

# Calvinism and Lutheranism on Church and State

*By Mike Warren*

The Reformation was catalyzed by a reformulation of the doctrine of salvation. Nevertheless its impact on how the Church and religion should relate to the State was far-reaching. The Roman Catholic Church had asserted its dominance over the State for centuries. When the dominance of the Catholic Church was undermined in terms of soteriology, the states were allowed to assert their independence. The theological fracture led to political fracture. The power structure was reversed, with individual states establishing local control of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

These developments forced the Reformers to decide how the newly independent states should relate to the Protestant Churches, as well as how individual Protestant should relate to Catholic states that were persecuting them. In 1520 Luther rejected the claims of the Papacy regarding the State in asserting, in the words of J.W. Allen, that "no coercive power whatever belonged properly to the clergy, bishops or Pope, that clergy subjects of the secular magistrates like other people and that the whole body of canon law was without validity."<sup>2</sup> From

---

<sup>1</sup> J.W. ALLEN, A HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY xiii (1960).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 5.

these negative declarations followed a positive conception of what the relation of Church and State ought to be, which we will explore.

Although Luther boasted that he had succeeded in understanding the nature of civil authority to a greater extent than any writer since the Apostles,<sup>3</sup> not until Calvin were the questions of Church and State systematically answered. That was done in Calvin's grand work in systematic theology, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin was a law school graduate, so impressing the law faculty that they waived his tuition debt when he graduated. The respect others in his day accorded his legal knowledge is seen in him being invited to proofread and edit Geneva's new constitution.

Calvin studied philosophy and literature before law school and expressed admiration for the natural law theory of the Stoics at that time. Shortly after Calvin graduated from law school, he experienced what he described as a "sudden conversion."<sup>4</sup> Thereafter his sharp legal mind worked to develop a theory of the State derived from the existence of a God who is absolutely sovereign, predestining some to salvation, the rest to damnation, some to be kings, the rest to be subjects; and all being equal in having a duty to submit to the absolute law of

---

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 38.

<sup>4</sup> RONALD S. WALLACE, *CALVIN, GENEVA AND THE REFORMATION* 1-9 (1988).

God. Yet, as we shall see, at some points in his political philosophy Calvin continued to accept without question the scholastic view of civil law.

In this paper I will examine each Reformer's political philosophy in terms of three areas: 1) God's law - the duty of the civil ruler to obey God's law, and where that law is to be found - in the law of Moses, in Biblical law generally, or in natural law; 2) establishment of religion - how the institutions of Church and State should interact in terms each one's proper jurisdiction; 3) civil disobedience - when is Christian rebellion against State authority justified and by what means. The main focus will be on each Reformer's individual views, but I will briefly attend to the views of their followers and determine to what degree the followers have been faithful to the views of their theological namesakes.

### **LUTHERANISM**

Defining "the Lutheran view of Church and State" is not a simple task. Not only are there various distortions of Luther's views on Church and State, but Luther himself held different views at different periods in his life after separating from Rome, and even within one period logical reconciliation of all his views is not always easy. One author has said, "In spite of

the fact that all schools of thought make a common appeal to the principles of the Lutheran Reformation, there is *no* consensus [sic] on the question of what actually constitutes the genuine Lutheran conception of the State.”<sup>5</sup> In his book *Christ and Culture* Richard Niebuhr labeled the Lutheran view as “Christ and Culture in Paradox.” Modern Lutherans have largely endorsed this label.<sup>6</sup> They accept the existence of irresolvable tensions between Church and State in their theology. I will attempt to clarify the Lutheran conception of the State by correcting the distortions of Luther’s teachings, distinguishing his teachings according to earlier and later periods, and then identify the paradoxes that remain.

### **The State under God’s Law**

At times, when Luther talked about the obligation of the State to enforce God’s law, he sounded like a Puritan theocrat, calling for the State to punish public blasphemers and revolutionary heretics according to the law of Moses. At other times, Luther sounded like an Enlightenment philosopher, giving

---

<sup>5</sup> NILS EHRENSTROEM, *CHRISTIAN FAITH AND THE MODERN STATE* 91 (1937), *quoted in* WILLIAM A. MUELLER, *CHURCH & STATE IN LUTHER & CALVIN* 37 (1965).

<sup>6</sup> See Robert Kolb, *Niebuhr’s ‘Christ and Culture in Paradox’ Revisited: The Christian Life, Simultaneous in Both Dimensions*, in *CHRIST AND CULTURE IN DIALOGUE*, 106 (Angus J. L. Menuge ed. 1999); GENE EDWARD VEITH, JR., *THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CROSS* 97, 115 (1999).

Reason supremacy over law, even God's law, and declaring Church and State to be completely autonomous from each other. Some of the tension can be resolved by separating Luther's early teachings from his late teachings, and asking which view is more in harmony with his theology as a whole. That will still leave us with some inconsistencies.

One of Luther's earliest writings on Church and State was *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, written in 1520. In this pamphlet Luther tried to persuade rulers to overturn the tyranny of the Catholic Church. The acts he enjoined the rulers to perform included divesting the Catholic Church of its temporal power, ensuring a married parish clergy, summoning a Council of the Church, reforming the curricula of the universities where the clergy were trained, and reducing the size of the religious orders.<sup>7</sup> These measures are not as strong as the ones he would later advocate, that is, for heretics to be executed; but events lead him in another direction in his political philosophy for a period. On November 7, 1521 George Duke of Saxony declared Luther's translation of the New Testament to be contraband. This led him to publish *On Secular Authority* in 1523, in which he asserts not only the complete

---

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority* (n.p. 1523), in LUTHER AND CALVIN ON SECULAR AUTHORITY viii (Harro Höpfl ed. & trans., Cambridge University Press 1991).

autonomy of the Church from the State, but also the substantial autonomy of the State from God and Biblical law.

*On Secular Authority* is Luther's most complete exposition of the issue of Church and State. It represents his earlier views before conflicts with Anabaptists, Jews and Catholics led him to switch his position once again and advocate the full, literal enforcement of Old Testament laws against false religion. The only consistency in Luther's views over the span of his career is that he chose whichever political philosophy at that time would best advance his goal of the Reformation of the Church. If the State was opposing the Reformation, then the State should keep out of religion, even if it were false religion. If the State could repel enemies of the Reformation, then it should use its power against those false religions.

In this treatise Luther interprets Jesus' words in Matthew 5:38 to be granting legitimacy to secular power to restrain the behavior (but not the religious beliefs) of the ungodly. He says that Jesus was saying to the Jews,

[Y]ou Jews think it is right and proper in the sight of God for you to recover what is yours by the law, and you rely on Moses saying 'an eye for an eye etc.' But I say to you that Moses gave this law on account of the wicked, who do not belong to God's kingdom, to prevent them from taking revenge themselves or doing worse. . . . You see, then, that Christ did not interpret his words as abolishing the Law of Moses or

as prohibiting secular authority.”<sup>8</sup>

Although Puritans would have clearly disagreed that members of God’s kingdom do not need the law anymore on account being under God’s grace,<sup>9</sup> it would seem that Luther’s application of the Law of Moses to those outside the kingdom by the State would be agreeable to the Puritan view. It seems that Luther is making the enforcement of Biblical law an obligation of the State. But this would be mistaken.

Unfortunately, the way that some modern Lutherans expound the issue can lead to the same mistaken impression. Gene Edward Veith defines the Lutheran “doctrine of two kingdoms” by saying, “The earthly kingdom exists to carry out the law; the spiritual kingdom exists to carry out forgiveness.”<sup>10</sup> He also says, “earthly institutions . . . are all subject to His law.”<sup>11</sup> But what Veith does not reveal is that, not only did Luther have a low view of the law in relation to the Christian and the Church, Luther’s view of the law in terms of the State was not as high as it may seem.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> In regard to the God’s law in the life of the Church and Christians, Luther said Christ “is king over Christians and rules by his Holy Spirit alone, without any laws.” *Id.* at 12.

<sup>10</sup> VEITH, *supra* note 6, at 102.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 98.

Whereas Calvinists would say that "the Law is King,"<sup>12</sup> with absolute authority over the ruler, Luther said that reason is "the head of all things."<sup>13</sup> Reason can justify the ruler in setting aside the law, even God's law in the Bible. Luther says, "reason remains the ruler at all times, the supreme law and master of all the laws."<sup>14</sup> Luther appeals to the wisdom of Solomon to prove that reason rules even over the law of Moses: "And because Solomon knew it, he despaired of all the laws, even though God had laid them down for him through Moses, and of all his princes and counsellors [sic], and turned to God himself, asking him for a wise heart to rule the people."<sup>15</sup> Uwe Siemon-Netto says that, although Luther taught that rulers were ordained by God in accordance with Romans 13:1, Luther "said over and over again that [the State] is not the realm of God, Christ or the Gospel, and secular rulers need not be saints. 'It is sufficient for the emperor to possess reason,' Luther writes."<sup>16</sup> Luther is said to have remarked that he would rather

---

<sup>12</sup> The Presbyterian minister Samuel Rutherford wrote *Lex Rex* (1644) in defense of this thesis.

<sup>13</sup> MARTIN LUTHER, WEIMAR AUSGABE 39 I:175, 9-10 (n.d.), *quoted in* UWE SIEMON-NETTO, *THE FABRICATED LUTHER* 80 (1995).

<sup>14</sup> Luther, *supra* note 8, at 35.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 71. (Emphasis added).

have a "competent turk rule than an incompetent Christian."<sup>17</sup> Siemon-Netto also quotes Luther as saying, "We have to . . . learn that the spiritual and the secular governments are as far apart as heaven and earth."<sup>18</sup> Because the ruler has reason to guide him in the affairs of State, he does not need grace, God's written word, or the advice of bishops to guide him in how to rule: "In short, *I know nothing about what laws to recommend to a prince*; I want only to instruct him how to dispose his heart with regard to whatever laws, counsels, verdicts and cases he has to deal with." This lack of a concrete conception of political justice in Luther's theology is one element in the criticism that Lutheranism allowed the rise of the Nazi totalitarian regime. That charge will be more fully examined below.

Although Luther's appeal to reason as the source of law for the civil ruler can make him sound like an Enlightenment philosopher, that would not be the most accurate comparison. Carter Lindberg provides a more precise understanding: "Reason replaced the ecclesial legitimation of politics. This is easily misunderstood today if we think of reason in post-Enlightenment terms as autonomous reason. . . . For Luther, the essential

---

<sup>17</sup> DAVID HALL, *From Reformation to Revolution: 1500-1650*, 3 PREMISE 3, (Mar. 29, 1996)

<<http://capo.org/premise/96/mar/p960304.html>>.

<sup>18</sup> SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 72.

characteristic for worldly rule is reason informed by wisdom and equity.”<sup>19</sup> This description of Luther’s use of reason bears resemblance to the Aristotelian view of reason as a guide to the *polis*. Roman Catholics, whose relationship to the State Lindberg says Luther was opposing by his appeal to reason, also derived their view of reason as guiding the *polis* from Aristotle. The difference is that the Roman Catholics synthesized Church authority with State authority in a unified hierarchy under the Unmoved Mover. Luther, in contrast, emphatically stressed the separation of the two kingdoms of Church and State into completely distinct hierarchies. They are both under God and serve each other (the Gospel admonishing obedience to the State, and the State providing an orderly world that allows the growth of the Gospel), but neither has any authority over the other, and God rules them in completely different ways. An Aristotelian use of reason and natural law is completely sufficient to guide the State. There is no need for the Church to exercise authority over the State or even try to influence the State through less coercive means to ensure that the lower (State and Nature) serves the higher (Church and Eternal) as in Catholic theology.

Despite explicit appeals to princes to enforce the letter

---

<sup>19</sup> CARTER LINDBERG, LUTHER’S CRITIQUE 690 (n.d.), *quoted in* SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 100 n.38.

of the law of Moses against heretics later in his life, in earlier years Luther denied the continuing authority of the law of Moses: "Therefore let Moses be to the Jews what the Saxon Mirror is to us; we of the Gentiles have nothing to do with it any longer. By the same token the French pay no heed to our Saxon Mirror, yet in matters of natural law they do agree with us."<sup>20</sup> Although the Mosaic law demands civil penalties (capital punishment) for public blasphemers, false prophets, and the public practice of pagan religions, Luther denied that such laws have any merit. He said that as long as heretics do not cause civil disturbances, they should be left alone: "Authority should not forbid anyone to teach or believe or say what he wants - the Gospel or lies. It is sufficient that authority fights the teaching of insurrection and unrest."<sup>21</sup> The reason for this, he says, is that heresy is a spiritual matter against which only spiritual weapons are effective: "The thoughts and beliefs of the souls cannot be known to anyone but God. Therefore it is futile and impossible to oblige anybody by force to believe this or that."<sup>22</sup> And also, "Heresy is a spiritual matter; no iron can smash it, no fire can burn it, no water can drown it. God's word

---

<sup>20</sup> MUELLER, *supra* note 5, at 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 101 n.47.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 101 n.46.

alone can deal with it, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 10:4, '[T]he weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds.'"<sup>23</sup> For the State to enforce laws against false religion was to fall for the devil's ploy of confusing the "two kingdoms" of Church and State:

Constantly I must pound in and squeeze in and drive in and wedge in this difference between the two kingdoms, even though it is written and said so often that it becomes tedious. The devil never stops cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil's name the secular leaders always want to be Christ's masters and teach Him how He should run His church and spiritual government. Similarly, the false governments and schismatic spirits always want to be masters, though not in God's name, and to teach people how to organize the secular government. Thus the devil is indeed very busy on both sides, and he has much to do. May God hinder him, amen, if we deserve it!<sup>24</sup>

Because Luther saw the fundamental doctrine of Christianity as justification by grace alone, anyone who mixed Law and Gospel was corrupting Christianity. Luther saw both the Papists and the Anabaptists committing this error by identifying God's kingdom with a political program. Lindberg says, "He saw in each of these expressions the claim that political criteria are relevant to determining who is and who is not the Church and that political programs be identified with the will of God. Luther's condemnations of . . . the Peasant's War . . . were

---

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 101 n.48.

<sup>24</sup> *Quoted in* SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 72.

consistent applications of his theological perspective that the Gospel stands against all 'holy wars' and efforts to 'baptize' politics."<sup>25</sup>

Luther said that the secular realm of the State is the realm of the "Deus absconditus," the hidden God. In the State God never reveals himself.<sup>26</sup> Franz Lau writes: "It is obvious that God conducts a curious masquerade in one of these two worlds [the secular one]; but that is a genuinely Lutheran thought. Luther has made it clear enough to us that God knows and uses ample means to make sure that his rule in the earthly world does not slip away from him."<sup>27</sup> God controls the earthly world by hidden means not only in the sense that a ruler can properly exercise reason without knowing God, but also in the sense that God is hidden by the hierarchy of authority that rules the masses. Natural reason, informed by wisdom and equity, directs the ruler, who in turn enforces laws that will control the unruly masses. In the Church, God is not hidden behind natural reason, hierarchal authority and laws in his control over people. Rather, God rules believers directly by

---

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 73.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 70.

<sup>27</sup> Franz Lau, *Luthers Lehre von den beiden Reichen* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1952), 95. *Quoted in* SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 70.

His Spirit; there is a "priesthood of all believers."<sup>28</sup>

Luther's statement above that the laws of the French, Saxons, and Moses are in agreement on natural law, even though they differ in terms of their written laws indicates that "natural law" for Luther is the authority of *natural reason over any written law*, and it has a distinct content even from God's law in the Bible. In order to interpret Luther's statements in a way that finds the most harmony between Luther's earlier and later views of the law of Moses, one must say that Luther was able to find some particular laws in the Old Testament that closely approximate the law of nature. In other words, those laws in the Old Testament that Luther endorses in his later years should be enforced not on the authority of the Old Testament, but on the authority of natural law, and the Old Testament just happens to agree with natural law in some points. William Mueller claims that Luther "thought very highly of the Mosaic law;" and even though it was popular in Luther's day to hold Roman law in high esteem, he preferred the law of Moses to it.<sup>29</sup> Thus Luther might find many particular laws in the Old Testament that he endorsed and would want enforced by the modern

---

<sup>28</sup> MUELLER, *supra* note 5, at 28. Not that obedience to the clergy is not usually required, but in terms of human hierarchy the Church members remain the source of Church authority, and they can remove clergy who fail their duties.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 48.

State, however he did not believe that the Mosaic law has binding authority in modern times; thus Luther or a modern ruler could pick and choose what he liked and disregard laws that he did not. This is exactly what Luther says in *On Secular Authority*:

Nor is it true that the Old Covenant had been abolished, so that it need not be kept, or that it is wrong to keep it - a point on which St. Jerome and many others have slipped up. Rather, this is the way in which the Old Covenant had been abolished: *doing or omitting are left free*, and no longer bind on pain of losing our souls, as they did formerly.<sup>30</sup>

There is a problem, however, with using this reasoning as a means of harmonizing Luther's earlier and later beliefs. Luther clearly changed his views on the wisdom of the State to enforce laws against publicly disruptive heretics; and he justified these laws in such a way as to accept, without disputation, what Moses commanded on the subject: "Moses in his law commands to stone such blasphemers (that is, who teach against a public article of faith which is clearly grounded in Holy Writ and believed throughout the world), yea to stone all false teachers. Therefore let us not engage in long disputations, but condemn such public blasphemy forthwith and without trial."<sup>31</sup> That Moses had commanded it was enough, the older Luther was saying. The law of Moses did not need to be submitted to the higher

---

<sup>30</sup> Luther, *supra* note 7, at 16, *emphasis added*.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in MUELLER, *supra* note 5, at 65.

authority of natural law. Luther's demand that the State prosecute heretics undermines his previous reasoning that the State's physical sword cannot touch the spiritual nature, the source of heresy. Yet the older Luther provided no new general principle for determining the line of demarcation between the jurisdictions of Church and State.

### **Establishment of Religion**

Despite Luther's insistence on many occasions that Church and State not be joined, from the beginning as a reformer he also insisted that the prince of the territory establish the Lutheran Church so as to provide it protection and aid.<sup>32</sup> In *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* Luther argued for State aid to the Church based on two arguments. The first was that regardless of religious issues, the civil ruler has a duty to prevent thievery of his subjects' property. Luther viewed oaths of German Catholic bishops to a foreign ruler, the Pope, as contrary to the material interests of the German people. The second argument was that the princes as individual Christians had a duty to aid the Church in whatever manner was under their power, although in matters of doctrine they were to act as a humble Church member. Christian princes were to act as bishops

---

<sup>32</sup> See ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 23.

when the need arose, and the need Luther perceived at the time was the convening of a council to inaugurate reforms that the Church would subsequently carry out. Luther emphasized that they were to be mere "emergency bishops," but inevitably the spiritual affairs were ultimately left to the princes' care, and the distinction between the princes' role as a Christian and his role as a civil ruler was dissolved. The territorial princes came to control not only Church administration, but also doctrine. This dependence on the State severely dampened the energies of the Lutheran Reformation.<sup>33</sup>

Luther's advocacy of a territorial Church, or people's Church (*Volkskirche*), was used to further Hitler's regime in the 1930's as a rationale for racist nationalism. But like other accusations that Luther's teachings lead to Nazism,<sup>34</sup> it may be true that Luther's teachings here lead Lutherans too far in acquiescing to Nazism before they were stirred to protest, but Luther cannot be fairly charged with the extremes that German Nazis took his ideas.<sup>35</sup> The modern concept of a nation did not exist in Luther's time. Luther loved the German culture, but that extended beyond the political boundaries of the princes. Luther had misgivings about the extent that the Lutheran Church

---

<sup>33</sup> MUELLER, *supra* note 5, at 26, 30-34.

<sup>34</sup> See *infra* "Civil Disobedience."

<sup>35</sup> MUELLER, *supra* note 5, at 15.

became dependent on the State in his own day, and even advocated a completely voluntary Church model at times.<sup>36</sup> After his hopes of wide-spread conversions among the Jews were not realized, Luther wrote *On the Jews and their Lies* in which he makes vitriolic demands for the State to persecute Jews as he thinks idolators were in the Old Testament, by burning down Jewish synagogues and homes, forbidding rabbinic teaching, and forcing them into manual labor. At the very least, it should be noted that these demands had nothing to do with race and nationality but with belief systems, and Hitler's beliefs were more pagan than any Jew at Luther's time ever was.<sup>37</sup>

Today Lutheranism is still the established Church in the Netherlands. Lutherans in America and other places where there is no established Church have not attempted to make Lutheranism the established religion. Modern Lutherans tend to emphasize those aspects of Luther's teachings that speak of the Church and State being "two kingdoms," that is, as functioning autonomously from each other.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 23.

<sup>37</sup> See ROBERT POIS, NATIONAL SOCIALISM AND THE RELIGION OF NATURE (1986).

<sup>38</sup> The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod is the Lutheran denomination in the U.S. most committed to adhering to the original Lutheran confessions, and it avoids taking political stands on any issue except for being pro-life on abortion.

## **Civil Disobedience**

The issue of the Lutheran teaching on State authority over the Church cannot escape an analysis of the charge that Lutheranism is to blame for the Nazi rise to power in the 1930's. To address this problem, however, one must begin with Luther's actual teachings. As one might expect with a time lapse of four hundred years, the beliefs of Lutherans of the Nazi era had undergone some changes from what Luther originally taught.

Some have believed that Luther required complete silence and obedience of citizens regarding any actions that the State might take, because the State had nothing to do with the Church, and that this led to acquiescence of the German people to Hitler's totalitarian regime. That a number of German Lutherans during the Nazi era did in fact hold this view is testified to by the well-known German Lutheran theologian of that era, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said, "On the Protestant side, Luther's doctrine of the Two Kingdoms was misinterpreted as implying the emancipation and sanctification of the world and of the natural. Government, reason, economics, and culture arrogate to themselves a right of autonomy, but do not in any way understand this autonomy as bringing them into opposition to

Christianity."<sup>39</sup>

Although there are some teachings of Luther that could be said to allow such a regime to gain great power before significant protest is made, it is incorrect to say that Luther prohibited all resistance to unjust rulers. In his earlier years, Luther advocated verbal rebuke in opposition to political injustice. In his later years he supported armed resistance when oppression became destructive of human life and true religion.

In these earlier years Luther taught that people are not obligated to follow rulers in their unjust actions. They can only resist passively. Insurrection is not an option. He allowed for the removal of a ruler only when the ruler had lost his mind, because, he said, one without reason is no longer human.<sup>40</sup> In 1520 he said, "I will side always with him, however unjust, who endures rebellion and against him who rebels, however justly."<sup>41</sup>

Luther based his teaching that resistance to the State could take the form of verbal rebuke but not physical resistance

---

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Bonhoeffer and the Sovereign State* 65 FIRST THINGS 27, 27-30 (1996).

<sup>40</sup> LUTHER, *supra* note 8, at 19:634, 18-20. Although Luther makes no reference to Aristotle, this is completely consistent with Aristotle view that man is defined by possessing reason.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 19.

on Christ's words to the officer in John 18:23: "'If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong' must be understood this way: There is a great difference between offering the other cheek, and punishing with words the one who hit us. Christ must suffer. But the word has been put into his mouth so that he may speak and punish what is unjust."<sup>42</sup> In the same vein he also said, "Let your mouth be the mouth of Christ's Spirit."<sup>43</sup> Preachers who fail to serve God by telling rulers their sins are, says Luther, "lazy," "worthless" and "swine."<sup>44</sup>

But what exactly are the sins that rulers should be rebuked for? After all, he has said, "I know nothing about what laws to recommend to a prince."<sup>45</sup> He did endorse a few laws from the Bible as the source of State authority, like the authority to use the sword against murderers.<sup>46</sup> But since he did not recognize the need for the civil ruler to consciously follow God, he offered little else. One must conclude that the sins the ruler would be rebuked for would mainly be of a personal nature rather than sins related to State actions. Since Luther wanted to keep religion and civil government separate, about the

---

<sup>42</sup> *Quoted in* SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 79.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 78.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 78-79.

<sup>45</sup> Luther, *supra* note 8, at 35.

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 6-7.

only political sin the ruler could be rebuked for is violating that separation and encroaching on the Church's preaching of the Gospel. Helmut Thielicke affirms this, saying of Luther's secular conception of the State, "The totalitarian state alone departs from this pattern, and in so doing shows that theologically it is no longer a state but a pseudo church."<sup>47</sup> Likewise Kenneth Barnes says even of those Christians who openly opposed Hitler, "most of the rebel Confessing Christians opposed totalitarianism only when total control extend to the church."<sup>48</sup> Therefore, while it is incorrect to say that Luther taught quiet obedience to a totalitarian regime, Luther's view of the State means that the Church should say very little about how the State operates until it becomes totalitarian. At that stage, any resistance, either by word or by sword, will most likely prove futile, as Bonhoeffer and other Confessing Christians discovered.

Luther's understanding of "the theology of the cross" requires that the Christian resistance to State oppression go no further than verbal rebuke. The Christian is to follow his Lord and accept suffering, and only in heaven will he receive glory and be triumphant over the ungodly. Based on Christ's example

---

<sup>47</sup> HELMUT THIELICKE, *THEOLOGICAL ETHICS: POLITICS* 21 (1979), *quoted in Hall, supra* at note 14.

<sup>48</sup> KENNETH C. BARNES, *NAZISM, LIBERALISM, & CHRISTIANITY* 122 (1991).

and His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, Luther taught that the Christian should not be his own judge and jury. If everyone took the law into his own hands, society would crumble.<sup>49</sup> While one could fight on behalf of his neighbor so as to “act in accordance with the [command to] love and . . . tolerate no injustice against him,” he could not fight for his own cause.<sup>50</sup> Fighting against injustice requires a concept of political justice, which Luther’s political philosophy could not provide in any well-developed form. Therefore, in practice, a Lutheran is much more likely to silently suffer injustice than try to end injustice by reforming the legal system from within the system.

Luther’s theology of the cross is also said to be a factor in allowing the rise of Nazism in terms of eschatology. Luther’s eschatology was amillennial, meaning there will be no earthly triumph of righteousness in society before the Last Judgment. The Church will always suffer and be persecuted by those in established authority in the world, always a voice crying in the wilderness, even as Christ was while He was on the earth. Since God ordains this, efforts to transform the State into a Christian institution will be futile. As modern Dispensationalists have said, “You don’t polish brass on a sinking ship.” Lutherans criticize Calvinists, who are often

---

<sup>49</sup> See SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 79.

<sup>50</sup> Luther, *supra* note 7, at 15.

postmillennial, for having "an undo hope for history."<sup>51</sup> This they say confuses law and gospel by teaching a salvation (of society) by law.

Barnes writes that among Lutherans in the 1930's both for and against Hitler, amillennialism was a prominent influence in their political philosophy: "Even the more outspoken Confessing Christian circle around Bonhoeffer agreed that the community of true Christians would not be able to 'restore this fallen and destroyed creation' but only bear witness to the will of God."<sup>52</sup> Bonhoeffer's circle showed that they recognized that eschatology and ethics are logically distinct; it is logically possible for one's efforts to establish justice in the world to be doomed to failure while still having a duty to proclaim a just standard to the world. However, Luther's lack of a standard of social justice and his eschatological pessimism combined to incapacitate the Lutheran Church in the face of encroaching Nazi totalitarianism.

As Luther's frustration with disruptive heretics led him to change his position on civil sanctions against them, in a similar way Luther's frustration with disruptive rulers led him to change his position on the morality of armed resistance against them. In October 1530 Luther signed, with other

---

<sup>51</sup> ROBERT BENNE, *THE PARADOXICAL VISION* 91 (1995).

<sup>52</sup> BARNES, *supra* at note 33.

Wittenberg theologians and jurists, the Torgau Disputation. This document justified resistance to tyrannical rulers in self-defense on legal grounds. Based on a review of feudal, Roman, canon, and Germanic laws, Luther and the others concluded that the authority they are required to obey itself allows for a right of resistance. This was what could be characterized as a contractual right to armed resistance.

Luther's views of civil disobedience changed in June 1530 when the Roman Catholic Church ordered Lutherans to submit within six months to its demands, which included a ban on proselytizing and religious publishing in Lutheran domains. In response Luther issued the *Warning to His Dear German People*, which warned people that they must obey God rather than men when the Gospel is at stake. In the *Warning* Luther says that if war breaks out, those who defend themselves will be justified in terms of self-defense. Luther described the individual as a magistrate when family and neighbors are attacked without constitutional authority.<sup>53</sup>

In 1538 Luther, with other reformers, Jonas, Bucer, and Melanchthon, went even further and justified armed resistance against civil rulers regardless of the existence of a positive legal contract. They argued that the Bible and natural law

---

<sup>53</sup> SIEMON-NETTO, *supra* note 13, at 86.

teach that when a public officer commits violent injustice he should no more be obeyed than a common murderer. The Biblical support they cited was 1 Tim. 1:9: “. . . the law is not laid down for the just.” Natural law, they said, contains the principle that “official violence dissolves all obligations between subjects and rulers.”<sup>54</sup>

Lutherans claim that this teaching was passed on to the Calvinists in terms of the idea that inferior magistrates have a duty under certain circumstance to resist by arms a higher authority's oppression of the people.<sup>55</sup> However the teachings of Luther and other Lutherans of his era demonstrate more than just resistance by lesser magistrates but also armed resistance by individual Christians. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed for attempting to assassinate Hitler, is the most prominent example of an informed Lutheran who acted on the teaching that individual Christians can resist unjust rulers.

In 1549 those who called themselves the *gnesio* (true) Lutherans at Magdeburg defended themselves in a war that threatened to defeat Protestantism in Germany. In 1550 Magdeburg theologians, led by Matthias Flacius, signed the *Magdeburg Confession*. This document outlined the four degrees

---

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 87.

<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 87-88.

of injustice and the correct responses to each. It says that a lesser magistrate who is innocent of violations against his duties and the law can resist the violent attacks of another ruler to defend the life and property of him and the inhabitants. The lesser magistrate also can forcibly resist a higher authority if the higher authority forces him to commit certain intolerable sins. All Christians can resist by force a superior authority that is so mad so as to attack the most fundamental rights of man and of God himself.

This last provision was based on an earlier experience. In 1538 Lutherans at Wittenberg had agreed to a truce with Catholics in which the Lutherans agreed to return to Catholic liturgical practices. They claimed these were matters of indifference. Flacius had condemned the Wittenberg Lutherans, saying that when the confession is at stake, nothing is indifferent. Dietrich Bonhoeffer later adopted this view from Flacius when the Nazis ordered all Jews removed from clergy positions in the Lutheran church.<sup>56</sup>

### **CALVINISM**

Of the leaders of the major Protestant denominations, John Calvin's name is probably most closely associated with the idea

---

<sup>56</sup> *Id.* at 86.

of "theocracy" than any other. He is the theological father of the Puritans, who unabashedly embraced theocracy. Calvin has been referred to as the "Dictator of Geneva" for his alleged support of theocracy in that city. However, not all who call themselves Calvinists embrace theocracy. They advocate natural law rather than Biblical law as the standard for the civil government. They even find support in Calvin for this because, in fact, his writings do not display the same commitment to the continuing authority of Old Testament civil law as some of his Puritan children displayed. An examination of the evidence, however, will reveal that Calvin's views on Church and State were much closer to the Puritan view than to modern natural law Calvinists'.

### **The State under God's Law**

Calvin strongly condemned as "perilous and seditious" the views of those<sup>57</sup> who "deny that any commonwealth is rightly framed which neglects the law of Moses, and is ruled by the common law of nations."<sup>58</sup> He argued for this position by appealing to the "well-known division" of the law into moral,

---

<sup>57</sup> Specifically, he was referring to the Anabaptist revolutionaries who had seized Münster, Germany in an attempt to directly establish the millennial kingdom.

<sup>58</sup> JOHN CALVIN, *INSTITUTES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION*, bk. IV, ch. 20, § 15 (Ford Lewis Battles trans., Philadelphia Westminster Press, 1960) (1559).

ceremonial and judicial, and by an analogy of judicial law with ceremonial law, that "as ceremonies might be abrogated without at all interfering with piety, so also, when these judicial arrangements are removed, the duties and precepts of charity can still remain perpetual."<sup>59</sup>

When Calvin denies that Old Testament civil laws are binding today, he does not mean that Old Testament law should never be enforced by the State. The example that he gives in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* is *punishments*. He says that the severity of punishments must vary from nation to nation because "One nation might be more prone to a particular vice, were it not most severely repressed."<sup>60</sup> Designation of punishments as part of the "civil law" that is not universally obligatory is standard Catholic natural law doctrine. As Thomas Aquinas said, "the law of nature has it that the evildoer should be punished; but that he be punished in this way or that way, is a determination of the law of nature."<sup>61</sup> This idea is standard among natural law advocates, as indicated by John Finnis' approval of Richard Hooker's statement of the same idea: "the threat of sanctions is indeed, as Hooker remarks, an 'expedient'

---

<sup>59</sup> *Id.*

<sup>60</sup> *Id.* at bk. IV, ch. 20, § 16.

<sup>61</sup> ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *THE SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, Question 95, Article 2, (1266-73), *quoted in* JURISPRUDENCE 118 (George C. Christie, ed., West Publishing Co. 1973).

supplementation for the legislator to annex to the moral rule, with an eye to the recalcitrant and wayward in his own society."<sup>62</sup>

After listing how different punishments are prescribed for certain crimes in different countries, Calvin explains that which *crimes* the State should enforce is determined by universal moral law, but the *punishments* for those crimes is not: "Yet we see that amid this diversity [of punishments] they all tend to the same end. For they all with one mouth declare against those crimes which are condemned by the eternal law at God, viz., murder, theft, adultery, and false witness; though they agree not as to the mode of punishment."<sup>63</sup>

Calvin was not consistent in his view of natural law and Mosaic law. In defense of the burning of the heretic Michael Servetus, Calvin appeals to the authority of the Old Testament to defend the punishment of death: "Whoever shall now contend that it is unjust to put heretics and blasphemers to death will knowingly and willingly incur their very guilt. *This is not laid down on human authority; it is God who speaks and prescribes a perpetual rule for his Church.*"<sup>64</sup> Likewise, in his sermons on

---

<sup>62</sup> JOHN FINNIS, *NATURAL LAW AND NATURAL RIGHTS* 282 (1980).

<sup>63</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. IV, ch. 20, § 16.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in James B. Jordon, *Calvinism and "The Judicial Law of Moses": An Historical Survey*, 5 *J. CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTION*,

Deuteronomy Calvin defends the validity of certain punishments by appealing directly to the authority of the law of Moses.

Gary North writes:

Calvin in the *Institutes* declared a view of civil law that was clearly Scholastic. He defended the concept of natural law. In his sermons on Deuteronomy, however, he declared a view of civil law that has to be regarded as theonomic.<sup>65</sup> He appealed to the Old Testament case laws to justify capital punishment for apostasy (Sermons 87-89, 103), murder (113), eye for eye: false witness (115-16), rebellious teenagers (123), adultery (128-29), and kidnapping (138). There seems to be a conflict in Calvin's thought between judicial theory (*Institutes*) and practice (Sermons on *Deuteronomy*).<sup>66</sup>

Most modern Calvinists take for granted that Calvin's view in the *Institutes* is Calvin's view, period. H. Henry Meeter writes: "There is a more or less developed political plan presented in the Bible, the so-called Mosaic theocracy, that civil-ceremonial system found in the first five books of the Bible. But that system, according to the very words of Calvin, was made for other times and other conditions and does not hold good for today."<sup>67</sup> Granted, Calvin's arguments that the Mosaic punishments apply to modern states are a minor theme in these

---

(Winter, 1978-79), (n.p.), *emphasis added*.

<sup>65</sup> "Theonomy" here refers to the thesis that Old Testament civil law remains obligatory under the New Testament, unless the New Testament teaches that a particular law has been abrogated. The thesis is defended in GREG BAHNSEN, *THEONOMY IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS* (1977).

<sup>66</sup> GARY NORTH, *WESTMINSTER'S CONFESSION* 52 (1991).

<sup>67</sup> H. HENRY MEETER, *THE BASIC IDEAS OF CALVINISM* 75 (1991).

sermons. The sermons do not read like a lecture on penology. The major theme is that *God* will personally see to it that those who violate the commandments delivered by Moses will be punished *in some way or other*, maybe in history, maybe in heaven, maybe by the civil ruler, maybe by nature. Nevertheless, the modern approach among most Calvinists to take Calvin's view in the Institutes for granted as *the "Calvinist"* view of the law of Moses is incorrect. Calvin left a divided legacy.

Besides the distinction between crimes and punishments, Calvin used the distinction between typological laws and non-typological laws to determine which Old Testament laws should be regarded as binding today. For example, in arguing against a monarchical form of government, Calvin says that God "established an aristocracy bordering on popular government among the Israelites, keeping them under that as the best form, until he exhibited an image of the Messiah in David."<sup>68</sup> Israel's form of government is a standard for modern governments, except where that form of government is typological of Christ, which is the monarchical period, especially under David.

Many modern Calvinists hold that the *general principles* of the Old Testament law are universally obligatory and known to all, but not the specifics of those laws. "Specifics" would

---

<sup>68</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. IV, ch. 20, § 8.

include the case laws and historical accounts of how Old Testament rulers applied the law of Moses in specific cases. To quote Meeter again, "While the Calvinist maintains that these divine regulations for the Jewish nation were not intended for and are not applicable to present-day conditions, yet he does maintain that they embody principles of government which are eternal and should hold everywhere under all conditions and in all ages."<sup>69</sup> The general principles are stated in the Ten Commandments. Calvin certainly agreed that the Ten Commandments are universally obligatory: "the very things contained in the two tables are, in a manner, dictated to us by that internal law, which, as has been already said, is in a manner written and stamped on every heart."<sup>70</sup> However dividing the applicable portions of the Mosaic law from the inapplicable by means of distinguishing the generals from the specifics is not a method found in Calvin's writings. He made no distinction between generals and specifics in applying Old Testament law. For example, he said,

For this cause, therefore, it is said, 'Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law.' He is not here speaking of one or two commandments, or of some part of them, but of the whole law, every part and parcel thereof without exception. . . . We must not rend God's justice in pieces. In whatever way we offend, we violate God's law, and despise His majesty.

---

<sup>69</sup> MEETER, *supra* note 67, at 103.

<sup>70</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. II, ch. 8, § 1.

But He will be acknowledged in His law throughout in all points, and not just in part, as I have told you before.<sup>71</sup>

In defending anti-heresy laws he appealed without qualification to the example of Old Testament kings who drove false religion from the land of Israel.<sup>72</sup> The idea that civil laws against heresy are a specific application of the "first table of the law" that demand honor to God, and that the specific application is now abolished and only the general principles of the commandments remain binding, did not enter Calvin's consideration.

His reasoning is a far cry from the modern Calvinists like Meeter who acknowledge with Calvin that the State should enforce the first table of the law, yet also says that *all* other religions should not only be tolerated within a Christian State but be given "complete religious liberty . . . and religious equality before the state."<sup>73</sup> For Calvin, "no other gods" meant that those who publicly denied essential doctrines of Christianity like the Trinity or Christ's divinity should be punished by the power of the State's sword. Calvin, despite his profound disagreements with Catholics, did not advocate making Catholicism illegal; but he certainly did approve of the

---

<sup>71</sup> JOHN CALVIN, *THE COVENANT ENFORCED* 64, Sermon 152 (James B. Jordon, ed., Institute for Christian Economics 1990) (1583).

<sup>72</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. IV, ch. 20, § 9.

<sup>73</sup> MEETER, *supra* note 67, at 137.

execution of the anti-Trinitarian and Anabaptist Michael Servetus. The execution of Servetus received practically universal approval at the time; whereas today, even among Calvinists, the disapproval is almost completely universal.

There is a movement of Calvinists today, often called Reconstructionists, who reject any use of natural law as a basis for laws of the State and argue that the Bible alone should be used as the ultimate authority for State action. They usually follow the Calvinist philosopher Cornelius Van Til who argued against the possibility of religious neutrality in any area of thought. He rejected Aquinas' view of natural law as something that the non-Christian can know just as well as the Christian. To understand natural law (or anything in life) rightly, one must begin one's thinking with God. But only the regenerated person will do so, and even he needs God's clearer written Word to overcome the sin still warring within him and see nature rightly.

The Theonomist segment within this movement also teaches the abiding authority of Old Testament civil law, as many of their Puritan forefathers did. There is a dispute among Presbyterians over whether the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches theonomy.<sup>74</sup> But among the English Puritans who drafted

---

<sup>74</sup> BAHNSEN, *supra* note 65, at 517-48.

the Confession, there certainly were influential delegates who did; and they imported their view to Massachusetts.<sup>75</sup>

### **Establishment of Religion**

In the *Institutes* Calvin writes in what sense he would have religion "established":

Let no one be surprised that I now attribute the task of constituting religion aright to human polity, though I seem above to have placed it beyond the will of man, since I no more than formerly allow men at pleasure to enact laws concerning religion and the worship of God, when I approve of civil order which is directed to this end, viz., to prevent the true religion, which is contained in the law of God, from being with impunity openly violated and polluted by public blasphemy.<sup>76</sup>

Calvin viewed Church and State as complementing one another. There was to be a close relationship, but also a clear distinction in areas of jurisdiction. In terms of the positive relationship between them, Calvin said: "Yet civil government has as its appointed end, so long as we live among men, to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote

---

<sup>75</sup> Jordon, *supra* note 64.

<sup>76</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. IV, ch. 20, § 3.

general peace and tranquility."<sup>77</sup> As mentioned above, by teaching and action Calvin approved of the civil power being used to punish heretics. But he was very cautious about this. He counseled the civil ruler to act with moderation and mercy. He should take no action in a doubtful case. The civil ruler was not to use the power of the sword against mere infidels or go crusading. The sword was not to be used against mere private opinions. The heresy must be a denial of essentials of the Christian faith in which even Roman Catholics agreed with Protestants. The State's sword is only to be applied to those who "having received the law become apostate" and try to spread their poisonous doctrine throughout the Church, like Servetus.<sup>78</sup>

A modern mythology is that Calvin was the "Dictator of Geneva," having authority over both the Church and the State in that city. Calvin in fact had no civil authority. He controlled the Consistory, which handed out mere ecclesiastical sanctions, although excommunication from the Church usually resulted in being banished from the city by the civil government. Because Calvin was trained in law and well-respected for his expertise in that field, he did edit and proofread a revision of the Geneva Constitution; but he did not write it, as some claim. Some claim that Servetus was put to

---

<sup>77</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. IV, ch. 20, § 2.

<sup>78</sup> ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 87-88.

death by Calvin's order, but actually the civil authorities were at odds with Calvin at the time of the Servetus affair and denied Calvin any controlling influence over the trial. The city even refused Calvin's request to have Servetus executed by a more humane means than burning.<sup>79</sup>

Calvin strongly opposed what would later become known as Erastianism - State jurisdiction over Church government. He refused to allow the State to determine who should and should not be admitted to the communion table. Although Calvin disagreed with the Anabaptists at several points, he did agree with them that the Church has a right to impose its own discipline, determine its own membership standard, and demand personal confession of a body of doctrine by those who were members. The Church did not have to be established by the State to exist. The Church existed, said Calvin, throughout the earth wherever people confessed the basic doctrines of Christianity.<sup>80</sup> This voluntaristic view of the Church allowed Calvinism to exist and grow even where the State was actively opposed to it.<sup>81</sup>

A century later, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) reflected Calvin's doctrine. The WCF clearly rejected Erastianism, saying, "Civil magistrates may not assume to

---

<sup>79</sup> ALISTER E. MCGRATH, *A LIFE OF JOHN CALVIN: A STUDY IN THE SHAPING OF WESTERN CULTURE* 109-120 (1990).

<sup>80</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. IV, ch. 1, § 9.

<sup>81</sup> WALLACE, *supra* note 4, at 122-23.

themselves the administration of the Word and sacraments; or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven; or, in the least, interfere in matters of faith.”<sup>82</sup> The Westminster delegate George Gillespie wrote the classic refutation of Erastianism in *Aaron’s Rod Blossoming; or, the Divine Ordinance of Church Government Vindicated*. Nevertheless, the WCF continues, the civil ruler is not to be neutral on religious matters, but rather “as a nursing father . . . protect the church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest.”<sup>83</sup> Does this forbid the establishment of religion? It certainly does of any one particular denomination. But should the civil ruler “as nursing father” commit funds to all Christian denominations in his realm? Calvinists have argued for both sides. “Nursing fathers” was the motto of those Christians, including some Presbyterians, who advocated establishmentarianism when the United States was founded.<sup>84</sup>

The tithe in Calvin’s Church in Geneva was collected directly by the Church and not the State. The Church

---

<sup>82</sup> WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH, ch. 23, § 3.

<sup>83</sup> *Id.*

<sup>84</sup> See LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, RELIGION AND THE FOUNDING OF THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC § 5 (last modified June 16, 1998) <<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel05.html>>.

disciplined those who failed to tithe, but not the State.<sup>85</sup>

However, Calvin was not completely averse to State funding for religious causes because he proposed that the State establish a compulsory school system that would teach children the Reformed faith as part of the curriculum.<sup>86</sup>

### **Civil Disobedience**

Calvin's doctrine of the State in general and of civil disobedience in particular, is based on the sovereignty of God. With such a basis both the absolutism of the State, resulting in totalitarianism, and the absolutism of the individual, resulting in anarchy, are avoided. Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian and politician, wrote: "Calvinism is to be praised for having built a dam across the absolutistic stream, not by appealing to popular force, nor to the hallucination of human greatness, but by deducing those rights and liberties of social life from the same source from which the high authority of government flows, even the absolute sovereignty of God."<sup>87</sup>

Calvin left little room for civil disobedience of private citizens to unjust rulers. He allowed for passive disobedience, but not active. Civil disobedience was not justified simply

---

<sup>85</sup> SIN AND THE CALVINISTS (Raymond Mentzer ed., 1994).

<sup>86</sup> Gregory Hogan, *Our Reformed Educational Heritage*, 143 THE CHRISTIAN STATESMAN 13, 14 (2000).

<sup>87</sup> ABRAHAM KUYPER, LECTURES ON CALVINISM 85 (1953).

because the law was sinful. In such a situation, "no command has been given but to obey and suffer."<sup>88</sup> When obeying the law would cause the Christian to sin, the Christian must obey God rather than men, but not commit unlawful acts against the State if possible. Calvin committed his own act of civil disobedience when the civil rulers of Geneva were directing who could and could not take the Lord's Supper. In defiance of the city's approval for a particular man to receive the Lord's Supper, Calvin refused to administer the sacraments to him because he was a known heretic. In regard to elected officials, Calvin said that the "lesser magistrates" do have an obligation to resist the tyranny of higher authorities to protect the citizens from abuse, because: "by the ordinance of God, they are its appointed guardians."<sup>89</sup> This has become known as the doctrine of interposition.

John Knox is said to have parted with Calvin over the doctrine of civil disobedience by arguing that private citizens have a God-given duty to depose unjust rulers. Knox said that,

[T]he punishment of such crimes as are idolatry, blasphemy and others that touch the majesty of God, doth not appertain to kings and chief rulers only, but also to the whole body of that people, and to every member of the same, according to that vocation of every man and according to that possibility and occasion which God doth minister to revenge the injury

---

<sup>88</sup> CALVIN, *supra* note 59, at bk. IV, ch. 20, § 31.

<sup>89</sup> *Id.*

against his glory, what time that impiety is manifestly known.<sup>90</sup>

However, it appears that he was not so radical so as to claim that any individual citizen should take it upon himself to assassinate a wicked ruler. He means that everyone "according to his vocation" should assist in bringing the idolater to justice, but the actual execution is to be carried out, as he explained later, by "the people assembled together in one body of one Commonwealth."<sup>91</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In modern America, most Americans claim to believe in God, yet it is common to hear that God and politics are a dangerous mixture. But the issue of God's relationship to politics is inescapable. Even the response "What does God have to do with politics?" implies a theological position. It implies that the concept of justice can be explained independently of the question of God's existence. Calvin's commitment to an absolutely sovereign God forbids that anything could be

---

<sup>90</sup> John Knox, *The Appellation of John Knox from the cruel and most unjust sentence pronounced against him by the false bishoppes and clergie of Scotland, with his supplication and exhortation to the nobilitie, estates and communalitie of the same realme*, in 4 WORKS 501(D. Lang ed., n.d.) (1558), quoted in ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 113.

<sup>91</sup> John Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland*, in 2 WORKS 442 (D. Lang ed., n.d.) (n.d.), quoted in ALLEN, *supra* note 1, at 113.

explained without God. Luther believed in a God that predestines those who will be saved,<sup>92</sup> but his theology was more focused on the Gospel in distinction from the Law than on God's sovereignty. Accordingly, his political philosophy allowed for the State to have greater independence from God.

If today's Americans would advance the cause of political justice, they must clarify the relationship between their political and theological beliefs. The twentieth century has pushed God to the side to in order to avoid the shedding of blood that religious disputes have produced in the past, only to experience a shedding of blood on an unprecedented scale by atheist governments.<sup>93</sup> Calvinism and Lutheranism offer two views, in addition to others, where the relationship between God and politics has been extensively grappled with. Whether their views are embraced or not, modern Americans should grapple with the answers that they have given if the cause of justice is to advance in the twenty-first century.

---

<sup>92</sup> MARTIN LUTHER, *THE BONDAGE OF THE WILL* (1525).

<sup>93</sup> GIL ELLIOT, *TWENTIETH CENTURY BOOK OF THE DEAD* (1972).