

Lecture Three
 “God’s People, Civil Gov’t and the Reformation”
 Sept. 22 - KTH

This lecture is an examination of the theories and relations of God’s People to civil government during the period of the Protestant Reformation. The life and work of several great Protestant Reformers will be the focus of the inquiry. The Reformers were in the first place concerned with restoring Gospel purity in the church. However, as civil rulers were deeply involved in the doctrine and practice of the church, reexamination of the Biblical relation between ecclesiastical minister and the civil ruler was inescapable.

In an earlier lecture I asked where God’s People were before the Reformation. When the corrupt Church of Rome was dominant and its doctrine enforced by the sword of civil power, the Reformers faced many dangers including death. Some early protestors, such as the Waldensians and Albigensians, rejected papal authority in both church and civil affairs. Others believed that it should be restricted to church government. Not all the friction between ecclesiastical and civil authority rose out of the imposition of church authority on civil authority. By the time of Reformation and the rise of nationalism, there was an increasing interference by civil rulers in the government of the church. This was in many cases the greater issue between the churches and civil rulers. Civil rulers might justify their interference in the name of the Roman Catholic cause or the Protestant one but in both instants the civil ruler was asserting totalitarian authority.

Wyclif

I speak first of the labors of the English priest and pioneer reformer, John Wyclif. He was born around 1324. He was educated and later taught at Oxford and Cambridge.

As a priest, he served as a king’s chaplain. Trusted by the king he was sent on a diplomatic mission to arrange a peace treaty with France. On this mission his eyes were opened to the duplicity of the pope when he learned that the pope had financed France’s war with England. Thus, indirectly Roman Catholic England, had financed a war against itself. Wyclif came to believe that the king had the moral right to control the temporal wealth of the nation including the church within his realm. We can easily see Wyclif’s point. The wealth of a nation ought not be diverted to its enemies. At the same time we can understand that total control of a nation’s wealth poses a danger to the church’s mission and could easily be used to subvert the loyalty of its members. **We see then that drawing the line between the authority of the civil ruler and the church is difficult. It has always been difficult and always disputed. We saw this tension when we reviewed the reign of Constantine.**

Understanding the abuse of the pope in one case appears to have released Wyclif’s inhibitions about speaking of other abuses. Coming to Cambridge, he became an opponent of several Roman doctrines central to the power of the papal church.¹ He cared deeply for the people entrusted to his care. He preached and published tracts detailing the abuses of the people by the Church. He called the bishop of Rome “the anti-Christ, the proud, worldly priest of Rome, and the most cursed of clippers and cut-purses”. He also wrote that the pope “has no more power in binding and loosing than any priest”. This was bound arouse his own bishop and the pope. The pope condemned his writings and charged Wyclif with heresy.

¹Those familiar with English literature will know a poem by Chaucer which speaks of a humble and faithful pastor who cared for his flock. The reference is to Wyclif.

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Wyclif had powerful political protection from the pope within England when he began to expose the pope. He continued to propose other reforms. Basic to his proposals was the assertion of Biblical authority over papal authority. He was passionate for proclamation of a pure Gospel cleansed of the superstitions of Romanism. Unlike many learned men imbued with intellectual arrogance, he cared deeply for the common people. He esteemed them in his parish and elsewhere. He longed to bring them the Scripture and to teach faith and freedom in Christ. To bring this about, he trained and sent out itinerant evangelists. These evangelists were equipped with a relatively few portions of Scripture and were taught to preach a simple Gospel message. In order for the people to hear the Gospel in their own tongue, translation of these Bible passages from Latin to English was necessary. This led to a larger project of translating the entire Bible into English.

Nor was Wyclif done yet. He understood that the Roman practice of the mass was actually idolatry. He taught that it was without support in Scripture. He rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation. Furthermore he said that confession to a priest was not necessary for God’s forgiveness. In sum his teaching struck directly at the bondage of fear which kept the people subject to priest and pope.

Eventually Wyclif lost his political support. He was forbidden to preach and was, in effect, put under house arrest where he continued the work of translating the Bible. After suffering a debilitating stroke and two years later a fatal one. Forty-five years after his death, the pope declared him a heretic and excommunicated him. His bones were dug up and burned. His ashes were thrown into a nearby stream.

It was too late to stop his reforms. Wyclif’s witness had been heard far and wide. It had reached Prague. John Hus took up Wyclif’s witness. Hus was treacherously seized and burned at the Council of Constance. Luther knew of and admired Hus. Today the name of Wyclif is prominently attached to Bible translation work. Ironically, Wyclif did not know Hebrew and it is doubtful that he knew Greek. His translations were from the Latin Vulgate and are not reliable translations. However, we gratefully remember him as one who labored to have the Word of God available in the common language of the people.

Perhaps the most long lasting legacy of Wyclif is the one which is least known. Those itinerant evangelists he recruited went far and wide and influenced generations.. Known later as Lollards, they came north to Scotland. Being unlicensed by the church they met great opposition. Some were martyred. James Resby was burnt at Perth. In 1414 reading the Scripture in English was made a capital crime. The Scottish Parliament decreed that in order to receive a degree at St. Andrew an oath to suppress the Lollards must be taken. It is believed that John Knox refused to take this oath and consequently was refused the degree which he had earned. The southwest of Scotland became a Lollard stronghold. Later it was a stronghold of the Covenanters. George Wishart, friend of John Knox, was native to this country. Wishart’s martyrdom for preaching the Gospel was the turning point in Knox’s life.

John Wyclif is worthy of remembrance for many things. He was a proto-reformer within the Roman Church. He dealt with many issues, but his commitment to the Bible as the highest authority and his passion to have it known by all, is his greatest and richest legacy to God’s People. Whether king or prelate; subject of the state or member of the church; all are subject to its authority. It is the Word of God. The authority of the Scripture against all contrary claims was the bedrock position of the Reformers. John Wyclif spent his life liberating God’s people from the tyranny whether ecclesiastical or civil that all might live under the compassionate rule of the Lord Jesus.

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Luther

No examination of the Reformation period may overlook the life and work of Martin Luther, but since this history is well known, I will be brief.

Luther was a Augustinian monk, Roman priest and doctor of the church. He had many terrible struggles of conscience both before and after he became a monk. Eventually he found peace in the knowledge that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone on the ground of Christ’s sacrifice and righteousness alone. Most of his early work was at the University of Wittenberg. In 1517 the corruption of the Roman Church was forcibly brought to his attention by the arrival of Tezel who was selling indulgences to raise money for the building of St. Peter’s. Luther nailed his famous 95 theses to the door of the Wittenburg church. After this he was the dynamic voice of opposition to the perversions of Christian doctrine and practice by hierarchy and pope..

In 1520 the pope excommunicated Luther. In response Luther burned the papal bull which excommunicated him and continued his preaching and writing. Luther lived within the jurisdiction of the Holy Roman Empire and being excommunicated by the Church, it was the duty of civil ruler to execute him. The question was whether the ruler would carry out its duty. The prince of Luther’s state, Saxony, was sympathetic and protected him. Luther had many friends. The common people and many the nobles loved him. Even within the Roman church he had friends. While the Spanish Emperor, Charles the Fifth, was loyal to the pope, the freedom of Charles was restricted by lesser attachments among the German estates.

The Diet of Worms met twice a year. This was the assembly of the estates of the Holy Roman Empire. As such, it was a political gathering. However, as noted, it was the duty of civil rulers within the Empire to suppress heresy and execute heretics. Luther was summoned to attend the diet. He was given promises of safe conduct coming and going. Knowing what had happened to John Hus at the Council of Constance, he must have wondered just how much the promises were worth. Nevertheless, Luther wished to attend and bear witness to the truth even if it meant death. His comment was, “I shall go to Worms, though there were as many devils there as tiles on the roof”. Luther arrived in Worms April 16, 1521.

The pope’s representatives were there. Dr. Eck speaking for the Emperor asked Luther to renounce his books. Luther asked for time to consider saying that the demand involved the salvation of the soul and the truth of the Word of God. He was given one day. The next day Luther in a brief reply while quoting Jesus said, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why smitest thou me?” Dr. Eck replied that it was useless for Luther to defend himself as the doctrines he taught were the doctrines of John Hus and John Wyclif which the Council of Constance had already condemned. Luther answered, “Unless I am refuted and convicted by the testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither pope nor the Councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound by the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience.” With these words, Luther made his stand, a position from which he could not be moved.

Dr. Eck replied briefly, saying, “You can not prove it”, meaning that Luther could not prove that councils error. Luther said that he would

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prove it, meaning that he would do so from Scripture. At issue was the infallibility of the church. At this time the pronouncements of a pope were not considered infallible. This dogma of the Roman church was not declared until much later in 1870. However, the pronouncements of an ecumenical council were said by many to be infallible and Luther’s rejection was heretical in the eyes of Rome.² After this Luther is reported to have said, “Here I stand. God help me. Amen.”, or some similar words. We are not certain as to what he said but these words capture his spirit and intention.

Martin Luther stood on two bedrock principles of Christian conduct when confronted with the demands of human authority. The first is that whether civil or ecclesiastical authority is at issue, the Christian position is the same: the Word of God is the supreme authority. The response of Peter and John in the first days of the Apostolic church still guide God’s People. “Whether we ought to obey God or men, judge you?” The second is that when in good conscience we believe that we obey God’s Word, we must follow our conscience. This is not to say that our conscience is always correct, but so long as we are persuaded that conscience has been accurately informed by Scripture, we must heed it. Far better an misinformed loyalty to our Lord, than presumptuous disloyalty. This is not to say that zeal is an approved substitute for right knowledge. Nor may we hold in legitimate human authority in arrogant contempt. Neither church nor state authority is to be despised since God has instituted it. Only an absolute conviction of the truth of our stand on the ground of God’s Word will excuse disobeying those authorities which in God’s providence have been placed over us.

The Emperor sent word to the estates that it was their duty to execute Luther as a convicted heretic and issued the ban of the Empire. Luther having repudiated the authority of Constance and the councils of the church must suffer the same sentence as John Hus suffered at Constance. After the safe conduct expired, Luther must be executed. Ten days after arrival in Worms, Luther left for home. On the way, he was abducted by a band of armed men and taken secretly to the Castle at Wartburg. Likely this was arranged by Elector Frederick of Saxony. While in hiding, Luther worked on his translation of the Bible into the German language. What Wyclif had started for English speakers, Luther did for Germans. His translation became the leading instrument of the Protestant Reformation in Germany.

What did Luther teach about the relation of church and state? It is difficult to give a clear answer. Although he published a book on the subject shortly after Worms, he was not consistent in practice nor was what he advocated entirely practical. As always, Luther endeavored to ground his teaching on Scripture. Citing Rom. 13:1 and 1 Pet. 2:13, Luther insisted on the duty of the Christian to obey the civil ruler. However, speaking from Acts 5:29 he also insisted, as we might expect, that the Christian must always obey God rather than men if the commandments of men are contrary to God’s Word. On the basis of Matt. 22:21 he made a sharp distinction between secular and spiritual power. He rebuked the popes and bishops for involving themselves in secular affairs and princes for meddling with spiritual matters. Thus far one sees in Luther is a Christian consensus. What we find missing in Luther’s doctrine is a practical demarcation between secular and spiritual matters. As we have seen, drawing this line is always the difficulty.

Luther wrote in 1523, “God has ordained two governments among the children of Adam - the reign of God under Christ, and the reign of the

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world under the civil magistrate, each with its own laws and rights.”³ This is the same two kingdoms formula used by Knox and the presbyterians in Scotland. However Luther did not distinguish the two kingdoms in the same way as the Scottish reformers and later the Covenanters. Luther seems to have been indifferent and actually pessimistic about the possibility or even the desirability of a Christian state or a civil ruler attempting to implement a distinctly Christian civil rule. He wrote, “From the beginning of the world wise princes have been rare birds, and pious princes still rarer⁴. Most of them are the greatest fools or the worst boobies on earth.”⁵ It is said that Luther expressed a preference for a wise Turk over a Christian fool for civil governor if that were the choice. Here Luther appears to have fallen into an either/or trap and ignores the ideal of a wise Christian ruler. We will grant that perfection is not for this world, but why should we not strive for it?

In his earlier years, Luther was adamant that the individual be allowed freedom to follow the religious belief of his choice. Here Luther may have been thinking in terms of Roman Catholic and Protestant differences. His argument was based on the obvious truth that physical force can not produce belief. From this observation, Luther derived the doctrine that God has left the conscience free and therefore all attempts to coerce it are not only impossible but immoral. This doctrine has evolved into the natural or human right argument for religious liberty. Luther supported his argument from Augustine who said, “Faith can not be forced on anybody.”

The argument of both Luther and Augustine rests on a truism but in some ways it is beside the point. It is true that belief can not be coerced, but confession and practice can be regulated. Thus while belief can not be coerced, is it immoral to suppress publication of beliefs and the practices which grow out of them? Also while it may be immoral to force or even encourage hypocritical confession of a belief, is it therefore immoral to suppress practices growing out of false beliefs? The question remains as to whether for the good of the state, the Christian civil ruler may wisely suppress false religions and their propagation in the interest of the state’s survival as a Christian state. Indeed, does not a Biblical view of the survival of nations and states entail loyalty and obedience to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? False religions and heresies are corrupting and detrimental to the good of the state and its people. Should the Christian civil ruler keep hands off and leave correction to the providential rule of Christ, or does duty demand involvement? Answers to these questions are difficult but unavoidable..

We know that neither Augustine nor Luther were consistent. Later developments altered the practice of both men. Augustine advocated toleration for the Manichaean heretics, but later when faced with the obstinacy of the Donatists he sought help from the civil power. Likewise, Luther dealing with Anabaptist anarchy and insurrection, called on the civil magistrates. The misuse of evangelical principles had led to intolerable social and moral disorder. Luther did not hesitate to call upon and support the civil rulers, both Catholic and Protestant, in their suppression. Perhaps it was done more ruthlessly than necessary, but it was done. Luther had a second problem. This was the disorder of the reformed church itself. He had not contemplated any ecclesiastical organization

³As translated from the German and quoted by Schaff, Vol. 7, page 543

⁴I would not argue against this point.

⁵Schaff, Vol.7, p. 544

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other than the Roman Church. His goal had been to reform that Church not abolish it. When Protestants became the practicing church in many of the German principalities, where were they to worship and be instructed in the faith? For the most part the bishops and government of what had been the organized church remained loyal to Rome. This left the Protestants unorganized without a ministry or government. This was not a healthy situation and could not be continued. Another truism is that an organized church requires an organizer. Luther turned to the Protestant civil rulers and assumed with them a quasi apostolic role. Thus the legacy of Luther was a church much like that of the post-Constantine decades. Lutheran Christianity became the state religion, and had a state supported Christian ministry. Whatever the theoretical distinctions between church and state may have been, practically the state government had extensive control of church affairs. In short we would say that the Lutheran church assumed an Erastian model for church and state relations. I suspect that if Luther had returned to Germany a century or two later, he might have been dismayed by the state of affairs.

Calvin

John Calvin was born in 1509 to a well respected Roman Catholic family. He was a serious minded youth, a brilliant and industrious scholar. His first studies were in theology, but soon, at the behest of his father, he studied law. While still at the university he was “suddenly converted” according to his own testimony. Within a year of his conversion, he became the leader of the evangelical party in Paris. This leadership was not due to any desire or effort on his part. His knowledge and humble zeal led the reform movement to him. Like the majority of Protestant Reformers, his intention was the reform of the existing church rather than its destruction. Thus he continued in the Roman church as a matter of conscience until he was cast out. In 1533 Calvin and other Protestants were forced to leave Paris in haste. Then in 1534 a deadly persecution approved by King Francis the First, forced Calvin to flee France with many others. Eventually he made his way to Basel. There in 1536 he published the first edition of his Institutes of the Christian Religion. Several editions followed. The final chapter of Book Four, Chapter 20, of the Institutes sets down his doctrine of civil government.

Calvin’s desire had been to live a quiet life as a scholar and writer. Soon, however, he was called to an active life as a pastor. Still, as it has turned out, his writing has made the thought of Calvin a powerful force in the church and world to this day. This is not to discount his work as a pastor and adviser to statesmen. Some like to point to the practice of civil government at Geneva as his definitive teaching on civil government. Of course there is a connection, but it is better to read the Institutes and his writings to discover his mind. While Calvin was an adviser with great moral influence on the civil rulers of Geneva, he never held political office. Nor did the civil rulers always follow his advice. His strict self-limiting to ministry in the church is witness to his doctrine of clear separation of civil and ecclesiastical office.

At the beginning chapter twenty, Calvin asked why he should concern himself with the matter of civil government. In answer he wrote, “Having already stated that man is the subject of two kinds of government, and having sufficiently discussed that which is situated in the soul, or the inner man, and relates to eternal life, we are in this chapter, to say something of the other kind, which relates to civil justice, and the regulation of external conduct. For, though the nature of this argument seems to have no connection with the spiritual doctrine of faith, which I have undertaken to discuss, the sequel will show that I have sufficient reason for connecting them together, and, indeed, that necessity obliges me to it; especially since, on the one hand, infatuated and barbarous men madly endeavor to subvert this ordinance established by God; and, on the other hand, the flatterers of princes, extolling their power beyond all just bounds, hesitate not to oppose it to the authority of

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God himself.”⁶

Calvin’s argument for the necessity of Chapter twenty clearly reflects contemporary problems confronting the Reformed Church. The Protestant movement was buffeted by the theology of the Anabaptists on the one hand Lutheran on the other. The radical Anabaptists taught that there was no authority over the Christian other than Christ. This led to rebellion, and anarchy. An over estimation of the authority of the civil ruler common among Lutherans, encouraged undue interference by the civil ruler in the affairs of the church. However, it seems clear that Calvin had in mind Roman Catholic rulers rather than Lutherans. These rulers forced the practice of the Roman Catholic religion on their subjects and suppressed the preaching and teaching of the evangelical doctrine of the Protestants. In short, by forbidding the Biblical doctrine they “hesitate not to oppose it (their authority) to the authority of God himself” While we find the seminal idea for “separation of church and state” in Calvin, the separation was far from that being advocated by contemporary secular state theory. Calvin thought that civil ruler had a proper role to play in the reformation and preservation of a church obedient to the Word of God.

We should keep in mind the political and religious circumstances of the time and place when we read the works of European Protestant Reformers. Unlike the political situation of many Christians today, the nations of Europe were by confession nominally Christian. They were in their own estimation Christian states, not heathen; not pagan. The notions of modern secular civil government did not enter their thinking. Christians of that day faced political questions very different than those faced by many today. Roman Catholics and Protestants shared political assumptions which have been repudiated by those who advance secular democratic principles today.

Calvin began his discussion of civil government with a review of the distinctions between church government and civil government. He held that it is utterly necessary that we understand the distinctions We must not confuse the one with the other which he said was very common. His analogy for the distinction is the difference between body and soul. The body is for this present transitory life while the soul is for the future eternal life. Correspondently, civil government regulates the present bodily life while church government is an aid to the entrance into and preparation for the eternal life of the soul. He spoke of the Jewish rejection of Christ as the folly of failing to appreciate this distinction and confusing the civil government with the kingdom of Christ. Calvin held that the spiritual kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of the world ruled by civil governments “are things very different and remote from each other”.⁷ Comparing civil and church government is like confusing apples and oranges. **One of the questions which Christians need to ask is whether such a radical distinction is Biblical or even practicable. Perhaps Calvin’s distinction between body and soul upon which his distinction of governments is grounded is too radical.** And dare I say this, could it even have Gnostic overtones?

Replying to Anabaptist theology, Calvin insisted that his distinction does not lead “us to consider the whole system of civil government as a polluted thing, which has nothing to do with Christian men”.⁸ Calvin wrote that the spiritual reign of Christ over Christians does even now

⁶Institutes, Book IV, Chap. XX, Sect 1

⁷Chap. XX, Sect. 1

⁸Sect. 2

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“commence within us some preludes of the heavenly kingdom, in this mortal and transitory life and affords us some prelibations of immortal and incorruptible blessedness”.⁹ Having said this, he went on to assert that civil government is an ordinance of God with a blessed design for God’s people in the world during the time of their residence here. What makes it a blessing?

Calvin wrote, “this civil government is designed, as long as we live in this world, to cherish and support the external worship of God, to preserve the pure doctrine of religion, to defend the constitution of the Church, to regulate our lives in a manner requisite for the society of men, to form our manners of civil justice, to promote our concord with each other, and to establish general peace and tranquility; all which I confess to be superfluous if the Kingdom of God, as it now exists in us, extinguishes the present life.”

To this Calvin added, “**Nor let anyone think it strange that I now refer to human polity the charge of the due maintenance of religion, which I may appear to have placed beyond the jurisdiction of men.** For I do not allow men to make laws respecting religion and the worship of God now, any more than I did before; through I approve of civil government, which provides that the true religion which is contained in the law of God, be not violated, and polluted by public blasphemies, with impunity.”¹⁰ Few Christians today even among the Reformed or Calvinist would agree to this statement at least in its entirety. Calvin argued that the aid of civil government is essential for Christians in this life due to the present imperfection of their nature. If the imperfection of Christians requires civil government in this life how much more it is required if human life is to be possible in the circumstance of false religion. Calvin asserts that the “thought of its (true religion) extermination, is inhuman barbarism”.¹¹ It seems that Calvin held that civil government in order to reach its God given goal must uphold the true religion. Otherwise civil government will deteriorate into a great evil rather serving as a restraint of evil. See Romans 13. From a Christian perspective, one could hardly disagree with Calvin. But how does Christian civil government go about its task? Where are the boundaries of its authority?

Having dealt with the argument of the Anabaptists, Calvin went on to deal with the “flattery of princes” which overestimates the authority of princes to use their power of the sword to establish the doctrine and worship of false religion. But Calvin went further. Not only must the civil government not establish a false religion, it must support and maintain the true religion. Calvin argued that failure to defend and support the true religion is tacit and practical support of a false religion. Calvin believed that history as well as Scripture taught that every civil government is founded in and dependent upon some religion. If it does not support and defend the true religion, then it supports and defends some idolatrous religion.¹² We cite an example from modern times. In a secular democracy the god of its religion is ‘the people’. Although secular civil government has been called atheistic, it has a religiously held constituting principle which is an idol and serves to legitimize the civil government and strengthen the loyalty of its subjects to itself.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹Sect. 3

¹² Sect. 9

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What then is a Biblical relation of civil government to the church in a confessedly Christian state? That was the question for the Reformed churches. A Christian civil government which establishes and maintains one organized church within its territory may appear to end difficulties for Christians, but the hope of peace is often ephemeral. If there is within the bounds of the Christian state more than one church calling itself the true Christian church, what is the civil government to do? With which church will it co-operate? Which one will it support and defend? Obviously the civil government must make a choice. Otherwise, like Pilot it washes its hands to the detriment of truth. In effect, supporting false religion.

Calvin dealt with this problem by adopting the visible and invisible church distinction. The invisible church, known to God, consisting of all regenerate persons is a spiritual body, ruled by Christ through the Spirit. The visible church is a body of people on the earth which confesses the Christian faith in its essence, submits to the rule of Christ by Spirit and Word, and demonstrates the credibility of its profession by its manner of life on earth. It is acknowledged that the visible church has within its membership some who have falsely professed faith. It is also acknowledged that all the sincere professors are not yet fully sanctified.¹³ As an aid to the edification and sanctification of imperfect members and for the gathering of the church, Christ has instituted a visible church, organized, led, taught and ruled by a ministry of preachers, teachers, pastors, elders under whom professors of Christ assemble and worship. These assemblies with their ministers are the visible church.

For the assistance of Christian believers and the civil magistrate marks of a true branch of the church derived from the Scriptures have been prepared for discerning true branches of the visible church. Concerning these, Calvin wrote, “Hence the visible Church rises conspicuous to our view. For wherever we find the word of God purely preached and heard,¹⁴ and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there it is not to be doubted a Church of God.¹⁵ Members of the church are all those who by a “confession of faith, an exemplary life, and a participation of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ”.¹⁶ This is the institution, visible in its several assemblies with its ministers and members, marked as a true church by faithful preaching and hearing of the Word and its right administration and reception of the sacraments, that the civil ruler should recognize, support and defend according to Calvin.

On the other hand the church must not go beyond the bounds of its sphere and meddle in the affairs of the civil government which is charged with the regulation of the temporal aspects of life in this world. It seems a simple delineation of spheres of authority and responsibility. Nor can it be called novel with Calvin or any of the Reformers or their successors. It is fundamentally the same

¹³Chap, I, Sect.7

¹⁴If the word is preached but not believingly heard and acted upon, is that assembly a true church? The implication is that a true visible church exercises discipline over its members.

¹⁵Chap. 1 Sect. 9

¹⁶Chap. I, Sect. 8

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separation of authority and work as that recognized by Constantine and the Christian church for centuries. However, in practice the separation of spheres has been difficult. As I have said elsewhere, the disagreements even to the point of wars within Christian states, have been over where in a Christian state the line is to be drawn between activities which belong to the eternal, to salvation, and sanctification, and those which relate to the temporal and material.

A serious problem is also obvious in respect to the Roman Catholic Church and any other which might claim to be the only true church. That church would not agree that any church other than itself has the marks of a true church. Roman designation of the marks would differ as would its doctrine of “true preaching of the Gospel and right administration of the sacraments”.

We have noted Calvin’s use of body and soul as an analogy of civil and church spheres of authority. However, as with body and soul so also with the interests of civil and church governments, they interpenetrate. Total control of the externalities of the visible church by the civil magistrate seems likely to severely handicap the church in the execution of its spiritual responsibilities. Nor can the civil authority be entirely detached from the spiritual mission of the church. We see this if civil government makes an effort as Calvin requires to determine and apply the marks of a true church. These difficulties are easily seen in the history of the Protestant Reformation. Humility, mutual respect and co-operation must be the order of the day in a Christian state. Perhaps the most important thing to be remembered by both authorities is that neither has sovereign authority. Both are ministerial authorities under the Lordship of Christ. Both are ruled by Christ according to His Word and Spirit. Neither is the infallible vicar of Christ on earth. Each needs to listen and sometimes admonished by the other on the authority of the Word of God.

Calvin spoke of two authorities and the spheres of their ministerial labors. He also spoke concerning what law the civil ruler should publish and enforce. Calvin was a theocrat or perhaps better said, a Christocrat. That is to say the law of Christ is to guide the civil law of the Christian state. But what is the law of Christ? Sections fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen aim to answer this question. Calvin’s answer was that the civil ruler is to promulgate and enforce the moral law. He said as Jesus said, that the moral law was briefly stated in two commandments: to love God and to love neighbor. It is more fully stated in the Ten Commandments. He made it clear that the civil ruler is called to enforce both Tables of the Law and that the first Table is of primary importance not only for the honor of God but because as the foundation of the Christian state.

In speaking of Biblical laws, Calvin recognized three categories of laws commonly accepted: ceremonial, Jewish judicial and moral. Calvin clearly taught that the ceremonial and judicial laws were temporary and have passed away. They were moral in that they were God’s law for their time and were a reflection and application of moral law in their time. However, they were situational and transient rather than the moral law in itself which is universal and permanent. We see then that Calvin was not a theonomist in the contemporary sense of that label. Calvin also wrote of other matters related to civil government. These are worth knowing, but we must move on.

In summary, it is beyond doubt that Calvin has had a profound influence in the area of church/state relations although his doctrine was more an organization of thought than anything novel. However, that influence is mostly in the past. Even the Reformed or Calvinistic churches have largely repudiated Calvin’s theology of the Christian state with Christian civil rulers. What’s left is often a distortion. His doctrine that the Christian civil ruler should enforce both tables of the law has been the great sticking point. Some

contemporary Christians claim that a confessedly Christian state with Christian civil government and law neither can be nor should be desired by Christians. This view is much closer to the radical Anabaptists of the Reformation period than either Calvin or Luther. Secular democracy with its idealized, god like “people” is the regnant political philosophy of the West and of modernists everywhere. In what was once Christendom, Christians are obsessed with efforts to sanctify it. We will not have Christ to rule over us except in some remote, ethereal, militantly spiritual, individualistic, post modern manner which leaves everyone to do that which is right in his own eyes. Unfortunately this will end in chaos for which the remedy will be tyranny.

Knox

John Knox was born in Haddington east of Edinburgh in 1513. He was prepared for the priesthood at the local grammar school and St. Andrews. He served as a tutor of children in several families and served Mass in their family chapels.

Knox became the friend and later the bodyguard of the reforming Roman priest and much persecuted preacher, George Wishart. He was with Wishart when he was siezed and Knox prepared to defend him. Wishart restrained him saying that one man’s life was enough. Wishart was strangled and his body burned at the behest of Cardinal Beaton in 1546.

Soon afterwards a band of vigilantes seized the castle of Beaton at St. Andrews and murdered him. Then they holed up in the castle. Sometime later Knox came to the castle with three boys in his charge whose fathers had been outlawed. At St. Andrews he continued his tutoring lectured from the Gospel of John. Eventually Knox was called by the people there to be their preacher.

The devotedly Catholic queen mother sent for the French fleet. St. Andrews was captured ad Knox became a galley slave. Not a robust man, he became sick and near dying, but God heard his prayer and he recovered. Early in 1549 he was released from galley service and went to England. Tat the time Edward, the only son of Henry Tudor, was on the throne. he was a boy king and his Protector favored the Protestant Reformation.

Knox received an appointment to Berwick near the border of Scotland as a priest in the Church of England. This city, notorious for its disorder and wickedness responded to his preaching. Here he met an aristocratic woman who became his wife. Later he was a king’s chaplain in London. He was always a blunt, outspoken preacher speaking the Word of God without fear of men. After the death of Edward, the devoutly Catholic Mary, daughter of Henry’s divorced first wife came to the throne. Knox secretly fled to France.

Knox was called as one of three pastors for the English refugees in Frankfurt. The congregation was quarreling and Knox became victim to the troubles. The form of worship was at the heart of the disputes. Knox went to Geneva intending to avoid public life and take up the work of a scholar. A distress call from his wife and her mother brought him back to Berwick. He learned that the Reformation was gaining force in Scotland. He went secretly to Edinburgh and met leading men and groups through out Scotland. All this came to the attention of the Regent Queen Mother. A call back to Geneva came and Knox thought it prudent to accept.

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A happy two years followed as he had his wife with him and his son Nathaniel was born. He finished his Book of Order and worked with the men preparing the Geneva Bible. Then a call came to return to Scotland. He resigned his pastorate and left for Scotland once more. It was a dangerous trip. As he waited at Dieppe for transportation for a ship to Scotland he was in constant danger. No opportunity to cross to Scotland came and his former congregation in Geneva recalled him. He went back.

Once more Scotland called and he went. Finally in the spring of 1559 he arrived in his homeland. He was now nearing fifty years of age and in weakened health. But the fires of love for Christ and his country still burned. He would see a Reformed Church in Scotland yet. We will continue our review of Knox’s work in Scotland in our next lecture. **End**