

John Calvin on Human Government and the State

By David W. Hall, Ph.D.

In a political year, it would be nice if we could simply dust off the work of a previous thinker and find applicable answers to all our political questions.¹ And while we wish to commemorate appropriately the approaching quincentenary of John Calvin (1509–1564), notwithstanding, the political involvement and ideas of John Calvin neither can nor should be expected to answer all or even the most pressing current questions in this field. Calvin was, to be sure, not a political scientist or a campaign strategist. However, in addition to stirring the republicanizing wave that crested on the shores of most western governments before and after the Enlightenment, his varied theological applications yield much political prudence.

Numerous scholars have traced Calvin's political ideas.² Some have focused on the socio-economic impact (M. Weber), while others have highlighted his ties to medieval thought (Q. Skinner), his fueling of a burgeoning democratic movement (R. Kingdon), his impact on the development of Western law and human rights (J. Witte, Jr., D. Kelly *et al*), and of course critics

too numerous to cite accuse him of inhibiting liberty, humanity, or knowledge.

Compared to the heft of its international and multi-generational influence, seldom have the written words of a pastor fostered so much and such sustained political impact. Douglas Kelly extols the virtue of the "sober Calvinian assessment of fallen man's propensity to seize, increase, and abuse power for personal ends rather than for the welfare of the many." He further evaluates: "Governmental principles for consent of the governed, and separation and balance of powers are all logical consequences of a most serious and Calvinian view of the biblical doctrine of the fall of man" (Kelly, 18). While probably overstating (thinking of Calvin as "wholly medieval" and as advocating an "aristocratic theocracy in which he was dictator"), notwithstanding, historian Franklin Palm recognized Calvin's contribution as "emphasizing the supremacy of God and the right of resistance to all other authority . . . [H]e did much to curb the powers of kings and to increase the authority of the elected representatives of the people" (Palm, 32). Further, Palm noticed Calvin's belief in the "right of the individual to remove the magistrate who disobeys the word of God. . . . Consequently, he justified many revolutionary leaders in their belief that God gave them the right to oppose tyranny."

Recently, John Witte, Jr., has noted how, "Calvin developed arresting new teachings on authority and liberty, duties and rights, and church and state that have had an enduring influence on Protestant lands." As a result of its adaptability, this "rendered early modern Calvinism one of the driving engines of Western constitutionalism. A number of our bedrock Western understandings of civil and political rights, social and confessional pluralism, federalism and social contract, and more owe a great deal to Calvinist theological and political reforms" (Witte, Jr., 2).

THE AUTHOR: David W. Hall is the Senior Pastor of Midway Presbyterian Church (PCA), Powder Springs, Georgia, and is the author and editor of many books, including *The Arrogance of the Modern* (1997), *Savior or Servant: Putting Government in Its Place* (1996), *Election Day Sermons* (1996), *Paradigms in Polity* (1994), *The Practice of Confessional Subscription* (1997), and *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding* (2003). He previously served as Pastor of the Covenant Presbyterian Church and the Founding Director of the Kuyper Institute in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and is a contributing editor to *The Confessional Presbyterian*.

1. This introduction is modified from the author's work *Calvin, Calvinism, and Political Ideas* (forthcoming, Presbyterian and Reformed); used with permission.

2. Among the scholars who have set their hand to explicating Calvin's political thought and impact are: Harro Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Age of Reformation*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

In various parts of the Calvin corpus of literature, he addresses the following questions, which are of vital interest to modernity and political theorists:

- Is the state or its governors sovereign?
- What form should the government take?
- Is democracy an absolute?
- Who pays for government and how/how much?
- Who functions as governmental leaders?
- How much of human life should government cover?
- What other valid spheres should the government respect (Family, church, school)?
- Can citizens resist their government? And under what limitations or conditions?

His political writings were, to be sure, the culmination of a tradition in part. They followed decades of Renaissance thought and sat perched atop centuries of Medieval and scholastic theological reflection on political principles. We would not wish to be understood as suggesting that Calvin worked in isolation in formulating his principles; it was actually common for leading theologians of the period—leaders in society in that day—to expound matters of state. However, the subsequent expansion and replication of his thought by his followers virtually created a new trajectory of political discourse. It is no exaggeration to observe that *before* Calvin, certain political principles were viewed as radical; while *after* him, they became widely acceptable.

John Calvin's commentary on political matters in his *magnum opus* is relatively diminutive. While many latter theologians would scarcely brave a comment on matters of state in a systematic theology text, John Calvin addressed political topics without trepidation. The resulting 40 pages of discussion on the civil government in the *Institutes* would blaze a trail for others.

Any proper analysis of Calvin's political thought should begin with his discussion in the *Institutes*; however, an accurate understanding of Calvin will also take into account his other writings and, importantly, the manner in which his disciples codified his teachings into a school of political thought. The elaboration below thus highlights his other commentaries and the concerted effort of many other orchestra members—Peter Viret, Christopher Goodman, John Ponet, Theodore Beza, among others—but first one should acquaint himself with the maestro's score.

CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*: BLUEPRINT FOR CIVIL GOVERNMENT

Calvin's political thought found in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* is, even by critics, still credited with immense political impact.³ Asserting that the state was not merely a necessary evil for Calvin, Karl Holl recognized that Calvinism, even more than Lutheranism, provided a theological basis to oppose unjust governments (Holl, 65–66). Everywhere Calvinism spread, so did its impulse to limit government. Later Calvinist Prime Minister of the Netherlands Abraham Kuyper summarized the essence of Calvin's theocentric emphasis⁴:

It is therefore a political faith which may be summarily expressed in these three theses: 1. God only, and never any creature, is possessed of sovereign rights, in the destiny of nations, because God alone created them, maintains them by his Almighty power, and rules them by his ordinances. 2. Sin has, in the realm of politics, broken down the direct government of God, and therefore the exercise of authority, for the purpose of government, has subsequently been invested in men, as a mechanical remedy. And 3. In whatever form this authority may reveal itself, man never possesses power over his fellow man in any other way than by the

1978); Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1898, repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953); Robert Kingdon, *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy* (Lexington, Maine: D. C. Heath and Company, 1970); Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and The Foundations of Modern Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) 62–81; John Witte, Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); John T. McNeill, "Calvin and Civil Government," in Donald McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984); Herbert D. Foster, *Collected Papers of Herbert D. Foster* (privately printed, 1929); John T. McNeill, "John Calvin on Civil Government," *Calvinism and the Political Order*, George L. Hunt, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965); Douglas Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992); Franklin Charles Palm, *Calvinism and the Religious Wars* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1932); Karl Holl, *The Cultural Significance of the Reformation* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1959); John B. Roney and Martin I. Klauber, *The Identity of Geneva: The Christian Commonwealth, 1564–1864* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998); and Keith L. Griffin, *Revolution and Religion: American Revolutionary War and the Reformed Clergy* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

3. This section is taken from the author's essay in David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback, eds., *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008); used with permission.

4. Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and The Foundations of Modern Politics*, asserts that the Protestant Reformation was "an essentially modern movement that in some way laid the foundations for our modern openness."

authority which descends upon him from the majesty of God (Kuyper, 85).

Calvinism, Kuyper continued, “protests against State omni-competence, against the horrible conception that no right exists above and beyond existing laws, and against the pride of absolutism, which recognizes no constitutional rights.” Calvinism “built a dam across the absolutistic stream, not by appealing to popular force, nor to the hallucination of human greatness, but by deducing those rights and liberties of social life from the same source from which the high authority of government flows, even the absolute sovereignty of God” (Kuyper, 85).

Such thoughts are indeed contained in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,⁵ which underwent considerable evolution between editions. The original 1536 edition composed in Basle⁶ combined the chapter on civil government with Calvin’s treatment of Christian liberty and ecclesiastical power. Calvin believed that civil government was the second part of a two-fold government, properly chartered to “establish civil justice and outward morality (4:20, 1).

Calvin’s major sections addressed these topics:

- (1) the magistrate, who is “the protector and guardian of the laws” (4:20, 3);
- (2) the laws, which provide objectivity for governors; and

5. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960). Unless otherwise referenced, all quotations in this section from *The Institutes*, Book IV, chapter xx, are from this edition.

6. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Age of Reformation*, vol. 2, 192, suggests that by 1559 Calvin had begun to change his views, permitting at least a discussion of the propriety of active resistance.

7. A more detailed outline of Calvin’s chapter on civil government for students is below:

- 20:01–02. Separation of governments
- 20:03–08. Tasks of Magistrates
Ordination of Magistrates
- 20:09–13. The Magistrates’ Prerogatives and Duties
- 20:14–16. The Rule of Law
- 20:17–21. Courts
- 20:22–29. Obedience and Deference from citizens
- 20:30–32. Constitutional Mechanisms

8. See Fn 15, p. 1490 of the Battles edition.

9. *Commentary on Romans*, xix.479. Unless otherwise noted references to Calvin’s Commentaries are to the 22 volume Baker reprint of the Calvin Translation Society edition. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979).

10. Theodore Beza, *Life of John Calvin* (contained in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958], vol. 1) c.

(3) the people—an early statement of the contract theory later rightly associated with Ponet, Beza, the *Vindiciae*, Buchanan, and Althusius.⁷

Calvin believed that civil government supplied an example of how God had compassionately provided for mankind; the sphere of human government, thus, was a gracious token for human culture much like the law itself. The task of the civil ruler was to ensure “that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.” If no civil government existed or if depraved men perceived that they could go “scot-free (4:20, 2),” they surely would opt for sin and society would deteriorate into chaos. On one occasion, Calvin likened such anarchy to living “pell-mell, like rats in straw.”⁸ He argued that God does not bid persons to “lay aside their authority and retire to private life, but submit to Christ the power with which they have been invested, that he alone may tower over all.” Calvin believed that “powers are from God, not as pestilence, and famine, and wars, and other visitations for sin, are said to be from him; but because he has appointed them for the legitimate and just government of the world. For though tyrannies and unjust exercise of power, as they are full of disorder, are not an ordained government; yet the right of government is ordained by God for the well-being of mankind.”⁹

Calvin, in marked contrast to the Anabaptists of his day, recognized service in a political office as entirely appropriate, even going so far as to speak of civil service as the most sacred and honorable of human callings. Calvin referred to these civil rulers favorably as “vicars of God,” (4:20, 6), “the highest gift of [God’s] beneficence to preserve the safety of men” (4:20, 25), and as “ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquility [whose] sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all” (4:20, 9). Calvinism, thus, did not inspire an inherently negative view of civil government. Elsewhere he stated that the appointed goal of the civil government was “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 and tranquillity” (4:20, 2). By early 1553 he had summoned the magistrates of Geneva to be “the vindicators, not the destroyers, of sacred laws.”¹⁰ The use of the sword was the necessary corollary to human depravity. Civil magistrates were to be honored as superiors in keeping with the commandment to honor one’s superiors. Even evil rulers kept God’s law to some degree, and disobedience was justified only

in response to actions contrary to God's law. The task of civil government according to Calvin's commentary on Romans was prescribed as follows:

Magistrates may hence learn what their vocation is, for they are not to rule for their own interest, but for the public good; nor are they endued with unbridled power, but what is restricted to the well-being of their subjects; in short, they are responsible to God and to men in the exercise of their power. For as they are deputed by God and do his business, they must give an account to him: and then the ministration which God has committed to them has a regard to the subjects, they are therefore debtors to them (Calvin, *Romans*, xix.481).

Calvin believed that both politics and providence were operative; indeed, he suggested that the Kingdom of God was already present, albeit not completely realized: "For spiritual government, indeed, is already initiating in us upon earth certain beginnings of the Heavenly Kingdom, and in this mortal and fleeting life affords a certain forecast of an immortal and incorruptible blessedness" (4:20, 2). He advised, "Let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion" (4:20, 3). Few would be greatly disturbed by such a statement, since it was the common notion of Calvin's time for government to uphold religion. Calvin acknowledged this: "All have confessed that no government can be happily established unless piety is the first concern" (4:20, 9). He also stated that the civil magistrate should care for both tables of the law (4:20, 9). Later conflicts between church and state, however, would beg for re-evaluations of this maxim. Furthermore, he included a limitation for his theory, i.e., that no administration was permitted to tailor the worship of God to their own imaginations nor prohibit the practice of true religion (4:20, 3).

Let, however, we brand Calvin a theocrat, his comments on a gospel passage (John 18:36) in which Jesus stated that his servants did not strive for enforcement of an earthly kingdom may reassure. His view of the separation of jurisdictions, enunciated in the mid-sixteenth century, is still helpful. Discussing the conditions under which it is appropriate to defend "the kingdom of Christ by arms," Calvin wrote:

[T]hough godly kings defend the kingdom of Christ by the sword, still it is done in a different manner from that in which worldly kingdoms are wont to be defended; for the kingdom of Christ, being spiritual must be founded on the doctrine and power of the Spirit. In the same manner, too, its edification is promoted; for neither the

laws and edicts of men, nor the punishments inflicted by them, enter into the consciences.... It results, however, from the depravity of the world that the kingdom of Christ is strengthened more by the blood of the martyrs than by the aid of arms (Calvin, *John*, xviii.210).

For Calvin, serving in civil government could be "the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men" (4:20, 4). He wrote that if civil rulers properly understood their callings, that is, "that they are occupied not with profane affairs or those alien to a servant of God, but with a most holy office, since they are serving as God's deputies" (4:20, 6), they would serve with more equity. Echoing Aristotle's morphology of the state and its tendency toward deterioration from monarchy to tyranny and from democracy to anarchy, Calvin advocated "a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy" (4:20, 8). He also saw a legitimate place for checks and balances, realizing the need for "censors and masters to restrain his [the monarch's] willfulness" (4:20, 8).

The civil magistrate did not act on his own, but "carries out the very judgments of God" (4:20, 10) in bearing the sword to punish lawbreakers. Calvin even cited King David as condoning the destruction of the wicked in the land as an example of the right to wage war. But, far from legitimating vengeance, violence, or undue cruelty, the magistrate was to avoid both exorbitant severity and "superstitious affectation of clemency." Alluding to the proverb from Seneca, Calvin concurred, "It is indeed bad to live under a prince with whom nothing is permitted; but much worse under one by whom everything is allowed" (4:20, 10). He argued: "Now if their [rulers'] true righteousness is to pursue the guilty and the impious with drawn sword, should they sheathe their sword and keep their hands clean of blood, while abandoned men wickedly range about with slaughter and massacre, they will become guilty of the greatest impiety, far indeed from winning praise for their goodness and righteousness thereby!" (4:20, 10)

In a phrase that would become incendiary, Calvin noted that not only kings but also "people must sometimes take up arms to execute public vengeance" (4:20, 11). The same basis for waging war was also used both to justify revolution and to put down sedition. If the magistrates were to punish private evildoers, then they could certainly punish mobs and protect the country from an external foe (4:20, 11). Regardless of class, the noble governor was to protect the people equally from robbers or invaders. If he did not, he would be considered a robber and worthy of censure. Calvin rested his

logic that the governor has the right to wage war, as he saw it, on “both natural equity and the nature of the office” (4:20, 11). If additional grounds were needed to refute pacifism, Calvin would argue that governors could still defend their subjects, an exclusively New Testament basis was not necessary, and that Christ did not compel soldiers to resign (4:20, 12).

That Calvin gave attention to a far-ranging set of civic concerns is evidenced by his discussion of the magistrate’s right to tax in the *Institutes*. He recommended prudent limits, arguing that taxes should only support public necessity; for “to impose them upon the common folk without cause is tyrannical extortion” (4:20, 13). Obedience was a Christian duty in this area; however, princes were not to indulge in “waste and expensive luxury,” lest they earn God’s displeasure. Excessive taxation was alluded to in his comment later: “Others drain the common people of their money, and afterward lavish it on insane largesse” (4:20, 24).

11. Theonomy is the belief system that holds that all the OT penal law is applicable in every age. The term literally means “the law of God,” and in this case it is the application of the law of God from the OT to varying political contexts. Some followers of Calvin, particularly some of the British Puritans and American settlers agreed with much of this sentiment. Their goal, for example in the Massachusetts Body of Liberties, was to set forth unchanging political wisdom, and the best source for that, they believed was the Bible. Of course, many would agree with that general thrust, but what characterizes theonomy is the strict adherence to the OT judicial code. Calvin cautioned against that, and his reasons distinguish him from a purely theonomic approach. Indeed, Sinclair Ferguson’s conclusion is a strong one that while there is much of a practical agreement between the Puritans and Theonomy in the application and use of the OT civil laws, “theoretical theonomy as such is not the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith” (Sinclair B. Ferguson, “An Assembly of Theonomists,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids, Mich: Academic Books, 1990) 348).

12. R. Scott Clark has recognized the formal identity between Calvin and Aquinas on natural law. However, believing that original sin corrupted moral and intellectual capabilities, Calvin constricted the sweep of natural law. Like Thomas, notes Clark, Calvin was “influenced by the classics, but unlike Aquinas, he defined natural law very precisely by identifying it with the decalogue or moral law.” R. Scott Clark, “Calvin on the *Lex Naturalis*,” *Stulos Theological Journal* 6/1–2 (May–November 1998) 3. Further attempting to correct the claims of earlier Calvin scholar J. T. McNeill, Clark notes that Abelard, Luther, and others equated natural law with the Ten Commandments (9, 11) rather than appealing to strict moral neutrality. Calvin, according to Clark, identified the Decalogue with natural law, as was “the general custom in Protestantism” in the early seventeenth century. Clark concludes: “For Calvin and for his successors . . . it was a given that God had entered into a probationary, federal-covenantal relationship with Adam, and that the *lex moralis* . . . is the same law which he codified at Sinai and which Calvin called the *lex naturalis*. It was part of the warp and woof of 16th and 17th century Reformed theology to think of these things synonymously as components of the creational order” (20).

Another major topic of discussion for Calvin is the use of the Old Testament judicial law, which Calvin called “the silent magistrate.” In a proper republic, laws were “the stoutest sinews of the commonwealth” (4:20, 14). Not as theocratic as some might expect, Calvin affirmed that just as the OT ceremonial laws (laws regulating ritual and diet, not viewed as permanent like the moral law; cf. Calvin’s own definitions of this tripartite taxonomy in 4:20, 15) had been “abrogated while piety remained safe and unharmed, so too, when these judicial laws were taken away, the perpetual duties and precepts of love could still remain” (4:20, 15). He admitted that different nations were free to make laws as they saw best, but with this qualification: “Yet these must be in conformity to that perpetual rule of love, so that they indeed vary in form but have the same purpose” (4:20, 15). And while some of his own day thought that a commonwealth could only be “duly framed” if it included a theonomic approach, Calvin called that idea “perilous,” “seditious,” “false and foolish” (4:20, 14).¹¹

Calvin taught, however, that even if all the specifics and particulars of the Mosaic judicial law were not binding, the moral principle within each command continued. The moral law,¹² which Calvin viewed as nothing other than a “testimony of natural law” and conscience (4:20, 16), was never abrogated, contrary to the ceremonial and judicial codes: “Consequently, the entire scheme of this equity of which we are now speaking has been prescribed in it. Hence, this equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws. Whatever laws shall be framed to that rule, directed to that goal, bound by that limit, there is no reason why we should disapprove of them, howsoever they may differ from the Jewish law or among themselves” (4:20, 16). Notwithstanding, Calvin did not teach that the Mosaic Law was to be in force everywhere (4:20, 16). Since Calvin is seldom accused of laxness, his own comments must be taken seriously. So taken, they do not call for disavowal of the equitable principles of the Old Testament judicial law but merely for the adaptation of nonessential and nonmoral aspects. It was, as Calvin realized, possible to maintain the applicability of God’s law while not necessarily advocating all the cultural specifics of the original Hebrew code. Some of his political descendants would adhere to this notion more than others.

Derivative of the proper understanding of laws and the magistracy, Calvin acknowledged that Christians could certainly avail themselves to public courts (4:20, 17). Access to legal process was not evil in itself, and the right to sue was a logical corollary of Calvin’s refutation

of pacifism, this time applied to the personal right to defend property legally. However, Calvin warned against greed, revenge, and (4:20, 18 through 21) an excessive reliance on litigation. Typical of his ethic, he recommended moderation, sometimes taking an economic loss, and to summarize: “love will give every man the best counsel” (4:20, 21).

In his third section, Calvin enumerated the duties of the Christian citizen, beginning with a call to honor the office as established by God as the first duty. Moreover, subjects should prove their obedience by paying taxes, obeying proclamations, and serving to protect the nation. Furthermore, Calvin warned Christians not to intrude excessively into the authority of the magistrate as long as he honored the office (4:20, 23).

Calvin’s discussion of governmental largesse led him to acknowledge the common reaction that called oppressive governors “tyrants” (4:20, 24). Still he warned that the mere existence of some over-taxation or misappropriation was not the same as divine warrant to overthrow the tyrant. There was still a scriptural priority on submitting to the governors who “have their sole authority from him” (4:20, 25). Moreover, Calvin devoted several sections (26–29), relying heavily upon narratives in Daniel and Jeremiah, to discussing how God’s providence presumptively called for submission to civil rulers.

However, despite such clarion calls to submit to the civil ruler, in some cases the lesser magistrates were justified in overturning a wicked ruler. That, however, was not to be carried out merely by private individuals. His argument, which was drawn upon by his disciples, was that rulers (whether in home, church, or civil spheres) also had obligations. The abuse of such obligations could negate their authority and relegate them to tyrant status.

Calvin acknowledged that, at times, divine providence was satisfied in the overthrowing of wicked rulers (4:20, 30), but he still preferred to allow the Lord to correct unbridled despotism. Calvin urged believers to consider that through prayer God might change the hearts of rulers (4:20, 29). Concerning revolution, he advocated a peaceful, incremental revolution *via* the intermediate magistrates:

For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings (as in ancient times the ephors ...), I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious

perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God’s ordinance. (4:20, 31)

The obvious exception to any of these rules, however, was that persons were not only free but also obligated to resist the magistrate who compelled ungodly activity. Calvin taught not only that there were exceptions to the above considerations but also that obedience to God was primary: “[O]bedience [to a ruler] is never to lead us away from obedience to Him” (4:20, 32), a good illustration of qualified absolutism.¹³ He reasoned: “How absurd would it be that in satisfying men you should incur the displeasure of him for whose sake you obey men themselves!” (4:20, 32) Still, this argument is balanced with Calvin’s conclusion that we should “comfort ourselves with the thought that we are rendering that obedience which the Lord requires when we suffer anything rather than turn aside from piety” (4:20, 32).

The other aspect of Calvin’s argument that resistance was appropriate under certain conditions was his argument from relative authorities. In this contention, he maintained that a lower authority (an elder, a father, or a magistrate) could not contradict the rule or norms of a higher authority. Calvin expressed it: “As if God had made over his right to mortal men, giving them the rule over mankind! Or as if earthly power were diminished when it is subjected to its Author” (4:20, 32). A blend of necessary factors, then, determined if revolution was in order. The following factors were necessary: (a) a tyrant, who exceeded his divinely charted boundaries; (b) a tyrant, who in so doing, contradicted some other divine mandate; (c) and lower magistrates to bring constitutional correction.

CALVIN’S POLITICAL THEOLOGY IN OTHER WORKS

Geneva’s premier reformer, though, was more than the sum of precise theology. He was also an able commentator and communicator. Driven by the need to record biblical insights for posterity, Calvin composed

13. “Qualified absolutism” is the term I use in *Savior or Servant: Putting Government in Its Place* (Oak Ridge, Tenn.: Kuyper Institute, 1996). See also Ralph Keen, “The Limits of Power and Obedience in the Later Calvin,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, vol. 27, no. 2 (Nov. 1992) 252–277, for a good harmonization between the earlier and later statements by Calvin on the propriety of resistance. Although Calvin is sometimes accused of shifting toward a more republican posture, as if influenced by Beza, Keen summarizes: “It is simply necessary to recognize that the position is not pro-monarchical in itself (that is, as a political doctrine) but pro-monarchical in the theological sense of being an endorsement of the divine presence in governments.” *Ibid.*, 259.

commentaries on most biblical books. His commentaries contained practical discussions as well as doctrinal treatises, expounding on subjects ranging from human relationships to work ethic concerns. Several parts of Calvin's commentaries develop certain significant themes more broadly than either his sermons or the *Institutes* permitted. Representative samples, concentrating on several key texts (Exodus 18, 1 Samuel 8, Daniel 6), along with other illuminating glosses, are provided below in order to present a more rounded vignette of Calvin's thought.

Old Testament Texts

In his comments on Genesis 49, he noted: "In order to make the distinction between a legitimate government and tyranny, I acknowledge that counselors were joined with the king, who should administer public affairs in a just and orderly manner" (Hopfl, 162). Calvin also expressed 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."¹⁴

14. John Calvin, *Harmony of Moses* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843–59) 3:154.

15. James Smylie notes that King James VI did not approve of the Geneva Bible's note on Exodus 1, seeing all too clearly that the Marian exiles in Geneva felt quite free to recommend resistance. See James H. Smylie, "America's Political Covenants, the Bible, and Calvinists," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 75:3 (Fall 1997) 156, 163. The marginal note on Exodus 1:19 of the 1560 Geneva Bible reads: "Their disobedience her[e]in was lawful, but their dissembling evil."

16. For a full treatment of the progressive and enduring features of the early Israeli republic, see Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1998) 1:437–447.

17. Even prior to Algernon Sidney, Lambert Daneau called Nimrod the first true monarch.

18. For an example of early American exposition on the character needed for office holders, complete with a discussion similar to Calvin's on this Exodus passage, see Simeon Howard's 1780 Election Sermon (*Sermons for Election Days*, David W. Hall, ed. [Oak Ridge, Tenn.: Kuyper Institute, 2002]). Charles Chauncy addressed the requisite character of civil rulers in his 1747 election day sermon (contained in *Election Day Sermons* [Oak Ridge, Tenn.: Kuyper Institute, 1996], 143–168). T. H. Breen provides one of the most thorough studies of American expectations for civil rulers in *The Character of the Good Ruler: A Study of Puritan Political Ideas in New England, 1630–1730* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970).

Calvin's resistance theory is further exhibited in his commentary on the rebellion of the Hebrew midwives.¹⁵ He characterized any obedience to the murderous command of Pharaoh as "preposterously unwise," a detestable effrontery, and ill-conceived in its attempt to "gratify the transitory kings of earth" while taking "no account of God" (Calvin, Exodus, 2:33). Most clear in that context, Calvin wrote that God did not delegate his rights to princes, "as if every earthly power, which exalts itself against heaven, ought not rather most justly to be made to give way."

Exodus 18

Calvin's commentary on Exodus 18 displays his appreciation for the robust Hebrew contributions to republicanism.¹⁶ In between Nimrod and Moses, the notion of a republic vanished or seemed unknown.¹⁷ Calvin realized that all that the Israelites had known for four centuries was the monarchical rule by Pharaohs. Thus, the republican-type plan suggested by Jethro appears as an innovation that did not originate in the mind of man, thought Calvin.

Rather than commending either a democracy or a monarchy, Jethro advised Moses and the people to select a plurality of prudent representative leaders (*Exodus*, 18:21).¹⁸ Moses instituted a graduated series of administrations with greater and lesser magistrates, and Calvin asserted that the earliest Hebrew republican government devolved from the divine mind long before the Golden Age of Greco-Roman governance, the Enlightenment, or other modern revolutions.

The early federal scheme adopted in Exodus 18 seemed, to Calvin and his followers (as it had to Aquinas and Machiavelli), to be republicanism. Commenting on a similar passage in Deuteronomy 1:14–16, Calvin stated: "Hence it more plainly appears that those who were to preside in judgment were not appointed only by the will of Moses, but elected by the votes of the people. And this is the most desirable kind of liberty, that we should not be compelled to obey every person who may be tyrannically put over our heads; but which allows of election, so that no one should rule except he be approved by us. And this is further confirmed in the next verse, wherein Moses recounts that he awaited the consent of the people, and that nothing was attempted which did not please them all." Thus, Calvin viewed the Hebrew Republic as being led by elected representatives, who ruled by the consent of the governed.

Later, Calvinist Johannes Althusius (1557–1638) agreed, writing: "I consider that no polity from the

beginning of the world has been more wisely and perfectly constructed than the polity of the Jews.” Part of what he believed was unimprovable was an early form of republican-federal government. As Doumergue noted, Calvin was the “founder of stable and powerful democracies, a defender not of ‘egalitarianism,’ but of ‘equality before the law.’”¹⁹ Whether Calvin was the founder of modern democratic governments or not, as Doumergue suggested, his sermons on these passages from the Pentateuch illustrated God’s inestimable gift to the Jewish commonwealth, specifically the “freedom to elect judges and magistrates.”

A century after Calvin, Samuel Rutherford used this same Mosaic pattern in his 1644 *Lex Rex* to argue for a republican form of civil polity.²⁰ Indeed, most of the Reformation era political tracts (e.g., those by Calvin, Beza, Bucer, Knox, Buchanan, Ponet, Althusius, etc.) devoted extensive commentary to the Old Testament patterns of government. These reformers viewed Old Testament precedents as applicable to the politics of their own settings, and these same ideas were drawn upon later by an American tradition that nourished its founders. Ideas, like those that Calvin espoused, furthered these arguments and western political discourse.

1 Samuel 8

Calvin’s sermon on 1 Samuel 8, one of the most widely expounded political passages in Scripture, provides more insight into his political matrix. His 1561 exposition discusses the dangers of monarchy, the need for proper limitation of government, and the place of divine Sovereignty over human governments. It is an example of Calvinism at its best, carefully balancing individual liberty and proper government.

Calvin began his sermon on 1 Samuel 8²¹ by asserting that the people of Israel were not required to elect a king. Warning against hierarchical “plundering and robbery,” Calvin reasoned that “the Lord does not give kings the right to use their power to subject the people to tyranny. Indeed, when the liberty to resist tyranny seems to be taken away by princes who have taken over, one can justly ask this question: since kings and princes are bound by covenant to the people, . . . if they break faith and usurp tyrannical power by which they allow themselves everything they want: is it not possible for the people to consider together taking measures in order to remedy the evil?”

Calvin preached that “there are limits prescribed by God to their power, within which they ought to be

satisfied: namely, to work for the common good and to govern and direct the people in truest fairness and justice; not to be puffed up with their own importance, but to remember that they also are subjects of God.” Leaders were always to keep in mind the purpose (i. e., the glory of God) for which they had been providentially appointed.

Calvin viewed Samuel warning citizens about “the royal domination they will have to bear, and that their necks will have to be patiently submitted to his yoke.” Calvin inferred something very significant from this: that intervening magistrates, not citizens themselves, should seek to correct abuses and tyranny. His doctrine was that “there are legitimate remedies against such tyranny, such as when there are other magistrates and official institutions to whom the care of the republic is committed, who will be able to restrict the prince to his proper authority so that if the prince attempts wrong action, they may hold him down.” He counseled that, if the intervening magistrates did not free the people from tyranny, perhaps the people were being disciplined by God’s providence.

Even though Calvin was more permissive of monarchy than most of his successors, his calls to submit to the governor were not without limit. God established magistrates properly “for the use of the people and the benefit of the republic.” Accordingly, royal powers were circumscribed “not to undertake war rashly, nor ambitiously to increase their wealth; nor are they to govern their subjects on the basis of personal opinion or lust for whatever they want.” Kings had authority only insofar as they met the conditions of God’s covenant. Accordingly, he proclaimed from the pulpit of St. Peter’s, “[S]ubjects are under the authority of kings; but at the same time, kings must care about the public welfare so they can discharge the duties prescribed to them by God with good counsel and mature deliberation.”

19. Cited by Ralph C. Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundation of Modern Politics*, 66.

20. Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, rex: the law and the prince. A dispute for the just prerogative of king and people. Containing the reasons and causes of the most necessary defensive wars of the kingdom of Scotland, and of their expedition for the ayd and help of their dear brethren of England. In which their innocency is asserted, and a full answer is given to a seditious pamphlet, intituled, Sacro-sancta regum majestas, or, The sacred and royall prerogative of Christian kings* (London: Printed for John Field, 1644). Also in *The Presbyterian’s Armoury*, ed. William M Hetherington (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver & Boyd, 1843; Rpt. Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1982).

21. Quotations are from the translation of Calvin’s Sermon on 1 Samuel 8 by Douglas Kelly. Copyright: *Calvin Studies Colloquium* (Davidson, N.C.: Davidson College Presbyterian Church, 1982), Charles Raynal and John Leith, eds.

Anticipating the later teaching of Beza and Knox, Calvin taught in this sermon that lawful obedience to a ruler “does not mean that it is ever legitimate for princes to abuse them willfully... This authority is therefore not placed in the hands of kings to be used indiscriminately and absolutely.” In an early statement of limitations on political power, he stated that private property was not “placed under the power and will of kings.” Kings, too, were to obey the laws, lest they convince themselves that they may do anything they wish. Rather, rulers should employ “all their ingenuity for the welfare of their subjects,” considering themselves bound by God’s law. Calvin had the foresight to explain that magistrates were instituted to be “ministers and servants of God and the people.”

This Genevan beacon, whose sermonic ideas later reached the shores of America, enumerated the ways kings abuse their power from the Samuel narrative, and he distinguished a tyrant from a legitimate prince in these words: “a tyrant rules only by his own will and lust, whereas legitimate magistrates rule by counsel and by reason so as to determine how to bring about the greatest public welfare and benefit.” Calvin decried the oppressive custom of government servants “taking part in the plundering to enrich themselves off the poor.”

In this sermon, Calvin forewarned about the price associated with hierarchical government and warned that if political consequences resulted from poor political choices, perhaps that was an instance of God’s judging a nation. Calvin did not call for rebellion, as Knox later did. However, similar sermons, along with reactions to the real depravity witnessed in the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, demanded that Calvinistic political theory progress to the next level and more directly address the propriety of resistance to oppressive government.

Daniel 6

Although some theologians claim to see discrepancies between Calvin’s early thought in the *Institutes* and his later commentaries and sermons on the matter

22. For more on this historically significant event see chapter 4 in my *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003).

23. Keith L. Griffin, *Revolution and Religion: American Revolutionary War and the Reformed Clergy*, 5. From 1550 on, Lutherans from Magdeburg acknowledged this.

24. John Calvin, “Commentaries on Daniel,” *On God and Political Duty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956) 100–101.

25. John Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

26. References are to Calvin, *Daniel*, xii.350–387.

of resistance, a review of his commentary on Daniel 6:21–23 reveals no radical discontinuity. Admittedly, certain events, such as the 1572 St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre,²² forced development and clarification within the Calvinistic political tradition, but Calvin’s own view about the legitimacy of reforming bad government need not be considered internally inconsistent.

Calvin expected his commentary on the Old Testament Daniel to become a handbook for princes (*Daniel*, xii.lxiv–lxxv). His belief that “the throne of [God’s] sceptre is nothing else but the doctrine of the gospel” shows that God’s conquest was not to be one of physical coercion. Meanwhile, not only were governors limited, but they were also expected to be virtuous, avoiding pride, bridling their lusts, and supporting piety. Whenever rulers and governors did not “willingly submit to the yoke of Christ,” societal turbulence ensued. Calvin’s commentary also decried corrupt judges who only gratified their own appetites.

Except for a few comments (e.g., on Daniel 6:22), Calvin consistently discouraged rebellion unless sound reasons demanded it and legitimate measures were employed. Both Luther and his understudy, Philip Melancthon (whom Calvin knew from his Strasbourg exile), allowed resistance to the superior magistrate to be carried out by the inferior magistrate in a Roman Catholic Establishment.²³ This Lutheran claim was applicable, in their view, if a superior magistrate “undertook by force to restore popish idolatry and to suppress or exterminate the pure teaching of the Holy Gospel... Then the lower godfearing magistrate may defend himself and his subjects” (Griffin, 5). Thus, tyrants were to be removed by the intermediating magistrates.

Calvin taught similarly that princes “who are not free agents though 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.”²⁴ Calvin’s frequent disparagement of ungodly kings in his sermons on Job and Deuteronomy in 1554 to 1555 and in his lectures on Daniel in 1561 indicate that he was not, in principle, a monarchist. Accordingly, the distinctive Calvinistic contribution was phrased: “Men’s vices and inadequacies make it safer and better that the many hold sway. In this way may rulers help each other, teach and admonish one another, and if one asserts himself unfairly, they may act in concert to censure, repressing his willfulness.”²⁵

Calvin’s commentary on Daniel 6 virtually enshrines all the major principles contained in the *Institutes*, yielding a consistency to be reckoned.²⁶ Calvin displayed his

suspicion of aggregate power in that commentary, to wit: “In the palaces of kings we often see men of brutal dispositions holding high rank, and we need not go back to history for this.” Of the low and contemptible character of some rulers, he wrote, “But now kings think of nothing else than preferring their own panders, buffoons, and flatterers; while they praise none but men of low character.”

Calvin also alluded to the necessity for fixed laws and universal norms, warning that “many are necessarily injured, and no private interest is stable unless the law be without variation; besides, when there is a liberty of changing laws, license succeeds in place of justice. For those who possess the supreme power, if corrupted by gifts, promulgate first one edict and then another. Thus justice cannot flourish where change in the laws allows of so much license.” Of the need for resistance against a totalitarian power that wrongly attempts to command the conscience, Calvin noted that “Daniel could not obey the edict [making public prayer a crime] without committing an atrocious insult against God and declining from piety.”

Calvin most clearly articulated his doctrine of contingent submission to the governor in his gloss on Daniel 6:22. Daniel, he wrote, “was not so bound to the king of the Persians when he [the king] claimed for himself as a god what ought not to be offered to him.” Earthly regimes were “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.” Daniel did not err when he disobeyed an illegitimate request from the king. As to duty, Calvin commented on this verse: “For earthly princes lay aside their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy to be reckoned among the number of mankind. We ought, rather, utterly defy them than to obey them.”

Commenting on Micah 5:5, Calvin suggested that rulers should be elected, interpreting the Hebrew word for “shepherds” as synonymous with “rulers.” He asserted: “In this especially 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. *We shall then set up for ourselves princes*, says the Prophet: that is, the Lord will not only give breathing time to his Church, and will also cause that she may set up a fixed and well-ordered government, and that by the common consent of all” (*Micah*, xiv.309–310). This

election by common suffrage is advocated elsewhere when Calvin recognized, “it is tyrannous if any one man appoint or make ministers at his pleasure.” Election by members adequately balanced the mean between tyranny and chaotic liberty (*Acts*, xviii.233).

These examples illustrate both the fullness of Calvin’s commentary on political subjects as well as illuminating certain nuances of his theory that extend beyond the *Institutes*.

New Testament Passages

Calvin’s doctrine of contingency, i.e., that governors should be supported contingent upon their ruling as divinely instituted, was also manifest in his explanation of Acts 4:19–20. He stated that, regardless of titles employed, we should only obey officials “upon this condition, if they lead us not away from obeying God” (*Acts*, xviii.178). Commenting a chapter later, he summarized: “Therefore, we must obey rulers so far that the commandment not be broken” (*Acts*, xviii.214). His balance is displayed in a related comment: “If a magistrate do his duty as he ought, a man shall in vain say that he is contrary to God.... We must obey God’s ministers and officers if we will obey him.” However, if rulers lead away from obedience to God, they are dishonorable and “darken his glory.” Using a parallel analogy, should a father order something unlawful in the home, he forfeits honor and “is nothing else but a man.” Similarly, “[I]f a king or ruler or magistrate becomes so lofty that he diminishes the honor and authority of God, he is but a man.... For he who goes beyond his bounds in his office must be despoiled of his honor, lest, under a color or visor, he deceive” (*Acts*, xviii.215).

Commenting on Jesus’ teaching to “render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” Calvin stated that obedience to a poor magistrate did not “prevent us from having within us a conscience free in the sight of God,” and also concluded this: “[T]hose who destroy political order are rebellious against God, and therefore, that obedience to princes and magistrates is always joined to the worship and fear of God; but that on the other hand, if princes claim any part of the authority of God, we ought not to obey them any farther than can be done without offending God.”

Even in view of the later New Testament teaching to “fear God, honor the king,” certain priorities must not be forgotten. Calvin commented: “The fear of God ought to precede, that kings may obtain their authority. For if any one begins his reverence of an earthly prince by rejecting that of God, he will act preposterously, since this

is a complete perversion of the order of nature.” Calvin noted that, “earthly kings lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind.” Rather than fulfilling unjust laws, although care in this determination was commended as well, the Geneva reformer advised the following: “We ought rather utterly to defy than to obey them whenever they are so restive and wish to spoil God of his rights, and, as it were, to seize upon his throne and draw him down from heaven.”

Romans 13

Calvin’s discussion of Romans 13 began by explaining that all civil power originates with the sovereign God—not with man, as later secular schemes suggested. He then discussed the role of civil government and the duty of the Christian to submit to that government except in extreme circumstances. The civil government was given, wrote Calvin, to prevent the damage of human sinfulness. Albeit restraining, it was a gracious institution for society. Calvin, it should be remembered, believed that any government was better than no government at all: “further, some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy.”²⁷

In sum, however, he concluded: “Now this passage confirms what I have already said, that we ought to obey kings and governors, whoever they may be, not because we are constrained, but because it is a service acceptable to God; for he will have them not only to be feared, but also honored by a voluntary respect” (*Romans*, xix.483). In addition, his comments called for magistrates to protect religion and public decency (“endeavor to promote religion and to regulate morals by wholesome discipline”²⁸).

Calvin called for ethical and religious considerations to be included in good government, argued for republicanism on an authoritative basis, pleaded with believers to exemplify virtue and be submissive as a norm, and paved the way for later political developments by stating that the governor could be resisted under

certain conditions. His disciples later augmented and expanded the conditions under which such revolution was acceptable.

With the scriptural survey above, Harro Hopfl’s recognition of the signatures of political Calvinism may be appreciated:

- Calvin detested rulers who acted as if their will made right (*sic volo sic iubeo*).
- Because no single individual possessed “power and breadth of vision enough to govern” unilaterally, a council was needed.
- Even in a monarchy, a council was required.
- Tyranny was exhibited in a ruler’s unwillingness to tolerate restraint or live within the law. Any ruler should be *sub Deo et sub lege* (under God and under law).²⁹

Hopfl views Calvin’s notion of order as necessitating law. Law then required enforcement, and different agencies with differing gifts and tools must each “adhere to his station and perform its duties willingly.” Hopfl’s summary is worth repeating:

There is an unmistakable preference for an aristocratic form with popular admixtures of sorts, and for small territorial units. Monarchy is explicitly rejected for ecclesiastical polity on scriptural grounds; in civil polity no such outright rejection was possible because of the earlier *parti pris* in favor of the divine authorization of all forms of government and Calvin’s almost inflexible opposition to political resistance. Nonetheless, the animus against monarchs is clear enough, and civil monarchy remains a discrepant and disturbing element in an otherwise carefully synchronized arrangement of mutual constraints.³⁰

With the foregoing review of Calvin’s own teaching, let us briefly illustrate how it grew and expanded.

CALVIN’S THOUGHT DISSEMINATED THROUGH HIS POLITICAL DISCIPLES

It is frequently though inappropriately implied that Calvin wished to unite church and state. In fact, he persistently advocated a difference of jurisdiction as noted above. Francois Wendel has corroborated that neither church nor state was to be annexed or collapsed into one another formally. This distinction or separation of jurisdictions “was the fountain of the entire edifice. Each of these autonomous powers, State and Church, was

27. Calvin, *I Peter*, xxii.83. He also commented on Romans: “there can then be no tyranny which does not in some respects assist in consolidating the society of men.” *Romans*, xix.480.

28. See his comments on 1 Timothy 2:2.

29. Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 112, 162, 164, 165, 166.

30. Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 171. In this and other sections, Hopfl notes “a very clear but imperfect homology” between church government and civil polity in Calvin.

conceived as issuing from the Divine Will.”³¹ Wendel recognized that Calvin advocated the complementarity of the civil and ecclesiastical powers, even if many modern interpreters do not sense his preservation of that key distinction. Moreover, Douglas Kelly suggests that this distinction, even with a close cooperation between Church and State, was an important factor in the diffusion of Calvinism.³² Calvin himself stated the relationship succinctly in a 1538 letter: “As the magistrate ought by punishment and physical restraint to cleanse the church of offenses, so the minister of the Word should help the magistrate in order that fewer may sin. Their responsibilities should be so joined that each helps rather than impedes the other.”³³ Calvin did not merge church and state into a theocratic monster.³⁴ He had no desire to advance the Reformation’s political tradition on the back of coercion. Instead, Calvin wished to energize the church to become a world-changing community.³⁵

Calvinists developed a knack for distilling theological thought. Theodore Beza, for example, wrote widely on political theory. His 1574 *The Rights of the Magistrates* became a classic supporting republicanism and limited submission to governors. Although Calvin and Beza had discouraged rebellion before Calvin’s death, even recommending support of existing rulers if at all possible, with the treacherous slaughter and virtual extinction of Reformed religion in France, Beza led efforts to reassess that formulation. The result was a tradition that included the likes of Knox, Viret, Ponet, and others. Beza’s argument to normalize resistance to evil governments on biblical bases transformed Calvinist political theory.³⁶

After beginning with a historical review his *The Rights of Magistrates* argued for a circumscribed resistance to tyrannical rulers. Organizing his work around ten questions, he affirmed that scriptural obedience did not categorically deny revolution in some cases. Toward the end of this tract, he articulated three “axioms” to clarify conditions warranting armed resistance: “(1) That the tyranny must be undisguised and notorious; (2) That the recourse should not be had to arms before all other remedies have been tried; (3) Nor yet before the question has been thoroughly examined, not only as to what is permissible, but also as to what is expedient, lest the remedies prove more hazardous than the very disease.”³⁷

From the Hebrew monarchy in the Old Testament, Beza, like Calvin, also induced the existence of popular election. Moreover, Beza championed a double-covenant idea, similar to later Protestant tracts. In

what amounted to a sweeping survey of the history of Western civilization, Beza found support for resistance to tyranny not only in Swiss republicanism, but also in the political histories of Denmark, England, Scotland, Poland, Sweden, Venice, Spain, France, and the Roman Empire itself. It is difficult to imagine a more informed or comprehensive history of resistance. The case Beza made was compelling.

Other Calvinistic disciples like Christopher Goodman,³⁸ a Genevan exile with John Knox and William Whittingham, authored a systematic defense of ideas close to Knox’s heart in 1558: *How Superior Powers Ought To Be Obeyed By Their Subjects: And Wherein They May Lawfully By God’s Word Be Disobeyed And Resisted*.³⁹ Arguing against custom and negligence as twin sisters of error, Goodman, Knox and Whittingham united (on January 1, 1558, from Geneva) to declare: “Obedience is necessary where God is glorified, but if God is dishonored, your obedience is abominable in the sight of God, be it never so beautiful in

31. Francois Wendel, *Calvin*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Collins, 1963) 79.

32. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World*, 14.

33. Cited by Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World*, 15.

34. William Naphy raises three key points to rebut the idea that Calvin was a repressive theocrat. First, he notes that the Genevan ministers focused on religious issues and did not seek to gain the civil magistrate’s sword to punish crime. Second, the theoretical ideal for church government was not always followed, even at the height of Reformed zeal. Third, Naphy suggests that by the 1570s, the influence of the church had begun to wane. *Calvinism in Europe, 1540–1610: A Collection of Documents*, selected, translated, and edited by Alistair Duke, Gillian Lewis, and Andrew Pettegree (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992) 15.

35. See Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World*, 23.

36. The summaries of Beza and Goodman below are taken, in part, from my *The Genevan Reformation and the American Founding* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003) chapters 4–5; used with permission.

37. Cited from Theodore Beza, *Concerning the Rights of Rulers Over Their Subjects and the Duty Of Subjects Towards Their Rulers*, trans. Henry-Louis Gonin, ed. Patrick S. Poole. Notes from the critical French Edition translated by Patrick S. Poole (© 1995 Patrick S. Poole). <http://www.constitution.org/cmt/beza/magistrates.htm> [accessed, May 14, 2008].

38. As a sign of the long continuity, in 1603 a Geneva diplomat attended to the estate debts of Christopher Goodman, one of Knox’s compatriots. E. William Monter, *Studies in Genevan Government, 1536–1605* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1964) 55.

39. See Patrick S. Poole’s modern edition at <http://www.constitution.org/cmt/goodman/obeyed.htm>. The citations in the original are from, Christopher Goodman, *How superior powers ought to be obeyed of their subjects and wherein they may lawfully by Gods Worde be disobeyed and resisted. Wherin also is declared the cause of all this present miserie in England, and the onely way to remedy the same* (Geneva: John Crispin, M.D.LVIII [1558]) 7–8; 30; 37–38; 84; 86.

man's eyes.... [W]hen it [Scripture] commands us to obey God, we must disobey man to the contrary: for no man can serve two masters.... [O]bedience to God's Laws by disobeying man's wicked laws is very commendable, but to disobey God for any duty to man is all together damnable."

Goodman (with Knox's hardy concurrence) argued that had the apostles obeyed the government when it prohibited their free exercise of religion, "the foundation of the Church should have been shaken, and the whole assembly discouraged." Based on that historical precedent, Goodman awarded both power and discretion to the people (prefiguring explicit formulations of "the consent of the governed") as he wrote: "the residue of the common people, seeing their superiors of all degrees and estates, by whom they should be governed with godly laws, and to whom they ought to obey in the fear of God only, thus cowardly forsake their obedience to God" if they fail to resist a tyrant. Thus, Goodman insisted that "to obey man in anything contrary to God, or His precepts though he be in highest authority, or never so orderly called there unto is no obedience at all, but disobedience."

Whether conscious of its revolutionary implications or not, Goodman was pioneering a new concept that would achieve wide currency centuries later: "the election of princes and kings." Rulers who are "elected" can of course be recalled or "unelected." Picking up on the growing swell of a Reformation chorus, Goodman essentially denied that kingship was hereditary. He succinctly stated, "Obedience is to hear God rather than man, and to resist man rather than God." Moreover, he proclaimed, "there is no obedience against God, which in His judgment is not manifest rebellion." Resistance to wicked kings is not rebellion. It is difficult not to see the seeds of Thomas Jefferson's motto, "Rebellion To Tyrants is Obedience to God," in Goodman's Calvinistic manifesto.

Following Calvin's teaching but predating the final edition of the *Institutes*, in good Calvinistic style, John Ponet delineated when tyrannicide itself would be legitimate: either if the tyrant was an overt criminal or when lower-level political officials became involved.

40. John Adams commended Calvinist theorist John Ponet for promulgating "all the essential principles of liberty, which were afterward dilated by Sidney and Locke." Later Adams specifically endorsed several other works from the Puritan period, including those by Milton and the *Vindicae Contra Tyrannos* among others.

41. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: The Age of Reformation*, vol. 2, 221–224, provides a helpful comparison of the thought of Ponet and Christopher Goodman.

42. *Collected Papers of Herbert D. Foster* (privately printed, 1929), 163–174.

With a passionate style, Ponet's *Short Treatise* (1556) argued for the following:

- The people could hold a ruler, who was to be viewed as the servant of citizens, accountable.
- Overthrow, even if forceful, was permitted under certain conditions.
- The basis for just governance was transcendental as well as universal.
- Government was to be limited in scope and in force.
- Authority was to be diffused among various spheres, not concentrated in one office.
- Checks and balances, *via* ephors or tribunes, were necessary.⁴⁰

These and other tenets of Calvinism would become standard fare in lands where the Reformed faith spread.⁴¹ The ideas (1) that God is the Superior Governor, (2) that man is a fallen sinner, and (3) that law, fixed constitutions, and decentralization of power are all necessary to limit human aggression became the signature of Calvinism in political forums. Later Hotman, Daneau and Althusius expanded these themes as the tradition developed.

Most knowledgeable historians spot a definite evolution in political theology from Calvin's early disciples (Knox, Goodman, Ponet) to his later disciples (Beza, Hotman, Danaeus). Two major lynchpins, however, changed after the 1570s: (a) submission was *limited* and (b) representation was *absolute*. These dynamics began to be publicized from pulpits and academies.

By the early seventeenth century, a new tradition was congealing. A summary from a Dartmouth historian Herbert Foster about a century ago noted the following as hallmarks of Calvin's political legacy,⁴² and most are exhibited by the works of his closest disciples referenced above:

(1) The absolute sovereignty of God entailed that universal human rights (or Beza's "fundamental law") should be protected and must not be surrendered to the whim of tyranny.

(2) These fundamental laws, which were always compatible with God's law, are the basis of whatever public liberties we enjoy.

(3) Mutual covenants, as taught by Beza, Hotman, and the *Vindiciae*, between rulers and God and between rulers and subjects were binding and necessary.

(4) As Ponet, Knox, and Goodman taught, the sovereignty of the people flows logically from the mutual obligations of the covenants above.

(5) The representatives of the people, not the people themselves, are the first line of defense against tyranny.⁴³

I have summarized the five points of political Calvinism slightly differently, referring to:

- Depravity as a perennial human variable to be accommodated;
- Accountability for leaders provided via a *collegium*;
- Republicanism as the preferred form of government;
- Constitutionalism needed to restrain both the rulers and the ruled; and
- Limited government, beginning with the family, as foundational.

The resulting mnemonic device, DARCL (though not as convenient as TULIP), seems a more apt summary if placed in the context of the political writings of Calvin's disciples.

The evolution was real, it was philosophically significant, it was politically revolutionary, and it would last for centuries, providing a true turning point in history. Whether one agrees with all of Calvin's theology or not, the subsequent altered terrain is clear. And Calvin, whether it is in his *Institutes*, or in his commentaries and sermons, stood at the front of a new, or renewed, political tradition.

There is abundant evidence that Goodman, Ponet, Beza, and Knox all had discussions with Viret, who also likely discussed these notions with Calvin. Noting that his *Remonstrances aux Fideles* (1547) was published a full generation before the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, and his 1561 *The World and the Empire* was available (and unrefuted by Calvin) more than a decade before that tragic event, it may be that an older theory was correct after all—namely that the Calvinist and Huguenot resisters did not merely react in the throes of crisis and then recast their theory after the fact. They had precedents and a history of understanding the propriety of resistance under certain conditions even before Calvin's death.

That being the case, Calvin's commentaries fit into a consistent paradigm, and the reason that Calvin devoted no more attention to explicit development of resistance theory is best understood as a combination of two important facts: (1) resistance theory based on priority of commandments was a philosophical given during Calvin's day, needing little further proof; and (2) with the tensions of the times, Calvin did not want to stoke revolutionary fervor unnecessarily, nor did he wish to

attract royalist criticism from France and elsewhere for espousing anarchical views. The later works of Beza and Hotman, as well as the *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* in the 1570s, thus, were not radical departures from the previous tradition that spanned from Farel to Viret to Calvin; rather, they were applications of the same seminal principles. Or as Robert Linder puts it: after 1547, anyone "looking for an ideology to justify revolution could have found many choice and useful ideas in the writings of Peter Viret."⁴⁴ The result, as one non-Protestant scholar put it, is that "in the political domain, Calvinist ideas are at the origin of the revolution which from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries gave birth and growth to the parliamentary democracies of Anglo-Saxon type."⁴⁵

Few, if any, post-canonical theologians made broader societal impact than Calvin on the public square. Interestingly, everywhere Calvinism spread, so did its views of both respecting government and limiting it. Calvinism, in fact, "placed a solid barrier in the path of the spread of absolutism" (Holl, 68), and helped make the world safer from tyrants. Furthermore, Karl Holl claimed that even though ancestors of human rights were found in the Middle Ages, nonetheless, their "formal acceptance into political theory is not completed until this period [Calvin's day] and only under the impact of religion.... The acceptance of universal human rights into the constitution was, however, not just the modification of a single point; it included in itself the transformation of the whole concept of the state" (Holl, 72–73). Calvin's pen, particularly through the *Institutes*, and personal genius spawned that revolution.

A somewhat different form of this article appears in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David W. Hall and Peter A. Lillback (P and R Publishing Company, 2008). ■

43. *Collected Papers of Herbert D. Foster* (privately printed, 1929), 174. Besides Calvin, this idea was reiterated in Buchanan, Beza, Peter Martyr, Althusius, Hotman, Daneau, *Vindiciae*, Ponet, William the Silent, and others. *Ibid.*

44. Robert Dean Linder, *The Political Ideas of Pierre Viret* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1964) 178.

45. Cited by Paul T. Fuhrmann, "Philip Mornay and the Huguenot Challenge to Absolutism," *Calvinism and the Political Order*, George L. Hunt, ed., 50.