

JOHN CALVIN'S THEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE

Michael R. Gilstrap

THE year was 1572. It was Saturday, August 23rd, the day before the festival of St. Bartholomew. The Roman Catholic Queen Mother, Catherine de Medici, was meeting with her sordid group of advisors. Her plan to murder the hated Huguenot leader, Admiral Coligny, had back-fired. He had lived through the assassination attempt. Now her son, King Charles IX, was marshalling efforts to locate and bring to trial the would-be assassin and all of his accomplices. Her other son, Anjou, would probably be executed for his part in the ill-fated plan. Although she would escape with her life, she would be forced to leave France in exile and disgrace. Her plans to control the French court for the Roman Catholic Church were about to be destroyed by the accursed Huguenots.¹

Her advisors included a select group of nobles who were united in their mutual greed, hatred of the Huguenots, and loyalty to the Roman Church. All of these men were desperate, and were more than willing to listen to any suggestion that Catherine had to make. Her plan was simple. First, the Admiral must be murdered. Then a carefully organized and precisely executed coup must be made against the Protestant leaders, so that by one forceful blow the enemy would be destroyed. Anjou, Nevers, Gondi, Birague, and Gaspard de Saulx-Tavannes, Marshall of France agreed, but they insisted that it was the King who must give such an order, and so he must be brought to agreement with their plans. They decided to use the argument that new civil wars would begin in order

1. Janet Glenn Gray, *The French Huguenots: Anatomy of Courage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981). This book is probably the best historical work on the Huguenots during the period of the French religious wars from an evangelical perspective. The details of this historical narrative are lifted from this excellent work.

to avenge the Admiral's attempted assassination, and that it was necessary to strike before being struck.

Gondi was given the assignment of relating the astonishing news to the King that it was his mother, along with his brothers and the Guises,² who had planned the attempt on the Admiral's life. While Gondi was explaining to the increasingly angered King, Catherine, along with Anjou and the rest of her group, entered the court room. She began by lying to Charles, telling him that the Admiral had sent dispatches to Germany and Switzerland in an effort to raise arms against the King, and then pressed the point that civil war was imminent. With the finesse of the good Machiavellian that she was, Catherine persuaded the King: "You must know that all the Catholics, tired of seemingly endless troubles and dreading new calamities, are resolved to be done with them: if the King does not take their advice—that is, strike first by killing the chief Huguenot leaders tonight—they will be determined to elect a captain-general and organize a league under his protection. Thus you will be left alone, exposed to the worst dangers, with neither power nor authority; you will see France separated into two great parties, over which you will have no command and from which you will obtain no obedience!"³

The implied threat made by Catherine was, of course, that Anjou would be made "captain-general" and take the place of his brother. This thrust at the sorest point of this weak king, his envy of his brother, was enough to cause Charles IX to agree to the offensive murders. He stormed around the room swearing in fury and anger. If his noble friends and family felt it advisable for the Admiral to be killed, then he too wanted it. But he also wanted the death of all the Huguenots in France so that none would remain to reproach him later. He gave the orders for the plan of his mother to go into effect immediately. He then left the room, leaving his mother and her advisors to give such specific orders as were necessary for the execution of such a diabolical enterprise.

During the next 24 hours, the streets of Paris ran with the

2. The noble house of Guise controlled the Lorraine in northeastern France. They were fiercely loyal to the Roman Church, and were probably agents of Philip II, King of Spain, the most powerful monarch in the Vatican stable at the time.

3. Quoted in Gray, p. 136.

blood of Huguenot men, women, children, and infants. Paris was filled with a fanatical and irresponsible mob of people. The white cross of St. Bartholomew, being displayed everywhere, gave to the crowd an identity, and it lent to the mob the "holy cause" of wiping out the accursed heretics. As the day progressed, the taste of blood in the Parisian mob's collective mouth moved them to an even greater slaughter. Three to five thousand Huguenots were murdered in one day in Paris alone. During the coming months the slaughter spread to the surrounding countryside. In fact, this venom so threatened anyone of the Reformed faith, that Geneva, which is southeast of France, feared that the madness might spread even into Switzerland. Beza wrote to Bullinger at Zurich: "Our friend Lochmann will advise you concerning the cruelest, the most atrocious events. I am sure that in that day more than 300,000 of our own people bare their throats in France; one no longer takes account of rank, sex, or age. Here we are assuredly exposed to the same danger and it is perhaps the last time I write to you. One could not doubt that it is a question of universal conspiracy which is going to erupt. My father, be advised of our common peril and more than ever pray with us. I am quite particularly aimed at and am thinking about death more than life. Farewell to you as well as your dear brother."⁴

For a period of three to six months after the initial massacre, France was controlled by the mob, and violent death at the hands of one's neighbor was a common occurrence. As one might guess, what began as a massacre of the Huguenots soon developed into such a slaughter that anyone could be a victim. As the nobleman Mexeray writes, "If one had money, or a well-paid office, or dangerous enemies, or hungry heirs, then one was a Huguenot."⁵ The overall effect on France was devastating. Economically, the nation lost the most productive citizens that it had. Commerce was disrupted by the widespread destruction from armies, sieges, pillages, and sackings. The King was not able to control the seas or the highways. The greatest loss for France, however, was in the raping of morality and true religion. The Huguenot was a

4. Quoted in Gray, p. 138. Beza was the chief advisor to the Huguenots from Geneva.®

5. Quoted in Gray, p. 140.

believer in the Reformation faith with a deep sense of his obligations to God. He was a follower of John Calvin and the theology that was emanating from Geneva. In one fatal swoop, France lost whatever hope she had of becoming a strong nation once again. In the aftermath of the massacre, most of Europe viewed France as something below despicable. From this time on, France was never to gain the position and power that she once had held and aspired to. Two hundred years later, the French Revolution finished the job that was begun on that infamous day in 1572.

The reason that this article has begun with the historical narrative of St. Bartholomew's day is to set the stage for the reader to understand, albeit with an extreme, climactic example, the context in which the Calvinistic doctrine of resistance to tyrants was worked out. The work that was done by Calvin and his disciples cannot be fully appreciated unless one understands that it was done in the fires of intense persecution in their native France.

Due to the confines of this paper, the subject is being limited to the theology of resistance in the thought of John Calvin. The seminal thinking in the area was done by Calvin, and his followers, most notably Theodore Beza and Francis Hotman, merely built upon what the master had taught them without any substantial change. Calvin's doctrine of civil government will be presented first, and then his notions regarding resistance to tyrants will be discussed.

Background to Reformed Political Thought

Reformed political thought has been neglected by most evangelical thinkers as well as most Christian historians. In fact, the history of the Reformation has been treated largely as a strictly ecclesiastical phenomenon. Nothing could be further from the truth. The history of the Reformation is the history of a cultural upheaval that had dramatic effect on every area of life, especially the political. The struggle of 16th century politics had much to do with the success or failure of the Reformation in different countries, as can be most accurately seen with respect to France. On the one hand, the Reformers, in direct opposition to the Anabaptists,⁶ everywhere asserted

6. The best book available on Calvin's relations with the Anabaptists is Wilhelm Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Eerdmans, 1980), \$17.95. The book is available from Geneva Divinity School Press at a discounted price of \$11.00.

that the gospel must be applied to the everyday concerns of political life. On the other hand, they rejected the medieval idea of ecclesiastical and political union in order to fracture the Holy Roman Empire. Their situation was a difficult one. Not only did they have to contend with the Anabaptists, but they also had to fight the might and power of the Roman Catholic Church and her political allies. The Reformers, therefore, had to establish their churches against both ecclesiastical and political opposition.

The dilemma that this situation created is obvious. On the one hand, God requires his people to give supreme allegiance to Him even to the point of hating father and mother (Luke 14:26), while on the other hand, a Christian must also take seriously Paul's admonition to be "in subjection to the governing authorities" (Rom. 13:1f.).

Each of the different "arms" of the Reformation answered this dilemma in different ways. The Lutheran Reformation ultimately solved the problem via a compromise that is summed up in the formula *cuius regio, eius religio*, which means "he who reigns, his religion." In other words, the local prince decided what the religion of that locale would be. As Christoph Jungen notes, "One of the consequences of this compromise-solution was that after the Peace of Augsburg (1555), the Lutheran Reformation stagnated and advanced only insignificantly beyond those areas in which it had already been established by that day."⁷

The Zwinglian Reformation was not very different, although in many respects more militant. The various loci of the Swiss Reformation usually began with popular resistance to the corrupt Roman Catholic Church, but it almost invariably ended by imposing the religion of the Reformation upon the cities and cantons by the civil magistracy. Where the magistracy was not converted, the Reformation made little inroads.

The Calvinistic arm of the Reformation was quite different. "Not only did Calvinism succeed in gaining a large following in France," writes Jungen, "where opposition and persecution were most severe, but it also succeeded in break-

7. Christoph Jungen, "Calvin and the Origin of Political Resistance Theory in the Calvinist Tradition" (Unpublished Th.M. Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980), p. 3.

ing all national boundaries and established itself in many places throughout Europe that otherwise remained staunchly Catholic."⁸ The case of France, which was previously referred to, is the prime example. Of all the countries in Western Europe, the absolutism of the Roman Catholic ruler in France had progressed the farthest. As can be seen by Calvin's own early exile, toleration of the new "heresy" was not even an option. Regardless of this opposition, Calvinism was as popular in France as it was anywhere else in Western Europe.

In a period of some twenty to twenty-five years, Calvinism, in the person of the Huguenots, became so influential that it even threatened the power of the King of France. What kind of political ideas were necessary in order to provide this driving force? That is the question with which this paper is concerned.

Two Key Considerations

There are two key considerations that must be touched upon before moving on to the corpus of Calvin's thought. The first involves the traditional conception of Calvin as a theologian and philosopher, and the second involves the sociological changes that the culture of the Reformation went through during this time.

In answer to the above question, "What kind of political ideas were necessary to provide the driving force behind the Calvinistic Reformation," many scholars simply throw the question back by flatly denying a political consideration at all. They say that Calvin was first, last, and always a theologian. There were times when he dabbled in philosophy, but he certainly was not a political ideologist! In the opinion of this author, it is important not to think of Calvin simply in the traditional categories of theologian and philosopher as those terms are defined. Traditionally, the power of a theology has been in its capacity to offer believers a knowledge of God and so make possible an escape from the effects of the curse and provide communion with God. Likewise, the power of a philosophy lies in its capacity to explain to its students the world and human society as they are and must be, and so to win for them that freedom which consists in an acknowledgement of

8. Jungen, p. 4.

those necessities. Calvin, on the other hand, not only brought the knowledge of God, freedom from the effects of the curse through Jesus Christ, and consequent communion with God, but he also activated his disciples and motivated them to change the world. His theology involved not only a description of contemporary experience as being unacceptable and unnecessary (that is, he showed a way to escape the effects of the curse), but at the same time he rejected a merely personal salvation. Rather, he called for the salvation of the world by Jesus Christ.⁹ It is, therefore, a mistake to limit the thought of John Calvin to the ecclesiastical realm; he had much to say about the political sphere.

The second consideration has to do with the progression of political thinking from the time of the Roman Empire up through the Middle Ages. During the Roman Empire, the average citizen had a very narrow sense of political duty. He was ready to perform any public tasks for which he might be made responsible by birth or by appointment. But he had no sense of public vision, no idea of the state reformed, no particular political purpose. His aim in his office was nothing more than an honorable performance. He had very little political imagination, and could discover no ideal to pursue patiently and systematically. During the Roman Empire, citizenship had lost its meaning, and all men had become, in one way or another, subjects, whose political existence had but one essential characteristic: that they obeyed impersonal, more or less legal commands.¹⁰

The collapse of the Empire and her universal sovereignty shattered even this politics, subjecting men to a frightening variety of extra-legal commands and forcing them to make private and personal arrangements. The feudal system that eventually emerged from these arrangements virtually precluded political relations. For the formal, impersonal, legal, and functional-rational ties established by a conventional political system, it substituted the extended family and the private treaty, relations intensely personal and in substance natural, patriarchal, and affective. For the

9. Greg Bahnsen, "The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. III, No. 2, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: 1976), pp. 48-105.

10. Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), pp. 5ff.

interests and ideals that bound men together in the pursuit of political goals, it substituted the bonds of personal loyalty, kinship, and neighborhood. For the rational consideration of political methods, it substituted blind adherence to customary ways. Men came to inherit not merely their lands and possessions, but also their social place and their moral and personal commitments. Reverence for tradition paralleled the reverence for fathers and lords, and similarly precluded impersonal devotion to ideas, parties, and states. Familial and dynastic aggression or retreat replaced political activity. Distant and largely powerless kings retained some vestiges of authority and some claim to dominate the world of feudal arrangements only by invoking divine right and acting out the magical rites of religious kingship. But if this somewhat increased the respect with which the monarchy was regarded, it also intensified the apathy of the citizens—leaving the kings no dependable supporters except God and their relatives. The religion of the Middle Ages didn't help any either. Under the synthesis of pagan cults and Christianity, politics became tied to the realm of magic and religion. Ordinary man lived in a narrower world, tied to family, village, and feudal lord, and forgot the ideas of citizenship and the common good. Religion reinforced the philosopher's advice: politics and religion don't mix. As Michael Walzer notes, "the traditional world-view of medieval man, with its conception of an unchanging political order, hierarchical and organic, and its emphasis upon personal and particularistic relations, probably precluded any sort of independent political aspiration or initiative."¹¹

All that the Middle Ages could muster, even from a more Biblical perspective, were men, not movements. The world-view and cultural outlook of the people precluded any sort of broadly based movement. The most important example of this is Savonarola, the Florentine Reformer. It was his endeavor, he wrote, to "make Florence virtuous, create for her a state that will preserve her virtue."¹² This might have provided an ideal around which to shape political activity and organize a party of zealots. But the single motor force of the Savonarolan reform was Savonarola himself. He exerted a

11. Walzer, p. 8.

12. Quoted in Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola* (New York, 1959), p. 105.

charisma so purely personal, so incapable of organizational expression, that there remained after the death of the man himself nothing more than an exotic memory and a rather uninteresting collection of sermons. The Florentines were entirely correct to recognize in Savonarola a man but not a movement, a passion but not an ideology. Half a century later the people of Geneva would discover precisely the opposite was true of John Calvin.

The final step in this progression of political thought came during the Reformation itself, specifically the Genevan and French Reformation. As was noted, prior to the Reformation, the men and women of the Middle Ages found their political identity in terms of familial and dynastic relations. Interests, ideals, goals, and convictions were all subservient to these considerations. With the coming of the Reformation, however, there was a radical change in the way people looked at themselves. Instead of finding their identity with their family, or the dynasty which they served, these new converts to the Reformed faith began to find their identity with the Church of Jesus Christ, as opposed to the Church of Rome. Because of the medieval conception of the union of the political and ecclesiastical spheres, it was relatively easy for these new converts to accept the applicability of the Word of God to all of life, including their politics. Now their allegiance was directed not by feudal loyalties, but by their religious and ecclesiastical convictions. Reformed interests, ideals, and goals dictated their politics, and the bond that was formed by being in covenant with God and His Church also bound them together politically so that a new "party" was formed. As we have earlier remarked, this new "party" changed the complexion of a large part of Western Europe, and it was largely the result of John Calvin.

Calvin and Civil Government

Calvin begins his remarks on civil government with these words: "But my readers, assisted by the very clarity of the arrangement, will better understand what is to be thought of the whole subject of civil government if we discuss its parts separately. These are three: the magistrate, who is the protector and guardian of the laws; the laws, according to which he governs; the people, who are governed by the laws and obey

the magistrate."¹³

Before Calvin's doctrine of civil disobedience can be adequately discussed, it is necessary to understand his thinking with regard to civil government. Here we generally follow the outline that he himself lays down. First, it is necessary to look at the origins of civil government. Then Calvin's view of the magistracy will be examined. Third, his conception of civil law and constitutionalism will be covered; and finally, the place of the people in Calvin's system will be discussed.

The Origins of Civil Government

Calvin insisted very strongly that civil government was ordained by God. Before the twelfth century, the prevailing understanding had been that it was God who instituted a unified state that was enclosed within definite boundaries.¹⁴ But with the popularization of Aristotle, this theocratic notion was replaced by the notion that the state originates in the natural society of men. This origin may follow a more familial or dynastic route, or it may originate along geographical lines, but common to all of these medieval theories, God was the remote cause. At the same time, the feudal ties that had limited the monarchy in the past were steadily being broken down, and the way of absolutism was left open. Already in the fifteenth century, the French estates had declared as an offense against the majesty of the king and as heresy, the denial that the King was to be recognized as the supreme sovereign.¹⁵

This situation proved something of a dilemma to the progress of the Reformation. The anabaptists responded to this by describing the magistrate's office as "carnal" and affirmed that the sword of the magistrate is "outside the perfection of Christ."¹⁶ The Reformers, on the other hand, insisted that civil government is ordained by God, and that there is no authority which is not so ordained. Calvin was, therefore, not alone in his thinking, but he did have certain distinctives.

13. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) IV, xx, 3.

14. Jungen, p. 15.

15. Jungen, p. 16.

16. William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Chicago, 1959), p. 27f.

The question that the anabaptists forced Calvin to deal with was whether or not civil government was really necessary. Most of the governments of his day had little to offer to the Protestants, and more often than not persecuted and oppressed them. Would it not be better to bring in the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Christ immediately and do away with civil government altogether, so that the gospel of Christ might directly rule the world?¹⁷

Although Calvin despised the absolutism that had swallowed up his native France, and had no intention of lending a hand to the terrible abuses of power that accompanied absolutism, he everywhere disagreed with this militant anabaptist approach. As Jungen observes, Calvin "agreed that the civil order did not exist for its own sake, and did not have a value of its own, apart from the ordinances of God."¹⁸ Although some scholars claim otherwise, neither did Calvin believe that the civil order would continue forever, or had been there from the beginning. In a sermon upon Deuteronomy 16:18, 19 he said: "If we had continued in the same soundness of nature wherein God created us: the order of Law (as men term it) should not be so needful, because every man should carry the law in his heart, so as no man needed to be compelled to obedience, but every man should know his rule, and we should all with one accord follow that which is good and rightful."¹⁹

Here Calvin assigned to the civil order the place to which he thought it belonged, namely the history of the world between the fall and consummation. In so doing Calvin distanced himself not only from those who glorified the state or the magistracy for its own sake as if it had perpetual legitimation in the order of nature apart from God, but also from those who did not take the fall seriously, and wished to establish the Kingdom prematurely.²⁰

In Calvin's opinion, something happened between the creation and the present day to occasion the system of laws and magistrates that we refer to as civil government. That "occasional cause" was the fall of man into sin. As Michael Walzer

17. This is what the anabaptists did try to do at Munster in 1535.

18. Jungen, p. 17.

19. John Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, Ch. 16:18, 19.

20. Walzer, p. 30 ff.

rightly observes, the first plank upon which Calvin built his entire political system is the inescapable estrangement of man from God which was caused by the fall.²¹ He did not believe that the fall actually produced the order, however, but he did believe that were it not for the fall, civil government would have been unnecessary.

Although Calvin assigned the "occasional cause" of civil government to be the fall, he firmly believed that the "effectual cause" is found only in God, whose redemptive work started with the fall, and thus, in a very real sense, included the establishment of a civil order. It is most enlightening to note that Calvin placed his chapter on civil government within the section which as a whole deals with "the external means or aims by which God invites us to the society of Christ and holds us therein."²² Further, Calvin lists as the purpose of civil government "to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the Church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquillity."²³ Again he writes, "it has not come about by human perversity that the authority over all things on earth is in the hands of kings and other rulers, but by divine providence and holy ordinance."²⁴ Calvin unequivocally claimed that there are no powers except those ordained by God.

Against the anabaptist's claim that civil government was carnal, and should be opposed upon the ground as inhabiting the Kingdom of God, Calvin asserted that the state was a "testimony of the grace of God,"²⁵ and the system of laws is due to His "admirable bounty" and "singular grace."²⁶ Calvin sweepingly asserted that "all kings of the earth have been placed upon their thrones by the hand of God, and the kingdoms of this world are appointed by the decree of heaven,"²⁷ and although these kings are either more or less good, he was careful to maintain that civil government is the

21. Walzer, p. 27.

22. *Institutes*, title of Book IV.

23. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 2.

24. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 4.

25. Quoted in Jungen, p. 20.

26. Quoted in Jungen, p. 20.

27. *Commentary* on Psalm 110.1.

greatest gift that God has given us in this transitory life.²⁸

Calvin held out a very high view of the magistrate and his offices to his readers and hearers, and this served as a warning and reminder to those who wished to give little respect to the magistrates; but he did not support any of the absolutistic notions common in his day. "For Calvin the fact that monarchs and other magistrates hold office by a sovereign act of God does not so much imply that their rule is absolute and inviolable, but rather it is an expression of the ultimate authority of God over them that implies heightened duties and responsibilities to him."²⁹

The Magistrate

For Calvin, each man had a distinct calling before God and accompanying duties, whether he realized them or not. Some were endowed by the Spirit of God for the difficult task of being magistrates. Others were subjects whose primary duty it was to obey the laws and the magistrates who enforced them. For Calvin, the scriptural injunction concerning submission to the will of one's parents and the responsibility of their calling as parents had similar applications to politics. He writes, "In the fifth commandment are comprised by synecdoche all superiors in authority. . . . The name of God is, figuratively indeed, . . . applied to magistrates, upon whom, as the ministers of his authority, he has inscribed a mark for his glory. . . . His own dignity is claimed for the judges, in order that the people may reverence them, because they are God's representatives, as His lieutenants, and vicars.

"It is a signal exaltation of magistrates, that God should not only count them in the place of parents, but present them to us dignified by His own name."³⁰

If it were not enough that God appointed magistrates as His representatives, and invested them with His dignity, in Calvin's view, He actually makes them the external medium of salvation in the broad sense of the term. Indeed, as he wrote in the *Institutes*, their function is not less than that of "bread, water, sun, and air."³¹ They are one of the ordinary

28. *Commentary* on Romans 13:1f

29. Jungen, p. 21. Cf. *Commentary* on Psalm 110:1.

30. *Commentary* on Exodus 22:28.

31. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 3.

means of bestowing the abundant blessings of everyday life.

The magistrate's responsibilities are many-fold, but chiefly it is to promote "humanity" among men.³² He is to prevent idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against the truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people. He is to promote the public peace, and see to it that each man is able to keep his property safe and sound. The magistrate is also to provide that men carry on blameless intercourse among themselves, and that honesty and modesty be preserved in their jurisdiction.³³

In addition to the more formal functions that a magistrate must fulfill, great demands are placed upon his personal life and character. "What great zeal for uprightness, for prudence, gentleness, self-control, and for innocence ought to be required of themselves by those who know that they have been ordained ministers of divine justice? How will they have the brazenness to admit injustice to their judgement seat, which they are told is the throne of the living God? How will they have the boldness to pronounce an unjust sentence, by that mouth which they know has been appointed an instrument of divine truth? With what conscience will they sign wicked decrees by that hand which they know has been appointed to record the acts of God? To sum up, if they remember that they are vicars of God, they should watch with all care, earnestness, and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice. . . . They are deputies of God, to whom they must hereafter render account of the administration of their charge."³⁴

As can be seen from this statement, magistrates are invested with the authority of God, and are wholly His representatives and acting as His vicegerents.³⁵ In some sense, God shares His very attributes and titles with those in authority, He lights them with the spark of His splendor, and they have some share in His honor so that their subjects may

32. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 3.

33. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 3.

34. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 6.

35. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 4.

recognize the divine ordination, and respect them accordingly.³⁶

Yet, in spite of his comments concerning the authority and dignity of the magistracy, Calvin must be understood as not lending his support to absolutism. He insists that though it is God alone that invests kings with authority, and it is by His will that they hold their positions, all power remains lodged in Him, and in so far as respects themselves, they have no legitimate title to reign.³⁷ Calvin, speaking as the true prophet that he was, often sounded a warning to the magistrates: "Judges and magistrates should not arrogate to themselves a power uncontrolled by any laws, nor allow themselves to decide anything arbitrarily or wantonly, nor, in a word, assume to themselves what belongs to God. Magistrates only acquit themselves properly when they remember that they are representatives of God."³⁸

"Let not kings and princes flatter themselves that it seems that the world is created for them, for they are created for the multitude. Has not God established principalities and kingdoms for the common good?"³⁹

"Kings are warned to submit reverently to God's Word, and not to think themselves exempted from what is common to all, or absolved, on account of their dignity, for God has no respect of persons."⁴⁰

"God has set his own arm and power in opposition to the pride of those who thought that they stood by their own power, and did not acknowledge that they were dependent on the hand of God alone, who sustained them as long as he pleased, and then overthrew and reduced them to nothing when it seemed good to him."⁴¹

Calvin's position, rather than supporting the idea that his elevated view of the magistracy lent itself to the rising absolutism in France, proves without a shadow of a doubt that his view of the magistrate, instead of diminishing the ruler's responsibility to God, the law, and his subjects, rather enhanced it, and placed the ruler, as well as the people, in the

36. *Institutes*, II, viii, 35.

37. *Commentary* on Psalms 110:1.

38. *Commentary* on Exodus 18:15.

39. *Calvin's Sermons from Job* (Baker Book House, 1980), p. 192.

40. *Commentary* on Jeremiah 36:29.

41. *Commentary* on Jeremiah 27:5.

position of owing supreme allegiance to their Creator, and ultimately responsible directly to Him.

The Civil Government and Its Laws

"Next to the magistracy in the civil state come the laws, stoutest sinews of the commonwealth, or, as Cicero, after Plato, calls them the souls, without which the magistracy cannot stand, even as they themselves have no force apart from the magistracy. Accordingly, nothing truer could be said than that the law is a silent magistrate; the magistrate, a living law."⁴² So Calvin introduces his section on the civil government and its laws.

It has been shown that Calvin had a very high view of the magistracy. The logical question at this point then might be, "Is it not enough that rulers have been set over the people in a way that whatever they say is the law that has to be obeyed? Would it not detract from their authority to say that the law is something different from the power of the magistrate himself, a law that he himself would then be responsible to?" The proponents of absolutism answered affirmatively, but that is just what Calvin opposed. The quotation above makes that clear.

Human society, according to Calvin, includes both subjects and magistrates, over which God alone is sovereign. The means by which a commonwealth is to be governed is by law, law that has its origin only in God, regardless of whether it is conceived of as divinely revealed, natural, or "man-made" positive law. "Therefore it is not the magistrates as such, but the law that holds the organism of human society together. The civil order is ordered by laws and the state cannot be regarded to be such unless it is actually constituted by law."⁴³

For Calvin, law has three levels: divine, natural, and positive. As might be guessed, his concept of divine law is the inscripturated Word of God. Although it may be contested by some, Calvin also has a very clear teaching regarding natural law.⁴⁴ But for him, nature is the divinely instituted creation order.⁴⁵ Although it has suffered through the fall, as a whole it

42. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 14.

43. Jungen, p. 30.

44. *Institutes*, II, ii, 12-17; *Commentary* on Romans 2:14ff.

45. *Institutes*, I, v, 5f.

has been essentially preserved.⁴⁶ Calvin sees revealed law as teaching us the very things that are deposited in nature, but which because of our sin are only dimly known.⁴⁷ According to Calvin, both natural and revealed law are ultimately divine law and each is equally a living expression of the personal, spiritual will of God.⁴⁸ "The written law is just an attestation of the law of nature, through means of which God recalls to our memory that which he has previously engraven on our hearts."⁴⁹

But that which still remains unanswered is exactly what things are known from natural law. And for purposes of civil government, by what principles are these things transformed into positive law?

As one might expect, much of what natural law has to reveal is the same thing that the Scriptures teach. Calvin particularly highlights the laws that are sometimes called creation ordinances: the sanctity of life,⁵⁰ monogamy,⁵¹ obedience to parents and superiors,⁵² and primogeniture.⁵³ These all belong to the principles of natural order.

For Calvin, positive law is the particular set of laws that a nation arrives at according to the principles inherent in natural law (which as has been demonstrated is in some sense divine). Aside from the relatively few concrete pieces of information which were mentioned above, nations must make specific decisions according to these common principles. Calvin refers to these "common principles" as an "equity"⁵⁴ that is the same among all men. He is quite clear in his insistence that any positive law, even Old Testament judicial law, is only a "surface-expression" of these underlying principles inherent in natural law.⁵⁵ In other words, Calvin distinguishes between positive law and the principle of equity upon which the law depends. Although the equity is natural, and the same

46. *Commentary* on Genesis 3:19, 8:21.

47. *Institutes*, II, viii, 1f.; *Commentary* on Ezekiel 16:1-3.

48. *Institutes*, II, xvi, 2f.

49. *Commentary* on Psalm 119:52; cf. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 16.

50. *Commentary* on Genesis 4:15.

51. *Commentary* on Genesis 42:22f.

52. *Commentary* on Genesis 9:22, Exodus 20:12, Deuteronomy 5:16.

53. *Commentary* on Genesis 48:17.

54. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 16.

55. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 16.

for all men, the concrete historical constitutions and judicial laws, because of differing circumstances, may well differ, as long as they look to the same end of equity. This equity alone must be the rule and end and limit of all laws. As he writes, "Whatever laws shall be framed to that rule, directed to that goal, bound by that limit, there is no reason why we should disapprove of them, however they may differ from the Jewish law, or among themselves."⁵⁶

Therefore, the laws made by a specific state ought to be an expression of the natural equity in terms of the situation and needs that the context dictates. For that very reason Calvin refused to speculate about the concrete form of the laws of different nations, since such discussion could go on forever, and would not be profitable.⁵⁷

In addition to the nature of civil law, the point that is particularly important to this discussion, and must be reiterated, is that Calvin described the relationship of the magistrate and the law by means of the ancient formula, "the law is the silent magistrate, and the magistrate a living law." In other words, the magistrate cannot stand without the law, but it is also true that the laws themselves have no force apart from the magistracy. It is extremely important for Calvin that the magistrate not be beyond the law, or without law.⁵⁸ In fact, for Calvin, the notion of being beyond the reach of the law is the main characteristic of what constitutes a tyrant.

The People, or The Ruled

It has already been shown that for Calvin each man has his distinctive calling before God, whether he realizes it or not. The place of the magistrate in Calvin's political thought has already been examined. Now it is time to turn to the people, or the ones who are ruled.

To understand Calvin's position, it is appropriate to present the two major contrasting views alongside of his. As has been noted, absolutism was a problem in Calvin's native France. Absolutism is the tyranny of the ruler. It is best described by the phrase, "The people are made for the sake of

56. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 16.

57. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 16.

58. *Commentary* on Exodus 3:22.

the king." In absolutism, the law is whatever the king decrees. The opposite extreme is democracy. Democracy is the tyranny of the people. In other words, "The king is made for the sake of the people." The law, under a democratic form of government, is whatever the people decide, because they have decided it. Calvin's view, on the other hand, was that the king and the people, together, in their proper places, form a government and well-ordered society which is sovereignly ruled by God. As can be seen, the trinitarian principle of the one and the many is applied here. Government is created by God and ordered by His laws. Both the king and the people are under that law.

Calvin begins his section regarding the people with these words, "The first duty of subjects toward their magistrates is to think most honorably of their office, which they recognize as a jurisdiction bestowed by God, and on that account to esteem and reverence them as ministers and representatives of God."⁵⁹ Note carefully that by "honor," he does not mean simply to tolerate them as a necessary evil, but that they must be respected and revered as God's ministers. A magistrate should be obeyed out of love for God (the source of his office), rather than out of fear of the magistrate himself. This principle leads to Calvin's insistence that a magistrate must be obeyed and respected because of the dignity of his office, even though a wicked person may occupy that office.

Calvin next quotes Paul, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. . . . For he who resists authority resists what God has ordained" (Romans 13:1-2, Vg.). Because of this passage, he writes that "with hearts inclined to reverence their rulers, the subjects should prove their obedience toward them [the magistrates], whether by obeying their proclamations, or by paying taxes, or by undertaking public offices and burdens which pertain to the common defense, or by executing any other command of theirs."⁶⁰ He goes on to say that resistance to the magistrate is resistance to God, and that "even though it seems that an unarmed magistrate can be despised with impunity, still God is armed to avenge mightily this contempt toward himself."⁶¹

59. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 22.

60. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 23.

61. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 23.

Calvin then makes a very important point with regard to civil disobedience: "Moreover, under this obedience I include the restraint which private citizens ought to bid themselves keep in public, that they may not deliberately intrude in public affairs, or pointlessly invade the magistrate's office, or undertake anything at all politically. If anything in a public ordinance requires amendment, let them not raise a tumult, or put their hands to the task—all of them ought to keep their hands bound in this respect—but let them commit the matter to the judgement of the magistrate, whose hand alone here is free."⁶²

Two points must be highlighted from this statement. First of all, in the thought of Calvin, the private citizen has very little authority or responsibility outside of the deference and obedience that he owes to the magistrate. Secondly, the righting of wrongs, or the amendment of an ordinance to make it better, is the sole responsibility of the magistrate, and should be left in his hands. The only way that a private citizen can actively contribute to the well-being of the state, according to Calvin, is to pray for the magistrates. Not only can they therewith benefit the magistrate and themselves, but their prayers are at the same time a sign of their submission and obedience. "We ought not only to obey the kings under whose authority we live, but we ought also to pray for their prosperity, so that God may be a witness of our voluntary subjection."⁶³ He goes on to make the point that if citizens at least do that, they will certainly be reminded of their other duties in the process.⁶⁴ In another place he says that such constant prayer also keeps the citizenry from being indifferent whether God-fearing or godless men exercise rule over them, and should remind them that it is also their responsibility to see that upright men obtain office when the opportunity offers itself.⁶⁵ To sum up, Calvin maintains that the people must regard all magistracy as ordained by God, even though it may not, in character or form, correspond to the ideal of what the magistracy should be. For if this is not done, then it is as if God Himself is being reviled, and the citizenry is casting Him

62. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 23.

63. *Commentary* on Jeremiah 29:7; cf. *Commentary* on I Timothy 2:2.

64. *Commentary* on Jeremiah 29:7.

65. Quoted in Jungen, p. 28.

off so that He may not reign over them.⁶⁶

The Two-Kingdom Doctrine

Before the specifics of Calvin's theory of resistance can be examined, one more foundational element in his teaching on civil government must be touched upon: his two-kingdom doctrine.⁶⁷ It is true that for Calvin all of life is important, and all areas alike must be brought under subjection to Christ. But out of concern for that, the fact that he structured his whole teaching on civil government on the distinction between the spiritual and the political kingdom must not fail to be appreciated.⁶⁸ He begins his chapter on civil government with these words: "Now, since we have established above that man is under a two-fold government, . . . this is the place to say something also about the other kind, which pertains only to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality. . . .

"First, before we enter into the matter itself, we must keep in mind that distinction which we previously laid down so that we do not (as commonly happens) unwisely mingle these two, which have a completely different nature."⁶⁹

As has already been noted, Calvin is very systematic with regard to the arrangement of his teaching. It is, then, extremely important to understand the significance of these introductory remarks, and to take them into account in the immediate context of his discussion of civil government, as well as the larger context of the *Institutes* as a whole.

In the last chapter of the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin covered the subjects of Christian freedom, ecclesiastical power, and civil government. Before he dealt with each of them in turn, he introduced them with the distinction that was going to be foundational for what he was going to say: "There is a two-fold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men. These are usually called the

66. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 7.

67. Jungen, p. 50.

68. In the following section, I am indebted to Christoph Jungen for his helpful insights.

69. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 1.

“spiritual” and the “temporal” jurisdiction, by which is meant that the former sort of government pertains to the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life. The one we may call the spiritual kingdom, the other, the political kingdom. Now these two, as we have divided them, must always be examined separately; and while one is being considered, we must call away and turn aside the mind from thinking about the other. There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority.”⁷⁰

After having dealt with conscience, Christian freedom, and the Church, Calvin again reiterated the distinction at the beginning of his section on civil government in order to make sure that it was understood that he was shifting from speaking about the spiritual to speaking about the political kingdom: “The two kingdoms are alike valid, but definitely distinct. . . . Whoever knows how to distinguish between body and soul, between this present fleeting life and that future eternal life, will without difficulty know that Christ’s spiritual kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct. . . . Spiritual freedom can perfectly well exist along with civil bondage; . . . It makes no difference what your condition among men may be or under what nation’s laws you live, since the Kingdom of Christ does not at all consist in these things.”⁷¹

In light of the thoroughly positive assessment that Calvin makes of civil government, discussed earlier, it is difficult simply to conclude on the basis of the above statements that Calvin is, in the final analysis, a Christian platonist; and, in his opinion, man is split into a lower, insignificant physical aspect and a higher spiritual principle. Calvin was not unaware of this possible misunderstanding, and therefore hastened to add: “Yet civil government has as its appointed end, so long as we live among men, to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our lives to the society of men, to form our social behaviour to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquillity.”⁷²

70. *Institutes*, III, xix, 15.

71. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 1.

72. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 2.

It is therefore quite clear that although Calvin distinguished the two realms, he did not separate them into upper and lower realms with some form of a chain of being inherent in his system. In Calvin's view, these two realms join and interpenetrate one another rather than standing in opposition to one another. Even though it is impossible to reduce the political and spiritual worlds to one another, it is equally impossible to separate them. For Calvin, any real alienation between the two would have spelled disaster. Although part of the reason for his insistence may be vestiges of a spirit-matter dualism, Calvin's self-conscious reason for such a distinction must be found elsewhere.

Looking back at the quotations above, and taking into consideration the fact that in the 1536 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin, in one section, covered Christian freedom, ecclesiastical power, and civil government, one can see that Calvin uses the term "spiritual kingdom" as synonymous with the "kingdom of Christ." It is likely, then, that the distinction between spiritual and political kingdom has something to do with the distinctive character of the kingdom of Christ.

In Calvin's development of the three offices of Christ, he is careful to maintain that Christ exercises His offices *pro nobis*—for us. Specifically, the prophetic office is not universal, but primarily for the Church, His body, so that the power of the Spirit may be exercised through the Church's preaching of the gospel.⁷³ The same is true for the priestly office of Christ. This office has the primary purpose of making atonement for the sins of the world and to acquire eternal life for men.⁷⁴ Christ is high priest and sacrifice at the same time and fulfills His function specifically *pro nobis*—for us who are the redeemed sinners united to His body. Therefore, when we come to the kingly office of Christ, this pattern is not suddenly altered. For Calvin, Christ's kingship is just as much soteriologically qualified. He distinguishes between the kingdom of the Father and the dominion of Christ,⁷⁵ and makes clear that the kingdom of Christ is only stable and abiding because it is not of this world and not carnal.⁷⁶ The foundation of the Kingship of Christ is that He has conquered death and redeemed His people. God has installed him as

73. *Institutes*, II, xv, 2.

74. *Commentary* on Acts 26:22.

75. *Institutes*, II, xv, 5.

76. *Institutes*, II, xv, 3, 5.

King on that basis.⁷⁷ In Calvin's view, Christ does not exercise any power apart from his redemptive purpose, which the Church participates in. The Kingly office is therefore particular, and is exercised *pro nobis*, for us, and its purpose is His people's participation in the heavenly life.⁷⁸ When Calvin, therefore, speaks of "spiritual", he is not talking about some element in a Platonic dualism, but about the work of the Holy Spirit, which is particular and "restricted" as the work of Christ.

One must not misunderstand Calvin's position and place some modalistic construction upon it. He does not imply that there is a separation between the dominions of Christ and of God the Father. In this respect, he is a thorough-going trinitarian. As Jungen notes, Calvin sees neither identity nor disunity, but he does distinguish among three kinds of life in this world:⁷⁹ "The first is animal life, which consists only of motion and the bodily senses, and which we have in common with the brutes; the second is human life, which we have as the children of Adam; and the third is that supernatural life which believers alone obtain. And all of them are from God."⁸⁰

The three levels of life might be better conceived as three concentric circles in which the wider circles in some sense exists for the sake of the narrower one. Thus the cosmos exists for the sake of humanity and humanity ultimately for the sake of the church. This would explain Calvin's insistence that civil government should protect the outward worship of God and the position of the church.⁸¹

Regardless of how this is characterized, it is clear that for Calvin the kingly rule of Christ belongs to the innermost circle, for this rule is concealed from the flesh.⁸² The reign of Christ is a spiritual reign that is governed by the Word and spirit. "The kingship of Christ is therefore a rule that has been delegated to the son by the Father and that in the present age is restricted to the government of the church through the Word and spirit."⁸³

77. *Institutes*, II, xv, 3.

78. *Institutes*, II, xv, 4.

79. Jungen, p. 56.

80. *Commentary* on Ephesians 4:18.

81. Jungen, p. 56.

82. *Commentary* on Luke 19:12.

83. Jungen, p. 57.

The "earthly," "temporal," or "political" kingdom, then, includes all that which does not directly pertain to this rule of Christ, but has reference to all the things that "have their significance and relationship with regard to the present life and are, in a sense, confined within its bounds."⁸⁴ Calvin does not deny that the Kingdom of Christ is in this world, but "strictly speaking, although it dwells within us, it is a stranger to the world, since its state is completely different."⁸⁵ The kingdom of Christ is firm and stable and will never be overthrown or shaken, but the same cannot be said of earthly kingdoms. The reason that this is so, according to Calvin, is precisely due to the fact that the Kingdom of Heaven is not earthly.⁸⁶

But just exactly what does all of this have to do with civil obedience or disobedience? From Calvin's viewpoint, a great deal: "Through this distinction it comes about that we are not to misapply to the political order the gospel teaching on spiritual freedom, as if Christians were less subject, as concerns outward government, to human laws."⁸⁷

In another place, commenting upon Matthew 22:21, he is even more specific: "A clear distinction is set out here between spiritual and civil government, that we should know ourselves to be under no external constraint from holding a clear conscience in the sight of God. The error Christ wanted to refute is the idea that a people cannot belong to God unless it is free of the yoke of human rule. . . . God's law is not violated or his worship offended if the Jews in external government obey the Romans. . . ."

"Keep the distinction firm: the Lord wishes to be sole lawgiver for the government of souls, with no rule of worship to be sought from any other source than his word, and our adherence to the only pure service there enjoined; yet the power of the sword, the laws of the land and decisions of the courts, in no way prevent the perfect service of God from flourishing in our midst."⁸⁸

In other words, Christian freedom does not mean that civil government has become unnecessary, or that it gives one an excuse to rebel against the civil government. On the one

84. *Institutes*, II, ii, 13.

85. *Commentary* on John 18:36.

86. *Commentary* on John 18:36, and Acts 5:34.

87. *Institutes*, II, xix, 15; IV, xx, 1.

88. *Commentary* on Matthew 22:21.

hand, the distinction between spiritual and political kingdoms serves to reinforce the authority of the civil magistrate, but it is also a safeguard against absolute rule in that it assigns him a limited sphere of responsibility, the boundaries of which he cannot overstep without being legitimately disobeyed. For, "the overthrow of civil order is rebellion against God, and obedience to leaders and magistrates is always linked to the worship and fear of God, but if in turn the leaders usurp the rights of God they are to be denied obedience as far as possible, short of offence to God."⁸⁹

"That God rather than man must always be obeyed is probably the most significant platitude in the history of political thought,"⁹⁰ so notes Michael Walzer. Calvin was guided by this platitude, and drew the line for civil disobedience when civil rulers illegitimately intruded into that which belongs only to Christ and His rule by Word and Spirit. Only then is disobedience warranted, but even then it is not proper actively to resist the magistrate, or deny his legitimate authority to rule.⁹¹

Calvin makes an important point in this respect. He sees a difference between civil and ecclesiastical rule and authority. "There is a certain distinction between civil magistrates and leaders of the church. For although the administration of earthly or civil sovereignty is disorderly and corrupt, yet the Lord wishes submission to it to remain unaffected. But when the spiritual rule degenerates, the consciences of the godly, are released from obedience to an unjust domination."⁹²

In commenting upon Acts 4:19, Calvin is even more pointed: "The apostles make clear that obedience offered to evil and unfaithful pastors, even though they exercise lawful authority in the church, is contrary to God."⁹³ He touches upon this same theme again in his comments upon Romans 13. After elaborating upon the inviolable authority of the civil magistrate he writes, "The whole of this discussion concerns civil government. Those, therefore, who bear rule over men's consciences attempt to establish their blasphemous tyranny from this passage in vain."⁹⁴

89. *Commentary* on Matthew 22:21.

90. Walzer, p. 57.

91. *Commentary* on Acts 4:19, 23:5.

92. *Commentary* on Acts 23:5.

93. *Commentary* on Acts 4:19.

94. *Commentary* on Romans 13:5.

Calvin and Civil Disobedience

At this point, having looked in some detail at Calvin's view of civil government, the question might understandably be asked if Calvin indeed had a doctrine of resistance, or civil disobedience. Nevertheless, it is clear, after having read the pertinent portions of the *Institutes*, that he did indeed have a well thought out notion of civil disobedience. Calvin's thinking is divided into two major sections: the grounds for disobedience and the agents of resistance.

The Grounds for Disobedience

As noted in our introduction, in Calvin's time the French monarchy was becoming increasingly absolutistic, and as a result, the issues of resistance and civil disobedience were burning ones. Calvin realized that the situation was difficult, and that the monarchy was less than ideal. While "he was realistic in his assessment of the actual state of affairs, he never tired of appealing to the ideal."⁹⁵ Calvin called upon the monarchy to supply the pastors and ministers of the Word with all that was necessary for their well-being. He appealed to the crown to allow the Church the freedom to build more schools and hospitals, and make better provisions for the poor. In short, to fulfill every arrangement that belongs to the protection and defense of the Church. With his appeals, however, Calvin also recognized that "matters are now very different, and that kings are not the 'nursing-fathers,' but the executioners of the Church."⁹⁶

The question that had to be dealt with by Calvin was whether the less than ideal situation that prevailed constituted legitimate grounds for rebellion against the magistracy that was in power. He was confronted on all sides with the clamour over legitimate grounds for resistance.

Calvin responded to this problem along two lines. First of all, he outlined what he considered to be illegitimate grounds for resistance, and then, he generally set out the guidelines for legitimate resistance.

One of the arguments that was popular can be termed the "pagan ruler" or "enemy of the gospel" argument. In answer-

95. Jungen, p. 64.

96. *Commentary* on Isaiah 49:23.

ing this argument, Calvin makes a comparison between the struggling reformed churches and the early churches who lived under hostile governments. On the one hand, he writes, "by refusing the yoke of government, they would have given the Gentiles no little occasion for reproaching them," for, "obedience towards magistrates is a part of honest behavior."⁹⁷ On the other hand this responsibility to obey was even made more difficult because these magistrates "were Christ's adversaries, and they so abused their authority that no image of God, which secures special reverence, was seen in them."⁹⁸ In spite of these magistrates being executioners instead of nursing fathers, Calvin insisted that such magistrates must be obeyed. He did not call upon the Christian to endorse or approve their tyranny or unchristian behavior: nor did he teach that their actions or attitudes were pleasing to God. Rather he reasoned that a Christian's submission is unaffected because it lies in the will of God who has given the magistrate power and authority. "Obedience is due to all who rule, because they have been raised to that honor not by chance, but by God's providence. Most people are in the habit of inquiring too closely by what right power has been attained, but we ought to be satisfied with this alone, that we see that they exercise power."⁹⁹

While these rulers certainly may not act in a legitimate way or are enemies of the gospel, the office that they hold is a divine institution that can never be obliterated by the viciousness and faithlessness of those holding the office. The "pagan ruler," or "enemy of the gospel" argument is invalid. Calvin sums up his position very concisely when he says: "Even if we lived under the Turks, tyrants or deadly enemies of the gospel, it would still be incumbent upon us to be subject to them. Why? Because it is the good pleasure of God!"¹⁰⁰

The second argument that Calvin dealt with was the argument that an unbiblical government, that is one that is not governed solely from the laws in the Bible, is illegitimate and may be opposed. Calvin rejects this rationale by another appeal to the early church, and then to the providence and will of God. "Since Peter refers especially to the Roman Emperor,

97. *Commentary* on 1st Peter 2:13.

98. *Commentary* on 1st Peter 2:13.

99. *Commentary* on 1st Peter 2:13; cf. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 28.

100. Quoted in Jungen, p. 66.

it was necessary to add this admonition (to obedience), for . . . the Romans . . . subdued these countries more by unjust guiles than in any legitimate way. Besides, the Caesars who then reigned had snatched possession of the monarchy by tyrannical force. Peter, therefore, forbids all these things to be brought into debate."¹⁰¹

"Divine Providence has wisely arranged that various countries should be ruled by various kinds of government. . . . Countries are best held together according to their own particular inequality. However, all these things are needlessly spoken to those for whom the will of the Lord is enough. . . . It is our duty to show ourselves compliant and obedient to whomever he sets over the places where we live."¹⁰²

As far as obedience is concerned, it does not matter whether rulers live up to the expectations put upon them, whether or not they rule according to biblical principles, or even whether they have been elected by popular vote or not. Christians must recognize that it is God who places the ruler in office, and it is their duty, then, to obey.

The third and final argument that Calvin had to deal with involved the derelict or tyrannical ruler. Although these are in reality two different categories, Calvin dealt with them as one. The prominent argumentation here is Calvin's appeal to the fifth commandment. As has been previously noted, Calvin parallels family life and the political life of the nation. Just as children are bound to obey their father and a wife her husband whether he exercises his authority as he should or not, so we owe obedience to those in authority over us.¹⁰³ "The perpetual law of nature is not subverted by the sins of men; and therefore, however unworthy of honor a father may be, he still retains, inasmuch as he is a father, his right over his children."¹⁰⁴

"Kings and magistrates often abuse their power, and exercise tyrannical cruelty rather than justice. . . . But . . . tyrants and those like them do not do such things by their abuse, without the ordinance of God still remaining in force, just as the perpetual institution of marriage is not subverted even

101. *Commentary* on 1st Peter 2:13.

102. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 8.

103. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 29.

104. *Commentary* on Deuteronomy 5:16, Exodus 20:12.

though the wife and the husband behave in an unseemly way. However men go astray, the end fixed by God is unchanged in its place."¹⁰⁵

Two important points must be noted here. First of all, a magistrate exercises his power only as long as God allows him to. God has ordained his authority, and even though he rules badly and tyrannically, he rules by God's decree. In addition, the exercise of authority is by the grace of God, and always by the grace of God. Even though a man is a tyrant, God does not completely withdraw His grace from him. It is God who makes sure that there is no tyranny in which, however cruel and unbridled, does not appear some of the justice and equity which he wants magistrates to maintain. In any case, some kind of government is still better and more beneficial than anarchy.¹⁰⁶ As Calvin writes in another place, if magistrates still turn out to be unprofitable to us, we should seek the fault with ourselves and attribute their tyranny to the wrath of God against our sins rather than to the good ordinance of God itself.¹⁰⁷

The second point that must be kept in mind is that Calvin makes a clear distinction between the divinely ordained office that a man holds and the office-bearer himself. The office-bearer is fully responsible for his actions, and just as guilty because of his sin. In other words, for Calvin, the obligation of a ruler to his subjects, and more importantly for this discussion, the obligations of subjects to the ruler, never imply that government only exists as long as the office of magistrate is properly fulfilled, but is maintained even when it degenerates into something less than ideal.

It is time now to look at what Calvin considers the grounds for legitimate resistance actually are. Surprisingly enough, he does not hesitate to point them out. He repeatedly makes clear that authority is legitimate that keeps within the bounds divinely prescribed for it. These "boundaries" are defined using the distinction previously discussed under the heading "the Two Kingdom Doctrine." Calvin clearly states that the limit to obedience comes when the honor and worship of God, or God's direct authority over us is in danger of being

105. *Commentary* on 1st Peter 2:14.

106. *Commentary* on 1st Peter 2:14.

107. *Commentary* on Romans 13:3, and I Timothy 2:2.

violated. God maintains his supreme authority, and does not allow it to be infringed upon. This argument from the two kingdoms is very explicit in some comments made on Acts 17:7: "Paul and Silas were only striving to set up the kingdom of Christ which is spiritual. Therefore, if religious considerations compel us to withstand tyrannical decrees which forbid us to give to Christ and to God the honor and worship which we owe them, then it can rightfully be claimed that we are not violating the majesty of kings. . . . If they are not content with their lawful (temporal) authority and wish to uproot in us the fear and worship of God, then there is no reason for anyone to say that we are despising them because the glory and the kingdom of God are of more worth to us."¹⁰⁸

Obedience to God in the sphere of Christ's kingdom, where he exclusively rules according to his Word and Spirit, always takes precedence over everything else. A man is not excused for doing what displeases God or for not worshipping God as he has commanded by appealing to the authorities and saying that all that has been done has been obedient to the lawful magistrates. Calvin's addresses this point in no uncertain terms in his comments on Hosea 5:11: "The vengeance of God would be just against Israel, because they willingly followed the impious edicts of their king, . . . all were implicated in the same guilt before God, because the people adopted the impious forms of worship which the king had commanded. . . . We now see how vain the excuse of those is who say that they ought to obey kings, and at the same time forsake the Word of God: for what does the prophet reprove here, but that the Israelites had been too submissive to their king? . . . When the king perverted God's worship, when he set up corrupt superstitions, then the people ought to have firmly resisted him."¹⁰⁹ Calvin's strongest resistance statements, however, are found in his comments upon Daniel where he praises Daniel for continuing to pray to God in spite of the edict of the King. "The fear of God ought to precede, that kings may obtain their authority. For if anyone begins his reverence of an earthly prince by rejecting that of God, he will act preposterously, since this is a complete perversion of the order of nature. . . . For earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being

108. *Commentary* on Acts 4:19, 5:29.

109. *Commentary* on Hosea 5:11.

reckoned among the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy (lat. "conspuere in ipsorum capita"—"to spit on their heads") than to obey them whenever they are so restive and wish to spoil God of his rights, and, as it were, to seize upon his throne and draw him down from heaven."¹¹⁰

Calvin appends his statement by pointing out that even though such unwavering obedience to God's commands may result in persecution, "we should comfort ourselves with the thought that we are rendering that obedience which the Lord requires when we suffer anything rather than turn aside from piety."¹¹¹ For it would be absurd if, in satisfying men, one should incur the displeasure of Him for whose sake obedience to superiors is given in the first place.¹¹²

It is important to underline the fact that disobedience to a magistrate who illegitimately oversteps his sphere and seeks to legislate areas over which he has no authority does not conflict with Calvin's teaching regarding obedience to magistrates, even those who are tyrannical. Calvin teaches that disobedience is only to be observed in that specific area, and those legitimate areas of authority must be respected. In other words, although a magistrate may be disobeyed in certain cases, he is not to be completely rejected without due process.

It is also significant to note that although many cruelties must be borne, and many injustices tolerated, when a magistrate seeks to rob God of his right, resistance in such a case is something that God requires, and it is considered an act of faithlessness not to do so. "The submission paid to them ought to be a step toward honoring that highest Father. Hence, if they spur us to transgress the law, we have the perfect right to regard them not as parents, but as strangers who are trying to lead us away from obedience to our true Father. So should we act toward princes, lords, and every kind of superior."¹¹³ The point, therefore, at which resistance becomes legitimate is, according to Calvin, always a question of actual lawbreaking. What is common in every actual case of resistance is that illegitimacy is determined by departure from the legitimate order. Resistance is, therefore, really a means of bringing the legitimate order back to its rightful

110. *Commentary* on Daniel 6:22.

111. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 32.

112. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 32.

113. *Institutes*, II, viii, 38.

place. In other words, resistance is not to be carried out against the existing order, but rather in the interests of the existing order. Resistance is carried out against the particular magistrate in office, and not against the office itself. Although it is a fine line, it spells the difference between revolution and an act of Christian resistance.

The Agents of Resistance

It has been established that, for Calvin, there are cases in which it is lawful for a ruler to be resisted, but it has not been shown what concrete forms such resistance can take, and who are the lawful agents in such a resistance. Just because the circumstances allow for some form of resistance, does not mean that anyone is automatically authorized to resist a tyrant by whatever means seems good.

Building upon his principle derived from God's being a God of order, Calvin insists that any resistance against a tyrant must be done in accordance with the legitimate laws of that particular order. An illegitimate and tyrannical ruler does not warrant an illegitimate reaction on the part of the people, but rather resistance is to seek to restore the *status quo* and thus must be proceeded with lawfully.

Private Citizens: What has already been noted regarding the magistrate is also true for the private citizen. Society is made up of both the rulers and the ruled, both subject to God's law. Each is to maintain his specific calling, and may not illegitimately overstep his boundaries.

What this implies for private citizens, then, is utmost restraint in public matters, so "that they may not deliberately intrude in public affairs, or pointlessly invade the magistrate's office, or undertake anything politically."¹¹⁴ Even if offences are committed against them, private citizens do not have any independent rights except those allowed by law, and even these may not be pushed privately, but only through the due process of law.¹¹⁵ Calvin violently disagrees with the modern concept of democracy in which all power is seen as ultimately in the hands of the people. For him, God is the only sovereign, and delegates power to whom He wills. In Calvin's

114. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 23; cf. *Commentary* on I Thessalonians 4:11; *Commentary* on Psalm 101:5.

115. *Commentary* on Psalm 18:48.

view, the people have primarily responsibilities and duties to fulfill; they are not some sort of check against the magistrate. For those private citizens who would want to rebel and advocate some change of the order, Calvin reserves his strongest rebuke: "These men unblushingly belched forth abuse against the magistrates to take away all respect for public law and order, and this was openly to attack God with their blasphemies. There are many turbulent men of this kind today who boast that all the power of the sword is heathen and unlawful and who busy themselves furiously to overthrow the body politic. Such ragings which upset the progress of the gospel are stirred up by Satan."¹¹⁶ In another place he writes even more categorically and uncompromisingly: "The wilfulness of kings will run to excess, but it will not be your part to restrain it; you will have only this left to you: to obey their commands and hearken to their word."¹¹⁷ The only comfort will be that "they who have proudly and tyrannically governed shall one day render their account to God," and that "God, whose prerogative it is to raise the abject and to relieve the oppressed," will come to their help.¹¹⁸ But as far as individual action on the part of private citizens is concerned, "the very desire to shake off or remove this yoke is tacit proof of an evil conscience that is plotting some mischief."¹¹⁹ "It does not lie in the will of the people to set up princes."¹²⁰ "We should rather consider that an unjust ruler is God's punishment for the sins of the people and that it is not our calling to supply a remedy, but that we have to wait upon God and implore His help."¹²¹

The Lesser Magistrates: Calvin has one long sentence which outlines his views with regard to the right and duty of resistance to tyrants by the lesser magistrates. "For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain¹²² the wilfulness of kings (as in ancient times the ephors were set against the Spartan kings, or the tribunes of the people

116. *Commentary* on 2nd Peter 2:10.

117. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 26.

118. *Commentary* on Genesis 16:8.

119. *Commentary* on Romans 13:3.

120. *Commentary* on Jeremiah 38:1-4.

121. *Commentary* on Romans 13:3; *Institutes*, IV, xx, 29.

122. The Latin has "intercedere," the French editions "s'opposer et resister."

against the Roman consuls, or the demarchs against the senate of the Athenians; and perhaps, as things now are, such power as the three estates exercise in every realm when they hold their chief assemblies), I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know they have been appointed protectors of God's ordinance."¹²³ In order to understand exactly what Calvin is getting at, it will be necessary first of all to understand what the import of his examples is, especially with regard to the "three estates."

The ancient examples are merely illustrative, and are only casually important. The Ephors were five Spartan magistrates whose task it was to exercise restraint upon the king. The Roman tribunes were officers chosen by the people to protect their liberties against the Senate and Consuls. The Greek Demarchs performed similar functions in Athens.

The "three estates" was a body of representatives made up of individuals from the three estates of the Clergy, Nobility, and Commoners or Burghers. This political body existed in several European nations, including France, and was permitted, at least in theory, to restrain monarchical absolutism. "Calvin thus seems to be suggesting that rulers are not only not above the law, but that they must be brought to heel by the duly appointed representatives of the law if the need arise."¹²⁴

Even though in his native France, the Estates had not met for over 50 years when Calvin first penned the above statement, and would not meet until a year after the final edition of the *Institutes* had come off the press,¹²⁵ the strength of his argument lies in the fact that he summons them to a realization of their duty given them in the law. In other words, if the Estates have the constitutional right that he assumes that they have (and he is not alone in so assuming), then they also have a corresponding duty. As has already been shown, this is not an optional duty, but is in fact sinful if neglected, and would thus place them under God's disapproval.

123. *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31.

124. Jungen, p. 96.

125. Note the "perhaps" in the quotation.

It is important to understand that this representative body that Calvin has in mind does not exercise its authority "in behalf of the people," but rather they are so commissioned by God as His lawfully ordained ministers. "What Calvin seems to have in mind is not a democratic, but rather a judicial approach to the question of resistance in which the laws and not the people are supreme and the Estates are thus not so much representatives as guardians of the people and of their rights."¹²⁶

Summary of Calvin's Position

Calvin's position is based primarily upon legal and judicial argumentation. In Calvin's opinion, the grounds for resistance are not dictated by narrowly conceived theological or religious considerations, but are based in the legal situation as it actually exists in a particular country. Legitimate resistance is not done in the name of some higher order or principle against the established political order, but it is carried out as part of the existing order.

Calvin sees no place for the private citizen actively to resist the duly ordained authorities. Rather he calls upon those officials whose constitutional power compels them to protect the established order against a usurper or tyrant. It is the duty of these officials to resist lawfully, using resistance to bring order back to the country, and to restore the nation to the constitutional *status quo*.

Contemporary Applications

We who believe in the sovereignty of God and in His all-ruling providence recognize that there is much to learn from history. History is the unfolding of God's decree, and it is presumptuous for us to cut off our "Hall of Heroes" with the closing of Hebrews 11. By God's standards, John Calvin is a hero of the faith, and with regard to Christian resistance, he should be listened to.

To begin with, Calvin's division of the agents of resistance into private citizens and magistrates is important. In 20th century America, with the radical egalitarianism that has

126. Jungen, p. 100.

been popularized as a result of our baptistic moorings, it is important to emphasize that a nation's constitutional basis must be defended by constitutional defenders. Too often the attitude that prevails in many churches is projected into political life. In most American churches, the "people" vote on everything, and make a decision on everything. If enough of the membership doesn't like something, then they band together and proceed to change it. Government, however, doesn't work that way. We may not like the federal funding of abortions, the United Nations, or the huge giveaway programs, but we as private citizens do not have the right actively to resist. In other words, even though the government does fund abortions, we must still pay our taxes.¹²⁷ If the time ever comes, and there is the need for armed, active resistance against a tyrannical federal government, then that resistance must come about as a result of the leadership of lesser magistrates. The people must never take matters into their own hands. The duties of the private citizen are primarily obedience to the laws of the land, and deference to the magistrates. It is only when obedience involves one in an actual sin that civil disobedience is acceptable. Active resistance, however, never is.

The second point made by Calvin that is important for us today is his teaching that the laws of the land are supreme over both magistrates and subjects. The magistrates as well as the people are subject to the law. For Calvin, the definition of a tyrant is one who claims for himself exemption from the laws of the land. In our antinomian culture, law is not appreciated as it should be, but a nation cannot forever harbor a low view of the law before God gives them what they deserve: one just like themselves—a ruler with a low view of the law; that is, a tyrant.

Third, it is important to underline the fact that Christian resistance is conducted within the established order, and not against it. In other words, we resist—not revolt. The popularity of modern day revolutionary movements has been a bad example for the average Christian. Christian resistance, however, seeks to bring order back to a country, rather than

127. The Tax Revolt issue is much more complicated than simply not paying as a result of disaffection with present governmental practices. This statement is not intended as an across the board condemnation of the tax strike.

create disorder for the purpose of overthrowing the reigning government. An act of Christian resistance works to bring the country back to the *status quo*, and when that is done, the resistance stops, even if all the wrongs haven't been righted. Those unrighted wrongs are then approached through the proper channels via the lesser magistrate.

Finally, although there is not time to go into detail, with the popularity of Francis Schaeffer's *A Christian Manifesto*, it is important to touch upon the relationship of the Scottish Reformed tradition and the Continental tradition which was molded largely by John Calvin. Schaeffer has highlighted one work from the Scottish tradition, *Lex, Rex* (translated—"The Law and the Prince") by Samuel Rutherford, and pointed to John Knox as a preeminent example of Christian resistance in Christian history. There is, however, a genuine divergence of views between the Continental and the Scottish reformed tradition. The Scots, under Knox, John Ponet,¹²⁸ and Christopher Goodman,¹²⁹ endorsed such things as the right of private citizens to depose an evil governor by force and even to kill a tyrant.¹³⁰ Goodman appealed to private citizens to remove an evil ruler from their midst lest they become polluted and guilty of his sins. Knox, who was a student of Calvin's at Geneva, expressed his most radical views in his famous *Trumpet Blast Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, where he argues that resistance is legitimate because of an un-biblical government (a female monarch). His view received an even more permanent place in the Scot's Confession of Faith (1560), where "repressing tyranny" is listed under the heading of "Good Works."¹³¹ As can be seen in this very brief view, the Scottish tradition is considerably more radical than Calvin's.¹³²

128. John Ponet, *On Politicke Power* (1556; reprinted 1972, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum Ltd., Amsterdam).

129. Christopher Goodman, *How Superior Powers Ought to Be Obeyed* (1558; reprinted 1931, New York).

130. See Ponet, *On Politicke Power*.

131. Chapter XIV, "The works which are counted good before God."

132. See Richard L. Greaves, *Theology and Revolution in the Scottish Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).