John Calvin, the famous Reformation theologian, is widely recognized for his exegetical brilliance in the study of both the Old and New Testaments, his contribution to Christian theology, and his work in pastoral ministry. The French Reformer is also well known for his political theory, as his writings are saturated with references to the topic. In his article, “John Calvin on Civil Government,” John McNeill insisted, “It would be difficult or impossible to name another eminent theologian whose correspondence is so fraught with references to contemporary political issues.” Political references are observable in The Institutes, which devotes all of chapter 20 of book four to the discussion of civil government. This inclusion of Calvin’s political reflection is not coincidental, as John de Gruchy explains: “This is surely unusual for a work of systematic theology. But it is significant and reminds us that the Institutes were published, from the first to the last edition, at a time of turmoil and persecution.” Donald McKim adds, “As a theologian and pastor, Calvin addressed political ideas and issues more from necessity than from direct inclination or intention.”

1. A rough draft of this paper was presented at the 2018 Calvin Congress at Westminster Theological Seminary.
sixteenth century and its impact upon the church, addressing issues of civil government was unavoidable for Calvin.  

In his article, “The Political Theory of John Calvin,” G. Joseph Gatis explains that Calvin’s political theory addressed four areas: (1) a distinction between church and state, (2) a summary of checks and balances on power, (3) the citizen’s submission to the state, and (4) the state’s responsibility to God. It is the third of these (and partially the second) that is the subject of this article. That the believer’s responsibility to governing authorities is one of the most difficult areas of theology hardly requires defense. Must believers always submit to pagan governments? How should believers respond to tyrants or evil rulers? Are there any biblical grounds for revolution? Because of his exegetical brilliance and the political climate of his day, Calvin’s contribution to this theological topic is a worthwhile study.

As expected, Calvin’s work in this area is not without controversy. To start, there is much confusion as to what Calvin actually taught on this subject. Some scholars argue that Calvin opposed all participation in revolution by believers, whereas others insist that Calvin began a Protestant tradition of revolution against oppressive governments. Calvin has also been accused of inconsistency and contradiction in his conclusions, and particularly in his attempt to reconcile biblical commands of submission with biblical examples of

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8. For example, John Fea, commenting on the significance of 4.20.27 in The Institutes, concluded, “John Calvin...taught that rebellion against civil government was never justified.... In the end, many patriotic clergy may have been more influenced in their political positions by Locke than the Bible” (John Fea, “Does America Have a Biblical Heritage,” in The Bible in the Public Square: Its Enduring Influence in American Life (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2014), 78–79).
9. For example, addressing the significance of Calvin’s comments in 4.20.31 of The Institutes, Davis argues, “Calvin argued for the right of designated representatives of the people to resist the tyranny of kings. The influence of this important sentence can be seen in later writings on politics and revolution, such as the Lex Rex of Samuel Rutherford (1644), the Politica methodice digesta of Johannes Althusius (1603), and the Lutheran Magdeburg Confession, which affirmed the duty of armed resistance to a ruler who violated the law of God” (John Jefferson Davis, Evangelical Ethics [Philipsburg, Pa.: P&R Publishing, 2015], 228–29). See also the discussion in Christopher Elwood, A Brief Introduction to John Calvin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 73–76.
political resistance. Furthermore, some scholars insist that Calvin’s attitude towards submission changed over time and that such change is evident in his writings, especially his sermons from 1559 onward.

This article examines Calvin’s theology regarding the submission of the believer to governing authorities in order to resolve some of these issues. There are four primary sources for Calvin’s understanding of the believer’s responsibility to the governing authorities: (1) *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*; (2) Calvin’s Commentaries, particularly those on Daniel, Romans, 1 Peter, 1 Timothy, and Titus; (3) Calvin’s Letters, and (4) Calvin’s sermons. Although some scholars only examine the first two sources to explain Calvin’s perspectives, it is also important to recognize the development in Calvin’s thought which took place after the final publication of *The Institutes* in 1559. Therefore, this article will first address Calvin’s thought using the *Institutes* as the foundational text with Calvin’s Commentaries written prior to 1559 in support. Following that evaluation, this paper will then examine Calvin’s works following the final publication of *The Institutes*.

Research into Calvin’s understanding of the believer’s responsibility to civil government reveals a stark tension. That Calvin held to a strong and consistent anti-revolutionary view of civil polity is evident in the *Institutes, Commentaries, and Letters*. At the same time, Calvin’s work, and particularly his sermons presented after 1559, also reveals the overwhelming tension between the biblical data and sociopolitical pressure that would put Calvin’s exegesis to the test.

**The Believer’s Responsibility to the Government**

When considering political theory as part of systematic theology, one must, as one does with all subsets of theology, summarize the entirety of the biblical data and organize one’s findings in a systematic presentation. As a good theologian, Calvin began his theology on the submission of believers to government with general conclusions. He then moved to specific issues and difficulties.

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The Believer’s Duties

Calvin’s presentation began with a summary of the believer’s general duties towards rulers. He stated bluntly, “The first duty of subjects towards their rulers, is to entertain the most honorable views of their office, recognizing it as a delegated justification from God, and on that account receiving and reverencing them as the ministers and ambassadors of God.” Among Calvin’s proof texts were Romans 13:1–2, Titus 3:1, and 1 Peter 2:13. That Calvin presented little exegesis of the passages themselves suggests that, for Calvin, their meaning was obvious. Because of God’s commands in these passages, believers were to show “obedience to [rulers], whether in complying with edicts, or in paying tribute, or in undertaking public offices and burdens, which relate to the common defense, or in executing and other orders.”

Furthermore, believers were not simply to obey rulers, but also to give honor to rulers. Calvin was aware of many in his day who, while obeying rulers, saw them as a kind of “necessary evil,” and thus did not respect them even if they obeyed them. In contrast, Calvin, citing 1 Peter 2:17 and Proverbs 24:21, recognized the importance of a right attitude towards rulers, one that included a “sincere and candid esteem.” Of course, such honor was not license for approval of any ruler’s evils, but rather a respect for rulers because of their office. Calvin explained, “I speak not of the men as if the mask of dignity could cloak folly, or cowardice, or cruelty, or wicked or flagitious manners, and thus acquire for vice the praise of virtue; but I say that the station itself is deserving of honor and reverence, and that those who rule should, in respect of their office, be held by us in esteem and veneration.”

The Biblical and Theological Justification for These Duties

For Calvin, the sovereignty of God played a central role in the justification for his theological conclusions. Joel Beeke explains, “God’s sovereignty was one of the dominant principles of John Calvin’s life.

13. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.22.
15. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.23.
16. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.22.
17. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.22.
18. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.22.
as well as of his biblical exposition and theology. It permeated all that he did and thought.”

Citing Daniel 2 and 4, Calvin reminded his readers of “that divine providence which, not without cause, is so often set before us in Scripture, and that special act of distributing kingdoms, and setting up as kings whomever he pleases.”

According to Calvin, “obedience is due to all who rule, because they have been raised to that honor not by chance, but by God’s providence. For many are wont to inquire too scrupulously by what right power has been attained; but we ought to be satisfied with this alone.” The revelation concerning the enthronement of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar was particularly important to Calvin’s thesis. He identified Jeremiah 27:5–8 as the “most remarkable and memorable passage” on the subject and argued that “the divine decree had placed [Nebuchadnezzar] on the throne of the kingdom, and admitted him to regal majesty, which could not be lawfully violated.”

According to Calvin, God was sovereign in the establishment of kingdoms and had purposes in making these arrangements. For this reason, Calvin concluded, “Let no man here deceive himself, since we cannot resist the magistrate without resisting God.”

Furthermore, the believer’s submission to rulers was also practical. Calvin argued that “the right of government is ordained by God for the wellbeing of mankind” and “they are the means which he designedly appoints for the preservation of legitimate order.” Calvin concluded, “Since God keeps the world in order by the ministry of magistrates, all they who despise their authority are enemies to mankind.”

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22. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.27.
23. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.23.
25. John Calvin, Commentary on James, Peter, 1 John, Jude.
shakes off their yoke, is an enemy of equity and justice, and is therefore devoid of all humanity.”

Tyrants and the Believer’s Duty
Calvin’s exegesis inevitably leads to the question, Does the believer have any biblical or theological justification to rebel against bad rulers because of their poor leadership? Are believers to submit to rulers regardless of the ruler’s actions or commands? Calvin was ready for these difficult concerns and addressed them thoroughly.

The Believer’s Response to Tyrants
Calvin recognized the nature of man to rebel against evil rulers. He admitted, “The natural feeling of the human mind has always been no less to assail tyrants with hatred and execration, than to look up to just kings with love and veneration.” However, for Calvin, submission to governing authority was non-negotiable. He insisted, “But if we have respect for the word of God, it will lead us farther, and make us subject not only to the authority of those princes who honestly and faithfully perform their duty towards us, but all princes.” Of course, many in Calvin’s time—just as in the present—would argue that governments have a responsibility to rule justly, and if they do not do so, then they do not deserve respect. Calvin was ready for this rebuttal. He counterargued, “But rulers, you will say, owe mutual duties to those under them. This I have already confessed. But if from this you conclude that obedience is to be returned to none but just governors, you reason absurdly.”

Calvin’s reasoning was threefold. First, he appealed to other commands of submissions in Scripture, particularly that within the family. He asked, if parents and husbands failed in their duties as parents and husbands, “would children be less bound to their parents, and wives to their husbands?” For Calvin, a failure for believers to submit to bad governments simply because they were bad could justify the
destruction of other important societal structures. Instead, believers are “to submit each to his own duty,”31 which included believers to governing authorities. Second, Calvin reminded his readers that the biblical commands for submission came from a context in which the church existed under, not a just government, but rather an oppressive government. Explaining 1 Peter 2:13, Calvin argued,

As Peter referred especially to the Roman Emperor, it was necessary to add this admonition; for it is certain that the Romans through unjust means rather than in a legitimate way penetrated into Asia and subdued these countries. Besides, the Caesars, who then reigned, had possessed themselves of the monarchy by tyrannical force. Hence Peter as it were forbids these things to be controverted, for he shews that subjects ought to obey their rulers without hesitation, because they are not made eminent, unless elevated by God’s hand.32

Lastly, Calvin appealed to the sovereignty of God. He argued, “If we constantly keep before our eyes and minds the fact, that even the most iniquitous kings are appointed by the same decree which establishes all regal authority, we will never entertain the seditious thought, that a king is to be treated according to his deserts, and that we are not bound to act the part of good subjects to him who does not in his turn act the part of a king to us.”33

For these reasons, Calvin argued that believers should not revolt against even bad governments. Instead, because rulers provided for the public defense and protection of citizens, Calvin insisted that believers offer prayers to God for their rulers.34 Citing 1 Timothy 2:1–2, Calvin argued, “To testify that they do not feign subjection, but are sincerely and cordially subject, Paul adds, that they are to commend the safety and prosperity of those under whom they live to God.”35 He also added,

Indeed, the depravity of men is not a reason why God’s ordinance should not be loved. Accordingly, seeing that God

31. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.29.
32. Calvin, Commentary on James, Peter, 1 John, Jude.
33. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.27.
35. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.23.
appointed magistrates and princes for the preservation of mankind, however much they fall short of the divine appointment, still we must not on that account cease to love what belongs to God, and to desire that it may remain in force. That is the reason why believers, in whatever country they live, must not only obey the laws and the government of magistrates, but likewise in their prayers supplicate God for their salvation.36

God’s Use of Tyrants

Beyond Calvin’s appeals referenced above, one of Calvin’s strongest arguments for the believer’s submission to tyrants was their use in the Lord’s divine plan. Again, one can see the sovereignty of God as central to Calvin’s thought. Tyrants may assume their absolute authority, but for Calvin, tyrants “derive their power from none but him,”37 and thus tyrants were clay in God’s hands.

Calvin was also insistent that, while good rulers were a sign of the Lord’s favor, unrighteous rulers were a sign of the Lord’s judgment.38 He argued, “Those, indeed, who rule for public good, are true examples of and specimens of his benevolence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by him to punish the people for their inequity.”39 Calvin added, “We need not labor to prove that an impious king is a mark of the Lord’s anger, since I presume no one will deny it, and that this is not less true of a king than of a robber who plunders your good, an adulterer who defiles your bed, and an assassin who aims at your life, since all such calamities are classed by Scripture among the curses of God.”40 Calvin also exemplified this point in his commentary on Romans. Addressing 13:3, he concluded, “For since the wicked prince is the Lord’s scourge to punish the sins of the people, let us remember that it happens through our fault that this excellent blessing of God is turned into a curse.”41 Although he did not explain if the crowning of every tyrant was the direct act of divine judgment, nevertheless the use of tyranny by God to judge sin was, for Calvin, a biblically defensible position.

36. Calvin, Commentary on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.
37. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.25.
39. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.25.
40. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.25.
41. Calvin, Commentary on Romans.
Lesser Magistrates and the Justice of God
Of course, one would be ignorant to conclude that Calvin’s insistence on the believer’s submission to governing authorities left absolutely no check upon unjust governments. According to Calvin, God had the right to overthrow unrighteous rulers just as He had the right to place them in authority. 42 Although Calvin rejected the private citizen’s right to revolution, he did advocate that magistrates of the people might restrain unjust rulers. 43 This punishment of tyranny could be accomplished by either those commissioned among God’s people (e.g., Moses leading Israel out of Egypt) or sovereignly through pagans lusting after their own aims and desires (e.g., the Medes and Persians conquering the Babylonian Empire). Calvin explained:

Herein is the goodness, power, and providence of God wondrously displayed. At one time he raises up manifest avengers from among his own servants, and gives them his command to punish accursed tyranny, and delivers his people from calamity when they are unjustly oppressed; at another time he employs, for this purpose, the fury of men who have other thoughts and other aims. 44

Explaining this passage, Thomas Davis notes, “Calvin did allow that, whereas citizens could not rise up against their government, there were those who could lawfully depose a tyrant—those who served beneath the ruler. Those who lawfully held positions of authority under a ruler could be used by God to overthrow a government. In other words, Calvin allowed for a transfer of power within government, even one by force, if undertaken by the right people.” 45 This summary is correct but requires further clarification. Calvin did recognize that the Lord can raise up certain men to overthrow

44. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.30.
tyrants. However, this permission did not extend to the believer. Calvin remarked, “Although the Lord takes vengeance upon unbridled domination, let us not therefore suppose that that vengeance is committed to us, to whom no command has been given but to obey and suffer.”

**Lesser Magistrates in Calvin’s Day?**

One of the most controversial elements of Calvin’s discussion on the believer’s submission to the governing authorities in *The Institutes* is the so-called “perhaps clause.” In section 31 of chapter 20, Calvin

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46. Calvin did distinguish between the ethical nature of the activity of the two kinds of magistrates. The former, acting upon the Lord’s command, resist tyrants in righteousness, but the latter, do so out of evil. Nevertheless, the latter are still used by God to accomplish His purposes (Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.20.30; cf. Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin* [Cambridge: James Clarke, 2002], 243).

47. Boer is critical of Calvin’s insistence that God could use the second rank of magistrates for His own purposes. He argues, “The second argument concerning these divine agents of political vengeance—that God may use for his own good the evil intent of others—introduces an argument fraught with danger. It may go in either direction. For instance, I can see it being used by some for the argument that Hitler actually carried out a good and necessary task despite his evil intent, namely, the belated bourgeois revolution in Germany. But then it may also be used to argue that Stalin, however brutal he might have been, did succeed in modernizing Russia. Or indeed, that China’s annexation of Tibet has brought it into the modern world, or that the theft of Hawaii by the United States has been good for the place in the long run. The list is endless, but it boils down to the old Jesuit position that the end justifies the means. Adding the qualifier that the good in question must be good for God’s people does not change the volatility of the original point” (Boer, *Political Grace*, 85).

This argument is emotionally appealing but plagued with difficulty. As Calvin explains, Scripture gives evidence of God’s use of evil men to accomplish His purpose, but that does not prove that every historical example of revolution is, in fact, God’s decree to use evil to fight evil. Just because God can use evil men to judge others does not mean that every historical example of evil is an example of God using evil men to judge others (cf. Luke 13:1–9 and Calvin’s *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 2). Furthermore, God’s use of evil men to accomplish His purposes is hardly an example of “the ends justifies the means” argumentation. In fact, there is at least one instance in Scripture in which God uses Assyria then punishes them for their sin (cf. Isa. 10:5–12 and Calvin’s *Commentary on Isaiah*, vol. 1). God could certainly use any leader as an instrument of judgment, but His use of evil men does not indicate that He approves of their actions. Ultimately, it is impossible to make these kinds of claims and charge Calvin’s argument as “fraught with difficulty.”


stated that “perhaps” the “power exercised in each kingdom by the three orders” was comparable to the lesser magistrates of the second kind, i.e., those who had not received direct revelation from God to overthrow a tyrant but had indirectly been appointed by God through His decree to overthrow tyrants.

Some scholars understand Calvin to mean that he did believe there to be magistrates in his day who had been decreed to overthrow the tyranny of kings. For example, Cornelius Van Dam argued, “This view of Calvin was very influential in the subsequent struggles for securing liberty, especially for the people in the Netherlands and Scotland. By restricting the right of opposing the rulers to lawfully established lower magistrates, Calvin places the right of resistance within the accepted political framework.” Gatis, citing McNeill, goes even further and states, “Calvin believed the lower magistrates of England, Scotland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, Spain, the diets of the Swiss confederation, and the imperial diets of Germany should assume the role of the Spartan ephors, thus limiting the tyranny of idolatrous kings.”

However, in that same article, McNeill rightly recognized Calvin’s use of the word “perhaps,” meaning that Calvin thought it was possible that magistrates existed in these countries that had the right to overthrow tyrants (as Moses and others did before them) but was not certain on the matter. McNeill did argue that Calvin saw “at least the possibility of some guarantee of liberty and security for the people” and thus his words became an “invitation to these bodies to play the role of the ephors and check the irresponsible arrogance of kings.” Nevertheless, this is as much as one could conclude, for, apart from a direct declaration of Scripture, it would be impossible to declare anyone a magistrate of the rank of Moses, and one could only guess if there were magistrates of the second order in Calvin’s day.

Civil Disobedience
The question of civil disobedience naturally follows from the previous discussion. If believers in general are not given the duty to overthrow rulers, then what can a believer do when a government decrees and enforces injustice? Although the Institutes and Calvin’s Commentaries are clear regarding the impermissibility of revolution, we must not conclude that Calvin was ignorant of the tension between submission to the Lord and submission to laws that might contradict the Lord’s decrees. For Calvin, matters regarding piety were worthy of civil disobedience. He argued, “But in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, no, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him...how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offense of him for whose sake you must obey men.... We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord.”54

The phrase, “subject only in the Lord” is important and thus requires clarification. The concern for Calvin was the piety of the commands, not the piety of the ruler. He said, “Since Peter, one of heaven’s heralds, has published the edict, ‘We ought to obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29), let us console ourselves with the thought, that we are rendering the obedience which the Lord requires, when we endure anything rather than turn aside from piety.”55 He added, “If [rulers] command anything against [God] let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved by all the dignity which they possess as magistrates.”56 It is important to recognize Calvin’s distinctions between obeying unrighteous rulers and refusing to obey unrighteous laws. Tyranny alone did not justify civil disobedience; rather, the ruler must command believers to violate God’s law before believers are to resist. Nevertheless, this resistance is not conducted in violence, but in a refusal to acknowledge the unjust law. In his commentary on Matthew 22, Calvin explained,

The amount of it therefore is, that those who destroy political order are rebellious against God, and therefore, that obedience to princes and magistrates is always joined to the worship and fear of God; but that, on the other hand, if princes claim any part

54. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.32.
55. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.32.
56. Calvin, Institutes, 4.20.32.
of the authority of God, we ought not to obey them any farther
than can be done without offending God.”

In the final chapter of *The Institutes*, Calvin left his readers with the
following:

> We must obey our princes who are set over us. Even though they torture us boldly and use tyranny and cruelty towards us, it is necessary to bear all this, as St. Paul says. But when they rise against God they must be put down, and held of no more account than worn-out shoes.... When princes forbid the service and worship of God, when they command their subjects to pollute themselves with idolatry and want them to consent to and participate in all the abominations that are contrary to the service of God, they are not worthy to be regarded as princes or to have any authority attributed to them.

There is obvious tension between Calvin’s assertion that believers are to submit to poor governments and the opportunity for civil disobedience. However, Calvin’s words in the final section of *The Institutes* must be interpreted in comparison to all of Calvin’s thought on the subject. Harro Hopfl explains,

> Although the very last paragraph of the section, and therefore of the whole book, exhorts Christians to ‘obey God rather than men,’ the rest had been at pains to stress the Christian duty of obedience to rulers, irrespective of the quality of their titles, their conduct or their religion. If disobedience to ungodly commands becomes inevitable, it must take on the form of prayer, supplication, suffering or exile, but not rebellion.

**Calvin’s Theology of Submission after *The Institutes***

Beyond the “perhaps clause,” Calvin’s theology regarding the believer’s submission to the government leaves little ground for debate. Under normal circumstances, believers were to always submit to their rulers

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unless a ruler declared a law contrary to the law of God. Even then, believers were to resist without revolution—a passive resistance. Furthermore, the Lord may choose to decree (whether directly by verbal command or indirectly through providence) the judgment of a ruler by the hands of a lesser magistrate, but even then “regular” believers were not given this permission.

Nevertheless, there is some debate as to whether Calvin maintained this position throughout his life. For example, in his article “The Limits of Civil Disobedience in Calvin’s Latest Known Sermons,” Willem Nienhash documents Calvin’s struggle with the concept of active resistance by individuals. Although Nienhash admits that *The Institutes* “proves the reader the clearest and most systematic account of Calvin’s ideas on church and state,” he is convinced that Calvin’s sermons following the final publication of *The Institutes* reveals that there is a “demonstratable development in his thinking on this subject” between 1559 (the date of the release of the final edition of *The Institutes*) and 1564 (the year of Calvin’s death). Scholars generally recognize four major examples in Calvin’s post-*Institutes* literature: (1) Calvin’s *Letters*, (2) Calvin’s *Commentary on Daniel*, (3) Calvin’s sermon on Genesis 14, and (3) Calvin’s sermon on 2 Samuel 8–17 and 18–32.

Calvin’s Letters

Calvin’s *Letters* present views of submission to the governing authorities corresponding to that held in the *Institutes*. For example, in his letter “To the Brethren of France,” written in November 1559, Calvin called the church to strengthen its strength amid persecution, as even affliction would turn out for the good of the church. He wrote,

> Since it is our duty to suffer, we ought humbly to submit; as it is the will of God that his church be subjected to such conditions that even as the plough passes over the field, so should


61. William Nijenhuis, *Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation*, 74. Nijenhuis also argues that *The Institutes* also witnessed similar development (see 75–76). Nevertheless, since the final version of *The Institutes* clearly articulates a strong anti-revolutionary stance, it is best to consider Calvin’s later commentaries and sermons for evidence regarding his theology on the subject.

the ungodly have leave to pass their swords over us all from the least to the greatest. According then to what is said in the psalm, we should prepare our backs for stripes. If that condition is hard and painful, let us be satisfied that our heavenly Father in exposing us to death, turns it to our eternal welfare. And indeed it is better for us to suffer for his name, without flinching, than to possess his word without being visited by affliction.... Now when he permits his children to be afflicted, there is no doubt but that it is for their good.63

In his “Letter to the Church of Aix,” written on May 1, 1561, Calvin encouraged the believers to endure persecution without resistance. While Calvin understood that the people of Aix might be tempted to dismiss Calvin’s encouragement because they were facing persecution (not Calvin), the Reformer reminded them that persecution was purposeful in God’s plan for the growth of the church. Calvin wrote,

If what has taken place astonished you, wait till God shows you by examples what has always been known; viz: not only that the blood of the faithful will cry out for vengeance, but will form a good and fertilizing seed for the multiplication of the church. It is not without a cause that the Scriptures insist so much on our correcting our hastiness, when we reflect how difficult it is for us to do God the honour of leaving him to do his own work in his own manner, and not according to our wishes.64

Perhaps Calvin’s most famous contribution to his understanding of the believer’s submission to the governing authorities is found in his letter “To the Admiral de Coligny,” written on April 16, 1561. Calvin’s objective was to respond to the accusations that he was involved in the conspiracy of Amboise. In his defense, he argued that “it were better we should perish a hundred times, than expose Christianity and the gospel to such opprobrium.”65 In the mind of Calvin, the

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taking-up of arms in such a conspiracy would be slanderous to the gospel message and thus one in which he could not participate.

Daniel and Resistance
Some scholars have suggested that Calvin’s comments in his Commentary on Daniel, published in 1561, suggest a change of tone in Calvin’s writings towards rulers. Charles Partee, referencing Calvin’s comments on Daniel 6:22, explains, “Generally, Calvin opposes revolution by the people against an unjust ruler following his understanding of Romans 13, but in his commentary on Daniel he also says, ‘Earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy than to obey them whenever they… wish to spoil God of his rights, and, as it were, to seize his throne and draw him down from heaven.’”

However, the difficulty with assuming a new revolutionary stance in Calvin based upon his commentary on Daniel 6:22 is that there is no advocacy for armed resistance in these comments. Defying a ruler can simply mean a refusal to obey a command rather than a call to revolution, as the context of Daniel insinuates. Furthermore, there is additional evidence that Calvin’s commentary closely resembles the theology of The Institutes, and particularly the sovereignty of God over rulers. For instance, Calvin explained the significance of Daniel 4:10–16 with the following: “Tyrants endeavor to extinguish the whole light of equality and justice and to mingle all things, but the Lord meanwhile restrains them in a secret and wonderful manner, thus they are compelled to act usefully to the human race, whether they will or not.” Nevertheless, Calvin’s words against evil rulers reveal a hint of hostility not witnessed in his other Commentaries or The Institutes. This hostility would become more evident in his later sermons.

Abraham as a Lesser Magistrate
Calvin preached three sermons on Genesis 14:13–23 in May and June of 1560 in the city of Geneva. In these sermons, Calvin would make a
dramatic shift in this theology regarding the rights of private individu­als to rise up against tyrants. To do this, he would look to Abraham, a man he argued was a private person who overthrew a tyrant (Ched­orlaomer). Calvin explained,

Abraham, although not a prince, but a private person, received God’s permission to draw the sword. For God often...grants to his servants a special vocation...to save their people. The Old-Testament judges like Gideon, Samson, and Jephtha are examples of such a vocation. We may not infer a general rule from these special cases. On the contrary, so far as the right of resistance is concerned, the principle of legitimacy is fully main­tained; for an extraordinary vocation...of God is needed.\(^68\)

Although Calvin did argue that these special cases did not grant a precedent for private individuals to rise against the government, it is right to argue that Calvin has significantly modified his theology regarding the right of non-magistrates to rise up against tyrants.

2 Samuel and Revolution
On June 4 and 5, 1562, Calvin preached sermons on 2 Samuel (8–17 and 18–32, respectively). In these sermons, Calvin’s theology takes an even sharper turn than those found in his series on Genesis. The following quote comes from Calvin’s June 4 sermon:

How much more must we keep ourselves under control when we see that our enemies are exasperating us as much as they can in order to make us quarrel! Let us in no way be eager seekers of vainglory or of high position. Rather, let us humble ourselves, and although we see our enemies so addicted to evil, let us not be ashamed to seek their good as far as we can.

However, that will not prevent us from resorting to arms when it is necessary. In that case we will do all that necessity requires. But, be that as it may, let no evil proceed from us, and

\(^{68}\) As quoted by Nijenhuis, Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation, 84. I would personally challenge Calvin on this interpretation. Abraham should not be considered a “private person,” by Calvin’s own definition. That Abraham was able to make war against four nations suggests that Abraham had great status, even if it was God that delivered the armies of Chedolaomer into Abraham’s hands. At the very least, Abraham was important enough to make treaties with kings. He could easily be identified as a magistrate of the first order as Calvin defines magistrate.
let us never seek to shed human blood, except to maintain the cause of God when it is necessary.\textsuperscript{69}

Calvin’s words become even stronger in his June 5 sermon:

There is a double war in the Church because of religion, for often it is the case that swords are not unsheathed, and yet they manage to have a battle. Indeed, if there are heresies and errors, it is legitimate to kill one another, for poison, when it is widespread, does far more evil than the sword. Now this is one kind of mortal combat. When people are banded against one another in sects and when there are heresies in the Church, eventually they reach the point of action with swords. After people have waged verbal debates and have grown more stubborn so that they exercise less restraint, it becomes necessary to resort to arms.\textsuperscript{70}

Let us not be astonished, therefore, if this takes place in our own times. For however horrible a thing it is to hear that only three hundred faithful men are dead and that they bear the name of God, we still must not conclude that Joab did wrong in fighting against Abner and his army.... And why? Because the fight was good and just and approved by God. It would have been by no means proper for David to give up his right to the crown and fail to go forward when God had given him his hand. Now then, are we to condemn those who fight not merely under a mortal man, but for the truth of God, for his service, for the pure religion, for the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ? Royal of sweden

Therefore, let us note well when there are wars inside the Church, that even if the matter is wrong in itself, still that does not mean that one should confuse judgement by considering both parties in the same class or as wrapped up together in the same bundle. That would be a failure to discern properly. And even when there are two opposing camps in the Church, if one is opposing the truth of God in order to overthrow it and the other holds to the good so that it may always follow what is


\textsuperscript{70} Muttitt, “John Calvin, 2 Samuel 2:8–32 and Resistance to Civil Government,” 9.
commanded, it is certain that whoever is neutral will be disloyal and a traitor.\textsuperscript{71}

In his article, “John Calvin, 2 Samuel 2:8–32 and Resistance to Civil Government,” Andrew Muttitt attempts to reconcile Calvin’s sermon with his statements in The Institutes by arguing that Calvin’s comments were meant to argue that private individuals should submit to the lesser magistrates in their call to arms. He said, “All those private individuals who are faithful to Christ (the “we” of Calvin’s exhortation) are thus equally under a duty to take up arms under the authority of the lesser magistrate and in obedience to his call.... To do so in such circumstances is not to resist the civil ruler, but to facilitate and lawfully assist the civil ruler in the fulfilment of his duties as outlined in the five maxims of the Institutes.”\textsuperscript{72} It is an admirable attempt at reconciliation, yet this, of course, still creates tension in Calvin’s writings. If this logic is fully played out, then one could argue that, while it is wrong for a believer to engage in revolution under normal circumstances, it nevertheless is morally permissible for a believer to assist a magistrate in revolution without a direct command from God. In any case, Calvin’s sermons present a strong shift in his theology.

\textbf{Conclusion}

What is one to make of this tension between Calvin’s Institutes and earlier Commentaries with his later work? It is probably fair to attribute much of this change to the political situation of Geneva and France at the end of Calvin’s life. Between 1550 and 1562, Geneva received nearly seven thousand immigrants and refugees, with the majority of them being French.\textsuperscript{73} Such migration of people, many of whom were Calvin’s own countrymen, would make it impossible for Calvin to avoid the political scene of France. It is likely that Calvin had great sympathy for their plight, as his knowledge of the conspiracy of Amboise demonstrates. Although Calvin’s earlier sermons preached patience for God’s justice, his later messages, and especially those after 1560, were more aggressive against government.

\textsuperscript{72} Muttitt, “John Calvin, 2 Samuel 2:8–32 and Resistance to Civil Government,” 9.
\textsuperscript{73} Nijenhuis, Ecclesia Reformata: Studies on the Reformation, 77.
In conclusion, one must observe the tension in Calvin’s development on the believer’s submission to the government. Much of Calvin’s writings define him as an anti-revolutionary. Nevertheless, Calvin wrestled with his beliefs as he faced pressure in his country and France. Even he could not escape the pressures that come with sociopolitical turmoil. That even a brilliant mind like Calvin would struggle with consistency in his theology on this topic confirms that the believer’s responsibility to the governing authorities is among the most difficult areas of theology.
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