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Calvin the Transformationist and the Kingship of Christ



by Timothy P. Palmer

It is usually assumed that John Calvin and the Calvinistic tradition are transformationist. Ernst Troeltsch, for example, says that one of the two tendencies throughout Calvinism is “the active

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formation of a society.”¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, in his *Christ and Culture*, states that “the conversionist idea is prominent in [Calvin’s] thought and practice.” His vision includes “the transformation of mankind in all its nature and culture into a kingdom of God in which the laws of the kingdom have been written upon the inward parts.”² Nicholas Wolterstorff also called early Calvinism a “*formative religion*” or a “*world-formative religion*.”³ These are just a few examples of the common belief that Calvin and Calvinism are transformationist.

It therefore comes as a surprise to read in the *Calvin Theological Journal* the article of David VanDrunen questioning the transformationist vision of Calvin.⁴ At the heart of the discussion is the place of the kingdom of God in his theology. VanDrunen argues that for Calvin, the kingdom of God is not found in all of society; rather, the kingdom of God is restricted to the Church. VanDrunen writes, “Calvin adamantly denied that one should expect to find the kingdom of Christ made manifest in the civil kingdom of politics, law, and the like” (249). For him, Calvin holds to a modified version of Luther’s two-kingdom doctrine, and this version constitutes a dualism rejected by contemporary transformationists. For VanDrunen, Calvin’s two-kingdom doctrine leads to a conservative attitude to politics: “Calvin believed that the civil kingdom was to remain the civil kingdom, and he was modest in his hopes of changing it” (264). He also states that Calvin believed that the civil kingdom “was not to be

transformed into a different kind of kingdom nor conjoined with the spiritual kingdom of Christ” (265). In his conclusion, VanDrunen reveals his cards by suggesting that this dualistic theology of the kingdom of God is also the dualistic theology of Scripture, which Calvin, “the insightful exegete and theologian,” has correctly discovered (266). For VanDrunen, the attitude of transformationists toward culture should be informed by the dualism of Calvin and Scripture.

The historical transformationism of Calvin and Calvinism is explained largely by Calvin’s theology of the universal rule of God and Jesus Christ.

This essay argues that although Calvin does teach a residual two-kingdom doctrine, the lordship of God and the kingship of Christ are more determinative for Calvin’s theology. The historical transformationism of Calvin and Calvinism is explained largely by Calvin’s theology of the universal rule of God and Jesus Christ.

Luther’s Two-Kingdom Doctrine

The two-kingdom doctrine originated with Martin Luther, even though there were influences from Augustine and others. This doctrine “made a decisive contribution toward unraveling the then hopelessly entangled spiritual and temporal interests.”⁵ Luther thus posited two kingdoms and two governments, which must be sharply distinguished. In 1525 he wrote,

God’s kingdom is a kingdom of grace and mercy, not of wrath and punishment. In it there is only forgiveness, consideration for one another, love, service, the doing of good, peace, joy, etc. But the kingdom of the world is a kingdom of wrath and severity....For this reason it has the sword....⁶

Corresponding with the two kingdoms are two governments:

For God has established two kinds of government among men. The one is spiritual; it has no sword, but it has the word, by means of which men are to become good and righteous, so that with this righteousness they may attain eternal life....The other kind is worldly government, which works through the sword....⁷

Both of these kingdoms and governments belong to God, and they should be distinguished from a third kingdom, that of Satan. However, God rules the two kingdoms in different ways: Christ is the head of the kingdom of God, ruling by his Word; while the emperor or civil magistrate is the head of the secular kingdom, ruling by the sword. The state or the temporal kingdom is ordained by God, according to Romans 13.

It has been frequently observed that Luther’s two-kingdom doctrine is dualistic. A dualism is established between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world, gospel and law, grace and nature, and the Christian as an individual and in society. Perhaps these distinctions reflect the complex dimensions of the Christian life, or to use Niebuhr’s words, “Christ and Culture in Paradox.”⁸

However, the place of Jesus Christ in the kingdom of the world is problematic. Luther writes,

Do you want to know what your duty is as a prince or a judge or a lord or a lady, with people under you? You do not have to ask Christ about your duty. Ask the imperial or the territorial law.⁹

In other words, while Christ is the king over the kingdom of God, or the church, his sovereignty over the state is excluded. A Luther interpreter has said, “Christ does not participate in this secular kingdom. God—and not Christ—institutes it. It is therefore certainly God’s kingdom, but it is not Christ’s kingdom. Christ is concerned only with the spiritual kingdom.”¹⁰ Another Luther authority said that the Barthian idea of Christ’s royal rule is “neither terminologically nor in any systematic sense...at the heart of Luther’s two-kingdoms doctrine or of his political ethics.”¹¹ This, I suggest, is a critical difference between Luther and Calvin.

Calvin's Two-Kingdom Doctrine

In its earlier stages Calvin's theology was strongly impacted by that of Luther. This impact is clear from the first edition of his *Institutes*, which has the same basic structure as Luther's Small Catechism.¹² Luther's Small Catechism deals with the Decalogue, Creed, Lord's Prayer, Sacraments, and practical matters, such as prayer and obedience to authorities. The six chapters of Calvin's 1536 *Institutes* are on the Decalogue, Creed, Lord's Prayer, True Sacraments, False Sacraments, and Christian Freedom and Government. It is in this final chapter that we find the two explicit references to the two-kingdom doctrine, which in 1559 are put in Books 3 and 4.¹³

Muller informs us that the placement of a doctrine does not determine its meaning;¹⁴ but the scattered and isolated references to this teaching suggest that for Calvin, it is less decisive than for Luther. Ganoczy, while recognizing the "profound influence" of Luther on Calvin, states that the latter did not follow the former on all points. For the young Calvin, what counted "was the absolute sovereignty of the message of the one Lord."¹⁵

It is true, though, that a two-kingdom doctrine is present in Calvin. We find it taught explicitly in two places in the final edition of his magnum opus. In *Institutes* 3.19.15 Calvin posits "a twofold government (*regimen*)" in a person, one spiritual and the other political. These two kingdoms may also be called "the 'spiritual' and the 'temporal' jurisdiction (*iurisdictio*)"; or "the spiritual kingdom (*regnum spirituale*)" and "the political kingdom (*regnum politicum*)."¹⁶ Thus, in a person there are "two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority."¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the emphasis is first of all on governments, or rules, and only secondly on kingdoms.

The second explicit reference is at the beginning of *Institutes* 4.20, where again we read of a twofold government (*regimen*), which is later defined as "Christ's spiritual kingdom (*regnum*) and the civil jurisdiction (*ordinationem*)."¹⁷ We see again that the emphasis is on rule or government; even the word *regnum* can be translated as rule, or authority, and not just realm, or kingdom.

Calvin is here describing two types of govern-

ment in society: church and state, to use contemporary language. Church government is different from civil government. The church rules through the Word; the state rules through civil laws and the sword. Calvin's polity here resembles Abraham Kuyper's sphere sovereignty and the American separation of church and state.

Of course, there is a duality, and even dualistic language, in these passages. However, the two-government, or two-kingdom, theology of Calvin is milder than that of Luther. Calvin does not have Luther's law-gospel dualism; the contrast between the personal Christian and Christian in society is much less pronounced; and most significantly, Jesus Christ in Calvin's theology is not excluded from the political realm. Luther's theology is more dualistic than Calvin's.

Regnum Christi

While the identity of the civil government is reasonably clear, the identity of the *regnum Christi* is less immediately evident. Presumably the defenders of Calvin's two-kingdom doctrine will assume that the *regnum Christi* is coterminous with the visible church, since the political kingdom refers to the state. Passages from *Institutes* 4.2.4 would seem to support this view: "the church is Christ's Kingdom, and [Christ] reigns by his Word alone...."¹⁸

The phrase *regnum Christi* is found about forty-one times in the 1559 *Institutes*.¹⁹ While twenty-five references are in Book 4, there are sixteen occurrences in the first three books. Since *regnum* can mean *reign* as well as *realm*, Battles sometimes translates the Latin as "the reign of Christ" (e.g., *Inst.* 1.9.1). In the Battles translation, the Chiliasts "limited the reign of Christ [*regnum Christi*] to a thousand years."²⁰

Calvin's view of the reign of Christ has been discussed in many places,²¹ but the discussion in Book 2 of the *Institutes* may serve as a summary. Although his resurrection is the beginning of his glorification, Christ "truly inaugurated his *regnum* only at his ascension into heaven." It was then that he began "to rule heaven and earth with a more immediate power."²² The session at the Father's right hand is directly connected with the ascension. Then, "Christ was invested with lordship [*dominio*]

over heaven and earth, and solemnly entered into possession of the government committed to him . . . until he shall come down on Judgment Day.” The purpose of the session is that “both heavenly and earthly creatures may look with admiration upon his majesty, be ruled by his hand, obey his nod, and submit to his power.”²³

One is impressed here by the universal nature of Christ’s reign. Heaven and earth are ruled by Christ; all of creation comes under his dominion. Of course, the church is the center of his kingdom. However, when the church is called the *regnum Christi*, is the reference to the visible or invisible church? Must this universal reign of Christ be restricted to the institutional form of the visible church? Surely Christ’s reign is broader than the visible church. Surely Christ’s reign impacts all of life, especially through the lives of Christians both inside and outside the visible church.

Calvin’s Old Testament commentaries offer a redemptive-historical perspective on the *regnum Christi*. The psalmists and prophets of old looked forward to the age of the Messiah, when Christ would reign in the world. Invariably the fulfillment of the prophetic expectations would be the *regnum Christi*. This would be the period of justice and righteousness when believers respond positively to the rule of Christ. Surely the reign and realm of Christ are greater than the visible, institutional Church.

The commentary on Jeremiah 31:31-34 is typical. Calvin says that this passage “necessarily refers to the *regnum Christi*.” This reign of Christ is then connected with the new covenant and the regeneration of believers by the Holy Spirit: “The coming of Christ would not have been sufficient, had not regeneration by the Holy Spirit been added. It was, then, in some respects a new thing, that God regenerated the faithful by his Spirit, so that it became not only a doctrine as to the letter, but also efficacious, which not only strikes the ear, but penetrates into the heart, and really forms us for the obedience to God.”²⁴

The prophecy of Isaiah 2:1-4 likewise refers to the *regnum Christi*, which began with the first coming of Christ. This prophecy looks forward to the “calling of the Gentiles, because Christ is not sent to the Jews only that he may reign over

them, but that he may hold his sway over the whole world.”²⁵

A final example is taken from Psalm 2. David’s temporal kingdom is a type of the *regnum Christi*: “the *regnum Christi* is here described by the spirit of prophecy.” The lesson of this psalm is that “all who do not submit themselves to the authority [*imperio*] of Christ make war against God.” Thus, “as the majesty of God has shone forth in his only begotten Son, so the Father will not be feared and worshiped but in his person.”²⁶

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For Calvin, the *regnum Christi* is a hermeneutical or exegetical tool for understanding Old Testament prophecies. The *regnum Christi* is the period of time between the first and second comings of Christ when Christ would reign from heaven by his Word and Spirit, regenerating believers and causing them to obey God. The visible church may be at the center of this obedience; but Christ’s reign is in no way restricted to this institutional church. The authority of Christ is too big for that.

The Reign of Christ and Civil Authorities

It should then not be surprising to observe Calvin’s insistence that earthly rulers obey the

rule of Christ. A favorite passage of his is Psalm 2:12: “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way.”²⁷ Calvin writes, “Since it is the will of God to reign by the hand of his Son..., the proper proof of our obedience and piety towards him is reverently to embrace his Son.... The sum is that God is defrauded of his honor if he is not served in Christ.”²⁸ This interpretation is especially relevant to the princes and rulers of Europe in Calvin’s time, as is abundantly clear from his letters. Especially prominent is the prefatory letter to King Francis I at the beginning of the *Institutes*, originally written in 1536:

Indeed, this consideration makes a true king: to recognize himself a minister of God in governing his kingdom. Now, that king who in ruling over his realm does not serve God’s glory exercises not kingly rule but brigandage....But our doctrine must tower unvanquished above all the glory and above all the might of the world, for it is not of us, but of the living God and his Christ whom the Father has appointed King to “rule from sea to sea, and from the rivers even to the ends of the earth.”²⁹

The authority of God and his Christ extends over earthly kingdoms. In 1548 Calvin wrote Protector Somerset, the regent under Edward VI:

It would be well were all the nobility and those who administer justice, to submit themselves, in uprightness and all humility, to this great king, Jesus Christ....Thus ought earthly princes to rule, serving Jesus Christ, and taking order that he may have his own sovereign authority over all, both small and great.³⁰

Of course, Calvin was concerned about the thorough reformation of the English church, but his language suggests a wider scope. In a letter to King Edward VI of England, Calvin wrote,

It is therefore an invaluable privilege that God has vouchsafed you, Sire, to be a Christian king, to serve as his lieutenant in ordering and maintaining the kingdom of Jesus Christ in England...[y]ou ought to be...setting to your subjects an example of homage to this great King, to whom your Majesty is not ashamed to submit yourself with all

humility and reverence beneath the spiritual scepter of his Gospel....³¹

If there is a two-kingdom doctrine in Calvin, this doctrine should be taken together with the absolute and universal authority of Jesus Christ over both spheres, or kingdoms. Luther excluded Christ from the temporal kingdom; Calvin put Christ over both kingdoms.

Calvin the Transformationist

It goes without saying that Calvin was a transformationist. The city of Geneva in his day is sufficient evidence. Through his influence the city was deeply changed. Whether the transformation was for better or worse is still a matter of debate; that it happened is obvious.

John Knox’s commendation is well known. In 1556 he called Geneva “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.” Only here were “manners and religion....so sincerely reformed.”³² Clearly there was transformation.

However, this transformation came at a price—the price of religious freedom. Dissenters who would not conform had to leave or face the consequences. Still, one cannot deny that the city of Geneva was radically transformed.

Calvin’s letters also reveal a desire that Europe be transformed. His letters to the princes and rulers express his desire for radical change. At the end of his life, he was sober, however, about the possibility of political change. On July 31, 1562, he said from the pulpit that “justice and judgment is a universal rule which applies to everyone. It means governing oneself so as to treat everyone fairly and properly, and it means standing against and resisting evil whenever it is necessary to relieve poor, afflicted people”; however, the princes of his day were too greedy, believing that “they have total license to gobble up their poor subjects.”³³

Calvin was concerned for social justice. This concern does not make him a socialist; but he was a revolutionary, having turned Geneva upside down. Whether he was a “*constructive* revolutionary”³⁴ is a separate matter of opinion.

There is, thus, a decisive difference between Luther and Calvin. Luther’s two-kingdom doc-

trine led to a conservative attitude toward engaging society; but Calvin's teaching of the kingship of Christ and sovereignty of God led to a transformationist engagement with society.

Of course, there is a lingering dualism present in Calvin's theology and language. However, to restrict Christ's reign to the visible church and not the state is not to read Calvin correctly.

Perhaps we should recognize an unresolved tension between the universal kingship of Christ and the kingdom of Christ as the Church.³⁵

If there is a two-kingdom doctrine in Calvin, this doctrine should be taken together with the absolute and universal authority of Jesus Christ over both spheres, or kingdoms. Luther excluded Christ from the temporal kingdom; Calvin put Christ over both kingdoms.

However, to suggest that the nature-grace dualism is the defining aspect of Calvin's theology would be to ignore the vast primary and secondary evidence about the centrality of the kingship of God and Christ in his theology.

Calvin was indeed an "insightful exegete and theologian." Because he was, he discovered the universal kingship of Yahweh that permeates all of Scripture. John Stek tells us that "God's kingship (-dom) is the Bible's *primary* and *pervasive* theme—from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22."³⁶ The theology of Calvin reflects this vital concern.

Endnotes

1. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. O. Wyon (New York: Harper, 1960) II: 602.
2. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 217-18.
3. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 10.
4. David VanDrunen, "The Two Kingdoms: A Reassessment of the Transformationist Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (Nov. 2005): 248-66. Page references to this article are put in our text.
5. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. R. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 319.
6. Martin Luther, "An Open Letter on the Harsh Book against the Peasants," in *Luther's Works* 46:69-70.
7. Martin Luther, "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," *Luther's Works* 46:99.
8. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 149.
9. Martin Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount," *Luther's Works* 21:110.
10. Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*, trans. R. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972), 46.
11. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology*, 315.
12. See Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, trans. D. Foxgrover and W. Provo (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 137.
13. *Institutes* (1559) 3.19.15 and 4.20.1-2 are found in sections 13 and 35-36 of the 1536 *Institutes* (cf. *Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans. F.L. Battles [Atlanta: John Knox, 1975], 252, 284-86).
14. Richard Muller, "The Placement of Predestination in Reformed Theology: Issue or Non-Issue?" *Calvin Theological Journal* 40 (2005): 204-5.
15. Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin*, 145.
16. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), 3.19.15; see for Latin: *Calvini Opera Selecta* (OS), ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926-1936), 4:294.
17. *Institutes* (1559) 4.20.1; OS 5:471-72.
18. *Institutes* (1559) 4.2.4; OS 5: 36.
19. See Ford Lewis Battles, *A Computerized Concordance to "Institutio Christianae Religionis" of 1559 of Ioannes Calvinus* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1972; microfilm).

20. *Institutes* (1559) 3.25.5; OS 4: 439.
21. See, for example: Thomas Torrance, *Kingdom and Church* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1956), 90-164; Timothy Palmer, "John Calvin's View of the Kingdom of God," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1988), 162-95.
22. *Institutes* (1559) 2.16.14; OS 3: 501-502.
23. *Institutes* (1559) 2.16.15; OS 3: 503.
24. *Commentary* Jer. 31:31-32; *Calvini Opera* (CO) 38:686, 688-89. English translations of the Old Testament commentaries are based on those of the Calvin Translation Society, reprinted by Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, 1979).
25. *Commentary* Isaiah 2:4; CO 36:59, 64.
26. *Commentary* Psalm 2:1-2; CO 31:42-43.
27. Scripture references are taken from the New International Version.
28. *Commentary* Psalm 2:12; CO 31:50.
29. "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France" *Institutes* (1559), 3-4; OS 3: 11-12.
30. "Letter to Protector Somerset," 22 Oct. 1548 in *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. J. Bonnet (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983) 1:188; CO 13:69.
31. "Letter to Edward VI," 4 July 1552 in *Letters of John Calvin*, 1:355; CO 13:342.
32. Cited by John McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 178.
33. "Sermon on 2 Samuel 8:9-18," *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, trans. D. Kelly (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1992), 418-19; *Supplementa Calviniana*, vol. 1. *Predigten über das 2. Buch Samuelis*, ed. H. Rückert (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), 244. See Timothy Palmer, "The Relevance of John Calvin for Nigeria: Political Reflections on his Sermons on Samuel," *TCNN Research Bulletin* 43 (2005): 24-31.
34. See W. Fred Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and his Socio-Economic Impact* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978).
35. Joachim Staedke, "Die Lehre von der Königsherrschaft Christi und den zwei Reichen bei Calvin" in *Kerygma und Dogma* 18 (1972): 202-14 speaks of the dialectical relation between the doctrines of the two kingdoms and the kingship of Christ in Calvin. He warns against absolutizing either one (213).
36. John H. Stek, "'Covenant' Overload in Reformed Theology," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 41; see J. Stek, "What Says the Scripture?" in *Portraits of Creation*, ed. H. Van Till et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 250-58.

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