

The Christian and Civil Government (19th)

(The study today continues by supplying more information concerning John Calvin and his contribution to the reformed teachings and practices regarding the civil government's role in punishing "heretics.")

In our last podcast, we supplied information about Zwingli and his belief that civil government is to guard the truth of the gospel and punish "heretics" which he viewed those who differed from him regarding the interpretation of the Scriptures regarding some subjects. For example, for those who did not agree with him regarding baptism, he and the council at Zurich drown Baptists in the Limmat River. Also, we began studying somewhat the life and views of John Calvin by quoting at length from Leonard Verduin's book *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, from pages 198-211. We were showing that Calvin, like the Catholics before the Reformation, and the Reformers during the Reformation, followed the teaching of Augustine against the Donatists in his introduction of a universal invisible "church" and a "visible church" residing within the invisible one. If you remember, in a previous podcast we quoted Thomas Goodwin where he said of the Donatists, "I find the highest venom of their opinions to lie in this, and it is high enough ... they denied the church universal." Regarding this, we will continue quoting Verduin.

Calvin did not object to having the church defined as concerning *Corpus Christi*, [body of Christ—JKB] provided that in the next breath it was defined as *Corpus Christianum* [Christian body—JKB]—a clear case of trying to blow hot and cold at once. As the German theologian Wernle has pointed out, there were in Calvin's mind "three concepts of the church, each of which spoke its piece to him: 1) the invisible church of the elect, 2) the visible church held together by Word and sacrament, 3) the church of the saints with its criterion of the inoffensive life and the employment of discipline to keep it free of offence." And it is understandable that a contemporary scholar, Arthur Cushman McGiffert, come to the conclusion that "Calvin's doctrine of the Church was a composite of many and diverse and inconsistent elements, and because of this, confusion concerning the meaning, the place, and the purpose of the Church has since his day reigned almost everywhere in the Reformed wing of Protestantism." (One finds it difficult to disagree with this, except to say that it is not necessary to single out "the Reformed wing of Protestantism," since the same confusion reigns in all other "wings" of the Reformation.)

It has been said that it is the conception of a free church consisting of freely committed and practicing believers, as opposed to the inclusive state church of the Catholics and most Protestants, that formed the basic doctrine of the Anabaptists. If this is true, then we know what Calvin's attitude toward the new rival church was bound to be—utter disagreement.

Verduin's assessment of the situation should open the door for us as to why civil government considers it legitimate to impose itself on the activities and doctrines of religious institutions, particularly those under the umbrella Christianity. With the Catholic-Protestant doctrine of the connection of "church and state" being generally accepted by all denominations, including the mainstream Baptists, is it any wonder that congregations in general have bowed to the pressure of the government in closing their doors under the current "crisis" of today? Regardless of one's opinion of Richard Weaver's philosophy, the title of his book certainly demonstrates that *Ideas Have Consequences*. However, in order to paint a clearer picture of the times of Calvin, we will continue quoting Verduin.

In 1527, the Anabaptists held a secret conference at Schleitheim (near Schafhausen), where they drew up a brief credal statement, which Calvin somewhat later undertook to refute item by

item. The Schleitheim statement contained among other things a definition of the church, the issue that was central in the bifurcation [a division into two parts—JKB] which had taken place. ... Schleitheim defined the church as “a fellowship of saints, namely, of all believing and regenerate Christians and children of God born again from above by the Word and the Spirit.” Calvin “refuted” this statement at some length, offering as a substitute for its definition of the church “that mass among whom the Word of God is purely preached and the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ.” ...

The Schleitheim confession also contained a definition of the state, one that likewise elicited Calvin’s ire because it went in opposite direction of his own. For Calvin the divinely intended function of the state was “not merely ... to enable men to breathe, eat, drink, and be warmed ... but it is that no idolatry, no blasphemy against the name of God, no calumnies against his truth, nor other offense to religion, break out and be disseminated among the people. ...” Calvin’s view of the state was that of Seneca, so that he declared: Wherefore no man can doubt that civil authority is, in the sight of God, not only sacred and lawful, but most sacred, and by far the most honorable of all stations in mortal life.” It is no surprise that he took great pains to “refute” Schleitheim at this point especially. It had said: “The sword is an ordinance outside the perfection of Christ; princes and rulers are ordained for the punishment of evil-doers and for putting such to death. Within the perfection of Christ excommunication is the ultimate in punishment, physical death not included in it.” ...

As mentioned above, Calvin wrote a “refutation” of Schleitheim’s definition of the *regnum* (or, as it was called in those days, the “magistracy”). In the course of his attempted refutation, he quoted I Corinthians 12:21, where we read: “The eye cannot say to the hand, nor the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” It would be difficult to tip one’s hand more conclusively than Calvin does here: for his quoting of this text in this argument shows clearly that he considered church and state to be two parts of the same body,

It is tempting to quote much more from Verduin. I believe his books are well worth reading for those who desire to get a fuller and more detail understanding of the overall subject at hand. After giving more details of the conflicts between Calvin and the Anabaptists, Verduin gives this summary.

In light of what we have observed in Calvin thus far, it is not really surprising that he endorsed the notion that it is the duty of the *regnum* to put heretics to death. He wrote: “Whosoever shall now contend that it is unjust to put heretics and blasphemers to death will, knowingly or unknowingly, incur their very guilt. This is not laid down on human authority; it is God that speaks and prescribes it as a perpetual rule for the Church.” The burning of Servetus was the logical outcome of this thinking.

Now that the stage is set somewhat to understand the times and beliefs of the reformers under the influence of Calvin in Geneva, we will direct our attention more specifically to Michael Servetus and his execution. It is generally accepted that Servetus was guilty of heresy, specifically regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. It is also to be noted that Calvin tried to prevent Servetus from being burned to death and executed in a different way; nevertheless, Calvin did want Servetus killed because he believed him to be a “heretic.” In fact, Verduin quoted Calvin as saying regarding Servetus, “If ever he comes to the city and my authority then counts for aught, I will never let him get out of the city alive.” *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, p. 207. In *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, pp. 51-52, Verduin wrote of Servetus, “Here was a man who posed no threat to civil serenity in Geneva—unless of course it be granted that anyone who deviates from the orthodoxy espoused by the State is *ipso facto* a threat to that civil serenity. Servetus stated no parades, made no speeches, carried no placards, had no political ambitions. He did

have some erratic ideas touching the doctrine of the Trinity, and he entertained some deviating notions concerning baptism, especially infant baptism.” Servetus was not living in Geneva; he was only passing through the city when he was arrested and burned to death for his religious views. The burning of Servetus was considered as being the correct and proper thing to do throughout the ranks of the reformers. Melanchton, wrote to Calvin and congratulated him on it. He said, “To you the Church owes now and always will owe a debt of gratitude. . . . I affirm that your magistrates did the right thing when they put the blasphemer to death.” *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*, pp. 207-208.

Since John Calvin is considered by many to be a principle figure in the Reformation and the overall system of theology of the sovereignty of God is often identified after him under the title of Calvinism, I thought it profitable to give considerable time and information about him. However, our time is up for today. The Lord willing, we will continue our study regarding the role of civil government and religion in our next lesson.