


Punishment and forgiveness of sexual crimes: A special reference to sodomy in Calvin's theology

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In 2017, the huge outpouring of articles and monographs concerning the study of the Reformation made explicitly clear how important social renewal was for the reformers. Doing so, they contributed much to resacralise the spiritual and religious dimensions of family and marital life. Nevertheless, a careful examination of Calvin's bibliographies shows that there are a great number of articles on Calvin's social thoughts, but the illumination of his views on sexuality and sexual crimes is still a neglected part of the research. On the basis of Calvin's Institutes, biblical commentaries and sermons, this article intended to give a case study of his arguments concerning the punishment of sexual immorality. However, Calvin did not expound his detailed evaluation related to sodomy, but the ethical considerations of Apostle Paul (1 Cor 6:9–11) give opportunity to reconstruct his 'moral codex'. To be sure, in his works Calvin accepted in theory that serious fornication (adultery, homosexuality) should be punished severely; still, he knew well the importance of forgiveness in practice. His pastoral calling was to preach from the hope of mercy; therefore, in the case of fornication – except for abuse, incest or paedophilia – wrongdoers could experience the grace of God.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article is based on the field of systematic theology. The study did not want to inquiry into any direct way into modern or postmodern interpretations of homosexuality but offered an attempt to understand 'homosexuality' in its 16th century theological, judicial and historical context.

Keywords: Calvin; sexuality; sin; crime; forgiveness; adultery; sodomy.

Introduction

According to the old standards of Calvin research, the reformer was a bloodthirsty tyrant of Geneva, who had a very strict view of public morals in his mind (cf. Graesslé 2010:40–49). In spite of this outdated thesis, the evaluation of his written heritage reveals that Calvin devoted himself to building up a new city consecrated to God in Geneva. His intention was to reshape ordinary life in Geneva; therefore, cases involving sexual crimes made him constantly anxious. In one of the forgotten fragments of his theological treatises (*De luxu*), he confessed: 'What should I do? I should conspire against public morals. I should proclaim a war against [...] the present age' (Battles 1965:193). It is not surprising that the Small Council gave affect to new statutes on dancing, dress fashions, singing, ornaments, drinking, eating and so on (Magyar 2019:209–220). In doing so, on the solid basis of God's eternal word, leaders of the Genevan church and state intended to control not only the public but the marital morality as well. Their main tool was the Consistory, with the high-esteemed moderation of John Calvin. This body was created for the task of overseeing and improving the lives of the people in religious and spiritual matters (Gordon 2009:127–128), so its members did not have the right to make adjudications. In general, they used sentences for admonition, exhortation, guidance and conciliation but rarely for censure, command and excommunication. But how did Calvin himself interpret the biblical verses concerning sexual sins in order to reform the public morality in the City of Geneva?

According to Calvin's bibliographies, much has been written about Calvin's thoughts on marriage and family life, but the field of his views on sexuality, especially on homosexuality ('*le crime de Sodomie*'), is still a neglected part of the research. However, moving from the broader 16th century European scope of the history of sexual crimes towards the Genevan context, most of the researchers¹ insisted on handling the question as a main part of the social and cultural history. The basic intent of this article is not to deal with the modern issues of homosexuality but to examine the theological and ethical opinion of the requisite and suitable punishment of

1. Kingdon 1972:114–131, 1990:158–172, 1995, 1996:21–34; eds. Kingdon & Witte 2005; Lambert 1998; Manetsch 2005:1–21, 2006:274–314, 2010:283–307, 2017:103–117; Monter 1974:1023–1033, 1976:467–484; Naphy 2002b:94–111, 2003; Watt 1993:429–439, 1996:63–86, 2002:439–456, Watt 2020:111–114; Witte 2013:245–280.

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sexual crimes with a brief reference to homosexuality in Calvin's biblical commentaries, sermons and other theological treatises. To date, the most relevant scholarship existing on the broader concept of 'Calvin on sexuality and homosexuality' was written by Thompson (1991:9–46, 1994:3–27, 2016:123–146), Elwood (2005:67–93), Blacketer (2006:30–53, 2008:267–289), Pitkin (1999:347–369, 2010:441–466), Sewell (2012:175–178) and Weidenaar (2011), whose unpublished PhD dissertation offers a case study of Calvin's thoughts on concupiscence.

Setting the scene: Sexual misconduct and the segment of sin and crime

Building on the main references of the topic, it is worth pointing out, however, that sexuality was a substantial issue with marked theological influence; still, the subject posed judicial questions concerning the punishment of serious sexual crimes. In case of central Europe, the main provisions of the first body of German criminal law (*Strafgesetzbuch*), the so-called *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* (1532) of Kaiser Karl V, proclaimed severe punishment not only for incest, abuse, adultery and bigamy but also for same-sex relations ('Straff der unkeusch [...] mann mit mann, weib mit weib') as well (cf. ed. Schroeder 2000:43. 116. §).

The study of Genevan archives confirms this view, because the most exact statement concerning homosexuality was in 1554, when Calvin and his colleagues presented judicial advice to the Genevan magistrates because of a terrible act of sodomy concerning five young children from the local school (*CO*. 15:69–70; Naphy 2002:107–108). The procedure shows, however, that the Consistory and the Genevan pastors had no power to proceed and judge in criminal cases; only the Small Council had such power. Still, it was important for the magistrates to promote precise theological and judicial information concerning this crime. Nevertheless, there is only one sentence referring to Christian theology, namely: 'this crime is one of the most abominable that there is. It is clearly punished by the Holy Scriptures' (*CO*. 15:69; Naphy 2002b:107). To return, then, to Calvin's written heritage, it is apparent that the Genevan reformer paid essentially no strong theological and ethical attention to the evaluation of homosexuality. Nevertheless, Calvin's thoughts on (original) sin, church discipline, forgiveness, justification and Christian praying collectively give an opportunity for the right understanding of his views on the requisite punishment of sexual crimes.

Calvin on marital fidelity and (sexual) sins

Calvin insisted on introducing religious and moral reforms in Geneva; therefore, the reflection on everyday questions of marriage and family life and cohesion was a substantial element of his pastoral calling and ministry. As a result, Calvin emphasised that God commands his people to lead an

honest and chaste life in justice, sobriety, modesty and purity (Magyar 2016:120–155). For that very reason, God established the order of marriage, which had been sanctified by his blessing. Calvin argues, 'God wants holy marriage to be preserved' and maintained among His people, meanwhile, He 'wills that that faith and mutual loyalty, which ought to exist between a husband and wife [...], and should not be exposed to villainy and shame' (Calvin 2011:170–171). So 'if married couples recognise that their association is blessed by the Lord, they are thereby admonished not to pollute it with uncontrolled and dissolute lust' (*Inst.* 2.2.44). Because of his rich experience as a moderator of the Genevan Consistory, Calvin knew well that in everyday practice:

If you look at the love that men bear to their wife, you will find scarcely one among a hundred, who could not find in his heart to back down. It is to be seen daily that men storm at their wives, and wives are pert with their husbands. It is a common occurrence in every house, and curses will fly and move around. In short, there is nothing but grief and scorn. (*CO*, 51:778; Calvin 1987:612)

To be sure, marital grief and sorrow for Calvin did not mean the fulfilment of God's Law; therefore, he argued: 'when man throws himself into fornication, [...] he breaks the body of our Lord Jesus Christ into as many pieces as he can'. Writing so, Calvin stressed that fornication is certainly not a 'natural sin, and a matter of small conscience' (Calvin 2011:173) but an accursed and indictable connection (*CO*. 49:394. Translation: *CTS*, 20/1:219). As a result, the Genevan reformer believed that sexual sins and crimes should have their severe punishment. However, Calvin certainly did not regard sexuality as purely a means of procreation. His comments on Genesis 2:23–24 make explicitly clear that he was considering marriage and sexuality together, pointing out that every type of sexuality, if it is lacking extreme and immoderate qualities, is an important tool for the maintenance of marriage. At the same time, theologically, marriage was not only a special contract in the eyes of Calvin (cf. Witte 1997) but a basic thing for the right order of the whole society. As Calvin states in the *Institutes* (1541), 'every company of people needs some polity in order to keep peace and harmony [...] and to preserve public decency among them' (Calvin 2009b:653). So the well-ordered nature of sexuality that shines forth in marriage contributes to sustain the order of proper public morality. It is taken for granted that without the constrained and spiritually and legally 'forced' righteousness of sexuality, family life could easily create public looseness, when 'everything is permitted to all men' (*Inst.* 2.6.10.). This is why Calvin reminded his readers and audience over and over again: 'all joining together of man and woman outside of marriage is cursed before God' (Calvin 2009b:149).

In spite of this fundamental theological, ethical and judicial horizon, Calvin did not bequeath a completely elaborated 'codex' or 'procedural law' related to the proper ways of penalising sexual crimes, because day after day he preached the hope of mercy (cf. McKee 2010b:101–120, 2016a:65–94, 2016b). Early editions of *Ordonnances Ecclesiastiques*, for instance, are entirely silent on this matter. Calvin followed

the similar manner in his expositions of 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, when he wrote only, ‘the fourth description of crime is the abominable of all’ (CO. 49:392–393. Translation: CTS, 20/1:216). Seemingly, Calvin did not want to give a profound study of the topic of sodomy.

However, the earthly presence of sexual sins is diverse; still, Calvin did not want to make theological and ethical distinction between the sins listed by the Holy Scripture. He states that all the people who transgress the commandments of the second table are ‘sinners’ in general (CTS, 21/3:32). Theologians, according to him, could speak only about ‘sin’. As he states in his *Institutes*:

At this point they [*papists*] take refuge in the foolish distinction that certain sins are venial, others mortal; for mortal sins a heavy satisfaction is required; venial sins can be purged by easier remedies [...] They dally and play with God. [...] For I ask whether among those very sins which they confess as mortal they recognize one as less than another. [...] sins that are mortal are at the same time equal. (*Inst.* 3.4.28)

To be sure, at this point he did not share the hierarchical view of sin elaborated by Roman Catholic theology and held by the early Protestant confession, the *Confessio Helvetica Posterior* (1562):

We acknowledge [...] sins [...] are sins, no matter by what name they may be called, whether mortal, venial or that which is said to be the sin against the Holy Spirit which is never forgiven [...]. We also confess that sins are not equal; although they arise from the same fountain of corruption and unbelief, some are more serious than others. (*Confessio Helvetica* 8.5)

Therefore, in order to grasp Calvin’s views on sexual sins or crimes, with brief reference to homosexuality, we can follow the example of Apostle Paul, who said:

Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor drunkards [...] will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9–11; cf. 1 Tm 1:9–11; cited by Calvin: *Inst.* 2.6.10)

Consequently, from a theological point of view, Calvin’s thoughts on fornication and adultery in general are ready to be applied to the treatment of homosexuality as well.

Calvin’s general practice for severe punishment of sexual sins or crimes

Calvin presented many theological and judicial statements against sexual misconducts in his works. To begin with, in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 6:13 he emphasised that sexual crimes were so prevalent at the time of Apostle Paul that it seemed in a manner as though they had been permitted. But, according to Calvin, Saint Paul pointed out ‘how unseemly fornication is for a Christian man; for Christ having been received into the heavenly glory, so what has he

in common with the pollutions of this world?’ (CO. 49:392–393. Translation: CTS, 20/1:216). As a result of the doctrine of the true God, it is forbidden ‘to prostitute our body’ to earthly pollutions and to ‘tear Christ and the marriage in pieces’ (CO. 49:392–393. Translation: CTS, 20/1:216). So Calvin made it explicitly clear that sexual sins corrupt entirely the earthly and spiritual characters of the holy institution of marriage. In case of adultery, for instance, it is not allowed for sinners to go unpunished, which is evident not only from the holy scripture but also from Roman law and from the common law of nations (CO. 49:392–393. Translation: CTS, 20/1:216).

Nevertheless, he was much more concrete in his commentary on Hebrews 13:4, arguing ‘that if fornication will not be unpunished, God will take vengeance on it’ (CO, 55:187. Translation: CTS, 22/1:341), because adulterers ‘violate and subvert [God’s order] by an improper intercourse’. There is only ‘one legitimate union sanctioned by the authority of God’ (CO, 55:187. Translation: CTS, 22/1:341), which is the marriage. However, at this point Calvin did not discuss in detail what the adequate punishment of improper sexual manners is; still, the exposition of the history of ‘Jesus and the adulterous woman’ (Jn 8:1–11; cf. CO, 47:190–191. Translation: CTS, 17/2:318–324) gave him the possibility to substitute it and to point out that ‘adultery violates the sacred covenant of God, without which no holiness can continue to exist in the world’ (CO, 47:190. Translation: CTS, 17/2:322). But seemingly, Calvin had to jump into cold water in order to reveal the power of the very grace of God, because his theological attention was engaged by the Old Testament dynamics of crime and judgement. Punishment should be a necessary end of a crime, therefore people:

Who infer from this [*story*] that adultery, ought not to be punished with death, must, for the same reason, admit that inheritances (Lk 12:13) ought not to be divided, because Christ refused to arbitrate in that matter between the two brothers. (CO, 47:190–191. Translation: CTS, 17/2:323)

Calvin was citing judicial statement again, saying: ‘so if adultery be not punished; for then the door will be thrown open for any kind of robbery, treachery and for poisoning, murder and robbery’ (CO, 47:190–191. Translation: CTS, 17/2:323).

On the basis of the story of Judah and Tamar (Gn 38:1–30), Calvin confirmed his statements against adultery very vehemently, arguing that the death penalty is:

Proof that adultery has been greatly abhorred in all ages. The law of God commands adulterers to be stoned. Before punishment was sanctioned by a written law, the adulterous woman was, by the consent of all, committed to the flames. (CO, 23:499. Translation: CTS, 1/2:286)

The Genevan reformer considered it important to examine the secret pregnancy of Mary, who was engaged to Joseph. However, Joseph was convinced that Mary was an adulterer (cf. Mt 1:18–19); still, he planned to dismiss her quietly.

Joseph knew well the possible consequences of adultery, but Calvin emphasised:

The gentleness of his disposition prevented him from going to the utmost rigor of law. [...] so he only made some abatement from stern justice, so as not to expose his wife to evil report. (CO, 45:62–63. Translation: CTS, 16/1:94–95)

After the great movements of the Genevan consolidation, in 1555, Calvin was delivering a sermon on the seventh commandment (Dt 5:18). The analysis of his preaching shows, he was putting effort into warning the Genevan townsfolk: God has ordained marriage for good purpose, He is its author. God surely presides over marriage, so whenever adultery happens, sinners break the body of Jesus into pieces (Calvin 2011:173). So, it is scarcely possible to deny that fornication and adultery are not great and mortal sins (Calvin 2011:174). 'Why?' – Calvin raised the question and the answer would illuminate what his point was regarding the adequate judgement of sexual sins:

[Because every] fornication is a detestable thing in God's sight, as he shows by the punishments which he sent and which Saint Paul lists in the tenth chapter of I. Corinthians. [...] Can't we learn from that, then, that God cannot tolerate sexual immorality?! [...] Men are creatures made in his image. Therefore, when 22 or 23000 men (cf. Num 25:1–18) sinned and God destroyed such a number of his images, [...] doesn't this tell us how intensely the fire of his vengeance burned?! (Calvin 2011:175)

To be sure, later, preaching on his honoured biblical 'idol' King David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11), Calvin stressed again that there is a strong relation between adultery and robbery. Calvin argued:

When somebody speaks to us of thievery, there is no-one who does not confess that it is a crime worthy of punishment, and cannot be tolerated among men. Adultery is detestable, but none are so unashamed as to say that it is not wicked. (SC. 1/4:307; Calvin 1992:527)

Regrettably, the serious outcome of David's wicked act was the death of his newborn child from Bathsheba. Shortly after his exposition on the story of David and Bathsheba, Calvin published his 'Harmony of Law', in which he made clear that because 'the marriage is a covenant consecrated by God, its profanation is in no way tolerable', which is why God 'denounces capital punishment against adultery' (CO, 24:648–649. Translation: CTS, vol 3/1:77). Validating his argumentation, Calvin finally cited several examples from Mosaic, gentile and Roman law to testify that 'the punishment of death was always awarded to adultery' (CO, 24:648–649. Translation: CTS, vol 3/1:78).

As a conclusion, the Genevan reformer believed sexual sins and crimes tear the covenant between husband, wife and God to shreds and disparage Christian morality. So Calvin accepted in theory that serious sexual misconducts should be punished severely, even with death, because fornication dishonours and rapes the body of Jesus Christ (Calvin 2011:172).

Calvin and the mercy of God: Showing forgiveness for sexual crimes

Many years after the great movements of Genevan consolidation, in April 1560, Calvin preached on the story of Sodom (Gn 19:1–5). In his exposition, Calvin paid long attention to the necessity of severe punishment of (sexual) sins, saying:

Thus those who hold public office must be vigilant to repress wrongs early and make an effort to take preventive actions [related to crimes]. For when weeds have taken over, there is no longer time to pull them out, but if you root them out early and at the right time, you will control them. The same is true for vices and crimes. And those who have oversight and authority serve God so that men will live together in complete uprightness and in good order. It will cost them practically nothing, so to speak, to keep the peace, but if they act like blind men for a time and pretend they do not see, iniquity will gain the upper hand in no time at all, and before long it will be impossible to maintain order. As when a storm is raging and preparations have not been set in place in time and location, it is certain that ships will not be prevented from sinking to the bottom of the sea. Thus it is when the wicked are allowed to become audaciously bold, and to do evil; that is, no one can prevent them. That makes for hell where there used to be paradise [...] If we see some danger, we must alert others, insofar as we can. [...] Now, when we see vices, there is no plague more deadly. (SC. 11/2:1013; Calvin 2012:737–738)

But what did it mean for Calvin 'to pull out' the sins or sinners? Would it be death penalty in practice as well? But where does the very grace of God remain? To be sure, the practical realisation of Calvin's teachings shows a very different pattern. An examination of the most noted Genevan legal procedures against adulterers presented by Robert M. Kingdon reveals that death penalty was used in case of serious fornication only, when the main character of the vice was related to toughness or perversity (Kingdon 1995:7–30, 116–142). So it is not surprising that in the well-known story of Sodom, the main character for Calvin was certainly not the sexual intentions of local townsfolk but the theological and ethical condemnation of toughness and cruelty which perverts every society:

When night came, all [of the people] gathered together as if the tocsin had been rung, as we say, from every street corner and the ends of the city, great and small, from the old to the little children, came together to lay siege to Lot's house. Therein we see that when we begin to live debauched lives, in the end we fall into such confusion that men are worse than brute beasts. There is still among the animals a natural sense that guides them to assemble into herds. When night comes, they lie down to rest or, if they go to search out prey, they still have some retreat and are content with what they are able to have. But when we read this story, we see that the devil so possessed all the inhabitants of that city that they come with a rage and fury to fall upon Lot's house. So they first had to abandon all reason, and then before men they had to abandon integrity and shame, having become hardened in all kinds of depravity. (SC. 11/2:1010–1011; Calvin 2012:734–735)

Nevertheless, it seems, Calvin was restating his earlier exposition on the people of Sodom concerning their cruelty, because in his commentary (1554) he wrote earlier:

For if the gates of cities are shut, to prevent the incursions of wild beasts and of enemies; how wrong and absurd it is that they who are within should be exposed to still more grievous dangers? [...] How blind and impetuous is their lust; [...] what is contrary to nature [...] since, without shame, they rush together like brute animals! How great their ferocity and cruelty! (CO. 23:267. Translation: CTS, 1/1:496)

But in other cases, the reformer kept in mind what he emphasised against Anabaptist radicals, namely that because of the painful effect of original sin, there can be no total perfection among the members of Christ's spiritual body. In spite of the admirable clemency experienced by the members of the mother church, said Calvin, people need the law of God, which is addressed to 'the ungodly and sinners [...], for murderers of parents, for manslayers, fornicators, perverts, kidnapers, liars, perjurers' (*Inst.* 2.7.10). Nevertheless, if believers look upon the law of God, they can be only despondent, confused and despairing in mind because according to the law, all of them will be condemned and accursed (cf. *Inst.* 2.7.4). So at this point Calvin stresses that believers stand in need of the remedy of divine grace, by which 'God begins his good work in us, therefore arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts, [...] by bending, forming and directing, our hearts to righteousness' (*Inst.* 2.3.6). Nevertheless, after the recognition of crime, self-denial and conversion, sinners will be reconciled to God by his grace and cleansed by Christ's blood (cf. *Inst.* 3.17.8). As a result of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, all of the wrongdoers could recognise the very grace of God which gives an extraordinary opportunity for them to have a 'new beginning', a second chance to experience the mercy of the Heavenly Father. At this point, if readers compare Calvin's sermon on Genesis 19:1–5, in which he emphasised the importance of 'pulling out' the sins or sinners with his commentary on the parable of the weeds (cf. Mt 13:24–43), they will find wicked people (as weeds) may experience the very grace of God by which they become good seeds. However, it seems:

God for a time abandons his elects, indeed even to the extent of giving them the marks and sores of the weed (i.e. so a reprobate), still he always has his eye upon them so as to draw them back. (SC. 1/4:279; Calvin 1992:478)

In brief, God could regenerate sinners through the grace of his Spirit. This is why Apostle Paul was saying: 'But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (1 Cor 6:11). To be sure, much has been written by Apostle Paul about the powerful conversion from several sexual sins, so it would be fairly out of the original intention of the holy writer to set out any kind of sin (e.g. homosexuality). Sin is quite opposite to the Creator's will; therefore, he wants sinners to be partakers of his mercy and grace, which is offered not only for drunkards or slanderers but also for adulterers and fornicators as well. If Christians accept this fundamental

theological thesis, they ought to look up Calvin's commentary on the story of Jesus' passion, when one of the robbers who was crucified with him upbraided him, but the other did not follow in the same manner; rather, he made a profession of his faith. By no means is it surprising that the robber finally received the very grace of God. As a result, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 6:9–11, the following exegetical recognitions of the Genevan reformer are ready to be applied not only for robbers but also for fornicators too, because Calvin said:

For who would ever have thought that a robber, in the very article of death, would become [...] but a distinguished teacher of faith and piety to the whole world? [...] Since in this wicked man a striking mirror of the unexpected and incredible Grace of God is held out to us, not only in his being suddenly changed into a new man, [...] but likewise in having obtained in a moment the forgiveness of all the sins in which he had been plunged through his whole life, and in having been thus admitted to heaven. [...] A remarkable instance of the Grace of God shines in the conversion of that man. (CTS, 17/1:308–310)

Calvin maintained the same argument in his commentary on the story of 'Jesus and the sinner woman' (cf. Lk 7:36–50), because he made clear that whatever the woman's former sins might have been, she had already shown the evidence of repentance and gratitude. 'Christ infers that the mercy of God was so abundant towards her that she ought no longer to be regarded as a sinner (CTS, 16/1:139)' – stresses Calvin, therefore:

We have no reason to fear lest any sinner be rejected by him, who not only gives them kind and friendly invitations, but is prepared with equal liberality, and with outstretched arms, to receive them all. (CTS, 16/1:137)

At first sight, treating Calvin's good words exhorting forgiveness for sexual crimes parallel with the firm and harsh regulations of the Law raises the question, what was the framework of Calvin's Law-Gospel narrative, or in other words, how could he balance theologically Gospel with Law? As Michael S. Horton pointed out, respectively: it is true, on one hand, Calvin affirms the Law-Gospel antithesis with respect to justification, but on the other hand, he preserves the unity of the covenant of grace prevailing in the Old and New Testament (Horton 2009; cf. Horton 1997:27–42). Writing so, Horton cites rightly the *Institutes*:

The Gospel has not succeeded the whole Law in such a sense as to introduce a different method of salvation. It rather confirms the Law, and proves that every thing which it promised is fulfilled. (*Inst.* 2.9.4.)

Fortunately, besides the *Institutes*, Calvin was touching this matter again in his biblical exposition on the fulfilment of the law (Mt 5:17–18). According to the Genevan reformer, Jesus had not come to destroy the law, so while he invited the Jews to receive the gospel, he still retained them in the obedience to the law. Nevertheless, it is true for the respect of doctrines, Calvin states:

We must not imagine that the coming of Christ has freed us from the authority of the law, for it is the eternal rule of a devout and holy life [...] there is nothing so durable is to be found in the whole frame of the world. (CTS 16/1:277–278)

At the end of his comments he concluded that Jesus' calling was to show good examples of love, charity, forgiveness, clemency and forbearance in ethical matters, but at the same time, he was expressly speaking of:

The commandments of life, or the ten words, which all the children of God ought to take as the rule of their life. He declares that they are false and deceitful teachers, who do not restrain their disciples within obedience to the law. (CTS 16/1:279)

The commentary on the story of Jesus and the adulterous woman proves how important was the complex view of law and gospel for Calvin, because indeed Jesus dismissed the wicked wife, while he stressed 'Go now and leave your life of sin' (CTS, 16/1:139).

In spite of Calvin's strong affection for the grace of God and for the 'wonderful work of the Spirit', he was well aware of the sorrowful effects of original sin. One of these was concupiscence. It is:

A natural feature of fallen humanity, a sinful misdirection of thought, emotion, sensual pleasure, and desire which [...] is not merely a sin, produced by our fallen condition, but it is itself a sinful motion. That [...] we are all guilty for it because we all share it by nature with Adam. (Weidenaar 2011:10)

This everyday experience makes it troublesome to follow the right way of Christian conversion and sanctification, because concupiscence affects all parts of the soul, which leaves no doubt that both heart and mind are under the ongoing temptation of desire, affection, appetite and inclination, so 'the whole man is of himself nothing but concupiscence' (Inst. 2.1.8). Nevertheless, on the basis of original sin, Calvin did not want to give an excuse for sinners, but he reminded them of the concrete moral responsibility in human actions, stressing: 'I deny that sin ought less to be reckoned as sin merely because it is necessary' (Inst. 2.5.1). As a result of the sorrowful theological and ethical dimensions of original sin, the Genevan reformer pointed out that Christian life is a battlefield, an ongoing struggle against emotions of the flesh, which are hostility against God and the righteousness, judgement and mercy offered by him (cf. Inst. 3.3.8–10, 3.3.18). This is why Calvin was intended to enhance the importance of one of the most perfect blessings of God's providence during our struggle and pilgrimage on this Earth, namely through prayer:

He watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace, in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us. (Inst. 3.20.2)

Doing so, Calvin appended the following exhortation to his sermon on the seventh commandment in 1555:

Now let us kneel down in the presence of our good God with acknowledgement of our faults, praying to him [...] to make us feel them better than we have done before, even in such sort, that being rightly sorry for them, we may learn to repair

unto him, [...] seeking to give ourselves to his obedience, [...] even until we have finished our course [...], and be come to the salvation that is prepared for us. (Calvin 2011:183)

Conclusions

The analysis of Calvin's works reveals: fornication tears the covenant between husband, wife and God to shreds. So Calvin accepted in theory that sexual crimes such as fornication, adultery and homosexuality should be punished, even by the death penalty. However, Calvin was convinced that the people of God ought to be like a 'burning lamp' to give light to those who are far from the gospel; he insisted on moral laws and church discipline touched by Christ and the ancient church, which have been given for edification and not for destruction. Thus, the reformer argued in the last book of his *Magnum Opus*:

We must always care particular care that he who is punished be not overwhelmed with sorrow. Thus a remedy would become destruction. [...] For in excommunication the intent is to lead the sinner to repentance (Inst. 4.12.8)

It shows that Calvin kept in mind, because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that the Old Testament dynamics of crime and punishment were ready to be outlawed because in the case of fornication – and of homosexuality – wrongdoers could evidently experience the very grace of God. So it is not surprising that most cases involving fornication or adultery resulted not in harsh punishment but in leniency, which meant (for instance) admonishment, remand and advice in practice. The serious sentence of excommunication and banishment was rare (Manetsch 2013:198–205; Watt 2020:101–109). At the same time, turning to the consideration of homosexuality in Geneva, it becomes relevant that during John Calvin's legacy only every second homosexual case ended surely with capital punishment (Naphy 2002:94–98).

Consequently, it causes a serious headache when *Les Sources du Droit du Canton de Genève* informs its readers, 2 years after Calvin's death, that the Small Council gave a new law on sexuality. According to the law inspired by Calvin's successor, Theodor de Bèze, 'if the man and woman were both married, they were both to be put to death' (eds. Rivoire & Berchem 1933:170). An important question should immediately be asked: after Calvin, were the early reformers of the Protestantism struggling for 'soli Deo gloria', even at the expense of grace in public morality? Not on your life! As it would be interesting to scrutinise in detail what the practical fulfilment was of this severe law, Scott Manetsch, for instance, offers a deep insight into public morality of Genevans after Calvin. According to his research, in spite of the severe law on adultery (1566), the members of the Genevan Consistory, together with city magistrates, were working exhaustively to achieve peace and complete harmony again in marriage disputes. This is why Geneva's ministers:

Supported this strict policy in principle, [but] their general practice was to recommend that leniency be shown adulterers [...] most of them were suspended from the church for a term [...] but they were not executed. (Manetsch 2013:203; – cf. Watt 2020:106.)

At the end of the article, seeking the possibility of contextualisation, it would be a situation like jumping into cold water to answer the question of how Reformed churches should interpret the harsh laws on adultery and homosexuality nowadays, because as we have already seen, there is no common accordance among them. Nevertheless, it is worth following Calvin's advice; namely, our calling is not to judge our brethren's faults, but to practise charity and exhort them to fall down before the majesty of God, who certainly forgives them. At the same time, in his comments on the 'golden rule' (Mt 7:12) Calvin reminds us: 'Perfect justice would undoubtedly prevail among us, if we were as faithful in learning active charity as we are skillful in teaching passive charity' (CTS, 16,1:355–356).

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