

“Calvin and Civil Disobedience.” – Ho Tze Kong (MCS1)

It is well known that John Calvin argues for submission to civil government. He expounds on the divine mandate for human governance and calls for obedience on the part of the governed even in instances where the powers that be are not given to justice and righteousness. The importance he attaches to the office of the magistrate is such that in the event of political action to be taken against the ruler it is for the appointed magistrate, not the people, to act. The general impression yielded, and understandably so, is that Calvin's political view with respect to civil authority is conservative and the Reformer's framework in this regard is one characterized by regimentation and the emphasis on stability. Nevertheless it is the intent of the present discussion to point out that there is a vein of possible activism against government in Calvin's outlook. Notwithstanding the fact that there are those who try to demonstrate Calvinist support for political radicalism, the aim of the present discourse is to adopt civil disobedience, that moderate and yet powerful form of basic opposition, as a point of departure to illustrate the case for congruity between resistance and Calvin's theology. In this context mention will be made of Henry David Thoreau whose classic statement on civil disobedience may be inspiring. Thoreau's transcendentalism and individualism in nineteenth century America seem to make him an unlikely choice for reference but a review of his tenets will manifest that the principles of civil disobedience, and for that matter activism, can be accommodated within Calvin's thought.

Calvin delivers a wide-ranging and poignant exposition on civil government in Chapter xx of Book IV of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. He has a very high opinion of civil authority as sanctioned by God: “Yet civil government has as 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 behaviour to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquillity.”¹ Hesselink takes the view that for Calvin the political order is a positive blessing. Civil government is a gift of God towards realizing the kingdom of God on earth. The spiritual kingdom and civil order are indispensable to each other.² Civil government is to provide “a public manifestation of religion” and maintain humanity among men: it “prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound; that men may carry on blameless intercourse among themselves; that honesty and modesty may be preserved among men”.³ The magistrates play a significant role: “They have a mandate from God, have been invested with divine authority, and are wholly God's representatives, in a manner, acting as his vicegerents.”⁴ The people, for their part, are to hold magistrates in great respect: “The first duty of subjects toward their magistrates is to think most honorably of their office, which they recognize as a jurisdiction bestowed by God, and on that account to esteem and reverence them as ministers and representatives of God.”⁵ Calvin's position on submission to civil government is of course exemplified by his commentary on Chapter 13 of the Book of Romans. On magistrates, he comments: “He[God]has appointed them for the just and lawful government of the world.”⁶ Calvin links obedience to magistrates with obedience to God: “They are to be obeyed not only on the grounds of human necessity, but also in order that we may obey God.”⁷

¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559 Edition), 2 vols., ed. J.T.McNeill, trans. F.L.Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol.XX and XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), IV. xx. 2.

² I. J. Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p.168.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, IV. xx. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, IV. xx. 22.

⁶ J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. R. Mackenzie (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960; reprint, Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1976), p.281.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.283.

Much has been said about what form of government Calvin favours. Hudson observes that apparently Calvin advocates absolute submission to authority which would be true in a pure monarchy, but since no such form of government existed in Europe, discussion of the rights and duties under monarchy is academic.⁸ Calvin himself notes: "The fall from kingdom to tyranny is easy; but it is not much more difficult to fall from the rule of the best men to the faction of a few; yet it is easiest of all to fall from popular rule to sedition. For if the three forms of government which the philosophers discuss be considered in themselves, I will not deny that aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others."⁹ As monarchy may lapse into despotism, aristocracy into oligarchy and democracy into sedition, it is more secure to have a mixture of aristocracy and democracy which we now call representative democracy.¹⁰ Calvin explains the rationale for it: "Therefore, men's fault or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number to exercise government, so that they may help one another, teach and admonish one another; and, if one asserts himself unfairly, there may be a number of censors and masters to restrain his willfulness."¹¹ McNeill remarks that by aristocracy Calvin means the rule of those best qualified, not of a hereditary caste. An elected aristocratic magistrate is the ideal.¹² Hopfl sums up this system of representation by saying that Calvin supports controlled and regulated popular participation.¹³

A more delicate matter comes up in the scenario in which the rulers are self-seeking and exploit the people. It will then be difficult to convince the populace of the necessity for obedience. Calvin stresses that we have to follow these rulers because the office itself commands deference and he counsels the subjects to accept their lot: "For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord's to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer."¹⁴ He appeals for introspection on the fact that the unjust princes have been raised up by God to punish the iniquities of the people and in his commentary on Romans 13:3-4 says, "If a wicked ruler is the Lord's scourge to punish the sins of the people, let us reflect that it is our own fault that this excellent blessing of God is turned into a curse."¹⁵

God will remove the unrighteous civil authorities. He "broke the bloody scepters of arrogant kings" and "overturned intolerable governments". So "let the princes hear and be afraid".¹⁶ The mechanism however is not people's uprisings but through lawful representatives. In view of Calvin's apprehension about anarchy, it is not surprising that he does not countenance mass participation in public affairs. "I include the restraint which private citizens ought to bid themselves keep in public, that they may not deliberately intrude in public affairs, or pointlessly invade the magistrate's office, or undertake anything at all politically...but let them commit the matter to the judgment of the magistrate, whose hand alone here is free."¹⁷ Calvin only allows for overthrow of tyrants by holders of subordinate office such as elected or appointed magistrates;¹⁸ these office-bearers have a public calling to rectify abuses of power: "I am so far from forbidding them to withstand, in accordance with their duty, the fierce licentiousness of kings, that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's

⁸ W. S. Hudson, "Democratic Freedom and Religious Faith in the Reformed Tradition", *Church History* XV (1946), pp.177-194, in R. M. Kingdon and R. D. Linder, ed., *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy?* (Lexington: D. C. Heath & Co., 1970), p.20.

⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 8.

¹⁰ Hudson, "Democratic Freedom and Religious Faith in the Reformed Tradition", p.22.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 8.

¹² J. T. McNeill, "Democratic Elements in Calvin's Thought", *Church History* XVIII (1949), 159-164, 166-171, in R. M. Kingdon and R. D. Linder, ed., *Calvin and Calvinism: Sources of Democracy?* (Lexington: D. C. Heath & Co., 1970), p.32.

¹³ H. Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.159.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 31.

¹⁵ Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, p.282.

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 31.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, IV. xx. 23.

¹⁸ Hesselink, *Calvin's First Catechism: A Commentary*, p.175.

ordinance.”¹⁹

Hence in Calvin’s framework on civil government, there is a political order sustaining divinely authorized administration based on submission. Corrective action, if any, is to be taken against unjust rulers by a few on behalf of the majority. Apparently there is not much room for political activism of individuals to manoeuvre. McNeill succinctly states that indubitably Calvin upholds liberty, but it is liberty delineated by law and duty and never interpreted in revolutionary terms.²⁰

Henry David Thoreau’s classic essay “Civil Disobedience” has been the guiding light for many distinguished modern thinkers and social reformers. Its historical influence is beyond the present ambit of discussion. The slant here is on the conceptual level which will facilitate later reference to Calvin in the same domain. Government in “Civil Disobedience” is described as a vulnerable institution: “Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.”²¹ As the means through which people execute their will, the state is liable to be “abused and perverted”,²² but it can also be a positive agency and exert a salutary influence to promote the rights of the people. Often the perspective on civil authority depends on one’s values. Seen from a lower point of view, the Constitution and the judicial system look respectable and the government admirable. Yet from a higher point of view, their worth may be questioned.²³ It reflects the lack of inherent meaning and the relative functionality of civil administration. In any event, Thoreau puts in the reminder that “the world is not governed by policy and expediency”.²⁴ If the state possesses superior physical strength but not superior honesty, it will not be strong enough to extract compliance from him.²⁵

Thoreau sets out the different categories of people who work for the state. The military and security personnel serve the government in a mechanical, not human, way. They do not exercise moral judgment. The legislators, politicians, lawyers and ministers serve the state with rationality but without moral distinction. Therefore they may unwittingly do something evil. The minority, consisting of great heroes, patriots, martyrs and reformers, serve the state with conscience and invariably resist it. Conscience, which we will ponder on later, makes the difference and may pit the individual against civil authority. Unjust laws come into the picture and the government has to be held accountable: “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once? Men generally, under such a government as this, think that they ought to wait until they have persuaded the majority to alter them. They think that, if they should resist, the remedy would be worse than the evil. But it is the fault of the government itself that the remedy is worse than the evil. It makes it worse. Why is it not more apt to anticipate and provide for reform? Why does it not cherish its wise minority? Why does it cry and resist before it is hurt? Why does it not encourage its citizens to be on the alert to point out its faults, and do better than it would have them?”²⁶

The argument is now one touching upon personal as well as social sensibilities and sensitivities. Should we tackle injustice and if the answer is in the affirmative how should we go about it? Thoreau, taking the moral high ground, offers his point of view in no uncertain terms: “If it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 31.

²⁰ McNeill, “Democratic Elements in Calvin’s Thought”, p.33.

²¹ H. D. Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. S. Paul (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), p.235.

²² *Ibid.*, p.235.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.254.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.254.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.249.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.242-243.

wrong which I condemn.”²⁷ Dissociating oneself from injustice is essential. While we may not need to nurture a moralistic outlook, it is incumbent upon us not to identify ourselves with unrighteous endeavours: “It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous, wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support.”²⁸

However, civil disobedience is not tantamount to passivity. There is in fact a revolutionary vein in it: “All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to, and to resist, the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable.”²⁹ Resistance against tyranny is a matter of principle, not expediency. This ethic gives expression to the noble qualities of humanity: “Action from principle, the perception and the performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was. It not only divides States and churches, it divides families; ay, it divides the individual, separating the diabolical in him from the divine.”³⁰ The revolution in question, a peaceable one, is the gist of civil disobedience: “Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison...A minority is powerless while it conforms to the majority; it is not even a minority then; but it is irresistible when it clogs by its whole weight...When the subject has refused allegiance, and the officer has resigned his office, then the revolution is accomplished.”³¹

The dynamic force behind civil disobedience is the idea of individuality. A just government is one that has the blessing of the people. Thoreau notes in the development of political institutions that the evolution from monarchy to democracy is headway made in the true respect for the individual. “There will never be a really free and enlightened State until the State comes to recognize the individual as a higher and independent power, from which all its own power and authority are derived, and treats him accordingly.”³²

In *Walden*, his definitive literary work on heightened personal perceptions in relation to Nature, Thoreau says a man should adhere to “the laws of his being which will never be one of opposition to a just government”.³³ These inner laws of the individual are an alternative epithet for conscience. Individual conscience takes precedence over majority rule: “Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience?...I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterwards.”³⁴ Moral law is the abiding yardstick. The introspective character of this yardstick is epitomized in Thoreau’s remark: “The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.”³⁵

Thoreau was opposed to slavery and the Mexican war. His conviction concerning civil disobedience has since become a universal proposition. Individual conscience is to defy unrighteous rule. The proposition heightens the consciousness of the people and undermines the complacency of the state. As such, it is subversive.

Connecting Thoreau with Calvin transcends anachronistic concerns as it will be seen that the two share kindred principles on resisting unjust authorities despite differences in religious and political

²⁷ Ibid., p.243.

²⁸ Ibid., p.241.

²⁹ Ibid., p.238.

³⁰ Ibid., p.242.

³¹ Ibid., pp.245-246.

³² Ibid., p.256.

³³ Ibid., p.220.

³⁴ Ibid., p.236.

³⁵ Ibid., p.236.

disposition. In terms of the concept of the state, Thoreau characterizes government with expediency. Zinn observes that for Thoreau governments are artificial creations established to serve the interests of the people.³⁶ Calvin as mentioned holds a very high view of civil government as a divinely sanctioned institution. Irrespective of the basis for the ruling entity both Thoreau and Calvin realistically regard the state as fallible. It may not cater for the well being of the citizenry and can be oppressive instead of being just.

Thoreau's plain moral sense calls for an active breach of unjust laws. Calvin, maintaining a godly, seasoned and discreet sensitivity, appeals for submission to rulers who fall short of the standard of righteousness and humaneness. Mediated action on behalf of the aggrieved can be taken by the magistrates. That is not the end of the matter. The ground for resistance by the people does exist and naturally it is inseparable from piety: "That we have been redeemed by Christ at so great a price as our redemption cost him, so that we should not enslave ourselves to the wicked desires of men—much less be subject to their impiety."³⁷ In his commentary on Daniel 6:22, Calvin conjures up the deplorable situation of rulers losing their legitimacy by virtue of their antagonism against God, thus paving the way for the subjects' disobedience: "For earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy than to obey them whenever they are so restive and wish to spoil God of his rights, and, as it were, to seize upon his throne and draw him down from heaven."³⁸ Mosse holds that in his Biblical Commentaries Calvin is inclined to take a more clearly defined view towards the right of resistance in the name of the power of God.³⁹ The outcome of Calvin's own critical analysis in this context is a line of thinking which paradoxically is in tension with his penchant for organization and stability. Walzer describes it incisively: "Secular order was thus subject to disruption by conscientious men: it was a difficult, even an untenable, position for a theorist whose fundamental teaching was one of discipline and obedience."⁴⁰ One may scent a Thoreauvian flavour in this line of thinking.

Thoreau's individualism seems to be foreign to Calvin's theology on civil authority in which aristocracy integrated with democracy prevails. However, Calvin's apparent distrust of private individuals can be seen in another light which gives a more positive thrust. Walzer has this insight: "Saint and citizen together suggest a new integration of private men (or rather, of chosen groups of private men, of proven holiness and virtue) into the political order, an integration based upon a novel view of politics as a kind of conscientious and continuous labor."⁴¹ Hudson argues luminously that in Calvin's frame of reference while God controls all the happenings man is obligated to carry out God's will in the world; while God effects his will through the state, it is the duty of those involved in the affairs of the state to effect the purposes of God. Hence the implication of Calvinist thinking is not to reduce the sense of individual responsibility, but to enhance it. The Christian is to shape the political order into a holy commonwealth.⁴² That Calvin's thought embraces personal responsibility can be appreciated by noting the importance he attaches to individual conscience: "It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men."⁴³

³⁶ H. Zinn, introduction to *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*, by H. D. Thoreau, ed. W. Glick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p.xiv.

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 32.

³⁸ J. Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, v.12: Ezekiel 13-20, Daniel 1-6*, trans. T. Myers (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), p.382.

³⁹ G. L. Mosse, *Calvinism: Authoritarian or Democratic?* (New York: Rinehart, 1957), p.9.

⁴⁰ M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965; reprint, New York: Atheneum, 1970), p.64.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁴² Hudson, "Democratic Freedom and Religious Faith in the Reformed Tradition", p.18.

⁴³ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 16.

Moral law to Thoreau is the law of the heart. He puts it in a distinct way in his essay "Slavery in Massachusetts": "What is wanted is men, not of policy, but of probity—who recognize a higher law than the Constitution, or the decision of the majority."⁴⁴ For Calvin, this higher law is the law of God which is the "true and eternal rule of righteousness, prescribed for men of all nations and times, who wish to conform their lives to God's will".⁴⁵ Despite the difference in origin, moral law in relation to both Thoreau and Calvin is the driving force behind civil disobedience. In the case of Calvin it specifically takes on the dimension of obedience to God being above that to men: "The Lord, therefore, is the King of Kings, who, when he has opened his sacred mouth, must alone be heard, before all and above all men; next to him we are subject to those men who are in authority over us, but only in him. If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed."⁴⁶

In style, Calvin's subdued and expository approach contrasts with Thoreau's exuberance. In substance, elements of Thoreauvian civil disobedience with a theological gloss can be found in Calvin's view of the relationship between the governing authorities and the governed. Whereas extremist political activism may be stretching Calvinism, there is clearly potential ground for people's disobedience beyond mediated aristocratic resistance. Calvin, by design or otherwise, may not articulate certain components of his theology, but it does not mean those components are not there.

⁴⁴ H. D. Thoreau, *The Higher Law: Thoreau on Civil Disobedience and Reform*, p.104.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV. xx. 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, IV. xx. 32.