

CHAPTER TWO

JOHN CALVIN'S POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Douglas Kelly states that John Calvin showed his strong political concern even before his conversion, which can be seen from his 1532 *Commentary on Seneca's De Clementia*, which concerned about equity for the people. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which he wrote in 1536 and presented to King Francis I of France, can also be considered a political treatise because it discusses the right form of governance outlined in the opening epistle. He frequently sent letters to European political leaders during his whole life and included political commentary in his letters to his pals. He even spends time codifying Geneva's civil and constitutional laws.¹

Calvin's interest in politics is evident in his letters, according to McNeill. The letters do reveal some of his political beliefs, but what makes them noteworthy to us is that they show that the author was constantly in search of opportunities to encourage or promote Reformation-friendly policies in the current circumstances.²

Johnson points out that Calvin chose to conclude *Institutes* by concentrating on our political responsibility for this world rather than the one to come as a way of demonstrating his involvement in politics. Why was politics such a big deal to Calvin? The prosecution of Calvin and his pals by the government is one plausible reason. His defensive aim was to

¹ Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1992), 5.

² John T. McNeill, "John Calvin on Civil Government," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 42.2 (1964): 72.

convince kings that the reformers were not interested in political revolution. However, there was also a more positive goal. Calvin sought to subordinate all in life to Christ.³

This chapter responds to the question: What is John Calvin's political theology? This chapter will examine Calvin's political theology through four sections: Nature of civil government, king and law, king and people, and the duty of resistance.

2.1 Nature of civil government

2.1.1 Origin of government

2.1.1.1 Origin from God

Calvin describes civil power as the most sacred and noble calling in the lives of men as well as a divine calling before God. God gave magistrates the greatest respectable names possible: gods.⁴ Calvin uses Proverbs 8:14-16 to demonstrate that kings and rulers hold the power of the state in their hands due to God's providence and His holy ordinance. God is with them, and he controls how laws are made and how fairness is applied in legal tribunals.⁵ Given that they hold the highest position and get their authority from God, the magistrates are obligated to serve God faithfully.⁶ He goes on to say that, despite the fact that there are many different sorts of magistrates, there is no differentiation in this respect, and we must accept each one as having been sent by God.⁷

³ William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 109.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.4.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.4.

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.6.

⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.7.

Calvin claims that civil rulers, whether pagan or Christian, are God's vicars on earth, and their justice must be the mirror image of His.⁸ He held that the civil ruler had a mandate from God and was entrusted with divine authority to the point where he served as God's vice-regent over all the subjects that were assigned to him as part of that mandate.⁹

As the result, Calvin claims that the rulers have to be respected because they were appointed by God. The right of government is prescribed by God for the good of the people, despite the fact that tyranny and the unjust use of power are not the appointed governments because they are characterized by their disorder.¹⁰

2.1.1.2 Mediation of people

Calvin sees the people's involvement in politics as entirely instrumental and that God uses them to elect political leaders. Calvin believes that the best scenario is one in which the people choose their rulers "by common consent" since men are so prone to misuse their position of authority. Calvin recommended employing a plurality of magistrates and the consent of the people to keep government free from the influence of wicked rulers.¹¹ He is aware that this objective can never be fully attained. But he has nothing but respect for those in positions of authority. Their faults do not diminish their noble calling.

For Calvin, the best condition for the people is when they can choose their own shepherds by agreement. Tyranny is when someone seeks absolute power through force, and it does not seem to be consistent with liberty when men become kings by hereditary right.

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.9.

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Exodus*, 22:8. John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalm*, 82. John Calvin, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 1:16–17. John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Chronicles*, 19:6. John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 13.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 13.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

Calvin believes that representative democracy is based on the biblical example.¹² McNeil states that Calvin's mention of the "rule of principal persons" refers to those selected by their peers rather than the blood aristocracy.¹³

2.1.1.3 Necessity of government

Calvin sees government be given by God before humans fall into sin. He sees civil government as a blessing from God. God gave us civil government as a gift and as a tool. He holds a fairly positive opinion of government; it is not one that is only concerned with maintaining law and order. Calvin sees government as "it is God's will that we go as pilgrims upon the earth".¹⁴

In his view, God's kindness and providence are a stronger reason for the presence of government than the reality of sin. Calvin states that government is "not a polluted thing with which Christians will have nothing to do" while he criticized Anabaptists who see government as evil.¹⁵

Calvin claimed that since God's creation is wonderful in and of itself, it reflects his magnificence and kindness. Humans should honor the Lord and think about his works since the creation shows the great order and covenantal care of God. He thinks that supporting human existence and activities was the creation's primary goal. Calvin makes a clear case for an anthropocentric view of creation in his Commentaries on the Book of Genesis. Calvin holds that everything in creation was intended for human use and nourishment.¹⁶ Calvin makes a significant point by going into detail on the obligations that man has to his creation prior to the Fall. He argues that man has been designated as the world's ruler. When

¹² John Calvin, *Commentary on Micah*, 5:5.

¹³ John T McNeill, 'Calvin and Civil Government' in Donald McKim (ed.), *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 273.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26.

commenting on the meaning of “in our image”, Calvin finds Chrysostom’s exposition, who speaks of the dominion that was granted to man for him to serve as God’s vicegerent in the governance of the world is truthful.¹⁷ He then restricts the image of God to government, which represents the divine order.¹⁸

Calvin’s analysis of the Genesis 2:15 story of Adam keeping the garden before the Fall is extremely significant in this sense. Calvin states that the command given to Adam to look after the garden highlights the significance of human government in God’s plan.¹⁹ When commenting on 2:16, Calvin states that man was the governor of the world.²⁰ All these happen before the fall. From here, we can see that Calvin finds the governing power given to people before the fall.

Besides of order of creation mentioned above, Calvin also sees sin as what makes government necessary. Without it, even moderately fruitful human interactions would be difficult to understand. So in a real sense, says Calvin’s commentary on Romans, “the safety of mankind is safeguarded” by civil order.²¹ Calvin claims that civil government is “no less necessary among mankind than bread, drink, sun, and air”.²²

2.1.2 Form of government

Calvin declared in his 1536 edition of *Institutes* that he was not interested in discussing the ideal form of governance. He considered his job was to simply explain what the Bible teaches about governance. He wrote that “it is our duty to show ourselves compliant

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 1:26.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:15.

²⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:16.

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 13.

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.3.

and obedient to whomever he sets over the places where we live”²³ and the forms of government change according to time and place by God’s providence. In his 1543 edition, Calvin began to tentatively assert that “aristocracy, or a system comprised of aristocracy and democracy” far exceeds others.²⁴

Calvin defends his support for an aristocracy-democracy form of government by arguing that rulers lack the self-control, perception of justice, insight, and sound judgment necessary for effective rule of law, and that “it is safer and more tolerable for a multitude to exercise government”²⁵ so that they might assist, educate, and admonish each other.

In Calvin’s own words,

For if the three forms of government which the philosophers discuss be considered in themselves, I will not deny that aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others: not indeed of itself, but because it is very rare for kings so to control themselves that their will never disagrees with what is just and right; or for them to have been endowed with such great keenness and prudence, that each knows how much is enough. Therefore, men’s fault 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.²⁶

Due to the dangers of pure democracy and dictatorship, according to Horton, Calvin opposes tyranny and anarchy in both the church and the state.²⁷ Sin makes tyrannies out of monarchies, oligarchies out of aristocracies, and anarchy out of democracies.²⁸

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.15.

²⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

²⁷ Michael Horton, *Calvin on the Christian Life: Glorifying and Enjoying God Forever* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), Chapter 12.

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

However, when comparing tyranny and anarchy, Calvin prefers tyranny. He inherits this idea from Augustine, who rejects anarchy and believes that all governmental and public affairs require absolute submission to rulers. Augustine states that “wicked and most vicious though it be”, even a clearly tyrannical government must be followed.²⁹ For him, subject should not challenge God’s plan because He is the source of all authority. Additionally, resistance to established power can only lead to chaos, and eventually leads to anarchy.³⁰

Calvin finds the bible sets down anarchy among the vices as Judges 21:25 states that “there was no king in Israel, and, therefore, everyone did as he pleased”.³¹ He describes those who introduce anarchy as ignorance and devilish pride.³² He states that when King David instructs the king and judges to “Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth;” “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry”³³, he does not command them to renounce their positions of power but to submit their positions of authority to.³⁴

In his commentary on 1 Peter 2:14, he clearly states his rejection on anarchy.

There has never been a tyranny, (nor can one be imagined,) however cruel and unbridled, in which some portion of equity has not appeared; and further, some kind of government, however deformed and corrupt it may be, is still better and more beneficial than anarchy.³⁵

He even states that “it is better that the devil should rule men under any sort of government than that they should be set free without any law, without any restraint.”³⁶ He gives the

²⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, vol. 1, trans. George E. McCracken (Cambridge: Mass, 1967), II:19.

³⁰ Quentin P. Taylor, “ST. AUGUSTINE AND POLITICAL THOUGHT: A Revisionist View”, *Augustiniana*, 48.3/4 (1998): 291.

³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.9.

³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.5.

³³ Psalm 2:10, 12.

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.5.

³⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on 1 Peter*, 2:14.

³⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 30:9.

reason he rejected anarchy because “no one could wish to yield to others; everyone would try the extent of his powers, and thus all would end in prey and plunder, and in the mere license of fraud and murder, and all the passions of mankind would have full and unbridled sway.”³⁷

Calvin sees tyranny of the wicked ruler as the judgment of God.³⁸ He even states that the people will be left with no choice but to obey their orders and follow their instructions.³⁹ For Calvin, someone who is most undeserving of all honor, if given public authority, acquires the glorious divine power that the Lord has, by his word, conferred on the ministers of his justice and judgment, and that as a result, in terms of public obedience, he is to be treated in the same honor and reverence as the best of kings.⁴⁰

During Calvin’s lifetime, most people thought that the monarchical idea was the greatest type of governance. But throughout his career, he lived in places like Basel, Strasbourg, and Geneva, all of which desired to be controlled by smaller confederations of carefully chosen individuals rather than by a single king. He spent the most time interacting with collectively managed governments. Also in his sermon, Calvin himself consistently criticized wicked rulers.⁴¹ Therefore, we cannot classify him as a monarchist.

2.1.3 Duty of magistrates

Calvin believed that the role of magistrates was to protect the physical integrity of its citizens while simultaneously upholding the authority of the church. Calvin holds that civil government has a responsibility to uphold and defend God’s outward worship, defend the

³⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Daniel*, 4:13-16.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.25.

³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.26.

⁴⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.25.

⁴¹ See Calvin sermons on Job in 1554, Deuteronomy in 1554-55, and Daniel in 1561.

church's position and sound piety doctrine, adapt our lives to human society, mold our social behavior to civil righteousness, heal our disharmony with one another, and foster overall peace and tranquility.⁴²

Calvin states that the duty of magistrates also include:

... prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound; that men may carry on blameless intercourse among themselves; that honesty and modesty may be preserved among men. In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians and that humanity be maintained among men.⁴³

Calvin also says that magistrates should do every effort to prevent any kind of damage, much less violation, to freedom. If they are not adequately alert and careful, they are traitors to their country and untrustworthy to the government.⁴⁴ He continued by saying that the magistrates' primary duty should be to maintain everyone's safety and peace since they are sworn to uphold and protect the public's innocence, modesty, decency, and serenity.⁴⁵

The civil magistrate should exercise force within the bounds of his divine mandate.⁴⁶ Calvin offers the crime of murder as an example and claims that God gives his minister sword to employ against all murderers. Everything done here is done because God commands it, not because men are hasty, and as long as we are aware of his authority, we never deviate from the path that is good.⁴⁷

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.3.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.8.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.9.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.10.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.10.

Calvin states that the primary end “for which magistrates bear the sword is to restrain the wicked, and thus to prevent violence from prevailing among men.”⁴⁸ Calvin holds that the government is obligated to defend the underprivileged. He stated in his commentary on Psalm that only when God’s truth is “well entrenched in the thoughts of kings and other judges,” when they understand that “they are assigned to be the protectors of the poor,” and that they must both acknowledge and “fight the wrongs” committed against the poor, can we speak of good governance.⁴⁹

Calvin sums up that if the magistrates “remember that they are vicars of God”, “they should watch with great care, earnestness and diligence, to present to men through themselves some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice.”⁵⁰

Calvin sees another important duty of inferior magistrates in resistance to tyranny, which will be discuss later in the chapter.⁵¹

2.2 King and Law

2.2.1 Natural law

Calvin states that God created man as “a social animal”, giving him a “natural instinct to build and safeguard society.”⁵² As a result, there are “universal perceptions of a certain civic fair dealing and order” in everyone’s mind.⁵³ Calvin believes that natural law, which is

⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, 82:3-4.

⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, 82:3-4.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.6.

⁵¹ See 2.4.2.2 Inferior Magistrates.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13. “animal sociale”.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13.

a universal phenomenon, is the governing system for all human communities, had been implanted like a seed in all men. In his commentary of Genesis, Calvin also wrote that there is a “general principle that man was created to be a social animal.”⁵⁴

Calvin doesn’t explain how people who have been created in this way interact with God because that isn’t his goal. He just wants to emphasize that people have “impressions of civil order and honesty” imprinted on their consciences as a result of their social nature.⁵⁵

Calvin often acknowledges the components of theological truth by pagan philosophers. He states that the truth that shines through pagan authors should serve as a reminder to us that, despite having been greatly corrupted from its original state, the human mind is nonetheless decorated with admirable gifts from its Creator.⁵⁶ If we consider that the Spirit of God is the only source of truth, we shall exercise caution so as not to offend him by rejecting or condemning truth wherever it may be found. In his commentary on Titus, Calvin claims that everything truthful, even when spoken by wicked men, comes from God.⁵⁷ The idea of “humans as social animals” itself was borrowed, unchanged, from paganism.⁵⁸

Calvin suggests that a person who wishes to “rule his life in complete perfection” should “live in justice and equity” with his neighbor, which implies “the equity of nature” in his sermon on Deuteronomy 5:22. He relates natural law to “not doing anything to anyone unless we would want them to do the same to us.”⁵⁹ For Calvin, God established natural law at creation and embedded it in human's heart. Calvin equated natural law to the ten

⁵⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 2:28.

⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13.

⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.15.

⁵⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Titus*, 1:12.

⁵⁸ Irena Backus, “Calvin’s Concept of Natural and Roman Law,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 25.

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Ten Commandments*, 247.

commandments. He states that the contents of the Ten Commandments in a way are dictated to us by that internal law, which is essentially inscribed and imprinted on every person's heart.⁶⁰ He applies the same point in book four chapter 20 when discussing the civil government.⁶¹

Calvin places a strong emphasis on this connection between natural law and political government. In *Institutes* 4.20.16 Calvin uses an example between Jewish and pagan laws to demonstrate fundamental equality despite certain differences.⁶² Calvin refers to Cicero's description of the magistrate or ruler as the living law who must not yield to his emotions but must carry out all the demands of the law.⁶³ He clarifies that Christians are solely subject to the moral standards of the Mosaic Law. The love of God and one's neighbor might be summed up as the one universal law that applies to all eras and all countries.⁶⁴ The moral component is the cornerstone of all orders which Calvin has referred to as natural law.

2.2.1.1 Conscience

Conscience serves as an internal witness and monitor, reminds us of our obligations to God, draws a line between right and wrong, and thereby condemns us for breaking our obligations.⁶⁵ Human conscience is a more advanced form of *Scientia*, which only exists between man and the things about which he learns in the outside world.⁶⁶ Because conscience

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.1.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14.

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.1.

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.10.3.

does not enable a person to conceal what they already know to be true but rather pursues them until they are brought to repentance, Calvin sees conscience as a bridge between God and man. Inner heart integrity is the only thing that constitutes a good conscience. Conscience only concerns God.⁶⁷

Conscience has something to do with liberty. According to Calvin, there are three components to Christian freedom, all of which have to do with human conscience. First, to find certainty of their justification before God, Christians' consciences should rise above and go beyond the law, leaving all legalistic righteousness behind. Second, consciences should follow the law voluntarily, freed from the burden of the law rather than as if they were forced to do so by its need. Third, we are not constrained before God by any religious requirement that forbids us from occasionally using or occasionally refraining from using outward objects that are by their very nature indifferent.⁶⁸ From here, we can say that conscience is free in the sense that it must obey only the word of God.

Calvin introduced the openly political final chapter of his initial printing of the *Institutes* with this essay "on Christian Freedom." This shows how the idea of Christian liberty was a key link in his thought connecting his theological and political understandings. The essay is one of Calvin's few substantial works that has seen fourteen editions and several revisions while remaining mostly unaltered.

Calvin notices that the natural law that God inscribed on man's conscience is the source of all just laws with fairness as their primary purpose. The moral law that we refer to as the law of God is nothing more than a testament to natural law and to the conscience that God has engraved on the minds of people. As a result, it has been specified in it the complete structure of the equity. Therefore, all laws must have equity as its sole objective, guiding

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.16.

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.2-7.

principle, and limit.⁶⁹ All morally sound law must be based on man's conscience, which the Bible has illuminated.⁷⁰

In addition, knowing "how much respect persons ought to pay to their magistrates and how far their obedience should go," is inseparably linked to the topic of the conscience and its liberty in the context of politics.⁷¹ According to Calvin, the conscience serves as a person's protector against tyrannical power.

2.2.2 Mosaic law

Calvin divided the moral law, ceremonial law, and judicial law from the entirety of the law of God as it was given to Moses.⁷² The moral law is split into two parts: the first tells us to worship God with unadulterated devotion and faith, and the second tells us to treat others with real compassion. As a result, it serves as the only real and timeless standard of righteousness for all men who want to live in accordance with God's purpose. He wants us all to love and adore him because that is his unchanging, eternal desire.⁷³

The ceremonial law served as the Jews' guide, and the Lord decided to use it to raise his people as though they were children until the fullness of time arrived so that he might completely demonstrate his wisdom to the nations and demonstrate the veracity of the things that were hinted at in symbols.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14. John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Timothy*, 2:3.

⁷¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.17.

⁷² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14.

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

The judicial law that was given to them for civil administration communicated specific formulas for justice and fairness that would allow them to coexist guiltlessly and pleasantly.⁷⁵ While these judicial rules were eliminated, the eternal obligations and precepts of love might remain, just as with ceremonial laws.⁷⁶

Calvin observed that although the ancient writers who advocated for this division were aware that the two latter portions had some bearing on morals, they did not refer to them as moral laws since morals were constant while the two latter sections may be revised or abolished.⁷⁷

As per Calvin, the laws come after the magistrature in the civil state; without law, the magistrature cannot exist, even though the laws lack any power on their own. Nothing could be more true than to claim that the magistrate is a living law and the law is a silent magistrate.⁷⁸ According to Calvin, every law - whether moral, ceremonial, or judicial - comes from God, and God's law permeates everything.⁷⁹

Calvin views equity as the driving force behind all law.⁸⁰ No matter what the goal of the law is, equity should be a part of every legislation since it is natural. Situations have a slight influence on constitutions. Even if they are all attempting to achieve fairness, it makes no difference.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

According to Calvin, there are three applications for moral law. First, it exposes our sins and draws us to Christ by demonstrating God's righteousness.⁸² Second, it prevents evil men from committing sin by instilling fear of judgment.⁸³ At that time, while Luther confined his explanation of the law to the mention of just first two purposes, Calvin introduces the concept of "third use of the law", which seeing law as a helpful manual for living a Christian life.⁸⁴ Calvin inherits the concept of "third use of the law" from Philip Melancthon. In the second edition of Melancthon's *Loci* (1535), a *triplex usus legis* (threefold use of the Law) is suggested, seeing the Law as a normative manual for Christians' sanctification.⁸⁵ For Calvin, the purpose of whole law is for

The fulfillment of righteousness to form human life to the archetype of divine purity. For God has so depicted his character in the law that if any man carries out in deeds whatever is enjoined there, he will express the image of God, as it were, in his own life.⁸⁶

From here, we see the goal of the law, like the goal of both the spiritual and civil spheres, is to glorify God. As a result, the church plays a crucial role in Calvin's conception of society. We are unable to understand Calvin's approach to state and politics without an understanding of the significance of the church and salvation.

2.2.2.1 The use of case law

⁸² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.6, 8-9.

⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.10, 11.

⁸⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.12.

⁸⁵ Ryan C. MacPherson, *A Lutheran View of the Third Use of the Law*, accessed July 2022, <https://www.ryanmacpherson.com/publications/26-research-papers/73-a-lutheran-view-of-the-third-use-of-the-law.html>

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.51.

Calvin claims that, even in the eyes of secular writers, no one has ever investigated the function of rulers, the creation of laws, or public welfare without first examining religion and divine worship.⁸⁷ He adds that we may also know from experience that incentive and punishment are necessary to maintain all commonwealths; take away either one, and city discipline would deteriorate and collapse. Justice is, in fact, the acceptance into safekeeping, love, defense, vindication, and liberation of the innocent. However, judgment is about confronting the brashness of the impious, restraining their violence, and punishing their wrongdoings.⁸⁸ Some contend that a properly organized commonwealth disregards Moses' political structure and is governed by common law. Calvin thinks this is both incorrect and ridiculous.⁸⁹

Calvin argues that every nation has the right to establish whatever laws it deems necessary to further its own interests. These, however, must abide by the unchanging law of love in order for them to seem different yet accomplish the same thing. He doesn't think laws should be considered when they honor thieves, permit promiscuous relationships, and other immoral and foolish behaviors. They reject all sorts of compassion and tenderness as well as all forms of fairness.⁹⁰

Calvin believes that people who contend that it is dishonorable to repeal the law of God given via Moses and replace it with other laws are making a blatantly false claim. When a law is more favorably received, it is not just in comparison but also in the context of the nation, the time, and the place; or when a law that was never meant for us is abolished. Because the Lord, through Moses, did not intend for that law to be declared in all nations and

⁸⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.9.

⁸⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.9.

⁸⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14.

⁹⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

to be in effect everywhere, but rather, after entrusting the Jewish people to his care, protection, and defense, he also wished to be a wise lawgiver and took special care of them when he created their laws.⁹¹

Calvin did not demand that all Mosaic judicial laws be adopted and applied.⁹² Instead, he rails against the totalitarian theonomists of his era who insisted that a civil government must adhere to the “political system of Moses.”⁹³ Calvin would have opposed it if the Genevan chose to follow the “political system of Moses” at that time because he believed it to be ideal but not necessary.⁹⁴

Calvin realized that all civic laws must take into account that sin is the product of human depravity, or what Jesus referred to as “hardness of heart”. Calvin got the concept from the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 19.⁹⁵ When the Pharisees questioned whether it was permissible for a man to divorce his wife for any reason, Jesus said that Moses had permitted it due to men’s hard hearts, but that such divorce was still a grave violation of God’s moral law.

Calvin wrote in his commentary on Matthew that: to find the key to understand the fundamental difference between political and spiritual laws is that, “political laws are sometimes accommodated to the manners of men, but God, in prescribing a spiritual law, looked not at what men can do but at what they ought to do”.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.16.

⁹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14.

⁹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14.

⁹⁴ George J. Gatgounis II, “The Political Theory of John Calvin,” *Churchman* 110.1 (1996): 62.

⁹⁵ Matthew 19:1-12.

⁹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew*, 5:31.

Another example in Deuteronomy 21, the Mosaic law permitted Israelites to compel captured women to marry. Such marriage is against God's will but God allowed it so that the women will not be treated even worse.⁹⁷

To explain God's allowing the Israelites to kill all the male residents of a city they had conquered in battle although it was a breach of the natural law, Calvin assume that the law's main goal was to limit the execution of prisoners in order to avert an even more horrifying outcome: the indiscriminate death of women and children.⁹⁸

2.3 King and People

2.3.1 The Covenant

Calvin's *Institutes*, which was published in 1559, can be regarded as a work of covenant theology. Calvin's 1539 writing, which examined the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, gave rise to covenant theology.⁹⁹ According to Moots's research, Calvin employed covenantal Latin phrases 273 times, without including related terms like *conjunctionis* and *adoptio*, which he uses more than 293 times.¹⁰⁰ It is clear that Calvin agrees that covenant continuity is a key topic for biblical interpretation as seen by his study of it in Book II of *Institutes*. The understanding of covenant continuity has important political implications. His covenant theology answer the question of how the law should serve as a model for contemporary politics.

Calvin claimed that all of the major covenants eventually point to a single, eternal covenant between God and people, which contains the authoritative revelation of the

⁹⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 21:10.

⁹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 20:12.

⁹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, (1536) 2.11.

¹⁰⁰ Glenn A. Moots, *Politics reformed : the Anglo-American legacy of covenant theology* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 39.

natural moral law found in the Ten Commandments. For this reason, he could stress that the moral law as revealed in the Old Testament continues to be applicable to everyone, everywhere, at all times.

For Calvin, although the administration and forms of the covenant change over the history of salvation, the covenant's substance never change. He states that "the difference between us and the ancient fathers lies in accidents, not in substance. In all the leading characters of the testament or covenant we agree: the ceremonies and form of government, in which we differ, are mere additions."¹⁰¹

Calvin sees the Sinai covenant as nothing more than a continuation of the covenant, it was an administration of the one eternal covenant.¹⁰² It serves the function to lead men to Christ.¹⁰³ He claims that the covenant that was established with the patriarchs and the church differs only in administration, and the promise provided to the Christian church is the same as the promise made to the Hebrew nations and the patriarchs.¹⁰⁴ Calvin used covenant theology to counter the Anabaptist inclination to deny the immediate application of the Old Testament to Christians.¹⁰⁵ Then, the covenant with the patriarchs is given civil importance. It is significant for politics.

Calvin emphasizes sadness more than triumph in his narrative of the patriarchs. Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all lived troubled and miserable lives on earth.¹⁰⁶ For him, if they anticipated a joyful life from God's hand, they see a different joy from that on earth.¹⁰⁷ The

¹⁰¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians*, 4:1.

¹⁰² John Calvin, *Commentary on Exodus*, 24:5.

¹⁰³ John Calvin, *Commentary on Exodus*, 24:5.

¹⁰⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.1.

¹⁰⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.1. and Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.7.

¹⁰⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.11. and Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.12.

¹⁰⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.13.

promise is for future happiness. According to Calvin, the patriarchs' "covenant of God's mercy" may have included earthly blessings. However, this gift was given so that the prophets may point people's attention upward. Calvin concurs that the prophets utilized temporal benefits as examples before the people of general blessing. But he also underlines that the purpose of that earthly blessing was to elevate their spirits.¹⁰⁸

For Calvin, the most basic political institution is the covenant that God establishes with the magistrates and people of a state. The foundational law of society, which is the constitution, serves as the basis for the covenant and should always be founded in part on the Decalogue.¹⁰⁹ In a constitutional state, the joint obligations and responsibilities of rulers and ruled are explicitly recognized and the covenant is much more visibly demonstrated. The governors protect residents' individual freedoms while simultaneously protecting their rights as individuals.

I agree with Reid's point that Calvin's entire political thinking is brought together in his concept of the covenant, although many have disregarded this idea or categorized it as one of many because they think the political covenant was developed by Calvinists later.¹¹⁰

2.3.2 Church and State

2.3.2.1 Two Kingdoms Theory

Calvin's understanding of church and state is related to his doctrine of two kingdoms. Calvin adopted Martin Luther's two-kingdoms theory in many significant aspects, but he

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.20.

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.14. and Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.15.

¹¹⁰ W. Stanford Reid, 'Calvin and the Political Order.' in Jacob T. Hoogstra (ed.), *John Calvin: Contemporary Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1959), 249.

expanded on it in a new way as he disagreed with how Luther characterized the connection between the church and the state.¹¹¹

Palmer establishes a strong contrast between the two kingdom theories put out by Luther and Calvin. Calvin's doctrine of Christ's kingship and God's sovereignty led to a transformationist attitude, in contrast to Luther's two-kingdom theory, which encouraged a conservative approach to addressing society, and thinks one must confine Christ's kingdom to the visible church rather than the state.¹¹²

Same as Luther, Calvin believes that God established twofold government in man, spiritual and political but "the nature of which is altogether different".¹¹³ To see their distinct, Calvin states that "when the one is considered, we should call off our minds, and not allow them to think of the other."

Calvin claims that church and state should be kept apart. However, he claimed that God has ordained both the church and the state. He was confident that when Church and state were kept apart, both could continue to cooperate and bear responsibility for one another.¹¹⁴

2.3.2.2 Difference between church and state

Calvin finds the church to be responsible to preach the Word of God faithfully and administering purely the sacraments. He wrote in his letter to Farel that "the sacraments are the means of communion with the church; they must need, therefore be administered by the hands of pastor."¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Harro Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 44.

¹¹² Timothy P. Palmer, "Calvin the Transformationist and the Kingship of Christ," *Pro Rege* 35.3 (2007): 37.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.19.15. and Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.1.

¹¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.1. and Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2.

¹¹⁵ Calvin, *Letter to Farel*, (October, 24th, 1538).

Calvin sees the lordship of Christ over the church. He wrote

... the government of the Church is vested in its Head. Hence where Christ shines, there the Church, which is his body, is said to reign; for Christ's will is, that he should have nothing apart from his members.¹¹⁶

The development of legislation to advance integrity and peace within the Christian community shall be overseen by the Church, not by political authority.

The goal of church authority is to prevent scandals from happening and to deal with them when they do. This spiritual power is wholly different from the sword's power. He claims that the holy bishops used the word of God, not fines, jail, or other legal sanctions, to wield their authority. However, for individuals who are immoral, Calvin draws reference to Paul, saying that he subjects Church members to condemnation in order to remedy their vices and suggests the establishment of courts from which no believer is immune.¹¹⁷

It is true that Calvin thought that the civil government must establish godliness in addition to maintaining public peace and justice.¹¹⁸ However, the government's duty in relation to religion tends to be external, temporary, and restricted to this life. Or else, it is impossible to discern between the earthly government and the heavenly kingdom of Christ.¹¹⁹

The separation between political and ecclesiastical roles is one that Calvin underlines in *Institutes*, asserts that the two tasks should never be combined in one person.¹²⁰ He highlights the differences between the roles of pastor and prince because he thinks that this is the clear message of Christ. They all yet work for the same objective thanks to divine

¹¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Zechariah*, 2:9.

¹¹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.5.

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2.

¹¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 12:10.

¹²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.8.

intervention. Church and state are committed to a cleansed society even though pastors and politicians shouldn't mix or overlap their positions.¹²¹

Church and state could not interfere with one another since they had different objectives and governing bodies. Although the principle was straightforward, Calvin soon learned that putting it into reality was much more challenging. He was determined that the two realms be kept apart, but he also believed that the state had a duty to advance genuine religion. It must uphold sound theology, cherish the church's status, and value God's outward worship.¹²²

Although distinct, Calvin rejects the idea of total separation of church and state as Anabaptist. The rejection of Christian involvement in civil government by the Anabaptists was seen by Calvin as overthrowing the political order. This shows a lack of understanding of the importance of civil government, which provides "civil justice and external morality" and is a gift from God's providence.¹²³

2.3.2.3 Mutual responsibility of church and state

Although he agreed that the church and state shouldn't be confused, he argued in favor of Christian involvement and participation in holding positions in the civil government. The cooperation and mutual support of the earthly and spiritual realms, in which each is free to operate in its own sphere, were his ideals rather than their complete separation.

Calvin refers to Paul's description of rulers as "ministers of God" and "an ordinance of God" in Romans 13. Calvin saw civil government as the "most sacred and by far the noblest of all callings in the whole existence of mortal beings," in addition to being a "holy

¹²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.8.

¹²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2.

¹²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.1.

and legitimate” profession.¹²⁴ He believes that civil government is under the authority of Christ even if he does not regard it as a component of the spiritual kingdom of Christ.

In *Institutes*, Calvin remarks that the civil magistrate is responsible for religion.¹²⁵ Calvin argues that besides maintaining peaceful life and public decency, civil government is ordained to preserve “godliness”, that is, “to promote religion, to maintain the worship of God, and to take care that sacred ordinances be observed with due reverence”.¹²⁶ Calvin believes that the state’s duties towards the church exclusively apply to the outer, external display of religion.¹²⁷ Calvin does not “allow men at pleasure to enact laws concerning religion and the worship of God”.¹²⁸ Therefore, civil governments have an obligation to respect religion, but their influence is limited and temporary. They were unable to take up the Church’s spiritual duties.

Calvin wrote to Farel that “the church cannot stand firm unless a government is constituted as prescribed to us by the Word of God and observed in the early church”¹²⁹ while he was invited back to take charge again in the church of Geneva. The city authority has to be willing to let him draft constitutional regulations for which the church was to be guided. And there came Calvin’s *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. The ability of the church to operate in its own sphere, free from the oversight of civil magistrates, lies at the heart of this legislation. The church shall be free to excommunicate the spiritual offenders rather than the civil magistrates.¹³⁰

¹²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.4.

¹²⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.3.

¹²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on 1 Timothy*, 2:2.

¹²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.2.

¹²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.3.

¹²⁹ Calvin, *Letters to Farel*, (September 16th, 1541).

¹³⁰ Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five*

However, because the Church lacks “the authority to coerce” through “the sword” that the state “commonly inflicts,” it is unable to decide how God’s law is to be implemented in civil government. The Church may counsel the government about what God’s law states.¹³¹

The church ought to have a significant influence on the government, and its primary duty is to present biblical teaching concerning the state and how it should operate. Calvin’s dedicatory epistles to the kings, princes, and magistrates across Europe show that he saw himself as having a counseling duty towards civil power, by seeking to educate them on the meaning and implications of the scriptures.

Calvin is aware that some civil affairs concerns have both civil and ecclesiastical components. He uses the example of drunkenness and prostitution to show that both the state and the church should be involved in enforcing punishment, such as incarceration by the state and - if there is no repentance - excommunication by the church. Both church and magistrate can be “so joined that each serves to help, not hinder, the other”.¹³²

However, Calvin rejects the idea of the radical theonomists of his time who urged that the “political system of Moses” be implemented in all spheres of civil government. In Calvin’s mind, the Mosaic judicial law was the ideal but not an immediate necessity.¹³³ Calvin criticizes governmental authority in England and Germany in his commentary on Amos 7, declaring that Henry VIII’s self-appointment as head of the church was “blasphemy.” German princes should not “become chief judges as in doctrine as in all

Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries (Philipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1992), 13.

¹³¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.3.

¹³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.11.3.

¹³³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.26.

spiritual government,” but rather help the Church by utilizing their earthly authority to “render free the worship of God.”¹³⁴

Calvin rejected the doctrine of papal supremacy which confuse the authority of the state to be under the church’s authority. The falsehood of the pope possesses higher jurisdiction in church matters than the state, will lead to “the Pope rules barbarously and tyrannically, and claims the power of changing and disposing of kingdoms.”¹³⁵ In that era, the exercise of political power was more important to priests than performing their spiritual duties as Christ’s messengers.¹³⁶ He regarded the Roman Church as a corrupted church since it neglects its fundamental ministry of the Word.¹³⁷

Some may argue that Calvin adopted Constantinian thinking which “sees the rule of God occur through Christian political authorities who are revelatory of God’s will and thereby have the right to govern over and above the church and society and impose Christian beliefs.”¹³⁸ However, it is not true because, for Calvin, the magistrates are not “make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God.” They are not responsible in “rightly establishing religion.”¹³⁹

It is true that there is some element of Constantinian influence in Calvin’s thinking, by allowing magistrates to promulgate laws against idolatry. It can be seen in the *Belgic Confession* (1561) which is drafted by Calvin’s student, Guido de Bres, influenced by Calvin’s largely written *Gallic Confession* (1559). Article 36 states that

¹³⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets II*, Amos 7.

¹³⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on Isaiah*, 60:10.

¹³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.5.1.

¹³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.2.10.

¹³⁸ John L. Hiemstra, “A Calvinist Case for Tolerant Public Pluralism: The Religious Sources of Abraham Kuyper’s Public Philosophy,” *Religious Studies and Theology* 34.1 (2015): 61.

¹³⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.3.

And [the magistrates'] office is, not only to have regard unto, and watch for the welfare of the civil state; but also that they protect the sacred ministry; and thus may remove and prevent all idolatry and false worship; that the kingdom of anti-Christ may be thus destroyed and the kingdom of Christ promoted. They must therefore countenance the preaching of the Word of the gospel everywhere, that God may be honored and worshipped by everyone, as he commands in his Word.¹⁴⁰

In sum, Calvin did not distinguish between religion and other facets of life. For Calvin, religion is both life and the source of life. Because of this, religion permeates every facet of society, including the law and politics.

I agree with Intan's summary that Calvin's theory of the connection between the church and the state not only frees the church from the bondage of social-political institutions like the state but also urges it to play its part in the public sphere.¹⁴¹

2.3.2.4 Religious freedom

Religious freedom is another important topic to be discussed when talking about church and state. When Calvin produced *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the work that made him famous overnight, at the age of twenty-seven, he had previously been exiled because of his religion.¹⁴² His preface to the king, which originally appeared in 1536 and was repeated in all following editions, was affected by the actuality of his persecution.¹⁴³ Calvin tried to defend his fellow Christians from the accusations made against them in the preamble.

¹⁴⁰ Henry Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1929), 266.

¹⁴¹ Benyamin F. Intan, "Calvin and Neo-Calvinism on Public Theology," *UNIO CUM CHRISTO* 6.2 (2020):49.

¹⁴² Christoph Strohm, 'Calvin and Religious Tolerance' in Martin Ernst Hirzel, & Martin Sallmann (ed.), *John Calvin's impact on Church and Society, 1509-2009* (Grand Rapids: William B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), Kindle.

¹⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, Prefatory address to Francis I.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Calvin asked the king to be tolerant of Reformed Christians. Calvin's principal objective in this regard was to emphasize believers' freedom of religion from laws that may strangle the Christian conscience.

In the 1536 edition of *Institutes*, Calvin advocated religious liberty for Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians. He denounced the persecution of "Turks and Saracens, and other enemies of religion." He states that

Far be it from us to approve those methods by which many until now have tried to force them to our faith, when they forbid them the use of fire and water and the common elements, when they deny to them all offices of humanity, when they pursue them with sword and arms.¹⁴⁴

Calvin highlighted Joseph as an illustration of a God-fearing servant who aggressively promoted paganism while still protecting their right to practice their religion. Joseph "may have erred in not fighting these beliefs with sufficient boldness," he hypothesized.¹⁴⁵ Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had threatened "punishment to anyone who talked reproachfully against God," and Calvin praised him for it, saying that "King Nebuchadnezzar's command was welcomed by the approval of the Holy Spirit."¹⁴⁶ Additionally, Daniel periodically had to disobey the king's harsh laws against pagan people.¹⁴⁷

For Calvin, the severity of the heresy should not be used except when the religion is suffering which is not only received by public authority and general opinion but having substantial support for it, for it to be crystal evident that we are God's vengeful defenders of the wicked.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, (1536), 2.28.

¹⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 47:22.

¹⁴⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Daniel*, 4:1–3.

¹⁴⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Daniel*, 2:13–15.

¹⁴⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Deuteronomy*, 13:12.

Besides, Calvin was against the concept of spreading Christianity by violence. He states in his commentary:

Although godly kings defend Christ's kingdom by the sword, it is done differently from the way in which worldly kingdoms are defended. For Christ's kingdom, which is spiritual, must be founded on the teaching and power of the Spirit. In the same way is its building effected; for neither the laws and edicts of men nor their punishments reach into consciences, yet this does not prevent princes from incidentally defending Christ's kingdom, partly by establishing external discipline and partly by lending their protection to the Church against the ungodly. But the depravity of the world causes the kingdom of Christ to be established more by the blood of martyrs than by the aid of arms.¹⁴⁹

However, some may not find Calvin's handling of Servetus to be against religious freedom. Johnson indicates that those who think Calvin bought the city council's allegiance to Servetus are blind to the reality that Servetus was detained when Calvin's adversaries held sway over Geneva's political scene. Servetus could have flown to Geneva, based on this knowledge and the knowledge that he was wanted in several European locations, thinking he could force a confrontation with Calvin and prevail. The Geneva City Council offered to have Servetus tried in another city, but he decided to take his chances with the Geneva authorities. Servetus was urged by Calvin to renounce his false beliefs. Calvin convinced the city council to punish Servetus instead of burning him alive when he was proven guilty. These facts serve to slightly lessen Calvin's guilt. But these do not absolve him of all responsibility.¹⁵⁰

2.3.3 The obedience of people

According to Calvin, the people's first duty to their monarch is to respect and worship him as God's ministers and representatives, and to think highly of their office, which they see

¹⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 18:36.

¹⁵⁰ William Stacy Johnson, *John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 114.

as a position of God-given power.¹⁵¹ He claims that the order itself is deserving of such honor and devotion that rulers are highly revered and get adoration out of respect for their lordship, not the men themselves as if a mask of dignity covered corrupt morals and garnered for vices the acclaim of virtues.¹⁵²

In discussing the fifth commandment, Calvin made it clear that not only parents but also others in positions of authority, such as governors and magistrates, should be revered and treated with the highest respect.¹⁵³

Calvin believes that regardless of the type of governance, all subjects of that state are accountable for their own compliance.¹⁵⁴ Calvin adds that the unjust magistrate owes obedience as well. But, since we've been describing a magistrate who is truly what he is called, that is, a father of his country and, as the psalmist puts it, a shepherd of his people, a guardian of peace, protector of righteousness, and avenger of innocence, anyone who opposes such government must be considered insane.¹⁵⁵

Calvin clarifies that when he speaks of obeying the authority, he is not referring to the sinful individuals individually but rather to the system of government as a whole, which deserves to be treated with respect due to its lordship.¹⁵⁶ Calvin states that citizens should accept their rulers' orders with a heart ready to honor them, whether that means paying taxes, serving in public office, carrying out duties linked to the common defense, or obeying any other mandate.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.22.

¹⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.22.

¹⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.38.

¹⁵⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.22.

¹⁵⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.24.

¹⁵⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.22.

¹⁵⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.23.

Calvin believes that the higher authorities were “placed there by the Lord’s hand” and that disobeying them is equivalent to disobeying God: “he who attempts to invert the order of God, and thus to resist God himself, despises his power; since to despise the providence of him who is the founder of civil power, is to carry on without him.” The “preservation of legitimate order” is the aim of these acts of providence.¹⁵⁸

Calvin argues that Christians must see how God is at work in these regimes. God “commands” certain institutions and structures to exist in his providence, not just “permits” them to.¹⁵⁹ He wrote letters on a regular basis warning believers against irreverently upsetting established institutions. Calvin, for instance, reacts to John Knox’s divisive tract against the government of women in a letter to the Englishman William Cecil in May 1559. He states that “in my judgment it is not permitted to unsettle governments that have been set up by the peculiar providence of God”¹⁶⁰

In a letter he wrote to a church burdened with violent persecution in Paris in September 1557, Calvin declares that “better it was that we were all involved in ruin than that the gospel of God should be exposed to the reproach of arming men to sedition and tumult.” God will ever, “cause the ashes of his servants to fructify, but excesses and violence will bring them nothing but barrenness”¹⁶¹. Calvin declares to Francis that the king has “not one seditious word was ever heard” from him and his followers and that “when we lived under you, our life was always acknowledged to be quiet and simple”.¹⁶² From here, Calvin’s obedience to authority can be discovered.

¹⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 13:1.

¹⁵⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.1.

¹⁶⁰ Calvin, *Letter to William Cecil*, (May 1559), Volume VII, 47.

¹⁶¹ Calvin, *Letter to the Church of Paris*, (16th September 1557), Volume VI, 361.

¹⁶² Calvin, *Institutes*, Prefatory address to Francis I.

2.4 The Duty of Resistance

2.4.1 Tyranny

According to Calvin, tyranny is some princes who are unconcerned about all they should have paid attention to and, instead, slackly pursue their pleasure. Others, motivated by their own business, put the law, privileges, rulings, and letters of favor up for sale. Others steal from the regular people and then spend the money on extravagant excess. Others engage in a robbery by robbing homes, raping virgins and mothers, and killing the defenseless.¹⁶³

A proper government is one that understands its actual goals, is open to outside criticism about how to best accomplish them, and then pursues them with zeal and commitment. Tyranny, on the other hand, is controlled by people who “give rein to their passion and believe all things legal to themselves”.¹⁶⁴

Calvin indicated that wicked tyranny represents God’s wrath. Even if he is evil, a very filthy man who is wholly undeserving of all respect possesses that glorious and heavenly authority which the Lord has given to the stewards of his justice and judgment by the Word of the Lord, so long as he holds the public power. His subjects should respect and worship him in the same way they would the finest kings if he were presented to them in terms of public obedience.¹⁶⁵

Calvin believed that the only thing people could do in the case of a wicked magistrate was to pray and accept his authority as a divine punishment for their sins.¹⁶⁶ But if the king

¹⁶³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.24.

¹⁶⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Daniel*, 2:5. Quote from Jr William R. Stevenson, “Calvin and Political Issues.” In Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 183.

¹⁶⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.25.

¹⁶⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.29.

violates divine law, his authority is called into doubt.¹⁶⁷ Tyrants will be overthrown by Providence, and God will raise up rulers who will serve as his appointed instruments.¹⁶⁸

In his dedication of the lectures to the French Protestants who are under persecution, Calvin's conclusion from comparing the experience of Protestants in France with that of the Israelites exiled in Babylon is that the faithful should continue to obey the government while patiently waiting for God's sure deliverance.¹⁶⁹

In his commentary on Jeremiah, Calvin states that Jeremiah called the exiles not only to reject all forms of rebellion but "to do what they could, to exert themselves to the utmost so that no harm might happen to the Chaldean monarchy."¹⁷⁰ Calvin then says he derived "a very useful doctrine – that we ought not only to obey the kings under whose authority we live, but that we ought also to pray for their prosperity, so that God may be a witness of our voluntary subjection."¹⁷¹

Calvin uses the case of Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah, chapter. 27 as an example. We can see how much obedience the Lord desired to be rendered to that vile and wicked dictator just because he had the throne. But he had been placed on the throne of the realm and assumed kingly grandeur by divine decree, which he would not be allowed to disregard.¹⁷² Another directive from the Lord given to the prophet Jeremiah was to seek and pray for the peace of Babylon, where they had been put as prisoners since that is where they would find peace.¹⁷³ When Saul attacked David, who had already been crowned king by God and

¹⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.32.

¹⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.30.

¹⁶⁹ Calvin, *Dedication of the Commentary on Daniel to the French Protestants*.

¹⁷⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 29:7.

¹⁷¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 29:7.

¹⁷² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.27.

¹⁷³ Jeremiah 29:7

anointed with his holy oil, he still regarded Saul's head as sacred since the Lord had sanctified it with the grandeur of the kingdom.¹⁷⁴

In his commentary on 1 Peter 2:14, Calvin agrees to honor even tyranny.

government established by God ought to be so highly valued by us, as to honour even tyrants when in power. There is yet another reply still more evident, - that there has never been a tyranny, (nor can one be imagined,) however cruel and unbridled, in which some portion of equity has not appeared.¹⁷⁵

Calvin believes that obedience to the bad king is required by Scripture.¹⁷⁶ He uses the example of Daniel to Nebuchadnezzar

You, O king, are a king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, powerful, mighty, and glorious; to you, I say, he has given also all lands where the sons of men dwell, beasts of the forest and birds of the air: these he has given into your hand and made you rule over them¹⁷⁷

and Daniel says to Nebuchadnezzar's son Belshazzar:

The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar, your father, kingship and magnificence, honor and glory; and because of the magnificence that he gave him, all peoples, tribes, and tongues were trembling and fearful before him¹⁷⁸

To solidify his claims, Calvin also refers to the relationships between parents and children and husbands and wives. He thinks that spouses and parents abandon their duties and that because parents are barred from inciting their children to rage, they must be harsh and uncompromising with them to the point of weariness. Assume that husbands mistreat the

¹⁷⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.28.

¹⁷⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on 1 Peter*, 2:14.

¹⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.26.

¹⁷⁷ Daniel 2:37-28.

¹⁷⁸ Daniel 5:18-19.

women they are meant to adore and spare because they are weaker vessels. Then he queries whether ladies will be less obedient to their husbands or children to their parents. He, therefore, draws the conclusion that even nasty and undutiful individuals are nonetheless vulnerable to them.¹⁷⁹

Calvin did not advocate for revolution in *the Institutes*. If a monarch is nice, it is a blessing; if not, it is a curse. Nebuchadnezzar was still God's servant even if he was just a tool for divine retribution, and Calvin calls him a "dire and ferocious tyrant."¹⁸⁰ Believers shouldn't fight back while evil is in power; instead, they should think back on their transgressions, repent, and ask God for help.¹⁸¹

2.4.2 Rights of resistance

Calvin did, however, add two crucial qualifications. First, rather than obeying man, we must obey God. The government cannot be obeyed if it demands something that God prohibits.¹⁸² Second, inferior magistrates have the power to resist, although private persons are not allowed to. Here, he is focusing more on those representative assemblies that serve as the constitution's guarantors of citizens' liberty than on local government.¹⁸³

2.4.2.1 Obey God rather than obey man

In his commentary on Daniel 6:22, Calvin went on to say that people who follow wicked policies forfeit their right to hold public office and are liable to be disobeyed. He

¹⁷⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.29.

¹⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.27.

¹⁸¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.29.

¹⁸² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.32.

¹⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.31.

indicates that: “earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. We ought rather to defy than to obey them.”¹⁸⁴

Calvin argued that when their magistrates breach the law, not merely when they do so out of piety, subjects have a duty to criticize and defy them.¹⁸⁵ For example, Calvin sees the midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh’s order to slaughter the male Hebrew children as their unwillingness to assist injustice, even if he did not think they should have lied.¹⁸⁶

While answering the question: “whether we ought not to obey a ruler, though he exercise tyranny?” Calvin gives the answer: yes.

But when the spiritual government doth degenerate, the consciences of the godly are at liberty, and set free from obeying unjust authority; especially if the wicked and profane enemies of holiness do falsely pretend the title of priesthood to overthrow the doctrine of salvation, and challenge to themselves such authority, as that they will be thereby equal with God. So it is not only lawful for the faithful at this day to shake off from their shoulders the Pope’s yoke, but they must do it of necessity, seeing they cannot obey his laws unless they forsake God.¹⁸⁷

In Matthew 26:52, Calvin asks if it is never lawful to use violence in repelling unjust violence? His answer is “for if any man resists a robber, he will not be liable to public punishment, because the laws arm him against one who is the common enemy of mankind.” However, “he must first lay aside excessive wrath, and hatred, and desire of revenge, and all irregular sallies of passion”.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Daniel*, 6:22.

¹⁸⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 37:18.

¹⁸⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on Exodus*, 1:17.

¹⁸⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*, 23:5.

¹⁸⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew*, 26:52.

Although for him, normally Christians “ought to be prepared for enduring the cross,” remembering that “He who strikes with the sword shall perish by the sword.”, there are exceptions that institutions and laws provide the opportunity for legitimate civil action. Then “we must also beware of repelling our enemies by force or violence, even when they unjustly provoke us, except so far as the institutions and laws of the community admit.”¹⁸⁹

Calvin also makes a reference to the idea of conditional obedience in his commentary on Ephesians 6:1. Calvin argues that because God has the power to command children to obey their parents, children should only obey their parents to the extent that doing so is consistent with devotion toward God, who is the ultimate authority.¹⁹⁰

In short, Calvin urges us to be obedient to God, to whose will all monarchs’ wishes should be surrendered, whose decrees all their mandates should bow, and whose majesty their scepters should be submitted.¹⁹¹

2.4.2.2 Inferior Magistrates

Calvin moves startlingly abruptly from his repeated warning against “private persons” engaging in tyrannical opposition to approving and urging action by the inferior magistrate to safeguard the rights of the people. He uses the ephors of Sparta, the tribunes of Rome, and the demarchs of Athens as historical examples of such “populates magistratus,” who were all chosen by an annual popular vote.¹⁹²

He wrote that there are times when God

...raises up open avengers from among his servants, and arms them with his command to punish the wicked government and deliver his people, oppressed in unjust ways, from

¹⁸⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 18:11.

¹⁹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, 6:1.

¹⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.32.

¹⁹² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.31.

miserable calamity....Thus he delivered the people of Israel from the tyranny of Pharaoh through Moses [Ex. 3:7-10]; from the violence of Chusan, king of Syria through Othniel [Judg. 3:9] .¹⁹³

Calvin states that he does not forbid the magistrates of people to withstand the tyranny as the inferior magistrates are appointed to restrain the personal desires of kings. If they wink at rulers who brutally oppress and abuse the poor common people, Calvin proclaims that they are engaging in devious perfidy because they are dishonestly betraying the people's freedom, which they are aware that they have been appointed guardians of by God's decree.¹⁹⁴

Calvin claims that magistrates chosen by the people were put in place to limit rulers' immorality. Because the king dishonestly betrays the people's freedom, which they are aware they have been entrusted with preserving by God's ordinance, Calvin believes it is the responsibility of lesser magistrates to oppose when the ruler forcibly falls upon and assaults the lowly common folk.¹⁹⁵

According to McNeil, depending on his perceptions of political authority, Calvin may have been inclined to support resistance against tyranny led by Condé, a legitimate lesser magistrate accountable to the people, in certain circumstances.¹⁹⁶

2.4.3 War

According to Calvin, both rulers and common people should occasionally pick up weapons to exact public punishment. We can decide if wars are legal based on this: If they are to be the defenders and guardians of the laws, they must defeat the efforts of those whose

¹⁹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.30.

¹⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.31.

¹⁹⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.31.

¹⁹⁶ John T. McNeill, "John Calvin on Civil Government," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 42.2 (1964): 75.

offenses corrupt the discipline of the laws. If they adequately punish those criminals whose terrible activities have only damaged a few, would they stand by and watch when an entire nation is afflicted and destroyed by thefts committed with impunity?¹⁹⁷

He concludes that:

Therefore, both natural equity and the nature of the office dictate that princes must be armed not only to restrain the misdeeds of private individuals by judicial punishment but also to defend by war the dominions entrusted to their safekeeping if at any time they are under enemy attack.¹⁹⁸

Calvin cites Luke 3:14 as an illustration. In passing, it is demonstrated there that Christ's coming has had no impact on this situation. Since the soldiers who were looking to Jesus for salvation should have been told to put down their weapons and quit the military entirely if Christian theology opposed all conflicts. They were told to "Strike no man, do no man wrong, and be pleased with your salary." When he told them to be content with their pay, he undoubtedly did not ban them from carrying weapons.¹⁹⁹

Calvin also tells us that all magistrates' presents must use the utmost restraint when displaying any form of passion. Instead, if they must punish, prevent them from becoming angry, angry out of hate, or angry out of unyielding harshness.²⁰⁰

2.5 Summary

John Calvin's interest in political theology is reflected in his writing and his practical work. Calvin sees civil government as a holy calling before God. He believes that God is the origin of government. God allows the people to elect political leaders, and the people's part is

¹⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.11.

¹⁹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.11.

¹⁹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.12.

²⁰⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.12.

entirely instrumental. The government was given by God before humans fall into sin. He sees civil government as a blessing from God. It is also necessary after fall, in order to safeguard the safety of mankind. Calvin does not believe that there is a perfect form of government, neither monarchy, aristocracy nor democracy because the form may change according to time and place by God's providence. However, he believes that representative aristocracy which is a hybrid between aristocracy and democracy outperforms other forms of government. Calvin sees magistrates as the defender and guardian of the laws, he argues that it is the responsibility of civil government to safeguard God's external worship, defend the church's position, adapt our lives to the society of men, shape our social conduct to civil righteousness, reconcile us with one another, and promote peace.

Calvin has a high view of law and indicates that without law, the magistracy cannot stand. For him, equity is the aim of all law. Natural law, which Calvin views as a reality that exists everywhere and that has been ingrained in every man like a seed, functions as the supreme authority in every human community. He emphasizes the relationship between political government and natural law. The God-given human conscience is unique in that it serves as a bridge between man and God. Calvin does not insist on the use of Mosaic judicial law in every nation because he believes that all country allowed to make laws that are proper to benefit themselves and to adhere to the eternal law of love.

Calvin's understanding of the covenant established by God between himself and the rulers and people of a state as the most essential political institution. Calvin distinguishes between the earthly government and the spiritual government so that we are not going to conflate with one another. However, this distinction should not lead us to see earthly government as a misunderstanding or something that has no relevance to Christians. Calvin is in favor of religious freedom. As the magistrates have the God-given authority, Calvin states

that we shall obey the authority of government. Calvin emphasizes that he is not talking about sinful persons, but about the order itself is deserving honor and respect from us.

Calvin explains wicked tyranny as a judgment of God and that obedience to the bad king is required by Scripture. Calvin does not advise revolution in the *Institutes*. Tyranny is still preferable when compared to anarchy. However, Calvin emphasizes that we are not compelled to obey the king in any other manner than in God. He remarks that the instruments of punishment for tyranny are determined by God himself, through inferior magistrates, not by people. Calvin also agrees with war to overthrow those whose crimes threaten the law's discipline.