

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 20 – Part 5
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, create appropriate laws, that Christians can make use of the courts and that Christians are to bear under insults. In this section Calvin covers a number of issues.

Summary: First, Calvin speaks of deference towards persons in positions of authority. Calvin, believes that all persons in authority have been put there by God, and so people ought to “...esteem and reverence them as ministers and representatives of God” (pg. 1510). What he makes clear though is that this esteem and reverence is not for the person, who might be foolish, slothful or cruel, but it is given to the office which “...itself is worthy of such honor and reverence...” (pg. 1510).

Second, Christians are to obey those in authority. Calvin writes, “From this something else follows: that with hearts inclined to revere their rulers, subjects should prove their obedience towards them, whether by obeying their proclamations, or by paying taxes...or by executing any other commands of theirs” (pg. 1510). This deference and obedience for Calvin does not allow people to become politically involved in seeking office. Instead, people were supposed to wait upon the authorities to call them to higher service. Obedience is even supposed to be offered to the unjust magistrate. “We are not only subject to the authority of princes who perform their office toward us uprightly...but also the authority of all who...have got control of affairs, even though they perform not a whit of the prince’s office” (pg. 1512). This obedience is due not only because God placed all princes in their positions of power, but because God might be using those unjust princes to punish the people for their sins; a position, by the way, for which Calvin was widely assailed.

Third, it is not for the subjects to unseat an unjust ruler, but only God. Calvin’s view of the relationship between rulers and ruled, beyond the fact that God places all rulers in their positions of power, is that of parents (rulers) and children (subjects). Thus, just as children have no right to overthrow their parents, subjects have no right to overthrow their rulers. Our only hope is “to implore the Lord’s help, in whose hands are the hearts of kings” (pg. 1517). Even so, Calvin warns rulers that God will bring them down if they do not rule as they ought, including through magistrates of the people who have been “appointed to restrain the willfulness of the kings” (pg. 1519). Calvin even encourages these magistrates to protect the lowly common folk from the evils of kings when kings have betrayed “...the freedom of the people” (pg. 1519). Finally, for Calvin, obedience has its limits; those limits are when obedience to a king, violates our obedience to God. This is not allowed because “We must obey God and not men” (pg. 1521).

Reflections: One of the things that I have learned about my family is that I have ancestors from both Connecticut and Georgia who fought for the colonies in the American Revolution. I wish I could ask them why they, as Christians decided to take up arms and risk everything against the authorities in Great Britain. Perhaps it was because they believed that the King had overstepped his authority. Perhaps they believed that God was calling them to seek greater freedom. Regardless of their reasons, they stepped outside of Calvin’s teachings and fought for their own self-determination. And I am grateful that they did. For because of their efforts, we have become a nation in which all are free to worship, speak and live as we choose. And so I close with Calvin’s final words in the Institutes, “God Be Praised.”

Questions:

1. How can you show deference to the office and not toward the person in it?
2. What are appropriate ways to stand up for your political beliefs?
3. When is it appropriate for obedience to turn to civil disobedience?