

August 2016

## John Calvin, Authority, and the Evangelical Conviction of the Evidentness of Truth

Joshua Miller

Liberty University, jkmiller10@liberty.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

### Recommended Citations

MLA:

Miller, Joshua "John Calvin, Authority, and the Evangelical Conviction of the Evidentness of Truth," *The Kabod* 3. 1 (2016) Article 9.

*Liberty University Digital Commons*. Web. [xx Month xxxx].

APA:

Miller, Joshua (2016) "John Calvin, Authority, and the Evangelical Conviction of the Evidentness of Truth" *The Kabod* 3( 1 (2016)), Article 9. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod/vol3/iss1/9>

Turabian:

Miller, Joshua "John Calvin, Authority, and the Evangelical Conviction of the Evidentness of Truth" *The Kabod* 3 , no. 1 2016 (2016) Accessed [Month x, xxxx]. [Liberty University Digital Commons](#).

This Individual Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kabod by an authorized editor of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu).

JOHN CALVIN, AUTHORITY, AND THE EVANGELICAL CONVICTION  
OF THE EVIDENTNESS OF TRUTH

Joshua Miller

HIEU 466: Renaissance and Reformation

Dr. Benjamin Esswein

11/12/2016

## Introduction

At the confluence of history and politics, the ideology of authority takes center stage, shaping the attitudes and actions of key figures either consciously or unconsciously. For example, the American Founding Fathers' ideology of republican democracy led to the rise of the most powerful nation in history, Abraham Lincoln's ideology of federal supremacy led to the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation, and Hitler's ideology of totalitarianism led to World War II and the Holocaust.

No less monumental than the American Founders, Lincoln, and Hitler, John Calvin stands apart as a singularly powerful figure in the history of Western Civilization.<sup>1</sup> His thought undergirds the fundamental principles of liberal democracy that dominate the most advanced nations on earth in the modern age,<sup>2</sup> and his theology continues to influence the doctrine and leadership of the Reformed church's many inheritors.<sup>3</sup> If the goal of historical study is to reiterate humanity's successes and avoid reliving its failures, the importance of understanding and evaluating Calvin's views on secular and ecclesiastical authority cannot be understated.

The very nature of the Reformation and the break he made with the dominant Roman Catholic Church forced Calvin to wrestle with his sometimes contradictory views on authority. Ironically, he set obedience as the centerpiece of his view, emphasizing—throughout ecclesiastical and political pronouncements alike—a message of nigh-unconditional submission to the will of the magistrate or minister. Furthermore, a deeply-held belief in the self-evident

---

1. William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 1.

2. Alan Ryan, *A History of Political Thought: Herotodus to Machiavelli*, vol. 1 of *On Politics* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012), 347.

3. John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., 2013), 11-13.

nature of truth undergirded Calvin's entire worldview. In practice, he considered himself a mouthpiece of God because of his devotion to the preaching and exposition of Scripture. This translated into self-righteous conduct in the exercise of his own personal authority. Although exploring the full impact of Calvin's theological and political views lies far beyond the scope of this paper, describing his preaching and his practice is a necessary first step toward learning the lessons they contain.

### **Calvin on Political Authority**

Calvin believed, like Luther before him, that political authority and ecclesiastical authority ought to be distinct for the proper functioning of society. This did not entirely contradict the Roman Catholic position, but it did deny the evangelical churches the power to apply coercion and force to achieve their ends; in addition, it more clearly separated the spheres of influence each authority was to occupy, albeit imperfectly.<sup>4</sup> In spite of these advances toward totally secular governance and religious toleration, Calvin insisted on two major religious mandates for civil government and—in accord with his ever-present mandate to obey—allowed very few exceptions to his general ban on resisting the will of authority.

The establishment of the church, including the appointment of church leaders, was the first religious exercise of state power that Calvin sanctioned.<sup>5</sup> In this, he again followed Luther.<sup>6</sup> To the overwhelmingly anti-establishmentarian modern mind, this seems absurd, but the Reformed worldview accepted it as a matter of course for several reasons.

---

4. Harro Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 196; Ryan, *Political Thought*, 333-340; Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 204-205.

5. T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 153; Höpfl, *Polity*, 42-43; Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 210-11; Ryan, *Political Thought*, 345.

6. Höpfl, *Polity*, 30.

First, as Höpfl writes, “The fact that all this ... made the secular authorities the judges of doctrine and determinants of what might be taught and heard seems to have been suppressed by the evangelical conviction of the evidentness of truth.”<sup>7</sup> This presumed self-evidence of truth undergirded many elements of Calvin’s thought which have received significant criticism in the modern age. To him, seeking and finding truth demanded no rigorous philosophical investigation or rational process. Rather, since truth was self-evident, dissenters were (at best) ignorant or foolish, and heretics were intentionally malicious and evil, actively denying the obvious for the sake of greed, chaos, or ego.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, rational arguments—especially those made by heretics—were not to be trusted for the justification of any viewpoints. “Truth requires no elaborate defense; subtleties and quibbling are the marks of a bad case; and the virtuous life is fostered by the art of rhetoric, not logomachy.”<sup>9</sup>

Therefore Calvin remained quite sure that ministers whose preaching contradicted truth would not receive appointments. Godly civil magistrates would plainly see that their influence would corrupt and destroy rather than edify and purify the church. He seriously considered the possibility that magistrates might appoint ministers to preach and teach according to their own whims, but concluded that the division of power among many individuals, as he experienced in Geneva, would be enough to check such license.<sup>10</sup>

Calvin concerned himself far more with the legitimacy of public resistance against the civil authority. According to his teaching, because all authority was established by God,

---

7. Ibid.

8. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 101.

9. Höpfl, *Polity*, 13. See also Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 98-109, 159-61.

10. Ibid., 45, 164.

Christians were to remain subservient until the bitter end.<sup>11</sup> If a governing body existed to check the power of a tyrant, it therefore bore a divine obligation to do so,<sup>12</sup> but rebellion by the people could never be justified even in the absence of political checks and balances. Moreover, since it was God's business to establish the prevailing authorities, Calvin argued that Christians should not concern themselves with the best forms of government; rather, their entire lives should be oriented toward a peaceful life of holiness under whatever rulers God saw fit to give them.<sup>13</sup> At best, Calvin would grant the right of passive resistance; that is, Christians were to disobey any command that directly contravened the word of God.<sup>14</sup> Thus the authority of a tyrant was checked only by an explicit contravening divine mandate,<sup>15</sup> or—if God so chose—by a system of distributed power.

The other major religious interference Calvin demanded from civil authority—an extension of the establishment of the church—was the punishment of heretics by exile, torture, and execution.<sup>16</sup> Although his predecessor Luther believed that Christians should abstain from recourse to civil governance—even for reasons of justice<sup>17</sup>—Calvin encouraged Christians to seek “the punishment of guilty and pestilential men, who, they know, can be reformed only by

---

11. *Ibid.*, 49.

12. Ryan, *Political Thought*, 348.

13. *Ibid.*, 345-349; Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 205-207.

14. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 208-209.

15. Calvin would here point to Acts 5:29: “But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men’” (ESV).

16. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 101, 211; Höpfl, *Polity*, 135-36.

17. Höpfl, *Polity*, 47; Ryan, *Political Thought*, 336-37.

death.”<sup>18</sup> This reveals not only Calvin’s grant of power to civil government for punishing heretics, but also his hatred for them.

Among them he counted Michael Servetus, a radical who, at times, only escaped discovery, trial, and painful death due to Calvin’s refusal to cooperate with the Roman Catholics in whose domains he concealed himself.<sup>19</sup> By intention or not, Calvin eventually outed Servetus, who escaped prison in Vienne and received a death sentence *in absentia*. Following his escape he went to Geneva, where Calvin promptly had him arrested. After a trial and some political maneuvering between Calvin and the Council in Geneva, Servetus was burned alive for his heresy. (Calvin had asked for a more humane beheading instead.)<sup>20</sup> Much time and effort has been put toward justifying this example of Calvin’s intolerance as devotion to the truth of the Word,<sup>21</sup> and, to be fair, he did strive to live as consistently as possible within his philosophical interpretation of the authority of Scripture. But his demand that all others do the same (or suffer the consequences, like Servetus) crossed the line into outright persecution.

For example, take the following account given by Calvin himself in a letter to Farel:

More than fifteen days have now elapsed since Cartelier was imprisoned, for having, at supper in his own house, raged against me with such insolence as to make it clear that he was not then in his right senses. ... I testified to the judge that it would be agreeable to me were he proceeded against with the utmost rigour of the law. I wished to go to see him. Access was prohibited by decree of the

---

18. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), quoted in Höpfl, *Polity*, 48.

19. Parker, *A Biography*, 148.

20. *Ibid.*, 148-52.

21. See, for example, G. Coleman Luck, Th.M, “Calvin and Servetus,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 104, no. 414 (April-June 1947): 236-41, and Mark Talbot, “The Servetus Affair: The Story of Calvin and His Critics,” *Desiring God*, September 26, 2009, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-servetus-affair>, accessed November 14, 2016.

Senate; and yet some good men accuse me of cruelty, forsooth, because I so pertinaciously revenge my injuries.<sup>22</sup>

Clearly, Calvin considered an insulting outburst in the privacy of a home to be worth imprisonment and possibly further legal action. Of course, there are several caveats and contextual notes to add. First, as the editor writes in a footnote on the letter, Cartelier was one of the most violent members of Calvin's opposition in Geneva.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, as another footnote reveals, he often granted mercy for such personal slights, as in the case of a woman whose prison sentence was canceled at Calvin's request.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Calvin did not press charges against the "good men" who accused him of cruelty, in spite of their criticism; and he did seek to reconcile personally with Cartelier in prison, although he was denied by the Genevan civil authorities. Finally, the persecution, torture, and killing of heretics formed the *modus operandi* of nearly every polity in that era; therefore, any condemnation of Calvin must necessarily extend to the entire Reformed world.<sup>25</sup> At the very least, it must be conceded that Calvin's insistence on the punishment of heresy by civil authorities did not translate into persecution, torture, and death for personal offenses, even if it did extend to fines, public humiliation, and forced apologies.<sup>26</sup>

Such was life under the political authority Calvin envisioned: the sword of the magistrate employed to punish those who disturbed the order of the polity and its church, the absolute condemnation of heresy, the equation of sin with crime,<sup>27</sup> and an inflexible mandate to obey.

---

22. John Calvin to Farel, 13 February 1546, *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Dr. Jules Bonnet, trans. David Constable (Edinburgh, UK: Thomas Constable & Co., 1855), 2:19-20. One might ask how Calvin reconciled his pursuit of vengeance with Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 10:19, and Hebrews 10:30.

23. Bonnet, *Letters*, 2:19.

24. *Ibid.*, 2:20.

25. Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2010), 255.

26. Parker, *A Biography*, 126.

27. Höpfl, *Polity*, 18.



### Calvin on Ecclesiastical Authority

In light of all this, Calvin's views on the authority of ministers almost describe themselves. As with political authorities, once established (no matter how), church authorities had to be obeyed in all things, so far as they did not contradict the law of God. Dissent was restricted and open dispute was prohibited. Calvin encountered some difficulty in reconciling these strictures with his criticisms of the Roman Catholic Church and its tyranny, but accomplished this by appealing to Scripture.

In Calvin's system, the clergy bore a duty to act as the spiritual fathers of their parishes,<sup>28</sup> bringing all men to account for their sins and exposing hypocrisy wherever it existed, without regard for the objections of the laity.<sup>29</sup> In part, this authoritarian perspective came from a denial of Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and its corollary, Christian liberty.<sup>30</sup> However, an overwhelming fear of disorder and disunity superseded these as the driving factor in Calvin's clericalism; Parker writes that "their sense of order was horrified by the thought of souls destroyed by false doctrine, of churches torn asunder into parties, of the vengeance of God displayed upon them in war, pestilence, famine."<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, dissent was tolerated only in the most restricted of fashions. For example, Calvin wrote the following regarding the specific forms and rituals in churches:

It is true, that if a different form has been seen and preferred, it is quite allowable in communicating first of all with the pastor, to tell him what is thought of it, provided one accommodates one's-self to the usages of the place where one lives,

---

28. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 211-13, 225-29.

29. *Ibid.*, 221.

30. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 49-51, 219; Höpfl, *Polity*, 35-38.

31. Parker, *A Biography*, 153.

without clamouring for novelty, but peaceably conforming to any order that is not repugnant to the Word of God.<sup>32</sup>

Such dissent could not reasonably extend to theological or doctrinal disputes, both because of the self-evidence of truth and because Calvin insisted that—at least ideally—the ministers of the church should be selected from among the wisest, most talented, best educated members of the community. Furthermore, he held that each minister bore a divine appointment in addition to the civil appointment. As a result, no member of the laity had any excuse; all must pay heed as though God himself were speaking.<sup>33</sup>

Another important question of church organization, which Calvin wrestled with early on,<sup>34</sup> could be termed “the catholic problem.” This refers not to the Roman Catholic Church and its political influence (which was also a problem for Calvin), but rather to the question of how the scriptural idea of “the Body of Christ” could be reconciled with the proliferation of obviously disparate and often quarreling evangelical churches that had sprung up as a result of the Reformation. At first, Calvin dealt with this issue by

prizing loose the title of “catholic” from the institution currently clinging to it, the strategy being to etherealize the notion of “church” to such an extent that the factual multiplicity and disunion of evangelical churches could no longer derogate from their entitlement to be considered part of the “communion of saints.”<sup>35</sup>

---

32. John Calvin to the French Church in London, 27 September 1552, *Letters*, 2:346.

33. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 217-21.

34. Höpfl, *Polity*, 32.

35. *Ibid.*

Later on he preferred to focus on the local church as a distinct entity,<sup>36</sup> although he did describe “the church universal” as a body which agreed on “the one truth of divine doctrine” and was bound together “by the bond of the same religion.”<sup>37</sup>

In keeping with the spirit of evangelical Reformed thinking, Calvin explicitly excluded the “Romanists” and “Papists” from this “church universal.” He despised the Roman Catholic Church, frequently hurling epithets at its bishops (“those horned cattle”) and its pope (“the brigand who has usurped God’s seat”). Although he did not entirely condemn the idea of praying for the pope, he commented that anyone inclined to do so had “surely much time to spare.”<sup>38</sup> The question therefore arises: how did he reconcile this emphatic rejection with his views on obedience to authority?

In the end, he accomplished this by arguing that the Romanists had subverted, denied, and even actively opposed the Word of God and its clear instructions for the clergy;<sup>39</sup> furthermore, he asserted, the pope had become a tyrant,<sup>40</sup> ignoring or manipulating the laws of God and of civil authorities.<sup>41</sup> To his credit, even though he had a significant impact on the edicts of the magistrates in Geneva with regard to moral mandates, Calvin himself always obeyed them.<sup>42</sup> Still, the obvious parallels cannot be ignored:

It is scarcely remarkable that Calvin, made so anxious by disorder, was unable to purge himself of attitudes that were, in him, sometimes more rigid than those of

---

36. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 216.

37. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, quoted in Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 215.

38. John Calvin to the French Church in London, 27 September 1552, *Letters*, 2:347.

39. Höpfl, *Polity*, 86-87.

40. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 54-55, 59-64, 204, 208.

41. *Ibid.*, 208.

42. Parker, *A Biography*, 124.

the papal church, and that he who had so vigorously denounced the “tyranny” of Rome was sometimes perceived as the tyrant of Geneva.<sup>43</sup>

### Calvin in Practice

Calvin’s preaching on authority must, of course, be compared with his practice. Höpfl’s attempt at this began with two grounding concepts:<sup>44</sup> first, that principles cannot simply be put into practice; and second, that Calvin’s ideas on paper did not reach as far as his success in Geneva’s “political and ecclesiastical games.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it is not safe to assume he always lived and acted in exact accord with his stated beliefs on the authority of church and state; a serious investigation must be undertaken to review how Calvin conducted himself in Geneva. Thus far, only a few historical examples have been used for illustration: Servetus, Cartelier, and the unnamed woman whose sentence Calvin dismissed. The totality of his interactions in spheres of authority, however, extends far beyond these, and it must be illuminated by an account of how he perceived himself and his actions.

Coupling his ideals on the divine call to ministry with his presupposition of the self-evidence of truth, Calvin believed that he had a perfect grasp on true theology and morality. This is not evidenced so much by specific pronouncements as by his overall bearing in everything he undertook,<sup>46</sup> but some proof may be offered from his letters. For instance, on the occasion of an illegal dance which took place in a private home, when he was informed of the falsehoods employed by several of the accused to cover themselves, he wrote, “I could do nothing but call God to witness that they would pay the penalty of such perfidy; I, at the same time, however,

---

43. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 215.

44. Höpfl, *Polity*, 1.

45. Lindberg, *Reformations*, 247.

46. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 101. The absence of such specific pronouncements may be attributed to Calvin actively avoiding references to himself throughout his work and preaching; see Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 5.

announced my resolution of unbarring the truth, even though it should be at the cost of my own life....”<sup>47</sup> A more direct view on his self-perception comes from another letter written on the same occasion to one of the accused:

You yourself either know, or at least ought to know, what I am; that, at all events, I am one to whom the law of my Heavenly Master is so dear, that the cause of no man on earth will induce me to flinch from maintaining it with a pure conscience.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, in defending himself and his views to the authorities in Geneva against Trouillet, who asserted that Calvin’s views on predestination ascribed sin to God, he wrote, “... I prove this doctrine so clearly from holy Scripture, that it is impossible for any living man to resist it.”<sup>49</sup> If Calvin ever seriously considered the possibility that he could be wrong in any matter of Scripture, theology, or doctrine, he never showed it.

Calvin’s self-confidence presents a glaring irony in the face of his own pronouncements against pride and arrogance. He recognized the reinforcing effect of pride, admitting that “by preventing us from acknowledging the truth in criticism of ourselves, pride protects us from recognizing our other sins.”<sup>50</sup> Calvin even invested some time and effort in describing and promoting the practice of self-examination to address personal hypocrisy, which, he said, ought to be done in private.<sup>51</sup>

In Calvin’s final words to the ministers of Geneva, shortly before his death, he broke with his standard practice and spoke plainly of himself and his accomplishments in what Parker calls

---

47. John Calvin to Farel, April 1546, *Letters*, 2:39.

48. John Calvin to Amy Perrin, April 1546, *Letters*, 2:43.

49. John Calvin to the Seigneurs of Geneva, 6 October 1552, *Letters*, 2:351.

50. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 51.

51. *Ibid.*, 179-80.

a “strange medley of devotion, self-justification, and bitterness.”<sup>52</sup> He claimed, among other things, that all his work in Geneva was for nothing, that he had always feared God and pursued righteousness, that he had taught faithfully, and that he had never written anything out of hatred.<sup>53</sup> He urged that his successors change nothing about the state of the polity—not for the sake of his legacy, but “because all changes are dangerous and sometimes hurtful.”<sup>54</sup>

His fatalism about his work in Geneva may have come from his concept of the cyclical nature of reform and degradation,<sup>55</sup> but it does not take center stage here; his claims about himself bear more serious consideration, particularly his claim never to have written out of hatred. Already several examples have been presented which contradict this idea; the fashion in which he wrote of heretics indicates hatred. It is possible that he justified this attitude by denying the humanity of these individuals.<sup>56</sup> Barring this, he may have been speaking of his conduct toward those who disagreed with him in less serious ways, justifying hatred toward heretics and criminals—an entirely separate category of people—with an unspoken appeal to God’s wrath and hatred for them.<sup>57</sup>

With all this in mind, Calvin’s involvement with Servetus makes more sense. More than seven years before Servetus’ trial and death in Geneva, Calvin wrote to him that “there is no lesson which is more necessary for [you] than to learn humility, which must come to [you] from

---

52. Parker, *A Biography*, 188.

53. *Ibid.*, 189.

54. *Ibid.*, 190.

55. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 83.

56. *Ibid.*, 101.

57. Höpfl, *Polity*, 202-203.

the Spirit of God.”<sup>58</sup> Then, in a letter to Farel, he indicated that Servetus had written to him and stated his intention to have the man executed if he set foot in Geneva.<sup>59</sup> In 1553, around the time of Servetus’ trial and execution, he referred to him as “this worthless fellow,” “this monster,” a spreader of “virulent and pestilential opinions,” “worthy of having his bowels pulled out, and torn to pieces,” perpetrator of “impious errors with which Satan formerly disturbed the church,” and “a monster not to be borne.”<sup>60</sup> His condemnation of Servetus’ heresies in his letter to Sulzer bears quoting at length:

As respects this man, three things require to be considered. With what prodigious errors he has corrupted the whole of religion; yea, with what detestable mockeries he has endeavoured to destroy all piety; with what abominable ravings he has obscured Christianity, and razed to the very foundation all the principles of our religion. Secondly, how obstinately he has behaved; with what diabolical pride he has despised all advice; with what desperate stubbornness he has driven headlong in scattering his poison. Thirdly, with what proud scorn he at present avows and defends his abominations. For so far is he from any hope of repentance, that he does not hesitate to fling his blot upon those holy men ... as if they were his companions.<sup>61</sup>

In light of these invectives, Calvin’s pursuit of a more humane death for Servetus seems out of place. Clearly, he was not a one-dimensional character.

Calvin’s overall record throws more fuel on the fire of his critics, however. According to Höpfl, “In the 17 years for which there are records between 1542 and 1564 there were 139 executions at Geneva.” Comparisons with other Reformation-era church polities during the 16<sup>th</sup> century paint Geneva as the bloodiest city of the Reformation, which Höpfl ascribes to Calvin’s severity and a general reluctance to use exile and heavy fines. He does note, however, that “there

---

58. John Calvin to Michael Servetus, alias John Frellon, 13 February 1546, *Letters*, 2:17.

59. John Calvin to Farel, 13 February 1546, *Letters*, 2:19.

60. John Calvin to the Pastors of the Church of Frankfort, 27 August 1553, *Letters*, 2:404; John Calvin to Sulzer, 8 September 1553, *Letters*, 2:409-410; John Calvin to Farel, 26 October 1553, *Letters*, 2:418.

61. John Calvin to Sulzer, 8 September 1553, *Letters*, 2:410-11.

is nothing whatever to suggest that Calvin at any time favoured anything except quick and efficient executions.”<sup>62</sup>

Calvin’s personal conduct clearly rested on a foundation of supreme self-confidence, but he was not without some measure of restraint, and in spite of its source, his messages on pride and introspection seem well-spoken. His attitude toward dissenters and heretics flowed naturally from his theology and the prevailing zeitgeist—no excuse for persecution, of course, but at least his views held the seeds of something better.

### **Conclusion**

In many ways, perhaps the best that can be said of Calvin was that his views on authority fostered an attitude that led to some of the greatest advances in religion, politics, and society that Western Civilization ever experienced.<sup>63</sup> He emphasized equality before the law and condemned sinners equally no matter their social station,<sup>64</sup> which represented a tremendous departure from the rigid hierarchy of feudalism.

Even so, Calvin may justly be accused of pride, persecution, and an overemphasis on subservience to established authorities. He preferred an authoritarian form of governance in both church and state, largely due to his fear of disorder and corruption;<sup>65</sup> and—as demonstrated by examples like Servetus—he did not shrink from advocating torture and death. Most importantly, his conviction of the self-evidence of truth led him to extreme self-confidence and zeal against his enemies.

---

62. Höpfl, *Polity*, 135-36.

63. Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 1.

64. Lindberg, *Reformations*, 256; Bouwsma, *Calvin*, 221.

65. Bouwsma, 219-20.



However he may be judged, Calvin's beliefs, actions, motivations, and presuppositions combine to build a difficult and sometimes contradictory figure in the annals of religious and political history. Examining his teaching on authority can better equip scholars and leaders of all kinds for the profound challenges of modern polities, even if it leaves many questions unanswered.

### Bibliography

- Bouwsma, William J. *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Calvin, John. *Letters of John Calvin*. 4 Vols. Edited by Dr. Jules Bonnet. Translated by David Constable. Edinburgh, UK: Thomas Constable & Co., 1855.
- Höpfl, Harro. *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Lindberg, Carter. *The European Reformations*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2010.
- Luck, G. Coleman, Th.M. "Calvin and Servetus." *Bibliotheca sacra* 104, no. 414 (April-June 1947): 236-41.
- Naphy, William G. *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Parker, T. H. L. *John Calvin: A Biography*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.
- Piper, John. *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace*. Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd., 2013.
- Ryan, Alan. *A History of Political Thought: Herodotus to Machiavelli*, vol. 1 of *On Politics*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2012.
- Talbot, Mark. "The Servetus Affair: The Story of Calvin and His Critics." *Desiring God*. September 26, 2009. <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-servetus-affair>. Accessed October 1, 2016.