

John Calvin: Source for political resistance?

**Calvin's political theology contains radical implications relevant for resistance today. Yet, Calvin also carries reactionary, anti-democratic impulses that make him a complicated figure.**

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John Calvin does not always receive the best press. He is often portrayed as an archconservative and an ideological father of capitalism. Most recently, the topic of Calvinism returned to public attention when Betsy DeVos was nominated Secretary of Education by Donald Trump. As a Politico [report](#) in January 2017 demonstrated, journalists were quick to associate DeVos' political conservatism with the Calvinism of her Christian Reformed Church denomination. This association is also situated within a larger move to reduce Calvin to Max Weber's thesis in *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which showed Calvinism's contribution to capitalist

ethics.

In this view, Calvin is not only associated with DeVos' educational policies (which stress privatization) but also with Trump's persona of being a successful businessman. Yet, notwithstanding the historical links between Calvinism and the rise of capitalism, what if there is actually more to Calvin's thought than these one-dimensional associations? What if John Calvin's thought is also a potential source for radical political resistance?

### **The Scepters of Kings**

It is easy to skip the preface. I have typically flipped over the preface while reading Calvin's *Institutes*. Yet, in his book *Political Grace: The Revolutionary Theology of John Calvin*, theologian Roland Boer highlights an intriguing passage in the preface that has stuck with me. I read it, re-read it in conjunction with the very end of the *Institutes*, and it gave me an entirely new impression of Calvin. Here is the passage:

So that no one may think we are wrongly complaining of these things, you can be our witness, most noble King, with how many lying slanders it is daily traduced in your presence. It is as if this doctrine looked to no other end than to wrest the scepters from the hands of kings, to cast down all courts and judgements, to subvert all orders and civil governments, to disrupt the peace and quiet of the people, to abolish all laws, to scatter all lordships and possessions—in short, to turn everything upside down!  
(Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France).

Calvin is complaining to King Francis I that his doctrine (i.e. the Reformed faith) is being misconstrued by critics. He is falsely portrayed as a revolutionary. His theology is getting blamed for undermining governments and social orders. As Calvin says, the critics make it seem as if he is turning everything upside down. Of course, Calvin dismisses these charges and attempts to ingratiate himself to the king. But why did Calvin feel so compelled to shoot down these charges?

There are different ways to interpret Calvin's words here. In one sense, Calvin is trying to distinguish himself from Anabaptists and other radical reformers. Catholics were in the habit of lumping all Protestants together. Moreover, there were precedents that troubled Europe's ruling authorities. The Placards Affair, Munster

Revolution, and Peasants' Revolt were all situations in which radical Protestants challenged political authority. These events were seismic shockwaves for those in power. King Francis I himself began persecuting Protestants after the Placards Affair in which anti-Catholic posters were distributed across Paris, including outside the king's bedchamber. Therefore, Calvin can be seen as distinguishing himself and his theology from these acts and revolts.

Still, there is another way that Calvin's prefatory words can be read. We can ask: is there anything in Calvin's theology that can lead to political resistance? After re-examining Calvin's treatment of civil authority, I believe the answer is yes. Boer writes, "By trying to counter the assertions of his opponents that he seeks to 'turn everything upside down', it seems to me that he protests too much." I agree. Calvin reacts vehemently to his critics' charges of political subversion, but there is at least some truth to the charge.

We started with the preface. Now, let us consider the very last section of the *Institutes*. In many ways, this final section re-introduces tensions that were present in the prefatory passage. Up until this point in the chapter, Calvin has been talking about how God ordains rulers and how obedience is owed to them. He considers the reality of bad rulers and how the Bible prioritizes the sovereignty of God in placing and deposing them. So far, no hint of radicalism. But at the very end of the chapter, Calvin pivots to say the following:

But in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to him, to whose will the desires of all ought to yield, to whose majesty scepters ought to be submitted. And how absurd would it be that in satisfying men you should incur the displeasure of him for whose sake you obey men he has opened his sacred mouth, must alone be heard, before all and above all men; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him. If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed (IV. xx. 32).

Calvin develops an exception to his previous discourse, an exception which he actually considers to be primary. If obedience to a king ever leads us away from God, or if the ruler commands something contrary to God, then civil disobedience is

more faithful than civil obedience. And Calvin uses strong language to describe this. He talks about God's authority, "to whose majesty scepters ought to be submitted." This language is eerily reminiscent of the preface. There, Calvin tries to chase away accusations that, "...this doctrine looked to no other end than to wrest the scepters from the hands of kings." Is Calvin downplaying the radical implications of his political theology? I believe so. The final section of the Institutes clearly relativizes human authority and makes room for radical political resistance. Still, as we shall soon see, Calvin finds ways to blunt the edge of these implications.

### **High view of government, low view of democracy**

One way that Calvin's theology deploys a reactionary measure to contain its radical implications is by denying the very possibility of political theology. In other words, Calvin believes that the theological sphere in which he is operating in is far from the political sphere in which revolts are taking place. He pushes this by articulating a distinction:

...there is a twofold 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 'spiritual' and the 'temporal' jurisdiction...through this distinction it comes about that we are not to misapply to the political order the gospel teaching on spiritual freedom...(III. xix. 15).

Calvin introduces a distinction between the spiritual and the political/temporal, and between spiritual freedom and the political order. As such, he is able to soften the stronger claims that he makes about Christian freedom and conscience. The teachings of the Gospel do not apply to the political order in the same way that they apply to individuals. I think that this distinction introduced by Calvin functions as a secularizing distinction that artificially separates the political from the spiritual. Moreover, this distinction is not even consistent with the rest of Calvin's thought.

Later in the *Institutes*, Calvin writes, "Yet this distinction does not lead us to consider the whole nature of government a thing polluted, which has nothing to do with Christian men" (IV. xx. 2). He did not want Christians to retreat from government. If anything, Calvin had a high view of government. He says, "[The civil government's]

function among men is no less than that of bread, water, sun, and air; indeed, its place of honor is far more excellent" (IV. xx. 3). Calvin goes on to talk about all of the ways in which governments can restrain evil, promote the good, and defend the Gospel. He lifts up civil magistrates as vital servants of God in society. It is evident that Calvin, himself, blurs the distinction that he made earlier. He wants to separate spirituality from temporal politics, but everywhere we can see Calvin's spirituality seeping into his account of temporal political life.

In this vein, Calvin not only relativizes human authority, he also emphasizes the importance of checking power. For example, he writes:

...men's fault or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government, so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and, if one asserts himself unfairly, there may be a number of censors and masters to restrain his willfulness (IV. xx. 8).

Calvin is democratizing the nature of authority and government. Positively, he argues that a company of leaders can encourage and help one another. Negatively, he argues that the company of leaders can restrain a particular leader who strays or wants to impose their will unfairly on the people. Calvin's articulation of shared authority is reflected in the Presbyterian/Reformed polity that would emerge; his articulation of shared authority resonates with some features of U.S. representative democracy. Calvin's emphasis on total depravity leads him to argue for some form of checks and balances. In his time, Calvin's approach to authority could be considered counter-cultural and potentially subversive. If this was all he said about governmental authority then maybe the accusations about him being a radical would have stuck. However, Calvin backpedals on democracy.

In this same section of the *Institutes*, Calvin considers different styles of government building off of the classical models contemplated by Plato. He writes,

The fall from kingdom to tyranny is easy; but it is not much more difficult to fall from the rule of the best men to the faction of a few; yet it is easiest of all to fall from popular rule to sedition...I will not deny that aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others (IV. xx. 8).

Calvin acknowledges the ways in which human sinfulness distorts different models of government. Due to sin, monarchies turn into tyrannies, aristocracies devolve into oligarchies, and democracies shatter into anarchy. For Calvin, the most vulnerable system of government is democracy. He opts for aristocracy or a mixture of aristocracy and democracy in which government would be composed of a responsible and gifted ruling class. Unfortunately, I think that Calvin undercuts his own democratic impulse here. His emphasis on depravity was a great equalizer for human social stratification. But here, he reintroduces another form of hierarchy. Whereas Calvin had previously relativized all human authority and power because of the problem of depravity and thus had radically democratized politics, here he reasserts the privileges of elite aristocrats.

### **Calvin's political legacy**

What do we make of Calvin's political legacy? I hope it is clear from my exposition above that Calvin's theology contained internal tensions. There was some truth to the accusations hurled at him. Parts of his thought opened up to radical possibilities. Yet, he also did his best to contain these possibilities and implications. As Boer explains it: "John Calvin let the radical political cat peek out of the theological bag only to try his hardest to push it back in and tie the bag up again."

Although many political conservatives may lay claim to Calvin's thought, he was no pure conservative. On the other hand, areas of Calvin's thought were reactionary—he was concerned about the ways in which revolt and thoroughgoing democracy could change the order of society. Nevertheless, I believe that Calvin's thought can still be a source for radical political resistance. His maneuvers to contain the possibilities of his thought have not stopped others from fruitfully extending his theological emphases. Perhaps one of the best modern examples of this is found in the *Barmen Declaration*.

Written by a group of Protestant Christians in Germany during WWII, including the Reformed theologian Karl Barth, the *Barmen Declaration* embodies the impulses that Calvin set in motion at the very end of the *Institutes*:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God's revelation (Barmen Declaration, Article 1).

This article from Barmen relativizes any human earthly authority that gets in the way of hearing and obeying God. One can hear clear echoes of Calvin's words when he says : "[God] has opened his sacred mouth, must alone be heard, before all and above all men; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him" (IV. xx. 32).

Beyond Barmen, there are ways in which Calvin's thought can be a source of radical political resistance within the contemporary United States. But first, this would involve overcoming Calvin's shortfalls in privileging aristocracy. Calvin saw the ways in which any political model could be warped by human depravity. He even acknowledged that his own preferred model of aristocracy could devolve into a much worse form of oligarchy. Yet, Calvin came down hard on democracy and was too optimistic (something Calvin is not typically charged with) about aristocracy. Within our own political moment, it is perhaps easier to see how an elite ruling class can exhibit toxic political tendencies which undercut the common good.

Additionally, it is perhaps also easier to see how Calvin's democratic notion of shared authority is highly inconsistent with an elite ruling class that is increasingly beyond the accountability of anyone else besides themselves. Overcoming these pitfalls in Calvin's thought, his emphases on shared authority, the relativization of human rulers, and the holy space for civil disobedience can function as a powerful antidote for our contemporary political malaise. Political leaders and economic authorities need to be accountable to the concerns of regular citizens. Any president, no matter how powerful and ruthless, is not above God. And if such a ruler asks the public to go against the core teachings of the Gospel which include the love of neighbor and this entire world, then there must be holy resistance. For some, this John Calvin will sound entirely unfamiliar to them. But he laid some of this groundwork and it's up to us to take a bold step.