

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 20 – Part 3
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 articles, 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, that the best government has a balance of power between multiple people, that the government should protect freedoms and that the government has the right to exercise the death penalty.

Summary: Calvin begins this section by examining the right of governments to wage war. *“But kings and people must sometimes take up arms to execute such public vengeance (meaning for the killing and oppression of innocent people). On this basis, we may judge wars lawful which are so undertaken”* (pg. 1499). Calvin lists other reasons for war including preserving tranquility, restraining sedition, helping the oppressed, punishing evil deeds, defending laws or invasion by *“a king or the lowest of folk...”* (pg. 1499).

Though they have the power to wage war, Calvin warns magistrates that they are to restrain themselves as much as possible in such endeavors. They are *“...to guard particularly against giving vent to their passions even in the slightest degree. Rather, if they have to punish, let them not be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with severity. Let them also (as Augustine says) have pity on the common nature in the one whose special fault they are punishing”* (pg. 1500). Calvin also instructs magistrates and kings to try everything they can *“...before recourse is had to arms”* (pg. 1501). One last note on this section is that nations have the right to garrison troops in various places to protect the nation.

The next issue Calvin takes up is taxes. He believes that it is appropriate for government to levy, collect and use them. *“Lastly, I also wish to add this, that tributes and taxes are the lawful revenue of princes, which they may chiefly use to meet the public expense of their office; yet they may similarly use them for the magnificence of their household, which is joined, so to speak, with the dignity of the authority they exercise...”* (pg. 1501). Nonetheless, princes are to *“remember that their revenues are not so much for their private chests (but are) the treasuries of the entire people...which cannot be squandered...without manifest injustice”* (pg. 1501). Finally, he offers this observation. *“...to impose them (taxes) upon the common folks without cause is tyrannical extortion”* (pg. 1501).

Calvin moves from taxes to the law. He sees three kinds of law in the scriptures; moral, ceremonial and judicial. The moral law comes under two headings, which command *“...us to worship God with pure faith and piety; the other, to embrace men with sincere affection”* (pg. 1503). The ceremonial law was the *“...tutelage of the Jews, with which it seemed good to the Lord to train his people...until the fullness of time should come...”* (pg. 1503). The judicial law which was *“...given to civil government, imparted certain formulas of equity and justice by which they might live together blamelessly and peacefully”* (pg. 1503). Calvin’s understanding of law then is that nations are free to make their own sets of laws as long as those laws *“reflect the law of love”* (pg. 1503).

Reflections: Over my lifetime I have watched as our nation struggled with the decision to go to war. Should we engage the Taliban after 9/11? Should we invade Iraq because they may have weapons of mass destruction? Should we engage in conflicts in Syria or North Korea? The problem is that there has been very little clarity as to what is the right choice. To do nothing endangers people. To wage war endangers still other people. Calvin’s comments remind us that this wrestling with war is nothing new. What is helpful for me from his comments are that we are to restrain ourselves as much as possible and remember to have pity on those we oppose.

Questions:

1. What do you believe are acceptable reasons for engaging in warfare?
2. What do you think about Calvin’s discussion of taxation?
3. How do you see the law of love reflected in our nation’s laws?