



Calvin's Christian Freedom, Modern Politics and God's Sovereign Grace

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FOR MODERN POLITICAL THINKERS “freedom” is without question the quintessential, even pivotal, political idea. It is this idea, after all, around which thinkers as diverse as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, and even Marx organize their thoughts on human development, on human fulfillment, and on the roles and responsibilities of government. Yet in spite of its obvious centrality to modern political understandings there appears to be little agreement on what this concept actually means. Machiavelli, for example, finds freedom to be largely a matter of national self-determination. Hobbes, by contrast, defines it as the mere absence, for “atomistic” individuals, of physical restraint. For Locke freedom resides in the self-determinative character of “rational” individuals. Rousseau departs from the individualist view to find freedom resulting directly from one’s alignment with the, unfortunately often provincial, “general will.” Attempting to transcend Rousseau, but still failing to see the legitimacy of human individuality Hegel pictures freedom as arising from the self-conscious identification with customs and traditions which have developed historically through the supra-historical Spirit of Universal Mind. For Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the dominant ideologues of the twentieth century, freedom means “post-historical” liberation from the “false consciousness” imbued through exploitative economic structures and enforced by social and political “superstructures.” Freedom for these revolutionaries arrives only when the coercive apparatus of government has “withered away.”

The sheer number of conceptions of freedom even in this short list testifies to the superficiality of each. Yet even if we were to boil this diversity down to a few primary ideas, and there appear to be at least three of these, we could still see the incompatibility of these primary notions with each other, not to mention the insufficiency of each in the face of ongoing human experience. If, for example, we envision freedom as a matter of individual fulfillment in individual identity and distinctiveness (such as is apparently offered by Hobbes and Locke), we not only contradict

our sense of freedom’s communal and historical dimensions, we also ignore our experience of the shallowness of individual choice when disconnected from any kind of transcendent pattern. Furthermore, if we envision freedom as perhaps both individual and communal fulfillment, but only within the context of communal identity and sacrifice (such as is apparently offered by Machiavelli and Rousseau), we work against the human need to distinguish oneself as a particular person having particular gifts and talents, and bury the possibility of the trans-historical judgment of particular communal norms. Finally, if we invoke the notion of freedom as historical development and thus “dialectical” fulfillment, within the context of changing sets of political and economic institutions and relationships, but culminating in a particular “post-historical” epoch (such as is apparently offered by Hegel and Marx), we not only discard the timeless quality of human experiences of freedom, we also arrogantly attribute to ourselves a trans-historical comprehension of which we are clearly incapable.

Indeed, for the bulk of the twentieth century the battle between the century’s two great ideological movements, Communism and Liberal Democracy (both, it seems, claiming residence in the territory of “freedom”), has exhibited just the sort of superficiality and insufficiency of understanding I am describing, and has thereby demonstrated the crying need for a more subtle and complete view of human freedom. Not only were the antagonists intransigent *vis à vis* each other, they were each also, rather obviously in hindsight, only partially right and as a result, in their presumption, profoundly wrong. As testified by the eloquent witness of an Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, the enforced “community” of Soviet communism does suffocate individuals. In addition, as testified by the widespread alienation and social breakdown of contemporary American cities, the shallow individualism of much liberal thinking does undermine community. We have all watched as “liberation movements” have systematically coerced individual consciences into lock-step uniformity, and as disciples of “liberty”

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have praised individual privacy to the point of communal disintegration and near moral anarchy. As a result, we look back on a century marked less by “liberation” than by progressive enslavement, and less by “liberty” than by growing despair, even terror.

Most problematic about the various modern notions of freedom, then, is their fragmented and thus illusionary and superficial character. Diverse and partial notions of human freedom vie for supremacy as comprehensive and complete. Simplistic understandings self-righteously assert moral and political autonomy. As a result, we appear to confront a public sphere within which, to borrow philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s description of our moral predicament, “the language and the appearances of [freedom] persist even though the integral substance of [freedom] has to a large degree been fragmented and then in part destroyed” (*After Virtue*, 5).

My study of Calvin’s work attempts to address this present plight by introducing students of modern politics to what I believe to be a more intricate and comprehensive conception of human freedom. It turns out that Calvin, a thinker who clearly anticipates modernity, warns against just the sort of superficiality and fragmentation of freedom which the modern age has bequeathed us. He systematically describes three “parts” of freedom, which correspond to the three primary modern ideas of freedom I have described above. Significantly, though, Calvin not only indicates, and critiques, the shallow understanding that each particular “part” might engender, he also demonstrates the interdependence, even coherence, of the parts within the larger context of Christ as God’s incarnate Word. One might then say, again, that Calvin’s conception both anticipates and serves as an antidote to each of the primary modern conceptions of freedom. His portrait aims to account for all three dimensions of human political experience, the individual, the communal, and the historical.

For Calvin, the primary reality for human beings is the reality of a sovereign and loving God, one who reveals himself in the patterns and substance of the natural order, in the Scriptural accounts as inspired by his Spirit, in the person and earthly ministry of his only begotten son Jesus Christ, and in the spiritual promptings of human conscience. This God is the Creator of all time and space; of all life; of all the beings, both living and non-living, which func-

tion within time and space; of all the mechanisms and patterns of their functioning; and therefore of all humankind and of all moral law. He is as well Ruler and Governor of his creatures and the created order in which he has placed them; he thus sustains and directs his creatures in accordance with his design and plan. As Ruler and Governor of his creation, God is no puppeteer: human beings have the gift of human will, though due to their own willful pride and its resulting self-imprisonment, one could hardly describe that will as “free.” Finally, therefore, God determines to serve as the Redeemer of all that his human creatures have perverted by following their own designs rather than his. In and beyond historical time, therefore, and in and through his three Persons, he works by way of both natural and supernatural means to save and restore what he has made, what he clearly loves, indeed treasures.

As sovereign, God is his own authority: he is accountable to no person or no principle other than his own will. Yet his will is the will of a righteous but loving, gracious, and long-suffering parent. In nature, in Scripture, and in the person and historical destiny of Jesus Christ he shows both the precision and ferocity of his judgments and the boundlessness of his love. In taking the punishment of human perversion upon his own shoulders Christ simultaneously satisfies God’s judgment and personifies his love. It is on account of Christ’s atoning sacrifice and the Holy Spirit’s redemptive inspiration, then, that Christians live lives that move from heedful guilt to heady gratitude. This rhythmic interplay of guilt and gratitude, growing from recognition of the meritless grace which has issued from a sovereign God, thereby defines the Christian stance, according to Calvin.

In more practical and immediate terms, living a grateful life in the face of a sovereign God implies recognition and experience of the three-dimensional liberation, even emancipation, from ordinary institutional structures and expectations which Calvin describes in his pointed essay “On Christian Freedom.” Yet at the same time it implies the newly and intimately felt sense of even closer attachment to God and to the very same institutional order which he in his providence has ordained for their good. By way of the first dimension or “part” of Christian freedom, then, believers are freed as individuals from the curse of punishment aimed at violators of God’s moral law.

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Since they have, individually and as humankind, locked themselves into cages of prideful rebellion against the full majesty of that law, God comes in Christ to pay the price of their imprisonment and to reintegrate them into his sainted community. Their liberation as individuals, then, composes this first dimension of freedom in Christ. For God comes to them in the immediacy of personal faith and subsequent repentance. They now stand as though fully righteous in God's sight. Yet at precisely the same time, they now recognize how beholden they are to the institutional workings of God's persistent love. They experience both a newfound independence in the face of humanly constructed barriers to God and a newly felt dependence on the God who reaches out to them through and around those “barriers.” Their independence from institutions joins with their dependence on them.

Because they are freed individually from the “curse” of God's law, Christians are freed, secondly, for willful and grateful obedience to the commands of God's law. As a *body*, they are now spiritually and emotionally equipped to perform what Calvin calls “all the duties of love.” They are freed for full service to the loving and ruling God they adore. In political terms, they are freed for world-transforming “action” as this body of believers. Their freedom blossoms in their losing themselves in the bonds of corporate institutional life. In this way they are electrified, in God's name and through his power, to address the needy and reform the perverse. At the same time, however, they now understand even more poignantly that their actions remain under the omniscient eye of God's righteous judgment. Their energizing gratitude melds with their muzzling recognition of the insidious spell of pride and the terrifying judgment of sovereign God.

Christians are freed, thirdly, from those culturally idiosyncratic “outward” or “indifferent things” for which Calvin uses the Greek term *adiaphora*. Since such things as particular ceremony, ritual, or custom are in themselves inessential to salvation, Christians may take or leave them alone. Politically, this third dimension emancipates believers from their particular historical setting, thereby opening their eyes to see God's trans-historical progress in ushering in his final kingdom. Seen narrowly, this third dimension may thus constitute Calvin's most revolutionary

teaching. Yet at the same time that God's providential tending of his creation points believers to look ahead in time, it points them to look back as well. That God is slowly, deliberately, inexorably restoring his creation is as true as that he is doing so *by means of* particular historical constraints. What this means is that at the same time Christian believers discover their freedom to move progressively toward the culmination of God's restoration history, they discern anew the grace of their current historical setting: God works progressively *through* what he has in tradition and ceremony provided. Christian freedom once again means feeling one's way along the delicate interplay between progressive renewal and attentive inveteracy, in full reliance upon God's explicit, though for believers often mysterious, revelation.

The strong thread which weaves all of freedom's dimensional strands together is Calvin's Biblically-grounded notion of sovereign grace. Human confrontation with an all-powerful, all-authoritative, yet all-loving and all-forgiving God yields both a new humility and an energizing gratitude. The God who rules, by inspiration and loving example, quite logically finds followers both willing to judge and willing to withhold judgment, both willing to act and willing to wait, both willing to transform and willing to conserve. In all things they determine both to acknowledge God's prerogative and their own crying need. Needless to say the elements of sovereignty and of grace are both essential to this equation. How could believers follow a God who is not truly Lord of their lives? At the same time, how could believers sacrificially serve a God who is not ultimately about love? Right away, then, Calvin denies the two great truths of modernity: that human beings are their own masters, and that the exercise of power is superior to all other motivations. Right away indeed, Calvin asserts that the myths of power and human mastership are exactly what stand in the way of authentic human living.

William Stevenson's new book *Sovereign Grace: The Place and Significance of Christian Freedom in John Calvin's Political Thought*, (Oxford Press, 1999) is available from the Calvin bookstore 1-800-748-0122.