

JOHN CALVIN ON CIVIL GOVERNMENT

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Introduction

Americans have, for the most part, embraced the political and legal doctrine that has in essence constructed a wall of separation between church and state. Most of us acknowledge that the concept is necessary to protect the free exercise of religion. Likewise, we are uncomfortably aware that the secularity of government is equally indispensable because there is little evidence that a national religion, or established church, would be the one of our choosing. As a Reformed church, we believe that the differing spheres of authority have no impact on the fact that governments remain accountable to God.² This reality provided the foundation for John Calvin's conviction that the civil government and the church must be separate in some regards, but in other ways allied. Calvin acknowledged the need for separation of church and state, but never considered the separation of state and God. But because his hope was for a Christian administration, and because he lived in a very different time, the principle of separation of church and state he endorsed was less restrictive than would be practical for most secular governments today.³

Calvin's views regarding government stemmed from his belief in the necessity of civil authority because of the depravity of man, his belief in providence, and his uncompromising certainty that God is sovereign over all things, including governments.⁴ His views regarding the corrupt nature of mankind as a result of Adam's disobedience to God are well documented. He believed that man's entire being was utterly sinful.⁵ Calvin wrote to the King of France that the wicked were so bold and their iniquity was so entrenched within them, that even the strictest of laws might not stop the evil doers from trying to harm God's people or disrupt God's plan. What then would those people do if there was no government to restrain them? Calvin concluded that civil government is necessary to protect the true church or "to uphold a public form of religion amongst Christians, and humanity amongst men."⁶ Calvin proposed that the purpose of the magistrate was to uphold God's glory, to preserve the divine truth, and to ensure the continuance of the Kingdom of Christ. When he was called upon to draft ordinances that would serve as a constitution for Geneva, he established an ideological movement that would have a lasting impact on both the sacred and the secular worlds.

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² G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Second Edition; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing Co., 1964), 311.

³ Clark, Gordon H. *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Unicoi, Tenn.: The Trinity Foundation, 2001), 212.

⁴ McNeill, John T., Editor, *Calvin: On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1950).

⁵ Barlow, Jonathan. *Calvinism*, 10 Jan 2009, The Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics <<http://www.reformed.org/calvinism/index.html>>.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Chapter 20, "Of Civil Government," trans. by Henry Beveridge (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989).

Components of Government

Calvin, writing on the subject of civil law in Chapter 20 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, identified three components of governmental authority: (1) the Magistrate, who is the protector or guardian of the laws; (2) the Laws, by which the magistrate governs; and (3) the People, who are governed. He started with the contention that no authority or government exists unless it is ordained by God.⁷ Governments are granted power by the consent of those governed, but their original authority is a gift from God and is subject to God.⁸ Calvin often referred to the magistrate as the minister or servant of God.

In his “Prefatory Address to His Most Christian Majesty, Francis, King of the French,” Calvin respectfully but firmly reminded the king that a true sovereign is the minister of God. Any ruler who does not make his reign subservient to God is not a king, but a robber. Rulers are ministers of God to punish those who do evil. Calvin instructed that magistrates must constantly remind themselves that they are the ministers of God, and in so doing, they will be forced to exhibit a “kind of image of the Divine Providence, guardianship, goodness, benevolence, and justice.”⁹

But this responsibility did not and does not establish the king or any other authority as the head of a state-sponsored religion. The Westminster Confession of Faith states, “The civil magistrate may not assume to themselves the administration of the Word and Sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁰ Civil authorities must not dictate a specific understanding of what the Scriptures teach so that one particular denomination would be given preference, nor may they usurp the authority given to elders by Scripture. The state has powers relating to the church, but no powers within the church.

Government, by definition, is an entity with legal force and authoritative control.¹¹ The second aspect of any civil government is the set of laws by which the magistrate rules and by which the people are governed. Calvin believed that there is a natural law, available and applicable to all men, but that nations have the liberty to enact laws it deems beneficial and that address the special needs or circumstances of the people. He taught that all laws so established must be tested by the perpetual concept of love and must be equally applied to all. But Calvin also noted the distinction between civil and religious jurisdictions, stating that “Christ’s spiritual Kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct.”¹² Calvin’s reforms in Geneva, where a type of Protestant state was established, still reflected his belief that man must be subject to two different but compatible governments: that which is found in the soul of man

⁷ Harro Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁸ “By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth” (Prov 8:16-17).

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ch. 20.

¹⁰ WCF 23:3.

¹¹ *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*. Merriam-Webster Online. 10 January 2009; <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/government>>.

¹² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ch. 20.

and relates to eternal life; and a second government that regulates the civic or material aspects of man. This view of “two kingdoms” is similar to the position established earlier by Martin Luther, and both reformers acknowledged that natural law alone would never be sufficient because of the foolishness of men.¹³

The third aspect of civil authority is the people that are governed. Calvin believed that every citizen had a duty to obey the government, even when the government was unjust.¹⁴ He understood that it is the duty of citizens to respect what God has ordained, leaving vengeance to him. The second duty of citizens is submission. We are to submit to the laws of the government, pay taxes that are levied, and perform required civic duties such as the bearing of arms in defense of the nation. There are certainly exceptions, but unless the government requires a Christian to do what God forbids or forbids them to do what God commands,¹⁵ we are called to be model citizens.

Role of Government

Calvin believed that these three components make up a system of civil government that is necessary and that will benefit the governed. He used the biblical example from the book of Judges to challenge those who would argue against the establishment of civil government. When there was no king, the people did what was right in their own heart. Most would agree that even a corrupt government is better than no government at all. Anarchy is absolute lawlessness, and no state can long survive in that condition. Civil authorities are given the responsibility of protecting the lives and property of its citizens, and the depravity of the human heart makes that protection indispensable.

There are other benefits as well. Calvin saw civil government as an opportunity for good. Schools and roads could be provided to benefit both the rich and the poor. New hospitals and prisons were also a part of the social reforms he encouraged.¹⁶ He believed there was great potential for any government that established a state that would be an entity truly “under God.” He actually went so far as to question whether there could ever be lasting prosperity in any kingdom that is not ruled by God’s divine word.¹⁷ Calvin wrote that man derives as much benefit from civil government as he does from bread and water, light and air.¹⁸ Quite simply, civil government allows for the possibility that men can live together in harmony.

If we stop there, Calvin’s views on government do not generate a lot of controversy. Most today would agree that government is charged with the protection of life and property,¹⁹ and that position fits easily within Calvin’s view of government. More difficult is the question of whether civil authorities should be involved in any matter regarding enforcement of the first

¹³ David M. Whitford, “Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the Lectures on Genesis,” *Church History* 73:1 (Mar 1, 2004).

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ch. 20; see also Rom 13:2.

¹⁵ Acts 5:29.

¹⁶ William C. Innes, *Social Concern in Calvin's Geneva* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1983).

¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ch. 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Rom 13:4.

four of the Ten Commandments. Many would take issue with the rest of Calvin's statement concerning civil government: "This is not its [civil government] only object, but it is, that no idolatry, no blasphemy against the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offenses to religion break out and be disseminated among the people."²⁰ Most Presbyterians would be reluctant to allow the state to enforce any duties toward God, particularly if physical coercion was employed to force conformity. In fact, the more integrated role seemingly championed by Calvin was a concern to early American Presbyterians who elected to revise Chapter 23 of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The original wording could be interpreted as too Erastian, and it was deemed necessary to clarify the position of the church to protect it from interference.²¹ But John Calvin lived in a time when the Protestant church looked to the state for protection from Rome, and it was natural to give the state more prerogatives than seem reasonable today.²² Ecclesiastical discipline was generally under the control of civil magistrates, and it was the subject of specifically ecclesiastical courts that was a source of controversy.²³ Calvin's statement must also be considered in light of the fact that he was a very religious man whose primary focus was advancement of the Reformation.²⁴ Calvin thought of the State as a Christian nation, and there is no evidence he would have wanted such involvement from a secular government without Christian leadership. And even in the early 1550s, he argued against the right of the state in the matter of excommunication, believing that to be the purview of the Consistory.²⁵

Forms of Government

So did Calvin promote one form of government over another? He is at times called an advocate of theocracy, usually by those citing the government of Geneva after Calvin returned in 1541. Geneva was governed by a City Council, but the Consistory (made up of preachers and lay elders) ruled on all matters relating to the church, and could refer citizens to the City Council for discipline.²⁶ The Consistory was seldom opposed by the City Council, but the fact that both authorities existed indicates that it was not a true theocracy. But it is certainly true that Calvin believed the state should be "theocratic" in the sense that it was and is subject to God's law.

In his writings Calvin discussed three forms of government: the monarchy (rule by one individual), democracy (the power rests with the people), and the aristocracy (a few selected individuals rule over many). Calvin has been characterized as a reformer of secular society in part because he championed liberation from the rule of tyrants, and he clearly rejected monarchy as a preferred form of government.²⁷ He thought it safer for government to be in the hands of many than in the hands of one, maintaining that monarchies are generally unable or unwilling to

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ch. 20.

²¹ Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?*

²² *Ibid.*, 212.

²³ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

²⁴ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932), 399-400.

²⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 114.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

²⁷ Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, transl. by M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

regulate themselves. Calvin vehemently opposed the theory that the Pope, or any king, should be able to claim absolute power.

Democracy is a system of government that fits well with Calvin's thinking in some regards, but the fit is not perfect. Calvin stressed the importance of education and practical training in the rights and duties of citizens. He promoted the dignity and equality of man, understanding that even in our fallen condition we are granted a remnant of grace because we are created in God's image. But while Calvin championed liberty, he also emphasized the principle of submission. Much has been made of the Calvinistic influences that impacted American history and its revolution from England.²⁸ The ideological origins of the American Revolution may have been rooted in Calvinism, and a love of liberty may well have been planted in the hearts of American patriots as the result of Calvin's reforms, but it is doubtful that John Calvin would have actually supported such a revolution. He declared that men should be content with whatever form of government exists, maintaining that governments are established according to the providence and particular dispensation of God.

The form of government apparently preferred by Calvin was aristocracy, or a blend of aristocracy and democracy.²⁹ Aristocracies have generally been associated with states where power was in the hands of the wealthy, the landowners, or some other class of the social elite. Rather than the state being ruled by those most able, a hereditary oligarchy generally existed that kept power in the hands of wealthy families regardless of achievement or intelligence. But in its true form, aristocracy is a form of government that advances "rule by the best."³⁰ Calvin endorsed the concept of an aristocracy, believing that it was sanctioned by scripture: "This has ...already been confirmed also by the Lord himself when he established an aristocracy... among the Israelites...."³¹ Calvin was acutely aware of man's fallen condition, and knew that a democracy could put government into the hands of the worst as easily as the hands of the best. This understanding, combined with his opposition to totalitarianism and absolutism, became components of the ideology that served as a precursor to the development of constitutional governments where the people collectively decide who the "best" are that will govern them. For this reason, Calvin is often credited with being with the forefather of the republican form of government, and the virtual founder of America.³²

Conclusion

By applying the principle of the sovereignty of God to the establishment of governments, be they secular or sacred, Calvin offered liberation from the tyranny that thrived under Arminianism and Roman Catholicism.³³ But for people and societies both, he stressed the need

²⁸ David W. Hall and David J. Vaughan, *A Heart Promptly Offered: The Revolutionary Leadership of John Calvin* (Nashville: Cumberland House Publishing, 2006).

²⁹ John T. McNeill, editor, *Calvin: On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1950), 53.

³⁰ Based on the Greek word, *aristos*, which means "best."

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ch. 20.

³² D. James Kennedy, *What if Jesus had Never been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994), 60; Kennedy quotes the German historian Von Ranke, saying, "John Calvin was the virtual founder of America."

³³ Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*.

for moral righteousness and warned that no society could prosper long without a government in submission to God. He proposed a Christian government that would control the people for their own good, and the results of his social and institutional reforms in Geneva were so successful that even his critics praised his political thought.³⁴ He believed there should be mutual support and cooperation between the civil and the ecclesiastical jurisdictions, but he knew the sinful nature of man meant there would be no perfect kingdom on this earth. So as we do today, Calvin ultimately looked forward to the time when Christ will reign on earth,³⁵ stating, “for it is not of us, but of the Living God and His Christ” who will “rule from sea to sea and from the river even to the ends of the earth.”³⁶

³⁴ J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract, Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume, and Rousseau*, ed. by Sir Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 206.

³⁵ Dan 2:32-35; Isa 11:4; Ps 2:9.

³⁶ Ps 72:8.