

# THE POLITICAL THEORY OF JOHN CALVIN

By: Shaun Lewis, Civil Servant Ministries

September 2014

Then Farel raised his hand toward heaven and exclaimed with the deepest solemnity: “John Calvin! If you forsake us in this time of need, when your scholarship and capacity to organize and guide our churches are absolutely necessary, then from this time forth the curse of God will rest upon you and your idolized studies!”<sup>1</sup>

It was with those words that John Calvin reluctantly stayed in Geneva. With the exception of a few years, he remained there from 1536 until his death in 1564. Geneva became the context of Calvin’s life and ministry. For this reason, the article herein will delve into the politics of Calvin’s Geneva followed by a discussion of his political theory.

## Calvin’s Geneva

The people of Geneva officially broke from Catholicism in 1536. They were Protestants in the verbal sense of the word, as ones protesting Roman Catholic authority. Generally, however, they hardly understood Protestant doctrine. The desire for self-governance had been growing in Geneva for centuries and exploded into revolution in the years before Calvin’s arrival.

Geneva had turned to the House of Savoy for protection in 1285, and the Savoyards helped the bishop overcome the counts of Geneva. Uncomfortable with the bishop’s power, the House of Savoy granted the city a measure of self-rule in 1387. Thus, bishop could preside only over spiritual matters; the city council and Savoyards presided over civil and judicial matters.<sup>2</sup>

This arrangement created a balance of power until 1444 when a Savoyard became bishop. The people reacted with hostility and formed alliances with the neighboring Swiss cantons of Bern and Fribourg by 1526.<sup>3</sup> Geneva’s bishop-princes were deposed by 1527, and the city council became sovereign, though it remained Catholic. Fribourg was solidly Catholic at the time, and Bern had not yet embraced the Reformation, either. Revolution had more to do with politics than religion at this time among the Swiss cantons.

The formidable canton of Bern adopted the Reformation in 1528, and the small-city state of Geneva followed suit in 1533 after being firmly admonished by Bern.<sup>4</sup> By 1536, Geneva had finally solidified

---

<sup>1</sup>Wolcott Calkins, “John Calvin’s Calvinism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 66:264 (October 1909): 674

<sup>2</sup>William Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1986), 231. Thomas Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribners’s, 1928), 2:62.

<sup>3</sup>Estep, *Renaissance*, 232. The alliance with Fribourg was made in 1519; Bern joined in 1526. See: Lindsay, *History*, 2:63.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 233. Geneva had banned the reformer, William Farel from the city in 1532. Turning to Bern for help and protection, Farel reentered Geneva in 1533. The city was now split between Catholic and Protestant factions, riots ensued, even war broke out as the Savoyards tried to retake the city.

her independence,<sup>5</sup> and the city council even voted to abolish the mass and all Catholic ceremonies throughout the city.<sup>6</sup> The Protestant Reformation was growing, and yet, relatively few understood its doctrinal principles.

When Calvin entered Geneva, factions of the city were pro-independence, while others favored the old order of Savoy rule. Some, such as William Farel, had read Calvin's *Institutes*, understood, and favored the Reformation; many others did not care or want it.<sup>7</sup> The people of Geneva had little interest in following political or religious leaders from the outside—Farel and Calvin were no exception. The people did not naturally submit to either of them.

When Farel introduced Calvin to the city council in September, 1536, the civil authorities recognized their need to establish Protestantism in Geneva. They accepted Calvin at first.<sup>8</sup> Alongside Farel, Calvin created a new catechism and confession of faith for the city. It was approved in January of 1537, but not without modification or opposition.

New council members had been elected in 1538, enough to tip the balance against Calvin and Farel. The city quickly voted to implement changes in worship that would undermine the two reformers.<sup>9</sup> Calvin and Farel were not opposed to the changes, but they asked for time to consult with other Swiss ministers. Refusing their request, Calvin and Farel were soon banned from Geneva.<sup>10</sup>

Two years later, the pendulum of public opinion changed again. Suddenly, the balance of power favored Calvin and Farel's return. Though Farel would never enter the city again, Calvin returned in 1541.<sup>11</sup>

The city formed a church constitution committee. It was comprised of Calvin with other ministers and members from the city council. They produced three documents pertaining to church and state: The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, the 1542 Edict of Lieutenant, and the 1543 Ordinances on Offices and Officers. The Ecclesiastical Ordinances, in particular, were a creation of Calvin.<sup>12</sup>

The Ecclesiastical Ordinances contained rules on church worship and structure. Most significantly, Calvin introduced a new committee called the Consistory in them.<sup>13</sup> Genevan churches would now

---

<sup>5</sup>Thomas J. Davis, *John Calvin's American Legacy* (Chelsea House: New York, 2005), 32.

<sup>6</sup>Calkins, "Calvinism," 673. Lindsay, *History*, 2:89-90.

<sup>7</sup>Davis, *Calvin*, 32.

<sup>8</sup>The General Assembly was comprised of male citizens with voting privileges who elected a 200-member lower council. The lower council elected a council of 60 who elected a smaller council of 20. Each had specific governmental duties. For instance, the council of 20 could impose fines, imprisonment, the stocks, banishment, or execution. See: G. Joseph Gatis, "The Political Theory of John Calvin," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:612 (October 1996): 450.

<sup>9</sup>The city of Bern started to use unleavened bread in their observance of the Lord's Supper.

<sup>10</sup>Estep, *Renaissance*, 237-38.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid, 240. Deteriorating relations between Geneva and Berne, the threat of war, mob violence in the city, and low public morals were some of the factors that swayed public opinion. Geneva came to see the need for Farel and Calvin. No doubt, Calvin's letter to Cardinal Sadolet defending the city endeared many to him.

<sup>12</sup>John Witte, *Sex Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva*, 2 vols. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 2005), 1:12. Though Calvin heavily influenced the Ecclesiastical Ordinances, they had to be approved by all three city councils. The citizens of Geneva voted in support of them. See: Lindsay, *History*, 2:129-30.

<sup>13</sup>Jordan Ballor and W. Bradford Littleton, "European Calvinism. Church Discipline", *European History Online*, (March, 25 2013), accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/ballorj-littlejohnw-2013-en>. A Presbyterian form of

hold four offices: pastor, teacher, elder, and deacon. Twelve elders and 6 pastors comprised the Consistory. Geneva had been at the forefront of modern democracy prior to Calvin's entrance.<sup>14</sup> The people had a voice into politics, held elections, and voted for civil leaders. Yet, they had never voted for spiritual leaders prior to the Ecclesiastical Ordinances. The city council voted to elect the twelve elders of the Consistory; pastors throughout the city voted to elect 6 among them.

The Genevan Consistory was a body of godly men who "warned and admonished" the unfaithful. It could excommunicate those who refused correction, if it did so, the matter was reported to the civil authorities.<sup>15</sup> Calvin believed that all citizens of Geneva were members of the visible church.<sup>16</sup> Thus, to maintain purity, the church and state must work together "as two hands washing each other under God."<sup>17</sup> The church should discipline spiritually via admonishments and excommunication. When this fails, the state should discipline physically. Prior to the Ecclesiastical Ordinances, the church had no role in disciplinary action.

The Consistory may seem like a continuation of merging church and state. In some ways, it was this. However, it actually provided a separation between the two with church and state having their own distinct jurisdiction and authority.<sup>18</sup> Where this broke down was when dealing with the unrepentant. In these cases, the Consistory looked more like "the Town Council of a medieval city" that combined church and state as one.<sup>19</sup>

Many have criticized Calvin for creating the Genevan Consistory, focusing on the state's harsh and abusive treatment of sinners. Such fails to understand the historical context and the city's need for high moral standards. Geneva was "a city in a permanent state of siege."<sup>20</sup> The city walls were always guarded, and arms were required of every citizen. For the entirety of Calvin's ministry, the city even held to a strict 9pm curfew.<sup>21</sup> All citizens made up Geneva's army. An undisciplined, unruly citizenry could lead to the downfall of the entire city. Thus, the city council took sinful conduct seriously (even to an extreme).

---

church government has many parallels to Calvin's Consistory. For a discussion of these, see: Mark Larson, "John Calvin and Genevan Presbyterianism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 60:1 (Spring 1998).

<sup>14</sup>The 200-member lower council was comprised of citizens elected to represent the people, and these elections preceded Calvin by nearly 150 years.

<sup>15</sup>Lindsay, *History*, 2:129.

<sup>16</sup>Larson, "Presbyterianism," 65. See: Harro Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 120. Hopfl says, "Calvin was clear that discipline and excommunication can be applied only to those who profess themselves to be of the household of the church (4.11.5); he omitted to mention that since 1536 he had demanded such a profession as a condition of merely residing in an evangelical community."

<sup>17</sup>Gatis, "Political Theory of Calvin," 451-53.

<sup>18</sup>Estep, *Renaissance*, 241.

<sup>19</sup>Lindsay, *History*, 2:129. Lindsay says the Consistory created an "illusory" distinction between church and state. This seems exaggerated. When dealing with those who heeded the Consistory's warnings, the state was not much involved. Thus, the church functioned as a separate institution. It was when dealing with those who repeatedly scorned the Consistory that the church looked to the state.

In the case of Michael Servetus, the Consistory declared him guilty of heresy. Being unrepentant, Servetus was handed over to the city council for further punishments, and finally he was burned alive. Reformed or Catholic, with or without a Consistory, Servetus would have received capital punishment. The point is that when dealing with the unrepentant, the Consistory made no practical separation between church and state.

<sup>20</sup>Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 130.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

Historically, heretics had been burned by the state for centuries. Profligates had been whipped, fined, exiled, or imprisoned. Geneva was no different, and sadly, Calvin was a product of his culture in this regard. The real contribution of the Consistory was to place the church and state on equal footing. Church and state leaders had wrestled with one another for power for more than a thousand years. To place both on a level plane under God, distinct in their roles, was no small achievement. What started in Geneva became revolutionary.

### **Calvin's Politics**

Calvin synthesized his ecclesiology in the *Institutes*, but he never attempted such a work with his thoughts on politics.<sup>22</sup> A treatise or concise work on the subject simply does not exist. Harro Hopfl has suggested:

Right conduct was never for [Calvin] a realm of ambiguity and perplexity in which the services of a problem-solver are called for. His 'office' as a theologian and a minister was to remind men of what they already knew and to urge them on to a better performance, and he was certainly doing that day after day, even if not in the form of a single treatise.<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, Calvin was not silent about the organization of society. He believed in a separation of church and state, a balance of power, and democratic elections, for instance. As opposed to modern America where the church is peripheral to the state, Calvin believed society should be governed by both institutions. Each has its own God-given authority and jurisdiction with distinct responsibilities in society.<sup>24</sup> Magistrates, like ministers, have their offices from God, and one does not rule above the other. George Gatgounis has summarized Calvin's position as follows:

The state rules the church's environs, maintaining domestic tranquility so that the church can execute a mission to evangelize and make disciples of all citizens. By fostering the maturity of its Christian flock, the church nurtures the state by producing model citizens; thus church and state are mutually inclined.<sup>25</sup>

Quite different from modern church-state constructs, Calvin did not envision a godless state. To separate church and state for him did not mean separating God and state.<sup>26</sup> All of life and society was meant to function in submission to the Lord. Calvin believed that God is the One who appoints ministers and magistrates. Thus, they exercise oversight in submission to Him, and the people should obey them in submission to God. The church, the state, and all institutions therein should draw their laws from God, and recognize His sovereignty over them.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>24</sup>Calkins, "Calvinism," 675.

<sup>25</sup>George J. Gatgounis II, "The Political Theory of John Calvin," *ChurchMan* 110:1 (1996): 60.

<sup>26</sup>Garry Z. Cole, "John Calvin on Civil Government," *Western Reformed Seminary* 16:2 (August 2009): 18.

<sup>27</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. by Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 2:20.9.

It is clear that Calvin moved Geneva towards theocracy by pressing society to recognize God as the ultimate ruler and lawgiver.<sup>28</sup> He was not a Reformed theonomist though, because he rejected the idea that Geneva should be governed by Old Testament civil laws.<sup>29</sup> Calvin writes:

For the statement of some, that the law of God given through Moses is dishonored when it is abrogated and new laws preferred to it, is utterly vain. For others are not preferred to it when they are more approved, not by a simple comparison, but with regard to the condition of times, place, and nation; or when that law is abrogated which was never enacted for us. For the Lord through the hand of Moses did not give that law to be proclaimed among all nations and to be in force everywhere.<sup>30</sup>

The Old Testament law was given for the nation Israel, and according to Calvin, the ceremonial and civil aspects were not given for other nations to follow.<sup>31</sup> The moral aspects of the law, however, he believed extended far beyond, since these involve the worship of God and the love of man. As Calvin explains: “It is his eternal and unchangeable will that he himself indeed be worshiped by us all, and that we love on another.”<sup>32</sup>

Calvin appealed to moral or natural law, God’s law, as the highest standard for organizing society. Every society should strive to reflect this. Calvin writes:

It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men. 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 the 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.<sup>33</sup>

The standard of good legislation was not the Mosaic Law but God’s moral law. Magistrates and ministers should have this standard in mind when making laws and leading the people.

---

<sup>28</sup>W. Stanford Reid, “John Calvin: One of the Fathers of Modern Democracy,” *Christian History* 12 (1986). Calvin believed that “no government can be happily established unless piety is the first concern; and that those laws are preposterous which neglect God’s right and provide only for men” (Mark W. Karlberg, “Reformation Politics: The Relevance of OT Ethics in Calvinist Political Theory,” *Evangelical Theological Society* 29:2 [June 1986]: 186).

<sup>29</sup>The term “theonomist” requires some discussion. Cornelius Van Til has said, “There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy” (Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics*, In Defense of Biblical Christianity, 3 vols. [Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 1980], 134). With those options, of course, Calvin was a theonomist. Greg Bahnsen represented many Reformed theonomists by presuming that “Old Testament laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation” (Greg Bahnsen, “What is Theonomy?,” *Covenant Media Foundation*, PE-180, accessed September 10, 2014, <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pe180.htm>).

Calvin was theonomistic, but he was not a Reformed theonomist.

<sup>30</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

<sup>31</sup>Calvin makes a threefold distinction: moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. The ceremonial law “was the tutelage of the Jews” for the purpose of training them. The civil law “imparted certain formulas of equity and justice, by which they might live together blamelessly and peaceably.” Only the moral law did he consider binding for all nations and peoples (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15).

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

Calvin believed that government should uphold God's moral standard but also promote true religion. The state should not shy away from worshipping the living God, protecting His church, and punishing false doctrine.<sup>34</sup> It was centuries later that Abraham Kuyper captured the essence of this when he stated, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"<sup>35</sup> Calvin believed that a state truly "under God" would promote His church.<sup>36</sup>

There is little about the best form of government in all of Calvin's writings. Whether the state functions as a monarchy, democracy, or some other form, he cared only that it was God-honoring.<sup>37</sup> The question for Calvin was not what form, but whether the government would recognize, submit to, and honor the Lord. He did, however, make a recommendation:

Therefore, men's faults or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government, so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and, if one asserts himself unfairly, there may be a number of censors and masters to restrain his willfulness.<sup>38</sup>

According to John McNeill, Calvin was not suggesting an oligarchy where power resides with a few. He supported a democracy where power is divided many times over.<sup>39</sup> This was the result of his understanding of human depravity. Democracy has certain checks and balances upon any one man's power, and it also allows the people to elect the best among them to represent their interests.<sup>40</sup> The wicked may be elected, but their power will be limited, and good leaders will be elected to counter them.

Calvin envisioned a theocratic republic for Geneva. He believed it possible to connect theocracy and democracy (two forms of government not often associated).<sup>41</sup> People in good standing with the church should be able to vote their conscience.<sup>42</sup> Such recognize a sacred responsibility in choosing their leaders but also God's sovereignty over the entire process. In a theocratic republic, the people vote but in submission to the Lord. The people recognize that the power does not belong to them, but to the King of Kings.

---

<sup>34</sup>Donald MacLeod, "The Influence of Calvinism on Politics," *Theology in Scotland* XVI no. 2 (Autumn 2009): 13. See: Lindsay, *History*, 2:131 for a balanced discussion on the execution of Michael Servetus.

<sup>35</sup>Abraham Kuyper, trans. by George Kamps, "Sphere Sovereignty," Inaugural Address at the Free University, Amsterdam, Netherlands, October 20, 1880.

<sup>36</sup>In America, the separation of church and state meant that the government would not promote or prohibit the free exercise of religion (See: The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution). Calvin would have disagreed, because the state was not ordained to be secular or godless.

<sup>37</sup>Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 153.

<sup>38</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., footnote 20. Calvin also stated: "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" (See: Gatis, "Political Theory of Calvin," 453).

<sup>40</sup>Cole, "Civil Government," 22.

<sup>41</sup>Gatis, "Political Theory of Calvin," 451-53.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 451.

Like the Founding Fathers of America, Calvin believed that men should elect their own leaders. They should govern themselves. Yet, unlike them, Calvin maintained a very low view of mankind. He did not believe that man could govern himself autonomously, as if God and the church are unnecessary.<sup>43</sup> Joseph Gatis summed up Calvin's position:

Evil—spiritual, social, doctrinal, moral, temporal—was the common enemy that unifies the [church and state]. In Calvin's vision, a society that was composed of a Reformed church, and a church comprised of Reformed citizens were a fist that beats back the world and all its evil manifestations spiritually, morally, culturally, legally, and politically.<sup>44</sup>

Church and state must work together as a united force. The church preaches the gospel, informs the conscience biblically, and makes disciples. Thus, citizens who fear God begin to abound and in submission to Him, they are able to govern themselves. Apart from the Christian God, Calvin saw only the collapse of society. Gary Cole writes: "But for people and societies both, [Calvin] stressed the need for moral righteousness and warned that no society could prosper long without a government in submission to God."<sup>45</sup>

When Calvin entered Geneva, it was a nominally Protestant city characterized by misrule, injustice, and all forms of sinful conduct.<sup>46</sup> Though Calvin's reforms have been criticized, even critics such as Rousseau have praised him.<sup>47</sup>

He soon made Geneva the soberest, the safest, and the most law-abiding community in the world. He put down libertines and rioters, and created a solemn, temperate, and happy metropolis for godly men from the ends of the earth. And yet, like Savonarola in Florence, Calvin never held a civil office. He was nothing more, but also nothing less, than a conscience inflamed with the fear and love of God.<sup>48</sup>

Calvin accomplished much good in Geneva, though it remained far from a perfect place. He was a faithful servant, ultimately looking forward to the day when Christ would return to rule and reign on earth.

---

<sup>43</sup>Calvin believed that natural or moral law was divine, an absolute standard revealed by God Himself. Karlberg writes: "Enlightenment philosophers had "secularized" the medieval doctrine of natural law in the interests of the autonomy of the modern state." (See: Karlberg, "Reformation Politics," footnote 11).

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 452.

<sup>45</sup>Cole, "Civil Government," 23.

<sup>46</sup>Calkins, "Calvinism," 678.

<sup>47</sup>Cole, "Civil Government," 23.

<sup>48</sup>Calkins, "Calvinism," 679.

## Bibliography

- Bahnsen, Greg. "What is Theonomy?" *Covenant Media Foundation*. PE-180 Accessed September 10, 2014. <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pe180.htm>.
- Ballor, Jordan and W. Bradford Littleton. "European Calvinism. Church Discipline." *European History Online*. March, 25 2013. Accessed August 27, 2014, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/ballorj-littlejohnw-2013-en>.
- Calkins, Wolcott. "John Calvin's Calvinism." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 66:264 (October 1909): 672-685.
- Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. Trans. by Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960.
- Cole, Garry Z. "John Calvin on Civil Government." *Western Reformed Seminary* 16:2 (August 2009): 18-23.
- David, Thomas J. *John Calvin's American Legacy*. Chelsea House: New York, 2005.
- Estep, William. *Renaissance and Reformation*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 1986.
- Gatis, G. Joseph. "The Political Theory of John Calvin." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153:612 (October 1996): 450-468.
- Gatgounis II, George J. "The Political Theory of John Calvin," *ChurchMan* 110:1 (1996): 60-75.
- Hopfl, Harro. *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Karlberg, Mark W. "Reformation Politics: The Relevance of OT Ethics in Calvinist Political Theory," *Evangelical Theological Society* 29:2 (June 1986): 180-192.
- Kuyper, Abraham. Trans. by George Kamps. "Sphere Sovereignty." Inaugural Address at the Free University. Amsterdam, Netherlands, October 20, 1880.
- Larson, Mark. "John Calvin and Genevan Presbyterianism." *Westminster Theological Journal* 60:1 (Spring 1998): 44-70.
- Lindsay, Thomas. *A History of the Reformation*, 2 vols. New York: Scribners's, 1928.
- MacLeod, Donald. "The Influence of Calvinism on Politics." *Theology in Scotland* XVI no. 2 (Autumn 2009): 5-22.
- Reid, W. Stanford. "John Calvin: One of the Fathers of Modern Democracy," *Christian History* 12 (1986).
- Witt, John. *Sex Marriage, and Family in John Calvin's Geneva*, 2 vols. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Mich., 2005.