



## Calvin's Theology of the Future

### Review

Chapter 24 examined Augustine's interpretation of the millennium. When the Roman emperors became Christians, they imagined their enormous empire as a Christian theocracy ruling over the spiritual affairs of the church. They governed their empire as the Jewish kings had governed Israel. Augustine gave theological justification to this turn of events based on his distorted interpretation of Revelation 20. He believed the first resurrection is of the regenerated spirits of the believers upon conversion; it is not a resurrection of their physical bodies. He also believed Satan was already bound and that God could now rescue pagans from bondage to sin and spiritual death. With the emergence of Christ's kingdom of believers on this earth, the millennium had begun. The Christian Roman rulers and the church leaders were those sitting on thrones to rule the world on Christ's behalf during his messianic kingdom. Augustine modeled this Roman theocracy on Israel's theocracy and looked to the messianic prophecies to describe how the Gentile messianic kingdom should rule the world on Christ's behalf.

### John Calvin (1509–1564)

During the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church grew more powerful, wealthy, and centralized. But it also became corrupt, and its beliefs

became more heretical. The Reformation was a revolution against this corruption and the heretical doctrines. Calvin and the early Reformers may have wanted to reform many of the teachings of the Catholic Church, but they did not reject its eschatology. They accepted Augustine's interpretation of Revelation and the prophets and his understanding of the role of church and state during Christ's reign over this world. They also agreed with Augustine's postmillennial eschatology. Calvin rejected a future millennium based on a literal interpretation of Revelation 20. He called that interpretation so childish as to not warrant a rebuttal.<sup>36</sup>

Calvin, too, believed the reign of Christ had already begun with the messianic kingdom being realized in his day. But he believed that the state and church rulers seated on the thrones described in Revelation 20 were Protestant rulers, not Catholic rulers. Since the Catholic and Protestant theocracies were both operating with the use of the sword, religious wars were often necessary to make the transition from the Catholic kingdom of Christ to the Protestant kingdom of Christ.

Calvin quoted many of the same messianic psalms that Augustine quoted when he attempted to justify the role of the civil magistrates over the affairs of the church. He had no qualms about having heretics arrested and prosecuted by the civil authorities. If the heresy was serious and the heretic unrepentant, he supported capital punishment. There was no religious liberty in Calvin's Geneva, just as there was none in the theocratic nation of Israel.

In his book *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin taught that civil government is responsible for the citizens' material well-being and their spiritual well-being. Just as the Old Testament kings were responsible for the religious purity of the Jewish people, so, too, the Protestant states should prevent false teachings among the people. In chapter 20 of book IV, titled "The Chief Tasks and Burdens of Civil Government," Calvin explains their role over the spiritual affairs of the people:

For it [civil government] does not merely see to it, as all these serve to do, that men breathe, eat, drink, and are kept warm, . . .

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36 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), Book III.25.5.

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. . . . Let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion.<sup>37</sup>

Calvin made himself quite clear that the function of a Christian state under Christ's reign was to use the coercive force of law to rule over the spiritual affairs of its citizens to establish a godly kingdom. To assign to the state only the responsibility of the material well-being of the citizens is to not understand Christ's current reign. Calvin drew heavily from the Old Testament model when explaining the relationship of church and state in his day. Calvin's Geneva was modeled after the Jewish theocracy.

Believing that the church and state were already experiencing the messianic kingdom, Calvin, like Augustine, applied the following psalm of David to his day:

I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. . . ." Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him." (Ps. 2:7–12)

Calvin believed that this psalm describing the future messianic kingdom pertained to the civil authorities of his day:

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.<sup>38</sup>

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37 *Ibid.*, Book IV.20.3.

38 *Ibid.*, *Inst.* IV.20.5.

Since Christ's reign had begun, Calvin believed that the nations to "the ends of the earth" had become Christ's possession. The kings and rulers of these nations, therefore, should submit to Christ and enforce Christianity in their kingdoms. They should use their authority and power to serve Christ by establishing his righteous kingdom on this earth.

In Calvin's day, some people were disturbed that he advocated using the civil government to establish Christianity as the religion of the state. They argued for religious freedom, even for heretics, and believed the state should only concern itself with civil affairs—not with religious affairs. Calvin considered this concept of religious freedom in civil society as folly and believed it would lead to anarchy. If the state did not fulfill its responsibility to serve Christ and to regulate the spiritual affairs of its people, evil would spread throughout the nations. Calvin looked to the Jewish kings in the theocratic nation of Israel as the model for how the civil rulers should rule over Christ's kingdom. Note that when I quote Calvin, all copy in parentheses, including Old Testament citations, is in the original text of Calvin's writings. My comments are always bracketed. Calvin wrote:

Also, holy kings are greatly praised in Scripture because they restored the worship of God when it was corrupted or destroyed, or took care of religion that under them it might flourish pure and unblemished. . . . the Sacred History places anarchies among things evil: because there was no king in Israel, each man did as he pleased (Judg. 21:25). This proves the folly of those who would neglect the concern for God and would give [civil authorities] attention only to rendering justice among men. As if God appointed rulers in his name to decide earthly controversies [civil disputes] but overlooked what was of far greater importance—that he himself should be purely worshiped according to the prescription of his law.<sup>39</sup>

The holy kings of Israel "took care of religion," which was under their jurisdiction. It was the king's responsibility to make sure the nation worshiped God properly, "according to the prescription of his

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39 Ibid., *Inst.* IV.20.9.

law.” The Jewish nation flourished spiritually when the kings were faithful to their spiritual covenant with God. When they were unfaithful, evil prevailed as “each man did as he pleased.” These kings were responsible for settling civil disputes among the people, but it was far more important that they made sure God would “be purely worshiped” during this time of Christ’s reign. They believed that those who advocate religious freedom, and the anarchy that comes with it, are teaching folly, which can only lead to a morally corrupt nation. Like the Jewish kings in theocratic Israel, the civil authorities in Geneva had a God-given duty to render justice in civil affairs for their citizens *and* to establish state laws to ensure God was properly worshiped.

Calvin drew heavily from the Old Testament to prove that the civil authorities had a duty to serve Christ by appointing judges to rule over spiritual matters:

What is this, except that God has entrusted to them [Jewish civil authorities] the business of serving him in their office [over spiritual affairs], 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; 2 Chron. 19:6)?<sup>40</sup>

Teachings in Deuteronomy and the two books of Chronicles are the basis upon which Calvin determined that the Christian state should govern the religious affairs of its citizens.

## Romans

Calvin struggled to find New Testament support for this Christian theocracy, which is why he mainly referenced the Old Testament. One section of the New Testament, however, that he did focus on was a teaching in Paul’s letter to the Romans in which Paul admonishes the Gentile believers to obey the civil authorities.

When the early Gentile converts abandoned pagan temple worship and emperor worship, they faced a great deal of persecution by the Roman authorities. Pagan worship was required by Roman law, so the practice of Christianity was, in effect, criminal behavior. Paul

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., *Inst.* IV.20.4.

taught these Roman believers to be good law-abiding citizens, despite their ill treatment by the civil authorities for violating these laws. Paul was obviously referring to the involvement of the civil authorities in the civil affairs of the believers. The last thing he would have condoned was Roman rulers governing the spiritual affairs of the church. That, in fact, was the problem because the Romans were attempting to force paganism on them. Paul wrote:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. . . . For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. (Rom. 13:1-4)

Yet, Calvin asserted that Paul intended this obedience to civil authorities to include religious affairs now that the rulers had become Christians. Calvin believed that governing authorities have been "instituted by God." Wayward Christians should fear these authorities, for they "bear the sword" to punish bad behavior. The question, of course, is what does Paul mean by bad behavior and wrongdoing? Was Paul referring to civil affairs, such as stealing bread from a market or burglarizing a house? Or was he referring to spiritual affairs, such as the proper worship of God? Did Paul envision these authorities, instituted by God, ruling over the religious beliefs and practices of their people?

In his interpretation of Romans 13, Calvin extended the right of the civil authorities to govern the spiritual affairs of the people and to use the sword, if necessary. The civil authorities, as servants of God, were God's means of avenging the heretic and carrying out God's wrath on wrongdoers in the church. Calvin linked this role of civil authorities ruling over the church to the Old Testament rulers. Again, the Scripture references in parentheses are in Calvin's original text:

But Paul speaks much more clearly when he undertakes a just discussion of this matter [the role of civil authorities to rule over

matters of the faith]. For he states both that power [with the sword] is an ordinance of God (Rom. 13:2), 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.<sup>41</sup>

According to Calvin, “Paul speaks much more clearly” when he teaches that Christian rulers are ministers of God over civil matters *and* spiritual beliefs and practices. Their powers *over the church* are ordained by God. When someone advocates false doctrines or unChristian conduct, the rulers are God’s agents as “avengers unto wrath” upon the evildoer. King David and the other godly Jewish kings during Israel’s theocracy are good examples of what Paul was advocating.

Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christians in AD 56 in a specific historical context. Calvin took Paul’s letter out of context and distorted it to support his false teachings regarding a Christian theocracy. It is absurd for Calvin to assert that Paul had wanted the pagan Roman authorities of his day to govern the teachings and practices of the church and to use the sword as an instrument of God’s wrath over the church.

On numerous occasions, Paul and the church had suffered greatly from the unjust use of the Roman sword against them for their religious beliefs and practices. The last thing Paul would have advocated was that Roman authorities police the doctrines of the church. He was merely instructing the Roman Christians to be law-abiding citizens—not criminals, and definitely not insurrectionists.

In Romans 13, Paul described how government authorities should *ideally* function in regard to civilian affairs. Note his careful choice of words: “For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.” Paul knew firsthand that the Roman government could be a real terror to good Christian citizens who simply followed Christ. He also knew these Roman Christians might be tempted to lash out against the Roman authorities for the abuse they were experiencing. To prevent such retaliation, Paul admonished them to “bless those who persecute you;

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41 Ibid., *Inst.* IV.20.4.

“bless and do not curse them” (Rom. 12:14); “Repay no one evil for evil” (v. 17); “Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God” (v. 19); “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21). Paul was also concerned that they would refuse to pay taxes as a form of protest for the unjust abuse they were receiving. He instructed them: “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed” (13:7). Paul knew that not paying taxes would provide the Romans with another excuse to terrorize them even more.

There is no New Testament support for Calvin’s concept of a Christian theocracy. Calvin misinterpreted Romans 13 to mean that the civil authorities should govern the doctrines and affairs of the church. He operated from this premise because he believed the messianic reign of Christ had begun, with Christian rulers sitting on thrones ruling the nations on Christ’s behalf. That is why they should emulate the kings of Israel. Paul, however, made it clear that he did not use the weapons of the civil realm to advance Christ’s kingdom. Rather, he used the power of persuasion of the truth combined with the conviction of the Holy Spirit:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3–5)

Paul even urged the church to pray for religious liberty so that the church could assemble peacefully without interference or persecution from the state:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. (1 Tim. 2:1–2)

This is a prayer for both religious freedom and freedom of assembly. Because the early church did not set out to establish a theocracy through the use of the sword, the disciples and the early church were

no real threat to the Roman state. Their only weapons were the Holy Spirit, the preaching of truth, and rational discourse to persuade the Gentiles to join them in peaceful assembly in worshiping God.

Calvin challenged many of the doctrines of the Catholic Church, rightfully relying on the Scriptures as the sole authority for Christian doctrine. And he was correct in his assessment of many of those doctrines. Unfortunately, he did not take the opportunity to revisit Augustine's flawed eschatology. Calvin wrote commentaries on many books of the Bible, but he never wrote one on Revelation—a book he seemingly did not understand and essentially ignored. As a result of Augustine's and Calvin's flawed interpretations of Revelation 20, the Western world lost religious liberty for centuries.

The Puritan Reformers in Scotland created the famous Westminster Confession of Faith, which was commissioned by an act of the English Parliament in 1647. Although never officially approved by Parliament and the Church of England, it became the *de facto* official statement of faith for the churches in Scotland. Religious liberty was not to be allowed, and the state had a major role in maintaining the purity of the church:

And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And, for their publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity, whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation; or, to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church, they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against, by the censures of the Church, and by the power of the civil magistrate.<sup>42</sup>

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42 *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1646 (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, reprinted, 2003), chapter 20, "Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience," para. 4, pp. 87–88.

In the footnote to this section of the Confession, the authors refer to Paul's instructions in Romans 13 to obey the civil authorities, extending to them the authority to rule over spiritual matters of the people and the church—just as Calvin did. The church and the civil authorities had a God-given duty to ensure that erroneous beliefs and practices would be prosecuted by the censures of the church and the civil magistrates. The idea of expounding false beliefs “upon the pretense of Christian liberty” was, in reality, a false teaching and a form of resistance against God, and it was not to be tolerated by the church or the state.

The civil authorities may not be the church, nor can they administer Holy Communion, but they do have the authority and power *to regulate* the church, to call for special councils to establish orthodox matters of faith, and to prevent heresies with the sword:

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.<sup>43</sup>

The footnote to this section of the Confession references multiple Old Testament Scriptures that served as guidelines for the theocratic nation of Israel in which the Jewish kings, magistrates, and judges were to enforce the Mosaic law with the sword. Violators were to have their goods confiscated, and they would be banished or, in some cases, put to death. Even blasphemers were to be put to death.

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43 Ibid., chapter 23, “Of the Civil Magistrate,” para. 3, pp. 100–101.

## Religious Liberty

Because both the Catholic and Protestant theocracies were operating with the use of the sword, the era was plagued by religious wars as they battled over doctrine, authority, and territory. When the conflicts in England and Scotland grew ugly, protestant Puritans came to Colonial America to escape the conflicts and to establish the Massachusetts colony in 1629 as a shining example of a Christian theocracy. The colony would demonstrate to Europe what Christ's righteous kingdom should really look like on this earth.

But Puritan separatists like Roger Williams (1603–1684) began to question the concept of a Christian theocracy. As Williams searched the New Testament, he concluded that Christ's millennial reign over the nations had not yet begun. Moreover, the church was not a theocratic version of Israel because it did not have a spiritual-civil covenant with God. Williams contended that the state had no right to rule over the affairs of the church and that the state should only be concerned with the material well-being of its citizens until Christ returned. Christ did not use the sword to establish his kingdom, and neither did his disciples. The church should only use rational persuasion and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring people into Christ's kingdom. The church promotes its gospel message best in a free marketplace of ideas where it can compete freely for the hearts and minds of the people.

Williams broke away from the Massachusetts colony and established Rhode Island in 1637 as the first truly secular state with religious liberty in history. Rhode Island became the model for the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1789. Thomas Jefferson and the humanists were also tired of the centuries of religious wars and tyranny, and they formed an alliance with the Puritan separatists when framing the Bill of Rights, creating a federal constitution that ensured the federal government would not rule over the spiritual affairs of its citizens. The state and the church were considered separate entities with different functions. They were not hostile to each other; they merely operated in different realms—one in the civil and material realm, and the other in the religious or spiritual realm. Churches could influence civil laws, but they could not leverage the state to establish orthodox doctrines and police the churches. Evangelists could compete for converts in a free marketplace of ideas and would have to use the power of rational

discourse and the power of the Holy Spirit to persuade converts to join them in worshiping God, just as Paul had advocated.

Calvin's view of a Christian theocracy continued to influence many Reformed theologians in America in the late 1700s, but their version of postmillennialism was not as theocratic as Calvin's. They adapted their views to the American context of a secular state with religious freedom. For example, the previously quoted sections of the Westminster Confession of Faith dealing with the role of the civil magistrate were modified after the American Revolution by the American Presbyterian Assembly of 1789 to remove the language concerning the authority of the civil magistrate to rule over the spiritual affairs of the people. This modified form of postmillennialism taught that we can Christianize the nations on a social and cultural level when our civil laws reflect a righteous nation. This view continued to be popular during the Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) due to the considerable improvement of the material well-being of the people. After World Wars I and II, however, postmillennialism suffered a major blow to its unfounded optimism, when it became obvious that Satan was not bound but was very much alive and active. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, instruments of war became more cruel and lethal. Horrible wars continued, just as Christ predicted.

### **Christian Nation**

This modified form of postmillennialism is still popular in America, although it often takes the form of neo-Puritanism. Pastors preach that we should return to the day when America was a Christian nation. They are not advocating the return to a Christian theocracy, however, as defined by Calvin. Rather, they preach for the return to a nation that has Christian values and morals. But with the historical baggage associated with the term “Christian nation” when it was used by the Reformers to refer to a true theocracy, it is probably not a good idea for pastors to harken back to a “Christian nation.”

It would also be wise for neo-Puritan Christians to stop clamoring for symbols of a Christian nation to be displayed in the public square. Neo-Puritans want nativity scenes to be displayed on public grounds, and so forth. But wouldn't a church be the best place to display a nativity scene, with Christians on hand to explain the true meaning of

the virgin birth and God incarnate? Nor is it the responsibility of the secular state to propagate the gospel. The Great Commission is the responsibility of the church.

The demands made by neo-Puritan Christians on issues such as these are counterproductive and give secular humanists and naturalists another excuse to keep discussions of biblical ideology out of the public domain. We are losing the battle for the hearts and minds of people in this country because we are fighting the wrong battles with the wrong objectives. We should be fighting for a true secular public domain with true religious liberty, where free speech and free press can operate. Christ wants us to use the church to spread our message to the world, not some pseudo-Christian nation run by leaders who may or may not be Christians.

When Christ was on this earth, he refused to get involved in the civil affairs of man because it was not time for his reign as Messiah to begin. It was difficult for even the disciples to wait for his reign. They hated the tyranny, injustice, and evil around them and desired for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. They also hated the false religions around them and sincerely wanted people to worship the true God. Many Christians today seem to be just as impatient as the disciples were. We have an innate desire for Christ to rule the world and for God's will to be done on earth. We desire justice, and we naturally react against false teachings that bring spiritual harm. Unfortunately, we often let this desire control our reasoning when we press forward in our timing by attempting to establish Christian nations, instead of waiting on the Father's timing.

Today, most Reformed theologians and pastors are amillennialists. They do not believe there will be a messianic kingdom on this earth. They believe the world remains an evil age under Satan's dominion until Christ comes again and ushers in the eternal new earth. In the meantime, they believe religious liberty allows for the greatest advancement of the gospel throughout the world.

## Summary

Augustine and Calvin did not see a future for the restoration of the nation of Israel. They contended that unrepentant Israel would never be restored to the promised land during the messianic kingdom. They

believed the Christian Gentile nations had replaced Israel as the heir of the messianic promises.

The next chapter will explore the Scriptures as they relate to the future of the nation of Israel. I will make the biblical case that one day Israel will become a nation of believers, which will lead to the restored nation of Israel in the messianic kingdom.