

John Calvin's Approach to Politics and Government¹

A. ***INTRODUCTION: Background Information***

The core of this short paper consists of a number of paragraphs purporting to summarize the basic insights of John Calvin with respect to politics and government. Understanding these propositions, however, requires some acquaintance with their background. No one can or, probably, should completely divorce himself from his environment, traditions, culture. Calvin retained a number of attitudes that sometimes militated against his better insights and which may have prevented him at times from understanding the full implications of these insights (Sanders, 260).

1. One such factor was that of a *static society*. Calvin shared with his contemporaries the notion that folk were basically meant to remain in their positions in life. The fluidity of present social mobility was outside of his purview (Hage, 147, 152, 163, 166).

2. The notion of a pluralistic society had not yet seen the light; all parties and churches at the time assumed a *unified* religious situation. Toleration was no one's hallmark. That modern characteristic was to emerge from the bloody religious wars that marked the Reformation and Post-reformation era (Sabine, 355; Hage, 147; Sanders, 255).

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3. One will search in vain for democratic sympathies in Calvin and his contemporaries. Calvin tended more towards oligarchic thinking. (Sabine, 363; Sanders, 261).

5. Though people tend to think of Calvin primarily as an opponent to the Roman Catholic Church (RC), his main discussion on government and politics is aimed more at *Anabaptists* than it is at RC (*Institutes*, IV/20).

6. Basic to Calvin's views on our subject is his rejection of the medieval synthesis known as Scholasticism with its *nature/grace* scheme. That scheme basically relegated the use of Scripture to the so-called religious or spiritual area of life, while in other areas man's reason sufficed to provide him with the wisdom necessary to run his affairs. Here Calvin differed not only from RC, but also from Luther. Calvin appreciated the intellectual heritage that had come to him through Greek and Latin pagan thinkers. However, he insisted that reason, like all other aspects of human life, was corrupted by sin, so that it stood in the service of a selfish heart and was therefore not free. Hence, all our rational activity requires the light of Scripture to overcome the effects of sin. Thus the teachings of the Bible played a much more consciously prominent part in Calvin's thinking on government and politics than is the case with some other traditions.

I believe this to be a crucial point for our conference. Even if we as 20th century Christians cannot accept all his ideas, *Calvin's greatest gift to us is the conscious and insistent use of the Bible for all areas of culture*, including the political, though not at the cost of despising the results of reason and tradition. In another publication I have sought to demonstrate the havoc Christians can cause when they do not so consciously and insistently use the Bible for their socio-political affairs (Boer, throughout, but esp. 468-487; Sander, 253; Hage, 159. Cf. also my earlier paper, pp. 18-19).

7. For those who wish to follow up this brief paper, it should be noted that many writers on Calvin – and, for that matter, on Luther – often restrict their research to the main writings these men have produced on political subjects. However, a responsible approach demands also a careful study of their other writings in which occasional references occur that are relevant for the subject. That means, for Calvin, that a study restricted to *Institutes*, Book IV, Ch. 20, will not do justice to his full insights.

B. ***CIVIL GOVERNMENT (CG) AND POLITICS: Nature and Function***

1. Like Augustine and Luther, Calvin taught *two kingdoms and two governments*. These were based on a dual anthropology that sees man in terms of the familiar dualities of inner/outer, soul/body, spiritual/physical. The two resultant governments coincide with these two aspects of man, namely spiritual government that deal mainly with the spiritual and the political or CG that deals with the rest of man's affairs. Both of these kingdoms or governments have positive functions (*Institutes*, III/10/15; IV/20, 1-2; II/2/13).

2. *The relationship between these two governments* is such that on the one hand they must be clearly distinguished and examined separately. On the other hand, Calvin resisted separating these two realms too much. Commenting on Matthew 22:21, the famous passage about rendering unto Caesar and God their respective dues, Calvin remarked

You should rather take pains to give God the worship He requires of you, and at the same time render to men what is their due. Perhaps that distinction hardly seems to apply, because properly speaking when we do our duty towards men we thereby fulfill our obedience to God. But to get His message across to the man in the street Christ is content to distinguish

the spiritual Kingdom of God from the political order and round of current affairs (Quoted in Sinnema, p. 15).

See also paragraph 17 for the magistrate's responsibility for the Christian religion.

3. The true *sovereign is God* himself. Civil magistrates are under Him and must obey Him. All, including magistrates, are to submit to Him. "The Lord ... is King of kings. When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard ..." (*Institutes*, IV/20/32). Civil rulers thus rule on behalf of God, not man. They are primarily responsible to Him, not to man (*Institutes*, IV/20/4, 5, 6, 10; Sinnema, 16; Sanders, 255; Hage, 169).

4. Hence civil magistrates are given *names of honour*. They are called, among other things, God's ministers, representatives, vice-gerent, vicars, deputies. Calvin reminds us that Scripture even calls rulers "gods." "... No man can doubt that civil authority is ... not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honourable, of all stations in mortal life." He insisted on this high calling especially *vis a vis* the Anabaptists who held CG in low esteem. (*Institutes*, IV/20/4, 6; Sanders, 258; Sabine, 366).

5. Anabaptists rejected Christian involvement in CG. Over against them, Calvin insisted that the magisterial office may legitimately be *occupied by Christians*. He defends his stand by reference to an array of Biblical examples (*Institutes*, IV/20/2, 4, 9; Sinnema, 21). This would, of course, follow from Propositions 3, 4, 6

6. All civil *magistrates are ordained by God*, including tyrants, according to Romans 13:1. It is not that God has ordained tyranny, but the people who so distort a God-given institution are ordained to the office they themselves distort. They remain ordained in spite of this distortion. Absolute tyranny is impossible, for God will not allow his order of justice to be completely obliterated; God himself will bridle it. When such tyranny arises, people should examine

themselves to see whether it could not be divine punishment for sin (*Institutes*, IV/20/7, 25; Sinnema, 21).

7. Because of their ordination by God, *tyrants are not to be resisted*, at least not by private citizens. Tyrants may be resisted only by subordinate magistrates (*Institutes*, IV/20/24-31; Sabine, 357-359, 366-367).

8. One exception to the above is the case when the ruler makes demands *contrary to one's conscience or to God's will*. "If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it." A case in point is Daniel (*Institutes*, IV/20/32).

9. Not only is a private citizen prevented from resisting a tyrant, he is *prevented from all political involvement*. Only those ordained to political life are to engage in politics; private citizens have only the call to obey. This ban, however, must not be understood as a negative attitude towards politics as we have known it in Nigeria. It was the product of Bible study from a pre-democratic static point of view (*Institutes*, IV/20, 23; Sinnema, 21, Sanders, 259, 261).

10. The citizen's duty is to *obey the magistrate*, for to obey him is to obey Him who rules through the magistrate and who appointed him: God. To resist the magistrate is to resist God, except for the conscience clause. This injunction is based on various considerations, one of which is the divine appointment and another Scripture as, e.g., Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1; I Peter 2:13-14. Here Calvin differed somewhat from Luther, who taught that Christians do not need CG, but they subject themselves anyway for the sake of their non-Christian neighbour.

According to Calvin, Christians are in need of government for themselves, for they are not yet perfect (*Institutes*, IV/20/5, 7, 22, 23; Sinnema, 20).

11. *Subjection to CG does not negate one's Christian freedom.* In opposition to Anabaptists, Calvin emphasized that Christian freedom is an inner affair that must not be confused with political liberty. It is possible to enjoy inner Christian freedom while simultaneously being subjected to political tyranny (*Institutes*, III/19/15; IV/20/1; Sinnema, 20).

12. The *ability to rule or lead is one of God's good gifts* classified by Calvin along with gifts such as prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, etc. Though in the 1538 edition of the *Institutes* he omitted reference to civil rule in his comments on Romans 12:8 (IV/20/4; Cf. KJV and NEB), in the 1539 edition he broadened the concept of the gift to rule to include not only ecclesiastical rule but also civil rule. A similar expansion of the concept is reflected in the 1540 edition of his commentary on Romans (Sinnema, 19). This means by implication that all the Bible teaches about gifts is to be applied also to civil rulers.

13. As to the origin of CG, Calvin identified three causes: (a) sin requires it; (b) it is God's favour to sinful men; (c) it serves to preserve the human race. Thus, though sin is the original cause, CG must not be regarded as an evil as Anabaptists were wont to do, but it must be appreciated positively as God's favour by which he restrains evil and makes life possible. Calvin's remark that CG is not due to "human perverseness" is aimed also at Anabaptists who tended to despise CG, but it must not be understood as a denial of sin as the basic cause. Thus CG is simultaneously the result of sin and a gift from God (*Institutes*, IV/20/4; Sinnema, 17).

14. To Luther, a *Christian state* would be a contradiction in terms, for, according to Luther, a Christian lives by the Gospel, not by law, while the state by definition is run by law. Since Calvin does not so separate Gospel and law, for him a Christian state is at least theoretically possible. Such a state would be one where the law of God is obeyed.

15. The law of God can take different forms under different circumstances, but it must always be *based on love*. The Mosaic laws are a specific instance of the application of the basic law of love under a concrete set of circumstances. These laws have not been abrogated because they represent the “true and eternal rule of righteousness, prescribed for all men of all nations and times.” The basics of Mosaic law are nothing but an expression or republication of the natural law to which all men are subject and which is lodged in their conscience, but which men have suppressed or distorted because of their sinful nature. Thus, though the specifics of Mosaic legislation are not incumbent on CG, the underlying principles remain valid and obligatory (*Institutes*, IV/20/14-16; Sinnema, 23; Boer 468ff, 487).

16. What then constitutes a *Christian magistrate’s function*? Calvin did not specifically distinguish Christian from non-Christian rule(rs), but he did spell out the functions of a proper magistrate. He proposes two basic functions, namely to *ensure justice* and to *execute judgement*. Justice demands “that they are ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquility, and that their sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all.” The execution of judgement means the CG is “to withstand the boldness of the impious, to repress their violence, to punish their misdeeds.”

17. In the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin added a function that probably we would not accept in our modern day, namely that the CG is also to protect the honour of God. In effect, this means that the magistrate is to *protect the Christian*

religion and actively oppose heresy as well as immorality. In summary, the CG 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” (*Institutes*, IV/20/2, 9; Sinnema, 22; Sabine, 355; Sanders, 256).

18. The above functions require that the CG have the *power of the sword*. Though the Christian is not to shed blood, in utilizing the power of the sword against disturbers of the peace the ruler is not only acting according to Scripture, but he “executes the very judgements of God.” Exercising this power constitutes a virtue (*Institutes*, IV/20/2, 9).

19. Another function that flows out of the basic functions in Paragraphs 16 and 17 is equally taught in Scripture in the *right to wage war*. The CG must be equipped not merely to “repress private crimes ..., but to defend the subjects committed to their guardianship whenever they are hostilely assailed.” Magistrates must be very careful, however, not to let their own passions rule them in this matter. This right may be exercised only when “compelled by the strongest necessity” (*Institutes*, IV/20/11-12).

20. The third subsidiary function approved in the Bible is that of *taxation*. None of the above functions can be carried out without taxes. However, here Calvin expands with a passage most appropriate to our current situation:

Princes, however, must remember ... that their revenues are not so much private chests as treasuries of the whole people (this Paul testifies, Romans 13:6), which they cannot, without manifest injustice, squander or dilapidate; or rather, that they are almost the blood of the people, which it were the harshest inhumanity not to spare. They should also consider that

their levies and contributions, and other kind of taxes, are merely subsidies of the public necessity, and that it is tyrannical rapacity to harass the poor people with them without cause. These things should not simulate princes to profusion and luxurious expenditure ..., but seeing it is of the greatest consequence that, whatever they venture to do, they should do with a pure conscience, it is necessary to teach them how far they can lawfully go, lest, by impious confidence, they incur the divine displeasure. Nor is this doctrine superfluous to private individuals, that they may not rashly and petulantly stigmatize the expenditure of princes ... (*Institutes*, IV/20/13).

21. Calvin recognized *three types of government: monarchy, aristocracy and "popular ascendancy."* It is difficult to determine which is the most useful, "so equal are the terms on which they meet." All have their drawbacks. Monarchy tends to tyranny; aristocracy shares that tendency; "popular ascendancy" tends to sedition. Nevertheless, Calvin preferred the second, i.e. aristocracy, either in its pure form or "modified by popular government." He preferred a modified version because of his little faith in one man to continue to rule justly. If more share power, they can check each other against excesses. Not only is this borne out by experience, but God established that type of rule over Old Testament Israel. Calvin refused to make an absolute choice between these various forms of government, since different forms suit different countries. However, once the Lord has assigned a certain form of government to a nation, it would not only be "foolish superfluous" to seek a change, but downright "pernicious." (*Institutes*, IV/20/8).

22. Calvin rejected "political millenarianism," the idea that the Kingdom of God can be established in our present dispensation through political or any other human means. That is to say, we will never be able to arrive at a perfect society. The assumption that this was possible was the error of Anabaptists. Calvin held a very high view with respect to the use of the Bible's teachings in these affairs; in fact, such teachings were obligatory, since they served to correct the product of

human reason that was under the influence of sin. Yet, he entertained no illusion that Christian obedience in politics would lead towards the perfect city, since human sinfulness could not be eliminated. That does not mean, however, that Christian obedience could not serve to improve society considerably (Sinnema, 19).

c. **CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

In Section A it was noted that certain aspects of Calvin's thought characterize him as a child of his age and some of these aspects would not necessarily be constructive for us today. You will have noticed them as we proceeded through the paper. However, there are also a number of positive aspects that we do well to seriously consider in the Nigerian context of today.

1. Calvin was very positive with respect to the role of government and participation in politics. He was negative with respect to popular participation in a nondemocratic era, but politics itself was regarded positively as an area of man's service to God and his neighbour. In fact, *he held it in great honour*.

2. The discussion in Part B does not indicate how much Calvin based his discussion on the Bible. The positive role of the Bible is another important, if not the most important, heritage from Calvin. *Politics cannot be divorced from the Bible*.

3. The purpose of government he identified basically as the *preservation of justice*. Lining one's own pocket with public money was an abhorrence to him.

Now there are three established churches of Calvinist origin in Nigeria and one that is just beginning to get established. These are:

- Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (Hq. in Takum, Gongola State. Referred to as CRCN).
- The Church of Christ in the Sudan among the Tiv (Hq. in Gboko, Benue State. Popularly known by the abbreviation of its Tiv name: NKST).
- The Presbyterian Church of Nigeria (Hq. in Aba).
- The Nigerian Reformed Church (Hq. Anambra. Known as NRC).

It is too early to say anything about NRC, since it is just beginning. However, it cannot be said that the first three churches have been noted for this positive Calvinistic approach to political life. How does one account for that?

The reason is that the missions that have established these churches were from churches that had adopted some characteristics that kept them from bequeathing this positive Calvinist heritage. The missions serving the first two were strongly marked with a *pietistic* stamp that effectively mooted any potential for a positive contribution to Nigerian politics. The mission out of which the Presbyterian Church arose, in addition to a pietistic strain, inherited a *rationalistic* tendency from the philosophy known as Scottish Realism. This heritage was not conducive to an emphatic use of Scripture in politics. Their Calvinistic heritage has expressed itself mainly in their church order, liturgy and some ecclesiastical practices and beliefs; they have not been the positive force they might have been. The time has come for them to take a good look at the positive aspects of their roots and apply it to the political life of the country for the benefit of all.

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