CALVIN:
INSTITUTES OF THE
CHRISTIAN RELIGION

IN TWO VOLUMES
(VOL. XXI: BOOKS III.XX TO IV.XX)

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Philadelphia
THE WESTMINSTER PRESS
the open, in order that patience of mind and good will be kept in secret, but that we may openly do what we see may benefit those whom we ought to wish well.43

21. Paul condemns a litigious spirit, but not all litigation*

*But the usual objection—that Paul has condemned lawsuits altogether—is also false [I Cor. 6:5–8]. It can easily be understood from his words that there was an immoderate rage for litigation in the church of the Corinthians—even to the point that they exposed to the scoffing and evilspeaking of the impious the gospel of Christ and the whole religion they professed. Paul first criticized them for disgracing the gospel among believers by the intemperateness of their quarrels. Secondly, he rebuked them also for contending in this way among themselves, brethren with brethren. For they were so far from bearing wrongs that they greedily panted after one another’s possessions, and without cause assailed and inflicted loss upon one another. Therefore, Paul inveighs against that mad lust to go to law, not simply against all controversies.

But he brands it a fault or weakness for them not to accept the loss of their goods, rather than to endeavor to keep them, even to the point of strife. *That is, when they were so easily aroused by every loss, and dashed to the court and to lawsuits over the least causes, he speaks of this as proof that their minds are too prone to anger, and not enough disposed to patience.

*Christians ought indeed so to conduct themselves that they always prefer to yield their own right rather than go into a court, from which they can scarcely get away without a heart stirred and kindled to hatred of their brother. But when any man sees that without loss of love he can defend his own property, the loss of which would be a heavy expense to him, he does not offend against this statement of Paul, if he has recourse to law. To sum up (as we said at the beginning 44), love will give every man the best counsel. Everything undertaken apart from love and all disputes that go beyond it, we regard as incontrovertibly unjust and impious.

(Obedience, with reverence, due even unjust rulers, 22–29)

22. Deference

*The first duty of subjects toward their magistrates is to think most honorably of their office,45 which they recognize as a juris-

43 Augustine, Letters cxxxviii. 2. 12–13 (MPL 33. 530; tr. FC 20. 44 f.).

44 Sec. 18, above.

45 Cf. Cicero, Laws III. ii. 5 (LCL edition, pp. 461 f.).
diction bestowed by God, and on that account to esteem and reverence them as ministers and representatives of God. For you may find some who very respectfully yield themselves to their magistrates and desire somebody whom they can obey, because they know that such is expedient for public welfare; nevertheless, they regard magistrates only as a kind of necessary evil. But Peter requires something more of us when he commands that the king be honored [I Peter 2:17]; as does Solomon when he teaches that God and king are to be feared [Prov. 24:21]. For Peter, in the word “to honor” includes a sincere and candid opinion of the king. Solomon, yoking the king with God, shows that the king is full of a holy reverence and dignity. There is also that famous saying in Paul: that we should obey “not only because of wrath, but because of conscience” [Rom. 13:5, cf. Vg.]. By this he means that subjects should be led not by fear alone of princes and rulers to remain in subjection under them (as they commonly yield to an armed enemy who sees that vengeance is promptly taken if they resist), but because they are showing obedience to God himself when they give it to them; since the rulers’ power is from God.

I am not discussing the men themselves, as if a mask of dignity covered foolishness, or sloth, or cruelty, as well as wicked morals full of infamous deeds, and thus acquired for vices the praise of virtues; but I say that the order itself is worthy of such honor and reverence that those who are rulers are esteemed among us, and receive reverence out of respect for their lordship.

23. Obedience

From this also something else follows: that, with hearts inclined to reverence their rulers, the subjects should prove their obedience toward them, whether by obeying their proclamations, or by paying taxes, or by undertaking public offices and burdens which pertain to the common defense, or by executing any other commands of theirs. “Let every soul,” says Paul, “be subject to the higher powers. . . . For he who resists authority, resists what God has ordained.” [Rom. 13:1–2, Vg.] “Remind them,” he writes to Titus, “to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready for every good work.” [Titus 3:1, cf. Vg.] And Peter says, “Be subject to every human creature45x (or rather, as I translate it, ordinance)  for the Lord’s sake, whether it be to the king, as supreme, or unto governors who are sent through him to punish evildoers, but to praise doers of good.” [I Peter

45x The phrase in parentheses following is an addition of 1545.
Now, in order that they may prove that they are not pretending subjection, but are sincerely and heartily subjects, Paul adds that they should commend to God the safety and prosperity of those under whom they live. "I urge," he says, "that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings, and all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, with all godliness and honesty." [I Tim. 2:1-2, cf. VG.]

Let no man deceive himself here. For since the magistrate cannot be resisted without God being resisted at the same time, even though it seems that an unarmed magistrate can be despised with impunity, still God is armed to avenge mightily this contemt toward himself.

Moreover, under this obedience I include the restraint which private citizens ought to bid themselves keep in public, that they may not deliberately intrude in public affairs, or pointlessly invade the magistrate's office, or undertake anything at all politically. If anything in a public ordinance requires amendment, let them not raise a tumult, or put their hands to the task—all of them ought to keep their hands bound in this respect—but let them commit the matter to the judgment of the magistrate, whose hand alone is free. I mean, let them not venture on anything without a command. For when the ruler gives his command, private citizens receive public authority. For as the counselors are commonly called the ears and eyes of the prince, so may one reasonably speak of those whom he has appointed by his command to do things, as the hands of the prince.

24. Obedience is also due the unjust magistrate

But since we have so far been describing a magistrate who truly is what he is called, that is, a father of his country, and, as the poet expresses it, shepherd of his people, guardian of peace, protector of righteousness, and avenger of innocence—he
who does not approve of such government must rightly be regarded as insane.

But it is the example of nearly all ages that some princes are careless about all those things to which they ought to have given heed, and, far from all care, lazily take their pleasure. Others, intent upon their own business, put up for sale laws, privileges, judgments, and letters of favor. Others drain the common people of their money, and afterward lavish it on insane largesse. Still others exercise sheer robbery, plundering houses, raping virgins and matrons, and slaughtering the innocent.

Consequently, many cannot be persuaded that they ought to recognize these as princes and to obey their authority as far as possible. For in such great disgrace, and among such crimes, so alien to the office not only of a magistrate but also of a man, they discern no appearance of the image of God which ought to have shone in the magistrate; while they see no trace of that minister of God, who had been appointed to praise the good, and to punish the evil [cf. I Peter 2:14, Vg.]. Thus, they also do not recognize as ruler him whose dignity and authority Scripture commends to us. Indeed, this inborn feeling has always been in the minds of men to hate and curse tyrants as much as to love and venerate lawful kings.

25. The wicked ruler a judgment of God*

But if we look to God's Word, it will lead us farther. We are not only subject to the authority of princes who perform their office toward us uprightly and faithfully as they ought, but also to the authority of all who, by whatever means, have got control of affairs, even though they perform not a whit of the princes' office. For despite the Lord's testimony that the magistrate's office is the highest gift of his beneficence to preserve the safety of men, and despite his appointment of bounds to the magistrates—he still declares at the same time that whoever they may be, they have their authority solely from him. Indeed, he says that those who rule for the public benefit are true patterns and evidences of this beneficence of his; that they who rule unjustly and incompetently have been raised up by him to punish the wickedness of the people; that all equally have been endowed with that holy majesty with which he has invested lawful power.

I shall proceed no farther until I have added some sure testimonies of this thing. Yet, we need not labor to prove that a wicked king is the Lord's wrath upon the earth [Job 34:30, Vg.; Hos. 13:11; Isa. 3:4; 10:5; Deut. 28:29], for I believe no man
will contradict me; and thus nothing more would be said of a
king than of a robber who seizes your possessions, of an adulterer
who pollutes your marriage bed, or of a murderer who seeks to
kill you. For Scripture reckons all such calamities among God’s
curses.

But let us, rather, pause here to prove this, which does not so
easily settle in men’s minds. In a very wicked man utterly un-
worthy of all honor, provided he has the public power in his
hands, that noble and divine power resides which the Lord has by
his Word given to the ministers of his justice and judgment. Ac-
cordingly, he should be held in the same reverence and esteem
by his subjects, in so far as public obedience is concerned, in
which they would hold the best of kings if he were given to them.

26. Obedience to bad kings required in Scripture*

*First, I should like my readers to note and carefully observe
that providence of God, which the Scriptures with good reason
so often recall to us, and its special operation in distributing
kingdoms and appointing what kings he pleases. In Daniel, the
Lord changes times and successions of times, removes kings and
sets them up [Dan. 2:21, 37]. Likewise: “to the end that the living
may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and
gives it to whom he will” [Dan. 4:17; cf. ch. 4:14, Vg.]. Although
Scripture everywhere abounds with such passages, this prophecy
particularly swarms with them. Now it is well enough known
what kind of king Nebuchadnezzar was, who conquered Jerusa-
lem—a strong invader and destroyer of others. Nevertheless, the
Lord declares in Ezekiel that He has given him the land of Egypt
for the service he had done him in devastating it [Ezek. 29:
19–20]. And Daniel said to him: “You, O king, are a king of
kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, power-
ful, mighty, and glorious; to you, I say, he has given also all
lands where the sons of men dwell, beasts of the forest and birds
of the air: these he has given into your hand and made you rule
over them” [Dan. 2:37–38, cf. Vg.]. Again, Daniel says to Neo-
uchadnezzar’s son Belshazzar: “The Most High God gave Neo-
uchadnezzar, your father, kingship and magnificence, honor and
glory; and because of the magnificence that he gave him, all peo-
laces, tribes, and tongues were trembling and fearful before him”
[Dan. 5:18–19, cf. Vg.]. When we hear that a king has been or-
dained by God, let us at once call to mind those heavenly edicts
with regard to honoring and fearing a king; then we shall not
hesitate to hold a most wicked tyrant in the place where the Lord
has deigned to set him. Samuel, when he warned the people of Israel what sort of things they would suffer from their kings, said: "This shall be the right of the king that will reign over you: he will take your sons and put them to his chariot to make them his horsemen and to plow his fields and reap his harvest, and make his weapons. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. Finally, he will take your fields, your vineyards, and your best olive trees and will give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards, and will give it to his eunuchs and servants. He will take your men-servants, maidservants, and asses and set them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks and you will be his servants" [I Sam. 8:11–17, with omissions; cf. Hebrew]. Surely, the kings would not do this by legal right, since the law trained them to all restraint [Deut. 17:16 ff.]. But it was called a right in relation to the people, for they had to obey it and were not allowed to resist. It is as if Samuel had said: The willfulness of kings will run to excess, but it will not be your part to restrain it; you will have only this left to you: to obey their commands and hearken to their word.

27. The case of Nebuchadnezzar in Jer., ch. 27*

*But in Jeremiah, especially, there is a memorable passage, which (although rather long) it will not trouble me to quote because it very clearly defines this whole question. "I have made the earth and men, says the Lord, and the animals which are upon the face of the earth, with my great strength and out-stretched arm; and I give it to him who is pleasing in my eyes. Now, therefore, I have given all these lands into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar . . . my servant. . . . All the nations and great kings shall serve him . . .; until the time of his own land comes. . . . And it shall be that any nation and kingdom that will not serve the king of Babylon, I shall visit that nation with sword, famine, and pestilence. . . . Therefore, serve the king of Babylon and live." [Jer. 27:5–8, 17, cf. Vg.] We see how much obedience the Lord willed to be paid to that abominable and cruel tyrant for no other reason than that he possessed the kingship. But it was by heavenly decree that he had been set upon the throne of the kingdom and assumed into kingly majesty, which it would be unlawful to violate. If we have continually present to our minds and before our eyes the fact that even the most worthless kings are appointed by the same decree by which the authority of all kings is established, those seditious thoughts will never enter our minds that a king should be treated according to his merits, and
that it is unfair that we should show ourselves subjects to him who, on his part, does not show himself a king to us.50

28. General testimonies of Scripture on the sanctity of the royal person*

It is vain for anyone to object that that command was peculiar to the Israelites. For we must note with what reason the Lord confirms it: “I have given,” he says, “the kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar” [Jer. 27:6, cf. Vg.]. “Therefore, serve him and live.” [Jer. 27:17, cf. Vg.] Let us not doubt that we ought to serve him to whom it is evident that the kingdom has been given. And when once the Lord advances any man to kingly rank, he attests to us his determination that he would have him reign. For there are general testimonies of Scripture concerning this. Solomon, in the twenty-eighth chapter of The Proverbs, says: “Because of the iniquity of the land there are many princes” [Prov. 28:2 p.]. Likewise, the twelfth chapter of Job: “He takes away subjection from kings, and girds them again with a girdle” [Job 12:18 p.]. Once this has been admitted, nothing remains but that we should serve and live.

In Jeremiah the prophet, there is also another command of the Lord by which he enjoins his people to seek the peace of Babylon, where they have been sent as captives, and to pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its peace will be their peace [Jer. 29:7]. Behold, the Israelites, divested of all their possessions, driven from their homes, led away into exile, and cast into pitiable bondage, are commanded to pray for the prosperity of their conqueror—not as we are commanded in other passages to pray for our persecutors [cf. Matt. 5:44], but in order that his kingdom may be preserved safe and peaceful, that under him they too may prosper. So David, already designated king by God’s ordination and anointed with his holy oil, when he was persecuted by Saul without deserving it, still regarded the head of his assailant as inviolable, because the Lord had sanctified it with the honor of the kingdom. “The Lord forbid,” he said, “that I should do this thing before the Lord, to my lord, the Lord’s anointed, to put forth my hand against him, since he is the Lord’s anointed.” [I Sam. 24:6, cf. Vg.] Again: “My soul has spared you; and I have said, ‘I shall not put forth my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord’s anointed’ ” [I Sam. 24:11, cf. Vg.]. Again: “Who will

put forth his hand against the anointed of the Lord and be inno-
cent? . . . The Lord lives; unless the Lord strike him, or the day
come for him to die, or he fall in battle, the Lord forbid that I
should put forth my hand against the Lord's anointed" [I Sam.
26:9–11, cf. Vg.].

29. It is not the part of subjects but of God to vindicate the
right*

*We owe this attitude of reverence and therefore of piety to-
ward all our rulers in the highest degree, whatever they may be
like. I therefore the more often repeat this: that we should learn
not to examine the men themselves, but take it as enough that
they bear, by the Lord's will, a character upon which he has
imprinted and engraven an inviolable majesty.

But (you will say) rulers owe responsibilities in turn to their
subjects. This I have already admitted. But if you conclude from
this that service ought to be rendered only to just governors, you
are reasoning foolishly. For husbands are also bound to their
wives, and parents to their children, by mutual responsibilities.
Suppose parents and husbands depart from their duty. Suppose
parents show themselves so hard and intractable to their children,
whom they are forbidden to provoke to anger [Eph. 6:4], that by
their rigor they tire them beyond measure. Suppose husbands most
despitefully use their wives, whom they are commanded to love
[Eph. 5:25] and to spare as weaker vessels [1 Peter 3:7]. Shall
either children be less obedient to their parents or wives to their
husbands? They are still subject even to those who are wicked and
undutiful.

Indeed, all ought to try not to "look at the bag hanging from
their back," 51 that is, not to inquire about another's duties, but
every man should keep in mind that one duty which is his own.
This ought particularly to apply to those who have been put
under the power of others. Therefore, if we are cruelly tormented
by a savage prince, if we are greedily despoiled by one who is
avaricious or wanton, if we are neglected by a slothful one, if
finally we are vexed for piety's sake by one who is impious and
sacrilegious, let us first be mindful of our own misdeeds, which
without doubt are chastised by such whips of the Lord [cf. Dan.
9:7]. *By this, humility will restrain our impatience. Let us then
also call this thought to mind, that it is not for us to remedy such

51 Cf. Catullus xxii. 21: "Sed non videmus manticae quod in tergo est" (LCL
Catullus, p. 26); cf. Horace, Satires II. iii. 298 f. (LCL edition, pp. 178 f.),
reflecting Aesop's fable of the two wallets, the one in view containing the
faults of others, the one unseen, our own.
evils; that only this remains, to implore the Lord’s help, in whose hand are the hearts of kings, and the changing of kingdoms [Prov. 21:1 p.], 52 “He is God who will stand in the assembly of the gods, and will judge in the midst of the gods.” [Ps. 82:1 p.]
Before His face all kings shall fall and be crushed, and all the judges of the earth, that have not kissed his anointed [Ps. 2:10–11], and all those who have written unjust laws to oppress the poor in judgment and to do violence to the cause of the lowly, to prey upon widows and rob the fatherless [Isa. 10:1–2, cf. Vg.].

(Constitutional magistrates, however, ought to check the tyranny of kings; obedience to God comes first, 30–31)

30. When God intervenes, it is sometimes by unwitting agents*

bHere are revealed his goodness, his power, and his providence. For sometimes he raises up open avengers from among his servants, and arms them with his command to punish the wicked government and deliver his people, oppressed in unjust ways, from miserable calamity. Sometimes he directs to this end the rage of men with other intentions and other endeavors. Thus he delivered the people of Israel from the tyranny of Pharaoh through Moses [Ex. 3:7–10]; from the violence of Chusar, king of Syria, through Othniel [Judg. 3:9]; and from other servitutes through other kings or judges. b6a) Thus he tamed the pride of Tyre by the Egyptians, the insolence of the Egyptians by the Assyrians, the fierceness of the Assyrians by the Chaldeans; the arrogance of Babylon by the Medes and Persians, after Cyrus had already subjugated the Medes. The ungratefulness of the kings of Judah and Israel and their impious obstinacy toward his many benefits, he sometimes by the Assyrians, sometimes bby the Babylonians, crushed and afflicted—although not all in the same way.

For the first kind of men, when they had been sent by God’s lawful calling to carry out such acts, in taking up arms against kings, did not at all violate that majesty which is implanted in kings by God’s ordination; but, armed from heaven, they subdued the lesser power with the greater, just as it is lawful for kings to punish their subordinates. But the latter kind of men, although they were directed by God’s hand whither he pleased, and executed his work unwittingly, yet planned in their minds to do nothing but an evil act.

52 To this point Calvin has recommended to those under bad rulers only patience and prayer. The previous sentences evidently reflect conditions in France at the time of writing (1535). The hope of relief, from divine intervention and human agency, will now find vigorous expression.
31. Constitutional defenders of the people's freedom

But however these deeds of men are judged in themselves, still the Lord accomplished his work through them alike when he broke the bloody scepters of arrogant kings and when he overthrown intolerable governments. Let the princes hear and be afraid.

But we must, in the meantime, be very careful not to despise or violate that authority of magistrates, full of venerable majesty, which God has established by the weightiest decrees, even though it may reside with the most unworthy men, who defile it as much as they can with their own wickedness. For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord's to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer.

63 "Audiant principes, et terreantur"—a startling and powerful phrase: but it does not threaten revolution. It is God that princes are to fear.

64 This packeted sentence, which was to prove powerfully influential, deserves close attention. See especially Doumergue, Calvin V. 500-502, and cf. Doumergue's numerous citations from Calvin's letters and commentaries, {ibid.}, pp. 487-494. 499. It is of interest that Zwingli, in his treatise Der Hirt (The Pastor) (1524), states that as the Spartans had their ephors, the Romans their tribunes, and the German towns their guild masters, with authority to check the higher rulers, so God has provided pastors to stand on guard for the people (CR Zwingli III. 36). This passage may have been known to Calvin, though indirectly, since it was in German. From his reiterated warnings against resistance to tyrants by "private persons," Calvin turns here with startling abruptness to approve, and solemnly urge, action by a constituted magistracy to protect the liberties of the people. As historical examples of such "populares magistratus," he cites, with some justification, the ephors of Sparta, the tribunes of Rome, and the demarchs of Athens, who were all elected to office by annual popular vote. Cf. Comm. Micah 5:5: "Hic demum maxime optabilis status populi creari omnibus suffragiis pastores." Kingship by hereditary right does not seem to be in accordance with liberty; a well-ordered government is one derived from the general vote, "communibus omnium suffragiis" (CR XLIII. 374). "Perhaps," he says here, there is a parallel in the three states of modern nations. The "perhaps" is natural for his own France where, when he wrote this, the estates had not met for thirty years, and had still not met when he repeated it in 1559. He must have been aware that nearly all other national governments, from Spain to Norway, had representative bodies or parliaments more or less effectively and regularly functioning, capable of acting to restrain monarchical absolutism or tyranny. Calvin seems to be summoning them to assume the duty of caring for the people's interests, and preserving to the people the "inestimable boon" of liberty. Cf. CR XXIX. 544; XXX. 185; McNeill, "The Democratic Element in Calvin's Thought," Church History XVIII (1949), pp. 162--166, and the studies there cited. The demand for a meeting of the estates of France became characteristic of Huguenot political writings such as the Franco-Gallia of Calvin's friend, Francis Hotman (1573; tr. Lord Moleworth, 2d ed., 1721); the Defense Against Tyrants (1579), by "Junius Brutus"—probably a joint work of Hubert Languet and Philip du Plessis-Mornay.
I am speaking all the while of private individuals. For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings (as in ancient times the ephors were set against the Spartan kings, or the tribunes of the people against the Roman consuls, or the demarchs against the senate of the Athenians; and perhaps, as things now are, such power as the three estates exercise in every realm when they hold their chief assemblies), I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God’s ordinance.54

(English edition, ed. H. Laski); and Pierre Jurieu’s Sights of Enslaved France Aspiring Toward Liberty (1689–1690). The influence of this passage can also be traced in John Ponet’s radical Shorte Treatise of Politick Power (1556; see W. S. Hudson’s edition) in George Buchanan’s De iure regni apud Scottos (1579) (tr. C. F. Arrowood, The Powers of the Crown in Scotland) and in the Lex Rex of Samuel Rutherford (1644). Cf. P. Mesnard, L’Essor de la philosophie politique au sixième siècle en France, pp. 330–336, 347–359. The weighty treatise of Johannes Althusius, Politica methodica digesta (1603), develops the main political conceptions of Calvin: see especially the Harvard lectures of P. S. Gerbrandy, National and International Stability: Althusius, Grotius, Van Vollenhoven. The position of John Knox is well illustrated in his History of the Reformation in Scotland in the account of his debate with Lethington, 1564, in which Knox cited the Magdeburg Confession (“Apology of Marburg”) issued in resistance to Charles V, 1550, while his fellow minister John Craig presented a document in which the Dominicans of Bologna defended their resistance to the pope, 1554 (see W. C. Dickinson’s edition, II. 127–134). The Magdeburg (Lutheran) statement affirms the duty of armed resistance to a ruler who violates the law of God. The Dominican thesis, which Craig had heard successfully defended at the University of Bologna, in more feudal terms declares that “all rulers, whether supreme or inferior, ought to be reformed or deposed” when they violate their sworn promises to their subjects. Knox, in using the Magdeburg document, was in effect reaffirming an uncompromising doctrine of resistance that had been expressed in his pamphlet On the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558). Elizabeth I came to the throne when this fiery pamphlet was newly published, and it was a cause of her alienation from Geneva. Calvin’s embarrassment over this incident is shown in his letter to Cecil (winter, 1559) in which he disapproves the pamphlet and disclaims any prior knowledge of it (Zurich Letters, 2 ser., pp. 34 ff.). Cf. Doumergue, Calvin V. 486–512; H. Strohl, “Le Droit à la résistance,” pp. 131 ff. In general, Calvin carefully guards against any endorsement of popular revolutionary action, but in some instances his language is less guarded. See, for example, his Comm. Daniel (1561), lecture xxx, on Dan. 6:22, where he says: “For earthly princes lay aside their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy to be reckoned among the number of mankind. We ought, rather, utterly to defy them [conspuere in ipsorum capita, lit., “to spit on their heads”] than to obey them” (CR XLI. 25).
32. Obedience to man must not become disobedience to God

*But in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to him, to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted. And how absurd would it be that in satisfying men you should incur the displeasure of him for whose sake you obey men themselves! The Lord, therefore, is the King of Kings, who, when he has opened his sacred mouth, must alone be heard, before all and above all men; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him. If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed. And here let us not be concerned about all that dignity which the magistrates possess; for no harm is done to it when it is humbled before that singular and truly supreme power of God.*

*On this consideration, Daniel denies that he has committed any offense against the king when he has not obeyed his impious edict [Dan. 6:22–23, Vg.]. For the king had exceeded his limits, and had not only been a wrong-doer against men, but, in lifting up his horns against God, had himself abrogated his power. Conversely, the Israelites are condemned because they were too obedient to the wicked proclamation of the king [Hos. 5:13]. For when Jeroboam molded the golden calves, they, to please him, forsook God's Temple and turned to new superstitions [I Kings 12:30]. With the same readiness, their descendants complied with the decrees of their kings. The prophet sharply reproaches them for embracing the king's edicts [Hos. 5:11]. Far, indeed, is the pretense of modesty from deserving praise, a false modesty with which the court flatterers cloak themselves and deceive the simple, while they deny that it is lawful for them to refuse anything imposed by their kings. As if God had made over his right to mortal men, giving them the rule over mankind! Or as if earthly power were diminished when it is subjected to its Author, in whose presence even the heavenly powers tremble as suppliants! I know with what great and present peril this constancy is menaced, because kings bear

55 Cf. II. viii. 98.
56 This sentence begins an addition of 1559, ending with “tremble as suppliants,” below. Here, referring to Dan. 6:22 (cf. sec. 31, note 54), Calvin does not anticipate the strong phrase of the commentary. Yet he firmly requires a courageous disobedience to the “impious edicts” of ungodly rulers. It is his final emphatic admonition that obedience to the political powers, which he has repeatedly enjoined, must not deflect the Christian from “piety” or compromise his obedience to the King of Kings.
defiance with the greatest displeasure, whose “wrath is a messenger of death” [Prov. 16:14], says Solomon. But since this edict has been proclaimed by the heavenly herald, Peter—“We must obey God rather than men” [Acts 5:29]—let us comfort ourselves with the thought that we are rendering that obedience which the Lord requires when we suffer anything rather than turn aside from piety. And that our courage may not grow faint, Paul pricks us with another goad: That we have been redeemed by Christ at so great a price as our redemption cost him, so that we should not enslave ourselves to the wicked desires of men—much less be subject to their impiety [1 Cor. 7:25].

GOD BE Praised