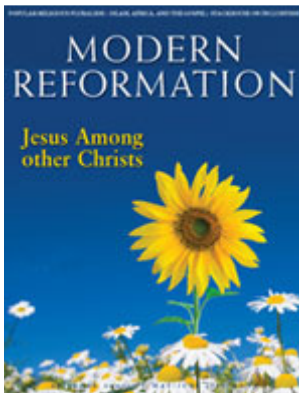


Celebrating Calvin

Ten Ways Modern Culture Is Different Because of John Calvin

David Hall



5. Collegial Governing: The Senate

Calvin argued long and hard that government should not and could not do everything; it had to be limited in its task and scope. If it was not, it would run aground as in the time of the Hebrew prophet Samuel.

Calvin's sermon on 1 Samuel 8 addresses one of the most widely expounded passages about political thought in Scripture. His 1561 exposition discusses the dangers of monarchy, the need for proper limitation of government, and the place of divine sovereignty over human governments. It is an example of Calvinism at its best, carefully balancing individual liberty and proper government.

Calvin began his sermon on 1 Samuel 8 by asserting that the people of Israel were—even at the last minute prior to electing a king—still free to change their minds; such freedom rendered the kingship optional. Then Samuel warned them "that the king who will reign over them will take their sons for his own purposes and will cause much plundering and robbery." Calvin preached that "there are limits prescribed by God to their power, within which they ought to be satisfied: namely, to work for the common good and to govern and direct the people in truest fairness and justice; not to be puffed up with their own importance, but to remember that they also are subjects of God."

Calvin's calls to submit to the governor were not without limit. God established magistrates properly "for the use of the people and the benefit of the republic." Accordingly, kings also had charters to satisfy: "They are not to undertake war rashly, nor ambitiously to increase their wealth; nor are they to govern their subjects on the basis of personal opinion or lust for whatever they want." Kings had authority only insofar as they met the conditions of God's covenant. Accordingly, he proclaimed from the pulpit of St. Pierre, "[S]ubjects are under the authority of kings; but at the same time, kings must care about the public welfare so they can discharge the duties prescribed to them by God with good counsel and mature deliberation."

The republican-type plan suggested by Jethro (Exod.18) appears as an innovation that did not originate in the mind of man, thought Calvin. Other commentators, ranging from Aquinas and Machiavelli to Althusius and Ponet, viewed Jethro's advice as a pristine example of federalism or republicanism. Commenting on a similar passage in Deuteronomy 1:14-16, Calvin stated:

Hence it more plainly appears that those who were to preside in judgment were not appointed only by the will of Moses, but elected by the votes of the people. And this is the most desirable kind of liberty, that we should not be compelled to obey every person who may be tyrannically put over our heads; but which allows of election, so that no one should rule except he be approved by us. And this is further confirmed in the next verse, wherein Moses recounts that he awaited the consent of the people, and that nothing was attempted which did not please them all.

Thus, Calvin viewed Exodus 18 as a representative republican form. Geneva's smallest Council of Twenty-Five was also known as the Senate.

This Genevan beacon, whose sermonic ideas later reached the shores of America, enumerated from the Samuel narrative the ways kings abuse their power and he distinguished a tyrant from a legitimate prince in these words: "A tyrant rules only by his own will and lust, whereas legitimate magistrates rule by counsel and by reason so as to determine how to bring about the greatest public welfare and benefit." Calvin decried the oppressive custom of magistrates' "taking part in the plundering to enrich themselves off the poor."

The character of Calvinism is exhibited in this (and other) sermons that advocated limited government. Calvin was correct that individual responsibility was a good speed bump to a government taking over more than it should. He altered the trajectory of governance, no less.

6. Decentralized Politics: The Republic

One of the procedural safeguards of the 1543 civic reform—a hallmark of Calvinistic governing ethos—was that the various branches of local government (councils) could no longer act unilaterally; henceforth, at least two councils were required to approve measures before ratification. This early mechanism, which prevented consolidation of all governmental power into a single council, predated Montesquieu's separation of powers doctrine by two centuries, a Calvinistic contribution that is not always recognized. The driving rationale for this dispersed authority was a simple but scriptural idea: even the best of leaders could think blindly and selfishly, so they needed a format for mutual correction and accountability. This kind of thinking, already incorporated into Geneva's ecclesiastical sphere (imbedded in the 1541 *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*) and essentially derived from biblical sources, anticipated many later instances of political federalism. The structure of Genevan presbyterianism began to influence Genevan civil politics; in turn, that also furthered the separation of powers and provided protection from oligarchy. The result was a far more open and stable society than previously, and Calvin's orientation toward the practical is obvious in these areas.

The process of Genevan elections itself was a mirror of Calvin's view of human nature and the role of the state. In one of the earliest organized democratic traditions, Calvin's fellow citizens elected four new syndics (commissioners) from a slate of eight for an annual term. Various levels of councils were then elected by the citizens.

This Calvin-shaped polity, which appeared to be either liberal or daringly democratic for its day, provided checks and balances, separation of powers, election by the residents, and other elements of the federal structure that would later be copied as one of Geneva's finest exports. Additional features of federalism, including an early appellate system, were developed by the late 1540s. Not only was Calvin's Geneva religious, but she also sought the assent of the governed to a degree not previously seen, leading the world to new and stable forms of republicanism. At the very least, one should acknowledge "the rather striking correlation, both in time and in place, between the spread of Calvinist Protestantism and the rise of democracy."

In keeping with the teachings of Calvin, elected governors perceived themselves as having a duty to God, one that compelled them to serve the public good and avoid pursuing personal benefit. This notion of selfless political duty owed much of its staying power to Calvin, and it soon became an integral feature of Genevan public culture. Municipal officials were not full-time salaried employees in the time of Calvin, and the combination of checks and balances between the various councils required government to be streamlined and simple. Political offices in Geneva, in contrast with medieval and some modern customs, were not profitable for office holders. Service in such offices was even avoided by some, requiring the threat of a fine if a citizen refused to serve after election.

Geneva became the chief laboratory for the implementation of many of Calvin's republican ideas. As such, her local political model yields hints about the character of Calvinism, complete with its tendency to limit government. Features such as limited terms, balance of powers, citizen nullification, interpositional magistracies, and accountability were at the heart of New World governments—which further amplified Calvinism to other generations and locales.

Many ideas that began with Calvin's reformation in Geneva and later became part of the fabric of America were cultivated and crossbred in the seventeenth century. Customs now taken for granted, such as freedom of speech, assembly, and dissent, were extended as Calvin's Dutch, British, and Scottish disciples refined these ideas.

1 [[Back](#)] Quotations in this section are from Douglas Kelly's translation of Calvin's Sermon on 1 Samuel 8 in *Calvin Studies Colloquium*, eds. Charles Raynal and John Leith (Davidson, NC: Davidson College Presbyterian Church, 1982).

2 [[Back](#)] For more support of this thesis, see my "Government by Moses and One Greater Than Moses," *Election Day Sermons* (Oak Ridge, TN: Kuyper Institute, 1996).

3 [[Back](#)] E. William Monter, *Calvin's Geneva*, (Huntington, NY: Krieger, 1975), 72. In 1542, the General Council adopted this proviso: "Nothing should be put before the Council of Two Hundred that has not been dealt with in the Narrow Council, nor before the General Council before having been dealt with in the Narrow Council as well as the Two Hundred" (translation by Kim McMahan).

4 [[Back](#)] In early Massachusetts, church attendance was sanctioned. Absenting oneself from church in Reformed Geneva drew a fine. E. William Monter, *Studies in Genevan Government, 1536-1605* (Geneva: Droz, 1964), 79.

5 [[Back](#)] Robert M. Kingdon, *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1970), vii.

6 [[Back](#)] Monter observed that Calvin did not so much purpose to instruct the existing magistrates "as to show others what magistrates are and for what end God has appointed them." Monter, *Studies in Genevan Government, 1536-1605*, 58.

7 [[Back](#)] Monter, *Studies in Genevan Government, 1536-1605*, 57.

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