

Title: John Calvin, the Geneva Reformation, and Godly Warfare: Church and State in the Calvinian Tradition

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary scholarship still has a tendency to portray the Protestant reformer John Calvin as a bellicose tyrant, harsh and autocratic in his iron-fisted rule over the city of Geneva. Historians allege that the Republic of Geneva was a creeping theocracy and that Calvin advocated holy war in continuity with Israel in the Old Testament, and that he even entertained the radical idea of private resistance theory. For some, Calvin was one, or even all of the above—so that these categories are viewed as interrelated in discussions of Calvin's politics.

Against such an interpretation, this dissertation argues that Calvin the pastor was a balanced church leader who set a high value on order, discipline, and legal process in relationship to the call to the ministry and the use of church courts, like the Geneva consistory. As to his doctrine of church and state, it demonstrates that Calvin opposed autocratic government in each sphere. He established the consistory to govern the Geneva church, a body which distributed ecclesiastical authority among pastors and lay elders. He insisted upon a separation of church and state in terms of their distinct jurisdictions, a situation in which the pastors only had an advisory role in relationship to the civil government. Calvin preferred a republic, a mixed government with democratic and aristocratic elements. Thus, the common thread that unites the pastor, the churchman, and the jurist was Calvin's sensibility of due process in the governing assemblies of both church and state—where duly elected church elders or civil magistrates decided issues in a legal and orderly way.

An aspect of Calvin's teaching on the state relates to his position on war. This study shows that Calvin positioned himself in continuity with the medieval just war tradition established by Augustine of Hippo. He did not believe in either element of what constituted a holy war—authorization by the church or the prosecution of war without restraint. He stood within the mainstream tradition when it came to both the *jus ad bellum* and the *jus in bello*. He always insisted that the private individual may only offer passive resistance to a ruler's ungodly commands. A parliamentary body alone is authorized by God to resist a tyrannical prince.

The methodology employed in this work includes three commitments. First, it endeavors to avoid an exclusive focus upon the *Institutes*. It recognizes that an accurate understanding of Calvin's theology on any given doctrine depends upon the examination of his entire theological production—most significantly his commentaries and sermons, and in the case of this study on church and state, the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. Secondly, one must study Calvin against the background of the medieval doctrinal tradition. Such an approach demonstrates that Calvin stood in harmony with the traditional teaching of the church on the just war. Calvin was by no means strikingly original on this subject. In the third place, this study examines Calvin's doctrine on the war-making authority of the state in terms of the teaching of several sixteenth-century Protestant contemporaries. This includes Martin Luther and three

major Reformed theologians—Theodore Beza, Henry Bullinger, and Peter Vermigli. A contextual approach casts additional light upon Calvin. It shows that Calvin stood in fundamental continuity with the just war teaching of Luther, and it demonstrates that Calvin produced the most conservative doctrine of the just war among the dominant Reformed thinkers in Geneva and Zurich.