**Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion***

Lesson 43: Civil Government (Book 4, Chapter 20)

**Chapter 20: Civil Government**

1. Previously, Calvin has talked about the authority of the church and the authority of the civil magistrate and how they are distinct spheres. The church is concerned about helping believers in their faith and addresses the inward person, while the state concerns itself with the outer person and with its citizens conforming to the rules of society for temporal life. The church has spiritual government while the state has political government that is people being taught their duty toward humanity to maintain society.
2. Calvin’s aim is to avoid the position of the Anabaptists who decried all civil government and the other extreme of worshipping civil government or giving civil government too much power. “Unless both these evils are checked, purity of faith will perish.” In other words, Calvin believes that a proper view of the relationship between church and state is part of Christian doctrine and belief.
3. “It is of no slight importance to us to know how lovingly God has provided in this respect [civil government] for mankind, that greater zeal for piety may flourish in us to attest our gratefulness.”
4. These 2 spheres are distinct but they are not at odds with each other, but rather are to serve one another. “Civil government has as its appointed end….to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility.”
5. The Anabaptists who saw all civil government as carnal and evil and having no authority over Christians would have anarchy and unchecked depravity of man. One representative Anabaptist wrote, “No Christian is a ruler and no ruler is a Christian.”
6. Calvin says that in our pilgrimage from this Earth to our “true fatherland” we are aided on our way by the “help” of civil authority.
7. Calvin sees the duties of the civil magistrate as:
   1. To enable people to breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm
   2. To “prevent idolatry, sacrilege against God’s name, blasphemies against His truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people”
   3. To prevent the public peace from being disturbed
   4. To provide “that each man may keep his property safe and sound”
   5. “That honesty and modesty may be preserved among men”
8. “In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.”
9. Calvin breaks down his discussion of Christian political theory into 3 parts: 1) The magistrate, 2)The laws, and 3)The people

*The Magistrate*

1. “For Calvin, the office of the magistrate is ordained by God, having a mandate from God, and is invested with divine authority. The civil government functions as God’s representative, acting, so to speak, as His viceregents.” --J. Mark Beach
2. Deuteronomy 1:16-17 – “**16**And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. **17**You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.’”
3. Proverbs 8:15-16 – “By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; **16**by me princes rule, and nobles, all who govern justly.”
4. Romans 13:1-7
5. “Accordingly, no one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men.”
6. Therefore we are to pray for and honor our rulers.
7. 1 Timothy 2:1-3 – “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, **2**for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. **3**This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior,”
8. “This means that not only government leaders that we like, but also those whom we do not, are God's agents to provide for peace that the Gospel might go forth and order that humanity might be maintained.” –Sean Michael Lucas
9. So magistrates are divinely ordained by God and we are to pray for them. What is the duty of a magistrate? “If they remember that they are vicars [deputies] of God, they should watch with all care, earnestness, and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence and justice.” Indeed, they will have to give an account before God and so they are not to carry out government in a deceitful manner as that is an insult to God Himself whose rule they are to mirror.
10. 2 Chronicles 19:6-7 – “and said to the judges, “Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the Lord. He is with you in giving judgment. **7**Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the Lord our God, or partiality or taking bribes.””
11. Calvin then discusses 3 forms of government – rule by king (monarchy), rule by a few (aristrocracy) and rule by all (democracy). Calvin does not think only 1 of these is legitimate and circumstances can dictate which one might be best in any given case. Different cultures find themselves with different forms of government, and there is nothing wrong with that. However, his preference is “a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy.” Monarchy is dangerous because of a monarch’s inability to exercise self-control. So Calvin says it is “safer and more bearable” when there is a plurality of leaders to govern us, to assist one another, to teach and admonish one another, and for there to be checks and balances to restrain willfulness [overreach of power].
12. To me this make sense given that the rule of the church is by a plurality of elders so that no one person has all authority and these elders are selected from amongst the members of the church. So the structure of the civil government reflects the structure of spiritual government and of course it’s this Presbyterian/Biblical form of government that provides the basis for our republic with its systems of checks and balances.
13. Even when God administered His people as a kingdom in the Old Testament, there were checks and balances as there were prophets and priests who could hold the king in check and hold him accountable to God’s Word.
14. “That no kind of government is more happy than one where freedom is regulated with becoming moderation and is properly established on a durable basis” and so those are “most happy who are permitted to enjoy this state and if they stoutly and constantly labor to preserve and retain it, they are doing nothing alien to this office.”
15. In upholding both true religion and the welfare of its citizens, the state upholds both tablets of God’s Law. To promote the welfare of its citizens, the state has the sword to prevent criminals from disturbing the peace and harming others and punishing them when they do so. This promotes public safety and peace for all.
16. Magistrates are to exercise justice, but also restraint. Their judgments should be fair. This is just the application of “an eye for an eye” principle on a civil government level. Excessive punishment harms rather than heals and excessive clemency leads to “cruel gentleness” which abandons many to destruction.
17. Calvin also argues that magistrates have the right and duty to defend itself and protect its people in war, when attacked. But even here it requires restraint and is to be pursued justly.
18. Finally, the magistrate also has the right to levy taxes to meet the public expenses of their office, yet they are not to be excessive, wasteful, or lavish it all upon themselves. “Moreover, let them [magistrates] consider that their imposts and levies, and other kinds of tributes are nothing but supports of public necessity; but that to impose them upon the common folk without cause is tyrannical extortion.”

*The Laws*

1. The Christian magistrate is to govern in accord with God’s law and this is found in the moral law of the Old Testament. Calvin is not a theonomist seeking to implement all of the Old Testament civil law in modern times.
2. “Every nation is left free to make such laws as it foresees to be profitable for itself. But such laws must be in conformity to that perpetual rule of love, so that they indeed vary in form but have the same purpose.”
3. “For I do not think that those barbarous and savage laws such as gave honor to thieves, permitted promiscuous intercourse, and others both more filthy and more absurd, are to be regarded as laws. For they are abhorrent not only to all justice, but also to all humanity and gentleness.”
4. Calvin sees that there are 2 parts to any given law: 1) Constitution of the law (circumstances) and 2) Equity of the law (principle). The circumstances can vary from nation to nation, but the principles are natural, moral, and unchanging.
5. Example: God forbids stealing. In the Old Testament, there are certain punishments for stealing (Exodus 22:1-4). Our laws imposes different punishments for stealing. The laws of other countries may impose different punishments than our country. Yet, they are all to the same end of deterring theft as a violation of God’s eternal law. So the principles of all laws should be in accord with God’s Word and serve His purposes, but the punishments can look different from country to country. In this way, there is both unity and diversity.
6. Some nations may be more inclined to one sin over another. So Calvin argues that such laws regarding that sin have harsher penalties in order to more sharply inhibit and discourage them.

*The People*

1. What are our duties to the civil magistrate?
2. First, we may use the civil courts for litigation but not to do so out of hatred or revenge because this reveals a lack of charity for others. “Lawsuits are permissible if rightly used.” That is, the defendant rightly uses litigation to defend what is his by right and the plaintiff who is undeservedly oppressed either in person or property puts himself in the care of the magistrate, makes his complaint, and seeks what is fair and good. It would be better if the plaintiff “should be prepared to yield his own and suffer anything than be carried away with enmity toward his adversary.”
3. “A lawsuit, however just, can never be rightly prosecuted by any man, unless he treats his adversary with the same love and good will as if the business under controversy were already amicably settled and composed.”
4. In Acts, Paul appealed to Rome as a Roman citizen and defended himself before civil magistrates (Acts 16:37; 22:1,25; 24:12). He even went as far as to appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:10-11).
5. So while it is true that we are called to turn the other cheek (Matt 5:38-42) and to bless those who curse us (Matt 5:44), it’s also not wrong to seek to defend and preserve our own possessions provided our motives remain friendly toward our enemies and zealous for the public good.
6. But doesn’t 1 Corinthians 6:5-8 forbid Christians from any lawsuit? Calvin argues that what Paul is forbidding here is “an immoderate rage for litigation in the church of the Corinthians – even to the point that they exposed to the scoffing and evilspeaking of the impious [unbelievers] the gospel of Christ and the whole religion they professed.” They are disgracing the gospel by their infighting and quarrels and then bringing those quarrels into the secular realm for public disgrace. Also, Paul condemns them for being brethren fighting against brethren. “They greedily panted after one another’s possessions, and without cause assailed and inflicted loss upon one another. Therefore, Paul inveighs against that mad lust to go to law, not simply against all controversies.”
7. Here’s the balance: “Christians ought indeed so to conduct themselves that they always prefer to yield their own right rather than go into a court, from which they can scarcely get away without a heart stirred and kindled to hatred of their brother. But when any man sees that without loss of love he can defend his own property, the loss of which would be a heavy expense to him, he does not offend against this statement of Paul, if he has recourse to law. To sum up, love will give every man the best counsel. Everything undertaken apart from love and all disputes that go beyond it, we regard as incontrovertibly unjust and impious.”
8. Finally, do we really have to submit to unjust rulers?
9. “Calvin reminds us to respect and reverence civil authorities, and this as an expression of love and reverence for God. The nature of the office demands this from us. We must admit that civil rulers often manifest undesirable traits. That does not give us license to disrespect or disobey them. Even the unjust ruler is ordained of God. Although the man might be a disgrace, the office he holds still deserves our esteem. ” –J. Mark Beach
10. Example: Daniel who submitted to and honored Nebuchadnezzar, a dishonorable king ordained by God to rule and to rule over God’s people in exile. We are not called to vindicate justice against a cruel ruler, rather we leave that to God. We are to look after our own duties and responsibilities, and recognize, that an irreligious or disgraceful ruler can be a divine punishment against us and we may need to suffer under God’s correction.
11. Calvin’s book ends with this: *Laus Deo* (God Be Praised!)