

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:  
A Third Way (18)**

**John Calvin and the Kingdom of God**

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With this article, we begin our presentation of the third way of relating the Bible, the church, and the world. Given the fact that the year 2009 marks the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth (July 10, 1509), we thought it would be fitting to introduce our reflection with a tribute to the contribution made to this question by the great Reformer. Though much has changed in the five hundred years since his birth, Calvin's teaching continues to supply important themes for our consideration today.

We wish to focus this (regrettably) brief tribute on the subject of John Calvin and the kingdom of God, because when we talk about the kingdom of God, we are talking not only about the church, but about all of Christian living in the world. Admittedly, many things have changed since Calvin's day, so that we must be careful in drawing lines from his teaching to our practice. But many of the questions of his day are the questions of our day as well.

***The view of Rome***

Throughout history Rome has viewed the kingdom of God as identical to, and coterminous with, the church. God's authority was exercised through the church, and throughout various periods of church history, the pope was the head of both church and nation. This situation is often described as the *corpus christianum*, often termed Christendom or a Christian society, where all of culture (like science, education, art) was brought under the church in one way or another.

Calvin opposed the Roman Catholic view on a number of levels. In distinction from an ecclesiocracy (every area of life ruled by the church), he spoke of theocracy, referring to God's rule by his Word and Spirit. Moreover, Calvin broke radically with the dualism between nature and grace whereby grace functioned to elevate nature. Rather, creation must be seen as a unity,

created with an integrity and order suited to the glory of God. This integrity and order were lost in the fall, but restored in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ; they are enjoyed especially by the church, and are to be translated by believers into daily living in the world. While the Roman view of the kingdom of God places the visible institution of the church in the foreground, Calvin emphasized the sovereign will of King Jesus over all creation, including the church. Calvin distinguished the church from the kingdom, since the church has a limited mandate in the world, namely, to administer the Word of God through the ordinances of sacred preaching and the holy sacraments.

To be sure, God rules differently within the church and beyond the church. The gospel word, the good news of forgiveness, reconciliation, and justification, is proclaimed and administered in the church. But beyond the church, the holy law of God serves as a divine witness to the nations and well as to individuals, to kings as well as commoners. Within Geneva itself Calvin desired to see visible evidence of Christ's rule in the public life of the city, while he fully realized that such evidence would remain partial and fragmentary until the return of Jesus Christ. So there is an eschatological dimension and dynamic to this kingdom of God. But Calvin never permitted eschatology to neutralize or enervate our present obedience as Christians in the world. He refused to allow the believer's meditation on the future life to become a substitute for the believer's present-day calling to submit in every area of life to the will of their Sovereign and King.

### ***The view of the Anabaptists***

On another front, the Reformers contended against the Anabaptists, a struggle that centered largely on the meaning of the kingdom of God. The Anabaptists desired to see the kingdom of God brought to full manifestation here and now, which resulted in a revolutionary attitude toward contemporary authorities in church and state. They felt that the Reformers had not gone far enough in purifying the church and all of life according to the teaching of Jesus.

Calvin shared many similar convictions with the Anabaptists, among them that the kingdom of God required concrete obedience and holiness in all of life. If God's will revealed in Jesus Christ aims at our sanctification, and if our sanctification must include all of life, then surely God's will revealed in Jesus Christ should direct all of life. The difference between Calvin and the Anabaptists on this score was that for Calvin, the third use of the law (as guide for

thankful living) did not lead to isolation from living in the world (think of the Anabaptists refusing to <sup>{17}</sup> serve in the military or as an officer of the state, or to take oaths, etc.), but rather propelled believers to live in every area of life *as Christians*—which is to say: according to God’s will made known in Jesus Christ.

### ***The view of Lutherans***

In addition to the two views of the kingdom of God sketched briefly above, a third view with which Calvin (and later Calvinists) came into conflict was that of the Lutherans. Both Luther and Calvin taught that God rules all of creation in different ways. He rules the church differently than he rules the world, a position which Luther spoke of as “two kingdoms” or the “two rules” of God. The one is the kingdom of Christ, the other is the kingdom of the world. God is ruler over both, but in different ways.

Undergirding Luther's teaching was a commitment to the medieval *corpus christianum* or Christian society. The spiritual kingdom of Christ is the more important of the two, and the secular kingdom of the state was often seen as subservient to the needs of the church. The tool of the secular kingdom is the sword, its guide is the law, and its principle is justice. By contrast, for the spiritual kingdom (the church), the tool is the Word of God, its guide is the gospel, and its principles are grace and faith. Confusing these two kingdoms, by using the wrong tool, or following the wrong guide, or employing the wrong principle, is an error of disastrous proportions.

Lutheranism has never been able to transcend the tension between these two kingdoms, and Lutheran ethics has generally tended toward a dual ethic, one for the church and another for society. Throughout history, this tension has surfaced as a conflict between reason and revelation, or between science and religion. In the church as the spiritual kingdom of Christ, the Word of revelation is to guide, while in secular (non-church) matters, reason is the guide.

We can understand Luther's concern as he struggled against the Anabaptists, who sought to set aside secular government and identify human institutions with the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, however, Luther severed the bond between the two kingdoms by failing to see that although the two manners of divine rule are distinct, they can and must both be understood in their service to the one kingdom of Jesus Christ.

### *The contribution of John Calvin*

No less than Luther did Calvin oppose the perfectionism of the Anabaptists that led to a revolutionary attitude toward the existing order. But this did not lead Calvin to follow the dualism resulting from Luther's two-kingdom view. He agreed that it would never be possible to transform this world and its structures into the kingdom of God, but Christians nevertheless are called to do everything they can so the kingdom of God can exercise its penetrating, leavening influence in this world. Although this influence may wax and wane, and although we may not expect the perfection of either the church or the world before Christ returns, believers are called, as members of the *militia Christi* (the army of Christ), to wage battle for the truth and for the right.

Until now we have refrained from giving lengthy citations from Calvin, but at this point we cannot resist. The following quote is so important because it encapsulates much of what we hope to set forth as the “third way” of relating the Bible, the church, and the world. This comes from Calvin’s *Institutes*, 4.20.9:

“Now in this place we ought to explain in passing the office of the magistrates, how it is described in the Word of God and the things in which it consists. If Scripture did not teach that it extends to both Tables of the Law, we could learn this from secular writers: for no one has discussed the office of magistrates, the making of laws, and public welfare, without beginning at religion and divine worship. And thus all have confessed that no government can be happily established unless piety is the first concern; and (18) that those laws are preposterous which neglect God’s right and provide only for men. Since, therefore, among all philosophers religion takes first place, and since this fact has always been observed by universal consent of all nations, let Christian princes and magistrates be ashamed of their negligence if they do not apply themselves to this concern.”

It is foolish, Calvin argued, for magistrates to neglect the concern for God and give attention only to rendering justice among men. God has appointed rulers in his name to ensure that he be purely worshiped according to the prescription of his law. And though Calvin addresses a special

word of warning to Christian princes and magistrates, let no one suppose that he thereby restricts to them the calling he has just set forth for all magistrates.

Immediately we hasten to observe that we might formulate matters a bit differently today, given the developments of history, specifically, the emergence of democratic institutions and constitutional republics. Yet let us not be so hasty as to overlook this Calvin-taught detail found in the Belgic Confession, Article 36: “And being called in this manner to contribute to the advancement of a society that is pleasing to God, the civil rulers have the task, subject to God's law, of removing every obstacle to the preaching of the gospel and to every aspect of divine worship.” You see, for Calvin, for Guido de Bres, and for their posterity today, there can be no neutrality “beyond the church.” Surely there may be proper separation between the spheres of the church and the state, but never between religion and politics, between the Bible and non-ecclesiastical life, between the daily obedience of believers in the world and the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ.

So we honor the memory, and the legacy, of John Calvin in this year of our Lord 2009, when this confession is renewed among us, in practice as well as in principle.