[13] (171)

[On the Commandment to honor parents:] Surely, since God would not have His servants comply with external ceremonies only, it cannot be doubted, but that all the duties of piety towards parents are here comprised, to which children are laid under obligation by natural reason itself; and these may be reduced to three heads, i.e. that they should regard them with reverence; that they should obediently comply with their commands, and allow themselves to be governed by them, and that they should endeavor to repay what they owe to them, and thus heartily devote to them themselves and their services. Since, therefore, the name of Father is a sacred one, and is transferred to men by the peculiar goodness of God, the dishonoring of parents redounds to the dishonor of God Himself, nor can anyone despise his father without being guilty of an offense against God (sacrilegium). If any should object that there are many ungodly and wicked fathers whom their children cannot regard with honor without destroying the distinction between good and evil, the reply is easy, that the perpetual law of nature is not subverted by the sins of men; and therefore however unworthy of honor a father may be, that he still retains, inasmuch as he is a father, his right over his children, provided it does not in anywise derogate from the judgment of God; for it is too absurd to think of absolving under any pretext the sins which are condemned by His Law; nay, it would be a base profanation to misuse the name of the father for the covering of

[12] Calvin 1847, p. 136.
[13] Calvin 1845, p. 30.

sins. In condemning, therefore, the vices of a father, a truly pious son will subscribe to God's Law; and still, whatsoever he may be, will acknowledge that he is to be honored, as being the father given him by God.

Obedience comes next, which is also circumscribed by certain limits. … Honour, therefore, comprises subjection, so that he who shakes off the yoke of his father, and does not allow himself to be governed by his authority, is justly said to despise his father, and it will more clearly appear from other passages, that those who are not obedient to their parents are deemed to despise them. Still, the power of a father is so limited as that God, on whom all relationships depend, should have the rule over fathers as well as children, for parents govern their children only under the supreme authority of God, Paul, therefore, does not simply exhort children to obey their parents, but adds the restriction, "in the Lord," whereby he indicates that, if a father enjoins anything unrighteous, obedience is freely to be denied him. Immoderate strictness, moroseness, and even cruelty must be borne, so long as a mortal man, by wickedly demanding what is not lawful, does not endeavour to rob God of His right. In a word, the Law so subjects children to their parents, as that God's right may remain uninfringed. An objection here arises in the shape of this question: It may sometimes happen that a son may hold the office of a magistrate, but that the father may be a private person, and that thus the son cannot discharge his private duty without violating public order. The point is easily solved that all things may be so tempered by their mutual moderation as that, whilst the father submits himself to the government of his son, yet he may not be at all defrauded of his honour, and that the son, although his superior in power, may still modestly reverence his father.

The third head of honor is, that children should take care of their parents, and be ready and diligent in all their duties towards them. This kind of piety the Greeks call ἀντιπελαργία, because the storks supply food to their parents when they are feeble and worn out with old age, and are thus our instructors in gratitude. Hence the barbarity of those is all the

more base and detestable, who either grudge or neglect to relieve the poverty of their parents, and to aid their necessities.[14]

When the Apostle says, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour" (1 Tim. v. 17), he refers not only to the reverence which is due to them, but to the recompense to which their services are entitled. But as this command to submit is very repugnant to the perversity of the human mind (which, puffed up with ambitious longings will scarcely allow itself to be subject), that superiority which is most attractive and least invidious [that of a parent] is set forth as an example calculated to soften and bend our mind to habits of submission. From that subjection which is most easily endured, the Lord gradually accustoms us to every kind of legitimate subjection, the same principle regulating all. … The titles of Father, God, and Lord, all meet in him alone and hence whenever any one of them is mentioned, our mind should be impressed with the same feeling of reverence. Those, therefore, to whom he imparts such titles, he distinguishes by some small spark of his refulgence, so as to entitle them to honour, each in his own place. In this way, we must consider that our earthly father possesses something of a divine nature in him, because there is some reason for his bearing a divine title, and that he who is our prince and ruler is admitted to some communion of honour with God.[15]

It is no small gift for a man to be renewed in his posterity; for God then gives him new strength, that he who otherwise would straightway decay, may begin as it were to live a second time.[16]

[14] Calvin 1854, pp. 7-9.
[15] Calvin 1953a, p. 344f.
[16] Calvin 1949, p. 111.

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