The Significance for Political Theory and Action
of Calvin's Sermons on Second Samuel
by
Milner S. Ball

Calvin's sermons on II Samuel were first delivered during the summer days of 1562 in Geneva. One wonders when Calvin had time to prepare them. They are severe, unrelenting, and must have taken at least an hour to deliver--unrelieved by humor.

The first and probably also the last thing to be noted about their political significance is that Calvin did not conceive of politics as a separate, self-contained discipline or activity. Political theory was not for him a branch of philosophy or social science, and political action was not for him a singular vocation. Rather, politics was one thread woven into the whole fabric of human activity.

In taking up II Samuel, Calvin had before him an extraordinarily rich tapestry: David and Bathsheba; David and numerous other objects of his womanizing; Uriah's drunkenness; David dancing before the ark, loin cloth flapping as he leapt. Calvin was examining, that is to say, the biblical version of sex, drugs and rock-and-roll music. Plus religion and politics if you think of these as categories distinguishable from the former three.

Calvin takes it as it comes, all of it, as the text brings it to him. No word escapes attention. And if his all-consuming exegetical need sometimes exceeds what good scholarship, fact and reason allow, his imagination and fancy make up for the difference.

[My own favorite example is Calvin's fabulous explanation of II Samuel 11:2-4:

> Well it is said that David arose during the evening, and seeing a woman who was bathing, inquired who she was. He finds that she is the wife of Uriah. Thereupon he sends and makes her come to him and commits shame and adultery, which was thereafter the cause of a much greater and more horrible confusion. Well concerning the sleeping, he is not so much to be condemed as he would seem, and several who have not experienced this mode of living as it was at that time, have wanted David to be reproved here for a great intemperance in that he slept after dinner. Well they did not eat dinner. Now that is an abuse, for the ancients only had one meal, and were accustomed to sleep during midday, and they stayed awake most of the night. Hence we must not spend much time on that and when it is said that he arose in the evening, it was in accordance with the general custom of those even who were very sober, and who were not like many people, who do not know what it is to live without eating and drinking and sleeping." (Chapter 11, Sermon XXXII.)]

Every word in the text is scrutinized. Just so, every subject raised is accepted as legitimate matter for sermonizing. And that is how politics arrives on Calvin's agenda.

It is tempting to approach the question of politics in these sermons by identifying the various issues which qualify as politics, and then tracing Calvin's thought on each as it reappears in first one sermon and then another.

I choose not to proceed this way because I think it creates a misleading impression of what Calvin was attempting. Among other things, if you pick a subject and follow it through the sermons, you soon encounter contradictions. And to attempt to resolve them would either be impossible or a digression or both.

For example, at several points Calvin speaks of just war or legitimate war and counsels obedience to rulers when they call citizens to arms. At other points, he says that we should be horrified over the shedding of blood in battle, for, to quote him, "one cannot kill a man without the image of God being violated." (Chapter 2, Sermon VI.) In one sermon he says: "The reign of Jesus Christ is called the kingdom of peace." (Chapter 3, Sermon VII.) In another, he says: "If there are heresies and errors, it is legitimate to kill one another." (Chapter 2, Sermon VI.)

I could multiply examples. For every statement about a political subject, I would have to conclude with Quentin Skinner that Calvin is a "master of equivocation." (The Origins of Modern Political Thought, Vol. II, p. 192.)

That is a possible but an inadequate conclusion.

I think there is an alternative.

John Updike once observed that some people read the Bible a passage at the time in the expectation of receiving momentary illumination, forgetting that the Bible as a whole makes continuous sense.

I am not going to do these sermons a slice at the time. I am going to take them whole, in search of the continuous sense they make. I think that there is such a sensibility of the whole and that, once it is grasped, the contradictions of the pieces can be understood as evidence, not of equivocation, but of a quick, creative faithfulness.

I shall try to state what I take that continuous, motivating sense to be and then try to assess its bearing upon political theory and action.

This is only an experiment. I make no predictions about the probability of its success.

The central idea is this: Calvin understands the world as metaphor. The political, like the natural world--politics, like sex, drugs and rock-and-roll music--is a metaphor of the will and action of God.

I

Let me establish the proposition.

Metaphor is normally thought of as a verbal device used by poets and rhetoricians. According to Robert Frost, metaphor is saying one thing and meaning another.

We say it is raining cats and dogs. We mean that it is raining very hard.

Howard Cosell says, after a given running play, that Herschel Walker really laid a stick to him. Cosell means that Walker hit him like a speeding, semi-tractor-trailer.

But metaphors are not only the device of poets and sportscasters. They are also visual. I know of only one person who, when given a Rohrschach test, reported that he saw ink blots. The rest of us see bats, and devils and arcane landscapes. Or we sometimes look at clouds, and see faces or objects and animals. We see one thing and perceive another.

This capacity for metaphor is developed in us--early and repeatedly--by the church. We are given bread and wine, and taught to discern the body and blood of Christ. We eat one thing and are nourished by another.

So Calvin looked at the world, and all that happens in it, including politics, and saw a metaphor--or many metaphors--of the will and action of God. As he put it, the world is the theater of God's glory. Or as he also expressed himself in addressing that passage in II Samuel--painful for him--in which the valiant, faithful Uriah is killed: "Instead of being horrified, we see that this death is useful for us, and that it represents as in a mirror eternal life before our eyes." (Chapter 11, Sermon XXXIV,)

The world is theater, mirror, trope.

Let me make a distinction. It is important to note the difference between metaphor and analogy.

An analogy is a comparison between two things that are not the same but resemble each other: El Salvador is like Vietnam. My love is like a red, red rose.

The metaphor, on the other hand, "the metaphor deals simultaneously with the things in themselves and in their union." (Edward Lueders, "The Need for an Essential Metaphor," unpublished essay.) The two elements of the metaphor, the things said and the thing meant, "are significantly identifiable with one another at the level of imagination even though they are patently different from one another in fact." (Ibid.)

Ezra Pound's two-line poem on the Paris metro: "The apparition of these faces in the crowd,/Petals on a wet, black bough."

Faces and petals. Seeing faces, we imagine petals. The metaphor deals with the two both in themselves--faces and petals--and in their union--faces as petals. Petals and faces are patently different from one another in fact but are identifiable at the level of imagination.

Or, Jesus said: "This (is) my body." There is bread, and there is body of Christ. They exist independently, in themselves, distinct. But also at the same time, to the eyes of faith, they are identifiable.

This is the way metaphor functions, and this is what distinguishes metaphor from analogy. Analogy treats two things that are unlike but resemble each other. Metaphor contains two things in themselves and simultaneously in their unity. Analogy employs reason; metaphor imagination. Analogy illustrates; meatphor illuminates. Analogy treats of that which is equivocal; metaphor of that which is univocal. Analogy is the mode of St. Thomas; metaphor that of Calvin.

II

So Calvin viewed the world as a metaphor of the glory of God. The Libertines got this much of the metaphor right: They saw correctly that the world and God were identifiable. But then a heaviness of mind, a heretical paralysis set in, and they suffered a fatal lack of poetic, playful, faithful suppleness of mind. (It is the same malady which afflicts the Moral Majority today.) Fixed on the unity of God and world, they were unable, simultaneously, to remember the distance between the two. They couldn't chew gum and believe at the same time.

In the first paragraph of the Institutes, Calvin observes that "our very existence is nothing but a subsistence in God alone." John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, p. 47 (Allen transl. 1949)]. But in that same paragraph, he observes that we who subsist in God are also those who have defected from God and been plunged into miserable ruin. Both are true. God and world are in subsistential unity, but they are also disunited, a great distance apart.

This general statement and approach of the first chapter of the Institutes is the clue to understanding the last chapter, the one on civil government. What is true of the world in general is true of politics in particular: It is a metaphor of the will and action of God.

At the end of the Institutes, Calvin says: "he who knows how to distinguish between the body and the soul, between this present transitory life and the future eternal one, will find no difficulty in understanding, that the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very different and remote from each other." (Ibid., Vol. II, p. 771).

But shortly after he adds about that radical difference between the City of God and the City of Man: "This distinction does not lead us to consider the whole system of civil government as a polluted thing, which has nothing to do with Christian men." (Ibid.) As it turns out, he says: "this civil government is designed . . . to cherish and support the external worship of God. . ." (Ibid., p. 772).

The facts of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world are irreconcilable. But at the level of faithful imagination, they are wonderfully identifiable. As he says in the sermon on II Samuel, chapter 2 (Sermon 4): "(T)he earthly reign is a token in which we must contemplate the reign of our Lord Jesus Christ. . ."

Such contemplation--or political theorizing--can only be carried out according to a certain order. "Though the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves be intimately connected," he began the Institutes, "the proper order of instruction requires us first to treat of the former, and then to proceed to the discussion of the latter." (Institutes, op. cit., Vol I, p. 50).

Observance of this priority is essential for two reasons.

First, if we begin with man, then we run the risk, realized by the Libertines, of forging a God in our image. That is to say, our knowledge of God will be defective.

Second, if we begin with man, then knowledge of ourselves will be faulty as well. "No man," Calvin wrote, "can arrive at the true knowledge of himself, without having first contemplated the divine character, and then descended to the consideration of his own." (Ibid., p. 48).

So political theory commences theologically.

But to begin this way--to get the whole enterprise started--we must, to use the oft-repeated injunction of Calvin (itself a metaphor), "elevate our thoughts to God." Or, in its eucharistic form, "lift up your hearts."

Then the question is: How? How start with God? How get there? Calvin gives the answer in his sermon on Chapter 6:

> If we want to go up there, alas, we do not have wings; we are so small that we cannot make it. God therefore must come down to see us. But when he has come down it is not to make us dull witted; it is not to make us imagine that he is like us. Rather it is so we might go up little by little, by degrees, as we climb up a ladder one rung at the time. (Sermon XV).

These descents of God are undertaken so that we can ascend and thus begin to understand first God and then man, first the reign of God and then the reign of princes, these descents in the Old Testament take the form of revelations, ephods, the temple, and most notably, the ark. All of these secondary modes of descent in the Old Testament are then superseded in the New Testament by the Incarnation. "Today," says Calvin, "we have no such ark, but we do have the fulfillment of all it implied in our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ibid.)

Christ descended that we might ascend by faith, there to contemplate God, subsequently ourselves to descend to knowledge of man.

All of which is to say that the enterprise is not only theological, but also christological. Political theory, as is the case with all anthropological subject matter, political theory is first of all theology and christology.

Also pneumatology. In order to theorize politically, we must ascend to God and begin there. In order for us to ascend, it is necessary for Christ first to descend. Since his incarnation, Christ has been given to us in the word--the word preached and the word celebrated in the sacraments, both functions of the spirit.

Preaching is of no avail to the hearer absent from the precedent presence of the Spirit. Again Calvin, this time from the sermon on II Samuel 12:

> The Word will be useless--although we have it hammered in our ears--until our Lord makes us give audience, that is, that he change the hardness of our hearts,... Therefore, although God sends his word to us in order to exhort us to repentance, this will be nothing but wasted effort unless he speak within by his Spirit. (Sermon XXXV).

And in addition to the word preached, there is the word celebrated in sacraments, also the work of the Spirit. As he proclaimed in the sermon on Chapter 6:

> When we have the word which is preached to us, God speaks in a common and ordinary fashion to us. Now that is an illustration of his condescension. Hence, the preaching of the Gospel is like a descent which God makes in order to seek us. . . He is not content with giving us his word, but he adds baptism to confirm it. . . Baptism is performed to insure that we inherit the eternal kingdom, to make us enjoy adoption by which we are companions and brothers of the angels--but can a little water do that? The point of course is that since God has come down to us (in this sumbol), we must go up to him (in faith). It is the same way with the Lord's Supper. . . When God declares himself to us, we must not cling to any earthly thing, but must elevate our senses above the world, and life ourselves up by faith to his eternal glory. In sum, God comes down to us so that then we might go up to him. That is why the sacraments are compared to the steps of a ladder. . ." (Sermon XVI).

Political theory is a metaphor of the glory of God. In order to understand the human term of the metaphor, we must start with the theological term, the thing meant before the thing said. In order to do so, we must ascend to God. We can only undertake this ascent through the descent of Christ, who then elevates us. And Christ is given us in the word preached and celebrated, the gift of the spirit.

Political theory is thus a theological, christological, pneumatological undertaking whose matrix is liturgy: preaching, baptism, eucharist.

Moreover, doing political theory is not formally or methodologically different from doing liturgy. Preaching exposes the will of God in the Bible; eucharist exposes the body of Christ in the bread; baptism exposes the cleansing of the Spirit in the water; political theory exposes the glory of God in the civil government.* All are tropological enterprises, and they follow a similar pattern.

I should also add that neither I nor Calvin is able to discuss political theory as theological metaphor without employing metaphor in the process. And not only metaphors like ascending and descending but also the central metaphor whereby we say one phrase, "Word of God," and mean, simultaneously or alternately, Jesus, the Bible, preaching, and sacraments. Theological thinking, like all thinking, is bound to be metaphorical. But that is subject for another day. Let me return to the argument at hand.

I have concluded that Calvin understood political theory as the metaphorical expression of the glory of God, the reign of Christ in the reign of princes. Now I want to turn from political theory to political action.

III

In taking up the subject of political action, I do not address a new issue. Political action is simply the other face of political theory, the physical embodiment of the noetic reality. It, too, is metaphor.

If metaphors are verbal devices employed by poets, rhetoricians and sportscasters, and are also visual devices employed by Rohrschach tests and artists, and are also conceptual, like political theory, then metaphors may also be acts. This idea has been implicit in what I have said already, and I need only briefly to make it explicit.

We are familiar enough with the notion of prophetic actions, the metaphorical acts of the prophets: buying a vineyard in Jerusalem, putting an ox's yoke around one's neck, etc.

Our Scottish forefathers referred to the eucharist as "The Action." It is not that we discern the body of Christ in bread. More accurately we discern the body of Christ in the <u>breaking</u> of the bread. It is the communal action that is the metaphor.

---

*Calvin notes in the <u>Institutes</u> that law and litigation, notwithstanding the attempts of some to corrupt them, are instruments of God. I have tried experimentally to pursue this insight of Calvin in a book, <u>The Promise of American Law: A Theological, Humanistic View of Legal Process</u> (University of Georgia Press, 1981).

For Calvin, political action, like political theory, is metaphor, tropological event.

I can give you an exact contemporary example, taken from an article written in 1968:

> Martin Luther King, Jr., was a great man for metaphors. Among southern Negro ministers in general, of course, the metaphor has always been indispensable to human communicaton, but King used it with unique effectiveness. In the early sixties, the civil-rights movement in the South included almost nightly mass meetings in Negro churches, and sometimes, as I sat listening to King explain how the long, dark night of discrimination was going to give way to the great dawn of emancipation, bringing a bright new day of equality and freedom, it occurred to me that the easiest way for white Southerners to cripple the movement would be to pass city ordinances against the use of metaphors in public. Their lawyers would argue solemnly that the ban was strictly non-racial in character, although everyone would know that white-segregationist orators would be unaffected, since their indispensable figure of speech was the simile ('Why, that ole boy was just as happy as a turkey on the day after Thanksgiving'). . . For anyone who sat through those church meetings in the South, Resurrection City, the encampment that the Poor People's Campaign has strung along the parkland between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, sometimes seems like not only the implementation of a Martin Luther King idea but the materialization of a Martin Luther King metaphor--some elaborate, resonant, five- or six-sentence construction about the community of the improverished being a crumbling eyesore among the shiny monuments to American democracy. (Calvin Trillin, "U.S. Journal: Resurrection City: Metaphors," The New Yorker, June 15, 1968.)

Resurrection City was a metaphor.

What we learn from Calvin is that all political action is a metaphor, a metaphor of the glory of God--sometimes a negative metaphor, but a metaphor constructed out of event nonetheless.

This tropological activity is a theological, christological, pneumatological enterprise rooted in the liturgy--in the same way and for the same reasons as the tropological theory which is its complement. What and how to act comes from the identical source as what and how to think: the word preached and celebrated.

After all, Calvin's preaching was intended to be affective: i.e., to produce right acting as well as right thinking. The hearer was to enact as well as to perceive and conceive metaphors of the glory of God. By these sermons, did not Calvin aspire to have Geneva become a Resurrection City?

IV

In Calvin's estimation, political action is never to be more than metaphorical.

There is a correspondence here between theory and practice. Political theory is not to produce systems and certainties. It is always to be probing, uncertain, doubtful. Otherwise it becomes rooted in the mundane, stagnates, becomes oppressive, becomes too heavily weighted with worldliness to be responsive to and reflective of God's will. It becomes a monument rather than a metaphor.

So Calvin, in the sermon on Chapter 10, observes:

> Joab says that the Lord will do what will seem good to him... (H)e does not know whether God would like to humble him for a time, and if he would like for him to be defeated by his enemies, for him to lose instead of winning. He could not be certain about that... We see therefore when Joab doubted that this was not lack of faith. For we can certainly doubt although we embrace the promises of God and hold them as totally certain and infallible. But we doubt concerning what is not clear to us. And that is how (God) wants us to remain, in suspense about many things and to give it all back to his secret counsel and his providence. (Sermon XXXI).

Later he adds:

> It is up to God to govern, and...all that we could do is nothing except insofar as he wants to bless it. Although we be not assured whether we shall live today or tomorrow, whether we ought to win a victory, whether we shall reach the goal of our enemies, whether we shall prosper in all our affairs; but rather, let us doubt and be in perplexity concerning what God will want to do for one day or one month... If we have a certitude as we shall have conceived of it in our hearts, this will be nothing but presumption... We must await such an outcome as will be pleasing to God. (Ibid.)

The corollary in political action to this perplexity of mind and doubt in political theory is non-institutional, non-programmatic, experimentation.

Triumphalism, moral majoritarianism and self-assurance are foreign to Calvinistic political action. We and the church are deliberately disenfranchised and disestablished. So the sermon on Chapter 2:

> For if the church were at peace and people received the Gospel without contradiction, and there were no kings nor princes who did not voluntarily align themselves with it, we would be immoderately sunk in our own ease; and Jesus Christ would reign by our opinion and not by his virtue. (Sermon IV).

Our actions are to be no more than metaphors, i.e., penultimate, incomplete, open-ended. Like poetic images and tents, they are impermanent, subject to rearrangement, realignment, disassembly and reassembly as we are led to move on.

This is not a formula for disengagement as Calvin repeatedly makes clear. From the sermon on Chapter 2 again:

> For it is not a matter of pursuing a compromising position when we see one side fight for the name of God and indeed for the cuase of our salvation, and yet we keep our arms crossed. Nor are we to be in the position of knowing how to use our tongue to speak evil and yet not daring to utter a word to maintain the honour of God. So today there are many who would like to be neutral in the midst of all these troubles. They think: Very well, I do not want to be involved on one side or the other. I will wait and see who is going to be the strongest and is more likely to win. So it is a matter (for believers) of becoming as deeply involved as possible. (Sermon IV).

We are to be deeply involved but not deeply rooted, like those engaged in guerilla warfare, awaiting opportunity and orders, traveling light, exactly so as to be in readiness to strike. As Calvin says in the sermon on Chapter 11: "the faithful have no stopping place in this world." (Sermon XXXIV).

Therefore, if political theory as metaphor of the glory of God is characterized by perplexity, political action on Calvin's model is typically episodic, but vigorously so.

V

There is one, last point to cover. For all that politics is to Calvin the art of the impossible, it is not random. We are given guidance, or at least goading. That is the point of his preaching, everyday, for an hour or more.

Calvin works his way through II Samuel, word by word, event by event, carefully, even tediously, exposing meaning. If he labors at it long and hard enough, each passage can finally be discovered as an indication of the glory of God. Each passage has this vertical reference: From text we are referred to God. But each passage also has a horizontal as well as a vertical reference.

The vertical tropology is complemented by a horizontal typology. Each passage can be discerned as exhibiting the glory of God: Each passage also gives guidance to us. To use Calvin's phrase, each has "a use for us." Each person and event recounted in the text is a type--people and events in Calvin's day, and ours.

Understanding of the biblical types will yield understanding of the corresponding contemporary types, and give guidance, so that present listeners and their acts, like their biblical precedents, may become positive metaphors of God's will and action.

So in working away at exegesis of II Samuel, Calvin invariably first establishes a given passage's metaphorical, vertical relation to God, and then its typological relation to the events and people around him.

It is to be carefully noted that Calvin's method is not to draw some lesson from the Bible which is then applied to the contemporary world. We are not encouraged by Calvin to apply the word to daily life. Calvin would have understood such preaching to be a form of blasphemy predicated on the arrogant belief that the incarnation had not taken place, that the word was not already present in life, and that it somehow required our playing God and putting it there.

Calvin's sermons are both more humble and more imaginative. He understood that the word is already present in text and in world, and that our role is to expose that presence--to expose how the text contains the glory of God and types for guidance, whereby the listener is excited and directed to expose the glory of God in his own life.

Political theory is perplexed and political action is episodic. But there is affective instruction for politics in biblical proclamation.

VI

Skinner concludes that, in the modern era, the state as a separate, secular, powerful entity with the right to command obedience, has become the most important political reality and the most important object of analysis for political theory. (Skinner, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 349.)

This detachment of politics and its concern alone with the art of government was, he says, an ancient assumption lost to view under the impact of Augustine's insistence:

> that the true Christian ought not to concern himself with the problems of 'this temporal life,' but ought to keep his gaze entirely fixed on 'the everlasting blessings that are promised for the future, using like one in a strange land any earthly and temporal things, not letting them entrap him or divert him from the path that leads to God.' As I have sought to argue, this in turn suggests that any attempt to excavate the foundations of modern political thought needs to begin with the recovery and translation of Aristotle's Politics, and the consequent re-emergence of the idea that political philosophy constitutes an independent discipline worthy of study in its own right. (Ibid.)

The modern absorption of politics into the art of government is, according to Skinner, a return to an old idea now re-anointed in a position of singular pre-eminence. If we follow this line of thinking, Calvin's sermons on Second Samuel are really diversionary and have very little to do with political theory and action. At best they would constitute an ante-diluvian, pre-secular, premodernist source for politics, a pre-politics of minor historical interest.

This is a possible conclusion. But it is not mine.

But then I also conclude that politics as the art of government--that is, politics concerned with techniques and not with ultimate causes, concerned with the question what and not why--I think that such politics has played itself out and has no more to offer us. As evidence of its bankruptcy, it produces, instead of political theory, tawdry gossip like John Ehrlichman's Witness to Power, or the confessions of David Stockman, or the nostrums of Ronald Reagan. And instead of political action, it offers us anti-politics, i.e., administration by bureaus like those of AT&T and the Pentagon, and the management of interests whose tools of control are the institutionalization of greed and the technological destruction of the human and natural worlds.

The politics which Skinner identifies as modern, I identify as dead. Therefore I find Calvin's sermons on Second Samuel to be astonishingly apt. They say that there is promise in politics, secular politics, howbeit when practiced not as the art of government but as the art of making metaphors whose larger term is the glory of God.

For us I think this means that political theory is stating theologically-based utopias and that political action is raising hell in hope that hearts will be lifted to heaven. For it is God and not the state which is the most important political reality--no less for us than for Calvin.