

Calvin Speaks



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CHRISTIAN RULERS (Part 2)

(Title not in original manuscript)

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

Summary of the First Half

When He set up the nation Israel, God organized the nation as a Christian Republic, ruled by laws administered by judges. The best kind of government is to have liberty under laws, with the LORD as king. God did, however, intend to set up a king among His people, such a king as would be an appropriate figure and forerunner of His own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. The people, however, rebelling against His grace in providing them with judges, demanded a king before the proper time had arrived. Thus, Saul was made king over them, a bad king whose ill-conceived actions might have shown the people the folly of wanting to be like other nations.

The King must be Chosen from among the People

Let us now turn to what Moses adds concerning the office of the king. He says, first of all, **the king must be chosen from among the people**. "You shall take one of your own brethren," he says, "and you shall not go seek a stranger." Now, according to the prophecy of Jacob, the king was to be chosen from the tribe of Judah. Why then does God speak generally of the whole lineage of Abraham, and not mark out the kingly house by name here in this passage? We should not expect God to obscure the prophecy He had already given! To understand this matter, let us note what has been said already, that the time had not yet come, and so the favor God had promised by the mouth of the patriarch Jacob was not to be made manifest for a while yet, because of the **unthankfulness** of the people. God had indeed spoken of this matter long before, and now, three hundred years later, He speaks again of there being a king among the people. And what king? Shall that prophecy uttered by the mouth of Jacob three hundred years earlier now vanish away and be of none effect? Should not Jacob's prophecy be reiterated with greater clarity at this point, with the giving of the Law?

Yes, we should rightly expect this to be the case; but our Lord here causes us to understand that the people had drawn as it were a veil over the promise, and so it was proper for God's favor to be as it were hidden away in the dark instead of coming to light at this point. That is what

God meant to show in this text by saying, "You shall choose a king from among your brethren," without specifying the house as had been done before. But, however the case stands, God's holding back of His favor at this time was not an utter abolition of it. He did at that time delay His promise of setting up a king from the tribe of Judah, but He did not utterly bereave His people of that hope. And so you see how the people themselves caused an interruption, and yet God, for all His chastising of them, uses gracious goodness and moderates His rigor, so that the thing which He had ordained abides still, saving only that the time of its accomplishment is postponed.⁶

Let us mark, therefore, that God will hide His favors away for a while in order to correct the faults of His people. In the interim the favor is not manifest, but in the end He will cause it to come again. In this way He overcomes our sinfulness with His infinite goodness, and we see it from experience. Yet sometimes we do not feel it even though our Lord shows it to us. At any rate, however the case stands, let us learn by the example of the Jews that if our Lord at any time withdraws Himself from us, and seems not to perform His promise to us, our own faults are the cause of it, because we have been rebellious and have pulled back God's hand when He would have reached it out to discharge His promise toward us. For how many times a day do we provoke His wrath? And is not that a kind of

⁶ In his *Commentary on this passage*, a few years later, Calvin says nothing about this matter. Whether he thought better of his views at this point, I do not know. His discussion here does seem a little strained. It is easier to take the Deuteronomic passage as having its own integrity: a king of **any** Christian nation should not be a foreigner but a citizen. If God had gone further and had written into the Deuteronomic law that the king must be of the tribe of Judah, it would have posed problems later on when God Himself sat up the Northern Kingdom and made Jeroboam king. The kings of the Northern Kingdom did not have the "sacramental" function Calvin notes later on, nor did they have to be of the tribe of Judah or the line of David. In a sense, the situation in the Northern Kingdom is more characteristic of any Christian monarchy, while the kingship in the Southern Kingdom is more peculiar and **typological** of the reign of the coming Messiah. It is because the Deuteronomic law is designed to cover more situations than only the Messianic-topological kingship of Southern Israel (Judah) that the law is phrased in more broad terms, and the tribe of Judah is not singled out.

shutting of the door against Him, that He might not come to us to make us partakers of His goodness? Therefore, when we have thrust back His grace in such a fashion, if it does not appear again to us immediately, we have to humble ourselves, acknowledging that we ourselves are to blame. But yet, for all that, we must not be discouraged, but we must pray God that although He has deferred the performance of His promises for a time, yet we may not be utterly bereft of them, no matter what happens, but that after we have languished for a time and been chastised for our offences, we return again without fail and enjoy "the thing which He has promised. Thus you see in effect what we have to learn from this text.

The King must not be a Stranger

There are two aspects we ought to mark well regarding God's forbidding His people to have *any stranger to be their king*. In the first place, that kingdom was a sacrament of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore it was not fit that it should have come into the hands of an unbeliever or idolator, for such would have a defiling of holy things. If heathen kings reign over their own kind, this is hardly to be marvelled at. For although some unbelieving kings reigned over the people of Israel by tyranny, as in the case of the Assyrians and afterward of the kings of Babylon (2 Kings 17:6, 25:22),⁷ yet it does not follow that this kind of exception is normal. God had even then a peculiar kind of reigning, whereby He showed as in a mirror that His people were gathered together as into His own house.

Therefore, if a stranger had been set up in the seat of David, it would have been treachery against God, and the insult would have been against God and His only Son. For, when the kingdom was established in the line of David, this promise was added: "I will be his Father, and he shall be My son" (Ps. 2:7, 8). And the apostle declares that this was so honorable a title that it was not even proper for angels (Heb. 1:5). It is true, of course, that angels are sometimes called the sons of God, but not without qualification; whereas Christ has this title because He is preferred before all creatures. Now then, if the people had chosen an idolator, and set him up in the seat which God had reserved for His only Son, Who was established in His infinite grace, *Who was the very image of His Divine majesty, and Who was above all the principalities of the world, yea and above heaven itself with respect to creatures* (as the apostle speaks of Him in the first chapter of his epistle to the Colossians [1:16, 17]), what a thing would that have been! Would not this have been a most horrible confusion, and an exceedingly shameful defiling of the grace of God? So then, let us mark this as the first reason why God would not have a stranger to sit in the seat of David.

And by so doing,⁸ God meant also to show a dreadful displeasure and to make the people aware how they were utterly accursed, in that their expectations of a Godly kingdom were disappointed, and that God's lamp was, in a certain kind of way, put out. For this analogy is often used in Scripture (1 Ki. 11:36) to show that God makes His light to shine on His people, and that although there may not always be a great light, yet there shall always be a lamp, no matter what happens in the world.

And so, turning to the *second* reason why the king must not be a stranger, it is that he would soon have changed the religion. We know that the heathen will always attempt to set up their own superstitions. The reason they do this is because they commonly do not have any fear of God to keep them in awe, but rather they think that God is obligated to them if they give men permission to worship Him and serve Him after some fashion. Also, they seek to turn the worship of God to a pattern established by their own desires and likings. If the Turk gets power in any country, even if he tolerates the Christians (as they call themselves), yet he persecutes them all he can in order to discourage them. Where the Papists bear sway, they defile all the purity of Christian doctrine, and they cannot abide that the gospel be preached or the sacraments properly administered, but they tear everything down and set up their own idolatries. And so you can see what would have happened if a stranger had reigned over the people of Israel: he would have overthrown the whole law. So, not without cause did God expressly provide that they should not choose any other as king than one from the lineage of Abraham, someone included in the covenant and bearing the mark of the Church (Col. 2:11, 12), which was circumcision, the Jewish sacrament equivalent to our sacrament of baptism.⁹

But we must apply all this to our own use. As regards the *first* reason, we must understand that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ must be maintained in such a sound condition that no defilement be brought into it. And what

⁷ The original English translation has "as was done by the Babylonians and afterward by the kings of Assyria." This may be an error in translation, or a slip of Calvin's tongue. At any rate, the references cited in the original English version make it clear that the reference is to the captivities of Northern Israel by Assyria and later of Southern Israel by Babylon. Thus, I have corrected the text at this point.

⁸ That is, apparently, on those occasions when the heathen, such as the Assyrians or the Babylonians, did sit in the seat of David.

⁹ The editor would like to take this opportunity to make a point Calvin does not make. The text says that the ruler must come from among his own people. It was the custom in Europe and throughout the rest of the world to get a monarch from the ruling house of some other country, if there was no heir. This happened several times in British history. George I, for instance, came from a royal house in Germany, and learned hardly any English at all during his reign. The presumption in all this is that there is such a thing as "royal blood" which ought to occupy the seat of royalty in a nation. The Bible strikes a death blow to this aristocratic conception. The monarch must come from among the people, and must always remember that he is but the first among equals. He must be a servant-ruler. Saul spared Agag and Ahab spared Ben-Hadad because they regarded them as "fellow royalty" (1 Sam. 15; 1 Kings 20:32). Saul's daughter, Michal, despised David when David humbled himself to be as one of the "common" people before the LORD (2 Sam. 6).

The history of early modern Europe, and especially of England, is very often a history of royal houses at war with the people of their own country. Obedience to Biblical law at this point would have prevented much suffering, and would have headed off the Cromwellian Revolution and later the French Revolution.

This passage also strikes against the notion that one nation ought to sat up a puppet regime in another nation, something the governments of Great Britain and the United States have apparently been repeatedly guilty of.

is the kingdom of Christ? I have told you already that it does not consist in any visible things, or in any things belonging to this present life, but it is the gathering of us together by His Holy Spirit into the hope of the heavenly life, and the preaching of the gospel to us that it may be a rule to hold us under obedience to God. And although the sacraments are visible in themselves, yet they are spiritual in respect of their end, as all other ceremonies are. We come together here, which is visible. We kneel down to pray to God, which is also visible. Yet all this aims at a higher end and has an aspect which is altogether spiritual.¹⁰ So then, let us learn that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ ought to be maintained in complete soundness; that is, we must beware that we do not mingle any corruption with the things that He has commanded in His Church, nor allow into office such persons as would overthrow the common good. For if we should choose false shepherds and men of wicked doctrine or of an evil manner of life, would this not be a dishonoring of Jesus Christ's kingdom, and would it not put all things to havoc?

Seeing then that the children of Israel were forbidden to set up a foreign king in the seat that was a figure of our Lord Jesus Christ, now that we have the Son of God to govern us, not in shadows as in the time of the law, but in full truth; now that we have our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is called the Sun of Righteousness by the prophet Malachi (4:2), Who tells us that He is near at hand, and Who rules in the midst of us; what a treachery it would be if we should deface His royal throne and not maintain it in such purity that He might always reign by His Word, and every man do Him homage, and both great and small know Him, and He always have the preeminence among us! Thus, you see how the first point is that God here commands us to have a special care for His Church, so that there be no defilement to hinder Christ's reigning over us as He ought to do.

As regards the application of the *second* reason, let us mark also that if God has given a people the grace to choose kings, princes, magistrates, or judges, they ought to have great regard that the seat which God has ordained for the welfare of mankind be not given to a man that is an unbeliever. For a people "that chooses either a king or a judge, without first discerning whether he is a man who fears God or not, put-themselves into willful bondage. And if they choose magistrates that are either deadly enemies of the gospel or hypocrites, who seek nothing else but to turn all things upsidedown, or worldlings who could find it in their hearts to tread all religion under foot; is not such an act simply an opening of the gate to Satan, that he might have a place among us? Is it not a rejecting of God's grace, to the end that all abominations might have their full scope?

So then, when we choose judges, magistrates, governors, and officers of justice, let us take warning from this text to look for this mark in them that they be men which fear God and are at the least desirous that religion should be maintained in its purity. For otherwise we might as well drive God from us and seek to banish Him from among us, which is too cursed a traitorousness to be comprehended!¹¹ So much for earthly government. After we have endeavored to maintain the Spiritual religion of the church, let us likewise be so minded toward the state of the temporal sword and ordinary justice, that such as sit in judgment may be all

one with us in brotherly religion; and that the holy bond of faith may knit us together in obedience to one selfsame God. The proof of this is in the next verse, so we shall treat of it immediately.

The King must Rule by God's Law

He says expressly that the *king who is chosen must cause the book of the Law to be copied out in the presence of the high priest and of the Levites. Now let us see why* "

¹⁰ Calvin's language here seems more Platonic than Biblical, in opposing "spiritual" to "visible". Generally the Bible opposes that which is Spiritual to that which is evil. In context, however, it is possible to take Calvin in a better sense, if we capitalize the "S" in 'Spiritual.' Calvin never denies that the Kingdom has a visible side, but he always affirms that the heart and core of the Kingdom of God is invisible because it is God Himself. Thus, the Kingdom is foundationally (Holy-) Spiritual. Calvin would have us imitate Moses, who took dominion over the visible realm, but always acted "as seeing Him Who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27).

Calvin is not always clear on this matter however, and a quasi-Platonic downgrading of the visible and the material has persisted in some Calvinistic circles right-down-to the present day. On this matter, see Rouses J. Rushdoony, *The Flight from Humanity: A Study of the Effect of Neoplatonism on Christianity* (1973; Thoburn Press, 11121 Pope's Head Road, Fairfax, VA 22030; \$1.50).

¹¹It ought to be noted that Calvin says so-called Christians who reject the idea that only Christians ought to rule in the state are traitors to the gospel and rejectors of God's grace. Sadly, such "graceless traitors" (to use Calvin's own language) seem to abound in so-called Calvinistic circles today.

For instance, the Banner of Truth Trust has published a book by Walter Chantry, *God's Righteous Kingdom* (1980), which asserts that Christians are not to strive for political control (p. 37). Indeed, Chantry indicates he thinks any Christian who, like Calvin, strives for political reconstruction is probably not regenerate (p. 18). Chantry claims, without credibility, to be a Calvinist. Actually he is a pure Platonist, couching grotesque heresies and caricatures of Biblical Christianity in pious-sounding language. Chantry's book is filled with lies and innuendos about his opponents, as anyone familiar with those he is attacking will recognize.

Chantry is an editor of the Banner of Truth Trust, another group which claims to be Calvinistic. The December 1980 issue of *The Banner of Truth* magazine tells to regard Chantry's book as one of their most important and valuable titles! The impotence of the heretical and Platonic theology of these men is nowhere better illustrated than in the fact that their every attack on Biblical Christianity consists of lies, distortions, innuendoes, and sneering false charges. (Perhaps the worst and most persistent lie is that Calvinists who are interested in social reconstruction are opposed to personal piety and to the local churches. Actually, the writings of Rushdoony, North, Bahnsen, and others abound in affirmations that the first work of Christianity is prayer, evangelism, and the building up of church and family. The editors of the Banner of Truth Trust have repeatedly been shown that this is true, but they continue to publish their lies.)

A similar "graceless traitor" is Meradith G. Kline, whose article in the *Westminster Theological Journal* (Fall, 1978), "comments on an Old-New Error," attacks everything Calvin argues for in this sermon. Kline thinks that if Israel was a special case, then it has absolutely nothing in common with any other Christian nation, while Calvin sees both continuity and discontinuity between Israel and other Christian nations. Kline asserts (p. 183f.) that the state is an institution of "common grace" and thus has no obligation to be Christian. He seems to compare the Old Testament law to the regime of Adolf Hitler (p. 187). The editors of the *Westminster Theological Journal* have, amazingly, refused to print any reply to Kline's wild accusations. (It might be added that Kline's article is a slanderous attack on the "Chalcedon position." Anyone in the least familiar with the "Chalcedon position" will realize that Kline has virtually no understanding of it. The "Chalcedon position" is, for all intents and purposes, theoretically identical with the position Calvin takes in these sermons on Deuteronomy.)

God has made such a clear ordinance, that there should be a book of authority for the king's use. Is it meant that a man should be ignorant and utterly unacquainted with the doctrine of God, until he came to the crown? No. For it is God's will that His law should be known both by great and small, as we shall see by His protestation hereafter (Deut. 32:46). The secret things belong to your God Himself, but it has pleased Him to set His Word here before you (Deut. 29:29). You must no longer say that it is a hidden doctrine, either for yourselves or for your children. We see then how it was God's will that His law should be common both to great and small. So then, should he that was brought up in the house of the crown be a beast? No. Ought he not to have been instructed in the Law? And if he should be so instructed, is it not requisite that he should have a book of it? Yes, of course.

So why then would God command that he should have a copy of the book at such time as he ascends to rule? It was so that he should perceive himself to be double bound, and understand that if private persons are bound to study in God's school and to give good heed to the doctrine that is preached or written, it is even more necessary that the person who has charge of the whole body, who has been set up in the name of God, and who has had God come near to him, should be diligent to profit in the same school. Therefore, let us mark how proper it was that a book be appointed especially for the king, and that the same be written out in a solemn fashion, and that the priests and Levites be witnesses thereof, and that the same be delivered to him as by the hand of God.

It is as if God had said to him, "Consider. I have given My Law to all My people, and I have ordered the remembrance of that Law to be renewed annually." 2For the book was brought forth, and the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled first upon the book and then upon all the people (Heb. 9:19, 20), so that they should consider thus: "We are linked in an inseparable bond with the law of God." But when this was done there was a second book brought out and delivered into the king's own hands, as if to say to him: "God binds you much more than any private person to know your duty, namely that you should be better learned than all the rest, and be an example for them, and behave in such a way that the people may take you as a guide." That is what our Lord means in this text.

Indeed, let us consider how difficult the duty of princes is. Even if a judge had only one city or town to govern, yet he would find himself much encumbered. What about the ruler of a whole realm! All magistrates and officers here present must apply this to themselves, and know that their charge surpasses all their abilities, so that they will never be able to go through with it unless God gives them His Holy Spirit. And He will not have them to be negligent.

What is to be done then? All magistrates and such as have charge of public affairs must understand that if it behooves other men to be diligent in reading the Holy

Scripture, in frequenting sermons, in being confirmed more and more in sound doctrine and in being more and more edified thereby; they themselves have twice as much need to be about this business. And seeing that God has advanced them to preeminence, it behooves them to have recourse to Him daily, and to call upon Him, and not to be so vain-glorious as to think: "I am fully able to guide myself and to govern others." No, no. Let them rather consider themselves to be unable, unless God gives them power and strength along with wisdom and discretion, to guide even their own selves. Therefore let them desire to be taught, that others may frame themselves after their example; and let all resort unto God, endeavoring to profit in this way in His school, so that the great men may have the means to govern well, and the humbler people may by this means be persuaded to obey quietly; so that all men maybe guided to God with one common accord.

12 Calvin argues in Sermon 174, on Daut. 31:9-14, that the Law was taught at the annual feasts.

Prayer

Now let us kneel down in the presence of our good God, with acknowledgement of our faults, praying Him to make us feel them in such a way that we may seek His mercy with true repentance, asking Him to grant to us not only to bury our past sins but also to reform us so that our whole desire may be to please him, and to frame ourselves to His will in all points; and also in the meanwhile He would bear with us in all our infirmities until He has rid us quite clean of them. And so let us all say, "Almighty God, heavenly Father.. "

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