

# **Intimations of Modernity: Freedom and Equality in Calvin's *Institutes***

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A lingering Enlightenment tendency, I might say abstraction, portrays the modern in sheer opposition to the superstition and intolerance of pre-modern religion. Commonly, reason is opposed to faith, science to religion, individual liberation to religious oppression.

Contemporary political philosophy falls prey to this tendency. Consider, for example, the brief portrait of Calvin in John Rawls' *Political Liberalism*, perhaps the most influential political philosophy text of our time. He states, "The historical origin of political liberalism (and of liberalism more generally) is the Reformation and its aftermath, with the long controversies over religious toleration in the 16th and 17th centuries. Something like the modern understanding of liberty of conscience and freedom began then. As Hegel saw, pluralism made religious liberty possible, certainly not Luther and Calvin's intention.<sup>1</sup> For Rawls, "Luther and Calvin were as dogmatic and intolerant as the Roman Church had been."<sup>2</sup>

However, by contrast with such portrayals, besides the extreme emphasis on predestination, double election and original sin, and in the face of what is in certain respects an extremely passive conception of citizenship and a restrictive social ethic, there also emerge in Calvin's thought conceptions of freedom and equality and of a division of the spiritual and the political not too far removed from characteristics ascribed to the modern self and its separation of church and state.

This then raises a question about the history of thought so far as it has been influenced by the above mentioned Enlightenment divisions. From within the enlightened perspective, that of science, liberalism and technology, free rationality liberates itself from the bondage of religious dogma. Nevertheless, as thus distinguishing faith, reason and freedom, a question arises as to whether that from which the enlightened mind frees itself is in fact that to which the pre-modern religious consciousness adhered. A more balanced perspective must strive to hold together both the modern criticism of religion and the historical and intellectual reality that modern freedom and equality emerge from a religious inwardness which has already begun to liberate itself from religious superstition and dogmatism.

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<sup>1</sup> Rawls 1993: xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> Rawls 1993: xxiii.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

A question can be asked as to what from a contemporary standpoint can be gained by a fuller appreciation of the historical relation between Christianity and liberalism. The assumption of the present essay is that modernity and its political forms express in a fuller way the freedom and equality that in certain respects remain merely implicit or abstract, one might say other-worldly, in religious consciousness. It is important to recognize, I believe, that while the intellectual approaches of modernity are distinct from those of religion there is nevertheless much that is shared in terms of content. Thus, this essay hopes to contribute to diminishing the prejudice on both sides of the argument that perceives variously a worldly destruction of spiritual life or a sectarian superstition destructive of public political deliberation. More than a cold toleration of human spirituality, modern liberal thought might find in its heritage a kinship with the spirit of Christianity. Thus, with the relation to its own historical religious origin clarified it is hoped that the tension be reduced between contemporary liberal forms and religion *per se*.

This essay considers Calvin's theological conceptions of freedom and equality and their relation to his concept of predestination, as well as his separation of the inner and the outer man, to suggest how it is that in religious or theological form, Calvin articulates what is expressed philosophically in the modern period.

For a clear exposition of Calvin's thought one can do no better than to look to *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Here in systematic form one finds precise definitions of the basic vocabulary of Calvinism: faith, justification, regeneration, conscience, freedom, equality, imputation, righteousness, spiritual and political. While to any number of contemporary outlooks, Calvin will appear strange if not dangerous and hostile, there is no faulting the clarity and integrity of his exposition.

### **Predestination and Freedom**

Concerning predestination, Calvin states, "The decree is dreadful indeed, I confess."<sup>3</sup> This clearly expresses his recognition of just how difficult the doctrine of double predestination is. The most fundamental principle in Calvin's thought is the sovereignty of God. God is the source of nature and redemption and of everything in between. It follows from this sovereignty that God's will must be utterly and ineffably free in the election of those who will be redeemed in Christ, that is in the choice of those who will be saved. Further, for Calvin this freedom means that not all will be chosen for redemption, that some will be reprobate and, startlingly, that they will likewise be chosen but for damnation. Every other category in Calvin's spiritual economy derives from this stern emphasis on the divine will. Faith will be the working of the Holy Spirit in the human heart, grace the undeserved gift of God, sin and righteousness imputed, conscience the witness of God's judgment. The totality of human spiritual experience has its origin and sustenance in God's will.

What is predestination? Calvin states, "We call predestination God's eternal decree by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For

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<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christianity*, Tr. Ford Lewis Battles, Ed. John T. McNeil, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) III, xxiii, 7, p. 955.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

all are not created equal in condition; rather eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or death.”<sup>4</sup> Further, “We say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy without regard to human worth; but by his just and irreprehensible but incomprehensible judgment he has barred the door of life to those whom he has given over to damnation.”<sup>5</sup>

For Calvin this contrast between the elect and the damned demonstrates that God is free in his election and that his choice is not indiscriminate but based on his ineffable wisdom. For Calvin, humans are not created equal. Speaking of the Israelites he states, “In the election of a whole nation God has already shown that in his mere generosity he has not been bound by any laws but is free, so that equal apportionment of grace is not to be required of him. The very inequality of grace proves that it is free.”<sup>6</sup>

While this conception does metaphysical violence to the contemporary liberal view of the inherent freedom and equality of all human beings, it expresses with integrity the difficulties inherent in beginning from a standpoint of an eternal and sovereign deity and in then attempting to relate this to the human individual. This approach faces the same tensions that are present in the thought of Augustine and Spinoza, for example. The ethical difficulties which emerge should not obscure the philosophically reasonable ontological position it expresses, of asserting the primacy of an eternal being.

Calvin's position will be decidedly pre-modern in its inability adequately to relate human subjectivity and freedom to the first cause. Yet it shares with its medieval ancestors, its renaissance kin and its modern progeny, a concern to show that human freedom is compatible with divine necessity. Following Luther, Calvin distinguishes necessity and compulsion. He considers the necessity of human sin by analogy with the necessity of God's goodness. God is necessarily Good, goodness itself, “God's goodness is so connected to his divinity that it is no more necessary for him to be God than for him to be good.”<sup>7</sup> But this necessity and God's inability to do evil is not, in Calvin's eyes, a restriction on God but rather a “boundless goodness”. He is not compelled by some external force but by his own good will. To put it another way, because God is goodness itself, whatever he wills must be good; there is no external moral standard from which his goodness can be evaluated because he is the foundation of all morality.

Likewise, for Calvin, though the human will must sin, this is not the product of an external compulsion but rather an inward necessity: “The chief point of this distinction, then, must be that man as he was corrupted by the Fall, sinned willingly, not unwillingly or by compulsion; by the most eager inclination of his heart, not forced by compulsion;

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<sup>4</sup> *Institutes*, III, xxi, 5, p. 926.

<sup>5</sup> *Institutes*, III, xxi, 7, p. 931.

<sup>6</sup> *Institutes*, III, xxi, 6, p. 929.

<sup>7</sup> *Institutes*, II, iii, 5, p. 295.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

by the prompting of his own lust, not by compulsion from without. Yet so depraved is his nature that he can be moved or impelled only to do evil. But if this is true, then it is clearly expressed that man is surely subject to the necessity of sinning.”<sup>8</sup>

Considered in itself, that is, without regard to any actual choice, the human will is able to enact an individual's own intentions. This is what Augustine refers to as *liberum arbitrium*. Adam, then, was free to follow the law established by God or to disobey it. In disobeying the law he followed the inclination of his own will. While it was necessary from the standpoint of providence that the fall occur, it did not occur except through Adam's own will. However, once the will falls, once it is rendered corrupt in punishment of its sinfulness, its inclinations are necessarily perverse, and it is only through grace that it becomes possible for the will to be redeemed, that is, for it to will the good. The post-lapsarian human will, the human will after the fall, is corrupt and can only be restored through God's activity. While Adam's will was such that it could obtain freedom in obedience to the law,<sup>9</sup> fallen humanity does not have the same possibility available to it; rather it can find redemption only in the gospel of love. These are the theological roots of Calvin's view of justification by faith. And it is only through faith that the will can be freed.

### **Faith and Freedom**

How are freedom and faith related on Calvin's view? Calvin defines faith as “A firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit.”<sup>10</sup> In Calvin's words, “not that knowledge which, content with idle speculation, merely flits in the brain but that which will be sound and fruitful if one duly perceive it and if it takes root in the heart.”<sup>11</sup> This unity of head and heart, of the rational and the natural if you will, results in a practical or moral wisdom, that is, piety. For Calvin, it is idle to question what God is; what is required is not speculation but reverence grounded in recognition and worship of the divine majesty and mercy.<sup>12</sup> Faith, he argues, “is more a matter of the heart than of the brain, and more of the disposition than of the understanding. For this reason it is called ‘obedience of faith’.”<sup>13</sup>

For Calvin, it is only through faith that one may be saved; this is his doctrine of justification by faith which he claims “is the main hinge on which religion turns”.<sup>14</sup> Like the doctrine of predestination, justification by faith asserts the absolute sovereignty of God. According to Calvin, “He is said to be justified in God's sight who is both reckoned righteous in God's judgment and has been accepted on account of his

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<sup>8</sup> *Institutes*, II, iii, 5, pp. 295-96.

<sup>9</sup> *Institutes*, I, xv, 8, p. 195.

<sup>10</sup> *Institutes*, III, ii, 7, p. 551.

<sup>11</sup> *Institutes*, I, v, 9, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin refers to Paul's definition of faith as: “That obedience which is given to the gospel.” Further he states: “It is not so much our concern to know who he is in himself, as what he wills to be toward us.” Here Calvin weaves together two crucial dimensions of faith, the Word and piety. *Institutes*, III, ii, 6, p. 549.

<sup>13</sup> *Institutes*, III, ii, 8, p. 552.

<sup>14</sup> *Institutes*, III, xi, 1, p. 726.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

righteousness.”<sup>15</sup> This righteousness, however, is not the product of any human activity. Justification by faith is contrasted with the doctrine of works which allows a positive human activity in salvation, which sees human good works as a contributing cause of salvation. For Calvin, this conception of works is appropriate to law righteousness but not to gospel righteousness. He conceives the law as the Old Testament revelation of God's will prior to the full revelation of Christ. Whereas works are required for righteousness relative to the law, for Calvin, the New Testament reveals that works are insufficient for Christian righteousness. He states, “Faith receives that righteousness which the gospel bestows. Now the gospel differs from the law in that it does not link righteousness to works but lodges it solely in God's mercy.”<sup>16</sup> Further, “Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God's sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.... And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.”<sup>17</sup> This concept of imputed righteousness is central: “Since God justifies us by the intercession of Christ, he absolves us not by the confirmation of our own innocence but by the imputation of righteousness, so that we who are not righteous in ourselves may be reckoned as such in Christ.”<sup>18</sup> In other words redemption occurs through the vicarious substitution of Christ's righteousness for our sinfulness.

Calvin's Pauline insight here is that no human activity can possibly meet the absolute moral standard revealed in the Bible. Because humans are ethically imperfect, or, in Calvin's words, the inheritors of original sin, they cannot reconcile themselves to God, at least not in the absolute way which Calvin envisages as promised in scripture. Therefore, true reconciliation can only be the product of a divine act through which we are adopted to participate in Christ.<sup>19</sup> Otherwise, only an imperfect reconciliation would be possible. It is important to see that while Calvin might be said to diminish the potency of the human will in obtaining redemption, this is, from his standpoint, for two very good reasons, (1) to retain God's absolute sovereignty and (2) to ensure absolute reconciliation with God. One might say that what is lost on the side of finite human activity is gained in terms of the absolute relationship that obtains between elect humanity and God.

Given that Calvin's concept of faith demands the radical assertion of the absolute sovereignty of God's will and of the thoroughly subordinate reality of the human will, his further contention that faith is the basis of freedom is apt to appear alien to the contemporary liberal standpoint. What meaningfully can be said to be left of human freedom when such emphasis is placed on the divine activity? Is there not more of servitude than of liberty here?

For Calvin, freedom is an “appendage of justification”.<sup>20</sup> And because justification is by faith alone, true freedom, on Calvin's view, is a product of faith. What

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<sup>15</sup> *Institutes*, III, xi, 1, p. 726.

<sup>16</sup> *Institutes*, III, xi, 18, p. 748.

<sup>17</sup> *Institutes*, III, xi, 2, pp. 726-27.

<sup>18</sup> *Institutes*, III, xi, 3, p. 728. For Calvin imputation means that Christ shares his righteousness with us, that he “pours into us enough of his power to meet the judgment of God” *Institutes*, III, xi, 23, p. 753.

<sup>19</sup> *Institutes*, III, ii, 24, p. 570.

<sup>20</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 1, p. 833.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

is essential to see, is that whereas his conception of the reception of grace denies the efficacy of the human will, grace itself regenerates the will from its corruption into the freedom of Christ's righteousness. The righteous human participates in Christ's freedom and by adoption gains the power to will the good. With reference to those like Erasmus who emphasize human cooperation with divine grace, Calvin states, "If they mean that after we have by the Lord's power once for all been brought to obey righteousness, we go forward by our own power and are inclined to follow the action of grace, I do not gainsay it. For it is very certain that where God's grace reigns, there is readiness to obey it."<sup>21</sup> This is the positive dimension of Calvinistic freedom; one is given the power freely to obey God.<sup>22</sup> From this standpoint no other freedom is comparable, indeed there would be no point to freedom were there no possible relationship to God.

Nevertheless, other forms of freedom, perhaps negative freedom, follow from this positive dimension. First, there is freedom from the bondage of sin which prevents one from willing the good. Calvin vividly describes sinful servitude, "The mind of man has been so completely estranged from God's righteousness that it conceives, desires, and undertakes, only that which is impious, perverted, foul, impure and infamous. The heart is so steeped in the poison of sin that it can bring out nothing but a loathsome stench. But if some men occasionally make a show of good, their minds nevertheless ever remain enveloped in hypocrisy and deceitful craft, and their hearts remain bound by inner perversity."<sup>23</sup>

Freedom from this bondage likewise entails a freedom from the burdens of the law of the Old Testament. Calvin contends, "No one will ever come to be completely convinced in his own mind that he has satisfied the law, as surely no one ever fully satisfies it through works."<sup>24</sup> Rather, "Christ alone, who surpasses all perfection of the law, must be set forth as righteousness."<sup>25</sup> For Calvin, Christian freedom thus consists of three parts. First, we must be freed from the law and thus avoid dependence on works. Secondly, we must, therefore, look not to ourselves for righteousness but only to Christ.<sup>26</sup> And third, we must treat the law as, nevertheless, serving the purposes of teaching and moral exhortation.<sup>27</sup> But the key point is that, in terms of God's judgment, human conscience need not be concerned with what the law requires. Indeed the assurance of faith emerges only when one has overcome the dread engendered by the law.<sup>28</sup> Thus liberated from dread, individuals find it possible freely if not joyously to obey the law, "Consciences observe the law, not as if constrained by the necessity of law, but ... freed from the law's yoke they willingly obey God's will. For since they dwell in perpetual

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<sup>21</sup> *Institutes*, II, iii, 11, p. 306.

<sup>22</sup> The terms positive freedom and negative freedom are often identified with Isaiah Berlin though they have a longer philosophical and theological lineage. Consider, for example, Augustine's distinction between *liberum arbitrium* and *libertas*. There is much of use in Berlin's analysis though I do not find his sense of these terms as denoting opposed concepts of liberty convincing.

<sup>23</sup> *Institutes*, II, iv, 19, p. 340.

<sup>24</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 3, p. 765.

<sup>25</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 2, p. 835.

<sup>26</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 1, p. 834.

<sup>27</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 2, p. 835.

<sup>28</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 5, p. 837.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

dread so long as they remain under the sway of the law, they will never be disposed with eager readiness to obey God unless they have already been given this sort of freedom.”<sup>29</sup>

In Calvin's universe this entails an extraordinary freedom of conscience. He defines conscience as an inner awareness of divine judgment, “a witness which does not let them hide their sins but arraigns them as guilty before the judgment seat.”<sup>30</sup> For Calvin, however, “Christian freedom is, in all its parts a spiritual thing. Its whole force consists in quieting frightened consciences before God.”<sup>31</sup> Our self-justification through works will always come up short, thus, “faith alone must have place, whose nature it is to prick up the ears and close the eyes – that is, to be intent upon [God's] promise alone and to turn thought away from the worth and merit of man.”<sup>32</sup>

Conscience, then, turns toward the divine and away from humanity. While human laws ought to be observed because the social order is ordained by God, they do not bind conscience as such.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, conscience is not bound by custom.<sup>34</sup> Conscience is thus authoritative for individuals without reference to other individuals or to the community except so far as directly commanded by God in scripture.<sup>35</sup> Conscience, then, maintains a free human inwardness relative to both spiritual and civil government. Because it concerns the “inner man”, conscience is subject only to spiritual or ecclesiastical government; and it is subject only so far as enjoined by divine commands not by human invention, indeed, only so far as the church grounds its government in God's word.<sup>36</sup>

This allows also what Calvin calls a freedom “regarding outward things that are indifferent”. He states, “We are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently.”<sup>37</sup> Calvin is at pains to show the superstition and compulsion to which the immoderate conscience tends: “When consciences once ensnare themselves, they enter a long and inextricable maze, not easy to get out of. If a man begins to doubt whether he may use linen for sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, and napkins, he will afterwards be uncertain about hemp; finally doubt will even arise over tow. For he will turn over in his mind whether he can sup without napkins, or go without a handkerchief. If any man should consider daintier food unlawful, in the end he will not be at peace, before God, when he eats black bread or common victuals, while it occurs to him that he could sustain his body on even coarser foods. If he boggles at sweet wine, he will not with clear conscience drink even flat wine, and finally he will not dare touch water if sweeter and

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<sup>29</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 4, p. 836.

<sup>30</sup> *Institutes*, IV, x, 2, p. 1181.

<sup>31</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 9, p. 840.

<sup>32</sup> *Institutes*, III, xiii, 4, p. 767.

<sup>33</sup> *Institutes*, IV, x, 5, p. 1184.

<sup>34</sup> *Institutes*, IV, x, 18, p. 1196.

<sup>35</sup> *Institutes*, IV, x, 4, p. 1182-83.

<sup>36</sup> *Institutes*, IV, viii, 13, p. 1162. Calvin will insist, for example that the church is not allowed to create new doctrine beyond that found in scripture (*Inst.* IV, viii, 15, p. 1164) Such doctrine is not binding on conscience (*Inst.* IV, X, 6, p. 1184)

<sup>37</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 7, p. 838.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

cleaner than other water. To sum up he will come to the point of considering it wrong to step upon a straw upon his path, as the saying goes."<sup>38</sup>

By contrast with spiritual government, civil government is authoritative for the "outer man" only.<sup>39</sup> Indeed Calvin asserts that the power of the sword is not exercised over conscience.<sup>40</sup> Conversely, even civil bondage is thought compatible with spiritual freedom. He states, "It makes no difference what your condition among men may be or under what nation's laws you live, since the Kingdom of Christ does not at all consist in these things."<sup>41</sup> The sword may be exercised over citizens, but it does not penetrate the recesses of conscience. The portrayal of the political as external in this fashion presupposes inward freedom and conscience, an internal spiritual dimension. There is envisaged here an inward freedom undisturbed by the external relations of humanity in social-political life.

It is in this light that Calvin can uphold obedience to the magistrate even under conditions of tyranny. In a passage which from a contemporary standpoint is remarkable and chilling, he states, "If we are cruelly tormented by a savage prince, if we are greedily despoiled by one who is avaricious or wanton, if we are neglected by a slothful one, if finally we are vexed for piety's sake by one who is impious and sacrilegious, let us first be mindful of our own misdeeds, which without doubt are chastised by such whips of the Lord [cf. Dan.9:]. Let us then also call this thought to mind, that it is not for us to remedy such evils, that only this remains to implore the Lord's help, in whose hand are the hearts of kings, and the changing of kingdoms [Prov.21:1]."<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, he will insist that the ruler not be obeyed in those instances where he is in conflict with God's law. He states, "The Lord, therefore, is the King of Kings, who, when he has opened his sacred mouth must alone be heard, before all and above all men; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him. If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed. And here let us not be concerned about all that dignity which the magistrates possess; for no harm is done to it when it is humbled before that singular and truly supreme power of God."<sup>43</sup> In lecture XXX of his *Commentary on Daniel*, Calvin is even more explicit: "For earthly princes lay aside their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy to be reckoned among the number of mankind. We ought, rather, utterly to defy them [*conspuere in ipsorum capita*, lit., "to spit on their heads"] than to obey them."<sup>44</sup>

Further, while he will deny private citizens the right to any political action in correcting tyranny,<sup>45</sup> he will also support correction which emerges from appropriate political quarters. In the words of John T. McNeil, "From his reiterated warnings against

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<sup>38</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 7, p. 838.

<sup>39</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 1, p. 1485.

<sup>40</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xi, 8, p. 1220.

<sup>41</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 1, p. 1486.

<sup>42</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 29, p. 1517.

<sup>43</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31, p. 1520.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted by McNeil, *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31, p. 1519, n. 54.

<sup>45</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 23, p. 1511..



PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

resistance to tyrants by 'private persons,' Calvin turns here [IV, xx, 36, 1518] with startling abruptness to approve and solemnly urge, action by a constituted magistracy to protect the liberties of the people."<sup>46</sup> When such duly appointed magistrates fail to restrain those kings who assault the common folk, this amounts to "nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance."<sup>47</sup> Also, "The magistrates ought to apply themselves with the highest diligence to prevent the freedom whose guardians they have been appointed) from being in any respect diminished, far less be violated. If they are not sufficiently alert and careful, they are faithless in office, and traitors to their country."<sup>48</sup>

### **The Separation of the Spiritual and the Political**

The distinction between the inner and the outer man, then, is the basis of Calvin's conception of the distinction between church and state, a distinction which becomes central in defining the modern standpoint. Spiritual government "resides in the soul or inner man and pertains to inner life", while civil government, "pertains only to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality".<sup>49</sup> What is of interest for the purposes of the present argument are the dimensions of freedom and equality present in each realm as well as the theological basis for the separation of church and state. Such notions are at the root of Calvin's criticism of the Roman Church.

Calvin argues that the Roman Church has corrupted the biblical order of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. He argues that the aim of such jurisdiction is the avoidance and correction of offense and scandal. On his view there are two elements that must be considered: "[Firstly,] that this spiritual power be completely separated from the sword; secondly, that it be administered not by the decision of one man but by a lawful assembly."<sup>50</sup>

With reference to the first point, Calvin insists, "The church does not have the right of the sword to punish or compel, not the authority to force; not imprisonment, nor the other punishments which the magistrate commonly inflicts. This then is not a question of punishing the sinner against his will, but of the sinner professing his repentance in a voluntary chastisement."<sup>51</sup> The purpose of Church discipline is to preserve the sanctity of the Lord's Supper by avoiding its indiscriminate administration, to preserve good people from corruption by the wicked and to encourage repentance.<sup>52</sup> Calvin outlines three stages of Church discipline: private admonition, public admonition and excommunication.<sup>53</sup> It is important to note, beyond certain caricatures of Calvin's

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<sup>46</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31, p. 1518, n. 54.

<sup>47</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 31, p. 1519.

<sup>48</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 8, p. 1494.

<sup>49</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 1, p. 1485.

<sup>50</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xi, 5, p. 1217.

<sup>51</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xi, 3, p. 1215.

<sup>52</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xii, 5, p. 1232-33. Cf. also p. 1232, n. 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xii, 2, p. 1230. Calvin sees excommunication as corrective and distinguishes it from anathema where there is no hope of reconciliation. He likewise notes that anathema is "rarely or never used" (*Inst.* IV, xii, 10, p. 1238).

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

rigidity, that he stresses the restorative and conciliatory character of church discipline and strongly emphasizes gentleness and moderation in its application.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, one of his few criticisms of the ancient church concerns the excessive severity of its discipline.<sup>55</sup>

With regards to the second point, that discipline not be applied by one man, we are drawn towards Calvin's criticism of the very concept of the papacy. Calvin's central argument is that there is no actual biblical sanction for the supremacy of one man as head of the whole church, neither in the Old Testament concept of high priest<sup>56</sup> nor in the New Testament concept of the "keys to the kingdom".<sup>57</sup> Calvin argues that there is no basis for the papacy in Jesus' promises to the apostle Peter. Rather, on his view the Bible asserts the equality of Peter with the twelve apostles: "Run over all that is extant: you will find nothing but that he was one of the Twelve, the equal of the rest, and their companion, not their master. He indeed refers to a council anything that is to be done and advises what needs to be done. But at the same time he listens to others, and he not only lets them express their views, but leaves the decisions to them; when they have decreed he follows and obeys [Acts 15:5-12]."<sup>58</sup>

Calvin thus asserts a sense of equality among the ministers of the church. Further, this sense of "equality" permeates the relationship between clergy and people. Indeed in the selection of ministers Calvin emphasizes the consent of the people. He states, "The call of a minister is lawful according to the Word of God, when those who seemed fit are created by the consent and approval of the people; moreover that other pastors ought to preside over the election in order that the multitude may not go wrong either through fickleness, through evil intentions, or through disorder."<sup>59</sup> In his editorial note to this section, John T. McNeil, states, "In political as well as in ecclesiastical government, Calvin habitually expresses a preference for plural authority rather than that of individuals. Here, for example, he excludes the unchecked authority of a single bishop or other dignitary to appoint a minister over a congregation."<sup>60</sup> Further, Calvin argues that the bishops are also subject to consent. He states, "It is a wicked spoliation of the church to force upon any people [a minister] they have not desired or have not at least approved with free voice!"<sup>61</sup> There is in the moment of consent an equalizing of clergy and congregation, both having a voice.

Whereas spiritual government is concerned with instructing conscience in piety, for Calvin, political government is concerned with educating citizens in "the duties of humanity and citizenship".<sup>62</sup> He states that the goal of civil government is "to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness and to

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<sup>54</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xii, 8-13, p. 1236-40.

<sup>55</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xii, 8, p. 1236.

<sup>56</sup> *Institutes*, IV, vi, 2, p. 1103-4.

<sup>57</sup> *Institutes*, IV, vi, 2, p. 1105-6.

<sup>58</sup> *Institutes*, IV, vi, 7, p. 1108.

<sup>59</sup> *Institutes*, IV, iii, 15, p. 1066.

<sup>60</sup> *Institutes*, IV, iii, 15, p. 1065, n. 13.

<sup>61</sup> *Institutes*, IV, v, 3, p. 1087.

<sup>62</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 15, p. 847.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

reconcile us with one another".<sup>63</sup> Further, "They are ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquility, and ... their sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all."<sup>64</sup> Calvin insists, therefore, that we must not apply the principles of the inner man and spiritual freedom to the political order.<sup>65</sup> This point has practical expression in Calvin's assertion of Christ's restriction of ministers from civil rule.<sup>66</sup>

Humans, according to Calvin are social animals with a natural instinct to "foster and preserve society". He states, "There exist in all men's minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order."<sup>67</sup> The universality of basic forms of law arises, Calvin argues, from seeds implanted in all men.<sup>68</sup> While fallen humanity is in itself destitute of spiritual resources, the light of reason provides humans with a sense of how to arrange political matters. In particular, Calvin states, "While men dispute among themselves about individual sections of the law, they agree on the general conception of equity."<sup>69</sup>

So while Calvin contends that spiritually speaking not all men are created equal (some being damned, some elect), he does emphasize a certain form of political equality, just as he asserts a principle of equality in ecclesiastical government. He states, "Equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws."<sup>70</sup> In this light, Calvin upholds a mixed form of government based on aristocracy and democracy. He states, "I will not deny that aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy far excels all others." Further, "Men's fault or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and, if one asserts himself unfairly, there may be a number of censors and masters to restrain his willfulness. This has been proved by experience, and also the Lord confirmed it by his authority when he ordained among the Israelites an aristocracy bordering on democracy."<sup>71</sup>

Nevertheless, though he maintains the distinction of spiritual and political he also considers them to be closely, indeed necessarily, connected.<sup>72</sup> First, the office of magistrate is ordained by God.<sup>73</sup> Second, the magistrate ought to be a member of the church: "For a good emperor is within the church, not over the church."<sup>74</sup> Third, the magistrate is entrusted with the protection and care of the church.<sup>75</sup> He states, "Civil government has as its appointed end, so long as we live among men, to cherish and

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<sup>63</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 2, p. 1487.

<sup>64</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 9, p. 1496.

<sup>65</sup> *Institutes*, III, xix, 15, p. 847.

<sup>66</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xi, 8, p. 1221.

<sup>67</sup> *Institutes*, II, xx, 13, p. 272.

<sup>68</sup> *Institutes*, II, xx, 13, p. 272.

<sup>69</sup> *Institutes*, II, xx, 13, p. 273.

<sup>70</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 16, p. 1504.

<sup>71</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 8, p. 1494.

<sup>72</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 1, p. 1485.

<sup>73</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 4, p. 1489.

<sup>74</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xi, 4, p. 1216.

<sup>75</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 6, p. 1491.

PEDDLE: INTIMATIONS OF MODERNITY: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY IN  
CALVIN'S *INSTITUTES*

protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound piety and the position of the church.”<sup>76</sup> This religious dimension of the magistracy, according to Calvin, encourages justice in the state: “If they remember that they are vicars of God, they should watch with all care, earnestness and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice.”<sup>77</sup>

Moreover, civil authority acts as a tempering force on religious tyranny. Far from seeing in the civil realm mere corruption, Calvin holds against the Anabaptists of his time that the church itself is imperfect and as such needs to be checked by civil authority. He states, “They stupidly imagine such a perfection as can never be found in a community of men. For since the insolence of men is so great, their wickedness so stubborn, that it can scarcely be restrained by extremely severe laws, what do we expect them to do if they see that their depravity can go scot-free – when no power can force them to cease from doing evil.”<sup>78</sup> Likewise he criticizes assertions of the supreme jurisdiction of the Roman pontiff. He states, “They leave no jurisdiction on earth to control or restrain their lust if they abuse such boundless power.”<sup>79</sup>

Beginning from the divine sovereignty and the dark depths of predestination Calvin's thought thus moves systematically to a pre-modern assertion of human freedom and equality expressed not only in the inwardness of faith but also in the reformation of a social world. It is here that the proximate religious roots of modernity are to be found.

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<sup>76</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 2, p. 1487.

<sup>77</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 6, p. 1491.

<sup>78</sup> *Institutes*, IV, xx, 2, p. 1487-88.

<sup>79</sup> *Institutes*, IV, vii, 19, p. 1138