

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 20 – Part 1
CIVIL GOVERNMENT

The relationship between church and state has a long and complicated history. Calvin, as a leader in Geneva, was concerned with how the scriptures sorted out this relationship. He begins by stating that this chapter is the place to say something about government that “...*pertains only to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality...and...although this seems alien to the spiritual doctrine of faith which I have undertaken to discuss, what follows will show that I am right in joining them...*” (pg. 1485).

Summary: Calvin believes that God has established an order by which human beings ought to organize their civic lives so that piety (true faith) can flourish. Unfortunately there are competing forces that put this order at risk. And unless these forces are dealt with, piety is at risk. He puts it this way, “...*insane and barbarous men furiously strive to overturn this divinely established order; while on the other side, the flatterers of princes, immoderately praising their power, do not hesitate to set them against the rule of God himself. Unless both these evils are checked, purity of faith will perish*” (pg. 1486). Having stated the problem (competing claims between freedom and law), he wants to be clear that secular power and religious power “...*are things completely distinct*” (pg. 1486) and that “...*spiritual freedom can exist along with civil bondage*” (pg. 1486). In other words, Christian can live “freely” under the laws of a civil society and thus there is no need for a theocracy, where the church runs the state.

Even so, Calvin believes that the civil government is responsible “...*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 according to civil righteousness, to reconcile us to one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility*” (pg. 1487). This is not the American ideal of separation of church and state. Instead it is a hybrid in which the state enforces laws that protect the life and liberty of the people, while at the same time it “...*prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God’s name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people*” (pg. 1488). Calvin wants to be clear however, that he does not give “...*to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion...*” (pg. 1488).

Calvin’s views on the providence of God (meaning God directs all things in heaven and on earth), can be clearly seen in his view that people obey their civil leaders. They should because those leaders “...*have a mandate from God, have been invested with divine authority, and are wholly God’s representatives...*” (pg. 1489). He bases this statement on Paul’s letter to the Romans where the Apostle makes clear that there are “...*no powers except those ordained by God [Romans 13:1]*” (pg. 1490). Because of this, he rejects anarchy on the one hand while on the other hand encouraging rulers to “...*submit to Christ the power with which they have been invested...*” (pg. 1490) and to remember that because “...*they are vicars 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.*” (pg. 1491).

Reflections: After college, I served for two years in the Philippines as a Peace Corps Volunteer. This was during the time when Ferdinand Marcos was ruling the nation under martial law. Everyone knew that he was enriching himself and his family and those who opposed him disappeared. One Sunday I visited a church where the guest preacher, an American, preached a fiery sermon about how all Filipinos were commanded by God to be completely obedient to Marcos, because he was God’s anointed. When I tried to catch him after the service and ask about government corruption, he became angry and said he never answered questions about his sermons. I knew in that moment, that he knew, that he could never justify what Marcos was doing, but was too wed to his theology (and to power and the powerful) to admit it.

Questions:

1. How do you balance the competing claims of the church and the civil government?
2. What do you think of Calvin’s hybrid relationship between church and state?
3. What do you think of Calvin and Paul’s contention that all leaders are God established?