to this one error? Thus, you may say that they sought nothing but a den of abominations when they made a sacrament out of marriage. For when they once obtained this, they took over the hearing of matrimonial cases; as it was a spiritual matter, it was not to be handled by secular judges. Then they passed laws by which they strengthened their tyranny, laws in part openly impious toward God, in part most unfair toward men. Such are these: That marriages between minors contracted without parental consent should remain firm and valid. That marriages between kinsfolk even to the seventh degree are not lawful, and if contracted, must be dissolved. They forge the very degrees, against the laws of all nations and also against the ordinance of Moses [Lev. 18:6 ff.]; that a man who has put away an adulterous wife is not permitted to take another; that godparents may not be coupled in matrimony; that marriages may not be celebrated from Septuagesima to the octave of Easter, and in the three weeks before the nativity of John, and from Advent to Epiphany; and innumerable like regulations which would take too long to recount. At length, we must extricate ourselves from their mire, in which our discourse has already stuck longer than I should have liked. Still, I believe that I have accomplished something in that I have partly pulled the lion's skin from these asses.

Lombard holds such marriages invalid for boys under fourteen and girls under twelve, but if they come together after the beginning of puberty, they are not to be separated (Sentences IV. xxxvi. 4; MPL 192. 931). On the prohibition of marriage within the seventh degree, see Sentences IV. xi (MPL 192. 937 ff.); Gratian, Decretum II. xxxv. 2 and 3. 16, 17, 19 (MPL 187. 1071 ff.; Friedberg I. 1267 f.).

These regulations appear in Lombard, Sentences IV. xlii. 1-2; IV. xxxvi. 4; IV. xxxiv. 5; IV. xlii (MPL 192. 938 ff.; 918 f.; 928 f.; 940-942); Gratian, Decretum II. xxxvi; III. xxx. 3 f.; II. xxxiii. 4, 10 (MPL 187. 1165 ff.; 1519 ff.; 1947 f.; Friedberg I. 1281 ff.; 1100 ff., 1249).

88 Lombard holds such marriages invalid for boys under fourteen and girls under twelve, but if they come together after the beginning of puberty, they are not to be separated (Sentences IV. xxxvi. 4; MPL 192. 931). On the prohibition of marriage within the seventh degree, see Sentences IV. xi (MPL 192. 937 ff.); Gratian, Decretum II. xxxv. 2 and 3. 16, 17, 19 (MPL 187. 1071 f.; Friedberg I. 1267 f.).

89 These regulations appear in Lombard, Sentences IV. xlii. 1-2; IV. xxxvi. 4; MPL 192. 938 ff.; 918 f.; 928 f.; 940-942); Gratian, Decretum II. xxxv. 2; III. xxx. 3 f.; II. xxxiii. 4, 10 (MPL 187. 1165 ff.; 1519 ff.; 1947 f.; Friedberg I. 1281 ff.; 1100 ff., 1249).

CHAPTER XX

CIVIL GOVERNMENT

(How civil and spiritual government are related, 1-2)

1. Differences between spiritual and civil government

Now, since we have established above that man is under a twofold government, and since we have elsewhere discussed at sufficient length the kind that resides in the soul or inner man and pertains to eternal life, this is the place to say something also about the other kind, which pertains only to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality.

For although this topic seems by nature alien to the spiritual doctrine of faith which I have undertaken to discuss, what follows will show that I am right in joining them, in fact, that necessity compels me to do so. This is especially true since, from one side, insane and barbarous men furiously strive to overturn this divinely established order; while, on the other side, the flatterers of princes, immoderately praising their power, do not hesitate


2 III. xix. 15: "duplex in homine regimen." Chapter xx is linked with the one on "Christian Freedom" (III. xix), which, in substance, formed the first part of ch. vi in the 1536 edition (OS I. 223-230) and was followed in the same long chapter by a section on ecclesiastical power and one bearing the title of the present chapter and essentially of the same content. Subsequent revisions widely separated these parts of the original ch. vi, but IV. xx is in a real sense a continuation of III. xix.

3 IV. iii-xi.
to set them against the rule of God himself. Unless both these evils are checked, purity of faith will perish. Besides, it is of no slight importance to us to know how lovingly God has provided in this respect for mankind, that greater zeal for piety may flourish in us to attest our gratefulness.

*First, before we enter into the matter itself, we must keep in mind that distinction which we previously laid down so that we do not (as commonly happens) unwisely mingle these two, which have a completely different nature. For certain men, when they hear that the gospel promises a freedom that acknowledges no king and no magistrate among men, but looks to Christ alone, think that they cannot benefit by their freedom so long as they see any power set up over them. They therefore think that nothing will be safe unless the whole world is reshaped to a new form, where there are neither courts, nor laws, nor magistrates, nor anything which in their opinion restricts their freedom. But whoever knows how to distinguish between body and soul, between this present fleeting life and that future eternal life, will without difficulty know that Christ's spiritual Kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct. Since, then, it is a Jewish vanity to seek and enclose Christ's Kingdom within the elements of this world, let us rather ponder that what Scripture clearly teaches is a spiritual fruit, which we gather from Christ's grace; and let us remember to keep within its own limits all that freedom which is promised and offered to us in him. For why is it that the same apostle who bids us stand and not submit to the "yoke of bondage" [Gal. 5:1] elsewhere forbids slaves to be anxious about their state [1 Cor. 7:21], unless it be that spiritual freedom can perfectly well exist along with civil bondage? These statements of his must also be taken in the same sense: In the Kingdom of God "there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free" [Gal. 3:28, Vg.; order changed]. And again, "there is not Jew nor Greek, uncircumcised and circumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman; but Christ is all in all" [Col. 3:11 p.]. By these statements he means that it makes no difference what your condition among men may be or under what nation's laws you live, since the Kingdom of Christ does not at all consist in these things.

4 These sentences (1559) evidently refer to the Anabaptists on the one hand, and on the other to Machiavelli, whose Italian Il Principe was only in 1553 translated into Latin. (OS V. 474.) Calvin may also have in mind the emperor-cult of antiquity.

5 III. xiv. 16; IV. x. 3-6.

6 Cf. II. x. 10-19.
3. The chief tasks and burdens of civil government

But there will be a more appropriate place to speak of the practice of civil government. Now we only wish it to be understood that to think of doing away with it is outrageous barbarity. Its function among men is no less than that of bread, water, sun, and air; indeed, its place of honor is far more excellent. For it does not merely see to it, as all these serve to do, that men breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm, even though it surely embraces all these activities when it provides for their living together. It does not, I repeat, look to this only, but also prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound; that men may carry on blameless intercourse among themselves; that honesty and modesty may be preserved among men. In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.

Let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion, which I seem to each his own, a phrase of ancient writers to express the objective of legal justice, and in Roman law especially with reference to property. Cf. III. vii. 3, note 6; Rom. 13:7.

These three: the magistrate, who is the protector and guardian of the laws; the laws, according to which he governs; the people, who are governed by the laws and obey the magistrate. See 8, below.

The Lord has not only testified that the office of magistrate is approved by and acceptable to him, but he also sets out its dignity with the most honorable titles and marvelously commends it to us. To mention a few: Since those who serve as magistrate are called "gods" [Ex. 22:8, Vg.; Ps. 8:1-6], let no one think that their being so-called is of slight importance. For it signifies that they have a mandate from God, have been invested with divine authority, and are wholly God's representatives, in a manner, acting as his vicegerents. This is no subtlety of mine, but Christ's explanation. "If Scripture," he says, "called them gods to whom the word of God came . . ." [John 10:35.] What is this, except that God has entrusted to them the business of serving him in their office, and (as Moses and Jehoshaphat said to the judges whom they appointed in every city of Judah) of exercising judgment not for man but for God [Deut. 1:16-17; If Chron. 19:6]? To the same purpose is what God's wisdom affirms through Solomon's mouth, that it is his doing "that kings reign, and counselors decree what is just, that princes exercise dominion, and all benevolent judges of the earth" [Prov. 8:14-16]. This amounts to the same thing as to say: it has not come about by human perversity that the authority over all things on earth is in the hands of kings and other rulers, but by divine providence and holy ordinance. For God was pleased so to rule the affairs of men, inasmuch as he is present with them and also presides over the making of laws and the exercising of equity in courts of justice. Paul also plainly teaches this when he lists "ruling" among God's gifts [Rom. 12:8, KJV or RV], which, variously distributed according to the diversity of grace, ought to be used by Christ's servants for the upbuilding of the church. For even though Paul is there speaking specifically of a council of sober men, who were appointed in the primitive church to preside over the ordering of public discipline (which office is called in the letter to the

see that their depravity can go scot-free—when no power can force them to cease from doing evil?

(Necessity and divine sanction of civil government, 3-7)

Let us, then, first look at the office of the magistrate, noting whether it is a lawful calling approved of God; the nature of the office; the extent of its power; then, with what laws a Christian government ought to be governed; and finally, how the laws benefit the people, and what obedience is owed to the magistrate.

4. The magistracy is ordained by God

Note the similar statement in Instruction in Faith (1537) 83 (OS I. 416 f.; tr. Fuhrmann, pp. 76 f.). See also Fuhrmann's note 249, citing in this connection Farel's Sommaire (1529) and Fr. Lambert's Somme chrestienne (1529), which contain similar teaching in brief form. (Instruction in Faith, p. 96.
seen in them. But whatever kind of men they may be, the refutation of authority and retire to private life, but submit to Christ. 

The divinity of kings being declared, the church shall be foster fathers of the church, and queens its nurses [Isa. 4:4]. Against the Christian denial or rejection of magistracy many passages which occur frequently, and especially in the Psalms, in which the right of rulers is asserted for them all, do not deprive them of their honor. Rather, by a noble discussion of this matter. For he states both that power is an ordinance of God [Rom. 13:1], and that there are no powers except those ordained by God [Rom. 13:1]. Further, that princes are ministers of God, for those doing good unto praise; for those doing evil, avengers unto wrath [Rom. 13:3–4]. To this may be added the examples of holy men, of whom some possessed kingdoms, as David, Josiah, and Hezekiah; others, lordships, as Joseph and Daniel; others, civil rule among a free people, as Moses, Joshua, and the judges. The Lord has declared his approval of their offices. Accordingly, no one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men.

5. Against the “Christian” denial or rejection of magistracy

Those who desire to usher in anarchy object that, although in antiquity kings and judges ruled over ignorant folk, yet that servile kind of governing is wholly incompatible today with the perfection which Christ brought with his gospel.16 In this they betray not only their ignorance but devilish arrogance, when they claim a perfection of which not even a hundredth part is seen in them. But whatever kind of men they may be, the refutation is easy. For where David urges all kings and rulers to kiss the Son of God [Ps. 2:12], he does not bid them lay aside their authority and retire to private life, but submit to Christ the power with which they have been invested, that he alone may tower over all. Similarly, Isaiah, when he promises that kings shall be foster fathers of the church, and queens its nurses [Isa. 49:23], does not deprive them of their honor. Rather, by a noble title he makes them defenders of God’s pious worshippers; for that prophecy looks to the coming of Christ. I knowingly pass over very many passages which occur frequently, and especially in the psalms, in which the right of rulers is asserted for them all [Ps. 21:22; 45:72; 89:110; 132]. But most notable of all is the passage of Paul where, admonishing Timothy that prayers be offered for kings in public assembly, he immediately adds the reason: “That we may lead a peaceful life under them with all godliness and honesty” [I Tim. 2:2]. By these words he entrusts the condition of the church to their protection and care.

6. Magistrates should be faithful as God’s deputies

*This consideration ought continually to occupy the magistrates themselves, since it can greatly spur them to exercise their office and bring them remarkable comfort to mitigate the difficulties of their task, which are indeed many and burdensome. For what great zeal for uprightness, for prudence, gentleness, self-control, and for innocence ought to be required of themselves by those who know that they have been ordained ministers of divine justice? How will they have the brazenness to admit injustice to their judgment seat, which they are told is the throne of the living God? How will they have the boldness to pronounce an unjust sentence, by that mouth which they know has been appointed an instrument of divine truth? With what conscience will they sign wicked decrees by that hand which they know has been appointed to record the acts of God? To sum up, if they remember that they are vicars of God, they should watch with all care, earnestness, and diligence, to represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice. And they should perpetually set before themselves the thought that “if all are cursed who carry out in deceit the work of God’s vengeance” [Jer. 48:10 p.], much more gravely cursed are they who deceitfully conduct themselves in a righteous calling. *Therefore, when Moses and Jehoshaphat wished to urge their judges to do their duty, they had nothing more effective to persuade them than what we have previously mentioned [Deut. 1:16]: “Consider what you do, for you exercise judgment not for man but for the Lord; since he is beside you in giving judgment. Now then, let the fear of the Lord be upon you. Take heed what you do, for there is no perversity with the Lord our God” [II Chron. 19:6–7 p.]. And in another place it is said: “God stood in the assembly of the gods, and holds judgment in the midst of the gods” [Ps. 82:1]. This is to hearten them for their task when they learn that they are deputies of God, to whom they must hereafter render account of the administration of their charge. And this admonition deserves to have great weight with them. For if they commit some fault, they are not only wrongdoers to men whom they wickedly trouble, but are also insulting to men whom they wickedly trouble, but are also insulting.
toward God himself, whose most holy judgments they defile [cf. Isa. 3:14-15]. Again, they have the means to comfort themselves greatly when they ponder in themselves that they are occupied not with profane affairs or those alien to a servant of God, but with a most holy office, since they are serving as God’s deputies.

7. The coercive character of magistracy does not hinder its recognition.

Those who, unmoved by so many testimonies of Scripture, dare rail against this holy ministry as a thing abhorrent to Christian religion and piety—what else do they do but revile God himself, whose ministry cannot be reproached without dishonor to Christian religion and piety—what else do they do but revile God himself? And these folk do not just reject the magistrates, but cast off God that he may not reign over them. For if the Lord truly said this of the people of Israel because they refused Samuel’s rule [I Sam. 8:7], why will it less truly be said today of these who let themselves rage against all governments ordained by God? The Lord said to his disciples that the kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over Gentiles, but it is not so among the disciples, where he who is first ought to become the least [Luke 22:25-26]; by this saying, they tell us, all Christians are forbidden to take kingdoms or governments. O skillful interpreters! There arose a contention among the disciples over which one would excel the others. To silence this vain ambition, the Lord taught them that their ministry is not like kingdoms, in which one is pre-eminent above the rest. What dishonor, I ask you, does this comparison do to kingly dignity? Indeed, what does it prove at all, except that the kingly office is not the ministry of an apostle? Moreover, among magistrates themselves, although there is a variety of forms, there is no difference in this respect, that we must regard all of them as ordained of God. For Paul also lumps them all together when he says that there is no power except from God [Rom. 13:1]. And that which is the least pleasant of all has been especially commended above the rest, that is, the power of one. This, because it brings with it the common bondage of all (except that one man to whom it subjects all things), in ancient times could not be acceptable to heroic and nobler natures. But to forestall their unjust judgments, Scripture expressly affirms that it is the providence of God’s wisdom that kings

18 Again referring to article vi of the Schleitheim Confession, 1527. Cf. sect. 8, note 7, above; IV. i. 28, note 35; Calvin, Instruction contre la secte des Anabaptistes (1544) (CR VII. 80); tr. "A Short Instruction for to arme all good Christian People Against the Pestiﬁerous Errors of the Common Sect of the Anabaptists (London, 1549) D 4a ff.

CH. XX MEANS OF GRACE: HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

1493

reign [cf. Prov. 8:15], and particularly commands us to honor the king [Prov. 24:21; I Peter 2:17].

(Forms of government, and duties of magistrates. Issues of war and taxation, 8–13)

8. The diversity of forms of government

Obviously, it would be an idle pastime for men in private life, who are disqualified from deliberating on the organization of any commonwealth, to dispute over what would be the best kind of government in that place where they live. Also this question admits of no simple solution but requires deliberation, since the nature of the discussion depends largely upon the circumstances. And if you compare the forms of government among themselves apart from the circumstances, it is not easy to distinguish which one of them excels in usefulness, for they contend on such equal terms. The fall from kingdom to tyranny is easy; but it is not much more difficult to fall from the rule of the best men to the faction of a few; yet it is easiest of all to fall from popular rule to sedition. For if the three forms of government which the philosophers discuss be considered in themselves, I will not deny that aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others: not indeed of itself, but because it is very rare for kings so to control themselves that their will will never disagrees with what is just and right; or for them to have been endowed with such great keenness and prudence, that each knows how much is enough. Therefore, men’s fault or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government, so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and, if one asserts himself unfairly, there


20 "Ut tutius sit ac magis tolerabile plures tenere gubernacula." Cf. IV. iii. 15, note 15; IV. iv. 10–11. In government, Calvin sees safety in numbers and expects thereby to obtain the advantages of co-operation, mutual admonition, and the restraint of individual self-assertion. In Geneva, he induced the Little Council to hold meetings, monthly or quarterly, as might seem best, for the simple purpose of mutual criticism, under pledge of secrecy. Cadier regards this passage as advocating oligarchy rather than democracy (Institution IV. 455, note 7); but the word plures throws the emphasis, not on the fewness of the ruling body, but on the fact that numbers share the responsibility. Cf. McNeill, Calvin on God and Political Duty, Introduction, pp. xxii f.; Bohatec, Calvin’s Lehre von Staat und Kirche, pp. 153–157.
may be a number of censors and masters to restrain his willfulness. "This has been both tried by experience, and also the Lord confirmed it by his authority when he ordained among the Israelites an aristocracy bordering on democracy, since he willed to keep them in best condition [Ex. 18:13–26; Deut. 19–17] until he should bring forward the image of Christ in David. And, as I freely admit that no kind of government is more happy than one where freedom is regulated with becoming moderation and is properly established on a durable basis, so also I reckon most countries are best held together harmful. ·However, as you will surely find if you fix your off, divine providence has wisely arranged that various countries kings over kingdoms, senates or municipal officers all these things are needlessly spoken to those for whom the will of the Lord is enough. For if it has seemed good to him to set government should transfer this very function to themselves, eyes not on one city alone, but look around and glance at the all these things are needlessly spoken to those for whom the will of the Lord is enough. For if it has seemed good to him to set
city where freedom is regulated with becoming moderation and is properly established on a durable basis, so also I reckon most countries are best held together harmful. ·However, as you will surely find if you fix your
off, divine providence has wisely arranged that various countries kings over kingdoms, senates or municipal officers all these things are needlessly spoken to those for whom the will of the Lord is enough. For if it has seemed good to him to set government should transfer this very function to themselves, eyes not on one city alone, but look around and glance at the
everything with impunity drives turbulent men to the point of wanting all vin-
dicators of violated piety removed from their midst."
Cicero, as in Laws II. ii. 7–9 (LCL edition, pp. 388–415).
This bears a resemblance to Thomas More’s Utopia II. ix, “Of the Religions of Utopia” (see Ralph Robinson’s translation [1559], ed. I. C. Collins, pp. 125 f.). The Basel edition of 1518 may have been used by Calvin (II. 140 ff.). Note here Calvin’s concern for the preservation of “piety,” and cf. sec. 32, below.
been oppressed by force from the hand of the oppressor," not to "grieve or wrong the alien, the widow, and the fatherless" or "shed innocent blood" [Jer. 22:3; cf. Vg.]. The exhortation which we read in Ps. 82 has the same purpose: that they should "give justice to the poor and needy, rescue the destitute and needy, and deliver the poor and needy from the hand of the oppressor" [Ps. 82:3–4]. And Moses commands the leaders whom he had appointed as his representatives to "hear the cases between their brethren, and judge . . . between a man and his brother, and the alien" and "not recognize faces in judgment, and hear small and great alike, and be afraid of no man, for the judgment is God's" [Deut. 1:16–17]. But I pass over such statements as these: that kings should not multiply horses for themselves; nor set their mind upon avarice; nor be lifted up above their brethren; that they should be constant in meditating upon the law of the Lord all the days of their life [Deut. 17:16–19]; that judges should not lean to one side or take bribes [Deut. 16:19]—and like passages which we read here and there in Scripture. For in explaining here the office of magistrates, it is not so much my purpose to instruct the magistrates themselves as to teach others what magistrates are and to what end God has appointed them. We see, therefore, that they are ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquillity, and that their sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all. Of these virtues David professes that he will be a pattern: when he has been elevated to the royal throne, he will not consent to any crimes, but will detest the impious, slanderers, and the proud, and will seek out from everywhere upright and faithful counselors [Ps. 101, esp. vs. 4, 5, 7, 6].

But since they cannot perform this unless they defend good men from the wrongs of the wicked, and give aid and protection to the oppressed, they have also been armed with power with which severely to coerce the open malefactors and criminals by whose wickedness the public peace is troubled or disturbed [cf. Rom. 13:3]. For from experience we thoroughly agree with the statement of Solon that all commonwealths are maintained by reward and punishment; take these away and the whole discipline of cities collapses and is dissolved. For the care of equity and justice grows cold in the minds of many, unless due honor has been prepared for virtue; and the lust of wicked men cannot be restrained except by severity and the infliction of penalties. And the prophet has included these two functions, when he bids kings and other rulers execute judgment and justice [Jer. 22:3; cf. ch. 21:12]. Justice, indeed, is to receive into safekeeping, to embrace, to protect, vindicate, and free the innocent. But judgment is to withstand the boldness of the impious, to repress their violence, to punish their misdeeds.

But here a seemingly hard and difficult question arises: if the law of God forbids all Christians to kill [Ex. 20:13; Deut. 5:17; Matt. 5:21], and the prophet prophesies concerning God's holy mountain (the church) that in it men shall not afflict or hurt [Isa. 11:9; 65:25)—how can magistrates be pious men and shedders of blood at the same time?

Yet if we understand that the magistrate in administering punishments does nothing by himself, but carries out the very judgments of God, we shall not be hampered by this scruple. The law of the Lord forbids killing; but, that murders may not go unpunished, the Lawgiver himself puts into the hand of his ministers a sword to be drawn against all murderers. It is not for the pious to afflict and hurt; yet to avenge, at the Lord's command, the affictions of the pious is not to hurt or to afflict. Would that this were ever before our minds—that nothing is done here from men's rashness, but all things are done on the authority of God who commands it; and while his authority goes before his wrath, avengers of wrongdoers [Rom. 13:4]. Therefore, if princes and other rulers recognize that nothing is more acceptable to the Lord than their obedience, let them apply themselves to this ministry, if, indeed, they are intent on having their piety, righteousness, and uprightness approved of God [cf. II Tim. 2:15].

Moses was impelled by this desire when, realizing that he had been destined by the Lord's power to be liberator of his people, he laid his hand upon the Egyptian [Ex. 2:12; Acts 7:24]. This was the case again, when, by slaying three thousand men in one day, he took vengeance upon the people's sacrilege [Ex. 32:


David also, when at the end of his life he ordered his son Solomon to kill Joab and Shimei [I Kings 2:5–6, 8–9]. Accordingly, he also includes this among kingly virtues: to destroy the wicked of the land, that all evildoers may be driven out of the city of God [Ps. 101:8]. To this also pertains the praise which is given to Solomon: “You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity” [Ps. 45:7; 44:8, Vg.].

How does Moses’ gentle and peaceable nature flame up into such savageness that, sprinkled and dripping with the blood of his brethren, he dashes through the camp to new carnage? How can David, a man of such great gentleness throughout life, as he breathes his last, make that bloody testament, that his son should not allow the hoary heads of Joab and Shimei to go in peace to the grave [I Kings 2:5–6, 8–9]? But both men, by executing the vengeance ordained of God, hallowed by cruelty their hands, which by sparing they would have defiled. “It is an abomination among kings,” says Solomon, “to do iniquity, for the throne is established in righteousness.” [Prov. 16:12]. Again: “A wise king scatters the evildoers and turns given to Solomon: “You have loved righteousness and hated iniquity” [Ps. 45:7; 44:8, Vg.].

Again: “A wise king scatters the evildoers and turns them upon the wheel” [Prov. 20:26 p.]. Again: “Remove the dross from the silver, and a vessel will come forth to the metal caster; remove the impious from the king’s sight, and his throne will be established in righteousness” [Prov. 25:4–5, cf. Geneva]. Again: “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord” [Prov. 17:15]. Again: “A rebel seeks evil for himself, and a cruel messenger is sent to him” [Prov. 17:11 p.]. Again: “He who says to the wicked, ‘You are righteous,’ will be cursed by peoples...and nations” [Prov. 24:34 p.]. Now if their true righteousness is to pursue the guilty and the impious with drawn sword, should they sheathe their sword and keep their hands clean of blood, while abandoned men wickedly range about with slaughter and massacre, they will become guilty of the greatest impiety, far indeed from winning praise for their goodness and righteousness thereby!

Begone, now, with that abrupt and savage harshness, and that tribunal which is rightly called the reef of accused men! For I am not one either to favor undue cruelty or think that a fair judgment can be pronounced unless clemency, that best counselor of kings and surest keeper of the kingly throne (as Solomon declares) [Prov. 20:28] is always present—clemency, which by a certain writer of antiquity was truly called the chief gift of princes. Yet it is necessary for the magistrate to pay attention to both, lest by excessive severity he either harm more than heal; or, by superstitious affectation of clemency, fall into the cruelest gentleness, if he should (with a soft and dissolute kindness) abandon many to their destruction. For during the reign of Nerva it was not without reason said: it is indeed bad to live under a prince with whom nothing is permitted; but much worse under one by whom everything is allowed.

II. On the right of the government to wage war

But kings and people must sometimes take up arms to execute such public vengeance. On this basis we may judge wars lawful which are so undertaken. For if power has been given them to preserve the tranquillity of their dominion, to restrain the seditious stirrings of restless men, to help those forcibly oppressed, to punish evil deeds—can they use it more opportune than to check the fury of one who disturbs both the repose of private individuals and the common tranquillity of all, who raises seditious tumults, and by whom violent oppressions and vile misdeeds are perpetrated? If they ought to be the guardians and defenders of the laws, they should also overthrow the efforts of all whose offenses corrupt the discipline of the laws. Indeed, if they rightly punish those robbers whose harmful acts have affected only a few, will they allow a whole country to be afflicted and devastated by robberies with impunity? For it makes no difference whether it be a king or the lowest of the common folk who invades a foreign country in which he has no right, and harasses it as an enemy. All such must, equally, be considered as robbers and punished accordingly. Therefore, both natural equity and the nature of the office dictate that princes must be armed not only to restrain the misdeeds of private individuals by judicial punishment, but also to defend by war the dominions entrusted to their safekeeping, if at any time they are under enemy attack. And


28 Seneca, On Clemency I. iii. 3 (LCL Seneca, Moral Essays I. 365 f.); cf. Calvin, Comm. Seneca On Clemency I. iii. (CR V. 41). See I. iii. 5, note 8; II. ii. 15, note 56; IV. vi. 8, note 16; and sec. 24, note 48, below, for other references in this edition to Seneca’s De clementia, on which Calvin as a young scholar wrote a notable commentary. On the place of this commentary in Calvin’s spiritual development, see A. M. Hugo, Calvin en Seneca.

29 Dio Cassius, Nerva, Epitome of Book lxviii. 3 (LCL Roman History VIII. 360 f.).
the Holy Spirit declares such wars to be lawful by many testi-
monies of Scripture.  

12. Restraint and humanity in war*

*But if anyone object against me that in the New Testament there exists no testimony or example which teaches that war is a thing lawful for Christians, I answer first that the reason for waging war which existed of old still persists today; and that, on the other hand, there is no reason that bars magistrates from defending their subjects. Secondly, I say that an express declaration of this matter is not to be sought in the writings of the apostles; for their purpose is not to fashion a civil government, but to establish the spiritual Kingdom of Christ. Finally, that it is there shown in passing that Christ by his coming has changed nothing in this respect. For if Christian doctrine (to use Augustine's words) condemned all wars, the soldiers asking counsel concerning salvation should rather have been advised to cast away their weapons and withdraw completely from military service. But they were told: "Strike no man, do no man wrong, be content with your wages" [Luke 3:14 p.]. When he taught them to be content with their wages, he certainly did not forbid them to bear arms.

*But it is the duty of all magistrates here to guard particularly against giving vent to their passions even in the slightest degree. Rather, if they have to punish, let them not be carried away with headlong anger, or be seized with hatred, or burn with implacable severity. Let them also (as Augustine says) have pity on the common nature in the one whose special fault they are punishing. Or, if they must arm themselves against the enemy, that is, the armed robber, let them not lightly seek occasion to do so; indeed, let them not accept the occasion when offered, unless they are driven to it by extreme necessity. For if we must perform much more than the heathen philosopher required when he wanted war to seem a seeking of peace, surely everything else ought to be tried before recourse is had to arms. Lastly, in both situations let them not allow themselves to be swayed by any private affection, but be led by concern for the people alone. Otherwise, they very wickedly abuse their power, which has been given them not for their own advantage, but for the benefit and service of others.

Moreover, this same right to wage war furnishes the reason for garrisons, leagues, and other civil defenses. Now, I call "garrisons," those troops which are stationed among the cities to defend the boundaries of a country; "leagues," those pacts which are made by neighboring princes to the end that if any trouble should happen in their lands, they may come to one another's aid, and join forces to put down the common enemies of mankind. I call "civil defenses," things used in the art of war.

13. Concerning the right of the government to levy tribute

*Lastly, I also wish to add this, that tributes and taxes are the lawful revenues of princes, which they may chiefly use to meet the public expenses of their office; yet they may similarly use them for the magnificence of their household, which is joined, so to speak, with the dignity of the authority they exercise. As we see, David, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jehoshaphat, and other holy kings, also Joseph and Daniel (according to the dignity of their office) were, without offending piety, lavish at public expense, and we read in Ezekiel that a very large portion of the land was assigned to the kings [Ezek. 48:10]. There, although the prophet portrays the spiritual Kingdom of Christ, he seeks the pattern for his picture from a lawful human kingdom.

*But he does so in such a way that princes themselves will in turn remember that their revenues are not so much their private chests as the treasuries of the entire people (for Paul so testifies [Rom. 13:6]), which cannot be squandered or despoiled without manifest injustice. Or rather, that these are almost the very blood of the people, which would be the harshest inhumanity not to spare. Moreover, let them consider that their impost and levies, and other kinds of tributes are nothing but supports of public necessity; but that to impose them upon the common folk without cause is tyrannical extortion.

These considerations do not encourage princes to waste and expensive luxury, as there is surely no need to add fuel to their
cupidity, already too much kindled of itself. But as it is very necessary that, whatever they venture, they should venture with a pure conscience before God, they must be taught how much is lawful for them, that they may not in impious self-confidence come under God's displeasure. And this doctrine is not superfluous for private individuals in order that they should not let themselves rashly and shamelessly decry any expenses of princes, even if these exceed the common expenditures of the citizens.

(Public law and judicial procedures, as related to Christian duty, 14–21)

14. Old Testament law and the laws of nations

*Next to the magistracy in the civil state come the laws, stoutest sinews of the commonwealth, or, as Cicero, after Plato, calls them, the souls, without which the magistracy cannot stand, even as they themselves have no force apart from the magistracy. Accordingly, nothing truer could be said than that the law is a silent magistrate; the magistrate, a living law.35

But because I have undertaken to say with what laws a Christian state ought to be governed, this is no reason why anyone should expect a long discourse concerning the best kind of laws. This would be endless and would not pertain to the present purpose and place. I shall in but a few words, and as in passing, note what laws can piously be used before God, and be rightly administered among men.

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 ruled by the common laws of nations.36 Let other men consider how perilous and seditious this notion is; it will be enough for me to have proved it false and foolish.

We must bear in mind that common division of the whole law of God published by Moses into moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws.37 And we must consider each of these parts, that we may understand what there is in them that pertains to us, and what does not. In the meantime, let no one be concerned over the small

15. Moral, ceremonial, and judicial law distinguished*

*The moral law (to begin first with it) is contained under two heads, one of which simply commands us to worship God with pure faith and piety; the other, to embrace men with sincere affection. Accordingly, it is the true and eternal rule of righteousness, prescribed for men of all nations and times, who wish to conform their lives to God's will. For it is his eternal and unchangeable will that he himself indeed be worshiped by us all, and that we love one another.

The ceremonial law was the tutelage of the Jews, with which it seemed good to the Lord to train this people, as it were, in their childhood, until the fullness of time should come [Gal. 4:3–4: cf. ch. 3:23–24], in order that he might fully manifest his wisdom to the nations, and show the truth of those things which then were foreshadowed in figures.

The judicial law, given to them for civil government, imparted certain formulas of equity and justice, by which they might live together blamelessly and peaceably.

Those ceremonial practices indeed properly belonged to the doctrine of piety, inasmuch as they kept the church of the Jews in service and reverence to God, and yet could be distinguished from piety itself. In like manner, the form of their judicial laws, although it had no other intent than how best to preserve that very love which is enjoined by God's eternal law, had something distinct from that precept of love. Therefore, as ceremonial laws could be abrogated while piety remained safe and unharmed, so too, when these judicial laws were taken away, the perpetual duties and precepts of love could still remain.

But if this is true, surely every nation is left free to make such laws as it foresees to be profitable for itself. Yet these must be in conformity to that perpetual rule of love, so that they indeed vary in form but have the same purpose. For I do not think that those barbarous and savage laws such as gave honor to thieves, permitted promiscuous intercourse, and others both more filthy and more absurd, are to be regarded as laws. For they are abhor-
rent not only to all justice, but also to all humanity and gentleness.

16. Unity and diversity of laws

What I have said will become plain if in all laws we examine, as we should, these two things: the constitution of the law, and the equity on which its constitution is itself founded and rests. Equity, because it is natural, cannot but be the same for all, and therefore, this same purpose ought to apply to all laws, whatever their object. Constitutions have certain circumstances upon which they in part depend. It therefore does not matter that they are different, provided all equally press toward the same goal of equity.

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.

God's law forbids stealing. The penalties meted out to thieves in the Jewish state are to be seen in Exodus [Ex. 22:1-4]. The very ancient laws of other nations punished theft with double restitution; the laws which followed these distinguished between theft, manifest and not manifest. Some proceeded to banishment, others to flogging, others finally to capital punishment. False among the Jews [Deut. 19:18-21]; elsewhere, only by deep disgrace; in some nations, by hanging; codes equally avenge murder with blood, but with different kinds of death. Against adulterers some nations levy severer, others, lighter punishments. Yet we see how, with such laws, all laws tend to the same end. For, together with one voice, they pronounce punishment against those crimes which God's eternal law has condemned, namely, murder, theft, adultery, and false witness. But they do not agree on the manner of punishment. Nor is this either necessary or expedient. There are countries which, unless they deal cruelly with murderers by way of horrible examples, must immediately perish from slughters and robberies. 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 humaneness 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 became a wise lawgiver—he had special concern for it in making its laws.

17. Christians may use the law courts, but without hatred and revenge*

It now remains for us to examine what we had set in the last place: what usefulness the laws, judgments, and magistrates have for the common society of Christians. To this is also joined another question: how much deference private individuals ought to yield to their magistrates, and how far their obedience ought to go. To very many the office of magistrate seems super-

* Cf. sec. 14, note 36, above. The present section emphasizes the point that positive law rightly relies on natural law and equity, and requires penalties adapted to nations and conditions, without dependence on Old Testament legislation.

* In this and following sections, Calvin's familiarity with legal procedures reflects his early legal training. Cf. Cadier, Institution IV. 497.
cannot but be impious. For this must be a set principle for all Christians: that a lawsuit, however just, can never be rightly prosecuted by any man, unless he treat his adversary with the same love and good will as if the business under controversy were already amicably settled and composed. Perhaps someone will interpose here that such moderation is so uniformly absent from any lawsuit that it would be a miracle if any such were found. Indeed, I admit that, as the customs of these times go, an example of an upright litigant is rare; but the thing itself, when not corrupted by the addition of anything evil, does not cease to be good and pure. But when we hear that the help of the magistrate is a holy gift of God, we must more diligently guard against its becoming polluted by our fault.

19. Against the rejection of the judicial process

As for those who strictly condemn all legal contentions, let them realize that they therewith repudiate God's holy ordinance, and one of the class of gifts that can be clean to the clean [Titus 1:15]; unless, perchance, they wish to accuse Paul of a shameful act, since he both repelled the slanders of his accusers, exposing at the same time their craft and malice [Acts 24:12 ff.], and in court claimed for himself the privilege of Roman citizenship [Acts 16:37; 22:1, 25], and, when there was need, appealed from the unjust judge to the judgment seat of Caesar [Acts 25:10–11].

This does not contradict the fact that all Christians are forbidden to desire revenge, which we banish far away from Christian courts [Lev. 19:18; Matt. 5:39; Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19]. For if it is a civil case, a man does not take the right path unless he commits his cause, with innocent simplicity, to the judge as public protector; and he should think not at all of returning evil for evil [Rom. 12:17], which is the passion for revenge. If, however, the action is brought for some capital or serious offense, we require that the accuser be one who comes into court without a burning desire for revenge or resentment over private injury, but having in mind only to prevent the efforts of a destructive man from doing harm to society. For if you remove a vengeful mind, that command which forbids revenge to Christians is not broken.

But, some will object, not only are they forbidden to desire revenge, but they are also bidden to wait upon the hand of the Lord, who promises that he will be present to avenge the oppressed and afflicted [Rom. 12:19]; while those who seek aid from the magistrate, either for themselves or for others, anticipate all the vengeance of the Heavenly Protector. Not at all! For we

But here I have to dwell with two kinds of men. There are very many who so boil with a rage for litigation that they are never at peace with themselves unless they are quarreling with others. And they carry on their lawsuits with bitter and deadly hatred, and an insane passion to revenge and hurt, and they pursue them with implacable obstinacy even to the ruin of their adversaries. Meanwhile, to avoid being thought of as doing something wrong, they defend such perversity on the pretense of legal procedure. But if one is permitted to go to law with a brother, one is not therewith allowed to hate him, or be seized with a mad desire to harm him, or hound him relentlessly.

18. The Christian's motives in litigation*

Such men should therefore understand that lawsuits are permissible if rightly used. There is right use, both for the plaintiff in suing and for the accused in defending himself, if the defendant presents himself on the appointed day and with such exception, as he can, defends himself without bitterness, but only with this intent, to defend what is his by right, and if on the other hand, the plaintiff, undeservedly oppressed either in his person or in his property, puts himself in the care of the magistrate, makes his complaint, and seeks what is fair and good. But he should be far from all passion to harm or take revenge, far from harshness and hatred, far from burning desire for contention. He should rather be prepared to yield his own and suffer anything than be carried away with enmity toward his adversary. On the other hand, where hearts are filled with malice, corrupted by envy, inflamed with wrath, breathing revenge, finally so inflamed with desire for contention, that love is somewhat impaired in them, the whole court action of even the most just cause
must consider that the magistrate's revenge is not man's but God's, which he extends and exercises, as Paul says [Rom. 13:4], through the ministry of man for our good.

20. The Christian endures insults, but with amity and equity defends the public interest

*We are not in any more disagreement with Christ's words in which he forbids us to resist evil, and commands us to turn the right cheek to him who has struck the left, and to give our cloak to him who has taken away our coat [Matt. 5:39-40]. He indeed wills that the hearts of his people so utterly recoil from any desire to retaliate that they should rather allow double injury to be done them than desire to pay it back. And we are not leading them away from this forbearance. For truly, Christians ought to be a kind of men born to bear slanders and injuries, open to the malice, deceits, and mockeries of wicked men. And not that only, but they ought to bear patiently all these evils. That is, they should have such complete spiritual composure that, having received one offense, they make ready for another, promising themselves throughout life nothing but the bearing of a perpetual cross. Meanwhile, let them also do good to those who do them harm, and bless those who curse them [Luke 6:28; cf. Matt. 5:44], and (this is their only victory) strive to conquer evil with good [Rom. 12:21]. So minded, they will not seek an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, as the Pharisees taught their disciples to desire revenge, but, as we are instructed by Christ, they will so suffer their body to be maimed, and their possessions to be maliciously seized, that they will forgive and voluntarily pardon those wrongs as soon as they have been inflicted upon them [Matt. 5:38 ff.].

Yet this equity and moderateness of their minds will not prevent them from using the help of the magistrate in preserving their own possessions, while maintaining friendliness toward their enemies; or zealous for public welfare, from demanding the punishment of a guilty and pestilent man, who, they know, can be changed only by death. *For Augustine truly interprets the purpose of all these precepts. The righteous and godly man should be ready patiently to bear the malice of those whom he desires to become good, in order to increase the number of good men—not to add himself to the number of the bad by a malice like theirs. Secondly, these precepts pertain more to the preparation of the heart which is within than to the work which is done in

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 evil-speaking 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*), 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,* which they recognize as a juris-
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 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 creature (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 2:13-14.]

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 contempt 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 here 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

Calvin's rendering here of I Peter 2:13-14 differs considerably from VG, and in less degree from his own Latin text in the Commentary on I Peter. Cf. Geneva Bible and KJV.

Xenophon, Cyropaedia VIII. ii. 10 (LCL edition, II. 336 f.).
Homer, Odyssey ii. 234: Odysseus is "gentle as a father to his people" (LCL Odyssey I. 52 f.); Seneca uses the expression pater patriae in De clementia I. xiv. 2 (LCL edition, pp. 358 f.); Calvin, Comm. Seneca De clementia I. xiv (CR V. 106).
Homer, Iliad ii. 243: Agamemnon is "a shepherd of his people" (LCL Iliad I. 68 f.); Cicero, Pro Sextio xxx. 65 (LCL edition, pp. 122 f.). Quintilian, in Institutes of Oratory VIII. vi. 17, 18 (LCL Quintilian III. 310 f.), cautions against this trite metaphor in pleading a case.

The phrase in parentheses following is an addition of 1545.
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 unworthy 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. Accordingly, 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 Jerusalem—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 destroying 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, powerful, 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 Nebuchadnezzar’s son Belshazzar: “The Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar, your father, kingship and magnificence, honor and glory; and because of the magnificence that he gave him, all peoples, tribes, and tongues were trembling and fearful before him” [Dan. 5:18–19, cf. Vg.]. When we hear that a king has been ordained 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 who 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 menservants, 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 outstretched 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.**

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 subject 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. 24:8, 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 innocent? . . . 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” [1 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 toward 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 engraved 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 despitely 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 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.

*Here 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 Chusian, king of Syria, through Othniel [Judg. 3:9]; and from other servitudes through other kings or judges. 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 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.

51 Cf. Catullus xxii. 21: “Sed non videmus manticae quod in tergo est” (LCL Catullus, p. 28); 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.

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 overthrew intolerable governments. Let the princes hear and be afraid.53

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.

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

54 This packed 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. 497-494, 499. It is of interest that Zwingli, in his treatise Der Hirt (The Shepherd), states that as the Spartans had their ephors, the Roman 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 majority 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 5:3: "Hic demum maxime opitulatia 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 XLI. 371). "Perhaps," he says here, there is a parallel in the three estates 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 bodics or parliaments more or less effectively and regularly functioning, capable of author to restrain monarchal absolutism or tyranny. Calvin seems to be summoning them to assume the duty of caring lor the people's interests, and preserving to the people "the inestimable boon" of liberty. Cf. CR XXIX. 544; XXX. 185; McNell, "The Democratic Element in Calvin's Thought," Church History XVIII (1949), pp. 164-166, 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); Lord Molyneux, ed., 1741; the Defense Against Tyrants (1575), by "Junius Brutus"—probably a joint work of Hubert Languet and Philippe de 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


The weighty treatise of Johannes Althusius, Politica methodice digesta (1609), develops the main political conceptions of Calvin; see especially the edition, by 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 Drummond, 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 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. 486-482; H. Strothol, "Le Droit à la resistance," pp. 151 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, unto defy them [comparare in iurum capitam, lit., "to spit on their heads"] than to obey them." (CR XLI. 29).
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 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. 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

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.