

CALVIN

On God and Political Duty



Edited by

JOHN T. MCNEILL



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INTRODUCTION

True wisdom, says John Calvin at the beginning of his *Institutes*, consists in the knowledge of God and of ourselves. God is to be known in his work of creation and redemption. He is revealed inadequately through nature and reason, adequately and authoritatively through the Scriptures, which are his authentic utterance. He is clothed with majesty and sovereign power, yet "he allures us to himself by his mercy." Man, enfeebled by sin, rises to his true life by God's undeserved grace, and finds his liberty in a voluntary obedience to God. Throughout his writings Calvin stresses his unwavering belief that the high Sovereign of the universe is also intimately present in the world of mankind. He sees God's hand in all historical events, and never doubts that in our personal affairs and choices we have "dealings with God" all the days of our life (*"in tota vita negotium cum Deo"*).

We cannot understand the political element in Calvin's teaching, any more than in the teaching of St. Paul or St. Augustine, without being aware that it hangs upon his scriptural conception of the relation of God to man and of the consequent obligation of man to man. He has numerous points in common both with Aquinas and with Marsiglio; but he is less indebted to Aristotle and more insistently scriptural than either of these contrasting medieval interpreters of government.

The dealings with God to which Calvin refers include far more than acts of worship and contemplation. The Calvinist piety embraces all the day-by-day concerns of life, in family and neighborhood, education and culture, business and politics. These are for Calvin realms of duty in which men ought so to act as to honor God and benefit their fellows.

Calvin's awe-stricken consciousness of God carries with it no indifference to mundane matters. Rather it demands the most intense participation in the common affairs of men. If, in Aristotle's phrase, man is a "political animal," he is in Calvin's view not less but more political when he is motivated by religion. Calvin is repelled, and even appalled by the type of sectarian spirituality that would desert the sphere of politics as beneath the spiritual man's plane of living. More emphatically than most theologians, he calls for active and positive political behavior.

I

Calvin wrote no extended formal treatise on government. His utterances on the subject are incidental, but they represent a continuous, thoughtful interest in political matters. The extracts here given are from writings scattered over a period of about twenty-five years. In the first of these he is addressing the greatest monarch of his time. In the last he is applying principles of political duty to a royal figure portrayed in an Old Testament book. He shows in the other selections political interests that go far beyond the topic of kingly authority and duty. His own age, and his immediate environment in Geneva, offered for consideration the phenomena of government by elective assemblies. Calvin is not so naïve as to suppose that political salvation comes from the adoption of any mere structure of government, but his decided preference is for some type of government in which citizens in general share responsibility.

"Shakespeare loves a king," but Calvin rarely mentions one with admiration. It is true that in passages of his works he shows a high regard for biblical kings who are approved by the Scripture writers. His warmest praise of King David is associated, however, with his belief that David was the author of that matchless treasury of devotion, the Book of Psalms. His approach to contemporary kings was respectful but far from subservient; he always assumes the rôle of a counsellor

rather than of a mere suppliant. He wrote numerous letters to the crowned heads of nations and to others in positions of power, seeking to move them to adopt a tolerant attitude toward their Protestant subjects, or urging them to action in the reform of the Church in their domains. The earliest and most notable of these is the letter to Francis I of France, which serves as an introduction to the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. It was written in August 1535. The first edition of this work was then about to go to the Basel printer, Thomas Platter; it appeared in March of the following year.

The letter offers a defense of the French Protestant minority, then subjected to persecution, against the charges of heresy and sedition. Early in the document we come upon statements of Calvin's fundamental ideas concerning the duties of kings, and in fact of all who bear rule. It belongs to true royalty for a king to acknowledge himself "the minister of God." Where the glory of God is not the end of government there is no legitimate sovereignty, but usurpation. The Kingship of Christ is over all earthly dominion. One is reminded here of a celebrated passage in Augustine's *City of God* (v. 24), oft quoted by medieval authors and known as the "Mirror of Princes," where the great African Father observes that in the Christian view those emperors are happy who "make their power the handmaid of God's majesty."

The significance of this letter lies not only in its vehement defense of the cause to which Calvin was attached and assertion of its right to the King's recognition, but also in the fact that the young scholar ventured thus boldly to admonish the proud and absolute monarch of a great nation. Aroused by the sufferings of his fellow believers, Calvin charges with "falsehoods, artifices, and calumnies" the inspirers of persecution who have gained influence over the King. He derives his munitions from the arsenal of Scripture and from the writings of the Church Fathers. His attack is merciless; it is with no tolerant spirit that he demands toleration. By implication the King himself is involved in the

denunciation of the policy of "extermination" which the government of France has apparently instituted. We do not know that Francis ever saw the letter; if he did, his policy was not affected by it. Calvin's passionate vehemence was less likely to be effective than a more moderate plea might have been. There were more prudent and balanced statements within the book itself in which we discern the outlines of his political doctrine. But the letter to Francis gave startling evidence that Calvin and his followers regarded all rulers as subject to criticism from the standpoint of scriptural religion.

II

Two chapters are here given from the final Latin edition (1559) of the *Institutes*, in John Allen's translation. Substantially the first of these texts is contained in the final chapter of the 1536 edition.¹ Calvin was about twenty-six years old when he completed the writing of the first edition, but his thought was already so mature in this field that he found little occasion to alter or expand this passage in his later editions. The same statements hold for the second selection, with the qualification that considerable additional matter of some interest was introduced, chiefly in the last edition. The structure of the work as a whole was materially altered in the series of revisions, and it was extended to five times its original size. While in the first edition the two topics here treated were separated only by a section on "ecclesiastical power," they appear in separate books of the final edition, and the materials inserted between them comprise no less than twenty-five chapters. Moreover, these are now set in different main divisions of the treatise. Despite the fact that in the enlarged *Institutes* our two selections have been widely

¹ Chapter VI: "*De libertate christiana, potestate ecclesiastica et politica administratione.*" In Peter Barth's edition, *Joannis Calvini opera selecta*, Volume I (Munich, 1926), this long chapter occupies pages 223-280.

separated and placed under different general headings,² they still bear references to one another, and the student will do well to remember that in their original form the relationship between them was made obvious in the organization of the work.

In the chapter on liberty, Calvin is largely concerned with the topic of conscience. Man stands helpless before the divine law, since the law condemns all imperfections. From this unhappy state God calls men "with paternal gentleness" into the liberty of faith. Man's good actions arise in glad response to this call, as children respond to a kind father. All the good works of the patriarchs referred to in the Epistle to the Hebrews are there said to be done through faith. It is important that we should be aware that we have liberty of choice with regard to external matters of the class of *adiaphora*, things morally indifferent. If this assurance is lacking, conscience may be entrapped into a course of meaningless cumulative self-punishment, and be led to despair. Yet for Calvin the things indifferent are not to be used in ways that escape moral restraint. Ivory and gold, music, good food and wine are to be enjoyed without excess and without pride or covetousness. Christian liberty is thus opposed both to unwholesome asceticism and to irresponsible indulgence. It requires that, like St. Paul, we shall know "how to be abased and how to abound," and that we avoid offending the scruples of others. It may involve, for example, abstinence from flesh on Fridays in deference to our neighbor's conscience.

Thus conscience is by no means merely an individual matter; it must be exercised with consideration for other men's consciences, where no imperative duty is thereby infringed. On the other hand, we must not by yielding too much "for-

² Book III of this edition, in which our chapter "On Christian Liberty" appears, is entitled: "On the Manner of Receiving the Grace of Christ, the Benefits which we Derive from It, and the Effects which Follow It." Book IV, which concludes with the chapter "On Civil Government," bears the title: "The True Church, and the Necessity of Our Union with Her, Being the Mother of All the Pious."

tify the conscience of our neighbor in sin." Calvin's rule is that we are to assert or restrict our liberty in accordance with charity and a due regard for the welfare of our neighbor (*studendum charitati et spectanda proximi aedificatio*, III, xix, 12).

Calvin here introduces the question of obligation to political authority. He warns against the error of supposing that since the Christian's conscience is set free by faith, he may disregard this obligation. But man stands under a double government (*duplex in homine regimen*, III, xix, 15): spiritual and political; these require to be separately considered. He first examines in connection with "spiritual government" the meaning of the word conscience, "a kind of medium between God and man," which "places man before the Divine tribunal." He insists on the principle that conscience, in the strict sense of the term, is directed to God, not to human laws. The nature of obligation to public law and government concerns the relations among men on the temporal level, which are discussed later, in Book IV, chapter xx.

III

This chapter (IV, xx) is Calvin's most systematic statement on government, and summarizes his entire thought on the subject. Again he distinguishes the two realms, of the spiritual and the temporal, and confines the liberty of the Gospel to the former. On the other hand, he protests against the notion that civil government is a polluted thing with which Christians have nothing to do. The political state has, indeed, functions directly connected with religion. It protects and supports the worship of God, promotes justice and peace, and is a necessary aid in our earthly pilgrimage toward heaven—as necessary as bread and water, light and air, and more excellent in that it makes possible the use of these, and secures higher blessings to men. Calvin is eloquent on the benefits of government in combatting offenses against religion, securing tranquility, safeguarding private property,

promoting honesty and other virtues, and maintaining "a public form of religion among Christians and humanity among men."

The State is not free to dictate laws to the Church, but is obligated to protect it. There is common ground here between Calvin and St. Thomas Aquinas; but Calvin gives to the State as over against the Church a somewhat larger sphere of action than the medieval doctor, and in this approaches more nearly to the position of Dante in *De Monarchia*, if not to that of a Marsiglio in the *Defensor Pacis*. Marsiglio has been regarded (though I believe unjustly) as a prophet of secularism. Certainly Calvin is not that. In his warm admiration for political government, he does not for a moment regard it as a realm of mere secularity. It is God-given, a "benevolent provision" for man's good, and for it men should give God thanks. The function of the magistrate is a "sacred ministry," and to regard it as incompatible with religion is an insult to God. Calvin has here in mind the Anabaptists and other enthusiastic groups. When he wrote, the fanatical experiment of the Münster Anabaptists had very recently come to a tragic close.

Calvin insists on applying this teaching to all sorts of political rulers. Paul, writing under the least satisfactory kind of government which is "by one man" and accompanied by a "common servitude," states that "there is no power but of God." It is evident that Calvin regards even non-Christian governments and governors as divinely authorized and worthy of obedience. A state may be well constituted though it "neglects the polity of Moses" and rests upon the common law of nations. Yet he is addressing Christian rulers and subjects of professedly Christian states, and is of course primarily concerned with politics in a Christian setting.

Magistrates are the guardians of the laws, and their very making and enforcement of law is "presided over" by God. Theirs is a holy calling, "the most sacred and honorable" of all. In a powerful passage it is pointed out that their realization of this should induce them to pursue zealously clemency,

justice, and other virtues becoming to their office. Calvin admonishes them as "vicegerents of God" to avoid bribery, to defend good men from injury, to aid the oppressed, vindicate the innocent, and justly to mete out punishment and reward. They are obligated where necessary to suppress violence by force. The commandment not to kill does not bind the justice of God of which they are executors. But there must not be undue severity. No equitable sentence is pronounced without mercy, yet an ill-advised lenity toward violent men may prove cruelty to the many who become their victims. By the same principle, a war of defense against a ruthless aggressor may become a necessary duty, though only when every peaceable effort has failed. Against this necessity frontier garrisons, foreign alliances, and military preparations are legitimate precautionary measures.

Calvin realizes that government requires revenues and taxation. These funds are not the ruler's private incomes but belong to the people; they are in fact the very blood of the people and should be used in their behalf as a sacred trust, and not collected with rapacity or wasted in luxury.

IV

The treatment of the duties of magistracy is followed by a discussion of public law. Calvin, a doctor of law, was at home in this field, but he restrains himself from a lengthy disquisition and handles the topic succinctly, with primary reference to the Old Testament. He follows the traditional distinction of the "moral, ceremonial, and judicial" aspects of the Mosaic law, of which the first only is of perpetual authority. The judicial law supplied a political constitution with rules of equity and justice by which men might dwell together in peace. The ceremonial law aided piety in the childhood stage of the development of the Jewish nation. Valuable as these were, they were of passing necessity. Only the moral law endures without change. It is summarized in the Ten Commandments, and in the Commandment of Love (Leviticus

19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-39). Nations are free to adopt such laws as they may find expedient, without regard to the political constitution, or judicial law, of ancient Israel, but always on the principles of the moral law and "the perpetual rule of love."

At many points in his other writings Calvin has touched upon the topic of natural law and equity, but his references here to this vital theme are disappointingly compressed. In his *Commentary on Romans* (1:21-22; 2:14-15) he affirms that God has set in all men's minds a knowledge of himself—"his eternity, power, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy." Gentiles, though they have in large degree disregarded these intimations of a divine natural morality, have nevertheless, "without a monitor," devised laws which reflect it.

It is beyond doubt that there are naturally inborn (*ingenitas*) in the minds of men certain conceptions of justice and uprightness, which the Greeks call "anticipations" (*προλήψεις*). They have therefore a law without the law [and] are not altogether lacking in knowledge of right and equity. [St. Paul] has set nature over against the written law, understanding that for the Gentiles a natural light of justice shines, which supplies the place of the law by which the Jews are instructed; so that they are "a law unto themselves."³

In an earlier passage of the *Institutes*, Calvin gives an extended treatment of the moral law as expressed in the Ten Commandments. He there refers to that "interior law . . . imprinted on the heart of everyone," which in some sense conveys the teaching of the Commandments. The inner monitor that expresses this is conscience, which ever and anon arouses us from moral sleep. The written moral law of the Bible is given by God to attest and clarify the precepts of natural law, and fix them in the memory (II, viii, 1).

In the present context we have a variant expression of the same teaching. Calvin's words are:

³ In this Introduction, the translations of quotations from Calvin's works are by the writer.

Now since it is a fact that the Law of God which we call "moral" is nothing else than a testimony of the natural law and of that conscience which has been engraven by God in the minds of men, the entire scheme (*ratio*) of this equity has been prescribed in it (IV, xx, 16).

Thus Calvin adopts, and clearly enunciates, the traditional view that a primal natural law has been imparted by God to all men, and that the scriptural Commandments bear witness to it (*naturalis legis testimonium*). All such laws as men may frame in accordance with the natural law, however they may diverge from those of other states, and from the Jewish law, are to be approved. The Laws of Moses were not all intended for all nations; they took account of the "peculiar circumstances" of the Hebrew people. The Commandments are, so to speak, a divine transcription for the Jewish people of the natural law that has always and everywhere been lodged in men's hearts, and properly governs all enacted laws.⁴

In general Calvin identifies natural law with equity. He seems to think of equity not in the technical sense of the human modification, in given circumstances, of the letter of a written code, but in the popular sense of common justice. Equity is natural, and hence "the same for all mankind"; and all laws should "have equity for their end." It is noteworthy that both Luther and Melancthon, who were not trained in law, use the technical language and make equity a "mitigation" of the *summum ius*, the limit of the law, while Calvin, the trained lawyer, avoids a definition of the term and gives it a sense virtually as inclusive as that of natural law itself. He leaves us, however, in no doubt of his desire to emphasize the normative authority of natural in relation to positive law. In all this Calvin has no notion of modern secular interpretations of natural law. It is a part of the divine endowment of the natural man, impaired indeed, but

⁴ For further evidence see the present writer's article, "Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers," *The Journal of Religion*, XXVI (1946), 179ff.

not obliterated by sin, evident in common concepts of justice and in the inner voice of conscience.

Calvin's affirmation of law, on this basis, is accompanied by a justification of participation in its judicial processes. An injured person has the right to claims its protection, and bring his cause before the courts. The magistrate in legal judgments exercises "a holy gift of God," and litigation is to be sought without feelings of revenge or enmity. St. Paul asserted his rights as a Roman citizen, and his rebuke of the Christians of Corinth (I Cor. 6) was designed to check their spirit of dissension and covetousness. Again he invokes the rule of charity, which is not necessarily violated when we defend our property.

V

Calvin lays emphasis repeatedly upon the duty of obedience to magistrates as vicegerents of God. So far as the individual citizen is concerned, this rule of obedience applies even to tyrannical rulers who seem to be in no sense representatives of God. An impious king is thought of as a scourge visited upon a people in punishment for sin; yet he too possesses a divine authority. Old Testament passages are adduced here: Jeremiah represents God as calling Nebuchadnezzar "my servant" and commanding the people to serve him and live, though in fact he was "a pestilent and cruel tyrant." Under a wicked ruler we are not to rebel, but to consider our own sins, and implore the help of God. This is not futile, for God does intervene to lay tyrants low, sometimes raising up leaders who are his appointed instruments of revolution even when they know it not. "Let princes hear and fear!"

The passage here selected from the Commentary on Romans (1539) accords with these views. The magistrate in punishment exercises the vengeance of God against the violation of his Commandments. Calvin remarks that no "private man" may seize the reins of government from the appointed

ruler. In paragraphs not included in the selection, he applies to government the principle of charity, which is the fulfillment of the law. To induce anarchy is to violate charity; obedience to magistrates is a great part of charity.

But we create a wholly false impression of Calvin's political ideas if we give sole attention to his exhortations to obedience. It will be observed that in commenting on Romans 13:1, he stresses the point that Paul speaks of the "higher," not of the "highest" power. The ruler has no authority that contends with God's. Calvin frequently reminds us that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:24). In the last edition of the *Institutes* he reinforces this argument (in the final paragraph of the work) by fresh Bible texts: in Daniel 6:22 the king has abrogated (*abrogaverit*) his authority by raising his hand against God; and Hosea 5:11 condemns the submissive obedience of the Israelites to the decrees of Jeroboam II enjoining idolatry. God does not resign his right to mortals when he makes them rulers.

Nor does Calvin deprive subjects of all right of resistance. The classical passage here is in the *Institutes* IV, xx, 31, which is in all editions of the work. So far as private persons are concerned, they are never permitted to resist. But if there are magistrates whose constitutional function is the protection of the people against the license of kings (*populares magistratus ad moderandam regum libidinem*), such as the Ephors of Sparta, the Roman tribunes, or the Demarchs of Athens, or, perhaps with such power as is exercised by the meetings of the Three Estates in the several modern kingdoms, it is not only their right but their duty to oppose the king's violence and cruelty. It would be "nefarious perfidy" for them to fail in this duty, and thus to "betray the liberty of the people."

How should we understand these references to the ancient popular magistrates and to the estates in modern realms? Calvin introduces his reference to the latter with the word "perhaps." This may suggest that he hesitated to regard them, or, at least, to regard all of them, as functioning like

the Ephors for the protection of the people against tyranny. He was doubtless aware that the classes of ancient magistrates here mentioned were all elected by popular vote. This was not uniformly the case in the membership of the estates; in some nations it was hardly the case at all. If he possessed detailed knowledge of the estates or parliaments of England, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, and Spain, of the diets of the Swiss Confederation and the imperial diets of Germany, he would observe wide differences among them in constitution and function, and in potentiality for defense against monarchical absolutism or tyranny. But Calvin would have in mind primarily his native France, and he could not fail to be aware that the French estates had not even met since three years before his own birth. During his lifetime, any expectation that the Three Estates would redeem France from absolutism was faint indeed. His "perhaps" may be, in relation to France, an expression of doubt regarding the very survival of the institution. Yet it is noteworthy 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. His words were, in fact, an invitation to these bodies to play the rôle of the Ephors and check the irresponsible arrogance of kings.

This emphatic and suggestive passage opened a path for writers like Francis Hotman and the authors of the *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos* who a few years after Calvin's death would frame doctrines of resistance that were to be vastly influential in the practical world. It also gave suggestions to the British seventeenth-century political prophets, Rutherford, Sydney, and Locke. It was not less but more influential in that it came as a concession at the end of a discussion that is anxiously conservative.