

# Calvinism and Politics

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## I. Introduction

- A. Personal Background
- B. “Those were the days”: Calvinism and Politics in the ‘50s.
- C. Educational Culture in the ‘50s: Rediscovery of the Reformation
- D. New Look at Calvin and Politics
  - 1. Calvin as Lawyer and Political Leader (Calvin’s dates: 1509-1564)
  - 2. Calvin as Conciliarist [Conciliarism, a late medieval movement: constitutional government, directed by a council, not a monarch]
  - 3. 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup>-Century Political Impact of Calvinism in Netherlands, France, Scotland, England, Colonial New England
- E. Deep Inner Tensions within Calvinism as a Political Movement

## II. The Ambiguity of Calvinism

- A. Reactionary Side
  - 1. Familiar Disparaging Images
  - 2. Genevan Record
  - 3. “Dark side” in Netherlands (and South Africa), Scotland, England, Massachusetts Bay and Other New England Colonies
- B. Liberal Side
  - 1. Calvin’s Liberal Theory of Government [“liberal” in *two* senses:
    - 1) *freedom from “arbitrary power,”* meaning (at a minimum) *infliction of force or injury for self-serving purposes;*
    - 2) *liberality of spirit,* meaning *freely guided by a generous, altruistic disposition, as in ‘she was a liberal giver’.* ]
  - 2. Church, ideally, as locus of freedom in both senses of “liberal.”  
Two Things to Emphasize:
    - a. Freedom of Conscience (early Calvin)
    - b. Freedom to Attend to the Needs of Others
    - c. Examples from Calvin’s treatment of the Law
  - 3. Problem of Sin, and the Role of the Earthly Government
  - 4. Place of Constitutionalism in State and Church: Protecting against Arbitrary Power, and Disposing People toward Liberality of Spirit.
    - a. Polyarchy v. Monarchy
    - b. Popular Participation v. Tyranny (Importance of Natural Rights)
    - c. Provide, Within Limits, for Needs of Others, and Encourage Opportunities for Liberality of Spirit.
- C. One Historical Example of Liberal Calvinism at Work: Roger Williams and the Rhode Island Experiment

## III. Relevance for Present Political Situation: Four Points

- A. A commitment to politics and to the importance of political institutions has always been a central part of the Calvinist legacy.

- B. There is a deep, challenging tension in the Calvinist tradition between freedom and coercion, between voluntary action and government enforcement. This tension is at the heart of current controversies over religion and government, economy and government, and the protection of civil liberties against government encroachment.
- C. This tension is particularly relevant to the “welfare function” of government, a function Calvin clearly supported. It is difficult to find the right balance, as the Calvinist tradition demonstrates. Still, the tradition speaks for an indispensable, if circumscribed, role for government in addressing the basic needs of all citizens for adequate sustenance, health, education, safety, and justice.
- D. The deep concern in the tradition to restrain arbitrary power seems urgently relevant to our present situation. That includes controversies over use of force by the military and the police. It also includes the worrisome prospect of a new president sympathetic to authoritarianism, one who praises leaders like Vladimir Putin and Saddam Hussein, and promises to authorize the use of torture and other violations of human rights standards, and to flaunt solemn prohibitions against discrimination based on religion, race, ethnic identity and gender.

### **Suggested Readings**

- Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (Yale University Press, 2009)
- John Witte, Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- Andre Bieler, *The Social Humanism of Calvin* (John Knox Press, 1964)
- Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (Yale University Press, 2002)
- I. John Hesselink, *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Pickwick Publications, 1992)
- David Little, “Religion, Peace, and the Origins of Nationalism,” and “Roger Williams and the Puritan Background of the Establishment Clause,” in *Essays in Religion and Human Rights: Ground To Stand On* (Cambridge University Press, Paperback Edition, 2016).