

# **Calvin's Covenantal Pronomianism**

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## Introduction

No one has described the dilemma of modern Western thought with greater faithfulness to the Calvinistic literary virtues of clarity and brevity than the Roman Catholic scholar Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn. “The Western Dilemma: Calvin or Rousseau?” is the title of a perceptive article in which he charts the development of Western thinking along the lines of the two great “Jeans” from Geneva.<sup>1</sup>

Kuehnelt-Leddihn describes the Reformed rejection of Rome as a return to the middle ages rather than, as is often thought, the beginning of liberalism and democracy.<sup>2</sup> In the Catholic Church of the sixteenth century “the mediaeval concept of the world as a circle with God as its center had been replaced by the concept of an ellipse with two focal points—God and man.”<sup>3</sup> The theocentric thinking of Luther and Calvin remained the most conservative force in Europe for some time after the deaths of the great Reformers.

But the Reformed countries, not having been vaccinated from ideological infection by the Renaissance, were much more influenced by the Enlightenment than were the Catholic. Gradually the Reformed nations succumbed to the other Jean of Geneva. This includes even the

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1. Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, “The Western Dilemma: Calvin or Rousseau?” in George A. Panichas (ed.), *Modern Age, The First Twenty-Five Years: A Selection* (Indianapolis, In.: LibertyPress, 1988), 520-531. Almost as if to verify one half of Kuehnelt-Leddihn’s thesis, historian Paul Johnson wrote a book describing leading Western intellectuals who presume to the office of secular prophet as followers of Rousseau. *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

2. It must be remembered that Kuehnelt-Leddihn is using the words “liberalism and democracy” in a negative sense here. Calvin’s theology did make an important contribution to the development of liberty in the West, see: Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th Through 18th Centuries* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992).

3. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, p. 521.

United States of America, begun by “Founding Fathers” who were the children of the Puritans and the grandchildren of Calvin.<sup>4</sup> Although the “American spirit” is still to a degree “more mediaeval than modern” and “the American retreat from Calvin was never a complete one” since Calvin’s influence “continues to run like a dark, subterranean stream through the American subconscious,”<sup>5</sup> the fact remains that, beginning even with Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and the influence of Free Masonry from the time of the War of Independence, America has gradually transferred her loyalty to Rousseau.

This is especially evidenced in the changed view of man. From the Calvinistic belief in man’s inborn and total depravity, but equally total responsibility, Americans turned with revulsion to accept the Rousellian idea of man as “at once good and irresponsible.”<sup>6</sup> According to Kuehnelt-Leddihn, “It is in the social and political spheres that the shift of loyalties from the religious reformer to the philosophic romanticist has wrought the greatest mischief.”<sup>7</sup> A naive belief in the goodness of man leaves all responsibility on “social conditions” that must be “constantly criticized and corrected” by one “noble experiment” after another, all of them ending in failure. The Rousellian creed confesses its faith in the “infallible majority ruling by a kind of divine right,” conveniently forgetting the very fallible kind of majority that elected Hitler.

“We are living today in an age of Rousellian triumphalism. . . . Rousseau is the grandfather of the concentration camps and also of those armed brothels that we continue to call universities.”<sup>8</sup> But the Rousellian triumph can only lead to the dissolution of Western culture, unless, by the grace of God, American is granted a Calvinistic revival.<sup>9</sup>

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4. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, p. 524.

5. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, p. 525.

6. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, p. 527.

7. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, p. 527.

8. Kuehnelt-Leddihn, p. 529.

9. Kuehnelt-Leddihn speaks of a new life for the “other Genevois” rising from the “deeper recesses of the American subconscious.” But as a serious

Although Kuehenelt-Leddihn is thinking primarily of the Calvinistic doctrine of man as a sinner versus the Rousellian doctrine of man as god, social and political philosophy naturally involves much more. One's doctrine of man will presuppose and include certain ideas of God, history, and law, for example. Calvinistic social philosophy, based upon the personal sovereignty of an Absolute Triune God who has spoken definitively in the Holy Scriptures, offers a covenantal world-life view that is centered on God Himself, that defines man as a sinner, but also considers him responsible, and that sees history as a process in which God redeems the world by grace. Law is an essential aspect of that covenantal world-view, for the very idea of the covenant includes law.<sup>10</sup>

Calvin's view of the covenant, and especially his view of the law of God, is the key to a Calvinistic philosophy of history as well as Calvinistic social philosophy. It is the key to a world-view Calvinism that does not stop at TULIP, but relates the Calvinistic vision of God's sovereign grace to all of life.

### Calvinism In America Today

In America the recent revival of Calvinism as a comprehensive world-view, including a social philosophy grounded in the sovereignty of God, was provoked especially by the work of Cornelius Van Til. Drawing from Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavink, and many others in the Dutch tradition, Van Til developed a Calvinistic epistemology consistent with the radical Biblicism<sup>11</sup> demanded by a *Sola Scriptura* Catholic, I am sure he would not mind my emending his phrase to express the fact that new life must come from God.

10. For an extended discussion of a Biblical definition of the covenantal idea, see: Ray Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, Texas: 1987).

11. For some Calvinists today, such as John R. Muether, former librarian at Westminster seminary, "biblicism" is a term of derogation. He criticizes theonomy for sharing "with contemporary evangelicalism a biblicist

theology.<sup>12</sup> Van Til clarified, as no one else before him, the fundamental antithesis of Christian and non-Christian thought. He undermined the “natural law” and “common grace” compromises with unregenerate thought and left Calvinists with nothing but the Bible to which to appeal for ultimate epistemological authority. And in so doing, Van Til insisted he was being faithful to Calvin’s thought, while developing it further.

But Van Til did not apply his Biblicist epistemology to the “social and political spheres” where the damage of Rousellian thought was the greatest. Not until 1973 with the publication of R. J. Rushdoony’s *The Institutes of Biblical Law* was there an attempt at a Biblical social philosophy that uncompromisingly denied the validity of natural law. Since then over 100 volumes have been published elaborating the details of Calvinistic social philosophy from a “theonomic” perspective. Led by Rushdoony, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, James Jordon, and Gary Demar, theonomic authors have expounded the Mosaic law with a fullness of application to modern society never before seen in Church history.

Never seen before, that is, except in Calvin’s sermons on Deuteronomy. Calvin himself, in 200 sermons on Deuteronomy which, in the English translation, fill 1247 pages of two 65 line columns of small hermeneutic that depreciates the role of general revelation and insists on using the Bible as though it were a textbook for all of life.” “The Theonomic Attraction,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, eds. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1990), p. 254.

His view stands in remarkable contrast to that of John Monsma, who Gary Demar describes as an early (pre-Van Tillian) advocate of world-and-life view Calvinism, who declared: “Calvinism is nothing but Biblicism.” John Clover Monsma, *What Calvinism Has Done for America* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1919), p. 141, quoted in Gary Demar, “Theonomy and Calvinism’s Judicial Theology” in *Theonomy: An Informed Response*, ed. Gary North (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 27. When all is said and done, what else could *Sola Scriptura* mean?

12. See, for example: Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969).

print, expounded and applied the Mosaic law to his own day in a truly “theonomic” fashion. Not even the loquacious Puritans equaled the usually concise Calvin for fulness of exposition of the law of Moses. Calvin’s sermons are as broad in their scope as the law of Moses itself, embracing a whole range of moral, political, and social issues from style of clothing to capital punishment and war.

The writings of the theonomic authors represent a rebirth of Calvinistic social philosophy because they imitate Calvin in applying the law of the God to modern man. Calvin himself, as well as his French, English, Dutch, and Scottish followers certainly regarded the law of Moses as relevant for the modern world, as is evidenced in their confessions and creeds.<sup>13</sup> Later Calvinists did not, however, follow Calvin in giving detailed exposition of the whole law, but confined themselves almost entirely to the ten commandments.

This does not mean, however, that they were “anti-theonomic.” Far from it. James Jordan’s survey of Calvinistic authors from the time of the Reformation to the 19th century southern presbyterians Robert L. Dabney and James H. Thornwell demonstrates that many of the most important thinkers in Calvinist history held a pronomian view.<sup>14</sup> Beginning with Martin Bucer’s pronomian stance,<sup>15</sup> Jordan establishes

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13. Meredith Kline, an opponent of theonomy, wrote, “At the same time it must be said that Chalcedon [R. J. Rushdoony’s Christian “think-tank”] is not without roots in respectable ecclesiastical tradition. It is in fact a revival of certain teachings contained in the Westminster Confession of Faith—at least in the Confession’s original formulations.” From, “Comments on an Old-New Error,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI (Fall 1978), p. 173, quoted in Gary North, *Westminster’s Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til’s Legacy* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), p. 99.

14. James Jordan, “Calvinism and the Judicial Law of Moses” in Gary North (ed.), *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, vol 5, no. 78-79 Winter, pp. 17-48.

15. Referring to the judicial law of Moses, Bucer, after explaining that the law of Moses does not apply to us directly in the way that it did to Israel, wrote: “whoever does not reckon that such commandments are to be conscientiously observed is certainly not attributing to God either supreme wisdom or a

that men such as Bullinger,<sup>16</sup> the Lollards,<sup>17</sup> the English Reformers, John Hooper, Hugh Latimer, and Thomas Becon, John Knox,<sup>18</sup> Thomas Cartwright,<sup>19</sup> Johannes Wollebius,<sup>20</sup> George Gillespie,<sup>21</sup> John Owen,<sup>22</sup> righteous care for our salvation.” quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 24.

16. Bullinger also denies a simple and direct application of the law of Moses, but he affirms, “the substance of God’s judicial laws is not taken away or abolished, but . . . the ordering and limitation of them is placed in the arbitrament of good Christian princes. . . .” He also regards the good laws of the ancient world as derived from the law of Moses. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

17. According to Jordan, “B. S. Capp has noted that the Lollards were strongly influenced in their social programs by the laws of Moses.” *Ibid.*, p. 29.

18. Thomas M’Crie writes of Knox’s debate with Maitland, “. . . both parties held that idolatry might justly be punished by death. Into this sentiment they were led in consequence of their having adopted the untenable opinion, that the judicial laws given to the Jewish nation were binding upon Christian nations, as to all offenses against the moral law.” *Ibid.*, p. 30.

19. Cartwright insisted on the death penalty for “blasphemer, contemptuous and stubborn idolaters, murderers, adulterers, incestuous persons, as such like, which God by his judicial law hath commanded to be put to death . . .” *Ibid.*, p. 30.

20. “In those matters on which it [the political law of Moses] is in harmony with the moral law and with ordinary justice, it is binding on us.” *Ibid.*, p. 32.

21. Gillespie, who was very influential at the Westminster Assembly, states clearly that the minister of the Gospel is required to teach the magistrate from the Bible how to make just laws. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

22. John Owen gave a rather exact statement of theonomy that differs very little, if at all, from that held by its modern American proponents: “Although the institutions and examples of the Old Testament, of the duty of magistrates in the things and about the worship of God, are not, in their whole latitude and extent, to be drawn into rules that should be obligatory to all magistrates now, under the administration of the gospel,—and that because the magistrate was “*custos, vindex, et administrator legis judicialis, et politiae Mosaicae,*” from which, as most think, we are freed;—yet, doubtless, there is something moral in those institutions, which, being unclothed of their Judaical form, is still binding to all in the like kind, as to some analogy and proportion. Subduct from those administrations what was proper to, and lies upon the account of, the church and nation of the Jews, and what remains upon the general notion of a church and



John Cotton,<sup>23</sup> Thomas Ridgeley,<sup>24</sup> and Robert L. Dabney regarded the law of Moses as a source of wisdom for modern society. Their views vary. Few, if any, of them are as theonomic as the modern American theologians I have referred to above. But their general pronomianism can be viewed as an undeveloped form of what is now appearing in America.

Not all of Calvin's modern descendents, however, share this enthusiasm for the law of Moses. American Calvinists are divided over the issue of God's law. Some discern in Calvin the basis for promoting a "natural law" social philosophy and criticize the pronomian Calvinists for their Biblicism. A critique of theonomy by the combined faculties of both the Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) and Westminster Theological Seminary in California published in 1990 included articles fundamentally critical of the whole idea of a theonomic social philosophy. It also contained articles that were relatively sympathetic. One of the articles was even written by an author who must be regarded as an exponent of pronomian Calvinistic social philosophy, Vern Poythress, author of *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*.

The division of American Calvinists into two groups, or, perhaps better, two tendencies was evidenced at a conference on a Calvinistic approach to politics held in June of 1987. Representatives from the four major political positions within the Reformed community—theonomy, nation must be everlastingly binding." Ibid., p. 34.

23. Jordan explains that "Cotton distinguished between the permanent judicials, which were appendages to the moral law, and temporary judicials, which were appendages to the ceremonial law." Ibid., p. 35.

24. Ridgeley defines the types of judicial law that he regards as no longer binding and apparently regards the rest as still applicable. The editor of Ridgeley's Body of Divinity, John Wilson, comments: "Dr. Ridgeley is of the class who appeal to the enactments of the judicial law; and he even seems to maintain that these enactments, just in the state in which they were made for the Israelites, are still in force. . . . he quotes its [the judicial law's] provisions in the same manner, and with the same drift, as if they were precepts of the moral law." Ibid., p. 45.

principled pluralism, Christian America, and national confession—came together for the “Consultation on the Biblical Role of Civil government.” What was especially interesting about the debate held between representatives of the various views was that it turned out that the four views reduced themselves to two—theonomy, broadly defined, versus principled pluralism. Greg Bahnsen, the strictest representative of the theonomic position, observed, “Both H. B. Harrington (for the national confession position) and Kevin L. Clauson (for the Christian America position) have replied to my essay in a way that indicates that their perspectives agree essentially with the theonomic viewpoint.”<sup>25</sup> Thus it seems that we can divide Calvinists in America into two rather broadly defined tendencies, one favoring the law of Moses as applicable to the modern world, the other favoring a more vague and general standard of social and political philosophy.

Which direction should we turn? That depends on how we understand the Scriptures primarily. But we may also ask the question, what is the essence of Calvinism? If Calvinism is what Warfield says it is, believing in God “without reserve,” “determined that God shall be God” to one “in all his thinking, feeling, willing—in the entire compass of his life-activities, intellectual, moral, spiritual, throughout all his individual, social, religious relations,” then it would seem that we are led to confess also that “Calvinism is nothing but Biblicism.”<sup>26</sup> For only in the Bible can we learn God’s will for “the entire compass” of life. The question is which of these two tendencies fulfills the demands of *Sola Scriptura*.

In this paper we seek to understand the position of Calvin. But Calvin’s position is complex on anyone’s reading and cannot be understood from the *Institutes* alone, or even from the *Institutes* plus commentaries. Puritan scholar Perry Miller’s opinion, for example, that Calvin’s theology was significantly different from that of the later

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25. Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Major Response” in *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, ed. by Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989), 234.

26. John Clover Monsma, *What Calvinism Has Done for America*, p. 141.

Calvinists was based in part on comparing Calvin's *Institutes* with Puritan sermons. Everett Emerson, objecting to Miller's approach, argues that a comparison of Calvin's sermons with the sermons of the Puritans demonstrates that Calvin is not at all very different from his heirs. On the issue of applying God's law to the modern world also, it seems that Calvin's immediate heirs were close to Calvin's position, but his more recent descendents have misunderstood his fundamental position and actually moved away not only from Calvin himself, but from the genius of Calvinism as a theological system. From Calvin's Biblicism some of his would-be-heirs have shifted to natural law, or what would seem to be virtually equivalent—a vague affirmation of Biblical authority that cannot be tied down to details.<sup>27</sup> This is, I believe, a fundamental distortion of Calvinistic theology, one that cripples Calvinistic attempts to speak to the social and political problems of modern man.

To argue this point we must consider the issue of natural law in Calvin's judicial thinking, Calvin's view of the covenant, and his approach to the law of Moses, in particular the question of the judicial law of Moses. Since the material in the *Institutes* is well known, we will concentrate on Calvin's *Harmony of the Law of Moses* and his sermons on Deuteronomy to elucidate the general principles and truths he states in the *Institutes*.

### Calvin on Natural Law

Defining Calvin's view of Old Testament law and modern society is paradoxically difficult. Who would expect that a man who was perhaps the most brilliant law student of the sixteenth century, studying under two of the most brilliant jurists of the age, Pierre de l'Estoile at the University of Orléans and Andrea Alciati at the University of Bourges,

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27. See Gordon J. Spykman, "The Principled Pluralist Position" in *God and Politics*, pp. 78-99 and Greg L. Bahnsen's critique of Schrottenboer's pluralism in the same volume, pp. 234-246.

would not have a consistently expressed view of the Old Testament law, especially since Calvin is not only famous for the comprehensive logic of his theology but also for perspicacity of thought and expression?<sup>28</sup>

The paradox is further complicated by the facts that Calvin's position in Geneva forced him to consider issues of law and society in concrete real life situations, that Calvin's close friend Bucer, whose influence on Calvin was very important, expressed his opinions on subject rather clearly, that Calvin addressed the subject of Old Testament law and the modern world directly, having been forced to consider the meaning of the Old Testament law for modern society in his controversies with the Anabaptists, that Calvin frequently dealt with the issue of Church and State, both theologically and practically, and, finally, that he wrote letters to civil magistrates, including even Kings, to offer Christian advice on civil issues. If anyone in church history would speak lucidly on the law, we would expect that it should be Calvin.

But when we actually turn to Calvin's writings we are confronted with material which, according to Gary North, is contradictory. On the one hand, Calvin, in North's words, "declared a view of civil law that was clearly Scholastic" in his *Institutes*.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, he seems to be merely regurgitating the medieval approach he learned at law school under l'Estoile, whom he preferred to Alciati. On the other hand, North says, Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy clearly apply the law to the modern world with no apology.<sup>30</sup> This has resulted in two types of Calvinism in America today, those who follow Calvin's *Institutes* and those who follow his sermons on Deuteronomy.

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28. On Calvin's education as a lawyer and its meaning for his theology, see especially: W. Stanford Reid, "John Calvin, Lawyer and Legal Reformer," in W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III, (eds.), *Through God's Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985)

29. *Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 52.

30. *Westminster's Confession*, p. 52

However, many Calvin scholars would deny that Calvin is contradictory. Westminster Seminary's W. Robert Godfrey, for example, asserts that Calvin's "approach to interpreting the law of Moses is the same in the *Commentaries* as in the *Institutes*."<sup>31</sup> Though Godfrey does not deal with Calvin's sermons on Deuteronomy, his summary of Calvin's comments on the law seems to support his contention that Calvin is consistent, but he does not really tell us what position Calvin consistently holds. In some places Godfrey seems to endorse natural law. In others he seems to call for a strict "Biblicism."<sup>32</sup> On either Godfrey's or North's interpretation, however, Calvin's understanding of the judicial implications of the Mosaic law is complex.

Perhaps the most important statement in all of Calvin's writings for the anti-theonomic Calvinist is the following:

I would have preferred to pass over this matter in utter silence if I were not aware that here many dangerously go astray. For there are some who deny that a commonwealth is duly framed which neglects the political system of Moses, and is rule by the common laws of nations. Let other men consider now perilous and seditious this notion is; it will be enough for me to have proved it false and foolish.<sup>33</sup>

Calvin goes on to say:

Equity, because it is natural, cannot but be the same

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31. W. Robert Godfrey, "Calvin and Theonomy," in William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (eds.), *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 304.

32. Godfrey, "Calvin and Theonomy," pp. 301, 307, 308, 310.

33. *Institutes*, IV: XX: 14. In this same context as the above, Calvin also says, "[N]othing truer could be said than that the law is a silent magistrate; the magistrate a living law." It should not be forgotten that Calvin's view of the magistrate is clearly "theocratic."

for all, and therefore, this same purpose ought to apply to all laws, whatever their object. . . .

It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men. Consequently, the entire scheme of this equity of which we are now speaking has been prescribed in it. Hence, this equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws.

Whatever laws shall be framed to that rule, directed to that goal, bound by that limit, there is no reason why we should disapprove of them, howsoever they may differ from the Jewish law, or among themselves. . . .

There are ages that demand increasingly harsh penalties. If any disturbance occurs in a commonwealth, the evils that usually arise from it must be corrected by new ordinances. In time of war, in the clatter of arms, all humanness would disappear unless some uncommon fear of punishment were introduced. In drought, in pestilence, unless greater severity is used, everything will go to ruin. There are nations inclined to a particular vice, unless it be most sharply repressed. How malicious and hateful toward public welfare would a man be who is offended by such diversity, which is perfectly adapted to maintain the observance of God's law?

For the statement of some, that the law of God given through Moses is dishonored when it is abrogated and new laws preferred to it, is utterly vain. For others are not preferred to it when they are more approved, not by a simple comparison, but with regard to the condition of times, place, and nation; or

when that law is abrogated which was never enacted for us. For the Lord through the hand of Moses did not give that law to be proclaimed among all nations and to be in force everywhere; but when he had taken the Jewish nation into his safekeeping, defense, and protection, he also willed to be a lawgiver especially to it; and—as becomes a wise lawgiver—he had a special concern for it in making its laws.<sup>34</sup>

Godfrey represents those Calvinists who regard these statements as definitive: “Calvin’s strong words may have been inspired in part by the radical, violent Anabaptist theocracy at Munster (1534-1535), but he comes to his conclusion from a clear line of reasoning.”<sup>35</sup> Godfrey summarizes Calvin’s statement in these words:

The key distinction for Calvin between the moral and the ceremonial or judicial laws is that the moral law is unchangeable, whereas the ceremonial and judicial laws are changeable. Calvin summarizes the moral law as ‘an unchangeable rule of right living,’ ‘the perpetual law of love,’ and ‘justice, . . . humanity and gentleness.’ For Calvin, different nations appropriately have diverse constitutions because the nations are shaped by distinctive historical circumstances. Yet all these different constitutions rest on the equity of the moral law, which is natural and common to all nations.

Calvin sees this unchanging moral law as the foundation of all particular laws. The moral law is the equity or the common, natural basis of all civil law.<sup>36</sup>

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34. *Institutes*, IV: XX: 16.

35. Godfrey, “Calvin and Theonomy,” p. 302.

36. “Calvin and Theonomy,” p. 302.

If the knowledge of the moral law is available apart from Biblical revelation, there would be a “natural law” basis for civil legislation. In Godfrey’s opinion, “Calvin seems to be saying that the basic moral law is objectively revealed in nature so as to be available to mankind and that the human conscience is so created that it responds to that law.”<sup>37</sup> Godfrey points out that Calvin address the issue of applying the penalties of the law of Moses and clearly rejects it.<sup>38</sup> Although Godfrey does not clearly advocate an extra-biblical source of moral law as a standard for civil legislation, his reasoning seems to inclines in that direction. He stresses “the need to examine the specifics of the civil laws of Moses in the light of the underlying moral law to find the contemporary application of those laws.” But the moral law in Godfrey’s thinking is “objectively revealed in nature so as to be available to mankind.” He also writes, “Calvin uses the law of nature to criticize the law of Moses and declare it morally inferior.”<sup>39</sup>

Other Calvin scholars, however, deny that Calvin intends to assign any such place to natural law. Wilhelm Niesel, for example, says:

The law of nature has only one purpose: namely to make man inexcusable before God. Since it becomes manifest in the dictates of conscience, the latter too has no other object but that of depriving man of the pretext of ignorance and making clear his responsibility before the judgment of God. All this, however, does not imply that in this way man can attain a real knowledge of the divine will. ‘As man is enclosed by the darkness of error, the natural law gives him scarce an inkling of the kind of service which is pleasing to God.’ The ability to distinguish between

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37. “Calvin and Theonomy,” p. 303.

20. “Calvin and Theonomy,” pp. 303-4.

39. “Calvin and Theonomy,” p. 308; Godfrey recognizes too that Calvin “had no interest in trying to develop an abstract natural ethics apart from scriptural revelation.” *Ibid.*, p. 310.



good and evil have ceased to be healthy and intact in the mind of fallen man.<sup>40</sup>

But even with regard to the second table we cannot rightly teach the truth.<sup>41</sup>

It [natural law] does not provide the starting point for a universal ethic which could develop into a Christian one.

In order to reveal His will to us and really to set us on the right way, God has given to us the written law. This does not speak otherwise than the natural law; but it addresses us so decisively that we must hear it when it pleases God to open our hearts to its authority by the power of the Holy Spirit. . . . The emphasis on the natural law does not injure the law of God which is drawn up in Holy Scripture: on the contrary, it suggests to us the necessity of the divine law of the covenant which has its basis in Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Ronald S. Wallace too denies that Calvin regards the law of nature as a second source of revelation apart from the Bible:

Therefore Calvin himself, as we shall see, does not hesitate to appeal to his hearers and readers to live according to the order of nature and the natural law, as well as according to the Gospel. *In making such an appeal to the natural order he is not turning from Jesus Christ and the Scripture to some supposedly possible second and different source of guidance and inspiration.* He is

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40. Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 102.

41. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 103.

42. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 103. Compare also, William Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 186.

rather using the natural realm to illustrate and to fill out the details of the meaning of the Law of God for the Christian man. In appealing, as he does, to men to become truly natural and human, it can never be far from his mind that only in Christ do we have it revealed what is truly natural and human, and only since He has died and risen again does nature and humanity have real significance. For the Christian, then, the law of nature is not to be separated from the Law of God, nor is the Law of God to be separated from the law of nature. He should be inclined to follow both.<sup>43</sup>

Calvin himself challenges us to *first* “know what our Lord declareth unto us; and then let us afterward go to antiquity. And it is certain that if the religion be true and good, it is not new nor devised in our time, but our repair must be to the things that are witnessed in the Law and the Prophets. There we shall see how God hath gathered His church, how He hath governed it, and how it hath always had His truths, even from the beginning of the world.”<sup>44</sup> He clearly prefers God’s Word to men’s customs: “For nothing is more absurd than for us to fix our minds on the actions of men, and not on God’s word, in which is to be found the rule of a holy life. It is, therefore, just as if God would overthrow whatever had been received from long custom, and abolish the universal consent of the world by the authority of His doctrine.”<sup>45</sup>

Although Calvin sometimes commends the laws of non-Christian nations,<sup>46</sup> he criticizes them also, regarding Biblical law as superior.<sup>47</sup>

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43. Ronald S. Wallace *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Tyler Texas: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1952, 1982), pp. 144-45. Italics added.

44. SD, pp. 488-89.

45. HLM, vol. 3, p. 98.

46. HLM, vol. 3, 18-19; 63-64; 78; 120, 121, 129.

47. HLM, vol. 3, 15, 36, 38-39, 40, 73-75, 97-106, 108, 126, 140-43.

Calvin seems to hold the view that the law of Moses influenced the laws of the ancient world when he says, "The Roman laws accord with the rule prescribed by God, as if their authors had learnt from Moses what was decorous and agreeable to nature."<sup>48</sup> In another place he asserts this view more unambiguously, adding that the ancients would have been better off to have studied Moses more carefully: "What God formerly delivered to His people the heathen legislators afterwards borrowed. . . . But if all things be duly considered, it will be found that both Solon and the Decemvirs have made a change for the worse, wherever they have varied from the law of God."<sup>49</sup>

We are forced to recognize that Calvin's "concepts of justice, of the nature of positive law, of the ideas of a constitution, constantly hark back to biblical principles."<sup>50</sup> Although he did not seek to reestablish the Mosaic law itself, "he did believe that if one were to establish a truly Christian justice within the state, one could find in the Old Testament theocracy basic principles which should be applied, but in a way that fitted in with the particular historical situation."<sup>51</sup> Therefore, not the mind or conscience of unregenerate man, or a vague natural revelation, but the Bible itself "became the source of the architectonic principles of his whole pattern of thought, not only for theology but also for law."<sup>52</sup>

Calvin's apparently anti-theonomic position in the *Institutes* is either in contradiction with his other statements or perhaps can be reconciled into an overall harmonious system, but, in any case, it cannot be simply taken to mean that he endorsed an extra-biblical source of civil law. His close friend Bucer openly approved of applying the judicial law of Moses to contemporary issues and it is not possible that Calvin is referring to Bucer's position as "foolish," or "perilous and seditious."<sup>53</sup> We can probably do no better than to conclude with

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48. HLM, vol. 3, 99.

49. HLM, vol. 3, 140.

50. Reid, "John Calvin, Lawyer and Legal Reformer," 154.

51. *Ibid.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. On Bucer's influence on Calvin, including Calvin's thinking on the

François Wendel that

Calvin expended a great deal of skill in presenting a coherent doctrine of natural law, which was an attempt to reconcile the Pauline texts with the definitions of the Roman jurists. And he did, no doubt, partly succeed in this by distinguishing between the application of the natural law in the political life and its function in the human conscience. Yet one cannot help feeling that this element in his theology is somewhat of a foreign body, assimilable to it only with difficulty; and that its existence alongside the divine Law that is expressed in the Decalogue is hardly justifiable. So it seems, at least, to those who have received some knowledge of the revealed Law.<sup>54</sup>

### Calvin on the Covenant

Calvin's views on the covenant are sometimes distinguished from those of his heirs. It is said that Calvin was not a Calvinist and that his theology is not covenantal. No doubt, Calvin's view of the covenant is less developed than the view of the Westminster theologians, for example, expressed in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. But this does not mean that the covenant was unimportant for Calvin's theology. On the contrary, as Osterhaven explains, the difference

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law, see: François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origin and Development of His Religious Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Inc., 1963), pp. 138-144. Wendel refers specifically to Calvin's "borrowing" from Bucer "on the question of the permanent validity of the Law, and of the equality of the two Testaments as expressions of the Divine Will." p. 142.

54. François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origin and Development of His Religious Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Inc., 1963), p. 208.

between Calvin and the Calvinists has been exaggerated:

“Elsewhere, as in the sermons on Deuteronomy, one meets the concept [of the covenant] often, and there are numerous places where the discussion centers around the meaning of the covenant for the people of God today. In the third book of the *Institutes*, where the author writes about the Christian life, the covenant is only occasionally mentioned, but the relationship which it denotes is always at hand. Such an instance is the discussion on prayer with its emphasis on the divine promises and the fatherhood of God. Thus explicit allusion to the covenant is easy and natural so that the reader is unaware of the introduction of a new concept when that occurs.

It is incorrect to affirm without qualification then that Calvin was not a covenant theologian, or to set him over against later Reformed theologians on the Continent or in New England as though their theologies of the covenant were utterly different. . . . Emerson writes that Calvin was not a ‘covenant theologian,’ as that term is usually understood, ‘but [that] many of the implications of covenant theology—that man can know beforehand the terms of salvation, that conversion is a process in which man’s faculties are gradually transformed—all these are present in Calvin’s teaching.’ . . . He concludes that there is a ‘near-identity of the approach of Calvin and that of the covenant theologians. . . . Calvin was not so different from the covenant theologians as has been argued.’”<sup>55</sup>

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55. M. Eugene Osterhaven, “Calvin on the Covenant,” in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Readings in Calvin’s Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker: 1984), 90-91.

In particular the concept of the covenant provides Calvin with his doctrine of the unity of the Scripture,<sup>56</sup> and was a foundational emphasis in his theology<sup>57</sup> affecting systematic as well as practical issues. Calvin pointed out that differences between the Old and New Testaments “do not erase the fundamental unity of the Scripture, and he supported this with his doctrine of the covenant. He argued that the covenant with the patriarchs ‘is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in mode of dispensation.’”<sup>58</sup> This means that the covenant God made with Israel is basically the same as the new covenant. In Calvin’s words:

Now as to the *new* covenant, it is not so called, because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself. He then who once made a covenant with his chosen people, had not changed his purpose, as though he had forgotten his faithfulness. It then follows, that the first covenant was inviolable; besides, he had already made his covenant with Abraham, and the Law was a confirmation of that covenant. As then the Law depended on that covenant which God made with his servant Abraham, it follows that God could never have made a new, that is, a contrary or a different covenant. For whence do we derive our hope of salvation, except from that blessed seed

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56. “Calvin based the unity of Scripture on the doctrine of the covenant.” William Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 315.

57. “The unity of the covenant that God established with mankind in Abraham and confirmed in Christ is a major emphasis in Calvin’s teaching.” Osterhaven, “Calvin on the Covenant,” p. 98.

58. William Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 310.

promised to Abraham? Further, why are we called the children of Abraham, except on account of the common bond of faith? Why are the faithful said to be gathered into the bosom of Abraham? Why does Christ say, that some will come from the east and the west, and sit down in the kingdom of heaven with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? (Luke 16:22; Matt. 7:11) These things no doubt sufficiently shew that God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses. . . . Let us now see why he promises to the people a *new* covenant. It being new, no doubt refers to what they call the form; and the form, or manner, regards not words only, but first Christ, then the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the whole external way of teaching. But the substance remains the same. By substance I understand the doctrine; for God in the Gospel brings forward nothing but what the Law contains.<sup>59</sup>

What this means for Calvin's view of the religion of the Old Testament is well expressed by Balke:

According to Calvin, the Old Testament did not proclaim a religion that was a step lower than that of the New Testament. It proclaimed Christ from beginning to end. . . . Calvin tied this pneumatic-Christocentric unity to the law. The prophets and the apostles were interpreters of the law: 'We are following Christ, [the law's] best interpreter.' Moreover, this is not legalism, because 'Indeed, every doctrine of the law, every command, every promise,

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59. Calvin is commenting on Jeremiah 31:31-32, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 4, p. 126-27.

always points to Christ.’ Calvin insisted that there was no conflict between law and gospel. Both have the same teaching, which is centered in Christ. In this *doctrina Christi* Old and New Testaments form one unit. . . . [T]he covenant is the same in both Testaments. It is possible to speak of a New Testament and a new covenant, but it must always be remembered that Christ renewed and confirmed the very same covenant that was broken by Israel. He extended it to all nations—but Christ did not make a new covenant.<sup>60</sup>

In short, Calvin taught one covenant, one covenantal religion of the people of God, one unified covenantal Holy Scripture. Thus, no consideration of Calvin’s view of the law of Moses is adequate which ignores his understanding of that covenantal unity of Scripture. As Osterhaven explains, “[T]he entire Old Testament was meaningful to Calvin in an unusual manner. Since Christ was the foundation of the covenant and both Testaments found their meaning in Him, that which was said by God to Israel was said to Calvin and us as well. The law was written *to us*, he is fond of saying in his explication of the Old Testament in commentaries and sermons.”<sup>61</sup>

In his first sermon on Deuteronomy Calvin emphasized that very point:

True it is that the things which are contained here were spoken to the people of Israel, and might have profited them in their time; but yet do they also belong unto us at this day, and they be as a common treasure whereof God will have us to be partakers.

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60. William Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 310-311.

61. Osterhaven, “Calvin on the Covenant,” 103.



For as we shall see hereafter, the Law was not only given as a rule whereby to live well; but also grounded upon the covenant which God had made with Abraham and his offspring. And by virtue of that covenant, we are become heirs of the heavenly kingdom, as sheweth Saint Paul. To seek our salvation, we must resort to the promise that was made to our father Abraham; and to be of the household of God's Church and members of our Lord Jesus Christ, we must be of Abraham's spiritual lineage. Hereby then we see, that this doctrine not only served till the coming of the Son of God; but also serveth still to our behoof, and shall do still to the world's end. For it is a building that is founded upon the everlasting covenant, from whence as from the true fountain thereof, our salvation springeth as I said before.

Wherefore let us mark, that *whensoever God shall henceforth speak to the Jews, the same is spoken also unto us; and we must receive it in such wise, as we must understand that God hath shed forth his grace through the whole world by the coming of His only Son, and builded up the heavenly Jerusalem, to the end that we should all be linked together in one holy brotherhood, to call upon Him as our Father all with one mouth. Since it is so then, let us understand that it is good reason that we should give over our selves unto him, and that He should hold us in awe, and enjoy us, and that like as he hath vouchsafed to give himself unto us, so we on our side should be wholly His, to yield him the duty which children owe to their father; and that when we be negligent and slow therein, we should at least wise be moved with the*

*exhortations that are contained in this book; and that seeing God calleth upon us so earnestly, we should not stop our ears against Him but every man awake, and one of us rebuke another. Yea and that if we were wise, we should not tarry til God quickened us up so sharply, but rather prevent Him, howbeit that we ought to be moved to be ashamed of our lewdness and to return again unto God, at leastwise when He falleth to correcting of us by thundering out His threatenings against us, and by upbraiding of us with our sins. Thus ye see what we have to mark in general upon this book.*<sup>62</sup>

Viewing the law as a continuation of the covenant with Abraham meant viewing it as part of God's grace to His people: "All this is true also of the Mosaic law itself. The latter belongs integrally to the

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62. SD, p. 4, italics added. See also pp. 133, 180-81, 797, etc. ; Calvin expresses this view in too many places to refer to them all: "Moreover it is true, that in substance God maketh no other covenant with us nowadays, than He made in old time with the Jews: but yet He speaketh much more familiarly unto us; He sheweth Himself to be our God and our Father, and hath made us a far greater assurance thereof in our Lord Jesus Christ, than the Jews could have under the shadows and figures of the law. Indeed the ancient fathers were saved by no other means than by that which we have, to wit, that they were the people of God; for this betokeneth as much as that God held them for His children: and they had their salvation grounded in Christ Jesus, as we have: but that was after an obscure manner, so as they beheld the thing afar off which was presented unto them. As for us, seeing God is come so near unto us in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we be united unto Him and have the truth and substance of the ancient figures: we be so much more the sure that God maketh us to say that we are His people, and that we make Him to say that He is our God. And how doth He make us to say it? Truly altogether of His own good will, without being tied or bound unto us. For God having adopted us for His children, certifieth us that the inheritance of heaven is made ready for us, and behold He giveth His own Son unto us for a pledge of His love, and whatever our Lord Jesus Christ hath is all ours, with all the fulness of riches which we read was given unto Him."

covenant which God concluded with His servant Abraham. . . . Moses is not the founder of a so-called religion of law but the prophet of the covenant God, witnessing to God's mercy and loyalty."<sup>63</sup>

Calvin's understanding of God's covenant grace and blessing upon His people is also essential to his view of history. In the *Institutes* Calvin, responding to Anabaptists who viewed the religion of the Old Testament as unspiritual, stressed the fact that the patriarchs suffered many trials for their faith.<sup>64</sup> They did not merely live for the blessings of this life. When Calvin teaches the book Deuteronomy to his congregation, however, he repeatedly draws attention to the fact that obedience to God's covenant brings the blessings of this life on both the individual and the whole church of God.<sup>65</sup> Calvin exhorts his congregation without ceasing, "Wherefore let us show this zeal, if we will have our Lord to bless and prosper us."<sup>66</sup> His sermons on Deuteronomy 27 and 28 make it abundantly clear that he understood God's sovereign rule over the nations in history as covenantal rule. The sanctions of the covenant are Calvin's basis for understanding the historical process.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, although Calvin himself never makes a systematic statement of the eschatological implications of his view of the covenant, it has been pointed out that, "Calvin seems to enjoy reflecting on the divine intention to make Abraham and his posterity a blessing to all the families of the earth so that there would be a spread of the gospel

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63. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 94.

64. Cf. *Institutes*, II: VIII, IX, X. See Gary North, *Westminster's Confession*, pp. 62-64.

65. Gary North deals with this subject at length in the "Publisher's Preface" to John Calvin, *The Covenant Enforced: Sermons on Deuteronomy 27 and 28* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), pp. ix-xxv. He also discusses Calvin's view of covenantal sanctions in *Westminster's Confession*, pp. 62-70.

66. SD, 760.

67. In contrast the many modern Calvinists! See, Calvin, *The Covenant Enforced*.

everywhere, for he alludes to it often.”<sup>68</sup> Nowhere does Calvin refer to God’s blessing upon the whole world more than in his prayers. In more than half of Calvin’s 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, the prayer ends with the formula, “That it may please him to grant this grace, not only unto us, but also to all people and nations of the earth.”<sup>69</sup> When we remember the place that Calvin assigned to prayer in the Christian life and the fact that his view of prayer was decidedly covenantal, we can not regard Calvin’s prayers as insignificant for understanding his outlooks on history and theology:

. . . O grant, that we, being mindful of these benefits, may ever submit ourselves to thee, and desire only to raise our voice for this end, that the whole world may submit itself to thee, and that those who seem now to rage against thee may at length be brought, as well as we, to render thee, obedience, so that thy Son Christ may be the Lord of all, to the end that thou alone mayest be exalted, and that we may be made subject to thee, and be at length raised up above, and become partakers of that glory which has been obtained for us by Christ our Lord.<sup>70</sup>

And should the number of those who are professed members of thy Church diminish, yet may some seed always remain, until abundant produce shall flow forth from it, and such fruitfulness arise as shall cause thy name to be glorified throughout the whole world, in Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>71</sup>

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68. Osterhaven, “Calvin on the Covenant,” 97.

69. It occurs 66 times in the first 100 prayers. SD, pp. 12, 24, 30, 36, 48, 54, 66, 72, 84, 90, 103, 109, 121, 127, 145, 159, 164, 176, 182, 193, 205, 212, 224, 229, 241, 247, 253, 265, 271, 277, 390, 296, 309, 315, 320, 333, 339, 352, 359, 371, 379, 392, 406, 419, 425, 438, 445, 451, 463, 470, 475, 481, 494, 506, 513, 526, 533, 539, 552, 558, 572, 578, 584, 596, 602, 620.

70. *Commentary on Hosea*, pp. 460-61.

In summary, Calvin's view of the covenant argues for the continuing validity of the law of Moses, for in essence the new covenant does not differ from the Mosaic. Furthermore, God is controlling history today just as He did in the days of Moses—through His covenant. When His people obey the covenant from their hearts, they are blessed and they prosper, both in this world and in the next. When they break His law, He disciplines them to bring them back to the way of obedience. In the end God will bring about the salvation of the world according to the covenant grace He promised to Abraham: "In thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." This view of the covenant is the basis for the Reformed approach to theology seen clearly, for example, in the doctrine of Baptism. In fact it affects virtually every area of doctrine. Calvin's world-view is a covenantal world-view that calls for the application of all of God's Word to all of life.

### Calvin on the Judicial Law of Moses

When we come to consider the application of the judicial law of Moses, we have to take into account the complexity of the theological issues. Calvin's position on natural law, discussed above, is only one aspect of the problem of understanding his approach to the law of Moses. The basically covenantal character of his theology is another: "Calvin's understanding of divine law is based on the recognition that the law of God is covenantal law. . . . It is not simply a collection of commands about how to live well, but is included in the covenant of grace which God founded. . . . The law of God is embedded in this grace and loyalty which He shows towards His people, the church; God in entering into a covenant with His people makes an absolute claim upon them. The divine demand is the meaning of the law."<sup>72</sup>

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71. *Commentary on Daniel*, p. 332.

72. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 92-93.

Calvin's basic position is that the judicial laws, like the ceremonial law, are no longer directly applicable in the way that they would have been in the days of Moses. But just as we can learn of Christ from the ceremonial law and gain wisdom for our Christian life from its teaching, so too the judicial prescriptions of Moses continue to have important meaning for Christians today. Calvin could not regard the law of Moses as unimportant for the Christian if, for no other reason, simply because it too is part of God's Word to us. "Calvin took great pains to preserve the unity of Scripture: 'So let us learn to preserve this connection of Law and Gospel inviolable.' He charged that 'the apathy or malice of the priests had dimmed the pure light of doctrine to such a degree, that no longer was there any great or lively respect for the Law.'<sup>73</sup>

Niesel expressed the relationship in these words:

What is true of the ceremonies of the Old Testament cult applies even more to the ordinances of the Mosaic law, which were meant to regulate the political life of the Jewish people. Even though such ordinances are connected with the divine law of love, they are to be distinguished from it. In that form they were given only to the people of Israel. Other nations are not involved in the political ordinance of the Old Testament law. But their emancipation means also subjection to the command of love, to the essential content of the divine law.

From all this it should have become clear that Calvin does not teach in the strict sense an abolition of the law. In this regard he is at one with the New Testament witness. Because he interprets the law exclusively in the light of Christ there can be no question of its annulment. Jesus Christ is the heart of the law. . . .

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73. Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, 315.

This Old Testament cultus proclaimed to the people of Israel the reality of the Christ. That is its meaning and this meaning is still reflected in the Old Testament account of it. The same applies to the political aspect of the Mosaic law. Its abolition does not mean its rejection. The foundation of those rules which were given to the people of Israel for the purpose of regulating its political life is abiding.<sup>74</sup>

Calvin himself never tires of stressing the abiding significance of the law for the present day, it is a theme of his Deuteronomy sermons:

Therefore it is appropriate for you to observe his law, since it has been established to be permanent, to endure age after age, and to be preached until the end of the world.

That is Moses' true and natural sense. And we can draw a favorable lesson from it: namely, that although we were not present at the beginning when the gospel was proclaimed and have not seen what was recounted to us from the law, nevertheless the work of God has not lost its authority. Why? It is true that when God chose Moses that that was a special favor which he bestowed on the people who were living then. Nevertheless, the authority of our law must not be deprecated, for it contains the truth of God which abides forever, which never varies, and which does not perish in the manner of men. It is said that men are like a flower, or like grass that is immediately withered and dry, but the truth of God is always permanent.

Now this truth which is neither changing nor

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74. Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 100-101.

variable is contained in the law. It is true that the law with regard to its ceremonies has been abolished, but with regard to its substance and doctrine which it contains, it always has virtue; it never decays. Thus let us note that although we did not live in the time of Moses, that does not mean that we can scorn the remonstrances which he made and which are contained in the law. Why? Because he was speaking to us; he was not simply speaking to that multitude which was assembled on the mountain of Horeb. In general, he was speaking to the whole world.<sup>75</sup>

It is not surprising, then, that for those who opposed Calvin's theology his theocratic<sup>76</sup> orientation was all too apparent:

The Reformed Christians were the practical party in the Reformation movement; the New Testament was not sufficient for their ecclesiastical-political institutions; they were compelled to go back to its Old Testament background and hence needed a unified authoritative Bible. The evangelical national state church and the Christian state as ideally pictured by Reformed Christians both rest upon the basis of Old Testament theocracy.<sup>77</sup>

Calvin's theology was certainly a theology of the rule of God. Nor did Calvin confine the rule of God to some small part of man's life. Politics for Calvin was a holy calling and a godly Christian magistrate would be expected to gain wisdom for life from the whole law of

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75. STC, pp. 48-9.

76. Theocracy means the rule of God and is to be distinguished from the idea of ecclesiocracy, rule by the church, something Calvin certainly never believed in.

77. Paul Wernle quoted in Osterhaven, "Calvin on the Covenant," p. 100.



Moses, even though he would not seek to apply its statutes and penalties in every case.

There is one principle of interpreting the law that Calvin frequently employs that has led some to misunderstand his view of the law. Calvin derived the principle from the New Testament, not from natural law.<sup>78</sup> And he applied the principle where he thought the New Testament gives us a different standard than the law of Moses, in areas like marriage and slavery. The source of his principle is Jesus teaching about divorce. When Jesus debated the Pharisees, He said that Moses permitted divorce because of the “hardness of your hearts” (Mat. 19:8). Calvin takes this to mean that the Jews were given a law of divorce because they were especially hardhearted, rather than seeing it as a reference to the fact that divorce came into the world because of sin—a reference to the hardheartedness of all men.

Calvin, thus, in many places, particularly laws relating to marriage, says that the law is accommodated to the low level of ancient Israel’s morality. The Jews “hardness of heart” is for Calvin a principle of interpretation.

Thus far God has proclaimed Himself the avenger of iniquities, and, citing thieves before His tribunal, has threatened them with eternal death. Now follow the civil laws, the principle of which is not so exact and perfect; since in their enactment God has relaxed His just severity in consideration of the people’s hardness of heart.<sup>79</sup>

. . . God did not always punish offences in such sort as by good right he might, I mean of punishing according to the law which he gave for that ordering of the people of Israel. For he bear with many things because of the harness of that people, as our Lord

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78. Contrary to Godfrey, “Calvin and Theonomy,” p. 308.

79. HLM, vol. 3, p. 140.

Jesus sheweth them when he speaketh of divorcements which were done against all reason and indifference. . . . Ye see then that the law of God is to judge us. As for this it served but for an earthly policy. And God (as I have said) respected not such perfection as is required in the faithful; but rather bare with the hardness of the people, which was so sturdy and so hard to be ruled.<sup>80</sup>

It should be noted, however, that this principle argues that the statutes and punishments of the law are too low for Christians today. We need a higher standard than ancient Israel. It would have never occurred to Calvin that the Old Testament law was overly strict in the sense that many today seem to think. The equity of the law reaches higher than Moses civil ordinances.

For the civil Laws (as I have told you already) serve but to deal with us according to our power and ability; but the righteousness which God commandeth us in his spiritual Law is a perfection whereunto we are tied and bound. And although we be not able to perform it; yet must we hold on still towards it, by setting our minds thereupon, and by straining all our powers to the uttermost. And when we find anything amiss, we must be sorry for it and condemn ourselves. For although men require nothing at our hands; yet shall we be ever guilty before God. Thus ye see what we have to remember to the intent we be not so blinded as to bear ourselves in hand, that because we escaped the hands of men, therefore we be also acquitted and discharged before God. Let that serve for one point.

And thereupon let us learn further, that we must

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80. SD, p. 792.

not imagine as a number of fanatical persons do, that all the things are allowed of God, which were not punished in the commonweal of the Jews. For our Lord executed a double office among that people. He gave them an earthly order of government, after the manner of the Laws which we have; and also he delivered them a rule whereafter he will have us to behave ourselves as his children. For if we intend to have a sure record of God's will, we must resort to the ten commandments, wherein is comprehended the sum of all holiness and righteousness. He that frameth his life according to the ten commandments may well say that he hath the perfect righteousness. But forasmuch as we come short of it, and can by no means come near it so long as we be clothed with our flesh; let us acknowledge ourselves to be wretched sinners, and resort for refuge to the mercy of our God . . .<sup>81</sup>

Turning to Calvin's application of the law to various issues, we see what it means for him to apply the "equity" of the law to the modern situation and understand better just how broad his view of equity is. In his sermons Calvin addresses both the most important legal issues, such as the authority of the magistrates, and the lesser commands of the law, such as those concerning apparel. Any and every subject that Moses touches or alludes to, from war to diet, are all covered in Calvin's sermons.

Consider Calvin's comments from his sermons and commentaries on the law on a few selected topics. Calvin's comments on the judicial implications of the first command serve as a good introduction:

The Commandment itself will always remain in

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81. SD, p. 753.

force, even to the end of the world; and is given not only to the Jews, but likewise to us also. But God formerly made use of the ceremonies as temporary aids, of which, although the use has ceased, the utility remains; because from them it more clearly appears how God is to be duly served; and the spirit of religion shines forth in them. Therefore the whole substance is contained in the precept, but in the external exercise, as it were, the form to which God bound none but His ancient people. Now follow The Political Supplements, whereby God commands the punishments to be inflicted, if His religion shall have been violated. For political laws are not only enacted with reference to earthly affairs, in order that men should maintain mutual equity with each other, and should follow and observe what is right, but that they should exercise themselves in the veneration of God. For Plato also begins from hence, when he lays down the legitimate constitution of a republic, and calls the fear of God the preface of all laws; nor has any profane author ever existed who has not confessed that this is the principal part of a well-constituted state, that all with one consent should reverence and worship God. In this respect, indeed, the wisdom of men was at fault, that they deemed that any religion which they might prefer was to be sanctioned by laws and by punishments; yet the principle was a just one, that the whole system of law is perverted if the cultivation of piety is ignored by it. . . . For as much as the several nations, cities, and kingdoms foolishly invent their own gods, *He propounds His own Law, from the regulation of which it is sinful to decline.*<sup>82</sup>

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82. HLM, vol. 2, p. 73. Italics added.

In his sermon on Deuteronomy 12:2-3, Calvin shows how the laws of idolatry still apply, though not literally:

The Papists in these days reply that the commandment was given to the Jews, because they were given to superstition. Verily as who should say that we were better disposed nowadays than they were. True it is that God giveth not this commandment to us as touching the ceremony of burning all things wherewith idols have been served; but yet for all that, His will is that we should make a clean riddance of all things that may turn us from the pure religion. If it were necessary that all things should be done away wherewith idols have been worshipped; this temple should not now stand to have the name of God preached in it. It hath been a brothel house of Satan's, but now must we apply it to good use, by taking away the trumperie that hath reigned in it, which was quite contrary to God's word. But howsoever the world go, if we look well upon our infirmity, we shall find that this lesson belongeth to us at this day, namely that all remembrance of idols is to be utterly rased out.<sup>83</sup>

Again commenting on the abiding significance of laws against idolatry, this time from Deuteronomy 7:5-8, Calvin says:

And now must we apply them to our own benefit. For although some would restrain this to the Jews, as though it belonged not to us in these days; yet it was not God's intent to speak for any one time only. . . .

Now then, out of this text we must draw a rule, which is that according as God giveth ability, we must

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83. SD, p. 491.

endeavor to have all idolatry and all the tokens thereof utterly abolished both publicly and privately. As how? When a Country is a liberty, and our Lord hath planted his word there, such as bear sway and have authority, must find the means that all such things as have corrupted the true religion may be abolished and brought to nought. If they do it not, it is a negligence which God condemneth.<sup>84</sup>

In his comments on theft, Calvin applies the interpretive principle that when the law forbids a sin, it calls for us not merely to restrain our evil, but to do what is right:

For as much as we restrain the commandment of the law too much whereby theft is forbidden; therefore the warning is given us here is very needful. It seemeth to us that if we have not taken away another man's goods or substance, we be clear before God, and can not be accused of theft. But God hath a further respect, to wit, that every man should work his brother's welfare. For we be bound thereto, and he that maketh none account thereof is condemned as a thief before God, though he can not be blamed before men. If I should abstain from doing any man harm, and keep my hands undefiled from robbery, and extortion; yet am I not discharged for all this. For if I have seen my brother's good perish, and suffered it to go to destruction through my negligence: God condemneth me for it."

Therefore let us mark well that the law in forbidding theft hath also bound us all to procure the welfare and profit one of another. And indeed it is a

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84. SD, 310, 311.

rule to be observed of us in all cases, that God in forbidding any evil, doth therewith command us to do the good that is contrary thereto.<sup>85</sup>

Calvin complains in more than one place of Geneva's laxity in punishing adultery. He clearly prefers the law of Moses here, though it contradicts the "law of nations" in his own day and goes against the grain of the whole contemporary European culture.

[T]he Gentiles, even before the Law, . . . punish[ed] adultery with severity, as clearly appears from the history of Judah and Tamar. (Gen. 37:14) Nay, by the universal law of the Gentiles, the punishment of death was always awarded to adultery; wherefore it is all the baser and more shameful in Christians not to imitate at least the heathen. Adultery is punished no less severely by the Julian law than by that of God; while those who boast themselves of the Christian name are so tender and remiss, that they visit this execrable offence with a very light reproof.<sup>86</sup>

He hath matched himself in whoredom like a beast; and is not this an intolerable offence, and such a one as ought to be punished to the full? If we open not our eyes to behold it, yet the Law of Moses must needs condemn us. But besides this, the Paynims (who have observed a better order than we, and have had laws to punish whoremongers and to cause wedlock to be kept undefiled) even they shall rise up against us in the latter day, and shall prove that we offended not of ignorance, or for lack of warning, but of wilful malice, because we would foster such

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85. SD, p. 767.

86. HLM, vol. 3, p. 78.

wickedness.

True it is indeed that this wicked custom is come from great antiquity, as *the Papists will say that we are not under the Law but under grace*, and therefore we must not punish whoredom. But it is a mocking of God when we take the Law of grace for a Lawless liberty to commit all wickedness.<sup>87</sup>

When he deals with incest, Calvin concedes that the Mosaic penalty does not necessarily have to be applied, but at the same time he also seems to prefer it. It is also clear that he was not impressed with the “law of the nations” whenever it contradicted God’s word.

But now hath God provided a law for it, and not without great cause. For in those countries there was more corruption touching incests than hath ever been in all other countries besides. I say, that neither in Greece nor in Italy men ever used such lawless and villainous liberty in this kind of wickedness, as they of Asia and of all the East country did. For there it was counted nothing for the brother to couple with the sister. It was therefore needful that God in this case should reign in his people with a shorter bridle. And hereby we may see that custom shall not serve us for an example. If a thing displeases God, although it be used among men, it serveth not to lessen the fault. For God will always remain judge. And why? God’s will is that we should do him this honor to hold our selves unto his simple will, although men draw clean backward. Let us therefore learn to yield ourselves unto the Law of God touching this point. And if a

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87. SD, 790. Italics added. Calvin goes on here to explain the significance of John 8 for civil law also. His conclusion is that Jesus is not to be our example for civil law in John 8.



man reply that we are not to be held thrall to that order of Moses, I grant it. But yet ought we at leastwise to admit that warnings which God giveth us and to use his counsel. Although we be freed from this bondage of the civil Law of Moses, yet will he have us to bear always in mind this ground, to wit, that we bethink us for what cause God hath forbidden this thing. For it is because the thing is intolerable. We must therefore frame ourselves unto that thing which we know to be acceptable to God, and withhold us from that which he forbiddeth.<sup>88</sup>

Calvin is concerned too with laws protecting and aiding the poor and refers to the subject frequently:

Finally, Moses admonishes us that this tyranny on the part of the rich shall not be unpunished, if they do not supply their workmen with the means of subsistence, even although no account shall be rendered of it before the tribunals of men. Hence we infer that this law is not political, but altogether spiritual, and binding on our consciences before the judgment seat of God; for although the poor man may not sue us at law, Moses teaches us that it is sufficient for him to appeal to the faithfulness of God.<sup>89</sup>

He applies judicial laws to protect the poor of his own day in terms of the equity of the law:

A precept is added as to lending without interest, which, although it is a political law, still depends on the

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88. SD, p. 795.

89. HLM, vol. 3, p. 114.

rule of charity . . . It is plain that this was a part of the Jewish polity, because it was lawful to lend at interest to the Gentiles, which distinction the spiritual law does not admit. The judicial law, however, which God prescribed to His ancient people, is only so far abrogated as that what charity dictates should remain, i.e. that our brethren, who need our assistance, are not to be treated harshly. Moreover, since the wall of partition, which formerly separated Jew and Gentile, is now broken down, our condition is now different; and consequently we must spare all without exception, both as regards taking interest, and any other mode of extortion; and equity is to be observed even towards strangers.<sup>90</sup>

It is abundantly clear that the ancient people were prohibited from usury, but we must needs confess that this was a part of their political constitution. Hence it follows, that usury is not now unlawful except in so far as it contravenes equity and brotherly union.<sup>91</sup>

The subject of magistrates applying penalties for crime naturally comes up frequently in dealing with the law. Calvin's comments shed light on his statements in the *Institutes*:

But it is questioned whether the law pertains to the kingdom of Christ, which is spiritual and distinct from all earthly dominion; and there are some men, not otherwise ill-disposed, to whom it appears that our condition under the Gospel is different from that of the ancient people under the law; not only because the kingdom of Christ is not of this world, but because

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90. HLM, vol. 3, p. 127-28.

91. HLM, vol. 3, p. 132.

Christ was unwilling that the beginnings of His kingdom should be aided by the sword. But, when human judges consecrate their work to the promotion of Christ's kingdom, I deny that on that account its nature is changed. For, although it was Christ's will that His Gospel should be proclaimed by His disciples in opposition to the power of the whole world, and He exposed them armed with the Word alone like sheep amongst wolves, He did not impose on Himself an eternal law that He should never bring kings under His subjection, nor tame their violence, nor change them from being cruel persecutors into the patrons and guardians of His church. . . .

And this is admirably expressed in the words of Moses, when he reminds them that judgment must be passed according to the law of God. I have already said that this severity must not be extended to particular errors, but where impiety breaks forth even into rebellion. When it is added, "to thrust thee out of the way, which the Lord thy God commanded thee," we gather from it that none are to be given over to punishment, but those who shall have been convicted by the plain word of God, lest men should judge them arbitrarily. Whence it also appears that zeal will err in hastily drawing the sword, unless a lawful examination shall have been previously instituted.<sup>92</sup>

On what may seem to be the harsh sentence of death in Deuteronomy 22:13-14, Calvin said:

For by the punishments which are set down here, we may gather how greivous and intolerable a

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92. HLM, vol. 2, p. 77, 78.

wickedness it is. And why? Because we know that God exceedeth not measure, when he punisheth sins, but that he doeth it with discretion. Let us therefore conclude, that if the punishments be rigorous, it is because the sin also is great and excessive. . . . [Y]et we shall not err at all if we make this conclusion, namely, that if God have punished any fault of theirs, it is do declare unto us that the thing displeased him, and that it is not to be borne withal, and that we provoke his anger: and therefore that we must stoop unto him, since we see that he hath appointed certain punishments, and that it shall cost us dear if we become not the better by them.<sup>93</sup>

Detailed laws that we might not think could provide equity for modern Christians are referred to by Calvin with no thought that they would be irrelevant. With reference to laws on slavery he comments, “Although the political laws of Moses are not now in operation, still the analogy is to be preserved, lest the condition of those who have been redeemed by Christ’s blood should be worse amongst us, than that of old of His ancient people.”<sup>94</sup> And of the Sabbath year laws he writes, “[A]lthough we are not bound by this law at present, and it would not be even expedient that it should be in use, still the object to which it tended ought still to be maintained, *i.e.*, that we should not be too rigid in exacting our debts, especially if we have to do with the needy, who are bowed down by the burden of poverty.”<sup>95</sup>

The relatively “minor” law in Deuteronomy 22:8, commanding Jews to build a parapet for the roof of their houses, is applied to us also:

Now our Lord commendeth them to provide

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93. SD, p. 787.

94. HLM, vol 3, 165.

95. HLM, vol. 3, 154.

beforehand for it [danger], by making battlements about their houses. But we must first of all advise ourselves whereunto all the sayings are referred, which are set down here. Following the key which I have given already, which is that there are but ten articles whereby to rule our whole life well; we must not go seek for five legs in one sheep, as they say; but we must always hold us to the point, that God have us a perfect rule of all righteousness and just dealing, when he comprised his Law in two Tables and in ten commandments. Now whereas here is mention made of building men's houses in such sort as they bring not blood upon them; hereby we see how our Lord hath shewed us how dear the lives of all men ought to be unto us. Mark that for one point. And so have we the exposition of this commandment, Thou shalt not kill. . . .

Now then, let us look well about us, and let us so seek our own commodities, as our building may be without danger. And why? For otherwise we shall be worthy of blame. . . .

[I]f any neighbor fall into any mishap through my fault or negligence, it is an offence committed against God, and the world also knoweth such things to be punishable.<sup>96</sup>

The law that forbids men to wear women's clothing and women to wear men's (Deu. 22:5) is applied to our day as well:

Howsoever the world go, let us learn that God will have us not only to be pure and clean from all lechery, but also to prevent all inconveniences. As for example,

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96. SD, p. 776-77.

when he saith, Thou shalt not commit adultery; that commandment hath an eye to this present text. I have told you already, that all the laws which are written here, concern manners and are rules of good life, and are to be referred to the ten commandments: For God hath not added anything to those ten sentences. Therefore whereas in this text it is said that the man shall not wear the apparel of the women; doth God set down an eleventh commandment? Did God bethink himself better afterward, and add somewhat else to that which we heard of him heretofore? No, it is but only an exposition of this saying of his, Thou shalt not commit adultery. As how? For in forbidding adultery, God not only forbideth the act itself, which were punishable and worthy of reproach even before men; but also he forbiddeth in effect all unchaste behavior, so as none may appear, neither in apparel nor in any part of our conversation. . . . Were this better as well borne away as it ought to be, we should have better rule among us than we have and there would be no such impediments in the redressing the abuse of apparel.<sup>97</sup>

I will close this survey of Calvin's application of the law with two controversial topics. First, what does Calvin say about the famous passage in Deuteronomy 21:18-21 about the death penalty for a

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97. SD, p. 774. Throughout Calvin's sermon on this section of Deuteronomy he applies the law directly to the society of his own generation with no apology other than his assertion that this is obviously an aspect of the seventh commandment forbidding adultery. The moral teaching of the law of Moses is much broader in Calvin's view than just the Ten Commandments themselves, it includes a great deal of other essentially moral instruction in the law which Calvin sees as filling out the meaning of the Ten Commandments and making their meaning concrete and specific.

rebellious child?

Howbeit, forasmuch as the time will not suffer me to speak so much thereof as were to be spoken; we will now come to the conclusion: which is, that if the disobedience which is committed against the fathers of this world be so grievously punished by God's law: what shall become of men when they will not hear the voice of their heavenly father? True it is that here God speaketh of the corrections which proceed from himself: for when a man nurtureth his child, he is God's minister in that behalf, and his voice is not the voice of man but of God. But yet when as God declareth after more manifest fashion, that it is he which gave us law, so as we have his holy writ, where we may hear his heavenly voice: that is a voice of more authority than the speaking of a father or a mother at home in their house. Again, we come to the Church, where God's word is preached unto us, and God hath dictated that place and the pulpit to deliver out his word to be heard, as though he were there in his own person. Seeing then that God's word is so set down unto us in the holy scripture, and so preached unto us: are they not to be rejected as monsters, and in no wise to be suffered, which disobey the same and make no account of it? And if men bear with them, is it not a procuring of God's wrath? When it hath lurked never so long among us, in the it it must needs betray itself, and we must feel to our cost what it is to have maintained evil willingly and wittingly.<sup>98</sup>

Concerning the penalty of death here, he said:

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98. SD, p. 760.

And therefore let Magistrates be vigilant in rooting out wickedness, yea and in punishing men's faults as they deserve. If there be need of man's correction, let it be had, and let this extremity of putting men to death be always prevented. But if the crime be unpardonable, then must severity and rigor be used. For if wickedness be willingly fostered, men shall see in the end what they shall have won by it. . . . Moreover if Magistrates and Judges be called here of God, yea, and expressly commanded by him to punish the disobedience that is committed against earthly fathers and mothers: let us mark, that whensoever there is any manifest contempt of God, an irreligiousness, or any withstanding of his word, those things are much less to be suffered; and that if they be borne with, it is rank treason to God, which he will not leave unpunished. And therefore let all Magistrates and all such as are set in place of government to execute justice, understand that God commendeth his own honor to them above all things, and that they must be vigilant in that case chiefly, yea, and that after such a sort, as all of us may show by our doings, that our whole desire is that God should reign among us, and that we would not have his word to be despised and scorned, but rather revered as it ought to be. Wherefore let us show this zeal, if we will have our Lord to bless and prosper us.<sup>99</sup>

Second, consider Calvin's thoughts on abortion. On this subject Hesselink, an expert on Calvin's view of the law, made the mistake of opining, "Calvin, of course, could not have anticipated some of the issues which defy neat and simple answers, such as abortion and

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99. SD, p. 760.



euthanasia.”<sup>100</sup> But Calvin did “anticipate” the complicated issue of abortion, which is anything but new. Commenting on Exodus 21:22-24, he wrote very clearly on the subject and gave us a rather neat, simple solution:

This passage at first sight is ambiguous, for if the word death only applies to the pregnant woman, it would not have been a capital crime to put an end to the *foetus*, which would be a great absurdity; for the *foetus*, though enclosed in the womb of its mother, is already a human being, (homo,) and it is almost a monstrous crime to rob it of the life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man’s house is his place of most secure refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a *foetus* in the womb before it has come to light. On these grounds I am led to conclude, without hesitation, that the words, “if death should follow,” must be applied to the *foetus* as well as to the mother. Besides, it would be by no means reasonable that a father should sell for a set sum the life of his son or daughter. Wherefore this, in my opinion, is the meaning of the law, that it would be a crime punishable with death, not only when the mother died from the effects of the abortion, but also if the infant should be killed; whether it should die from the wound abortively, or soon after its birth.<sup>101</sup>

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100. I. John Hesselink, “Christ, the Law, and the Christian” in *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids, Baker: 1984), 183.

101. HLM, vol. 3, pp. 41-42.

## Conclusion

My own conclusions on what Calvin believed and taught about the judicial law of Moses can only be tentative. Calvin's position is complex enough that even Calvin scholars disagree about how we should understand him. But Calvin's preaching on the law is also clear enough that Christian ministers today can learn a great deal from him. His sermons on Deuteronomy certainly deserve a modern English translation—not to mention a modern Japanese translation!

At this point in time then, my own conclusions are:

1. I tend to agree with Godfrey that Calvin is consistent in the *Institutes*, his commentaries and his sermons. It seems to me that the difference is one of emphasis, the *Institutes* being directed to a theological audience and often colored by polemic concerns, whereas the sermons are aimed at edifying Calvin's congregation. I do not mean, however, that Calvin's understanding of the judicial law is consistent. I mean that he is consistently inconsistent everywhere that he addresses the issue.

In both the *Institutes* and the sermons on Deuteronomy Calvin at some points implies that the judicial law of Moses is subject to the scrutiny of a principle of equity that appears to tolerate a certain amount of natural law input. It is not really clear. On the other hand, both the *Institutes* and the sermons and commentaries on the law seem to teach a covenantal Biblicism. I think Wendel's view applies to both the Deuteronomy sermons and the *Institutes*—Calvin's attempt to wed some form of natural law to the law of God is a failure that goes against the grain of his whole theological system.

2. Calvin's concern to teach the law of Moses, including the judicial laws, is not only clear but profound. Two hundred long sermons on Deuteronomy betrays more than a passing interest in the law of God. In this respect, at least, we may say that Calvinism departed from Calvin, for—to the best of my knowledge—there was not a significant

Calvinistic study of the law of Moses and its modern application from the time of Calvin to Rushdoony. Calvinists contented themselves with the ten commandments, but almost completely neglected the judicial laws, except for occasional references. Though Calvin regarded the ten commandments as the central concern, he gave due attention the rest of the law of Moses because he regarded even ceremonies and judicial laws as an exposition of the meaning of the moral law of Moses that we can learn from.

3. Speaking of Calvin, Godfrey writes, "He does not simply appeal to Moses, but reasons from the equity of the moral law."<sup>102</sup> In his sermons on Deuteronomy Calvin's appeals to the law of Moses are sometimes quite direct, but Godfrey's point may be admitted. We are not under the Mosaic covenant today. We should not apply the law of Moses in the same manner that Joshua, David and Daniel did. On this point theologians totally agree with their critics. The question is, How far does the equity of the law of Moses extend? Why did God inscripturate all these details about the judicial law and the punishment of crimes if we are not to learn from it?

It seems to me that Calvin himself is ambiguous about just how far the equity of the law extends. But after centuries of Rousseauian statism are not Calvinists ready to conclude that we need clearer Biblical guidelines for the limitation of the state? Calvin seems to worry about the law of Moses restricting the state too much. He does not want to bind the Christian magistrate so strictly that he will be unable to make laws that are more severe than what the Mosaic judicial law permits. No doubt Calvin is correct that emergency situations such as war or pestilence sometimes require special laws. But our problem is very different.

Gary North illustrates radical perversity of modern law and our need for Biblical standards by quoting the following from a local newspaper:

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102. "Calvin and Theonomy," p. 311.

A Jacksonville [Texas] man [Marvin Hall] was sentenced by Cherokee County Judicial District Court Judge Morris W. Hassell to 50 years in prison for robbing the Holiday Inn . . .

In another robbery case, Hassell sentenced James Virgil Walker, 24, to 10 years in prison for robbing Floyd Roach of Rusk of his wallet . . .

Jerry Dale Jones, 26, Jacksonville, was sentenced to 12 years in prison on a charge of burglary of a habitation. Jones took guns, jewelry and an assortment of other items owned by William Patterson in Jacksonville, Holcomb said. Most of the items were recovered, he added.

A 22-year old Bullard man pleaded guilty to a charge of aggravated sexual assault on a child on Aug. 26, 1986, in Bullard, Assistant District Attorney Elmer Beckworth said. The man was sentenced to eight years and sent to boot camp, a new program that provides counseling and military-type training.<sup>103</sup>

As much as fifty years in prison, and no less than twelve, for robbery, but only eight years for aggravated sexual assault on a child! Note that the names of the robbers are reported but not the name of the man guilty of sexual assault. North also reports that "In the State of Massachusetts in the early 1970's, the median jail term served by a murderer was under two and a half years."<sup>104</sup> We are in far greater need in our day of considering what equity there may be in the judicial law of Moses than in moderating the Biblical standards to preserve the freedom of the magistrate.

#### 4. We cannot do better than to adopt Calvin's basic attitude to the

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103. Gary North, *Victim's Rights, The Biblical View of Civil Justice* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p.ix.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

law expressed at the beginning of his series on Deuteronomy:

Now herewithall we be warned to receive the doctrine here contained, not as coming from a mortal man. In speaking unto us, Moses protesteth that he himself is not our schoolmaster though he rehearseth our lesson unto us; but that must always be God and His Holy Spirit, that must even be our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose hand the Law was given, as Saint Paul speaketh of Him. For He was the governor of the Church at all times. Ye see then that the thing which we have to consider here, is that we must reverently and carefully receive the things that were given us by the hand of Moses. Not that we may think that anything came of himself, but that God sent him and ordained him to be His instrument, so that when we receive anything that was spoken by Moses, we may warrant our selves that God guideth and governeth us by His own pure truth, and that our faith resteth not upon men nor upon any mortal creature, but that the living God is the author, and will also we be the warrant thereof.<sup>105</sup>

God's laws given through Moses continue to instruct us in wisdom and righteousness. If we obey His law, we will be blessed and prosper so that we may be an instrument in His hand for the extension of His kingdom in this world.

Calvin's covenantal view of the Bible has never been more needed, was never more relevant than it is today. What is desperately required today is Calvinists with a covenantal world-view, Calvinists who will apply the law of God to the problems of our day, building on the inheritance of wisdom left behind by Calvin. And by the grace of

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105. SD, p. 5.

God we seem to be seeing the beginning of such a revival. May God grant that it will grow and increase and “that it may please Him to grant this grace, not only unto us, but also to all people and nations of the earth.”