

# Calvin Speaks



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## CHRISTIAN RULERS (Part 1)

*(Title not in original manuscript)*

Sermon 105.20 November 1555. Deuteronomy 17:14-18.

14. When you have come to the land which the LORD your God gives you, and possess it, and dwell in it, and say "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me;"

15. You will surely set *him* king over you whom the LORD your God chooses. One from among your brethren shall you set king over you; you may not set a stranger over you, who *is* not your brother.

16. But he is not to multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to the end that he may multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, "You shall henceforth never return that way."

17. Neither is he to multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away; nor shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold.

18. And it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, out of *that which is* before the priests the Levites.<sup>1</sup>

Heretofore Moses has spoken of the judges that were ordained in every city to govern the people, and especially of the chief judge to whom all things were referred. Now he adds that if the people are disposed to choose a king, this is the kind he ought to be, First he prescribes that he must be taken out of the lineage of Abraham, and secondly he declares his duty, with the intent that he should not go beyond it and become a tyrant instead of a king. That is Moses' general meaning.

### The Questionable Desirability of Monarchical Government

Here we must consider why God does not set up a king by His own authority, but rather leaves it up to the desires of the people. For if He allowed the estate of a king, or if it were a thing He well liked, should He not have shown the way, so that the people might have obeyed His command in the matter? What He says, however, is, "*When you have come into the land which your God gives you, and en-*

*joy it, then if you want to choose a king like those of the other nations. . .*" It seems from this that God was not willing that there should be any kingship in Israel, but that if the people were so desirous of a king that they could not be held from it, then He granted it to them by way of sufferance.

At the same time, we hear how it is said in Genesis (49:10) that the scepter should not be taken from the tribe of Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until the person who would be sent had come. This prophecy was not a curse against the people, nor was it a manifestation of God's vengeance; rather, it was a special favor, above all others. For in so saying, Jacob declared that God would set up an everlasting King, by Whom salvation would be sent throughout the whole world. And until the time of the manifesting of our Lord Jesus Christ, it behooved the people to be maintained constantly in hope of Him; and God gave to Him the kingdom of Judah and that whole tribe.

We see then in a few words that this kingdom was a figure of our Lord Jesus Christ, and a pledge which God gave to that people that He Himself reigned over them. The kings of Judah served always to hold the people under God's protection, as if they were the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For although all the princes of the world are called God's children and His lieutenants (Ps.82:6), yet notwithstanding, the kingdom of Judah had that title after a more special and holy manner. And therefore we see it was God's will that there should be a king among His people, because it was the full perfection of all felicity that Jesus Christ should be the head of them.

True it is that if disputations should arise concerning the government of men, it might be said that a free state is much better than a principedom, but Scripture here is not entering into any such controversy. Indeed, such disputations are not very profitable. They that are under the gov-

<sup>1</sup> or, in the presence of the priests the Levites.

ernment of a prince ought not to be fickle-minded so as to make any alteration, and those to whom God has given liberty and freedom ought to use it with thanksgiving as a singular benefit and treasure that cannot be prized sufficiently.

As for the office of king in Judah, there was a special aspect to it, as I said before, namely that it was the image of the truth which was in our Lord Jesus Christ, in gathering us to Himself to make us God's church and His own flock. For that is better than all the government in the whole world. If a man were to compare a principality, or a free state having a senate, or whatever else can be imagined for a commonwealth, with that grace which God gives us in showing Himself to us in His own Person, purposing to reign over us Himself and to take charge of our welfare, and establishing His only Son in the office and dignity—1 pray you, is it not much better to be under the obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ and to have Him to reign over us as our sovereign Lord and King, than to be Kings and Emperors every one of us?

So then, we must conclude that since God ordained judges from the beginning, He shows thereby that it is a desirable thing for people to be governed in common and to have laws to reign among them, and that there be no succession by inheritance, but that even those chosen (to bear office) be bound to give account of their doings, and that they do not have absolute liberty to do as they please or to say, "I will have this thing; it shall be done thus." This did God show when He governed His own people by the hand of judges.

For the same reason He blamed and chastised the Jews for requiring a king to be their head and to reign over them (1 Sam. 8). "It is not you (He says to Samuel) to whom they have done this wrong. It is true that you are the one who exercised My authority in that I set you up (as a judge), but their unthankfulness and disobedience pertains to Me, in that they cannot abide that I should have the governing of them." And afterward He adds, "Well, then, let them have a king. But it shall be to their trouble, for he shall spoil their houses, take away their sons and daughters, consume their substance, lay taxes and tallages<sup>2</sup> on them, and (to be short) use them like wretched bondslaves. See what they have won by requiring a king!"

In this text our Lord shows that in respect of worldly government He had chosen the best state that could be, namely that the Law should reign over the people, and along with that there should be judges in every city and a chief governor over all, to the intent that matters might be determined and concluded, as was declared yesterday (Sermon 104); *however*, with this most noble condition, which God reserved to Himself, that our Lord Jesus Christ should reign over them.<sup>3</sup> For it behooved them to be under one head, howbeit not simply of a mortal man, but of the Son of God. But forasmuch as the time was not yet come that such grace should be shown, it behooved the hope thereof to be fed with some figure. And that is why it was promised by the mouth of Jacob that the scepter should not depart from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10). God purposely chose out one tribe, and when He meant to set up

the king, He said that his reign should endure until the coming of His own Son, Who was the true Heir and the very Party to whom the crown belonged, namely our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we have a declaration of what sort of kingdom God meant to establish among His people: one which prefigured our Lord Jesus Christ.

But with respect to worldly government the best and most desirable state was to have judges; that is to say, to be in liberty and yet to be ruled by laws. Thereby we are to understand that although all worldly governments deserve to be esteemed as holy and as necessary for the maintenance of man's state, yet notwithstanding when it pleases God to give us a proper kind of government, void of tyranny, wherein the magistrates rule in such a way that the laws have their due course, this revelation is a special privilege and we ought thereby to perceive that God is near at hand to us and that He pities us as the people of His own household and as those that are of His flock and His own heritage. Mark that for one point.

And we must mark also that if we experience God's grace in His governing of us in this earthly and transitory life, it is nothing in comparison to the Spiritual kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore we must highly exalt and praise this benefit, that God condescends to govern us by the hand of His only Son. Yea, and we must esteem it not only more than all the liberty of the world, but also more than all the kingdoms and empires of the world. But shortly this point will be touched on again.

#### The Institution of Monarchy under the Old Covenant

Furthermore, let us mark that though God intended to set up a king, He tarried nevertheless until the people required one. This was in order to create in them a desire, so that afterward they might not rebel against the king that was to be set up. For the unthankfulness and malice of the people betrayed itself in that they could not find it in their hearts to adhere to the state which God had established already. And what a thing it would have been if He had set up a monarchy among them at the first day? For it is a far more tolerable thing for us to have governors that go by choice and election, who in executing their office shall know themselves to be subject to the law, than to have a prince whose mere word must stand for reason, whose child must inherit even if he is only a baby at the time, and consequently obeyed even if he is the most wilful fool or the cruelest person in all the world. It is a far

<sup>2</sup>tallage – a tax levied by kings upon towns and crown lands, or by a feudal lord upon his tenants.

<sup>3</sup>The reader should notice that Calvin calls this arrangement "the best state that could be." He is describing a Christian Republic governed by the laws of Scripture.

The secular Renaissance was a time of burgeoning absolutism, and the perverted doctrine of the divine right of kings was receiving a tremendous boost from many of the humanists, Machiavelli being the most noted example. It was Calvinism, and more generally Protestantism, which stood unalterably opposed to the tyrannical political theories of the secularists of its day. What Calvin is saying in this paragraph was not said in a vacuum.

more tolerable state, I say, to have judges for governors.<sup>4</sup>

Now if the people of Israel could not endure with this state, but had to have a king through wicked desire), what would they have done if God had at the beginning said to them, "I set this or that house to reign over you, and it is necessary for you to obey the king"? What murmuring would there have been? What scheming would there have been? Therefore, it was God's will to make the people willing, to the end that there might be no occasion of rebellion when David was to be made their king.

Well, we see what came of it. For as a matter of fact their insistence on having a king, Saul, was through a foolish ambition and spite which they bore to their neighbors (1 Sam. 8:20). When they saw how there were kings in Edom, in Ammon, in Syria, and in the other countries, they thought there was no such dignity and stateliness among themselves because there was no royal seat among them. And therefore they wanted to have one. But behold their folly: When they had chosen Saul, even though he vexed them and put them to as much difficulty as can be imagined, yet they were so wedded to him that they wanted to keep the crown for his children and not allow David to reign. Even though God had declared that David was the man whom He had chosen and that they did not have the authority to choose any other to be their king, yet the people chose Saul's son, as though to say, "We will have this house to continue forever, no matter what God says."

And as we can see, David was only maintained in his kingdom by God's stretching out His hand to preserve him. For the people fell after a while to rebelling against David, and the story of Absalom shows that the insurrection was so great that David was forsaken by the majority of his subjects (2 Sam. 15:4). So then, it appears that if the people had not been tamed beforehand, the kingdom which God had determined on in His own purpose would never have taken place, nor would they have submitted themselves to it but by compulsion. All the same, it was necessary for them to submit, And so by that means the people were prepared for kingship by requiring a king for themselves, and yet they found themselves disappointed in their expectations.

For it was not God's will to establish the blessed kingdom at the first, by which the whole world would have salvation, but He chose a king of the tribe of Benjamin, even though it was said that the scepter should not depart from the tribe of Judah. Why did God turn away from that which He had spoken by the mouth of Jacob? This was done not because He is changeable, nor because He repented Himself, nor because He did not intend to fulfill the prophecy, but because He did not intend to let His blessing appear so soon because of the people's seditiousness. And so He hid it, or at least delayed it until they had acknowledged their fault and repented of it. And this shows us sufficiently for what reason God in this place does not reserve to Himself the choosing of that king who should govern His people, but rather says "you shall require one." It was so that His reign should have greater authority, and He be better loved by His people, so that every

man should submit himself to 'Him and thereby know in truth that there was no greater happiness than to be under the house of David, forasmuch as that house was a shadow and figure of the Son of God, who was to bring salvation and the full perfection of all good things.

In effect, we see here two things. The one is that our Lord blames the people for their stubborn insistence on making the first move in desiring a king. It is as if He said, "You will not permit Me to set up the monarchy. Of course I will never forget your needs, and in time I will set up such an order among you that you will thank Me for it and rejoice in My goodness. Alas the same, you are so malicious and stubborn that when I have given you judges, you insist on a king. And this stubbornness of yours will cause Me not to set up the kingdom I have ordained and which I have reserved for Myself, which is of the tribe of Judah." Yet at the same time (secondly), our Lord shows that He will set up the kingdom, but only after the people are made to obey and have acknowledged their sin in desiring a change not according to the will of God and before the time had arrived. In this way, we can see that the various parts of Scripture agree with one another.

We may gather a good lesson from this: When God has promised some benefit or token of His mercy, we must keep ourselves in awe and not run ahead to challenge Him to do what He has promised whenever we desire. Rather, we must be patient and quiet until God shows us by His actions that He did not intend to disappoint us in His promises pertaining to salvation. Here then is a general rule: In all God's promises we must be patient and not be hasty as if to say, "What's going on here? Why does God delay? Why doesn't He do what we hoped for?" Let us beware of such impatience, seeing the example of the people is such as we see it is here. Rather, let us be still when God has promised us anything, until its proper time has come of itself.

At the same time, this does not hinder us from praying to Him for it. After all, for what reason does He call us to Himself and command us to pray, except that we should discharge all our cares and sorrows on Him (Phil. 4:6), and receive comfort from it? Therefore, we may indeed pray to God when we are stirred up to impatience, but yet we must always refer all things to Him. And it is surely proper for Him to dispose of things according to His own determination and purpose, and not according to our fancy.

Also, let us bear in mind what I have touched on before, that since God has given us a convenient civil state, and we are governed by judges and magistrates in such a way as laws reign over us, we ought to give God thanks for this benefit and be careful not to provoke his wrath by our

<sup>4</sup>One of the most dangerous myths of the present climate of opinion in America is that liberty is a byproduct of 18th century rationalism and its predecessor, the Renaissance. As a matter of fact, the only nations in the world which have enjoyed sustained periods of liberty under law have been the Calvinistic nations of Western Europe and the United States of America. This has not been a coincidence. *Preachers need to make this point crystal clear in our day.*

fickleness in desiring this or that and in saying, 'Why is it not thus or thus?' For when we want to change things according to our own pleasure, it is not against men that we make war, but against God, as we thrust Him far from us so that He should not reign over us. Therefore, to be short about it, since there is some form of government among us, let us learn to thank God and to keep under the shadow of His wings, and not to crave this or that through foolish ambition. For we see what happened to the people of Israel. True, God chose for them a king; it was, however, to punish them for their wicked desire. It will come to pass the same way with others as well. Indeed, we see how He gave large scope to the king He set up, namely Saul, saying, "He will not reign as a Prince, but he will execute all kinds of tyranny over you, and you will have to put up with it in spite of your teeth."<sup>5</sup>

But however we fare, let us learn to refer all the benefits that God gives us in this world to the Spiritual kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ, assuring ourselves that even if we had everything we want and lived in immeasurable wealth and pleasure, and that even if we had such rulers as were as gentle toward us as possible, all this would be

nothing unless our Lord Jesus Christ reigned over us and bore all the sway. On the other hand, even if we were tormented according to the flesh, just as we see many people suffering greatly under tyranny, and even if we did not have so much as mere bread to eat, yet the blessing that God sends us in that our Lord Jesus Christ rules over us ought to be preferred above all other things, and we ought to bear all afflictions patiently so that we may have the comfort of His reign over us. Now, the scepter of our Lord Jesus Christ is not a material scepter, after the manner of the royal scepters and crowns which kings and princes had at all times, but it is the gospel, which is the true token of His presence. And we can see how He takes us as His people. We have a sure warrant for seeing this in that He will have us gathered together into the unity of faith by the teaching of His gospel and by that means to be made the heritage of God.

(to be concluded)

<sup>5</sup>"in spite of your teeth," that is, no matter how much you oppose and resist it.

#### F. NIGEL LEE SPEAKS AT GENEVA DIVINITY SCHOOL

Dr. Francis Nigel Lee, noted Reformed scholar and lecturer, and newly-appointed Chairman of the Department of Systematic Theology at the theological seminary of the Continuing Presbyterian Church of Australia, Emmanuel College, Queensland University, delivered a series of 25 lectures at Geneva Divinity School during the Christmas season, 1980.

Audiocassettes of these lectures, each about 55 minutes in length, can be obtained from the Geneva Tape Ministry, 708 Hamvassy Road, Tyler, TX 75701. The price is \$3.00 per cassette purchased, or \$1.00 per cassette rental.

The following are the titles of the lectures, which can be purchased individually. The series as a whole is titled: "The Eschatology of Victory from Adam to the Afrikaners."

1. The Eschatology of Victory in the Old Testament.
2. The E. of V. in the Apocrypha.
3. The E. of V. in the New Testament.
4. The E. of V. in the Apostolic Fathers.
5. The E. of V. in the Second Century Fathers.
6. The E. of V. in the Third Century Fathers.
7. The E. of V. in the Fourth and Fifth Century Fathers.
8. The E. of V. from the Middle Ages to the Reformation.
9. The E. of V. in the Ethics of John Calvin.

10. The E. of V. in the Theology of John Calvin.
11. The E. of V. in the Continental Reformed Creeds.
12. The E. of V. from Knox to the Synod of Dordt.
13. The E. of V. from Dordt to 17th Century Holland.
14. The E. of V. in Holland from Green to Bavinck.
15. The E. of V. in Holland from Geesink to Van Ruler.
16. The E. of V. transplanted in 1652 to South Africa.
17. The E. of V. among the Afrikaners, 1652-1900.
18. The E. of V. among Afrikaners in the 20th Century.
19. The E. of V. in Afrikaner Political Life.
20. The E. of V. in Afrikaner Ecclesiastical Life.
21. The E. of V. in Afrikaner Education, Art, Race Relations, Economics.
22. The E. of V. in Afrikaner Theology from World War II to 1960.
23. The E. of V. in Afrikaner Theology in the 1960s.
24. The E. of V. in Afrikaner Theology in the 1970s.
25. The E. of V. in Afrikaner Theology in the years ahead.

The last four lectures provide a summary of the otherwise-inaccessible theological and philosophical work of Afrikaner theologians such as Stoker, Potgeiter, and others.

Dr. Lee also presented three sermons on the Book of Haggai. These are also available from the Geneva Tape Ministry.

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