

## Discussion Guide for Session 11

A. **Announcements and prayer:**

B. **Scripture meditation:** Ephesians 5:31-32

Calvin's Commentary:

....*And they two shall be one flesh.* They shall be one man, or, to use a common phrase, they shall constitute one person; which certainly would not hold true with regard to any other kind of relationship. All depends on this, that the wife was formed of the flesh and bones of her husband. Such is the union between us and Christ who in some sort makes us partakers of his substance. "We are bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh," (Genesis 2:23;) not because, like ourselves, he has a human nature, but because, by the power of his Spirit, he makes us a part of his body, so that from him we derive our life.

**32.** *This is a great mystery.* He concludes by expressing his astonishment at the spiritual union between Christ and the church. *This is a great mystery;* by which he means, that no language can explain fully what it implies. It is to no purpose that men fret themselves to comprehend, by the judgment of the flesh, the manner and character of this union; for here the infinite power of the Divine Spirit is exerted. Those who refuse to admit anything on this subject beyond what their own capacity can reach, act an exceedingly foolish part. We tell them that the flesh and blood of Christ are exhibited to us in the Lord's Supper. "Explain to us the manner," they reply, "or you will not convince us." For my own part, I am overwhelmed by the depth of this mystery, and am not ashamed to join Paul in acknowledging at once my ignorance and my admiration. How much more satisfactory would this be than to follow my carnal judgment, in undervaluing what Paul declares to be a deep mystery! Reason itself teaches how we ought to act in such matters; for whatever is supernatural is clearly beyond our own comprehension. Let us therefore labor more to feel Christ living in us, than to discover the nature of that intercourse....

*But I speak concerning Christ and the church.* He intended to give express warning that no man should understand him as speaking of marriage; so that his meaning is more fully expressed than if he had uttered the former sentiment without any exception. The *great mystery* is, that Christ breathes into the church his own life and power....

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C. **A Partial Review of Book III, Chapter 19, "Christian Freedom"** (Notes from W Edgar, Chapter 14, in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*):

1. Our conscience is an "appendage of justification" (19.1).
2. We acquire the power of freedom but we also need to develop a proper sense of Christian liberty.
3. "Unless this freedom be comprehended, neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace, can be rightly known" (19.1).
4. Calvin identifies three parts of Christian freedom:
  - a. Conscience must ascend above all law-based righteousness—justification is a matter of God's mercy alone (19.2-3).

- b. Justification by grace alone provides Christians true freedom to obey God’s commands without compulsion—being emancipated by grace we are truly free, therefore the conscience must obey the law not by constraint but because now that we are free from its yoke, we readily embrace its teachings (19.4-6).
  - c. Commenting on the text of Romans 14, Calvin said that Christians are free from the practice of *adiaphora* (indifferent things), but Calvin cautions against opulence in the name of freedom, viz., though we have never been forbidden to laugh, eat well, gain wealth, enjoy music, or drink wine, yet when desire gives way to gluttony, then we lose all sense of propriety in the exercise of freedom (19.7-9).
5. Christian conscience and the proper exercise of freedom in relating to civil government (III.19.14-16):
- a. Calvin maintains that Christians are no less subject to the government, magistrate rule notwithstanding, than to the church.
  - b. “Therefore, as works have regard to men, so conscience refers to God. A good conscience, then, is nothing but inward integrity of the heart” (19.16).
  - c. We need to walk with a clear conscience “toward God and men” (Acts 24:16), but our conscience, according to Calvin, is always ultimately bound to God’s bidding.

D. **Brief overview** of dominant political theories in Calvin’s time (from C Partee, p. 293, in *The Theology of John Calvin*):

1. Erastian [Thomas Erastus (September 7, 1524 - December 31, 1583) was a Swiss theologian] political theory places the state over the church.
2. Roman theology (grace perfecting nature) places the church over the state.
3. “Radical Reformers” [e.g., the Anabaptists] who advocated complete separation of church and state, maintaining that saints pure in heart should not participate in the dirty work of secularists.
4. Calvin’s position of a twofold government predicated on divinely established order: 1) the spiritual pertaining to the inner man and eternal life; 2) the political pertaining to civil justice and outward morality (IV.20.1) under the presumption that since Jesus Christ is Lord over all, He is Lord over both church and state.
  - a. Since we are pilgrims on the earth and not perfect, we need the help of civil government, which “has its appointed end, so long as we live among men, to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church, to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile

us with one another and to promote general peace and tranquility" (20.2).

- b. This means those who rule are raised to that honor not by chance but by providence (Com. I Pet. 2:13).
- c. NOTE: Partee interjects personal dissatisfaction with Calvin's assertion that politicians are "ministers of God". While he agrees that Calvin is theologically and theologically correct, he finds fault with Calvin's assumption that the state was neither hostile nor indifferent to the Christian religion (20.9). Moreover, he thinks Calvin's one kingdom view of church and state is unworkable in modern pluralistic societies.

E. **Overview of Book IV.20:** "Civil Government" (Notes from DW Hall, Chapter 18, in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*):

1. "Any proper analysis of Calvin's political thought should begin with his discussion in the Institutes; however, an accurate understanding of Calvin will also take into account his other writings and, importantly, the manner in which his disciples codified his teachings into a school of political thought." (Hall, p. 413)
2. Calvin suggested that the kingdom of God was already present, though not fully realized, and therefore providence was operative in politics: "For spiritual government, indeed, is already initiating in us upon earth certain beginnings of the Heavenly Kingdom, and in this mortal and fleeting life affords a certain forecast of an immortal and incorruptible blessedness" (IV.20.2).
3. It was a common notion in Calvin's time for government to uphold religion, and so he advised: "let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion" (20.3).
4. Magistrates are sanctioned by God to be "the protector and guardian of the laws" (20.3); however, no administration was permitted to tailor the worship of God to its own imaginations or to prohibit the practice of true religion (20.3).
5. Calvin distrusted human nature: If no civil government existed or if depraved men perceived that they could go "scot-free" (20.2), they surely would opt for sin, and society would deteriorate into chaos.
6. Calvin referred to civil rulers favorably as "vicars of God" (20.6), "the highest gift of [God's] beneficence to preserve the safety of men" (20.25), and as "ordained protectors and vindicators of public innocence, modesty, decency, and tranquility [whose] sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all" (20.9).
7. The use of the sword (20.10) was the necessary corollary to human depravity; therefore, civil magistrates were to be honored; serving in civil government could be "the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men" (20.4).

8. Calvin advocated “as system compounded of aristocracy\* and democracy” (20.8). He saw a legitimate place for checks and balances, realizing the need for “censors and masters to restrain his [the monarch’s] willfulness” (20.8). [\*McNeill commented that Calvin used this term to refer to those individuals best qualified, not of a hereditary caste. An elected aristocratic magistrate is the ideal. Ref., JT McNeill, “Democratic Elements in Calvin’s Thought”, *Church History* XVIII (1949), pp 159-164, 16-171, in RM Kingdon and RD Linder, ed., *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy?* (Lexington: D.C. Heath & Co., 1970), p. 32.]
9. Magistrates, as ordained protectors of civil society, have the right to levy taxes and this protection also justifies capital punishment as well as just wars (20.11) although “surely everything else ought to be tried before recourse is had to arms” (20.12).
10. Calvin recommended prudent limits on the right to tax arguing that taxes should only support public necessity, for “to impose them upon the common folk without cause is tyrannical extortion” (20.13). Obedience was a Christian duty in this area; however, princes were not to indulge in “waste and expensive luxury,” lest they earn God’s displeasure.
11. While different nations are free to make laws as they saw best, “Yet these must be in conformity to that perpetual rule of love, so that they indeed vary in form but have the same purpose” (20.15).
12. Christians may avail themselves to public courts (10.17); but Calvin warned against greed, revenge, and excessive reliance on litigation (20.18-21), recommending moderation, even if suffering loss results, for “love will give every man the best counsel” (20.21).
13. Since life is “nothing but the bearing of a perpetual cross,” Calvin posited, “Christians ought to be a kind of men to bear slanders and injuries, open to the malice, deceits, and mockeries of wicked men” (20.20).
14. Calvin warned Christians not to intrude excessively into the authority of the magistrate as long as he honored the office (20.23).
15. Civil order is God’s will; therefore, the first duty of citizens is to respect the magistrate’s office as a jurisdiction bestowed by God. The second duty is to pay obedience to good and bad rulers. The former is a blessing from God and the latter a punishment from God, i.e., “to obey and suffer” (20.31).
16. Magistrates should protect the people from the willfulness of unjust rulers, and therefore at times lesser magistrates, to satisfy divine providence, are justified in overturning a wicked ruler—that, however, is not to be carried out by private individuals (20.30), but Calvin still preferred to allow the Lord to correct unbridled despotism.
17. Calvin urged believers to consider that through prayer God might change the hearts of rulers (20.29).

18. Persons are free to rebel against a magistrate who compelled ungodly activity. Obedience to God is primary: "Obedience [to a ruler] is never to lead us away from obedience to Him" (20.32).
19. Hall summarizes a blend of factors, which justify revolution:
  - a. A tyrant who exceeded his divinely charted boundaries;
  - b. A tyrant who in so doing contradicted some other divine mandate; and,
  - c. Lower magistrates to bring constitutional correction.

**F. *Reflections Summarizing Chapter 20:***

1. Though the Reformed tradition has produced many articulate political theorists, John Calvin's ideas remain most representative of reformed attitudes toward civil government.
2. Calvin takes a positive attitude toward culture in general and government in particular as Calvin. For him there is no dichotomy, no dualism between Christianity and culture.
3. Calvin emphasized that Christ is not only head of his church, but also Lord of this world. By eliminating the distinction between the natural and supernatural orders, he intensified the Christian significance of the state.
4. Building on the great themes in Books I, II, and III (the doctrines of creation, the universality of divine revelation, original sin, human depravity, and the place of law), Calvin saw no separation between the divine and human spheres of activities.
5. The fundamental difference between the church-state theologies of Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Anabaptism:
  - a. Luther saw the state as an expression of God's creation but accorded the church alone historical responsibility for humanity's redemption. The state was to the church as law was to the gospel; it remained a different order.
  - b. The Anabaptists were even more severe in their limitation of the state, which at best expressed the wrathful benevolence of God, while Christ ruled in Christian communities separated from political life.
  - c. Calvin certainly separated the functions of church and state, but unlike Luther and the Anabaptists he felt that the state could exercise a godly, Christological purpose together with the church in establishing God's kingdom.
6. Calvin's primary interest lay in establishing and safeguarding the freedom of the church. Only secondarily did he concern himself about the interest of the state.
7. Calvin sought a working relationship between the church and the state without one controlling the other. He held that the church should determine freely, without interference from the political order, the aspects of life directly concerned with religion. The civil government, on the other hand, should contribute to the salvation of

its citizens while providing an orderly and beneficial temporal setting for their daily life.

8. Calvin assigned to church and state mutual obligations designed to enhance the religious and civic life of the entire Christian commonwealth:
  - a. The church should pray for the political authorities, encouraging the state to defend the poor and weak against the rich and powerful, calling on the political authorities for help in promoting true religion and even in enforcing church discipline, and warning the civil authorities when they were at fault.
  - b. Calvin opposed placing the church under the state. Rather, the church's task is always an active one toward the state. Though he insisted on obedience to "good" and "bad" governments alike and did not advocate rebellion, the seeds of revolution can be derived from his writings. In fact, many of his followers did advocate armed resistance in the face of tyranny.
  - c. Calvin also assigned duties to the state, particularly in regard to the "external worship" of God, that is, suppressing idolatry, maintaining the honor of God, and preserving public worship. The magistrate would also be obligated to protect the church and preserve public law and order, while always remembering his accountability to God.
9. For Calvin political participation by Christians was regarded as a high vocational calling.

**G. Preparation for Session 12:**

1. Photocopy (attached) from HJ Selderhuis, *John Calvin: A Pilgrim's Life*, pp. 250-257. A poignant portrait of Calvin near the end of his life.
2. Photocopy (attached) from DH Hall, *Calvin in the Public Square: Liberal Democracies, Rights, and Civil Liberties*, pp. 333-338.
3. DW Hall, *The Legacy of John Calvin: His Influence on the Modern World*
4. *Appendix* from Piper's sermon reproduced below.

Appendix (with redacted end notes) from John Piper's sermon to the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors entitled "The Divine Majesty of the Word: John Calvin: The Man and His Preaching." Please refer to the full article below:

[www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Bibliographies/1471\\_The\\_Divine\\_Majesty\\_of\\_the\\_Word/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Bibliographies/1471_The_Divine_Majesty_of_the_Word/)

### **Calvin's Barbaric World - The Case of Michael Servetus**

The Europe that John Calvin was born into on July 10, 1509, was a harsh and immoral and even barbaric place to live. There was no sewer system or piped water supply or central heating or refrigeration or antibiotics or penicillin or aspirin or surgery for appendicitis or Novocain for tooth extraction or electric lights (for studying at night) or water heaters or washers or dryers or stoves or ballpoint pens or typewriters or computers or motors of any kind. Life was harsh.

Calvin, like many others in his day, suffered from "almost continuous ill-health" (see note 54). He wrote to his physicians in 1564 when he was 53 years old, and described his colic and spitting of blood and ague and hemorrhoids. He said, "An ulcer in the hemorrhoid veins long caused me excruciating sufferings" (see note 55). But even worse were the kidney stones that he had to pass, unrelieved by any sedative.

[They] gave me exquisite pain. . . . At length not without the most painful strainings I ejected a calculus which in some degree mitigated my sufferings, but such was its size that it lacerated the urinary canal and a copious discharge of blood followed. This hemorrhage could only be arrested by an injection of milk through a syringe. My sedentary way of life to which I am condemned by the gout in my feet precludes all hopes of a cure. I am also prevented from taking exercise on horseback by my hemorrhoids (see note 56).

If life could be miserable physically, it could get even worse socially. "He was not unfamiliar with the sound of mobs outside his house [in Geneva] threatening to throw him in the river and firing their muskets" (see note 57). On his deathbed Calvin said to the pastors gathered on April 28, 1564, "I have lived here amid continual bickerings. I have been from derision saluted of an evening before my door with forty or fifty shots of an arquebus [a large gun]" (see note 58).

Not only was life harsh, it was immoral. In every city in Europe, men kept mistresses. When Calvin began his ministry in Geneva in 1536 at the age of 27 there was a law that said a man could keep only one mistress (see note 59). Even after Calvin had been preaching as pastor in St. Peter's church for over fifteen years the immorality was a plague, even in the church, especially in the form of the so-called Libertines. They were a sixteenth century version of the same group at Corinth who boasted in their license. By the "communion of saints," they understood the common possession of goods, houses, bodies and wives. So they practiced adultery and indulged in sexual promiscuity in the name of Christian freedom. And at the same time they claimed the right to sit at the Lord's table (see note 60).

Not only were the times harsh and immoral, they were often barbaric. This is important to see, because Calvin did not escape the influence of his times. He described in a letter the cruelty common in Geneva. "A conspiracy of men and women has lately been discovered who, for the space of three years, had [intentionally] spread the plague through the city, by what mischievous device I know not." The upshot of this was that fifteen women were burned at the stake. "Some men," he said, "have even been punished more severely; some have committed suicide in prison, and while twenty-five are still kept prisoners, the conspirators do not cease . . . to smear the door-locks of the dwelling-houses with their poisonous ointment" (see note 61).

This sort of punishment loomed on the horizon not just for criminals, but for all the reformers. Calvin was driven out of his homeland, France, under threat of death. For the next 20 years he agonized over the martyrs there and corresponded with many of them. In 1552, five young pastors, who had been trained in Switzerland, returned as missionaries to France and were arrested. Calvin writes to them through their trial. They were condemned to death by burning. "We pray," he wrote, "that [God] would glorify Himself more and more by your constancy, and that He may, by the comfort of His Spirit, sweeten and endear all that is bitter to the flesh, and so absorb your spirits in Himself, that in contemplating that heavenly crown, you may be ready without regret to leave all that belongs to this world" (see note 62).

In a letter to Melanchthon on November 19, 1558, he wrote that war was imminent in the region and that enemy troops could reach Geneva within half-an-hour. "Whence you may conclude," he said, "that we have not only exile to fear, but that all the most cruel varieties of death are impending over us, for in the cause of religion they will set no bounds to their barbarity" (see note 63). So Calvin lived in a time of incredible cruelty and almost daily vulnerability to death by agonizing disease or agonizing torture - and that without any hope of pain-relievers. It was a harsh and immoral and barbaric time.

This atmosphere gave rise to the greatest and the worst achievement of Calvin. The greatest was the writing of the Institutes of the Christian Religion, and the worst was his joining in the condemnation of the heretic, Michael Servetus, to burning at the stake in Geneva.

The Institutes was first published in March, 1536, when Calvin was 26 years old. It went through five editions and enlargements until it reached its present form in the 1559 edition. If this is all Calvin had written - and not 48 volumes of other works - it would have established him as the foremost theologian of the Reformation. But it did not arise for merely academic reasons. Here's why he wrote it, soon after he had been driven from France and was safely hiding in Basel:

But lo! whilst I lay hidden at Basel, and known only to few people, many faithful and holy persons were burnt alive in France . . . . It appeared to me, that unless I opposed them [the perpetrators] to the utmost of my ability, my silence could not be vindicated from the charge of cowardice and treachery. This was the consideration

which induced me to publish my Institutes of the Christian Religion. . . . It was published with no other design than that men might know what was the faith held by those whom I saw basely and wickedly defamed (see note 64).

So it was the very barbarity of the times against the faithful in France that stirred up Calvin to write the first edition of the Institutes.

But it was this same barbarity from which he could not disentangle himself. Michael Servetus was a Spaniard, a medical doctor, a lawyer and a theologian. His doctrine of the Trinity was unorthodox - so much so as to shock both Catholic and Protestant in his day. In 1553 he published his views and was arrested by the Catholics in France. But, alas, he escaped to Geneva. He was arrested there and Calvin argued the case against him. He was sentenced to death. Calvin called for a swift execution, but he was burned at the stake on October 27, 1553 (see note 65).

This has tarnished Calvin's name so severely that many cannot give his teaching a hearing. But it is not clear that most of us, given that milieu, would not have gone along under the circumstances (see note 66). Melancthon was the gentle, soft-spoken associate of Martin Luther whom Calvin had met and loved. He wrote to Calvin on the Servetus affair, "I am wholly of your opinion and declare also that your magistrates acted quite justly in condemning the blasphemer to death" (see note 67). Calvin never held civil office in Geneva (see note 68) but exerted all his influence as a pastor. Yet, in this execution, his hands are as stained with Servetus' blood as David's were with Uriah's.

Which makes the confessions of Calvin near the end of his life all the more important. On April 25, 1564, a month before his death, he called the magistrates of the city to his room and spoke these words,

With my whole soul I embrace the mercy which [God] has exercised towards me through Jesus Christ, atoning for my sins with the merits of his death and passion, that in this way he might satisfy for all my crimes and faults, and blot them from his remembrance. . . . I confess I have failed innumerable times to execute my office properly, and had not He, of His boundless goodness, assisted me, all that zeal had been fleeting and vain. . . . For all these reasons, I testify and declare that I trust to no other security for my salvation than this, and this only, viz., that as God is the Father of mercy, he will show himself such a Father to me, who acknowledge myself to be a miserable sinner (see note 69).

T. H. L. Parker said, "he should never have fought the battle of faith with the world's weapons" (see note 70). Whether Calvin came to that conclusion before he died, we don't know. But what we know is that Calvin knew himself a "miserable sinner" whose only hope in view of "all [his] crimes" was the mercy of God and the blood of Jesus.

So the times were harsh and immoral and barbaric, and had a contaminating effect on everyone, just as we are all contaminated today by the evils of our time. Their blind spots and evils may be different from ours. And it may be that the very things

they saw clearly are the things we are blind to. It would be foolhardy to say that we would have never done what they did under their circumstances, and thus draw the conclusion that they have nothing to teach us. In fact, what we probably need to say is that some of our evils are such that we are blind to them, just as they were blind to many of theirs, and the virtues they manifested in those times are the very ones that we probably need in ours. There was in the life and ministry of John Calvin a grand God-centeredness, Bible-allegiance and iron constancy. Under the banner of God's mercy to miserable sinners we would do well to listen and learn.

Notes (54-70):

54. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, orig. English 1577, orig. French, 1562), with introduction by the publishers, viii.

55. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin, Selections from His writings*, (Scholars Press, 1975), p. 78.

56. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 78.

57. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 29.

58. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 42.

59. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 29.

60. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, (London: J. M. Dent and Co., 1909), p. 75.

61. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letters*, p. 63.

62. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 120.

63. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 71.

64. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 27.

65. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 102.

66. T. H. L. Parker describes some of those circumstances in *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 102.

67. Henry F. Henderson, *Calvin in His Letter*, p. 196.

68. Benjamin Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*, (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), p. 16.

69. John Dillenberger, *John Calvin*, p. 35 (emphasis added).

70. T. H. L. Parker, *Portrait of Calvin*, p. 103.

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