

What Shall We Do With Ungodly Rulers?

On Calvin, Theology and Politics

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Abstract: This essay focuses on the famous last section of John Calvin's *Institutes* (4.20.32), where for all his efforts to stipulate obedience to rulers, he closes with the realization that one is duty-bound to *disobey* any ungodly and tyrannical ruler. Through a close reading of the literary structure of Calvin's argument, I follow his struggle concerning this issue, moving through his assertions that one must obey at any cost, through recognizing that God and/or his appointed agents may punish and overthrow tyrannical rulers, to his direction not to obey any ungodly ruler. This last topic is the most absorbing of all, for it reveals Calvin struggling with a tension between radical and conservative elements within his theology.

The concern of this essay is twofold. Above all, I am interested in a tension in Calvin's theology between radical and conservative elements. With his natural proclivity towards conservative positions that support the powers that be, he perpetually struggles with the radical directions that he keeps finding in the Bible and at the heart of theological thought. A second, more underlying concern is the close connection between theology and politics in Calvin's texts, especially his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In our Taylorized academies we like to distinguish between little corners of specialization that rarely recognize one another.¹ So also with the study of Calvin: his theological thought is distinct from his deliberations over politics or economics or indeed daily life. Although there are one or two studies that make precisely this point (Graham 1978; Stevenson 1999), all too often his thought is placed in neat little boxes quite separate from each other (see Höpfl 1982, 217). We have politics here, culture there, economics a little further away, theology around the back and so

¹ Taylorization was the process of separating the production process into discreet parts, a method Henry Ford was famous for implementing and perfecting.

on. I suspect that Calvin would have looked with horror at the Taylorized academic market-place we inhabit in this period of late capitalism. He would have found our knowledge factories abhorrent, where scholars are assigned their little posts, tightening bolts or polishing the exterior of yet another product for intellectual consumption.²

This essay is an exercise in showing that those convenient boundaries are artificial if not dreadfully mistaken, especially for someone like Calvin. In what follows I focus on the famous last section of Calvin's *Institutes* (4.20.32), where we find politics and theology inseparably entwined. Every sentence of what is called "Of Civil Government (*De Politica Administratione*)" manifests a tension between radical and conservative, or revolutionary and reactionary elements of theology. Again and Again Calvin spies the radical possibilities of the Bible and theology, only to try to contain it within his own careful boundaries from where it breaks out once again.³ Calvin struggles between strict stipulations to obey rulers and his closing realization that one is duty-bound to *disobey* any ungodly and tyrannical ruler. Through a close reading of the literary structure of Calvin's argument, I follow his struggle concerning this issue, moving through

² Despite their limits, I have profited from some of the studies of his economic, social and political thought. Especially useful has been Edward Dommen and James B. Bratt's collection *John Calvin Rediscovered: The Impact of His Social and Economic Thought* (Dommen and Bratt 2007). This collection seeks to draw attention to Calvin's thought on social and economic matters and show how that thought has influenced subsequent developments. See also the massive study by Biéler (2006). And then there is Dale K. Van Kley's *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution 1560-1791* (Van Kley 1999). This is a well documented historical study of the way religious debates beginning with Calvin shaped those in politics, especially in the lead-up to the French Revolution.

³ Structurally too there is something amiss with the chapter. It seems as though he couldn't quite get on top of the material. Calvin sets out in this last chapter of the *Institutes* to speak of three categories: the magistrate, the laws and the people (*Inst.* 4.20.3; *OS* 5:474.17-24). Yet before too long kings turn up so that we find a competing structure: king, magistrate (and the laws), and people. One is the ostensible structure of his chapter, while the other of the political reality with which he tries to deal. They are at odds with each, clashing from time to time, all of which suggests an inability to control what is happening with the discussion. See further Stevenson (1999, 32-6; 2004), Bousma (1988, 204-13), Steinmetz (1995, 199-208), and Willis-Watkins (1989).

his assertions that one must obey at any cost, through recognizing that God and/or his appointed agents may punish and overthrow tyrannical rulers, to his direction not to obey any ungodly ruler.

Let me begin with the crucial paragraph of the whole chapter, bring out its main points and then retrace the steps by which Calvin arduously works his way towards this paragraph.

But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow. And, indeed, how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offence of Him for whose sake you obey men! The Lord, therefore, is King of kings. When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all. We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates – a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God (*Inst.* 4.20.32; *OS* 5:501.28-502.3).

Nothing could be clearer. If a ruler goes against the commands of God, then we have no need to obey the ruler. When it comes to a choice between obedience to God or obedience to an ungodly ruler, there is no choice. We may be subject to those who rule over us, but “subject only in the Lord.” So, writes Calvin, “If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it.” I will have more to say about this extraordinary paragraph at the end of my discussion, so let us leave it for now, go back to the beginning of the last chapter of the *Institutes* and see how he comes to this conclusion.

From Separation to Entanglement

Through this long and winding chapter Calvin tries to negotiate three main tensions: between temporal and the spiritual; between tyranny and anarchy; and then between obedience to evil rulers and obedience to God. The last one is the most interesting for this book (and obviously the subject of the paragraph I have quoted above), but let us take the argument one point at a time.

Earlier in the *Institutes* in the section called *De Libertate Christiana*, “On Christian Freedom” (*Inst.* 3.19), we encounter Calvin’s sharp distinction between the spiritual and the temporal domains. In a last ditch effort to block the argument that Christian liberty – as liberty from the law through the grace of Christ – has radical political potential, Calvin slams into place the distinction between spiritual and temporal. Such liberty from the law and for Christ, he argues, only applies to the spiritual domain. Temporally one is subject to all the laws of the land. One is free only in that private, inner zone, in the inner life of faith.

The opening comments in the last chapter of the *Institutes* open on a similar note. Of the “two governments” within us, Calvin admits that he has spent most of his energy exploring the inner one which relates directly to eternal life but that he does indeed need to say a few things about the other one, “which pertains only to civil institutions and the external regulation of manners” (*Inst.* 4.20.1; *OS* 5:471.15-16). Here too he asserts the sharp difference between them for the same reasons as he did in his earlier discussion of “Christian freedom” (he refers explicitly to *Inst.* 3.19): it is to forestall those sadly mistaken souls who think that the promise of liberty from the law relates to this fleeting, temporal realm. These characters seek to overcome all that interferes with their freedom in this life – laws, courts, magistrates and what have you – until the revolution has been achieved, or, as he puts it, “the whole world is changed into a new form (*nisi totus in novam faciem orbis reformetur*)” (*Inst.* 4.20.1; *OS* 5:472.11-12). Not so fast, Calvin points out, since the spiritual and the temporal are poles apart and simply cannot be confused with one another.

Spiritual is spiritual and temporal is temporal and never the twain shall meet. Or so it would seem: as soon as he has re-asserted his earlier argument Calvin switches tack. Despite this very sharp separation between the realms, Calvin goes on to write: “we ought to know that they are not adverse to each other (*ita nec quicquam pugnare sciendum est*)” (*Inst.* 4.20.2; *OS* 5:473.8-9).

Distinct but not opposed – it is a neat distinction. And it appears a minor concession, a small point in a larger argument. Yet it is extraordinarily important: now the spiritual and temporal, the internal and external are in fact connected. Much turns on this concession, for once he admits that the spiritual and temporal are connected a mass of items floods in (see Graham 1978, 158-9).

So what role does a civil government have in the life of faith? For starters, it should ban idolatry, blasphemy and any slanders against the truth (*Inst.* 4.20.3; *OS* 5:473.30-474.24). That is substantial enough, but he goes on to suggest that such government might also maintain public peace and quiet, and perhaps ensure that private property remains intact (a good early capitalist line). While we are on the topic, why not include the protection of commerce, as well as ways of maintaining honesty and modesty and even a decent form of public religion among Christians? A rather comprehensive list, is it not?⁴ Here he comes through as a good conservative: everything must be done to ensure that order is maintained and no revolutionary threat can arise. But he has gone much further than such conservatism, for the proper task of government is to protect and nurture “the true religion (*vera religio*), which is contained in the law of God” (*Inst.* 4.20.3; *OS* 5:474.13 see also 4.20.9; *OS* 5:479-81). If it does so, then the very earthly civil government actually plays a role like that of food and water, even light and air, albeit with greater dignity.

I have been giving an exposition of the third paragraph of chapter 20 since it brings out how closely the spiritual and the temporal realms have come in the space of a few short sentences. But Calvin realizes that his argument seems like a complete about-face so he sets out to show why it isn't. As a first step to exploring that difficult task, I need to ask a question: why does he make such a

⁴ I cannot help thinking of that initial list of revolutionary elements in the prefatory letter to Francis I of France, where Calvin tries to reassure the king that he and his cronies are not in the business of overthrowing the laws and the courts, disturbing the peace, tearing scepters from the hand of kings or, to sum it up, turning society upside down.

move to connect the spiritual and temporal? The short answer is that he wants to prevent both tyranny and anarchy. The long answer is in what follows.

Between Anarchy and Tyranny

This opposition between tyranny and anarchy is one of the structuring features of the whole chapter. Initially Calvin deals with various forms of anarchy, whether spiritual escapism or political radicalism. Later he focuses on tyranny, working away at the problem of what Christians should do when faced with ungodly rulers. Let me take each one in turn.

The political radicals, whom we keep meeting in the *Institutes*, connect that spiritual and temporal very closely. Disdain for the existing political order, the law and other grubby matters of human society, translates into a radical and anarchistic agenda. The social, economic and political life of this world is corrupt and depraved. However, instead of retreating from it they seek to overthrow and replace it with a properly holy society. In what is a rather good description of anarchism, Calvin writes: “they think that nothing will be safe until the whole world is changed into a new form, when there will be neither courts, nor laws, nor magistrates, nor anything of the kind to interfere, as they suppose, with their liberty” (*Inst.* 4.20.1; 5:472.10-13). Faced with such a close connection between the spiritual and the temporal in the hands of such anarchists, Calvin opts for their separation – at least in this instance.

Spiritual escapism is a relatively new beast, although its crux is the radical separation of spiritual and temporal. It may take two forms. On the one hand, it is a retreat within when faced with the troubled and complex matters of the world. I may find a quiet corner away from the cares and worries of life, block them out as best I can and live my inner life of faith in peaceful solitude. On the other hand, it may mean a complete disdain of the things of this world. Since we already have one foot in heaven and sit at the table of the Lord we really don't need to bother with the laws and sanctions of society. We are far above all those

messy earthly matters and can therefore ignore the grubby matters of politics and the legal system. We are, in short, a law unto ourselves; or rather, we already live out God's law and need no law of men. Both types of spiritual escapism are problematic for Calvin (see *Inst.* 4.20.2; *OS* 5:472.35-473.29). He knows full well that his argument for the purely spiritual and inner domain of Christian faith can lead in this direction, so in this case he switches and seeks to connect both spiritual and temporal.

In the remainder of this last chapter of the *Institutes* Calvin keeps both forms of anarchy in mind: to counter the political anarchists he constantly asserts the need to obey one's earthly rulers since they have been appointed by God; against the spiritual escapists he harps on the point that civil government is there to protect and nurture the life of faith. But it is really tyranny that draws more and more of his attention.

Already in his opening statement Calvin lays out the threat of absolute power. Although he speaks of finding a way between the two extremes of anarchy and tyranny – between the “frantic and barbarous men” trying to overthrow God's order (our political anarchists) and the “flatterers of princes” who oppose earthly power to God's government in order to enhance their own “power without measure (*potentiam sine modo*)” (*Inst.* 4.20.1; *OS* 5:471.21-3) – he is actually more interested in countering tyranny. And the nub of the problem is that if an earthly ruler is opposed to God, what is a Christian or indeed a citizen to do?

The answer is not clear. For a man given to a near obsessive precision and the careful arrangement of his arguments, this is curious indeed. Something must be bugging him. In fact, Calvin resorts to his usual efforts to categorize and organize. So we find that most of his attention in this last chapter is given over the respective roles of the king, magistrate, laws and people. This time his famed precision does not help him. One would imagine that the simple question – what to do with an ungodly ruler? – would be relatively easy to answer. But not so,

and the reason is that Calvin is far too good a student of the Bible to find an easy answer to the question. So let us follow him as he twists and turns.

What to Do With an Ungodly Ruler

In section after section (from the 4th to the 13th of chapter 20) we find various tasks of the rulers, both kings and magistrates. Calvin begins by emphasizing that they are appointed by God (*Inst.* 4.20.4-7; *OS* 5:474.25-478.10) but then already raises the problem of what to do when they tend towards tyranny. His preliminary response is to argue for a small aristocracy bordering on popular government (*Inst.* 4.20.8; *OS* 5:478.11-479.31) in order keep tyranny in check. Here his theology meshes with his politics very closely: analogous to the combination of his democracy of depravity (the doctrine of sin) and the aristocracy of salvation (predestination), Calvin argues for an aristocratic government with distinct popular elements. Since monarchy tends towards tyranny, since aristocracy slips all too easily towards the faction of the few and since popular government has a knack of being seditious, he seeks a system with the proverbial checks and balances: “Owing, therefore, to the vices or defects of men, it is safer and more tolerable when several bear rule, that they may thus naturally assist, instruct, and admonish each other, and should any one be disposed to go too far, the others are censors and masters to curb his excess” (*Inst.* 4.20.8; *OS* 5:478.28-479.2). No democrat here: rather, he is a careful conservative who feels that the Bible points in this direction. But he is also not about to plunge into arguments for absolute monarchy, for this would be an open ticket to the exercise of “power without measure (*potentiam sine modo*)” (*Inst.* 4.20.1; *OS* 5:471.23) and tyranny. Calvin’s admirable ability to specify two extremes and then walk a line between shows itself once again. His position seems so reasonable, the strategy so persuasive that I cannot help but nod in agreement.

The next few sections cover matters such as the close relation between spiritual and temporal laws (*Inst.* 4.20.9; *OS* 5:479.32-481.26), an effort to find a moderate position between the command not to kill and the need for the death penalty (*Inst.* 4.20.10; *OS* 5:481.27-483.28), as well as the uses of war in light of the same argument and the need to keep sedition in check (*Inst.* 4.20.11-12; *OS* 5:483.28-485.17). Taxes too (*Inst.* 4.20.13; *OS* 5:485.18-486.8) should be necessary but not tyrannical. And then we dip into a lengthy discussion of the law (*Inst.* 4.20.14-21; *OS* 5:486.9-493.15), where Calvin argues that the basis of civil law is and should be Moses' law and not some common law. We are a long way indeed from that sharp division between temporal and spiritual realms on which Calvin was so keen not that long ago. In fact, here he goes so far as to argue that revelation is the basis of temporal law!

I have outlined all too briefly some features of Calvin's effort to give precise order to matters pertaining to civil government. Although the threat of anarchy turns up every now and then – especially on the dangers of popular government – we gain the sense that it is not really the major issue. That sense is enhanced when we come to the closing sections of the chapter, for this is where Calvin really comes to grips with the issue of tyranny. And he is driven to do so by a series of (for him) difficult biblical texts that deal with the overthrow of a ruler.

Obedience

Calvin begins the final stages of this chapter by asserting the importance of obedience to divinely appointed rulers. Starting with the flagship text of Romans 13:1-2, he brings out a string of biblical texts to show that this is as solid a biblical position as one will find: Titus 3:1 on obeying the powers, principalities and magistrates; 1 Peter 2:13 on submission to kings and

governors; 1 Timothy 2:1-2 on prayers and intercessions for all in authority (*Inst.* 4.20.23; *OS* 5:494.6-26).⁵

Well and good, one might want to say. The Bible has plenty of texts that give divine sanction to the ruler, whether king, dictator or despot. And over the last two millennia there have been more than enough rulers and small-minded churchmen who have been all too ready to use such texts for their own megalomaniac programs. So we face our next problem: if the Bible says we must obey our rulers, what do we do with the dreary run of ungodly and tyrannical ones? Calvin's initial answer is, as we might expect, rather conservative:

Those, indeed, who rule for the public good, are true examples and specimens of his beneficence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by him to punish the people for their iniquity. Still all alike possess that sacred majesty with which he has invested lawful power (*Inst.* 4.20.25; *OS* 5:470.1-6).⁶

At this point he takes the line that such a ruler is still to be obeyed, since he may be an agent of punishment in God's hands. The worst tyrant is still in a divinely appointed role, even if it is to remind us of our sinful state. Now, it would be a stretch to imagine a president or prime minister in our own time arguing that she or he has been sent by God to punish us. Then again, many people have often felt precisely this way – that their elected ruler has been sent to punish them for one or other unknown sin. I am sure that most readers would be able to identify at least one ruler they have experienced personally who fits Calvin's colorful description:

⁵ Stevenson (1999 143-4; 2004) heavily stresses this element in Calvin's political thought, drawing on letters that give direct advice on the matter. See also the commentaries on 1 Peter 2:13 (Calvin 1855, 79-80), 1 Timothy 2:1-2 (Calvin 1856, 51-3), and Titus 3:1 (Calvin 1856, 324).

⁶ So also: "When we hear that the king was appointed by God, let us, at the same time, call to mind those heavenly edicts as to honouring and fearing the king, and we shall have no doubt that we are to view the most iniquitous tyrant as occupying the place with which the Lord has honoured him" (*Inst.* 4.20.26; *OS* 5:497.10-13).

If we are cruelly tormented by a savage, if we are rapaciously pillaged by an avaricious or luxurious, if we are neglected by a sluggish, if, in short, we are persecuted for righteousness' sake by an impious and sacrilegious prince, let us first call up the remembrance of our faults, which doubtless the Lord is chastising by such scourges (*Inst.* 4.20.29; *OS* 5:499.33-500.2).

So the first proposition is in place: the people must not disobey or even contemplate removing an ungodly ruler, no matter how rapacious or outrageous he (or at times she) might be. This would be an excellent place to close his argument, especially for a conservative like Calvin. It would also enable him to take his place beside Luther, forming a solid line on the question of the two kingdoms.

God and Agents

The problem is that Calvin is too good a student of the Bible. For in that troublesome text he finds at least two situations when one may remove a ruler from power. However, that “one” is not anyone: only God may do so or someone specifically appointed by God for that purpose, whether such a person knows they have been given this desirable task or not. As for the first category, God’s wrath has been and will be directed at any ruler who happens to disobey God. In language that comes all too close to the Hebrew prophets and even (God forbid) the likes of Thomas Müntzer, Calvin writes:

Before his face shall fall and be crushed all kings and judges of the earth, who have not kissed his anointed, who have enacted unjust laws to oppress the poor in judgment, and do violence to the cause of the humble, to make widows a prey, and plunder the fatherless (*Inst.* 4.20.29; *OS* 5:500.7-13).

This is a rather important text, for it is both saturated in biblical allusions and it marks the emergence of a different position on ungodly rulers.⁷ The crucial principle that swings into action here is as follows: rulers are no different from anyone else, so if they have done wrong they deserve to be punished for it. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God – and that includes rulers. In

⁷ The allusions are to Psalm 2:10 and Isaiah 10:1. We can see such a position espoused quite clearly in his commentaries on these passages (Calvin 1845, 22-4; 1850, 333-4).

case the odd anarchist might start to get excited, with fingers twitching at the scabbard, Calvin makes it perfectly clear that this task of removing an ungodly ruler is strictly God's ... unless of course he happens to appoint someone to do the dirty work for him:

Herein is the goodness, power, and providence of God wondrously displayed. At one time he raises up manifest avengers (*vindices*) from among his own servants, and gives them his command to punish (*poenas sumant*) accursed tyranny, and deliver (*eximant*) his people from calamity when they are unjustly oppressed; at another time he employs, for this purpose, the fury of men who have other thoughts and other aims ... The former class of deliverers being brought forward by the lawful call of God to perform such deeds, when they took up arms against (*arma sumendo*) kings, did not at all violate that majesty with which kings are invested by divine appointment, but armed from heaven, they, by a greater power, curbed (*coercebant*) a less, just as kings may lawfully punish (*animadvertere*) their own satraps. The latter class, though they were directed by the hand of God, as seemed to him good, and did his work without knowing it, had nought but evil in their thoughts' (*Inst.* 4.20.30; *OS* 5:500.14-19, 29-501.4).

There are in fact two types of agent in the divine (secret) service of doing away with sundry rulers or at least delivering his people from the iron fist of impious oppression. Perhaps the best way to distinguish them is in terms of the conscious/unconscious distinction. Some are directly appointed for the task, perfectly conscious of the role assigned to them (however unwilling they might be) and undertake this ministry with more or less gusto. The examples are easy to call to mind (I cull a few from Calvin and add a few others): Moses and the ungodly rule of Pharaoh; Gideon and freedom from Midianite oppression; Othniel the judge who overthrew the oppression of Cushanrishathaim, the king of Mesopotamia; Ehud the judge and assassin of Eglon king of Moab; Esther and Mordecai in response to the oppression of Haman and so on.

However, others are not conscious of their divinely appointed roles, co-opted into the task without their knowledge. In fact, they may think that some minor affront needs to be avenged, they may be driven by fury and evil intent, but still they carry out the divine purpose (see also *Inst.* 1.18; *OS* 3:219-27). The biblical examples are not as numerous on this count, but we can find them

nonetheless. The most notable of these is Cyrus, king of the Medes and Persians, who is named by Isaiah as Yahweh's anointed – “messiah” no less in Isaiah 45:1 (see Calvin 1852c, 394-5). Others include the use of one state to punish another – Tyre is punished by Egypt, but then Egypt is punished in turn by Assyrians, who in their turn are chastised by the Babylonians and they get their own medicine from the Medes and Persians (under our friend Cyrus). Not a bad way to read the processes of imperial rise and fall, but then Calvin also points out that these empires punish Israel and Judah with sickening regularity.

But note carefully what has happened with this move by Calvin. Two fascinating twists have appeared in his argument, the first explicitly recognized by Calvin, the second not. The first of these is one of the many moments when he sets out to reconcile what is really a contradiction: God appoints rulers (and so we must obey them) but then God also appoints agents to curb (*coerceo*), punish (*animadverto*), inflict recompense on (*poenas sumo*), take up arms against (*arma sumo*) and deliver from (*eximo*) ungodly rulers. How to make sense of this contradiction? Calvin asserts that such agents “did not at all violate that majesty with which kings are invested by divine appointment.” How so? Another order now comes into play. The people may be commanded to obey rulers appointed by God, but those rulers must obey the one who appointed them in the first place. They might be kings, but God is king of kings. Or, as Calvin puts it, they are his satraps. The catch with this argument, which was initially produced to deal with a biblical contradiction, is that it introduces a further problem for Calvin: rulers need to obey God. If they do not, they may well be punished. The emergence of this position will lead us eventually to the explosive conclusion to chapter 20.

The second argument concerning these divine agents of political vengeance – that God may use for his own good the evil intent of others – introduces an argument fraught with danger. It may go in either direction. For instance, I can see it being used by some for the argument that Hitler actually

carried a good and necessary task despite his evil intent, namely the belated bourgeois revolution in Germany. But then it may also be used to argue that Stalin, however brutal he might have been, did succeed in modernizing Russia. Or indeed, China's annexation of Tibet has brought it into the modern world, or that the theft of Hawaii by the United States has been good for the place in the long run. The list is endless, but it boils down to the old Jesuit position that the end justifies the means. Adding the qualifier that the good in question must be good for God's people does not change the volatility of the original point. To my mind it is an extraordinarily dangerous line to take.

We have reached the end of the second turn in Calvin's argument. At first we found him asserting, with the assistance of a long list of texts, that the ruler must be obeyed even if he is an oppressive, evil and ungodly ruler. But then Calvin had to come to terms with those biblical texts that tell stories about punishing or removing ungodly rulers, so he allows that either God or one of his agents may avenge or punish a wayward and tyrannical ruler – a position fraught with dangers.

Magistrate

Now for the third turn of his argument – the magistrate. This crucial figure actually fills a gap. When I first read Calvin's text on the divinely-appointed agent whose task it is to curb and punish ungodly rulers, I began to wonder why the ministry of removing such rulers has not made it into the regular ordained ministries of the church. I pondered what the theological training for such a ministry would entail and how one might construct an ordination service. But then I realized that it has become a ministry of sorts – in the form of the magistrate (*magistratus*).

But who is the magistrate? In Calvin's text the magistrate is the contemporary form taken by the divinely appointed agent whose task (in part) is to curb the tyrannical excesses of the king. In this respect the magistrate

occupies an intermediate position between king and people. He sees such a magistrate embodied in figures like Moses, who receives the law from God and appoints 70 judges to manage the judicial load (Exodus 18:13-27 (Calvin 1852b, 302-12)), or like the judges in the book of the same name in the Hebrew Bible, or indeed Samuel in the books of his name. Indeed, a little earlier Calvin is drawn to the texts of 1 Samuel, although he uses them to point out that the people should obey an unjust king (1 Samuel 8:11-17) and then to show how even David refrained from taking Saul's life when he had Saul in his power (1 Samuel 24). Yet Samuel the judge or magistrate functions at another level here, for he is the one who both anoints and removes kings from office. While Samuel anoints Saul as the first king of Israel, he later removes that divine sanction from Saul and transfers it to David. This king-making magistrate is one who seems to have played a role in Calvin's depiction of the relations between magistrate and king.

As far as the historical situation in Calvin's own time is concerned, the magistrate was not merely a bureaucrat or even a law clerk as we tend to think of magistrates now. Their task was to watch over public affairs, keep a watch on other public officials, collect taxes, lead armies into battle if need be, execute the odd criminal as a last resort, and, of course, see that the laws were followed and enforced. It should be no surprise, then, that Calvin covers these topics in this last chapter.

One of the tasks of the magistrate is that he has been "appointed to restrain (*ad moderandam*) the tyranny of kings." And just to make sure, Calvin repeats the comment in a slightly different way: magistrates are appointed "officially to oppose (*intercedere*) the undue license of kings" (*Inst.* 4.20.31; *OS* 5:501.17 and 23). Here is a distinct echo of the curbing, punishing, inflicting recompense upon and taking up arms against tyrants that we found with the divinely appointed agents a little earlier. Now there is a slight difference: restraining and opposing is slightly milder than curbing, punishing and taking up

arms, but the difference is not so great. Precisely what this restraining and opposing may be is left unstated, but it is perfectly clear that absolute monarchs have no place in Calvin's polity. Nor indeed do kings who get too full of themselves and act in a tyrannical fashion.

We seem to have an answer to our problem of what to do with ungodly rulers. If you are a member of the common people, all you can do is obey and bear an ungodly ruler as best you can. But if you happen to be a magistrate then you may do what is necessary to ensure that king does the right thing by the people. And if you are a king then you must put aside any pretension to absoluteness, for at the first sign of tyranny God may crush you or a magistrate may oppose you. So we have two propositions: the people must obey kings in all situations; God and/or the magistrate are to keep a check on rapacious kings. It seems as though we have a cautious formula for political stability. Indeed, Calvin seems to have laid down a polity with some decent checks and balances in place: a kingship kept in check by a magistrate, who I assume is appointed from within the aristocracy that Calvin so favors as the ruling body.

Calvin lays down this careful argument by section 31 of the last chapter of the *Institutes*. The problem is that it this is the penultimate section. Calvin knows full well that there are some final biblical texts with which he has not dealt. And they will undo all the careful work he has invested in this long final chapter.

Let Princes Hear and Be Afraid

A little earlier I identified a move by Calvin that would have profound consequences for his argument. At the point where he specifies the two ways in which a ruler might be resisted and removed – by God directly or by a designated agent – he introduces the following principle: since a ruler is subject to God, any ruler who does not obey and serve God will be dealt with severely. At that point he is careful to stipulate that only God or his agent may do the dirty

work. But what happens when the people have to endure an ungodly or self-serving ruler? The answer with which we have become familiar is that the people should do nothing but endure. The last thing Calvin wants to do is give license to insurrection. So we find him asserting the following:

But whatever may be thought of the acts of the men themselves, the Lord by their means equally executed his own work, when *he broke the bloody sceptres of insolent kings, and overthrew their intolerable dominations. Let princes hear and be afraid (Audiant principes, et terreantur)*; but let us at the same time guard most carefully against spurning or violating the venerable and majestic authority of rulers, an authority which God has sanctioned by the most surest edicts, although those invested with it should be most unworthy of it, and, as far as in them lies, pollute it by their iniquity (*Inst.* 4.20.31; *OS* 5:501.5-13; emphasis added).

This is a fascinating and highly revealing passage. The first point to make is that here the tension between the reactionary and the radical, between the conservative and revolutionary, shows up in all its glory. So on the one hand we find statements warning us not to violate “the venerable and majestic authority of rulers,” but then on the other we read of breaking “the bloody sceptres of insolent kings” and overthrowing “their intolerable dominations.” The text is almost at war with itself, moving one way and then the next. It is as though Calvin lets rip only to hold himself back once again.

Further, I am particularly interested in the outburst against insolent and intolerable kings. For this passage is the second time Calvin has given vent to such political passion. We have already come across this slightly earlier one, but I cite it once again:

Before his face shall fall and be crushed all kings and judges of the earth, who have not kissed his anointed, who have enacted unjust laws to oppress the poor in judgment, and do violence to the cause of the humble, to make widows a prey, and plunder the fatherless (Inst. 4.20.29; *OS* 5:500.8-13; emphasis added).

All kings and judges of the earth shall fall and be crushed; he will break the blood-soaked scepters of insolent kings and intolerable tyrants – a theme is certainly emerging here. What we have is nothing less than prophetic fury against oppressive and tyrannical rulers. However, up until this point Calvin

must content himself with allowing God and his agents to do away with such tyrants. At least that is so until we come to that extraordinary final section of the last chapter of the *Institutes*.

Subject Only in the Lord

I quote the passage again, this time with the Latin since I want to give it closer attention:

But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow. And, indeed, how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offence of Him for whose sake you obey men! The Lord, therefore, is King of kings. When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all. We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates – a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God (*Inst.* 4.20.32).

At vero in ea, quam praefectorum imperiis deberi constituimus, obedientia, id semper excipiendum est, imo in primis observandum, ne ab eius obedientia nos deducat, cuius voluntati Regum omnium vota subesse, cuius decretis iussa cedere, cuius maiestati fascis submitti par est. Et vero, ut hominibus satisfacias, in eius offensionem incurrere, propter quem hominibus ipsis obedias, quam praeposterum fuerit? Dominus ergo Rex est regum: qui ubi sacrum os aperuit, unus pro omnibus simul ac supra omnes est audiendus; iis deinde qui nobis praesunt hominibus subiecti sumus: sed non nisi in ipso. Adversus ipsum siquid imperent, nullo sit nec loco nec numero; neque hic totam illam, qua magistratus pollent, dignitatem quicquam moremur: cui iniuria nulla fit dum in ordinem, prae singulari illa vereque summa Dei potestate, cogitur (OS 5:501.28-502.3).

Finally the deeper impulse of Calvin's argument rises to the surface. He begins by recalling the obedience due the rulers, a point we can hardly forget given the way he has driven the point home before. But then he introduces an "exception" (*excipiendum est* – literally, an exception must be made). Any obedience should not be incompatible with obedience to God. Or, as Calvin puts it in a finely balanced piece of writing, obedience to the one to whom rulers are in fact subject (*ne ab eius obedientia nos deducat*). So we find three balanced subordinate clauses that follow this central statement, each of them introduced

by “whose” (*cuius*): to whose will (*voluntati*), decrees (*decretis*) and majesty (*maiestati*) every king should be subject (*subesse*), must yield (*cedere*) and bow (*submitti*). Each item – will, decree, majesty, being subject, yielding and bowing – any garden-variety king would claim for himself. In response, Calvin points out that they all are in fact attributes of God first and kings second. He reinforces the point a sentence or two later, asserting that God is King of kings and that his is the mouth we should listen to “instead of all and above all” (*simul ac supra omnes*). Way back in that preface addressed to Francis, King of France – where Calvin is trying to assure the king that he means no seditious harm – we find exactly the same sentiment addressed directly to the king:

The characteristic of a true sovereign is, to acknowledge that, in the administration of his kingdom, he is a minister of God. He who does not make his reign subservient to the divine glory, acts the part not of a king, but of a robber (Calvin 1989, 5).⁸

Let the princes hear indeed! This quotation also suggests that the point Calvin makes at the end of the *Institutes* is not really an exception at all. If we go back to the opening sentence of the text I quoted above we find that what Calvin has to say must be observed above everything else: *in primus observandum* (the gerund of *obervo* giving the sense of obligation). Indeed, what Calvin writes here is hardly an exception at all but the basic rule for all engagements by Christians with the state.

The remainder of the quotation really turns around one point: when it comes to a choice between obeying God or obeying an ungodly ruler there is no choice. The ruler loses out. Three times he repeats what has become all too

⁸ See also his closing comment to the exposition of the fifth commandment: “It ought to be observed by the way, that we are ordered to obey parents only in the Lord. This is clear from the principle already laid down: for the place which they occupy is one to which the Lord has exalted them, by communicating to them a portion of his own honour. Therefore the submission yielded to them should be a step in our ascent to the Supreme Parent, and hence, if they instigate us to transgress the law, they deserve not to be regarded as parents, but as strangers attempting to seduce us from obedience to our true Father. The same holds in the case of rulers, masters, and superiors of every description. For it were unbecoming and absurd that the honour of God should be impaired by their exaltation – an exaltation which, being derived from him, ought to lead us up to him.” (*Inst.* 2.8.38; *OS* 3:379.16-27).

obvious. It would be simply “preposterous” (*praeposterum*) to suggest that anyone would attempt to please men and thereby incur the wrath of God. Then again, we may be subject to our rulers, as Calvin has asserted again and again, but “only in the Lord” (*nonnisi in ipso*). And once again, as bluntly as possible, “If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it” (*Adversus ipsum siquid imperent, nullo sit nec loco nec numero*).

I cannot emphasize how much of a breakthrough these last lines are. This position may seem obvious now, but it was not so clear a little earlier where we were enjoined in no uncertain terms to obey even unjust, oppressive and willful rulers for our own edification. I will return to this tension in a moment, but first an observation. When I first read this passage I assumed Calvin was talking about magistrates. The word does appear towards the end and I had been told that Calvin did not endorse civil disobedience by the people. Only the magistrate can curb, check or even punish ungodly rulers. This would have the minimal benefit of maintaining some consistency within Calvin’s own argument. The problem with such an argument is twofold. Firstly, this passage from Calvin mentions kings (*Regum*) and rulers (*praefectorum*) along with magistrates. *All* rulers come under the same principle. And that is the second problem with the superficial consistency that might have been maintained. To do so would betray a far deeper theological truth for Calvin: God is supreme and any obedience is due entirely to him. Rulers constitute no exception.

All too often we come across efforts to solve the contradictions in Calvin’s thought. I prefer to take the other path and push these contradictions as far as they will go. And here we have a central contradiction: either obey the rulers at all costs or obey God at all costs. Such a position works when there is no tension between the two, when the ruler’s guidelines coincide with those of God. But when they clash, we have a problem. Calvin tries to mediate between the two, so he begins by arguing that the people should obey the rulers in all situations, even when they are rapacious, oppressive and ungodly. Only God or

his appointed avengers may punish such rulers, or indeed the magistrate, who is one such appointed agent.

But then he realizes that there is more at stake, far more. It all turns on his theological position and his view of Scripture: if one's ultimate obedience is to God, there can be no compromise, and any ruler who decrees laws that contradict those of God must be shunned. Even more, if all of us are radically fallen and depraved, then that includes rulers as well. Thus, a ruler will more often than not tend to be oppressive and tyrannical since he or she is a fallen creature like everyone else. It is a radically democratic position, what I like to call the democracy of depravity. Further, Calvin is far too good a student of the Bible to let his earlier position stand. What I mean here is that he knows all too well that we have stories of civil disobedience, refusal to obey unjust laws and outright rebellion in the Bible. He cites texts such as Daniel's refusal to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's decree to worship him (Daniel 6:22), or the edict of Peter in Acts 5:29 to obey God rather than men (see also Calvin 1844, 214-15), or indeed Paul's comment on not yielding to the depraved wishes of men (1 Cor. 7:23). In fact, Calvin glosses this text from Paul as the last statement of the *Institutes*: "we were redeemed by Christ at the great price which our redemption cost him, in order that we might not yield a slavish obedience to the depraved wishes of men, far less do homage to their impiety" (*Inst.* 4.20.32; *OS* 5:502.28-31). Or even more strongly in his commentary on Daniel 6:22 he writes:

For earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. *We ought rather to utterly defy 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 (Calvin 1852a, 382; emphasis mine).

Conclusion

The outcome of Calvin's careful attention to the Bible is that he actually replicates the many-layered contradictions of that collection of texts (see further Boer in press). In closing, let me suggest that the tension I have been tracing

may also be cast in terms of compromise over against principle. For much of this last chapter of the *Institutes* Calvin tries to find a compromise between obedience to rulers and obedience to God. We have seen the results of that compromise – the people must obey rulers at all costs, God and his agents may punish them – but in the end it cannot hold. The principled Calvin triumphs in the end and that principle is none other than obedience to God first and his Scripture. To my mind this is the mark of a true revolutionary: one who does not compromise the ideal and holds to it.

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