

XII. CALVIN'S CONCEPT OF GOVERNMENT

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. By the early sixteenth century, there was very little democracy to be found. What democratic institutions or forms were in existence were on the decline.
- B. Democratic institutions were largely taken away by absolute monarchs. The worldly monarchs were challenged by the popes who viewed themselves as spiritual rulers of the world. As vice-regent of Christ, the popes asserted their right, not only to persecute those who disagreed with the Roman Catholic Church, but even to depose monarchs who refused to obey their orders. Popes had the power of excommunication (eternal hell) over the worldly monarchs.
- C. Calvin was trained as a lawyer which gave him a legal mind and was early on (before conversion) influenced by the humanist scholars of his day.
- D. Calvin, after conversion to Christ, came to understand the thinking of the leading Reformers of his day. Luther thought that the civil ruler was supreme over the church in all such worldly matters as property and even organizations but insisted this authority stopped at what was taught from the pulpits of the church. Zwingli allowed the civil ruler nearly total control over the church. We must remember those Reformers were dealing in cultures highly influenced by Christian culture, so for them it was not such a bad thing to have the church and state all mixed up in authority roles. The Anabaptists, however, would have nothing to do with civil authorities. The civil government only had control over non-Christians, and true Christians did not need civil law because they obeyed the Biblical moral law of God.

II. CALVIN'S ULTIMATE AUTHORITY

- A. Calvin's final authority for all of life was the Word of God, the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.
- B. From the Bible, Calvin believed that God was sovereign and possessed ultimate authority over all men.
- C. From the Bible, Calvin developed a logical Christian world-and-life view which encompassed all phases of life – not just religion, but science, economics, education and politics.
- D. From the Bible, Calvin believed that all men, even non-Christian men, have implanted within them a sense of justice and equity because they are created in the image of God, even though this image is marred by sin. It was on the basis of natural, common revelation that the Christian could find common ground with the non-Christians in political matters.

III. CALVIN'S CONCEPT OF CHURCH AND STATE

- A. The church and State were both under the sovereign God of heaven and earth. There was a separation of functions within the church and State, yet both are responsible to God. They both were to be supportive and yet independent of one another. NOTE: Calvin believed in a theocracy (State where God rules).
- B. The Church is responsible to set forth the Biblical teaching to the State as to how it should operate and yet the State was not to rule the Church. The Church may admonish the State as to what God's law says, but cannot determine how that law is to be applied in matters of civil jurisdiction.
- C. The State may advise the church concerning matters relating to civil affairs but cannot force the church to conform to civil rules in its teaching, worship or government. If the State attempts to interfere in the operation of the church or seeks to restrict its spiritual work, the church has the right and the duty to disobey, although it will have to suffer the consequences of such disobedience.
- D. The church was to be truly Christian and operating on divine revelation, the Bible. Calvin believed the government of the church was to be basically democratic. He did not believe ministers and church officials should be forced on the Church by civil government or by any small group of wealthy or aristocratic individuals. He believed that ministers, elders, evangelists and deacons should be appointed by the people of the church as a whole.

- E. Those who wanted to become ministers and elders were examined first by a consistory made up of ministers and elders of the churches, as to their morals and knowledge of the Bible and their skills and gifts to serve as a pastor. When approved, they were presented to the city council for financial support. Finally, they were presented to the people for a vote to either accept or reject the candidates. The congregation, then, had the final say as to who were going to be their ministers.

F. The ecclesiastical government of Geneva undoubtedly influenced the civil government of that city.

IV. CALVIN'S CONCEPT OF THE LAW AND THE MAGISTRATE

- A. Calvin held the magistrate in high honor, believing it was one of the high callings of God.
- B. The State was created by God to maintain peace and order and do justice in a sinful world. The State, however, does not have the freedom to do as it pleases, for it is under the rule of God's law.
- C. Divine law is essential for the Church and is foundational for the State, even if that State is not Christian. Even the unregenerate have natural law implanted in their hearts, and this is the foundation for all political government.
- D. Rule, whether by one ruler or a body made up of individuals, was a necessity in Calvin's thinking. Without rule of some kind, a society falls into anarchy. All rulers are ultimately appointed to that position by a sovereign God.
- E. Calvin did not favor the idea of succession by right of birth. He believed that free elections were the best method of establishing any ruler or ruling institution. He did not say all non-elected leaders were illegitimate but that free election was the more Biblical way.
- F. All rulers are not above the law of God but under the law of God. All laws must be just and equitable, and the ruler cannot do as he pleases. The ruler, whether a individual or parliament, must seek to rule for God and seek to benefit, protect and sustain the people.
- G. The people are to obey the civil ruler not merely for the social benefits but in so doing they are obeying God (Rom. 13). Only if the people are commanded to do what is contrary to the revealed will of God in the Bible, are they permitted to disobey the civil authority.
- H. Calvin believed that magistrates who are elected are more likely to rule justly than those who take control by inheritance or force.

IV. CALVIN AND REBELLION

- A. At first Calvin was opposed to any rebellion by the people to a tyrannical ruler. He believed that hereditary monarchy could only lead to tyranny. Yet, he understood that tyranny was better than anarchy.
- B. In his later years, Calvin gave more weight to the possibility of anti-tyrannical action. However, he felt such action should never be taken up by an ordinary citizen but only by those who hold public office.
- C. In some of his commentaries, Calvin seems to sanction the right of lesser magistrates to remove a tyrannical, persecuting monarch. This laid the groundwork for rebellion against tyranny not only by Protestants but others who were against dictatorial government.

V. CONCLUSION

- A. The teachings of Calvin went to France, England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain, etc. The Reformer most influenced by Calvin was John Knox who established Presbyterianism in Scotland.
- B. The outcome of all this is that Calvin's political ideas became the standard view among those who accepted his theological teachings.
- C. Calvin's political thought not only had an influence upon modern day democracy but his ideas have greatly influenced the political thinking of the western world.