

Calvin and Politics

Written by K B Napier
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Author, Ralph C Hancock (in 'Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics', St Augustine's Press, 2nd Ed., 2011, as quoted in Law and Liberty) writes: *"What is Calvin's relationship to the foundations of modern politics? One obvious answer is that Calvin doesn't have one. On this view, modern political thought begins by rejecting revelation (Christian or otherwise) and embracing reason."*

Modern politics is, then, humanistic and godless; Calvin's views see this as anathema.

In other words, today's politicians subscribe to 'No God' and act accordingly. Therefore, while Calvin's ideas and theology were very relevant to the politics of his day, they are simply discounted now, because men have removed God. This rejection of Calvin's ideas by modern politicians is strange, given that Calvin is acknowledged to be the basis of the modern 'work ethic' underlying what is the modern free-market economic society, which they accept! The only reason modern men reject Calvin is their atheism, just as the same atheism rejects Creation.

Though some see Calvin as a political mind, in reality, Calvin merely enacted what his understanding of biblical behaviour demanded. It was not 'politics', but straightforward obedience to God. And this is how Hancock sees him, as a man whose beliefs were transcribed into everyday life... shopping, buying, selling, cleaning the house, having a career, and so on. Thus, Calvin imbued life with God's sovereignty, which controls everything in life. Titles were irrelevant.

Politics in the modern sense is a collective view of living. In the Calvin-type view politics is just a word used to describe how individuals act out their beliefs in their lives, affecting others. Were his ideas the foundation of modern politics? No, they could not be, for modern politics is devoid of godly roots, and a cess-pit of secular, atheistic thought, determined to push unbelief onto everyone. And, in reality, much that is attributed to Calvin is actually what has been deduced from his writings by followers, and not the express views of Calvin.

In summary, what we call 'politics' was, to Calvin, just one aspect of all of life, as it should be lived under God's laws. There was no separation of state and religion, because, for Calvin EVERYTHING is subject to God (so he advocated separation of Church and state, but not religion and state). In my own view, the only separation is between a state's impiety and the Church. Other than that the state is subject to scripture, in that the Church follows Christ exactly.

Another source speaks of Calvin's influence in every area of study: *"There is no end of the flow of new books exploring the continuing impact of Calvin and Calvinism on law, politics, the economy, and society, as well as on church doctrine, liturgy, and governance."*

('Calvin, Calvinism and Politics', as quoted in 'Root and Branch' paper by The Centre for Public Justice, April 2009). Calvin, then, is very relevant.

In a true godly perspective, and as taught by Calvin, the 'state' or government is a body authored and authorised by God. But, it only retains its authority when it acts according to God's laws. Anything not arising from this impeccable and perfect source is illegal and to be opposed.

'Politics' is the Protection of the Church and the People

Politics should not be placed on a pedestal. It is merely the activities pertaining to citizens (politikos, πολιτικός), and nothing more. Yet, today, it has covered itself with a magical cloak that hides the true aims and objectives of atheistic men and women with their own agenda. For this reason, many Christians fear 'politics' and think it is a subject far above them, or even outside the mandates given by God. They do not look into this naïve idea, to see that EVERYTHING is under God, including the activities of worthless and godless politicians, whose objective is their own glorification and wealth. They must be removed.

'Politics' has been the activity of all societies since the beginning. At first each family decided its own fate. Then each small tribe or clan. Then each village containing several clans. Then each walled town containing individuals from a variety of clans. Today, these mixes include many countries and religions, often in vast conurbations called cities. Even so, the activity is still the same – governance of the many by a few, elected to act on their behalf. But, in the strictest sense, the aims of the few must not be marked by their unilateral decisions and actions; they must act on behalf of all who live within their stated area of work, EVEN IF SOME DID NOT VOTE FOR THEM TO ACT. This is because they are NOT the arbiters of law and change, but only the agents of it... and everything they do MUST be according to what God requires.

In this sense we must declare 'democracy' to be irrelevant. The only rule is theocracy, whether or not atheistic rulers decide otherwise (is this not what is demanded by Islam?). We can say, then, that the various 'Party policies' put out by political parties are totally irrelevant to true politics, if they declare what is opposed to what God demands. Any person can demand what God demands, even if the rulers are atheistic. And any person who makes this demand NEED NOT be in government at the time, because the demand is universal, eternal and godly.

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This is how Calvin viewed 'politics'; it was the outworking of God's laws in everyday life. It is how Calvin rejected any other influence, and how he was able to literally close the city of Geneva against all foreign influences, including Romanism and its insistence that people obey the political mandates of the popes. For Calvin, the only purpose of the 'state' was to support and advance the requirements of God. In this way the 'state' smoothed the path of righteousness so that the Church could get on with the task of evangelism and holy living/teaching. (See 'The Political Theory of John Calvin', George J Gatgounis II, as in biblicalstudies.org).

Church Produces Model Citizens

In Calvin's eyes, the Church then produced 'model citizens' who went on to enrich all of society... which it had to because everything of God is perfect and for our good. One can argue that not all under Calvin were true believers. This is not what matters. What mattered was that even if they did not personally believe, they nevertheless obeyed God's civil demands made of people everywhere in all ages. By doing this they may have harboured sin in their hearts and minds, but did not openly declare them, so not harming the rest of society or the proper workings of the Church. (Espoused in Calvin's Institutes).

Obedience to God is the Key

Calvin knew that Church and state were separate entities, but he taught that both existed to obey and teach God's laws, and both were spiritual bodies which fed each other. Today, we see the state disobeying and rejecting God's laws, and feeding us poison, thereby negating their own authority and role in society under God, deserving to be removed as enemies of us and of God. Whereas Calvin taught subjection to the state that was *under God*, today he would advocate opposition to the same state if it is godless and refusing God's laws.

"According to Calvin, there is a unity of purpose for church and state but there is also a distinction of purpose. For where the state supports the church, the church does not obstruct the state. ('The Consistory of Geneva', E William Monter). Calvin held that state and church were mutually spiritual, because the state adjudicated temporal matters under God and the church adjudicated specifically spiritual matters, both opposing evil. Evil - spiritual, social, doctrinal, moral – was the common enemy that unified the two divinely instituted bodies. In

Calvin's vision, a society which was composed of a Reformed church, and a church comprised of Reformed citizens, were a force that beat back the world, and all evil." (Institutes, 4.20.9)

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What Calvin and his peers refused to allow in Geneva is now, plainly and unworthily, allowed in modern politics and society, because the 'state' has divorced itself from God and godly laws. Oddly, it does so even though the results are obviously evil and harmful to society as a whole, making their activities not just inadequate and pathetic, but godless, wicked and curiously inept and rather stupid. For Calvin, the state was an instrument of God that has no other purpose:

"Yahweh ... tolerates no other gods beside him. He demands an exclusive obedience of the whole man and his whole life. This has an immediate impact on all aspects of political life."

(Arnold van Ruler: 'Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocratic Politics'. The Edwin Mellen Press, 1989, p157).

"In theonomy, all law derives from God's law. Calvin views a Christian state as God's rule by God's law." (Gatgounis, p62)

Calvin rejected any totalitarianism of his day, which demanded obedience to Mosaic laws as well (much as atheists demand it today!), because Mosaic laws were not mandatory on the people of God once Christ came, even if some of those laws are useful. It is sheer logic to uphold what is worthy and good for us.

"Calvin sees the state as a religious entity and hence as a stabilizing force; this view is recorded in book four: 'The External Means or Aids by which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein'. It has been demonstrated that only a meagre seven per cent of the book deals with the state. The remainder is devoted to the role of the church." (W Fred Graham, 'Calvin and the Political Order', Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1988, p55).

The reason so little space is given in the Institutes to the state seems practical – because it is only a small part of total Christian life on this earth, and arises from the spiritual condition of the

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Church... which should be pure and fully godly. Some see Calvin's approach to the state as "overly harsh" (Graham). But, when we examine how patriarchs and biblical kings ruled, perhaps that reaction is itself overly-critical. And what of God's own response to our meagre and sinful lives? The Lord has crushed many thousands in the past for their sins... today we should thank God for not punishing us for our own failure to obey. And, in the matter of politics we should be more aware of our dire need to demand godliness from politicians, and to be strict in applying this demand in everyday life.

Yet, we must also remember that not all believers are strong, and not all unbelievers are totally wicked. There must also be a degree of compassion and a desire to teach others, even if they are unsaved. At times, Calvin showed this kind of approach, and at other times his responses were very strict indeed. Graham comments:

"The Christian gospel, which proclaims the love of God inextricably bound up with Jesus Christ, whose compassion for humankind took him even to the Cross, if this good news will not have a beneficial effect on men in society when once it grips a man of Calvin's stature - then it is of dubious value ... But if the gospel at times became a club, an excuse for foolishness and insensitivity, for torture, even death ... What went wrong? ... Contemporaries of lesser acumen than Calvin in neighboring cities were perplexed by this rigor; that, had St Paul applied it, would have excommunicated every person in Corinth."

(Graham: 'Constructive Revolutionary', Calvania: Ideas and influence of John Calvin. Sixteenth Century, pp174-6).

So, there must be some leeway in government, but not concessions to sin. Sin must still be regarded as sin, and no sin can be acceptable, but we must offer respite from strictness by giving teaching and time to adjust to what is right. If such does not follow, then strictness must be applied. If it is, say, giving fines for parking, well, that is debatable. If it is homosexuality, or the enforcing of Islam on the population, there can be no compromise and no debate, for both are wicked and harmful to the people.

For Calvin, tyranny occurs when power is in the hands of only a few. Is this not the case today? Is it not true that the few manipulate and control everyone else, to their detriment? Is it not true that there is no questioning of their power, though it is clearly abusive? Calvin saw this situation as "the demon that stalks the state" (Gatgounis, p4). As the saying goes, 'absolute power corrupts absolutely'.

“Calvin sees tyranny as the demon that stalks the state, seeking to possess it. Tyranny threatens whenever power is in the hands of the few. To him, power unchecked is power unjustified, since he believes that too often power, especially absolute power, has corrupted those who hold it. He sees absolute power as so corrupting that those in power cannot call themselves 'ministers of God' (Rom 13:1-7). Indeed the powerful sink to a level where there is 'no trace of that minister of God, who had been appointed to praise the good, and to punish the evil'. According to Calvin, state officers (Rom 13: 1-7) are good, though evil may eclipse the good, to such a degree one can see them no longer as a moral force”. (Institutes 4.20.25).

This is what we see today in all western societies, where governing politicians rule without God and against Him, causing immense damage to citizens and country, reducing their nation to rubble. As Calvin notes in his Institutes (4.20.24):

“But it is the example of nearly all ages that some princes are careless about all those things to which they ought to have given heed, and, far from all care, laxly take their pleasure. Others, intent upon their own business, put up for sale law, privileges, judgments, and letters of favor. Others drain the common people of their money, and afterward lavish it on insane largesse. Still others exercise sheer robbery, plundering houses, raping virgins and matrons, and slaughtering the innocent.”

I see all this in the British government, especially as taxation is imposed unreasonably for reasons no man may know and cannot tolerate. Those who are taxed pay for the rulers' “insane largesse”. Who can argue against this observation, when it is even boasted of in parliament? And who can deny the “slaughtering (of) the innocent” (abortion)? Calvin called for rule by the ruling class (not many of these with us today, thanks to robbery of their estates by taxation!) and by ‘democracy’. Some think his reference to aristocracy is not necessarily to ‘blue bloods’ but to fellows chosen by their equals because of their worth. Again, not many of these around today... indeed, there are MPs who are homosexual! As unworthy as you can get. Calvin calls for elected persons to rule... but only if they rule by God:

“If we have the liberty to choose judges and magistrates, since this is an excellent gift, let it be preserved and let us use it in good conscience ... If we argue about human governments we can say that to be in a free state is much better than to be under a prince. It is much more endurable to have rulers who are chosen and elected ... and who acknowledge themselves subject to the laws, than to have a prince who gives utterance without reason. Let those to whom God has given liberty and freedom (franchise) use it ... as singular benefit and a treasure

that cannot be prized enough.”

(Ionnis Calvini, Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia’)

Now, we have self-styled ‘princes’ (MPs, AMs, and MEPs) who “rule without reason” expecting everyone to submit to that rule though it makes no sense. “Chosen and elected” does not refer to modern elections, where politicians are elected, but who then ignore their voters and do whatever they wish, ignoring voter choice and objections! They are chosen for the good, but destroy us with what is bad. This is why Calvin, just before an election, warned:

“to choose [their magistrates] with a pure conscience, without regard to anything but the honor and glory of God, for the safety and defense of the republic”. (John T McNeill, ‘Calvin and Civil Government’. Readings in Calvin’s Theology. Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984, p274).

It is painfully clear, then, that when modern believers vote, they dishonour the Lord by voting for those whose lives or aims are opposite to those of God! Government MUST enable tranquillity and peace so that the Church can flourish...

“Yet civil government has as its appointed end, so long as we live among men, 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 of tranquillity ...” (Institutes 4.20.3).

As I have warned recently (2014) THE biggest issue for Christians today is the single one of homosexuality, yet Christians are voting for those who espouse it, or will uphold the sin, doing great damage to believers and the Church. Government is NOT upholding the Church; it is NOT bringing peace and tranquillity; it is NOT doing what God demands – glorifying His name and living by His laws. Rather, they defy everything of God, hurt Christians and the Church, and promote or allow what is gross wickedness without any form of refutation or opposition.

In such a situation it is not the place of Christians to join government, but to oppose and

condemn it from without, so as not to be tainted with the same evils. Otherwise, their joining equals conformity and acceptance. And, as state and Church are two aspects of God's commands, being outside the state machine is preferable to being within, sodden with its sins and blood. Even until the 1950s the state was at least outlined with God's laws. Now, those same laws are laughed at and scorned. In his day Calvin would have fought such evil with great force.

"Let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion, which I seem above to have put outside of human decision. For, when I approve of a civil administration that aims to prevent the true religion which is

contained in God's law from being openly and with public sacrilege violated and defiled with impunity, I do not here, any more than before, allow men to make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God."

(Institutes 4.20.3)

The Reason for Existing

Note again that the state exists ONLY to support the Church and to provide it with a safe environment! The opposite can be seen today. Even though rule by God's law is good and just for all. Modern politicians prefer to stab themselves in their own eyes and then to blindly stab everyone else. How stupid can men get, when they shun what does everyone good for what does everyone evil? Is it not pertinent to abstain from fake government and to observe good government from within a Christian fold, even if such have no state powers if they oppose government? Is it not true that a perversion of this righteousness is performed in many British cities and the USA by unelected Sharia-law Muslims?

"When a city becomes renowned for having received the Word of God, the world will reckon that the city ought to be, as a result, so much better governed, that such order will there prevail as to accord right and justice to one and all."

(Alastair Duke, 'Calvin the Preacher – Extracts from Calvin's Sermons on Micah'. Manchester University press, 1992).

As we view the absolute rage of homosexuals around the world, those who want wickedness to prevail oppose such a perspective and go all-out to destroy such a city or country. Yet, such a place is better governed than any atheistic state! This is an indication of how absolute sin blinds the user of that sin. What these wicked fellows want is anarchy, and Calvin despised such a condition, saying that anarchic men are like rats running every way possible in straw. (Institutes 4.20.8).

Common-Sense

We must remember that while Calvin teaches certain forms of government, such models are not found explicitly in scripture. Calvin just gave what he thought was a reasonable model from the bulk of the Bible. And this is itself a reasonable activity, if the result is glory to God and to His word and laws. The details could be argued, but not the overarching thesis – that government is the agent of God and exists to support and protect the Church in its God-given tasks. And, such government must be divided into a number of counter-balancing sub-groups, each supporting and checking the other. In this way abuse of power is minimised.

Modern cowardly/ignorant Christians would not subscribe to Calvin's firm resolve – that if rulers rise up against God, they lose their divine right and must be put down (Clifton E. Olmstead [1960], 'History of Religion in the United States', Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J., pp. 9–10 and Jan Weerda, 'Calvin, in Evangelisches Soziallexikon', col. 211). And to add to this, it means not obeying a godless government when it specifically opposes God's word and people.

Calvin also advocated the expelling of heretics... which, we can see, can be directly applied to people such as Islamists who refuse peace and the instruction to be silent about the evils of their religion. However, in our day, I would accept the situation if they speak generally about their religion and are able to be criticised and spoken against, or even legally imprisoned if they teach evil or violence. Calvin taught the ethic of work, both to glorify God and to keep the body. This parallels scripture, which says that people who choose not to work deserve no help... and this maxim would save western governments (that is, taxes of the people) millions! Instead, they use communist ideals to support loafers.

Finally

What I have given above is only a brief overview of Calvin's ideas concerning politics. I believe the main point to make is that Church and state are not separate, but that the state may not control the Church. It is scriptural to say that the state is a tool of the people, when the people

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are obeying God. When the state rises against God, then it must be removed. Any laws and policies that harm the Church must be removed or ignored, though it is likely that Christians may lose their freedom.

Can a Christian join a government as a ruler (e.g. an MP) if it rises against God? No, he cannot. Can he join a political party if it does so? No, he cannot. Is he allowed by God to fight from within, to change it? No, he may not. I base this on the obvious saying, that one bad apple corrupts the barrel-load. One good apple amongst bad apples has no chance to cleanse the bad ones, because the corrupt nature has already taken over. It is far more likely that the bad nature will also corrupt the good. This is why God commands that we avoid and shun what is evil, not join with it. In many ways, Calvin would accept such beliefs, because they are Christian 'common sense'.

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