

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 20 – Part 4  
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, that the government has the right to exercise the death penalty, to wage war, levy taxes and create appropriate laws. In this section Calvin covers a number of disparate issues.

Summary: First, Calvin spends some time dealing with the concept of law and equity. Equity for Calvin, though not specifically defined, seems to be a combination of fairness and justice. He believes that all laws should “*press toward the same goal of equity...hence equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws*” (pg. 1504). This is so because laws are supposed to reflect God’s will for humanity, which is always fair or equitable. Equity is possible for humanity because it can be found in natural law which, according to Calvin, God has engraved on the consciences of human beings. One example of this natural law/equity at work is that “*...we see how, with such diversity, all laws tend to the same end. For, together with one voice, they pronounce punishment against those crimes which God’s eternal law has condemned, namely murder, theft, adultery and false witness*” (pg. 1504-1505). In other words, God’s equity/fairness/justice has been hard wired into people, and so they come to the same conclusions about the same crimes.

Second, Calvin tells his readers that they use the law courts, but only within certain parameters. He notes that even though scripture appears to discourage Christians from going to court, the Apostle Paul “*...clearly testifies to the contrary that the magistrate is a minister of God for our good [Romans 13:4]. By this we understand that he has been so ordained by God, that, defended by his hand...against the wrongdoing and injustices of evil men, we may live a quiet and serene life*” (pg. 1506). With that having been said, Calvin warns that even though Christians can go to court, they are “*...not...allowed to hate him (the opponent), or be seized with a mad desire to harm him, or hound him relentlessly*” (pg. 1506) and “*...they are to treat their adversary with the same love and good will as if the business under controversy were already amicably settled*” (pg. 1507).

Third, Christians are to endure insults, but at the same time they are to defend the public interest. Calvin writes, that “*...Christians ought to be the kind of men born to bear slanders and injuries, open to the malice, deceits, and mockeries of wicked men...and should have complete spiritual composure*” (pg. 1508). Even so, Christians can use the magistrate and the courts in “*...preserving their own possessions, while maintaining friendliness toward their enemies*” (pg. 1508). He sums it up in this way. “*...love will give every man the best counsel...*” (pg. 1509).

**Reflections:** It has been painful over the years to watch members of my congregations to be cheated out of what was rightfully theirs and then to be forced to go to court against people they trusted and cared for. They wrestled with whether, as Christians, this was the right course of action. My advice was not only to do what they believed Christ was calling them to do, but to remember that by going to court they were seeking what was rightfully theirs and nothing more. This was fair and just, which is part of God’s natural law.

**Questions:**

1. What do you think of Calvin’s belief in equity being part of human consciences?
2. Have you ever had to go to court to right a wrong? What was that like?
3. How have you dealt with those who have, as we say in Texas, done you wrong?