

The Political Theory of John Calvin

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Calvin advances a doctrine of separation of church and state, not religion and state. Because God is sovereign, Calvin postulates that he should rule both church and state, since both are spiritual entities predicated on God's authority, even though the two structures are distinct organizations. The state rules the church's environs, maintaining domestic tranquillity so that the church can execute a mission to evangelize and make disciples of all citizens. By fostering the maturity of its Christian flock, the church nurtures the state by producing model citizens; thus church and state are mutually inclined. Over temporal matters, the state was to have jurisdiction; over doctrinal and spiritual matters, the church, though both were to be equally spiritual. Theocracy, theonomy, and spirituality were fundamental to Calvin's Reformed society, since he believed that the entire state should be ruled by God, draw its laws from God, and be devoted entirely to him.¹ Fundamental to Calvin's political theory were a distinction of church and state, checks and balances on power, the citizen's submission to the state, and the state's responsibility to God.

Church and State

Although for Calvin church and state are distinct, their spheres overlap. Specifically, the church of Geneva was ruled by a representative body, the consistory. Nine pastors, elected by their several congregations, deliberated as men of the cloth; twelve elders, and four syndics (executives), elected democratically by all church members, represented the church. To hold any office, a person had of course to be a church member in good standing. Voting was a right accorded on the basis of good standing within the church. Nominated and elected by the church, the most the consistory could do by way of church discipline was to withhold the sacraments. Any who were not sufficiently penitent were excommunicated until they mended their ways.² Such offenders were remitted to the care of the state.

Three elected bodies ruled the city-state of Geneva: the council of 200,

1 John Calvin *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2 vols ed John T McNeill and trans Ford Lewis Battles *Library of Christian Classics 20-21* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1960) (hereafter *Institutes*, book.chapter.section) (1559 edition) 2.20.9

2 Cf *Institutes* 4.11.3.

the council of 60, and the council of 20, or small council. The council of 200 was popularly elected. It elected the council of 60 and the council of 60 the small council, which possessed executive power to punish impenitents. The small council sentenced people to fines, the stocks, imprisonment, banishment or, as a last resort, capital punishment.

According to Calvin, there is a unity of purpose for church and state but there is also a distinction of purpose. For where the state supports the church, the church does not obstruct the state.³ Calvin held that state and church were mutually spiritual, because the state adjudicated temporal matters under God and the church adjudicated specifically spiritual matters, both opposing evil. Evil – spiritual, social, doctrinal, moral – was the common enemy that unified the two divinely instituted bodies. In Calvin's vision, a society which was composed of a Reformed church, and a church comprised of Reformed citizens, were a force that beat back the world, and all evil.⁴

Calvin, therefore, envisages church and state as a united force that protects the people. Arnold van Ruler contends that according to Calvin, the state's vision and *raison d'être* derives from the church: 'The state must have some vision, some insight into the truth, into the essence of things'.⁵ He says that Calvin sees the church's influence upon the state in terms of the First Commandment, the imperative of which encompasses both church and state: 'Yahweh... tolerates no other gods beside him. He demands an exclusive obedience of the whole man and his whole life. This has an immediate impact on all aspects of political life'.⁶ Calvin's God demands an obedience that circumscribes not only religious belief and practice, but also every facet of human existence, social, legal, governmental and political.

Calvin's view of the relationship uniting church and state is neither Erastian nor 'ecclesiocratic', since both schemes deny reciprocity. Erastus advanced the notion that the church is an arm of the state, along the lines of Henry VIII's Act of Supremacy. In an ecclesiocracy, however, the state is an arm of the church. Church officials, using state institutions, run society – that is, they raise and spend state revenue, settle disputes, provide for the common defence, and regulate the economy and social relations. Calvin envisages neither, but rather a religious republic, both theocratic and theonomic. In a theocracy, God rules the state and God rules the

3 E William Monter 'The Consistory of Geneva' *Enforcing Morality in Early Modern Europe* (London 1987) pp 467-84

4 *Institutes* 4.20.9

5 Arnold A van Ruler *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics – Essays Toward a Public Theology* John Bolt trans (Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press 1989) p 157

6 van Ruler p 153

church. In theonomy, all law derives from God's law. Calvin views a Christian state as God's rule by God's law.

Calvin does not, however, insist that all Mosaic judicial law should be enacted and enforced.⁷ Instead he denounces the totalitarian theonomists of his day who insisted that the 'political system of Moses' was mandatory for civil government.⁸ If those who represented Geneva's citizenry voted to enact the entire 'political system of Moses', Calvin would have opposed the total enactment, since he saw the 'political system of Moses' as an ideal but not mandatory requirement for a Reformed state.

Calvin sees the state as a religious entity and hence as a stabilizing force; this view is recorded in book four: 'The External Means or Aids by which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein'. It has been demonstrated that only a meagre seven per cent of the book deals with the state. The remainder is devoted to the role of the church.⁹

Calvin sees the necessity for consistency in applying law: 'When laws are variable, many are necessarily injured, and no private interest is stable unless the law be-without variation; besides, when there is liberty of changing laws, license succeeds in place of justice'.¹⁰ Rewards and punishments are 'part of a well-ordered administration of a commonwealth'. He interprets the term 'praise' (Rom 13:1-7) according to its Semitic biblical origins, and its meaning is various.¹¹ Calvin sees the term 'praise' as general benefit, including protection and prosperity.

Graham's thesis on Calvin's treatment of the state is inimical: 'Calvin's political theory is weak and unhelpful, his practice as an influencer of the magistrates of Geneva overly harsh, lacking in the generally pragmatic approach Calvin took toward matters that were not at the heart of the gospel.'¹² Graham continues:

The Christian gospel, which proclaims the love of God inextricably bound up with Jesus Christ, whose compassion for humankind took

7 *Institutes* 4.20.14 n 36

8 *Institutes* 4.20.14

9 W Fred Graham 'Calvin and the Political Order: An Analysis of the Three Explanatory Studies' *Calviana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin* R V Schnucker ed (Kirksvilles Ms: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers 1988) p 55

10 John Calvin 'Commentaries on Daniel' *On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1956) p 92

11 John Calvin 'Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter XIII:3' *On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1956) p 86

12 W Fred Graham 'Calvin and the Political Order: An Analysis of the Three Explanatory Studies' *Calviana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin* R V Schnucker ed (Kirksvilles Ms: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers 1988) p 55

him even to the Cross, if this good news will not have a beneficial effect on men in society when once it grips a man of Calvin's stature – then it is of dubious value ... But if the gospel at times became a club, an excuse for foolishness and insensitivity, for torture, even death... What went wrong? ... Contemporaries of lesser acumen than Calvin in neighboring cities were perplexed by this rigor; that, had St Paul applied it, would have excommunicated every person in Corinth.¹³

Checks and Balances

Calvin sees tyranny as the demon that stalks the state, seeking to possess it. Tyranny threatens whenever power is in the hands of the few. To him, power unchecked is power unjustified, since he believes that too often power, especially absolute power, has corrupted those who hold it. He sees absolute power as so corrupting that those in power cannot call themselves 'ministers of God' (Rom 13:1-7). Indeed the powerful sink to a level where there is 'no trace of that minister of God, who had been appointed to praise the good, and to punish the evil'. According to Calvin, state officers (Rom 13:1-7) are good, though evil may eclipse the good, to such a degree one can see them no longer as a moral force:¹⁴

But it is the example of nearly all ages that some princes are careless about all those things to which they ought to have given heed, and, far from all care, laxly take their pleasure. Others, intent upon their own business, put up for sale law, privileges, judgments, and letters of favor. Others drain the common people of their money, and afterward lavish it on insane largesse. Still others exercise sheer robbery, plundering houses, raping virgins and matrons, and slaughtering the innocent.¹⁵

Calvin sees the danger of entrusting power to one or a few; accordingly he argues for a 'system compounded of aristocracy and democracy'.¹⁶ McNeil believes that Calvin's reference to the 'rule of principal persons' does not refer to blood aristocracy but rather to those chosen by their fellows.¹⁷ To Calvin, the presence of any hereditary ruling caste is an infringement of liberty.¹⁸ Even judges do not escape unscathed:

13 W Fred Graham 'Constructive Revolutionary' *Calviana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin* R V Schnucker ed (Kirksvilles Ms: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers 1988) pp 174-6

14 *Institutes* 4.20.25

15 *Institutes* 4.20.24

16 *Institutes* 4.20.7

17 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 273

18 McNeill p 273

When God gave such a privilege to the Jews, he ratified thereby by his adoption and gave proof that he had chosen them for his inheritance, and that he desired that their condition should be better and more excellent than that of their neighbors, where there were kings and princes but no liberty ... If we have the liberty to choose judges and magistrates, since this is an excellent gift, let it be preserved and let us use it in good conscience ... If we argue about human governments we can say that to be in a free state is much better than to be under a prince. It is much more endurable to have rulers who are chosen and elected ... and who acknowledge themselves subject to the laws, than to have a prince who gives utterance without reason. Let those to whom God has given liberty and freedom (*franchise*) use it ... as singular benefit and a treasure that cannot be prized enough.¹⁹

Calvin sees as the highest good a state that is governed by elected representatives. In other words, the original Israelite state is categorized as a theocratic theonomic republic: 'I readily acknowledge that no kind of government is more happy than this, where liberty is regulated with becoming moderation and properly established on a durable foundation (*ad diurnitatem*)'.²⁰ In February 1560, on the eve of an election, Calvin pleaded with the General Assembly 'to choose [their magistrates] with a pure conscience, without regard to anything but the honor and glory of God, for the safety and defense of the republic':²¹ for he believed that the republic was the highest form of government, and so the highest form of loyalty to country was that given to a Christian republic.

In Calvin's thinking, theocracy and democracy are 'easily and naturally associated'.²² The civil government has the God-given burden of maintaining peace and tranquillity, so that the church can flourish:

Yet civil government has as its appointed end, so long as we live among men, to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace of tranquillity...²³

19 Ioannis Calvini *Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* G Baum, E Cunitz, E Reuss, P Lobstein and A Erichson edd 43.374

20 *Institutes* 4.20.8

21 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 274

22 McNeill p 274

23 *Institutes* 4.20.3

Calvin, however, includes within the state's ambit the defence of 'sound doctrine' a concept which may strike us as strange today, but was the norm in Calvin's time:

Let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion, which I seem above to have put outside of human decision. For, when I approve of a civil administration that aims to prevent the true religion which is contained in God's law from being openly and with public sacrilege violated and defiled with impunity, I do not here, any more than before, allow men to make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God.²⁴

Neither did he advocate that governments necessarily enact all the Old Testament judicial laws.²⁵ Indeed, he denounces the radical theologians of his day who insisted that the 'political system of Moses' was mandatory for civil government.²⁶ Mosaic judicial law was the ideal but not the immediate requirement in Calvin's thinking.

For Calvin, the highest form of political development is representative democracy, modelled on the biblical example:

In this consists the best condition of the people, when they can choose, by common consent, their own shepherds; for when any one by force usurps the supreme power, it is tyranny, and when men become kings by hereditary right, it seems not consistent with liberty.²⁷

In his lectures on Amos 7, Calvin rebukes civil authorities in England and Germany,²⁸ saying that for Henry VIII to be the self-appointed head of the church was a 'blasphemy'. Neither should princes in Germany 'become chief judges as in doctrine as in all spiritual government', but rather, they should support the Church, using their temporal power to 'render free the worship of God'.²⁹ When a city-state comes under the influence of God's Word, then that body is held to a higher function:

When a city becomes renowned for having received the Word of God, the world will reckon that the city ought to be, as a result, so much better governed, that such order will there prevail as to accord

24 *Institutes* 4.20.3

25 *Institutes* 4.20.26 n 36

26 *Institutes* 4.20.26

27 John Calvin *Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society 1843-59) Micah 5:5

28 John Calvin *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1950) p 349

29 John Calvin *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets II* pp 349-50

right and justice to one and all.³⁰

Calvin also sees the danger of anarchy, particularly in the proselytizing of radical Anabaptists, who ‘would have men living pell-mell like rats in straw’.³¹ Not only does Calvin declaim against tyranny, especially ruling dynasties, but also against anarchy, including the Anabaptists, who sought to eliminate the state altogether, replacing it with an ecclesiocracy.

The Reformation is not responsible for the political theories that dominated the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it did accelerate and intensify the growth of theories that already existed.³² Early in the Reformation, the monarchs of Spain, France, Scotland and especially England, were polemic Catholics ready to stamp out Protestantism. The Reformation began at the local level and, as it expanded, it had a certain tendency to absorb those who opposed absolutist practices. Absolutism is a presence in the scholarship of the Renaissance, as well as featuring in Reformation writings.³³ The Reformation had to contend with proponents of absolutism, who rejected its pluralism,³⁴ preferring instead to believe in one God, one king, one creed and one law.³⁵

A variety of theorists argue for the sovereignty of the people in contradistinction to the sovereignty of a monarch – Marsilius of Padua, Occam, Ptolemaeus of Lucca, Bartolus, Gerson, d’Ailly and Cusanus.³⁶ Each of these teaches that under natural law people’s sovereignty is protected by a political contract that binds both ruler and subjects.³⁷ Italian humanists see the self-governing city-state as a breeding ground for anti-monarchist tendencies. Machiavelli, for instance, argues that ‘Where there are many states, there arise many efficient men; where the states are few, the efficient men are rare’.³⁸ The reformation at Strasbourg mirrored the paradigm shift of the Italian city-states. The Italian humanists want to restore the *Respublica Romana*, a state where people were free. Butzer desires a restoration of the early Israelite confederacy before the reign of Saul (cf 1 Sam 8:15ff), the state of a free people.³⁹ Nuremberg and Strasbourg (particularly Strasbourg) were economically self-sufficient as

30 Alastair Duke trans and ed ‘Calvin the Preacher – Extracts from Calvin’s Sermons on Micah’ *Calvinism in Europe 1540-1610 – A Collection of Documents* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1992)

31 *Institutes* 4.20.8

32 Hans Baron ‘Calvinist Republicanism and its Historical Roots’ *Church History* 8 1939 p 32

33 Baron p 33

34 Baron p 34

35 Baron p 32

36 Baron p 32

37 Baron p 32

38 Baron pp 33-4; Machiavelli *Opere: Arte della Guerra* (Italia 1813) IV 271

39 Baron pp 36-7

well as self-governing German city-states.⁴⁰

According to Butzer, the existence of *magistratus inferiores*, that is of self-governing city-state authorities, is a product of historical political development that is directed by God. Any overlord who tries to limit the authority of minor powers is acting against the will of God. All minor authorities must protect and beautify the Sparta that has been entrusted to them by God, against encroachments of any higher power that threatens the true religion.⁴¹

In his *Lectures on the Book of Judges* Butzer states that 'wherever absolute power is given to a prince, there the glory and the dominion of God is injured. The absolute power, which is God's alone, would be given to a man liable to sin'.⁴² Butzer, a contemporary of Machiavelli, recognizes the benefits of husbanding one's resources in times of need, reminding his readers that the Roman republic allowed for dictatorial emergency powers when that was necessary.⁴³ Calvin agrees with Butzer.

Because granting absolute power to princes might appear to diminish the sovereignty of God, the grounds for limiting the princes' power are religious ones.⁴⁴ If the power over others is hereditary, then the prince's capacity to judge according to God's judgment is limited:⁴⁵

There ought to be room for divine selection of those whom God will place at the helm of the state, and whom He benefits with the spirit of His wisdom. Elective monarchy, and not a hereditary kingdom, is the constitution favored by religion. This, stated Butzer, would be the ideal order of a state: either one or a few men would have the power; but these men ought to be designated by God. They would govern on the basis of a legal order. Absolute power would not be conferred on any ruler.⁴⁶

Israel's offer of a throne to Gideon, who had rescued the nation, was justified, but conferring royal power by hereditary right to Gideon's family was *vitiosum et impium* – impious.⁴⁷ Calvin later argues for the *magistratus populares*, elected by the people for the people.⁴⁸ Calvin's own works accord with Butzer's views and were published after Butzer's

40 Hans Baron 'Calvinist Republicanism and its Historical Roots' *Church History* 8 1939 p 35

41 Baron p 36

42 Baron pp 30-42; *In Librum Judicum Enarrationes* (Geneva 1554) p 448

43 *In Librum Judicum Enarrationes* (Geneva 1554) p 473

44 Hans Baron 'Calvinist Republicanism and its Historical Roots' *Church History* 8 1939 p 37

45 Baron pp 37-8

46 Baron p 38

47 Baron pp 30-42

*Lectures on the Book of Judges.*⁴⁹

Calvin urges moderation on a sovereign, remarking as he does so 'that no virtue is so rare in kings as moderation, and yet none is more necessary; for the more they have in the power, the more it becomes them to be cautious lest they indulge their lusts, while they think it lawful to desire whatever pleases them'.⁵⁰

Moreover, he warns them not to be ruled by their subjects. 'Thus princes also who are not free agents through being under the tyranny of others, if they permit themselves to be overcome contrary to their conscience, lay aside all their authority and are drawn aside in all directions by the will of their subjects'.⁵¹ In the *Harmony of the Last Four Books of Moses*, Calvin voices his approval of classical republican traditions:

In as much as God had given them the use of the franchise, the best way to preserve their liberty for ever was by maintaining a condition of rough equality, lest a few persons of immense wealth should oppress the general body. Since, therefore, the rich, if they had been permitted constantly to increase their wealth, would have tyrannized over the rest, God put a restraint on immoderate power by means of this law.⁵²

Calvin does not identify an ideal way to govern, nor does he denounce the monarch, recognizing that good government was a prerogative of kings (as in his exhortation to Francis I). However, Calvin frequently disparaged ungodly kings, as in his sermons on Job in 1554, on Deuteronomy in 1554-55, and his lectures on Daniel in 1561, which contain convincing denunciations of 'kings' in general.⁵³ We cannot therefore regard him as a monarchist.

Men's vices and inadequacies make it safer and better that the many hold sway. In this way rulers may help each other, teach and admonish one another, and if one asserts himself unfairly, they may act in concert to censure, repressing his wilfulness (*libido*).⁵⁴ Calvin differs from Aquinas, who in the second chapter of *The Governance of Princes* argues for a monarchy for the sake of national unity, and to remove the danger of the many tyrannizing the few.⁵⁵

48 Baron p 38

49 Hans Baron 'Calvinist Republicanism and its Historical Roots' *Church History* 8 1939 p 39

50 John Calvin 'Commentaries on Daniel' *On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1956) p 94

51 Calvin 'Commentaries on Daniel' pp 100-1

52 John Calvin *Harmony of Moses* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society 1843-59) vol III p 154

53 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 270

54 *Institutes* 4.20.8

55 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald

Calvin views 2 Thessalonians 3:15 as evidence of the virtue of 'fraternal correction'. In his thinking, mutual admonition provides checks and balances against arrogance; believing in it so thoroughly he has 'fraternal correction' incorporated into the constitution of the church at Geneva. So saying, in 1557 Calvin established the Little Council, the chief deliberative body for civil government that met quarterly to admonish the recalcitrant in secret 'fraternal charity' sessions.⁵⁶

From Micah 5:5, Calvin interprets *r'h* to mean rulers:

For the condition of the people most to be desired is that in which they create their shepherds by general vote [*communibus suffragiis*]. When anyone usurps the supreme power by force, that is tyranny. In addition, where men are born to kingship, this does not accord with liberty. Hence, the prophet says: we shall set up princes for ourselves; that is, the Lord will not only give the church freedom to breathe, but also institute a definite and well-ordered government, and establish this upon the common suffrages of all.⁵⁷

Calvin might well agree with Knox's statement:

To bridle the fury and rage of princes in free kingdoms and realms ... it pertains to the nobility, sworn and born to be councilors of the same, and also to the barons and people, whose votes and consent are to be required in all great and weighty matters of the commonwealth.⁵⁸

In 1 Samuel 8, Samuel warns that an absolute monarch with command of judicial, legislative and executive powers would oppress the people. In his first proposition, Samuel contends 'and this will be the manner (*mšpt*) of the king that shall reign over you ...' (8:11; Calvin gives *puissance* for *mšpt*, implying that he sees the word in terms of a legal right).⁵⁹

McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 272

56 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 272

57 *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia* G Baum, E Cunitz, E Reuss, P Lobstein and A Erichson edd 43.374

58 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 273

59 W Fred Graham 'Calvin and the Political Order: An Analysis of the Three Explanatory Studies' *Calviana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin* R V Schnucker ed (Kirksville Ms: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers 1988) p 53; Keith W Whitelam *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press 1970). Whitelam traces the legal and political ideal through Ancient Near Eastern cultures and concludes that 'it was the king's primary duty to guarantee the true administration of justice throughout the land. By so doing, this governed not only right social relationships, as expressed in the king's concern for the underprivileged, but also

Government and the Citizen

Regardless of the particular form of government, in Calvin's view all subjects of that state are responsible for their own obedience:

Subjects should be led not by fear alone of princes and rulers to remain in subjection under them (as they commonly yield to an armed enemy who sees that vengeance is promptly taken if they resist), but because they are showing obedience to God himself when they give it to them; since the rulers' power is from God.⁶⁰

Since a ruler's power is from God, his citizens are obliged to obey the ruler's agent, no matter what their character might be:

I am not discussing the men themselves ... but I say that the order itself is worthy of such honor and reverence and that those who are rulers are esteemed among us, and receive reverence out of respect for their lordship.⁶¹

We are not only subject to the authority of princes who perform their office toward us uprightly and faithfully as they ought, but also to the authority of all who, by whatever means, have got control of affairs, even though they perform not a whit of the princes' office.⁶²

Calvin views the higher authorities as having been 'placed there by the Lord's hand', and rebellion against these authorities as rebellion against God himself: 'he who attempts to invert the order of God, and thus to resist God himself, despises his power; since to despise the providence of him who is the founder of civil power, is to carry on without him'. The purpose of these acts of providence is the 'preservation of legitimate order'.⁶³

Drawing on Romans 13:3, Calvin exhorts his readers to accept that a wicked prince is the result of divine judgment visited upon the governed as punishment for their sins: 'For since the wicked prince is the Lord's scourge to punish the sins of the people, let us remember that it happens through our fault that this excellent blessing of God is turned into a curse'.⁶⁴ He continues in the same vein:

There are indeed always some tumultuous spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ cannot be sufficiently elevated unless all

guaranteed prosperity and fertility for the nation as a whole'.

60 *Institutes* 4.20.22

61 *Institutes* 4.20.22

62 *Institutes* 4.20.25

63 John Calvin 'Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter XIII:2' *On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1956) p 84

earthly powers be abolished, and that they cannot enjoy liberty given by him except they shake off every yoke of human subjection. This error, however, possessed the minds of the Jews above all others; for it seemed to them disgraceful that the offspring of Abraham, whose kingdom flourished before the Redeemer's coming, should now, after his appearance continue in submission to another power.⁶⁵

Thomism requires submission to secular authorities. Aquinas argues that 'our flesh was still in subjection; we can but await a freedom both of spirit and body, "when Christ shall have delivered all the kingdoms to God the Father, when he shall have brought to nought all principality and power"'.⁶⁶ He further explains:

On earth, there often appears dreadful confusion and the works of God, so far as we can understand them, appear mutually discordant; but whoever raises his eyes to heaven will see the greatest harmony.⁶⁷

Those who cannot submit themselves to the magistrates, who rebel against their fathers and mothers, who cannot bear the yoke of masters or mistresses sufficiently show that they cannot join with anyone who does not reverse the whole order of nature and jumble heaven and earth, as people say.⁶⁸

In the *Institutes* Calvin does not advance an argument for revolution,⁶⁹ since to him a ruler is appointed by the providence of God, whether good or evil. If benevolent, the ruler is a blessing; if not, the ruler is a curse. Nebuchadnezzar was still God's servant, even though he served only as an instrument of divine chastisement, and Calvin calls him a 'pestilent and cruel tyrant'.⁷⁰ When ruled by wicked persons, believers must not resist, but instead consider their sins, repent, and implore divine help. Providence will lay proud tyrants low; and moreover, God will raise up leaders who are his appointed instruments.⁷¹

64 John Calvin 'Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter XIII:1' p 85

65 John Calvin 'Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans, Chapter XIII:1' *On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1956) p 83.

66 Thomas Gilbey *The Political Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago 1958) p 157

67 John Calvin *Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society 1843-59) Ezekiel 1:11; W Fred Graham 'Calvin and the Political Order: An Analysis of the Three Explanatory Studies' *Calviana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin R V Schnucker* ed (Kirksvilles Ms: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers 1988) p 59-60

68 Sermon No 46, Deuteronomy; Graham pp 59-60

69 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 268.

70 McNeill p 268

In his commentary on Romans, written in 1539, Calvin forbids any 'private man' from seizing government from a ruler who is appointed by God.⁷² Although the ruler is referred to as the 'higher' power (Rom 13:1-7), the text leaves out the 'highest', God, whom men must obey, and who commands them, above all others (Acts 5:29).⁷³ Calvin's last edition of the *Institutes* draws on biblical support for this contention (Dan 6:22-23). Here, the king has abrogated his right to reign by raising his hand against God. Hosea 5:11 reminds us that people who submit to the religious decrees of an idolatrous king have merited God's condemnation.

In his discussion of rebellion, Calvin forbids any individual from resisting civil government. He argues that it is both the duty and responsibility of elected magistrates to protect people from the licence of kings (*populares magistratus ad moderandum regum libidinem*). He applauds the ephors of Sparta, the Roman tribunes, and the demarchs of Athens for their demonstration of this principle. To Calvin, the Three Estates have not only the right but obligation to oppose an idolatrous king's violence and cruelty. For a king to 'betray the liberty of the people' is a 'nefarious perfidy'.⁷⁴

John McNeill remarks that in 'all these European organs of quasi-representative government he saw at least the possibility of some guarantee of liberty and security for the people'.⁷⁵ Calvin invites the lower magistrates of England, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, Spain, the diets of the Swiss Confederation and the imperial diets of Germany to assume the role of the Spartan ephors, thus limiting the tyranny of idolatrous kings.⁷⁶ This rationale for political resistance inspired John Knox, John Penot, Christopher Goodman, Francis Hotman and Samuel Rutherford in their moves against the state and its spiritual profligacy.

Here is the substance of Calvin's thinking about submitting to and resisting oppressive regimes:

Though we are under Turks, under tyrants, and under the deadly enemies of the gospel, yet is it commanded us to submit ourselves unto them. Why so? even because it pleases God.⁷⁷

71 McNeill p 268

72 John T McNeill 'Calvin and Civil Government' *Readings in Calvin's Theology* Donald McKim ed (Grand Rapids: Baker 1984) p 268

73 McNeill p 269.

74 *Institutes* 4.20.31; McNeill p 270.

75 McNeill p 270.

76 McNeill pp 269-70

There are always some restless spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ is properly exalted only when all earthly powers are abolished, and that they can enjoy the liberty which he had given them only if they have shaken off every yoke of human slavery.⁷⁸

For although the administration of earthly or civil sovereignty is disorderly and corrupt, yet the Lord wishes submission to it to remain unaffected. But when the spiritual rule degenerates the consciences of the godly are released from obedience to an unjust domination, especially if impious and profane enemies of holiness make a false pretense to the title of the priesthood to destroy the doctrine of salvation, and arrogate to themselves a lordship by which God Himself is reduced to order.⁷⁹

Therefore every office of dignity, which has been instituted for the preservation of the civil order, ought to be respected scrupulously, and held in honor. For whoever rises in rebellion against the magistrate, and those endowed with authority or official standing, is striving after anarchy. But a passion of that sort tends to the disruption of order, yes, and what is more, deals a shattering blow to humanity itself.⁸⁰

Christians are free to protest, but:

they may not boil over in anger, and match injury with injury ... but strive to overcome evil with goodness. This does not prevent them from complaining of the injuries done to them, or from convicting the ungodly of their guilt, by summoning them before the judgment of God, provided that they do so with a calm mind and without ill-will or hatred ... [for] ... the spirit of gentleness rules in us.⁸¹

Government and God

Although citizens must submit to government, Calvin argues that magistrates should not 'wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk'.⁸² Magistrates have a duty to resist tyranny, but in general, unjust rulers were to be viewed as a judgment from God:

They who rule unjustly and incompetently have been raised up by him to punish the wickedness of the people; that all equally have been endowed with that holy majesty with which he has invested

77 *Commentaries* Titus 3:1

78 *Commentaries* Rom 13:1

79 *Commentaries* Acts 23:5

80 *Commentaries* Acts 23:5

81 *Commentaries* Acts 23:3

lawful power ... In a very wicked man utterly unworthy of all honor, provided he has the public power in his hands, that noble and divine power resides which the Lord has by his Word given to the ministers of justice and judgment. Accordingly, he should be held in the same reverence and esteem by his subjects, in so far as public obedience is concerned, in which they would hold the best of kings if he were given to them.⁸³

Therefore, if we are cruelly tormented by a savage prince, if we are greedily despoiled by one who is avaricious or wanton, if we are neglected by a slothful one, if finally we are vexed for piety's sake by one who is impious and sacrilegious, let us first be mindful of our own misdeeds, which without doubt are chastised by such whips of the Lord. By this, humility will restrain our impatience. Let us then also call this thought to mind, that it is not for us to remedy such evils; that only this remains, to implore the Lord's help, in whose hand are the hearts of kings, and the changing of kingdoms.⁸⁴

Calvin opposes the idea of forwarding Christianity by the sword:

Although godly kings defend Christ's kingdom by the sword, it is done differently from the way in which worldly kingdoms are defended. For Christ's kingdom, which is spiritual, must be founded on the teaching and power of the Spirit. In the same way is its building effected; for neither the laws and edicts of men nor their punishments reach into consciences, yet this does not prevent princes from incidentally defending Christ's kingdom, partly by establishing external discipline and partly by lending their protection to the Church against the ungodly. But the depravity of the world causes the kingdom of Christ to be established more by the blood of martyrs than by the aid of arms.⁸⁵

Calvin's view is that magistrates too are subject to God's glory: 'We know how earthly empires are constituted by God, only on the condition that he deprives himself of nothing, but shines forth alone, and all magistrates must be set in regular order, and every authority in existence must be subject to his glory'.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Calvin, a man of his day, approaches the subject of politics with

82 *Institutes* 4.20.31

83 *Institutes* 4.20.25

84 *Institutes* 4.20.26

85 *Commentaries* John 18:36

86 John Calvin 'Commentaries on Daniel' *On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1956) p 101

presuppositions different from our own. Calvin does not distinguish between religion and other aspects of life. To Calvin, religion is life and life is religion. Therefore, all life, law, and politics are not separate from religion but pervaded by religion. Further, Calvin does not approach politics from the perspective of Kantian dualism. To Calvin, the 'noumenal' and 'phenomenal' realms are both subject to God's law. Because Calvin's definition of law differs from our own, he sees law, life, politics, and religion as a unity. To Calvin, all law, whether moral, civil, or religious, derives from God and God's law pervades all things. Calvin's view of the institutions of church and state, checks and balances on power, the citizen's relation to government, and government's relation to God derive from his religion.

The modern secularist will find Calvin's political views distant – almost otherworldly. He did not labour under the sacred/secular dualism that dominates modern pluralistic societies. Although some of Calvin's premises may be considered outmoded in our day, his basic principles – hatred of tyranny, love of limited government, and passion for justice – remain central to our system of values today.

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