

CALVIN'S VISION OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

By

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The title of our subject as it is before you, "Calvin's Vision of the Christian Community," is as broad as it is wide. One could give to any inquirer either the Institutes or John Léith's book, Introduction to the Reformed Tradition, and say here is what Calvin meant by the Christian community. The question behind that title is, to what degree did Calvin see himself as establishing a theocracy in Geneva. I recently spoke with a professor at Stetson University who is very knowledgeable in not only in Russian history, but in the whole history of the Christian church, and when I told him I was working on that subject, said, "I suspect Calvin has been 'overdone' by the liberals in affirming that all Calvin did is establish a theocracy in Geneva. I wish someone would come along and give him credit for what he really did there." My question is, was Calvin guilty of being the "autocrat" that liberals have pinned on him, or did Calvin do something in Geneva which may well have its implications for us in our society today? Again, is theocracy a bad word or a good word? It may well be that many of us living in a country which broadly proclaims the separation of church and state need to reexamine that question.

Etymologically, "theocracy" is derived from two Greek words, theos and kratein; the fundamental sense is, therefore, "the rule of God" or "the reign of God." I would like, therefore, to give to the word theocracy a definition as follows: "A structure in which all life and relationships within the community are governed by the Will of God."

What I want to understand as a result of this investigation is not only to what degree did Calvin seek to establish the "rule of God" or "reign of God" in Geneva, but in what sense are we as pastors and theologians empowered or authorized to do something similar in a country in which we are primarily governed by the doctrine of separation of church and state?

Needless to say, the literature on the subject is extensive. One has only to look at the Battles' translation of Book 4, Chapter 20, where Calvin launches into the theme of civil government and see in footnote 1 that there is an extensive literature on the subject and note the sources listed there. If you add to that the works of Kingdon and J. W. Allen, one would even question why, in a brief paper such as this, the subject ought to be tackled.

For me in order to come to some clarity on the subject, it has been helpful to separate out the role of the church in relation to the state into four brief categories and examine what those who preceded Calvin have said on the subject so that we might come to a more clear understanding of what Calvin asserts on how the Christian performs vis-a-vis the state. This outline is, to the best of my knowledge, original and, therefore, subject to all sorts of challenges, but let me share it with you.

Four Possibilities

1. The Christian in relation to the state should assume no secular office.
2. The Christian in relation to the state should fight or rebel against the secular office.
3. The Christian may perform the function of the secular office but see it as distinct from an office in the church.
4. The Christian may be an official in the secular state but see that office under the rule and guidance of the church.

What I would like to share with you in each instance is how the contemporaries of Calvin saw each position and how Calvin responded to that position, therefore, leading to a clarification of where Calvin stood on the relationship between the church and the secular powers.

I

THE CHRISTIAN SHOULD ASSUME NO SECULAR OFFICE

This, of course, is the position represented by the Anabaptist movement and most clearly delineated in the Schleithem Confession of 1527. These Swiss and South German Baptists formed a community separated from the world in virtually everything, and attempted a community withdrawn from the world. In the sixth point of the Schleithem Confession, the authors agreed as follows concerning the Christian's service in the secular world:

Finally, it will be observed that it is not appropriate for Christians to serve as a magistrate because of these points: the government magistracy is according to the flesh/but the Christian's is according to the spirit; their houses and dwellings remain in this world/but the Christian's are in a heaven; their citizenship is in this world but the Christian's citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only/but the Christian's weapons are spiritual against the fortification of the devil; the worldlings are armed with steel and iron but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the word of God.¹

In affirming that the Christian should hold no secular office, the Anabaptists were drawing out the implications of their position that they should be completely separated from the world and live completely at peace. In the fourth point of the Schleithem Confession, this is made abundantly clear.

¹"The Schleithem Confession," in Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., The Protestant Reformation (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 135.

We are agreed as follows on separation: a separation shall be made from the evil and from the wickedness which the devil planted in the world; [in this manner simply that] we shall not have fellowship with [them] the wicked, and not run with them in the multitude of their abominations. This is the way it is: since all who do not walk in the obedience of faith and have not united themselves with God so that they wish to do His will, are a great abomination before God, it is not possible for anything to grow or issue from them except abominable things. For truly all creatures are in but two classes, good and bad, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who have come out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial; and none can have part with the other.²

This notion of withdrawal and separation from the world and the formation of a "holy community" is strongly rejected by Calvin. Calvin could not accept the Anabaptist's view that Christians should assume no secular office on the grounds that the nature of government is "a thing polluted" which therefore has nothing to do with Christian people. The question asked by the Apostle Paul in Colossians 2:20 "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belong to the world?" in no way implies a separation from participation in the political process. Calvin is insistent that the world of the secular government is distinct from the spiritual and inward kingdom of Christ yet the case is that they are not at variance. Here is Calvin:

Yet this distinction does not lead us to consider the whole nature of government a thing polluted, which has nothing to do with Christian men. That is what, indeed, certain fanatics who delight in unbridled license shout and boast. [They think] it is a thing unworthy of us and set far beneath our excellence to be occupied with those vile and worldly³ cares which have to do with business foreign to a Christian man.

Calvin is realistic enough to know that even in the church there can never be such perfection that there be no necessity for civil governance. The answer of total separation from the world and no assuming of a secular office is not a viable option for Calvin.

II

THE CHRISTIAN IN RELATION TO THE STATE SHOULD FIGHT OR REBEL AGAINST THE SECULAR OFFICE.

This position of rebellion against established authority is most clearly represented by the peasants of Swabia who in 1524-1525 rose up against the nobility. While the causes of the peasants' revolt were

²Ibid., p. 132.

³John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (John T. McNeill, ed., Ford Lewis Battles, tr.), IV, xx, 2.

manifestly economic, the motifs of the Reformation, the freedom of the Christian man, the priesthood of all believers, the repudiation of man-made laws and regulations, sounded loudly and clearly in the ears of the German peasants. Here is a section from the third article of the twelve articles of the peasants:

It has been the custom hitherto for men to hold us as their own property which is pitiable enough considering that Christ has redeemed and purchased us without exception by the shedding of His precious blood, the lowly as well as the great. Accordingly, it is consistent with scripture that we should be free and we wish to be so not that we want to be absolutely free and under no authority. God does not teach us that we should lead a disorderly life according to the lusts of the flesh but that we should live by the commandments, love the Lord our God and our neighbor . . .⁴

Luther responded with a tract published in April 1525 entitled, A Friendly Admonition to Peace Concerning the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants. In this tract it is clear that Luther responded violently to the "use" of Reformation teachings in order to enhance the economic goals of the peasants. There was little room for "liberation theology" in Luther's reply. For Luther, it was perfectly consistent with the gospel for men to hold men as property. Responding to the notion of the peasants, "There shall be no serfs for Christ has made all men free" Luther wrote:

That is making Christian liberty an utterly carnal thing. Did not Abraham and other patriarchs and prophets have slaves? Read what St. Paul teaches about servants who at that time were all slaves; therefore, this article is dead against the Gospel. It is a piece of robbery by which every man takes from his Lord a body which has become his Lord's property. For a slave can be a Christian and have Christian liberty in the same way that a prisoner or a sick man is a Christian and yet not free. This article would make all men equal and turn the spiritual kingdom of Christ into a worldly external kingdom and that is impossible, for a worldly kingdom cannot stand unless there is in it an inequality of persons so ⁵ that some are free, some imprisoned, some lords, some subjects, etc.

Luther's final admonition to the peasants was to stop defying and threatening authority, to live within the Lord's Prayer by saying, "Thy will be done." The true saints do not react against authority and the established secular office but take their necessities to God. He would quote the Psalmist, "Call upon me in trouble and I will help thee." (Psalm 50:15)

What was Calvin's response to the question of the Christian's rebellion against the secular office? His well known statement in Book four, Chapter 20, Section 31 allowing for "lesser magistrates" or

⁴"The Twelve Articles of the Peasants," Hillerbrand, op. cit., p.65

⁵Luther, "Friendly Admonition to Peace Concerning the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants," op. cit., p. 83.

nobility to restrain "arrogant kings" is undoubtedly Calvin's most mature and considered statement on the subject; however, it should not be taken out of context. One sentence cannot replace the sections from 22 to 30 all of which speak of the Christian's duty to deference and obedience, even to unjust rulers. Magistrates for Calvin are not simply to be tolerated but respected and even given reverence. They should be obeyed out of love rather than fear of the magistrate himself. The general principle is, even unjust magistrates need to be obeyed. God himself is the source of the magistrate's office and if unjust and incompetent magistrates come along they are there as punishment for public wickedness. It is not the part of subjects but of God to vindicate the right. Having said all this, however, Calvin certainly does allow for magistrates who are appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings. Let us recall the key sentence:

For if there are now any magistrates of the people appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings (as in ancient times the ephors were set against the Spartan kings, or the tribunes of the people against the Roman consuls, or the Demarchs against the senate of the Athenians; and perhaps, as things are now such power as the three estates exercise in every realm when they hold their chief assemblies), 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 know⁶ that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance.

It would appear that Calvin allows for constitutionally authorized rebellion. Perhaps the real meaning behind the lengthy sentence just quoted is given by Calvin in the final page of the Institutes where he observes this:

But in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed to observe it as primary/that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to Him to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, and to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted.

For Calvin the final word is "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

⁶Calvin, op. cit., IV.xx.31.

⁷Ibid., IV.xx.32.

III

THE CHRISTIAN MAY PERFORM THE FUNCTION OF THE SECULAR OFFICE BUT SEE IT AS DISTINCT FROM AN OFFICE IN THE CHURCH.

This classical distinction is most clearly given by Luther's division of all creation into the realm of the church and the realm of the state. For Luther, all the children of Adam and all mankind are divided into two classes, the first belonging to the kingdom of God, the second to the kingdom of the world. For Luther, the number one problem of the medieval church was the interconnectedness between the church and the secular realm. In the two-kingdom theory of Luther, those who belong to the kingdom of God are all the true believers who are in Christ and under Christ. (Like Calvin), Luther felt that people of the kingdom of God need no temporal law or sword. If all the world were composed of Christians, there would be no necessity for princes, kings, swords, or laws. Because Christians have in their heart the Holy Spirit, Christians do injustice to no one and love everyone.

On the other hand, there is the kingdom of this world. It is for these "unjust" that the law is given. The righteous man/of his own accord/does all/and more than the law demands/but the unrighteous do nothing that the law demands. Therefore, they need the law to instruct, to constrain, and compel them to do good. Thus, God has provided those who live only in the kingdom of this world with the law. God has also subjected them to the sword, so they are unable to practice their wickedness and if they do practice it they cannot do so without fear or with success and impunity.

In the same way a savage wild beast is bound with chains and ropes so that it cannot bite and tear as it would normally do, even though it would like/whereas a tame and gentle animal needs no restraint but is harmless despite the lack of chains and ropes.⁸

This neat division of all things into the two kingdoms allowed Luther to say that the Christian may perform the function of the secular office even to the extent of being a hangman or wielding the sword in vengeance and see that as perfectly legitimate because it is practiced in the secular kingdom and not in the kingdom of God.

Therefore if you see that there is a lack of hangmen, constables, judges, lords, or princes, and you find that you are qualified, you should offer your services and seek the position that the essential governmental authority may not be despised and become enfeebled or perish. The world cannot and dare not dispense with it. . . . For yourself, you would abide by the Gospel and govern yourself according to Christ's word (Matthew 5:39-40) gladly turning the other cheek and letting the cloak go with the coat when the matter concerns you and your cause.

⁸Luther, "On Governmental Authority," op. cit., p. 47.

⁹Ibid., p. 51.

Luther sets up a clear double standard. One can have a set of ethics for oneself within the kingdom of God and feel justifiably called upon to adopt an altogether distinct ethical standard when functioning and performing within the kingdom of the world.

How does Calvin respond to the question of the Christian acting in the secular sphere? The answer, it appears, is that Calvin allows the Christian to function as a magistrate or under the magistrate with the power to wield the sword, but Calvin does not do this on the basis of two kingdoms. The Christian is not abiding by one set of ethics when he sees himself within the "kingdom of God" and abiding by another set of ethics when acting as a "hangman" or wielding the sword or exercising coercion.

For where David urges all kings and rulers to kiss the Son of God (Psalm 2:12) he does not bid them 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.¹⁰

There is a different spirit here. Even in the secular sphere the Christian acts by "submitting to Christ the power with which he has been invested that Christ alone may tower over all."

Calvin asks the question, if the law of God forbids all Christians to kill or that in God's holy mountain (the church) men shall not afflict or hurt, how can magistrates be pious men and shedders of blood at the same time? For Calvin, the magistrate in administering punishments takes this action not by himself, but carries out the action according to the judgments of God. The law of the Lord forbids killing but murderers must not go unpunished. Thus God himself puts into the hand of His "ministers of the sword" the authority to draw the sword against all murderers. Thus princes and lords when they take such actions are not doing it in a realm distinct from that which is God's realm, but are doing it in obedience to God acting in a realm all of which is God's.

IV

THE CHRISTIAN MAY BE AN OFFICIAL IN THE SECULAR STATE BUT SEE THAT OFFICE UNDER THE RULE AND GUIDANCE OF THE CHURCH.

Here it would seem we come to Calvin's mature statement of the relationship between the Christian's service in the church and the Christian's service within the state. Calvin agrees with Luther that God has provided magistrates with coercive power that mankind may live in some sense of community; however, in contradistinction with Luther and his two-kingdom theory, the unique contribution of Calvin is that he always saw civil government from the perspective of the Gospel rather than as a "second kingdom" apart from Christ. This is Calvin's "theocracy." In this view of theocracy both the church and the state

¹⁰ Calvin, op. cit., IV.xx.5.

exist under the sovereignty of God and the mission of the church in Calvin's day as well as in ours is not only to seek the purity of the church within, but to do all it can so that the state conforms to the revelation of God as given in Jesus Christ. Calvin's view is neither church over state nor state over church, but the state seen from the vantage point of the church. Calvin wants to see the nobility, the magistrates, the judges, as sons of the church.

For the magistrate, if he is Godly, will not want to exempt himself common subjection of God's children. It is by no means the least significant part of this for him to subject himself to the church which judges according to God's word--so far ought he to be from setting that judgment aside! "For what is more honorable," says Ambrose, "than for the emperor to be called a son of the church, For a good emperor is within the church, not over the church."¹¹

When the Christian sees both the church and the secular government in this perspective, the Christian may take a rightful place in the secular state and see his or her office in the secular state as coming under the rule and guidance of the church. The separation of the church and state Calvin wants to maintain and not confuse, but there is a healthy interconnection between the two in Calvin. While the office of the church is to foster a state built upon Christian principles, the state sees to it that the worship of God is freely guaranteed. Functions of the state are to maintain not just coercion but civil righteousness and, in fact, justice. As Calvin defines the function of the state:

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 us¹² with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility.

The role of the church and the role of the state are certainly not antithetical as if they were part of two different realms, but come together so that the Christian may function within the state receiving guidance and direction from the church. It is not just Calvin's high view of the church, but his high view of the state which gives to the Calvinian view of theocracy an esteem which far surpasses that of the Anabaptists, the peasants, and Luther.

CONCLUSION

It has commonly been felt that because of the religious rigorism of Calvin, that followers of this reformer felt called upon to be removed from the world. The only way to maintain one's purity, it has been

¹¹Ibid., IV.xi.4.

¹²Ibid., IV.xx.2.

thought, is to establish a religious community removed from "the stain of the world." It is clear in Calvin's response to the Anabaptists and his high estimation of the magistrate and the place of the state vis-a-vis the church that such a removal from the world, particularly in relationship to the world of politics, is untenable.

In a day when liberation theology is having its day, I find Calvin's balanced opinion regarding rebellion against the state helpful. His major presupposition is that citizens owe the magistrates honor and obedience and yet clearly when the citizenry finds the actions of government antithetical to the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, duly constituted magistrates must perform their "checking" function against tyrannical rulers. The Lutheran position, as it is seen in Luther's reaction against the peasants where they are asked only to obey and pray, is untenable.

The separation of all things into two realms is a handy ideology but easily leads to schizoid ethics. It is impossible for a Christian to function under one set of rules when perceiving himself in one kingdom, and quite another set when perceiving himself in yet another kingdom. From the standpoint of the Anabaptists, the peasants, and Luther, the division of the gospel into the spiritual and worldly is the fundamental flaw.

Calvin's view of the relationship between church and state is so attractive because it is unitive and puts a plus sign over both the church and the state, from God's perspective as well as ours. This is theocracy not churchocracy. Calvin's view places both the church and the state under the sovereignty of God.