

On Civil Government

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book IV, 20.1-2, 8-10, 15-16, 25, 32, English updated and emphasis added.

Christians can live under all types of civil governments. Christians are guaranteed spiritual freedom; but civil freedom is not guaranteed.

1. Having shown above that there is a twofold government in man, and having fully considered the one which, placed in the soul or inward man, relates to eternal life, we are here called to say something of the other, which pertains only to civil institutions and the external regulation of manners. For although this subject seems from its nature to be unconnected with the spiritual doctrine of faith, which I have undertaken to treat, it will appear as we proceed, that I have properly connected them, no, that I am under the necessity of doing so, especially while, on the one hand, frantic and barbarous men are furiously endeavoring to overturn the order established by God, and, on the other, the flatterers of princes, extolling their power without measure, do not hesitate to oppose it to the government of God. Unless we meet both extremes, the purity of the faith will perish.

We may add, that it in no small degree concerns us to know how kindly God has here consulted for the human race, that pious zeal may the more strongly urge us to testify our gratitude. And first, before entering on the subject itself, it is necessary to attend to the distinction which we formerly laid down (Book III. Chap. 19. sec. 113, et *supra*, Chap. 10.), lest, as often happens to many, we imprudently confound these two things, the nature of which is altogether different.

For some, on hearing that liberty is promised in the gospel, a liberty which acknowledges no king and no magistrate among men, but looks to Christ alone, think that they can receive no benefit from their liberty so long as they see any power placed over them. Accordingly, they think that nothing will be safe until the whole world is changed into a new form, when there will be neither courts, nor laws, nor magistrates, nor anything of the kind to interfere, as they suppose, with their liberty. But he who knows to distinguish between the body and the soul, between the present fleeting life and that which is future and eternal, will have no difficulty in understanding that **the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very widely separated**. Seeing, therefore, it is a Jewish vanity to seek and include the kingdom of Christ under the elements of this world [i.e., a theocracy like ancient Israel], let us, considering, as Scripture clearly teaches, that the blessings which we derive from Christ are spiritual, remember to confine the liberty which is promised and offered to us in Him within its proper limits.

For why is it that the very same apostle who bids us “stand fast in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and do not again be entangled with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1), in another passage forbids slaves to be concerned about their state (1 Corinthians 7:21), unless it be that spiritual liberty is perfectly compatible with civil servitude? In this sense the following passages are to be understood: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28). Again, “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all and in all” (Colossians 3:11). It is thus taught, that it matters not what your condition is among men, nor under what laws you live, since in them the kingdom of Christ does not at all consist.

Nevertheless, Christians have a duty to participate in the political process and to influence society for good, being salt and light in the world, as we proclaim Christ and His word of righteousness.

2. Still the distinction does not go so far as to justify us in supposing that the whole scheme of civil government is a matter of pollution, with which Christian men have nothing to do. Fanatics, indeed, delighting in unbridled license, insist and vociferate that, after we are dead by Christ to the elements of this world, and being translated into the kingdom of God sit among the celestials, it is unworthy of us, and far beneath our dignity, to be occupied with those profane and impure cares which relate to matters alien from a Christian man. To what end, they say, are laws without courts and tribunals? But what has a Christian man to do with courts? No, if it is unlawful to kill, what have we to do with laws and courts?

But as we lately taught that that kind of government is distinct from the spiritual and internal kingdom of Christ, so we ought to know that they are not adverse to each other. The former [spiritual government], in some measure, begins the heavenly kingdom in us, even now upon earth, and in this mortal and evanescent life commences immortal and incorruptible blessedness, while to the latter [civil government] it is assigned, so long as we live among men, to foster and maintain the external worship of God, to defend sound doctrine and the condition of the Church, to adapt our conduct to human society, to form our manners to civil justice, to conciliate us to each other, to cherish common peace and tranquility.

All these I confess to be superfluous, if the kingdom of God, as it now exists within us, extinguishes the present life. But if it is the will of God that while we aspire to true piety we are pilgrims upon the earth, and if such pilgrimage stands in need of such aids, those who take them away from man rob him of his humanity. As to their allegation that there ought to be such perfection in the Church of God that her guidance should suffice for law, they stupidly imagine her to be such as she never can be found in the community of men. For while the insolence of the wicked is so great, and their iniquity so stubborn that it can scarcely be curbed by any severity of laws, what do we expect would be done by those whom force can scarcely repress from doing ill, were they to see perfect impunity for their wickedness? . . .

What form of civil government is best?

8. And certainly it were a very idle occupation for private men to discuss what would be the best form of polity in the place where they live, seeing these deliberations cannot have any influence in determining any public matter. Then the thing itself could not be defined absolutely without rashness, since the nature of the discussion depends on circumstances. And if you compare the different states with each other, without regard to circumstances, it is not easy to determine which of these has the advantage in point of utility, so equal are the terms on which they meet. **Monarchy** is prone to tyranny. In an **aristocracy** [rule by the nobility, the rich and powerful, those most qualified to lead], again, the tendency is not less to the faction of a few, while in **popular ascendancy** [democracy] there is the strongest tendency to sedition [rebellion, anarchy].

The best civil government includes many rulers with a separation and balance of powers.

When these three forms of government, of which philosophers treat, are considered in themselves, I, for my part, am far from denying that **the form which greatly surpasses**

the others is aristocracy, either pure or modified by popular government [democracy], not indeed in itself, but because it very rarely happens that kings so rule themselves as never to dissent from what is just and right, or are possessed of so much acuteness and prudence as always to see correctly. Owing, therefore, to the vices or defects of men, **it is safer and more tolerable when several bear rule, that they may thus mutually assist, instruct, and admonish each other, and should anyone be disposed to go too far, the others are censors and masters to curb his excess.**

Old Testament Israel demonstrates a similar form of government.

This has already been proved by experience, and confirmed also by the authority of the Lord Himself, when **He established an aristocracy bordering on popular government among the Israelites**, keeping them under that as the best form, until He exhibited an image of the Messiah in David.

Christians have a duty to fight for the preservation of their civil rights and freedoms. Civil rulers have a duty to uphold justice and liberty; they are appointed by God as the guardians of liberty.

And as I willingly admit that there is no kind of government happier than where liberty is framed with becoming moderation, and properly constituted so as to be durable, so I deem those very happy who are permitted to enjoy that form, and I admit that they do nothing at variance with their duty when they strenuously and constantly labor to preserve and maintain it. No, even magistrates ought to do their utmost to prevent the liberty, of which they have been appointed guardians, from being impaired, far less violated. If in this they are sluggish or little careful, they are perfidious traitors to their office and their country.

We should think twice before attempting to impose our forms of government on other countries or seeking to change a form of government.

But should those to whom the Lord has assigned one form of government, take it upon them anxiously to long for a change, the wish would not only be foolish and superfluous, but very pernicious. If you fix your eyes not on one state merely, but look around the world, or at least direct your view to regions widely separated from each other, you will perceive that Divine Providence has not, without good cause, arranged that different countries should be governed by different forms of polity. For as only elements of unequal temperature adhere together, so in different regions a similar inequality in the form of government is best.

All this, however, is said unnecessarily to those to whom the will of God is a sufficient reason. For if it has pleased Him to appoint kings over kingdoms, and senates or burgomasters [magistrates] over free states, whatever be the form which He has appointed in the places in which we live, our duty is to obey and submit.

You cannot separate government and morality.

9. The duty of magistrates, its nature, as described by the word of God, and the things in which it consists, I will here indicate in passing. That it extends to both tables of the law, did Scripture not teach, we might learn from profane writers, for no man has discoursed of the duty of magistrates, the enacting of laws, and the common welfare, without beginning with religion and divine worship. **Thus all have confessed that no polity [government] can be successfully established unless piety is its first care, and that**

those laws are absurd which disregard the rights of God, and consult only for men. Seeing then that among philosophers religion holds the first place, and that the same thing has always been observed with the universal consent of nations, Christian princes and magistrates may be ashamed of their heartlessness if they make it not their care.

We have already shown that this office is specially assigned them by God, and indeed it is right that they exert themselves in asserting and defending the honor of Him whose vicegerents [appointed representative, like a vice-president] they are, and by whose favor they rule.

Hence in Scripture holy kings are especially praised for restoring the worship of God when corrupted or overthrown, or for taking care that religion flourished under them in purity and safety. On the other hand, the sacred history sets down **anarchy** among the vices, when it states that there was no king in Israel, and, therefore, everyone did as he pleased (Judges 21:25). This rebukes the folly of those who would neglect the care of divine things, and devote themselves merely to the administration of justice among men; as if God had appointed rulers in His own name to decide earthly controversies, and omitted what was of far greater importance, His own pure worship as prescribed by His law. . . .

Such views are adopted by turbulent men, who, in their eagerness to make all kinds of innovations with impunity, would fain get rid of all the vindicators of violated piety. In regard to the second table of the law, Jeremiah addresses rulers, "Thus says the Lord, Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood" (Jeremiah 22:3). To the same effect is the exhortation in the Psalm, "Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy. Deliver the poor and needy; free them from the hand of the wicked" (Psalm 82:3, 4). Moses also declared to the princes whom he had substituted for himself, "Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him. Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; but ye shall hear the small as well as the great: ye shall not be afraid of the face of man, for the judgment is God's" (Deuteronomy 1:16). I say nothing as to such passages as these, "He shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt;" "neither shall he multiply wives to himself, neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold;" "he shall write him a copy of this law in a book;" "and it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God;" "that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren" (Deuteronomy 17:16-20). In here explaining the duties of magistrates, my exposition is intended not so much for the instruction of magistrates themselves, as to teach others why there are magistrates, and to what end they have been appointed by God.

We say, therefore, that **they are the ordained guardians and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, honor, and tranquility, so that it should be their only study to provide for the common peace and safety.** Of these things David declares that he will set an example when he shall have ascended the throne. "A froward heart shall depart from me: I will not know a wicked person. Whoever secretly slanders his neighbor, him I will cut off: him who has a haughty look and a proud heart I will not endure. My eyes shall be on the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me: he who walks in a perfect way, he shall serve me" (Psalm 101:4-6). But as rulers cannot do this unless they protect the good against the injuries of the bad, and give aid and protection

to the oppressed, **they are armed with power to curb manifest evil-doers and criminals**, by whose misconduct the public tranquility is disturbed or harassed. For we have full experience of the truth of **Solon's saying**, that **all public matters depend on reward and punishment; that where these are lacking, the whole discipline of states totters and falls to pieces**. For in the minds of many the love of equity and justice grows cold, if due honor be not paid to virtue, and the licentiousness of the wicked cannot be restrained, without strict discipline and the infliction of punishment. The two things are comprehended by the prophet when he enjoins kings and other rulers to execute "judgment and righteousness" (Jeremiah 21:12; 22:3). It is righteousness (justice) to take charge of the innocent, to defend and avenge them, and set them free: it is judgment to withstand the audacity of the wicked, to repress their violence, and punish their faults.

Anarchy is worse than a repressive government.

10. . . . It was well said by one under the empire of Nerva, It is indeed a bad thing to live under a prince with whom nothing is lawful, but a much worse to live under one with whom all things are lawful.

The moral law—Moral laws, not a theocracy, is what is required.

15. **The moral law**, then (to begin with it), being contained under two headings, the one of which simply enjoins us to worship God with pure faith and piety, the other to embrace men with sincere affection, **is the true and eternal rule of righteousness prescribed to the men of all nations and of all times, who would frame their life agreeably to the will of God**. For His eternal and immutable will is, that we are all to worship Him and mutually love one another.

The ceremonial law of the Jews was a tutelage by which the Lord was pleased to exercise, as it were, the childhood of that people, until the fullness of the time should come when He was fully to manifest His wisdom to the world, and exhibit the reality of those things which were then adumbrated by figures (Galatians 3:24; 4:4).

The judicial law, given them as a kind of polity, delivered certain forms of equity and justice, by which they might live together innocently and quietly. And as that exercise in ceremonies properly pertained to the doctrine of piety, inasmuch as it kept the Jewish Church in the worship and religion of God, yet was still distinguishable from piety itself, so the judicial form, though it looked only to the best method of preserving that charity which is enjoined by the eternal law of God, was still something distinct from the precept of love itself. Therefore, as ceremonies might be abrogated without at all interfering with piety, so, also, when these judicial arrangements are removed, the duties and precepts of charity can still remain perpetual.

But if it is true that each nation has been left at liberty to enact the laws which it judges to be beneficial, still these are always to be tested by the rule of charity, so that while they vary in form, they must proceed on the same principle.

Morally evil laws—those that are unjust and abhorrent to humanity and civilized life—should not be recognized as lawful.

Those barbarous and savage laws, for instance, which conferred honor on thieves, allowed the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes, and other things even fouler and

more absurd, I do not think entitled to be considered as laws, since they are not only altogether abhorrent to justice, but to humanity and civilized life.

16. What I have said will become plain if we attend, as we ought, to two things connected with all laws — namely, the enactment of the law, and the equity on which the enactment is founded and rests. Equity, as it is natural, cannot be the same in all, and therefore ought to be proposed by all laws, according to the nature of the thing enacted. As constitutions have some circumstances on which they partly depend, there is nothing to prevent their diversity, provided they all alike aim at equity as their end.

Good laws are based on God's law, because God is good, and He is the source of all that is good, true, and just.

Now, as it is evident that **the law of God which we call moral, is nothing else than the testimony of natural law, and of that conscience which God has engraven on the minds of men, the whole of this equity of which we now speak is prescribed in it. Hence it alone ought to be the aim, the rule, and the end of all laws.** Wherever laws are formed after this rule, directed to this aim, and restricted to this end, there is no reason why they should be disapproved by us, however much they may differ from the Jewish law, or from each other (Augustine, *De civitate Dei* lib. 19 c. 17).

The law of God forbids to steal. The punishment appointed for theft in the civil polity of the Jews may be seen in Exodus 22. Very ancient laws of other nations punished theft by exacting the double of what was stolen, while subsequent laws made a distinction between theft manifest and not manifest. Other laws went the length of punishing with exile, or with branding, while others made the punishment capital [i.e., the death penalty]. Among the Jews, the punishment of the false witness was to “do unto him as he had thought to have done with his brother” (Deuteronomy 19:19). In some countries, the punishment is infamy, in others hanging, in others crucifixion.

All laws alike avenge murder with blood [i.e., the death penalty], but the kinds of death are different. In some countries, adultery was punished more severely, in others more leniently. Yet we see that amidst this diversity they all tend to the same end. For they all with one mouth declare against those crimes which are condemned by the eternal law of God — namely, murder, theft, adultery, and false witness; though they agree not as to the mode of punishment. This is not necessary, nor even expedient. There may be a country which, if murder were not visited with fearful punishments, would instantly become a prey to robbery and slaughter. There may be an age requiring that the severity of punishments should be increased. If the state is in troubled condition, those things from which disturbances usually arise must be corrected by new edicts. In time of war, civilization would disappear amid the noise of arms, were not men overawed by an unaccustomed severity of punishment. In sterility, in pestilence, were not stricter discipline employed, all things would grow worse. One nation might be more prone to a particular vice, were it not most severely repressed. How malignant were it, and invidious of the public good, to be offended at this diversity, which is admirably adapted to retain the observance of the divine law.

The allegation, that insult is offered to the law of God enacted by Moses, where it is abrogated, and other new laws are preferred to it, is most absurd. Others are not preferred when they are more approved, not absolutely, but from regard to time and place, and the condition of the people, or when those things are abrogated which were never enacted for us. The Lord did not deliver it by the hand of Moses to be promulgated

in all countries, and to be everywhere enforced; but having taken the Jewish nation under His special care, patronage, and guardianship, He was pleased to be specially its legislator, and as became a wise legislator, He had special regard to it in enacting laws. ***Good and evil rulers are sent by God.***

25. But if we have respect to the word of God, it will lead us farther, and make us subject not only to the authority of those princes who honestly and faithfully perform their duty toward us, but all princes, by whatever means they have so become, although there is nothing they less perform than the duty of princes. For though the Lord declares that a ruler to maintain our safety is the highest gift of His beneficence, and prescribes to rulers themselves their proper sphere, He at the same time declares, that of whatever description they may be, they derive their power from none but Him. **Those, indeed, who rule for the public good, are true examples and specimens of His beneficence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by Him to punish the people for their iniquity.**

Still all alike possess that sacred majesty with which He has invested lawful power. I will not proceed further without subjoining some distinct passages to this effect. We need not labor to prove that **an impious king is a mark of the Lord's anger**, since I presume no one will deny it, and that this is not less true of a king than of a robber who plunders your goods, an adulterer who defiles your bed, and an assassin who aims at your life, since all such calamities are classed by Scripture among the curses of God.

But let us insist at greater length in proving what does not so easily fall in with the views of men, that even an individual of the worst character, one most unworthy of all honor, if invested with public authority, receives that illustrious divine power which the Lord has by His word devolved on the ministers of His justice and judgment, and that, accordingly, **insofar as public obedience is concerned, he is to be held in the same honor and reverence as the best of kings.**

When we must obey God rather than men.

32. But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, no, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their scepters must bow.

And, indeed, how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offense of Him for whose sake you obey men! The Lord, therefore, is King of kings. When He opens His sacred mouth, He alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all.

We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates—a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God.

On this ground Daniel denies that he had sinned in any respect against the king when he refused to obey his impious decree (Daniel 6:22), because the king had exceeded his limits, and not only been injurious to men, but, by raising his horn against God, had virtually abrogated his own power. On the other hand, the Israelites are condemned for having too readily obeyed the impious edict of the king. For, when Jeroboam made the golden calf, they forsook the temple of God, and, in submissiveness to him, revolted to new superstitions (1 Kings 12:28). With the same facility posterity had bowed before

the decrees of their kings. For this they are severely upbraided by the Prophet (Hosea 5:11). So far is the praise of modesty from being due to that presence by which flattering courtiers cloak themselves, and deceive the simple, when they deny the lawfulness of declining anything imposed by their kings, as if the Lord had resigned His own rights to mortals by appointing them to rule over their fellows, or as if earthly power were diminished when it is subjected to its author, before whom even the principalities of heaven tremble as suppliants. I know the imminent peril to which subjects expose themselves by this firmness, kings being most indignant when they are contemned. As Solomon says, "The wrath of a king is as messengers of death" (Proverbs 16:14).

But since Peter, one of heaven's heralds, has published the edict, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29), let us console ourselves with the thought, that we are rendering the obedience which the Lord requires, when we endure anything rather than turn aside from piety. And that our courage may not fail, Paul stimulates us by the additional consideration (1 Corinthians 7:23), that we were redeemed by Christ at the great price which our redemption cost Him, in order that we might not yield a slavish obedience to the depraved wishes of men, far less do homage to their impiety.

<> END OF THE FOURTH BOOK. <>

END OF THE INSTITUTES