



# The Reformation, Calvin, and Government

John Calvin, initially trained in law, has been described as the greatest theologian since the Apostle Paul. On this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth we have remembered him in a variety of ways as the leading theologian of the Reformation. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* comprised of two volumes and four books has provided us with the biblically reformed theological foundation for all of life. No richer course of study besides the Scriptures themselves can be found. In saying that, we are only acknowledging how God used Calvin to develop a unique biblical theology based on the Word of God. His writings underscore the theme of the first *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” He believed with the Psalmist, “*In his light we see light.*”

Calvin believed God was more than a Sunday God only interested in the spiritual part of our life. For him God was the sovereign king over all of life. His kingdom is a totally inclusive one, nothing is left out. He made no distinction between the natural and the spiritual or the

secular and the sacred.

Calvin strongly denied the idea that God belongs to the private or spiritual area of life but not in the public square, unlike what is popularly maintained today. The Apostle Paul’s words, “*in all things Christ preeminent*” were for Calvin what life and reality were all about.

While no one would question Calvin’s theological acumen, not everyone realizes his great influence on politics and civil government. A. M. Fairburn wrote about Calvin’s influence on political history, “Calvin’s chief title to a place in history rests upon his success as a legislator. As a theologian, he was a follower, as a legislator, he was a pioneer.” Fairburn elaborated—his system of theology and doctrine were derived from the Scriptures, but his political influence “broke new ground.”

You cannot read *The Institutes* (not to mention his many biblical commentaries), especially books one and four, and fail to see his influence in political history. As we continue to encourage the study of *the Institutes of the Christian Religion*, we also give attention to the study of

Calvin's political philosophy. It challenges our contemporary context in dynamic ways. There is no public or private dichotomy as far as God is concerned. He is sovereign over all. He is the head of the church, and he is king of his kingdom. His truth and authority apply to both the public and private arenas. With much enthusiasm and urgency, we encourage and recommend the reading of book four "Civil Government." Calvin's view of civil government was framed from his theology of the Word and though he was clear that the Scriptures did not teach any one particular form of government for all peoples, he taught that those in the role of civil magistrates or authorities, like the leaders in the church, were there at God's appointment to serve his purpose and answer to him for their performance.

He embraced Paul's words in Romans 13 that the governing authorities received their authority from God and served at his pleasure; he therefore insisted that they be obeyed because they were rulers not for terror to the good but for the bad. They were, "*God's servant for your good*," Rom. 13:4. When Calvin referred to the Bible as the only rule for faith and life, he applied that to political activities as well. He allowed for flexibility in the application of the principles for civil government while maintaining that those principles had to be true to the Scriptures as the foundation.

Reading Calvin seems strange to our western mindsets which have embraced a dualistic philosophy when it comes to the issue of the separation of church and state, which intends to separate God and religion from the political and public realms. There were those who believed

that the civil authorities were responsible to enforce the second tablet of the law (from the 10 commandments), but Calvin insisted the civil leaders were not only responsible to enforce the second tablet but the first as well. He believed with Paul, in 1 Timothy 2, that the first and foremost responsibility of those in authority over us is to make it easy for us to worship God. This assignment was to precede that of protection, justice, and promotion of peace and tranquility. Calvin stated that if the authorities fail in their duty, they not only do wrong toward the people, they also offend or insult God. He also believed that how the civil government operates should be a matter for men operating under biblical concepts to decide. (Calvin was more comfortable with an aristocracy/democracy form of government.)

Calvin's words regarding civil government echo those of Scripture: God is not to be left out of any area of life, including the political and public arena. Government authorities first of all are to make it easier for us to worship God. Then they are to protect us and keep us safe from evildoers. While Calvin made it clear that we are subject to two powers or authorities, one being the church and the other the civil, both are subject to the one power and authority of God himself.

The challenge of the reformation in civil matters requires our prayers and participation in all the kingdom of God, including the political realm. There is one God, one Lord, one kingdom over which he is the Sovereign Lord. Even the kingdom of darkness or government of men exist within his kingdom, presently, as we await the final consummation.



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