

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 20 – Part 2  
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. In the previous article, we learned that Calvin believes that governments should not establish religion, yet should protect religion and public morals, and that all governments are God ordained. He makes this clear when he states that when people rail against those in power “...they do not just reject the magistrate but they cast off God that he might not reign over them” (pg. 1492).

**Summary:** Calvin begins this section with an examination of the various forms of government. He admits that trying to decide on an appropriate form of government “...admits of no simple solution but requires deliberation...and if you compare the forms of government among themselves apart from circumstances, it is not easy to distinguish which one of them excels in usefulness...” (pg. 1493). That having been said, Calvin states that a “...system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others; not indeed of itself but because it is very rare for kings to so control themselves...or for them to be 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...censors and masters to retrain his willfulness” (pg. 1493-94). Calvin even takes this one step farther, when he states that “...magistrates ought to apply themselves with the highest diligence to prevent...freedom...from being in any way diminished” (pg. 1494).

Where this leaves his readers however, is in a quandary. It does so because on the one hand Calvin believes in freedom (which he enjoys) while at the same time he argues that God has put repressive regimes in place. He even goes so far as to declare that people should not try to change their government (because it was God ordained) even when those countries have great inequality. People in those nations, where people are not free, are to show themselves “...compliant and obedient to whomever God sets over...” (pg. 1495) them.

Calvin next turns to the role of government in protecting religion. He believes that “...no government can be happily established unless piety is the first concern; and that those laws are preposterous which neglect God’s right and provide only for men...also holy kings are greatly praised in scripture because they restored the worship of God...or took care of religion that under them it might flourish pure and unblemished” (pg. 1495). He continues by stating that rulers are “...ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency and tranquility, and that their sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all” (pg. 1496). For Calvin, providing for the safety of all, includes the right to inflict the death penalty and the defense of the innocent. “The Lawgiver himself puts into the hand of his ministers a sword...to avenge, at the Lord’s command the afflictions of the pious (in this case the affliction of murder)” (pg. 1497) and “should they (the magistrates) sheath their swords...while men wickedly slaughter and massacre, they will become guilty of great impiety” (pg. 1498). Calvin sums it up this way. “Yet it is necessary for the magistrate to pay attention to both, lest by excessive severity he either harm more than heal; or, by ...affection of clemency, fall into the cruelest gentleness...” (pg. 1499).

**Reflections:** During my years in ministry I have had church members who have been for the death penalty and against it. Each called upon scripture to prove their point. Each used statistics in the same fashion. Even though I have had good friends and church members murdered, I believe that taking the life of the murderer, when life imprisonment is available, ought not to be the Christian choice. By so doing I don’t believe that we would fall into “the cruelest gentleness” but would instead show that we are people of love and mercy.

Questions:

1. How do you see Calvin’s concept of government in our governments structures in this nation?
2. What role do you think government ought to play in maintaining public morality?
3. Where do you stand on the death penalty and why do you stand there?