

CALVIN AND THE AMERICAN QUEST FOR LIBERTY

HANS A. ZEIGER¹

“And as I willingly admit that there is no kind of government happier than where liberty is framed with becoming moderation, and duly constituted so as to be durable, so I deem those very happy who are permitted to enjoy that form, and that I admit that they do nothing at variance with their duty when they strenuously and constantly labor to preserve and maintain it.”

– John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter 20²

“I can never join Calvin in addressing his god,” Thomas Jefferson wrote to John Adams in 1823. “If ever man worshipped a false god, he did. The being described in his 5 points is not the God whom you and I acknowledge and adore, the Creator and benevolent governor of the world; but a daemon of malignant spirit. It would be more pardonable to believe in no god at all, than to blaspheme him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin.”³ Jefferson had his strange reasons for rejecting the God of John Calvin. What the author of the Declaration of Independence could not have disputed is the profound impact of Calvinism in the making of America. For all of Jefferson’s outrage about the inequity of Calvinistic “Daemonism,” he wasn’t about to question the Calvinist contribution to human liberty. As the nineteenth-century historian George Bancroft wrote in his *History of the United States of America*, “The fanatic for Calvinism was a fanatic for liberty.”⁴

There is some irony in the fact that Calvinism turned out to be revolutionary. Calvin was a man of law and order, a lawyer and a scholar of the Roman Stoics before his conversion, later a defender of public discipline in Geneva. He did challenge the authority of the Catholic church, but only because he first taught submission to the authority of Scripture. In the last chapter of the *Institutes*, entitled “On Civil Government,” Calvin rebutted the anarchism of the radical Anabaptists who supposed that the state was “unworthy of a Christian man,” worthless to the citizen of heaven.⁵ Calvin argued that the office of the magistrate was “a most sacred office,” a

¹ Hans A. Zeiger is a senior fellow at the American Civil Rights Union and a 2008 Publius Fellow of the Claremont Institute. A graduate student in the Pepperdine University School of Public Policy, he holds a BA in American Studies from Hillsdale College. Hans is a member of the Tacoma Bible Presbyterian Church.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Ch. XX, trans. Henry Beveridge (BibleOne 4.0, 1999), 321.

³ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 11 April 1823, quoted in Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 191.

⁴ George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895), I, 319.

⁵ Calvin, 315.

noble profession worthy of any Christian's respect. Magistrates were "the viceregents of God," said Calvin, established by his authority and accountable to him for their actions. Even tyranny was preferable to anarchy, and only where the tyrant contradicted the commands of God was peaceful resistance warranted.⁶

According to Calvin, government had a divinely-instituted purpose: to protect the public order and defend God's moral law.⁷ When it came to the question of how best to order the state, Calvin offered an opinion: a mix of republicanism and aristocracy. But Calvin rejected the notion that a regime could change its form. Types of government arose organically by the will of God; revolution could never be just. "Whatever be the form [of government] which [God] has appointed in the places in which we live, our duty is to obey and submit."⁸

But the anarchic Anabaptists weren't the only extremists Calvin responded to in his final chapter. There were also the "flatterers of princes" who exalted the state in the place of the Divine.⁹ To them, Calvin pointed out the limits of government. Taxation was a legitimate power of government, but tax revenues were not "private chests" for princes. Taxes "are almost the blood of the people" and "are merely subsidies of the public necessity, and ... it is tyrannical rapacity to harass the poor people without cause."¹⁰ Rulers who abused their powers and oppressed the people would answer to God.

Since governments were just as much corrupted by the fall as any human institution, Calvin suggested the importance of a mixed government that checked and balanced itself, for "it is safer and more tolerable when several bear rule, that they may thus mutually assist, instruct, and admonish each other, and should any one be disposed to go too far, the others are censors and masters to curb his excess."¹¹ And though he taught that the state was the protector of the church, he also taught the separation of those institutions. "But he who knows to distinguish between the body and the soul, between the present heeling life and that which is future and eternal, will have no difficulty in understanding that the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very widely separated."¹²

Calvin did not rule out entirely the possibility that individuals might resist the state in defense of their organic constitution. Those who already lived in a free society would fail in

⁶ Calvin, 324, 336.

⁷ Government was especially "to prevent the true religion, which is contained in the law of God, from being with impunity openly violated and polluted by public blasphemy" (Calvin, 318).

⁸ Calvin, 321.

⁹ Calvin, 316.

¹⁰ Calvin, 326.

¹¹ Calvin, 321.

¹² Calvin, 317.

their duties to sit by as a tyrant attempted to uproot their ancient liberties. “And as I willingly admit that there is no kind of government happier than where liberty is framed with becoming moderation, and duly constituted so as to be durable, so I deem those very happy who are permitted to enjoy that form, and that I admit that they do nothing at variance with their duty when they strenuously and constantly labor to preserve and maintain it.”¹³ Magistrates who did not labor to preserve liberty were “traitors to their office and their country.”¹⁴ So Calvin was a partisan for liberty, but he was an opponent of revolution to achieve it.

Calvinism—a set of ideas and experiences much larger than one man—never was revolutionary in the sense that Calvin’s native France became in the wake of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. With Calvinism the idea of liberty was always ordered—ordered first by God and second by his appointed rulers. Unfettered freedom of choice was not really freedom at all. It was anarchy or license, not liberty. It was the height of fallen man’s slavery to sin, and it would be no wonder to Calvin that France’s Revolution turned quickly into despotism, spreading its legacy on to the Gulags and killing fields of later generations.

Neither was Calvinism revolutionary in the sense that it offered something original or novel to the world. Indeed, Calvin was an echo of Augustine and many of the Church Fathers.¹⁵ He was, more significantly, a teacher of the Holy Scripture. Calvin was a conservative—a conservator of eternal truths, a believer in the divine ordering of this life and the life to come.

But Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was rocked by the impact of biblical faith renewed. The old orders, bound to Rome, allowed too little space for Protestantism to flourish. For the Presbyterians in Scotland and the Huguenots in France, the practice of faith created a political problem. How can Christians obey their magistrates when those magistrates restrict the freedom to worship? In 1561, the Reformer John Knox stood before Mary Queen of Scots to answer for his Protestantism. The queen asked if subjects may rebel against their government. Knox replied, “If princes exceed their bounds, madam, no doubt they may be resisted even by power.”¹⁶ The English historian James Froude wrote of that incident, “Thus spoke Calvinism the creed of republics.”¹⁷

¹³ Calvin, 321.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ John Cotton wrote that Augustine, Luther, and Calvin “were all of them thought new Doctrines in their time; and yet all of them the ancient truths of the everlasting Covenant of grace.” From *Gospel Conversion*, (London, 1646), quoted in Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1982), 93.

¹⁶ W.P. Breed, *Presbyterians and the Revolution* (Decatur, MS: Issacharian Press, 1993), 60.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The English Puritans were just as concerned about politics, but their focus was less on the right of rebellion than the possibility of a decent political order. The Puritans settled in New England nearly a century after the first publication of Calvin's *Institutes*. They were devoted above all to the Word of God and the life to come. Yet, like Calvin in Geneva, the Puritans in America were not careless about the affairs of this life. They reflected on the lessons of nature and sought, through reason, to make their way amid the ruins of the fall. They attempted, with mixed results, to balance the demands of Scripture and the requirements of a just community. They were an intensely political people.

The Puritans shared much of Calvin's understanding of politics. They also were the beneficiaries of decades of scholarship and conversations about Calvin's theology that constituted Calvinism. They carried on the Calvinist school of thought in their sermons, their home devotions, their books and pamphlets, and their discussions about politics and culture. According to the eminent historian Perry Miller, "Calvinism could no longer remain the relatively simply dogmatism of its prophet. It needed amplification, it required concise explication, syllogistic proof, intellectual as well as spiritual focus."¹⁸ For young New England Puritans who studied at Harvard College and for pastors who reasoned with their congregations and each other, books on logic and systematic theology by Samuel Willard, William Ames, Petrus van Mastricht, Zacharias Ursinus, and John Wollebius helped to form the Calvinist intellectual canon.¹⁹

The Puritans, as their label suggests, wrestled intensely with the problem of purity: how could they promote it in individuals, families, and society? How could they emphasize God's sovereign grace while encouraging obedience among His people? The answer that English Puritans like John Preston, Richard Baxter, Richard Sibbes, and William Perkins found in Scripture was the idea of the covenant.²⁰ Defending intently the sovereignty of God, the covenant theologians sought out a deeper understanding of man's part in the divine plan. Their work was a fuller affirmation of Calvin's beautiful declaration, citing Augustine, in the *Institutes*, that "human will does not obtain grace by freedom, but obtains freedom by grace."²¹

So when the first Englishmen reached New England, "The one thing that these largely Calvinist settlers brought with them was their familiarity with religious covenants as the basis for forming communities," writes Donald Lutz.²² If spiritual freedom came only as a grace of God to the regenerate soul, certainly God was the giver of other graces too, even sometimes to those

¹⁸ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1982), 95.

¹⁹ Miller, 95-97

²⁰ Miller, 374

²¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter 3, 308.

²² Donald Lutz, *The Origins of American Constitutionalism* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 24-25

outside of faith. The covenant theologians were covenant political philosophers too. They spoke of society as a contract, a binding agreement with the Lord and each other to which people endowed with the gift of reason freely consented. “No common weale can be founded but by free consent,” said Massachusetts governor John Winthrop, “...for no man hath lawful power over another, but by birth or consent.”²³

Among early American covenants were the Mayflower Compact of 1620; the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, which created a common government for three villages in 1639; the Organization of the Government of Rhode Island in 1642; and the partnership of the Massachusetts, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven colonies into the New England Confederation in 1643.²⁴ The Pilgrims who signed the Mayflower Compact did “in the Presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil Body Politick, for our better Ordering and Preservation.”²⁵

Covenants and compacts were clearly the established basis of governance in the American colonies.²⁶ And, as Lutz notes, the establishment of compact government in the colonies occurred quite apart from the theories of Locke, Montesquieu, and Blackstone, who in the middle of the seventeenth century had yet to add their contributions to political philosophy.²⁷ It is the prevalence of covenant theology in the colonies that explains “the surprising similarity in the Americans’ state constitutions and colonial documents.”²⁸

Along with their belief in the necessity of public authority and government by consent, the Puritans developed a belief in limited government. The purpose of government was to maximize liberty for individuals and families to govern themselves according to the Law of God. “[L]iberty,” wrote Winthrop, “is the proper end and object of authority, and cannot subsist without it; and it is a liberty to that only which is good, just and honest.”²⁹ Freedom was to be constrained within moral limits, but it was best if the people could do this privately rather than

²³ Miller, 408. A moment before Winthrop uttered his famous passage about the “city on a hill” in his inaugural address for a new land in 1630, he declared: “We are entered into Covenant with Him for this worke. Wee haue taken out a commission ... Wee have hereupon besought Him of favour and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath hee ratified this covenant and sealed our Commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it” (John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” 1630, Hanover Historical Texts Project, 1996, <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>, accessed 21 Jan. 2009).

²⁴ Lutz, 31-32.

²⁵ John Carver, William Bradford, et al, “Agreement Between the Settlers at New Plymouth,” 1620, Avalon Project, Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp, accessed 22 Jan. 2009.

²⁶ Lutz, 28.

²⁷ Lutz, 31.

²⁸ Lutz, 24-25.

²⁹ Miller, 426.

submitting to a tyrant. In order for government to exercise its power for the public good, wrote John Cotton, it was necessary “that all power that is on earth be limited.”³⁰ Contained within Calvinism were both the need for government to rule over sinful men, and the need for limited government to avoid usurping the realm of the church, the family, and the individual.

Over time, the relationship between the New England church and the social compact of the growing colonial community changed form. Membership in the town was no longer synonymous with membership in the church. After a period of spiritual declension in the late seventeenth century, the churches of New England experienced a tremendous revival by God’s spirit, known to history as “The Great Awakening.” The Awakening reminded the settlers of their covenants and of their part in the plan of God. No one did more in this effort than Jonathan Edwards of Northampton, Massachusetts. He was the greatest theologian and the greatest Calvinist in American history.

The Puritans were not the only settlers to convey Calvinism across the Atlantic. The Scottish Reformation was transmitted to America when droves of Scots-Irish Presbyterians fled persecution by the established church. If the Puritans had come to their belief in government by consent through careful deliberation, the Scots-Irish had reached the same conclusion through rough experience. Many settled in Virginia and the Carolinas and eventually in the backwoods of Kentucky and Tennessee. As Lord Thomas Babington Macauley later said of their preachers, “They inherited the republican opinions of Knox.”³¹

John Witherspoon was one such Scottish preacher descended both intellectually and biologically from Knox.³² Witherspoon came to America from Scotland in 1768 to become president of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. A decade prior, Jonathan Edwards had been president of the college. In Witherspoon were combined the two movements that gave revolutionary energy to American Presbyterians: Scots-Irish Presbyterianism and the Great Awakening. Among the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Witherspoon affirmed the principles of the Founding in his 1776 sermon entitled “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Man.” Witherspoon asserted God’s providence as the superintending principle in the defeat of sin and the triumph of liberty. Revolution, he said, was “not only lawful but necessary.”³³ The sermon was distributed in over 500 colonial churches.³⁴

³⁰ Miller, 409.

³¹ Breed, 9.

³² Breed, 42.

³³ Witherspoon, “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” in Ellis Sandoz, ed. *The Political Sermons of the Founding Era: 1730-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 549.

³⁴ Michael Novak, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003), 15.

The republican philosophy, as it culminated in 1776 and 1787, was deeply grounded in 150 years of local self-government informed by biblical and Calvinist principles. Enlightenment ideas about the social contract served simply to lend breadth to an organic movement that had its institutional foundations in the Puritan community, and its intellectual foundations long before that. According to religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom, “Puritanism provided the moral and religious background of fully 75 percent of the people who declared their independence in 1776.”³⁵ More than that, intellectual historian Paul Conkin observes that Calvin’s “followers exerted by far the greatest influence upon American political thought.”³⁶

The Father of the Constitution, James Madison, studied the writings of Calvin under John Witherspoon at Princeton. The most famous lines of the *Federalist*, penned by Madison, reflect a Calvinist understanding of the soul and the state. They fall in *Federalist 51*: “But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”³⁷ The American Constitution not only made a government that was sufficiently powerful to create order among sinful men and women, it checked and balanced the government itself.

Even with its towering influence on the development of the American order, Calvinism seemed to be a dying theology to some observers in the early republic. Ezra Stiles of Yale predicted in 1787 that the writings of Jonathan Edwards “in another generation will pass into as transient notice perhaps scarce above oblivion, and when posterity occasionally comes across them in the rubbish of libraries, the rare characters who may read and be pleased with them will be looked upon as singular and whimsical.”³⁸ But according to Marsden, Stiles “underestimated the resilience and popular support of strict Calvinism. Even in the era of Revolutionary politics, Edwards had a following.”³⁹

A grandson of Edwards, Timothy Dwight, held aloft the light of the Awakening in the first generation after the Founding. When Stiles died in 1795, Dwight rebutted Stiles’ talk of

³⁵ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, quoted in Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 195.

³⁶ Paul K. Conkin, *Self-Evident Truths* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974), 7.

³⁷ James Madison, “No. 51,” *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 319; John Adams of Puritan Massachusetts had made a similar explanation of government as a necessary evil in 1760: “all Magistrates and all civil officers, and all civil Government, is founded and maintained by the sins of the People.” John Adams, 18 Dec. 1760, *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1961), I, 184, quoted in A.J. Beitzinger, *A History of American Political Thought* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1972), 189-190.

³⁸ Ezra Stiles, quoted in George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 499.

³⁹ Marsden, 499.

Edwards' insignificance by taking his place as president of Yale. There he taught a new generation of reformed preachers. In their discussions in the seminaries and presses, Calvinist scholars carried on a vigorous debate about piety, revivalism, and reason throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. As Calvinism was delivered by pioneers to new frontiers like Michigan and Indiana, it took root in the culture of the Midwest. Even while the country was becoming more pluralistic and extensive, the basic concepts of Calvinism remained influential over the American mind.⁴⁰

Just as it is impossible to understand the history of American politics without an appreciation for religion, it is impossible to understand the history of American religion without an appreciation for politics.⁴¹ Religious historian Nathan O. Hatch has described the major religious movement following the Revolution as "The Democratization of American Christianity."⁴² The cultural tides of democracy posed two major challenges to Calvinism. The first was the ascendancy of Arminianism, beginning in the eighteenth century and intensifying with the Second Great Awakening. The Arminians emphasized free will instead of God's sovereignty in the plan of salvation.

The second challenge to Calvinism was the turmoil of the nineteenth century: as it split the country, so it split the descendants of the Puritans from the descendants of the Scots-Irish. It divided whole denominations. At the center of the conflict was the old question of government by consent. It took a man of spiritual doubt, his mind shaped in the simple congregations of Kentucky and Indiana Calvinism, his words laced with Scripture, to call back the nation to its "ancient faith," as he called it. By that, Abraham Lincoln meant "that 'all men are created equal;' and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another."⁴³

A third assault against Calvinism originated outside of democracy and threatened to topple consensual government. It had its roots in nineteenth century philosophy and science, propagating a new determinism and a new understanding of human nature. The English biologist Charles Darwin and his followers said that human beings were evolving creatures; nature was said to change over time, eliminating the political basis for human equality and the theological basis for sin and salvation. The German philosopher Georg William Friedrich Hegel taught the doctrine of historical inevitability that gave rise to the totalitarian states of the twentieth century.

⁴⁰ Marsden, 499.

⁴¹ See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁴² Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁴³ Abraham Lincoln, "Speech on the Kansas-Nebraska Act," 16 Oct. 1854, AMDOCS, <http://www.vlib.us/amdocs/index.html>, accessed 22 Jan. 2009.

With milder results in America, liberal preachers of Calvinist heritage accepted the new faith of Darwin and Hegel. Rejecting the doctrines of sin and grace, they promised heaven on earth. The old Puritan notions of Providence remained in the background, but often the heirs of the Puritans exalted the new god of Progress. It was Woodrow Wilson, a Presbyterian and successor of Edwards and Witherspoon as the head of Princeton, who believed that Americans had evolved beyond the Constitution of limited government into the age of the administrative state, and who, from his vision of a perfected world, promised a “war to end all wars.” Instead, according to the great Calvinist scholar J. Gresham Machen, “humanity is standing over an abyss.”⁴⁴

Against these developments there arose a protest by the true heirs of the Reformation in the twentieth century. This movement continues in churches throughout the land, in private schools and in the home schooling movement, and in publications like this one. Religious conservatives—Calvinists among them—have continued to play a significant role in American politics.

Yet, today liberalism dominates most of the nation’s cultural institutions, and at this very moment Progressivism is making a grand resurgence in our public life. From such challenges Calvinists need not retreat. As Machen warned in 1936, it would be hopeless to solve the world’s political and social troubles “until we have come to be right with God.”⁴⁵ So it is today. If we are to preserve our nation’s “ancient faith,” we must renew the Ancient Faith of John Calvin.

⁴⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (Reprinted; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), 4.

⁴⁵ Machen, 8.