

THE INFLUENCE OF REFORMATION POLITICAL THOUGHT ON EARLY
COLONIAL AMERICA AND THE THOUGHT OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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The Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This thesis examines whether a distinct political theory came into existence out of the Reformation and whether that theory, political Calvinism, had an influence in early colonial and revolutionary America. The thesis examines a wide range of primary and secondary source material to do this. The thesis finds that the Reformation created a distinct and well defined political theory and that this theory had a long-lasting impact on both political thought on mainland Europe as well as in England and the American colonies. This thesis attempts to raise the profile of the Reformation as a causal event in the American Revolution and in the development of American political thought.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When George Bancroft published his *History of the United States* in the mid-nineteenth century, to include the Puritans in the pantheon of American founders was not controversial. In fact, Bancroft went as far as to name John Calvin as the true beginning of the American political experiment and “foremost among the most efficient of modern republican legislators.”¹ To Bancroft, Calvin and the Calvinist faith of the Puritans was at the very center of the American story. Unsurprisingly, Bancroft placed the Calvinists at the epicenter of the founding by saying,

The pilgrims of Plymouth were Calvinists; the best influence in South Carolina came from the Calvinists of France. William Penn was the disciple of the Huguenots; the ships from Holland that first brought Colonists to Manhattan were filled with Calvinists. He that will not honor the memory, and respect the influence of Calvin, knows but little of the origin of American liberty.²

¹ Michael D. Clark, “The Meaning of Freedom for George Bancroft and John Fiske,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (1969): 61.

² *Ibid.*

Another early American historian, John Fiske, writing in 1895, similarly placed the Puritans and Calvin as the starting point of American political liberty. Fiske, who rejected Calvinism when it came to his own religious sensibilities, nonetheless believed the Calvinists of New England to be the creators of American political liberty.³ Fiske, who once declared Calvin “about the most abominable old scamp that ever disgraced this mundane orb with this presence,” at the same time declared that “the promulgation of his theology was one of the longest steps that mankind have taken toward personal freedom,” and that Calvin fostered “the dignity and importance of the individual human soul.”⁴

Today, most mainstream, secondary education textbooks largely ignore the Reformation. Certainly, the Reformation is described as splitting Germany and other European states along religious lines, such as in Britain and the Netherlands, but is rarely described as the progenitor of a new political philosophy with long lasting and wide-ranging effects. As a political force, the Enlightenment is given top billing, as it certainly should, with the exclusion of the Reformation as a political movement. In McDougal Littell’s *World History: Patterns of Interaction*, a single sentence provides insight into the long-term political effects of the Reformation. It reads, “The Reformation’s questioning of beliefs and authority also laid the groundwork for the Enlightenment.”⁵ That sentence is the sole entry in this popular textbook on the political ramifications of

³ Ibid, 62.

⁴ Ibid. John Fiske, *The Beginnings of New England, Or, The Puritan Theocracy in Its Relation to Civil and Religious Liberty* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1895), 58.

⁵ Roger B. Beck et al., *World History: Patterns of Interaction* (Evanston, IL: McDougal Little, 2009), 500.

the Reformation. While certainly less true among academic historians, the Reformation is still undervalued by historians of the United States in terms of the political ideology that grew out of it.

This paper will argue that the Reformation did not merely “lay the groundwork” for the development of new political ideologies, but rather was integral to the development of a new political ideology which saw its culmination in the Puritan colony of Massachusetts and in the run up to the American Revolution. To prove this thesis, three different time frames will be examined as well as political development in both continental Europe, Britain and ultimately in Massachusetts in the colonial period.

The Argument

The second chapter of this thesis focuses on the genesis of Calvinist resistance theory and argues that out of the Calvinist branch of the Reformation came a distinct political ideology that allowed for some measure of democracy and for resistance, in one form or another, to a secular authority. To accomplish this, the political thought of the two largest figures of the continental Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin, will be examined. These two figures serve as the beginning of a new system of political thought. Neither of these two figures gave voice to the political ideology of later British and American Puritans. Rather, they, and especially Calvin, conceived of a separation between the state and the church. Luther argued that there ought to be independence between the church and the secular authorities.⁶ Luther, along with Calvin after him,

⁶Harro Höpfl, ed. and trans., *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), vii-xi.

would open the door to further reexaminations of the intersection of the church and state. Luther's rejection of the papacy and the political leaders whom he saw as propping up and being propped up by Rome came as he was being sought by both Pope Leo X and Charles V. Luther did not allow for rebellion on the part of a subject.⁷

Unlike a modern understanding of separation between the state and the church, Calvin believed that the two entities, though separate, had a similar God-ordained mission.⁸ Calvin's greatest contribution to a new system of political thought was his assertion that a secular authority who was violating his charge and violating scripture ought to be removed from his office. This idea was the basis for a new, political Calvinism that became extremely potent across the English Channel.⁹

In Scotland and England, two Calvinist movements would emerge. The Puritans in England the Presbyterians in Scotland. These two groups would lay hold of political Calvinism and would refine it under the opposition of the English Crown and the Church of England. These Puritans ultimately carried this new stand of political thought to the shores of New England where they were implemented in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Chapter three of the thesis examines the political ideology in Massachusetts Bay Colony and argues that New England's Puritans were the founders of a new and unique

⁷Cynthia Grant Shoenberger, "Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (Jan.-Mar. 1979): 3-5.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T McNeill and trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 1485.

⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge, trans. Christopher Fetherstone (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 214-215.

political order which was deeply rooted in political Calvinism and which continued to have an influence on American political thought long after the Puritans ceased to control Massachusetts. The chapter also focuses on the Puritan's view of the purpose and legitimacy of government.

The legacy and thought of the Reformation is easily seen in the governing of Massachusetts and the political speech of the Puritans in New England. The Puritans affirmed the Reformation principle that everything was to be done "Soli Deo Gloria".¹⁰ The Puritans in New England made it clear that this was also their standard for governance in their new colonies.¹¹

The Puritans also believed that their governance, like their theology, ought to be based on covenants. They believed that the power of the civil authority was limited and that for that power to be legitimate certain conditions needed to be met by both the populace and the ruler.¹² Were the secular authority to violate the command of God, the people would be wrong to obey. This development in Calvinist resistance theory built on

¹⁰ Justin Holcomb, "The Five Solas-Points from the Past that Should Matter to You," originally published July 13, 2012, <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/the-five-solas-of-the-protestant-Reformation.html>. Soli Deo Gloria, or Glory to God Alone, was one of the five "solas" of the Reformation. Along with Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia and Solus Christus, they were the pillars of Reformation theology.

¹¹ John Cotton, "Dissension at Quinnipiac: The Authorship and Setting of a Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design Is Religion," *Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson* (1663): 6-7.

¹² Edmund S. Morgan, Introduction to *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794*, by Edmund S. Morgan. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.), xxiii-xxiv.

the foundation left by Luther, Calvin and Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, and set the stage for early American political thought.

The Puritans in New England also had a strong tradition of suffrage. Like Calvin's Geneva, Massachusetts saw a much wider range of people voting that did almost any other place on the planet. As in their churches, the Puritans allowed near universal suffrage among church members.¹³ Possibly most importantly, the Puritans attacked the idea of the divine right of Kings as posited by James I. This was perfectly in line with political Calvinism. Both Calvin himself and the Puritans wrote against the idea of the Divine right of Kings.¹⁴ As Calvin's death preceded John Locke's *Two Treatises on Government* by over a century, political Calvinism, and the Reformation more generally, ought to be seen as an important step in the development of political theory.

In short, chapter three demonstrates that the Puritans were committed to and advanced three fundamental political principles. 1) That the power of the secular authority was limited. 2) That the divine right of kings was damaging both to the church and the right of the people. 3) That the people should be allowed to influence their government through suffrage. This chapter argues that all three of the principles were drawn directly from Reformation political thought.

Chapter four of this thesis focuses on the influence of political Calvinism in the years preceding and during the American War for Independence. During the eighteenth

¹³ Michael P. Winship, "Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no.3 (Jul., 2006): 427.

¹⁴ W.A. Dreyer, "Calvin on Church and Government," in *Die Skrifling* 44, no. 4 (2010): 171; Morgan, Introduction to *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794*, xxiii-xxiv.

century, the American colonies saw the explosion of religious fervor known as the First Great Awakening. Driven by two unabashed Calvinists, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, the First Great Awakening was a thoroughly Calvinist affair. Edward's placed himself squarely within the tradition of political Calvinism and demonstrated agreement with both Calvin and John Winthrop and other early colonial Puritans.¹⁵

Another figure focused on in chapter four is John Witherspoon. The only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, Witherspoon was a true academic and Calvinist Presbyterian. As the president of the College of New Jersey, Now Princeton, Witherspoon educated a generation of statesmen and influenced their views on the role and limits of government. He also drew a connection between civil and religious liberty.¹⁶ Most importantly, Witherspoon's intellectual marriage of Lockean Liberalism with Calvinist political thought will be explored.

Definition of Terms

Several terms used in this thesis ought to be defined. The terms that will be defined are Calvinist, Puritan, Congregationalist, Presbyterian, the divine right of kings, and active and passive resistance. For the purposes of this paper, the term Calvinist will serve as an all-encompassing term which will refer to the broad group of Christians who followed the teachings of John Calvin. This group includes Puritans, Separatists,

¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon: "Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery" (1729)," In *The Other Jonathan Edwards: Selected Writings on Society, Love, and Justice* (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 39-40.

¹⁶ "Sermon Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving," in Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 29.

Huguenots, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, some Anglican and some other denominations. Broadly speaking, these groups accepted Calvin's teachings on most theological subjects but often were at odds over ecclesiology.

In this paper, the Puritans, unless otherwise noted, will refer to the Puritans who came to New England during the seventeenth century. This paper will not explore political Puritanism in England after the exodus of Puritans to New England began. The Puritans were a diverse group of English Protestants, who were nearly exclusively Calvinists, who called for reforms within the Church of England. They were largely focused on removing from the Church of England any remaining remnants of Catholicism and were especially focused on the abolition of bishops within the Anglican Church, a request which was rebuffed by James I. The Puritan movement was dominant religiously and politically in Massachusetts through the seventeenth century and saw a resurgence during the eighteenth century during the First Great Awakening.¹⁷

Congregationalism will refer to those churches who rejected the ecclesiology of both the Anglican and Presbyterian church. These churches argued that all decisions ought to be made by individual churches, independent from any others. During the seventeenth century, Congregationalist churches in New England became dominant. Most Congregationalists in the seventeenth century were Calvinists and held to Calvinist orthodoxy. During the eighteenth century, many Congregational churches would move

¹⁷ Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2-3.

towards Unitarianism. This paper will focus on those Congregationalist who maintained fidelity to Protestant orthodoxy.¹⁸

For the purposes of this paper, Presbyterianism will refer to churches which followed the ecclesiology of traditional reformed churches. Presbyterians govern their churches through presbyteries which control churches within a geographic area. Rather than being led by Bishops in a church where power was exerted from the top down, Presbyterian churches were, and continue to be, led by elected elders. Presbyterians in the United States remained staunchly Calvinist through the nineteenth century and were committed to Calvinism.¹⁹

In the context of this paper, the term “divine right of Kings” will refer to its usage in light of James I’s *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*. In this work, James I, who was still James VI of Scotland, lays out his view of divine-right kingship. James I’s argument is a forceful argument for non-resistance to the king. The argument made by James I, formerly James VI of Scotland, was largely made in response to the rise of Scottish Presbyterians, like John Knox, who argued for resistance to kings in certain circumstances.²⁰ In this paper, the term divine right of Kings will refer to this expansion

¹⁸ “Congregationalism.” 2018. Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia, January, 1; <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=funk&AN=co198800&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁹ Gideon Mailer, “HOW FAR THE MAGISTRATE OUGHT TO INTERFERE IN MATTERS OF RELIGION”: Public Faith and the Ambiguity of Political Representation after 1776,” in *John Witherspoon's American Revolution: Enlightenment and Religion from the Creation of Britain to the Founding of the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 285.

²⁰ Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars: Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603-1660* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 22.

of royal absolutism of James I and his insistence that active resistance was not to be allowed.²¹

Active and passive resistance must also be defined. Passive resistance could also be called passive non-compliance. The idea of passive resistance is that for a Christian peacefully disobeying a king's commands, all the while knowing that there will be consequences for that disobedience. It is summed up nicely when Calvin said that "no command has been given except to obey and suffer" when living under a wicked king. Under passive resistance, a person may not obey a king, while at the same time knowing that they are still subject to the authorities and that they do not have the right to rise up against that authority. Active resistance refers to actually resisting the government with force, be that armed resistance or simply by more defiantly refusing to obey government orders.²²

Historiography- Chapter 2

Chapter two focuses on the creation of a coherent, distinct political philosophy that came out of the Reformation. Beginning with Martin Luther, the chapter examines the creation of Lutheran and Calvinist political thought. A secondary source which is most helpful in the examination of this topic is an article authored by Cynthia Grant

²¹ Alan D. Orr, "'God's Hangman': James VI, the Divine right of Kings, and the Devil," *Reformation & Renaissance Review: Journal of the Society for Reformation Studies* 18, no. 2. (2016): 146.

²² For a more complete treatment of the differences between passive and active resistance see: Witte Jr., John. "Rights, Resistance, and Revolution in the Western Tradition: Early Protestant Foundations." *Law and History Review* 26, no. 3 (2008): 545-570.

Shoenberger entitled “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority.” This article argues against the idea that Luther believed Christians were called to obey secular authorities without exception. Rather, follows Luther’s changing views through the Reformation and comes to the conclusion that Luther was supportive of the idea that in some circumstances, Christians ought to resist illegitimate and abusive authority. In the essay there is also a distinction drawn between Luther and the Calvinist impulse to democratize. She also places Lutheran political thought as a forerunner of Calvinistic resistance theory. The article is an invaluable source for the student of Reformation politics.²³

Harro Höpfl’s *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority* is cited throughout this chapter. As this thesis focuses on the ultimate influence of Calvin’s political philosophy, this book is used to examine Luther’s political thought in a succinct manner. While a study of Luther’s *On Secular Authority* may have been helpful, Höpfl’s study of the arc of Luther’s political sentiments was more helpful for the purposes of this thesis. Höpfl also analyses Calvin’s political thoughts and draws distinctions between the two groups.

Another work by Höpfl was used in the examination of Calvin. *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* examines the political reality in Geneva when Calvin became active in the city. The book was used to examine the realities of class, religion and politics in Geneva. The work also further draws distinctions between Lutheran and Calvinist political thought. Höpfl’s research on the different classes of citizens in Geneva is invaluable for understanding the formation of Calvinist political thought.

²³ Cynthia Grant Shoenberger, “Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (Jan.-Mar. 1979): 20.

Two works by John T. McNeill are referenced in this paper. McNeill also edited the edition of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* which is cited throughout the chapter. McNeill's introduction to Calvin's *On God and Political Duty*, while written in the mid-twentieth century, endures as one of the leading works on Calvin's political thought. In the book, McNeill draws out Calvin's criticism of the medieval doctrine of the Divine right of Kings. McNeill's article "Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers" also is examined as McNeill makes the argument that Calvin used language and arguments concerning natural law, which very closely resemble arguments made during the Enlightenment. Both sources paint a clear picture of Calvin's burgeoning political ideology.

In the examination of Calvin's beliefs on the relationship between the church and the state, John Witt's book *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism* is most helpful. As one of the few modern treatments of Calvin's political thought, Witt clearly lays out argument that Calvin was committed to some democratic participation among the citizenry. He also successfully argues that one of the defining differences between Luther and Calvin is that Calvin did not believe that the church should be subordinate to the state. Witt demonstrates that by leaving some independence between the two entities, Calvin set the stage for the Puritan resistance to the English crown. He also demonstrates that Calvin believed that Christians were not compelled to obey an order that would violate scripture. In fact, he stated that Christian ought to "be ready for civil disobedience of all kinds."²⁴ Carlton M. Waterhouse, while

²⁴ John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 49-51.

acknowledging much of Witte's argument, argues that the Reformers were inconsistent in their implementation of their political views and often trampled on the rights of those under their political systems.²⁵

The most important work cited in this chapter, which is cited more than any other, is Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. As Calvin's magnum opus, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is by far Calvin's most comprehensive work. While most of the work is focused on theological topics, Calvin does examine the proper establishment of a government and that government's relation to the church. Without this work, it would be nearly impossible to examine Calvin's political ideology. Calvin's *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles* also gives insight into Calvin's beliefs concerning a Christian's duty towards the state. Calvin's work is examined extensively throughout this chapter and is at the center of the argument.

Historiography- Chapter 3

Chapter three of this thesis focuses on the political ideology of Puritan New England during the seventeenth century. Any study on this topic requires a few foundational secondary sources. No other historian has impacted the study of the Puritans as much as Edmund Morgan. Two of Morgan's works, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* and *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794*, are invaluable to a study of this topic. *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* was used to provide context to the migration of Puritans to New England as well as to examine the

²⁵ Carlton M. Waterhouse, and John Witte. *The American Journal of Legal History* 50, no. 2 (2008): 235.

political career of John Winthrop. *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794* provided primary source material as well as a study of the centrality of covenants to Puritan political thinkers. The most important quotation in the book is a letter sent from John Cotton to Lord Say and Seal, in which he argues that the people of a polity have the right to resist a government.²⁶

One of the few recent historians to undertake an exhaustive study of Puritan Politics in New England is Michael P. Winship. Winship's book *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* is the most recent and most informative study on Puritan political ideals since Edmund Morgan's work in the 1960s. Winship ties together Puritan politics in England, which includes the regicide of Charles I, with the political thought of North American Puritans. Also cited in the chapter is an article written by Winship entitled "Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity." This article includes many of the same arguments as does his but also includes extensive quotation of Puritan thinkers. Much like Edmund Morgan, a study of Puritan politics in New England would be incomplete without an examination of Winship's work.

As this chapter focuses on the thoughts of Puritans in New England in the seventeenth century, it was necessary to examine sermons that explain the Puritans' views on the role and power of government. The most well-known Puritan discourse cited in this chapter is John Winthrop's 1630 "Model of Christian Charity." While best known for the "Citty upon a Hill" illusion, the context and argument of the sermon were essential to proving the thesis of this chapter. Charles I's hostility towards the Puritans as

²⁶ John Cotton to Lord Say and Seal as quoted in Edmund S. Morgan, *Puritan Political Ideas* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 167.

well as the Puritans' covenantal thinking make this sermon essential to an understanding of the motives of Puritans establishing a religious haven for themselves in the new world.²⁷

Perhaps the best-known Puritan aside from Winthrop is John Cotton. Cotton was a prolific preacher who was not afraid to expound on political matters when he believed they had an impact on the religious health of Massachusetts. In his Sermon "Limitation of Government," which was written in 1655, whose title gives insight to Cotton's beliefs, Cotton laid out his belief that one man ought not be given too much power, as he, like all Calvinists, believed that man was at his core wicked. This belief places Cotton's political beliefs squarely within the mainstream of political Calvinism. Another sermon attributed to Cotton, but most likely written by John Davenport, was entitled "A Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design is Religion." This sermon clearly echoes Calvin's belief that the civil government had a mission in supporting the church but that the two ought to remain separate. This sermon is valuable in demonstrating that the Puritan's were in line with political Calvinism as outlined by Calvin himself.²⁸

John Eliot's "The Christian Commonwealth: or, The Civil Policy of the Rising Kingdom of Jesus Christ" is demonstrative of the connection in the Puritan mind between civil and religious liberty and the importance of covenants in safeguarding the people's safety and liberty. This source, written sometime in the late 1640s, was vital to this

²⁷ John Winthrop, "A Model for Christian Charity" (1630), in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: and Other Puritan Sermons*, ed. Mary Carolyn Waldrep (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 64.

²⁸ John Cotton, "Dissension at Quinnipiac: The Authorship and Setting of a Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design Is Religion," *Samuel Green and Marmaduke Johnson* (1663): 6-7.

chapter as it demonstrates that the Puritans in New England sought to create the type of government outlined by Calvin in Geneva. Most importantly, Eliot believed that civil government had a duty to “submit...to being ruled by the Lord.”²⁹ This source also demonstrates the importance to the Puritans of living under a government that submitted itself to upholding the religious principles which they held so dear.

The final primary source to be examined in detail is Samuel Willard’s “The Character of a Good Ruler.” This sermon was delivered in 1694, much later than most of the other sources in this chapter. This demonstrates that the Puritans were still abiding by political Calvinism as late as the turn of the eighteenth century. In the sermon, Willard upheld the same standards for rulers as did Calvin in Geneva. He also expressed the idea that all laws made by a civil government ought to align with scripture and God would ultimately judge lawmakers for their conduct while in office.³⁰ This is one of the clearest demonstrations that the Puritans of New England were strictly conforming to political Calvinism as late as the 1690s.

Historiography- Chapter 4

When researching topics of religious influence on political thought during the American Revolution, it is obvious that there have been several movements of

²⁹ John Eliot, “The Christian Commonwealth: or, The Civil Polity Of The Rising Kingdom of Jesus Christ. An Online Electronic Text Edition.” *Faculty Publications, UNL Libraries*. Paper 19 (1659): 1-2.

³⁰ Samuel Willard, “The Character of a Good Ruler,” 1694. In *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: and Other Puritan Sermons*, ed. by Mary Carolyn Waldrep (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 117-119.

thought concerning this topic. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, religion, especially reformed Protestantism, was seen as a hugely influential force in the formation of American politics. This was typified by the writings of historians such as C.H. Van Tyne and George Bancroft. One historian, B. F. Morris, said in 1864 that, “The ministers of the Revolution were, like their Puritan predecessors, bold and fearless in the cause of their country. No class of men contributed more to carry forward the Revolution and to achieve our independence than did the ministers...by their prayers, patriotic sermons, and services [they] rendered the highest assistance to the civil government, the army, and the country.”³¹

Since then, many historians began to view the Revolution as purely economic, leading C. H. Van Tyne to say that historians have, “...worshipped too partially the golden calf of economic stresses.”³² One of the most often quoted books on the role of ministers was John Thornton’s *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: Political Sermons of the Period of 1776*. Originally published in 1860, it had at its core, the intention of showing the marriage of politics and religion in Revolutionary America.³³ The work of Van Tyne’s and Thornton’s *Pulpit of the American Revolution* dominated the field until the mid-1950’s. As

³¹ Benjamin Franklin Morris, *Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1864), pp. 334-335.

³² C. H. Van Tyne, “Influence of the Clergy, and of Religious and Sectarian Forces, on the American Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 19, no. 1 (Oct., 1913): 44.

³³ John Wingate Thornton, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: Political Sermons of the Period of 1776* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), III.

was noted earlier in this chapter, George Bancroft clearly articulated a link between the creation of American liberty and the influence of political Calvinism. Both are reference in the fourth chapter of this thesis as a good summation of the treatment of political Calvinism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although not examined in detail, both authors allow the modern reader to understand past historiography of the subject.

During the 1960's, this view started to change. With the emergence of Bernard Bailyn, the Revolution was deemed a "secular event," with the focus completely on the ideas of the Enlightenment, to the exclusion of almost all others.³⁴ Bailyn, in his article "Political Experience and Enlightenment Ideas in Eighteenth-Century America" argued that the Revolution ought to be seen as the triumph of the Enlightenment. He argues that the Revolution was the result of the Enlightenment's "endowing with high moral purpose inchoate, confused elements of social and political change." Bailyn also argues that the revolution saw the "disestablishment of religion," and therefore, religion's retreat as a social and political force.³⁵

Over the next thirty years, ministers would receive very little attention. To prove the point, Gordon Wood in a book devoted entirely to the American Revolution, only mentions Jonathan Mayhew and John Witherspoon, both

³⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Random House, 1990), 104.

³⁵ Bernard Bailyn, "Political Experience and Enlightenment Ideas in Eighteenth-Century America," *The American Historical Review* 67, no. 2 (Jan., 1962): 345, 351.

massive influences in the Revolutionary era, once.³⁶ When speaking about public virtue, he never mentions religion. (It seems to this author nearly impossible to discuss the ideologies and changing ideas of the revolutionary age without speaking about the marriage of Enlightenment ideas and religion: an undertaking Wood completely ignores.) To further illustrate the point, Bernard Bailyn's short chapter concerning religious influences on the Revolution in his book *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, is one of the longest pieces devoted to that subject.³⁷

In 2005, Jeffrey H. Morrison released the first comprehensive look at John Witherspoon since 1925.³⁸ With Witherspoon falling into relative obscurity, the work was well overdue. Morrison contends that Witherspoon was a bona fide founder, and deserves to be recognized as such. Morrison also calls attention to the role of religion in the founding as well as Witherspoon's role in developing the role of religion. In his book, Morrison shows the ability of Witherspoon to navigate the waters of the Enlightenment, while at the same time, remaining a faithful Calvinist, both politically and religiously.³⁹ This work is the most recent

³⁶ Gordon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History*. (New York: Random House, 2002), 104.

³⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1967), 301-319.

³⁸ Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969)

³⁹ Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Norte Dame Press, 2005), 60.

treatment of Witherspoon and is the only modern work that examines his political sentiments in detail. This book is examined in detail throughout the fourth chapter of this thesis.

Morrison also examines the influence of Witherspoon in his own time. While Witherspoon is not held in the same esteem in the twenty-first century as other, more prominent founders, he was extremely influential as an instructor and as president of the College of New Jersey. As a professor, Witherspoon had an influence on a large number of prominent political figures, the most notable being James Madison. It is here that Morrison's work becomes so important. By supplanting Collin's biography of Witherspoon, Morrison reintroduced the impact of Witherspoon to the modern reader.⁴⁰

Another secondary source which is used to provide context in Charles Akers' *Called unto Liberty: A Life of Jonathan Mayhew 1720-1766*. While this work was published in 1964, it remains one of the best treatments of Jonathan Mayhew's early life and of his father and grandfather. As Mayhew himself was outside of the Calvinist theological mainstream, this examination of his early life and pedigree is important in evaluating the formation of his political thinking.⁴¹

Another secondary source used through the fourth chapter is Patricia Bonomi's *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*. Although published in 1986, the work is still cited frequently in

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴¹ Charles W. Akers, *Called unto Liberty: A Life of Jonathan Mayhew 1720-1766*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964), 8-9, 24-25, 219-221.

academic journals and remains one of the most important works in the study of the early American political scene. Bonomi writes extensively concerning the political landscape in the English speaking work, both in England and America. Her work is invaluable in the study of early American religion.

In the fourth chapter of this thesis, several primary sources are examined in detail. In order to explore the influence of political Calvinism in the years preceding the American Revolution, two sermons by Jonathan Edwards are examined. Edwards is extremely useful to the historian who is examining the political thought of Calvinists during the First Great Awakening. Edwards stands alone as the greatest eighteenth-century Calvinist thinker and demonstrative of American Calvinist political thought in the half-century preceding the American Revolution. Born in Connecticut in 1703, Edwards died in 1758, before the Seven Years War and the American Revolution. Even in that context, like other Calvinists before him, Edwards subscribed to a political Calvinism that was defined by a commitment to limited government power, a covenantal understanding of God's relationship to political entities and that a form of democracy was essential. These political principles are clearly seen in two sermons delivered by Edwards in 1729 and either 1731 or 1732.⁴²

⁴² Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon: "Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery" (1729)," In *The Other Jonathan Edwards: Selected Writings on Society, Love, and Justice* (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 35-41. ; Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon: "The State of Public Affairs" (1731-32)," In *The Other Jonathan Edwards: Selected Writings on Society, Love, and Justice*, ed. Gerald McDermott and Ronald Story (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 49-54.

Edwards' sermon "The State of Public Affairs" demonstrates two critical elements of political Calvinist thought. The first being that the people have a right to resist a government which strips them of their rights, and the second being that the people are ultimately responsible for the actions of their government.⁴³ In the same sermon, Edwards expressed the idea that civil authorities were ultimately responsible to God and ought to serve alongside the church in their common calling. Here Edwards demonstrates a clear commitment to political Calvinism and was an important voice for the political theory in the mid-eighteenth century.⁴⁴

Another Edwards sermon is demonstrative of Edward's commitment to the political theory which came out of the Reformation. The sermon "Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery" shows the importance of covenants between God and man in the Calvinist mind. This sermon demonstrates the line that can be drawn from Calvin and the Reformation to Edwards and colonial America.⁴⁵ Although Edwards was a prolific writer, these two sermons are two of the best examples of his political thought.

Two of John Witherspoon's sermons are also examined. Delivered in May of 1776, John Witherspoon's "The Dominion of Providence over the

⁴³ Edwards, "Sermon: "The State of Public Affairs" (1731–32)," 51.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁵ Edwards, "Sermon: "Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery" (1729)," 39-40.

Passions of Men: A Sermon preached at Princeton, the 17th of May, 1776, being the general fast appointed by the Congress through the United Colonies” outlined the Presbyterian argument for separation from Britain. In the sermon he argues that Britain’s violation of the colonists’ civil liberty was sure to result in the violation of their religious liberty as well. By tying civil and religious liberty together, Witherspoon was able to justify the Revolution in the Calvinist mind. This sermon serves to show that during the American Revolution, resistance to a civil authority needed to be justified along the lines outlined by Calvin and the Puritans.⁴⁶

Another sermon delivered by Witherspoon which bears the uninspiring title “Sermon Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving,” outlines Witherspoon’s devotion to public virtue and its role in politics. In the sermon, Witherspoon outlines his belief that a people must be religious in order to long last as a politically free people. Much like Calvin, the Puritans and Edwards, Witherspoon believed it absolutely necessary for a people to acknowledge God in order to flourish. This sermon demonstrates Witherspoon’s alignment with historical political Calvinism.⁴⁷

The sermons referenced in chapter four are a clear demonstration of political Calvinism in colonial America in the years before the American

⁴⁶ John Witherspoon, “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men: A Sermon preached at Princeton, the 17th of May, 1776, being the general fast appointed by the Congress through the United Colonies,” (Philadelphia: 1776).

⁴⁷ John Witherspoon, “Sermon Delivered at a Public Thanksgiving,” in Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*.

Revolution. The time period focused on in the chapter, with Edwards writing in the 1720s and Witherspoon writing in 1776, demonstrating the lasting influence of political Calvinism in early American history.

CHAPTER 2

THE CALVINIST POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Reformation stands a pivotal turning point in Western history. While it certainly upended the religious order that existed for well over a millennium in Europe, it also upset the political order as well. This was indelibly tied to religion. Although the Church of Rome continues to be influencer of world events, even in the twenty-first century, this pales in comparison to the power it wielded in the sixteenth century. However, the movement started by Martin Luther in Wittenberg forever transformed political thought in Europe, and ultimately in the new world.

Out of the Reformation came a new political philosophy which threw off the medieval trappings which characterized the political world which Martin Luther was born into and would live in. Through the writings of Luther, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, John Knox and others, would come a political philosophy which would abandon the ideas that had empowered the political class in Europe. This movement resulted in the ideas of political Calvinism which would guide both Calvinists in Geneva and Scotland, but

ultimately in New England.⁴⁸ Political Calvinism, which was created mainly through the writings of John Calvin and Theodore Beza would argue three main points. The new philosophy contended that people were best ruled when they were granted suffrage, that the power of governments ought to be limited, and that the people had the liberty to resist unjust and ungodly rulers. This chapter will contend that this new political Calvinism was the catalyst for political upheaval in Europe, and was a distinct political philosophy which was birthed out of the Reformation.

Lutheran Political Thought

When, in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg, he began one of the most dramatic religious, social and, ultimately, political shifts in Western history. Luther's movement would challenge the very undergirding of European governments and, of course, the power of the church in Rome and of the Holy Roman Empire of Charles V. However, Luther was certainly not the first to challenge the power of the Roman church. Several proto-reformers had also challenged the church over the previous four centuries, quite notably John Wycliffe and John Hus, whose actions challenging Catholic authority foreshadowed the Reformation. During the fourteenth century, Wycliffe rejected additions to the gospel, namely the sacraments, the power of the papacy and the numerous land holdings of the church and church officials. In central Europe, John Hus was inspired by Wycliff and would challenge the church on

⁴⁸ Herbert Darling Foster, "The Political Theories of Calvinists before the Puritan Exodus to America," *The American Historical Review* 21, no. 3 (April, 1916): 481. Foster's assertions are representative of the early twentieth century consensus view of the Reformation's impact on political development.

the same grounds. For this he would be burned at the stake. In Florence, Girolamo Savonarola would also be burned for opposing the church. His offense was less theological. Savonarola loudly criticized the church for corruption and what Savonarola saw as the abuse of the papal power.⁴⁹ All of these objections to the teachings and power of Rome presaged Luther and foreshadowed the coming Reformation.

As Luther began to challenge the Catholic Church, Europe was primed for a political schism as the Holy Roman Emperors began to vie for power against the Kings of France. There was also discontent with the power of the church among some German princes. The Reformation cannot be explained away as a political or economic event. While the Reformation certainly had wide ranging political and social consequences, it was, and must continue to be viewed as, a religious movement primarily, as those forming the movement held their faith as the prime motivating factor in all they did. However, there was economic and political discontent toward the church in Rome. These would only help to open the divisions that were beginning to form as the Reformation began.⁵⁰

At the outset of the Reformation, the role and scope of governments across Europe was still largely tied to the Roman Catholic Church. However, with the introduction of Lutheranism, the Anabaptists and the Reformed churches of Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, the political future of Central Europe was in question. Both Luther and

⁴⁹ Andre Bieler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, ed. Edward Dommen, trans. James Greig (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 5,9.

⁵⁰ Andre Bieler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, 7-8.

Calvin would contribute to the political discussions of the time: Luther primarily through his *On Secular Authority* and Calvin through his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Early Lutheran Political Thought

Luther's political thought would largely be shaped by his protection by German princes following his excommunication in 1521 and his dealings with Rome's allies in the aftermath of the excommunication. Many of the reformers, and indeed Luther himself, saw the church in Rome as a "tyranny" according to Harro Höpfl. Luther's *On Secular Authority*, which was written in 1523 in the aftermath of his translation of the New Testament being banned in Saxony, laid out the argument that there should be independence between the church and the secular authorities.⁵¹ Höpfl describes Luther's political thinking, as laid out in the work, by saying that "he [Luther] saw the duty of the secular governors, traditionally enough, as keeping the peace, enforcing conformity to laws, protecting the law-abiding and punishing law-breakers."⁵²

Throughout the work, Luther stresses the importance of Christians obeying the civil authorities. Much of what has been written concerning Luther's political ideas indicates that Luther, like Augustine before him, required absolute obedience to the state. Early in his ministry, Luther argued, like Augustine, that if a magistrate⁵³ were to come

⁵¹ Harro Höpfl, ed. and trans., *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), vii-xi.

⁵² *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁵³ The term magistrate will be defined in more detail in the next section of this chapter.

into conflict with scripture, it was the Christian's duty to passively resist. It is important to note that while Luther was composing *On Secular Authority*, he was being pursued by Catholic Charles V and Pope Leo X and was protected by Frederick of Saxony. As he was dependent on the support of the Protestant German princes, he was unwilling to upset the political balance in the region and risk violence.⁵⁴

At the outset of the Reformation, Luther outrightly condemned armed resistance and rebellion as he believed it showed a lack of faith in God on the part of the believer. As an Augustinian by training, Luther was certainly influenced by Augustine's theology, as were many of the later, reformed theologians in Geneva. Luther also believed that man's evil was best contained by the power of an upright and well-managed state. Again, as an Augustinian, Luther carried with him a belief in the sinful nature of man.⁵⁵ As such, any dismantling of the state would slow the work of reforming the church, which was always his primary concern.⁵⁶

Luther repeatedly based much of this belief on one passage from Paul's epistle to the Romans. Over the course of two decades, spanning from 1522-1544, Luther referred

⁵⁴ Cynthia Grant Shoenberger, "Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40 (Jan.-Mar. 1979): 3-5. Luther's support of the German princes during the Peasants War would seem to lend credence to this view.

⁵⁵ Brandon Peterson, "Augustine: Advocate of Free Will, Defender of Predestination," *Theology* (May 2006): 3-4. Augustine has been called the most influential Christian writer in church history. Both Luther and Calvin rely heavily on his *City of God*. Luther's *Bondage of the Will* considers heavily the theme of the sinfulness of man. This fear of man's sinfulness being fully displayed weighed heavily on Luther as he considered the level to which the political order should be challenged.

⁵⁶ Shoenberger, "Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority," 6.

to the same passage during nearly all controversies over the issue of submission to civil authorities, Romans 13: 1-7. The passage reads,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.⁵⁷

This vision of the governing authorities as a sword by which God governs the earth dominated the early portion of Luther's political thought. Although he never completely abandoned this idea, he would certainly soften his position.⁵⁸

The popular idea that Luther demanded complete obedience to secular authorities seems to indicate that most of the writing on Luther's political philosophy focuses on his writings before the publication of *On Secular Authority*. This excludes what Luther wrote and said when he came into the greatest conflict with the Holy Roman Empire in the late 1530s and 1540s. However, his writings from after this time period indicate that

⁵⁷ Rom. 13: 1-7. (English Standard Version) All quotations of the Bible will be taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

⁵⁸ Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, xv-xvi.

he was more willing to allow for resistance to secular authority. It was during this time period that Luther's views on resistance begin to shift.⁵⁹

Lutheran resistance theory, as taught by Luther himself, is based on the idea that Luther did not demand complete obedience to a civil power from all people in all circumstances. While he concluded that private individuals should not rebel, he left open the possibility that a magistrate, while carrying out his duties, might find it necessary to protect his subjects from the attacks of the Emperor. Other Lutheran reformers, such as Johannes Bugenhagen, argued that it was the responsibility of the prince to protect his subjects, no matter the threat. This seeming break in the Lutheran line on the issue of resistance did show that Luther would allow for arguments to be made from resistance, even if he himself were not willing to espouse the position.⁶⁰

Many Lutherans began to accept arguments for resistance to the Emperor, even while Luther himself did not. However, Luther himself began to show a change in position during a clash with Charles V. Lutheran lawyers began to argue that Charles V violated the limitation on his power as understood under the terms of his coronation. It was this narrow argument that Luther would tepidly endorse. Luther would allow for resistance if the laws governing a state limited the authority of a political figure, such as the Emperor. Luther stated, "Render unto the Emperor, what is the Emperor's. And it is the Emperor's right, that he must be resisted in matters of notorious injustice. . . . All that the Emperor has established, that is, the law of the Emperor, is to be observed. But that

⁵⁹ Shoenberger, "Luther and the Justifiability of Resistance to Legitimate Authority," 3-4.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

law determines, that one must resist him in such a case.” Luther was not allowing for a natural rights argument for rebellion but rather a constitutional argument based on the governing agreement surrounding the Holy Roman Empire⁶¹

Through the 1530s and 1540s, Luther began to argue that the Emperor was limited in his power and that his power was to be shared with the German Princes, as stipulated in his election and coronation. As a clash with the Emperor became obvious, Luther expressed a belief that German Christians were duty-bound to disobey the Emperor. This was based on Luther’s belief that the Emperor was opposing “God and divine laws,” as well as violating the laws which governed the Empire. It was at this point that Luther argued that, whenever the Emperor acted outside of his legal authority, it was acceptable to resist him. This did not mean that Luther was endorsing armed rebellion, but rather passive resistance, on the part of the individual. By passive resistance, Luther precludes the use of force. Rather, he meant that individuals could simply choose to not obey an edict which violated scripture. However, Luther did leave open the possibility for certain circumstances when a private individual would be obligated to violently resist an authority. Luther gave assent to the argument that a private individual would be justified in protecting his wife and family from an outside threat, even if it were to come from the Emperor.⁶²

Luther should not be seen as a proponent of complete obedience to secular authorities no matter the situation. While he certainly did not endorse violent resistance

⁶¹ Ibid., 10-11.

⁶² Ibid., 13-14, 17.

to the Catholic authorities, he did, in the end, embrace a theory of resistance when the Lutheran movement was being threatened by the Catholic church as well as the Holy Roman Empire and Charles V. This resistance was a last resort and should not be taken lightly. After his death, Luther's assent to some form of resistance was touted by Lutherans in their further efforts to resist the Emperor. Luther's close friend and associate Philip Melanchthon went as far as discussing natural rights and self-defense arguments for resistance to a governing authority. In this way, Luther ought to be seen as an earlier influencer of Reformation political thought, as well as a contributor to early Lutheran, and ultimately Calvinist, resistance theory.⁶³

Calvinist Political Thought

While the Reformation certainly saw its genesis with Luther and his ninety-five theses, the true apex of the movement's religious thought could be found in John Calvin. Calvin was, in his time, a veritable genius. Having received his Doctor of Laws in his early twenties, he was forced to flee his homeland of France for Switzerland after accepting and teaching the religious ideas of the Reformation, which were sweeping across Germany and beginning to gain a foothold in Calvin's native France. It was at this time that he fully turned his attention to religious writing. During his exile in Switzerland, Calvin penned his magnum opus, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which would become the basis of the teachings of the Reformed, Presbyterian, Puritan and

⁶³ Ibid., 14, 17-20.

Scottish churches. It was at this point that the twenty-five-year-old Calvin began his theological teaching.⁶⁴

In *Institutes*, Calvin laid forth a sweeping theology that covered nearly every area of religious thought. The very last subject covered in *Institutes* is civil government. It was here that Calvin detailed the ideology with which he would rule Geneva and the ideas which would be carried to Scotland by John Knox and to the new world by the Separatists of Plymouth and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Calvin's view of civil government would become one of the most influential treatises on government in Europe, as it helped form the fledgling government which was being formed in the new world in Massachusetts. Unlike Luther, Calvin would, in detail, explain his thoughts on civil government.

In *Institutes*, Calvin squarely addresses the domination of politics by the pope and by the church in Rome and several new religious movements cropping up in Europe.⁶⁵ Calvin, like Luther, begins the chapter on civil government by explaining that he believed that man was always subject to two governments, a civil government as well as a government that primarily "pertains to eternal life."⁶⁶ He clearly drew a distinction between the two. During this time of Reformation, it was not a forgone conclusion, among the religious, that a government was even necessary.

⁶⁴ R. W. Wallace, "John Calvin," *The Journal of Education* 70, no. 2 (July 8, 1909): 35.

⁶⁵ Peter Iver Kaufman, *Redeeming Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 109.

⁶⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T McNeill and trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 1485.

Calvin addressed the “fanatics” who claimed that political offices and governments ought to be rejected by believers. This was largely aimed at the Anabaptist movement which was a minority movement in Germany during the time period. The Anabaptist position was demonstrated clearly in Peter Rideman’s declaration that “no Christian is a ruler and no ruler is a Christian.”⁶⁷ The Anabaptist position was that before Christ, a government was needed to control the actions of men. However, once Christ established a kingdom, a government was unnecessary. Neither Luther nor Calvin were party to the radical Reformation typified by the Anabaptists who were more likely than Lutherans and Calvinists to simply remove themselves from secular life altogether.⁶⁸ Calvin would label the proponents of this position, a government not being a necessity, “those who would have men live pell-mell, like rats in straw.”⁶⁹ Calvin asserted that there was a misunderstanding in the church, especially among the Anabaptists, that the freedom discussed in the gospel would not be complete while a government ruled over members of the church. He also stated that this was a misunderstanding of the difference between the soul and the body. He went to great lengths to stress that a person can be spiritually free while the body suffers under “civil bondage.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Peter Rideman, “An Anabaptist View of the Church,” in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), 665.

⁶⁸ Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, viii-ix.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1490.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 1486.

This idea, that one could be spiritually free while at the same time be physically in bondage, did not cause the reformer to shrink from the political arena. Calvin believed that governments were established by God to allow faith to flourish. He contended that it was necessary for Christians to understand the proper role of government, as it both protected the believer from unscrupulous government officials who would corrupt religion for political gain, but also to preserve the “divinely established order” from “insane and barbarous men.”⁷¹ It was, in his view, the task of the government to ensure the conditions under which an undefiled and productive church could operate freely. In this respect, Calvin very closely mirrored the position held by Martin Luther. He believed that the civil government was largely a positive good which helped protect the church.

Calvin’s theology permeates this line of political thinking. A core tenant of Calvin’s theology was that man is unable on his own to turn from sin and choose to follow Christ. Later Calvinists would define this teaching at the Synod of Dort more formally as “Total Depravity.”⁷² Calvin taught that “We must ... distinctly note ... two

⁷¹ Ibid., 1485-1486.

⁷² Calvin did not himself define this teaching as Total Depravity. Rather it was well after his death that the teaching was formally named at the Synod of Dort. The synod was called to address the teaching of Jacob Arminius who would become known as the Remonstrants. His modern followers are called simply Arminians. At the synod, the Remonstrants were answered by the leaders of the reformed churches of Europe. They compiled five teachings, or points, which have become known as Five Point Calvinism. The first of these points is Total Depravity. The other four would be listed as Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace and Perseverance of the Saints, which is alternatively called Once Saved, Always Saved. While Calvin never used the term “total depravity” in *Institutes*, it was his teaching that led the reformed churches to adopt the doctrine. This point of theology will become important later in this paper. For more on the synod, see *Revisiting the Synod of Dort (1618-1619)*, ed. Aza Goudriaan and Fred van Lieburg (Leiden: Brill, 2011)

things. First, we are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity.”⁷³ It was because of this view of the human condition that Calvin believed a government was necessary. Calvin argued that because man is imperfect there must be some constraint on his behavior so that he will not impede others in their attempt to live pious lives. The reformer summed up the idea most cogently in *Institutes* by stating:

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 behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility. All of this I admit to be superfluous, if God’s Kingdom, such as it is now among us, wipes out the present life. But if it is God’s will that we go out as pilgrims upon the earth while we aspire to the true fatherland, and if the pilgrimage requires such helps, those who take these from man deprive him of his very humanity.⁷⁴

Calvin’s theology drove him toward the idea of the necessity of a just civil government. He also believed civil law to be necessary to restrain those who would commit crimes. Again, his belief in the yet to be defined doctrine of Total Depravity drove him toward this idea. He stated, “For since the insolence of men is so great, their wickedness so stubborn, that it can scarcely be restrained by extremely severe laws, what

⁷³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 251

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 1487.

do we expect them to do if they see that their depravity can go scot-free when no power can force them to cease from doing evil.”⁷⁵

As for the law, Calvin believed that each society had the right to make laws that were unique for their own situation. Calvin argued that not all nations were under an obligation to follow Old Testament laws as laid out in scripture. He made the argument that the law given in the Old Testament was particular to the ancient nation of Israel and should not be given to every nation. Rather, it was only necessary for the laws to conform to “God’s eternal law.” In short Calvin believed that the law should restrain evil men and that the law should punish “murder, theft, adultery” and perjury. It was for this reason he believed a government necessary. This, however, would not be the only role he saw for a government.⁷⁶

Calvin clearly defined the role of the government. It was not only the responsibility of the government to oversee the necessities of daily life and to ensure the well-being of the people, but also to prevent “idolatry, sacrilege against God’s name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offenses against religion from arising and spreading among the people.” He also gave to the government powers which would seem unsurprising to the modern reader, such as the ability to keep the peace, securing property rights and to ensure that business would flourish. From this perspective, it can be seen that Calvin’s ideal government would not only carry on the administration of a political state, but would also allow the church to function in its proper role. In this manner,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 1487-1488.

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1504-1505.

Calvin was in total agreement with Luther. For both reformers, the civil authority certainly was to work with the church to establish and preserve religion and protect the people.⁷⁷

In a rather brief statement Calvin addresses the concern that “I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion.” This would seem to conflict with his earlier distinction between spiritual and civil government. However, he states that his true intention is to have the government protect “the true religion which is contained in God’s law from being openly and with public sacrilege violated and defiled with impunity.” In this statement, Calvin gives away his underlying assumption, namely, that the church is more at risk from forces other than the civil government. He reinforces this by stating “I do not. . .allow men to make laws according to their own decision concerning religion and the worship of God.” This would indicate that the government’s role would be to protect the church rather than direct the church’s actions. Calvin has here further established a guiding tenet of his political thinking. Namely, that Church and state ought to be separated, but not completely cut off from one another.⁷⁸

A defining feature of Calvin’s teaching would be the assurance that the church should not be subject to the dictate of the state. Rather, with a common purpose, they would govern. One would govern the “temporal” and the other the “spiritual.” He also envisioned participation in government being predicated on good standing in the church. This was limited however. A person would not lose life or property due to a loss of

⁷⁷ Ibid. 1487-1488.

⁷⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1487-1488.

standing in the church. Rather, it would be the ability to participate in government and the right to hold office that would be tied to a man's standing in the church.⁷⁹

In his book *The Reformation of Rights. Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*, John Witte Jr. argues that Calvin's view of civil governance was driven by three principles. The first of these principles was that Calvin believed in a democratic process. Councils were necessary in decision making. Through these councils, the people's rights would be better preserved and tyranny would be avoided. The second was that he believed in the necessity of the rule of law and the government's duty to enforce the civil, and in some cases religious, law. The final principle identified by Witte was Calvin's belief that a limited liberty of conscience should be protected. This would not extend to religious thought that veered outside of what Calvin saw as Christian Orthodoxy. It is important to note that the reformer did not believe in religious tolerance. He believed that the civil government ought to establish a church and help enforce the orthodoxy of the church. While Calvin was present in Geneva, it was illegal to practice Roman Catholicism and to promote teachings contrary to Christian orthodoxy.⁸⁰

Calvin's rejection of complete religious tolerance does not however indicate that he was in favor of the most stringent punishments for the rejection of orthodoxy. Many of Calvin's critics point to the execution of Michael Servetus as a sign of Calvin's intolerance. In his book *Calvin*, Bruce Gordon is quick to point out that religious

⁷⁹ Gerald Bray, "The Reformation of Rights. Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism," *Ecclesiology* 4, no. 3 (2008): 366.

⁸⁰ Gerald Bray, "The Reformation of Rights. Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism," 366.

intolerance and the execution of heretics was not an anomaly in Geneva, but was the norm in most of Europe, Protestant and Catholic alike.⁸¹ In fact, Servetus was first arrested by Catholic authorities in France after they were made aware of his views by Calvin. Servetus' offense was the publication of his book *On the Restoration*, which contained many views which were considered heresy by both Calvin and the Catholic Church. His punishment was also accepted as reasonable by other reformers. Upon hearing the news of Servetus' execution, the Lutheran reformer Philip Melanchthon would write to Luther, "I have read your answer to the blasphemies of Servetus and approve of your piety and opinions. I judge also that the Genevan Senate acted correctly to put an end to this obstinate man, who could never cease blaspheming. And I wonder at those who disapprove of this severity."⁸²

While Calvin had previously stated that he wanted to see Servetus burn and was a crucial player in the Spaniard's trial, it was not Calvin who would condemn him to death. Rather, it was the city council that unanimously signed his death warrant. While the Servetus affair seemed harsh to many, even at the time, it was highly demonstrative of his belief that "civil government has as its appointed end . . . to cherish and protect the outward worship of God, to defend sound doctrine of piety and the position of the church."⁸³

⁸¹ Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009), 217.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 218, 224.

⁸³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1487.

The Role of the Magistrate

In his attempt to allow the government to function properly, Calvin divided the polity into three distinct groups. In Calvin's formulation, these branches consisted of an executive, whom Calvin would call "the magistrate," the law, which the magistrate uses to govern, and the people, who are under the magistrate as well as the law. He also saw fit to define each of the branches in detail. The first office which he explores is that of the magistrate, which illustrates the reformer's vision for how the government ought to function.⁸⁴

Calvin saw governmental offices as positions which were mandated by God and which carried with them the respect due to a position established by God.⁸⁵ He also assented to the popular belief of the time that governmental officers were "wholly God's representatives, in a manner, acting as his viceregent." In keeping with Luther's understanding, Calvin believed that God had a hand in raising and removing kings. He said it was "by divine providence and holy ordinance" that kings came to power and not purely by the actions of men. He also believed that the administration of the state was under the authority God and that "God was pleased so to rule the affairs of men, inasmuch as he is present with them and also presides over the making of laws and the exercising of equity in court of justice." Like Luther, Calvin based much of his thoughts on the ordination of government by God in Romans 13, in which Paul states that

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1487-1488.

⁸⁵ In this section of *Institutes*, which focuses on the magistrates, Calvin echoes some of the ideas proposed by the proponents of the ideology known as the Divine right of Kings. Calvin points to Romans 12:8 as evidence of this in which Paul lists leading as a worthy task alongside teaching and acts of service.

governments have been established by God. In this chapter, Paul makes the statements that “princes are ministers of God” and that “there are no powers except those ordained by God.” To further his explanation, Calvin points toward Old Testament examples by saying,

To this may be added the examples of holy men, of which some possessed kingdoms, as David, Josiah, and Hezekiah; others, lordships, as Joseph and Daniel; others, civil rule among a free people, as Moses, Joshua, and the judges. The Lord has declared his approval of their offices. Accordingly, no one ought to doubt that civil authority is a calling, not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men.⁸⁶

Calvin points to two passages in the Old Testament as a guide for magistrates. In both instances, he points to instructions given to judges in ancient Israel. The first, Deuteronomy 1:16-17, demands that a ruler “Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's.”⁸⁷ The other, II Chronicles 19:6, states that judges should “Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the Lord. He is with you in giving judgment.”⁸⁸

Calvin’s instructions were clear. While it was certainly the duty of the Christian to submit to the ruling authority, it was equally the duty of the magistrate to carry out his duties in accordance with the law of the state as well as in a way which upheld the law of

⁸⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1489-1490.

⁸⁷ Deut. 1:16-17

⁸⁸ II Chr. 19:6

God. In the introduction to his book *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, Harro Höpfl describes the core of Calvin's political ideology. He states, "Christian polity is characterized by a two-fold government, a double 'ministry' of magistrates and pastors, both deriving their authority from God, and both charged with governing the same body of persons, the only possible relationship between them is one of cooperation and mutual restraint."⁸⁹ To Calvin, the civil magistrate was to have the same end in mind as the religious minister, namely to forward the gospel and ensure that the church could operate properly, which would include implementing the religious teachings of the Reformation.

Calvin's statements on Civil Government in *Institutes* largely aligns with Luther's *On Secular Authority*. One of the central themes in both works was the exhortation of Paul in Romans chapter 13 to submit to secular authorities. Both reformers stressed the duty of the Christian to submit to authorities. However, on the last page of *Institutes*, Calvin states that Christians ought to "obey God rather than men," leaving the possibility that submission to a secular authority may not at all times be possible. This view of passive resistance aligns with Luther's view. Höpfl states that Calvin never gives his reader the option of rebellion, but rather "prayer, supplication, suffering or exile."⁹⁰

There seemed to be little difference between the minister and the magistrate other than the realm in which they operated, be it the secular or divine in Calvin's mind. He stated that rulers were required by God to "represent in themselves to men some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice."⁹¹ In other words,

⁸⁹ Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, xxiii.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁹¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1491.

magistrates were limited in their power and were not able to wield power “for any end they please.” Calvin believed that there was only one authoritative and final power, that of course being the authority of God. All men, be they laity, ministers, magistrates, governors and kings, were all under the authority of God and must conform to his will.⁹²

Calvin drew a direct connection between God’s will and political power. This connection necessitated that rulers would be guided by scriptural truth and religious law. He also did not allow rulers to exercise their power with immunity from scrutiny. As Jeffreys makes clear, Calvin uses the standard of rulers being subject to God’s will as the standard by which their actions are judged.⁹³

Much of Calvin’s writings on the magistrate are directed to the magistrate rather than those under the magistrate. In other words, Calvin was calling on magistrates to check their own power and to restrain themselves when they carried out their duties. Just as he cautioned the people to view the magistrate as a divinely created office, he believed that all magistrates should take seriously the idea that they were God’s vicars, or representatives, on earth. It was their responsibility to carry out God’s justice on earth and, if they should fail, to answer to God concerning those failures. He went as far as declaring that corrupt magistrates were “not only wrongdoers to men whom they

⁹² Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, xxii.

⁹³ Derek S. Jeffreys, "It's a Miracle of God That There Is Any Common Weal among Us": Unfaithfulness and Disorder in John Calvin's Political Thought," *The Review of Politics* 62, no. 1 (Winter, 2000): 114.

wickedly trouble, but [they] are also insulting toward God himself, whose most holy judgements they defile.”⁹⁴

Calvin demanded complete honesty and uprightness on the part of the magistrate. He stated that they cannot live up to their charge “unless they defend good men from the wrongs of the wicked, and give aid and protection to the oppressed.”⁹⁵ In this passage, Calvin is placing the burden of good governance on the magistrate rather than on the people. This is evident when Calvin exhorts his reader to submit to the governing authority. He stated that private individuals have no right to overthrow or resist a ruler, even if that ruler is a tyrant. In fact, he explicitly said to private individuals that “no command has been given except to obey and suffer.” Calvin also said that Christians ought to obey unjust and “wicked” rulers as they are often representative of God punishing the people for some disobedience to God. Throughout the passage, Calvin points to scripture emphasize this teaching.⁹⁶

Calvin saw the magistrate as the means by which a tyrannical government ought to be opposed. After stating that private individuals are called to “suffer and obey,”

⁹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1491-1492.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1496.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1510, 1512, 1516-1518. The three scriptures used by Calvin to support his argument were Romans 13: 1-2: “ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment,” Titus 3:1: “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work,” and I Peter 2: 13-14: “Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the king as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” Calvin never abandoned this teaching, even as he became an advocate of limited democracy later in life.

Calvin differentiates between the duty of the people to suffer and the magistrate's duty to resist the king as his office demands. He states,

For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings ... 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 ordinance.⁹⁷

Calvin also left open the possibility that the magistrate may be able to openly resist the king if certain conditions were met. In the aftermath of the "enterprise of Amboise," which saw a group of Huguenots attempt to overthrow the Catholic House of Guise to gain power, Calvin wrote a letter to The Admiral de Coligny. In the letter, Calvin is distancing himself from this power grab, as he was being charged as having a role in the plot. Calvin makes clear throughout the letter that he was opposed to the plot and even had admonished a military officer who inquired of Calvin if it would be lawful to defend "children of God" who "were then oppressed." Calvin answered that "he should abandon all thoughts of this kind," and that "he had no warrant for such conduct according to God." He did not, however, rule out entirely the possibility of armed resistance. He stated, "I admitted, it is true, that if the princes of the blood demanded to be maintained in their rights for the common good, and if the Parliament joined them in their quarrel, that it would then be lawful for all good subjects to lend them armed resistance."⁹⁸ Here, Calvin leaves open the possibility that in some circumstances, it

⁹⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1519.

⁹⁸ John Calvin, *The Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. Marcus Robert Gilchrist (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1858), 175-176.

would be legal and acceptable for the magistrates and the people to resist the king if certain constitutional conditions were met.

Calvin's view of the magistrate dominated most of his writing in chapter twenty of *Institutes*. He clearly demonstrated a desire for the people to revere the magistrate, as he believed the magistrate to be God's representative in the temporal government. However, he believed that the magistrate ought to be restrained and should be judged based on God's law. He also made quite clear that the magistrate should be intent on protecting the church and ensuring the well-being of the people. This conclusion did not lead Calvin to believe that there should be no external restraint placed on a secular government.

Democratic Strains in Calvin's Political Thought

Due to his theological beliefs, Calvin believed that men were bent toward sin and that no man was to be entirely trusted. He saw the necessity of a governmental system in which the "secular authority [was] limited in its capacity to do evil, but not inhibited in any way in doing the work of God, with agencies to act as guarantors and sureties for its good behavior."⁹⁹ This led the reformer to conclude that it was preferable to avoid monarchy and rather adopt a mixed system where there were aristocratic and democratic elements.¹⁰⁰ To this end, Calvin says that although it may be impossible to say which form of government is best in every circumstance, he stated, "I will not deny that

⁹⁹ Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, xxii.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xx.

aristocracy, or a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others.”

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Unlike many other writers of his day, and perhaps Luther, Calvin was not a monarchist. In his writings, he only praised kings in scripture in a religious sense. He was less committed than Luther to the governmental structure of a monarchy.¹⁰² He expressed his belief that it was the rare king or magistrate who would restrain his own power. It was this belief that led him to advocate that a mixture of aristocracy and democracy was the most feasible method to secure a measure of political freedoms. He thought that because kings rarely restrained themselves properly, having more people involved in governing would better protect the people. This is most clearly expressed when he stated,

Men’s faults or failing causes it to be safer and more bearable for a number or 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. This has both been proved by experience, and also the Lord confirmed it by his authority when he ordained among the Israelites an aristocracy bordering on democracy.¹⁰³

To illustrate this point, Calvin points to two different texts in the Old Testament. The two texts, Exodus 18: 13-26 and Deuteronomy 1:9-17, describe when Moses divides the responsibility of governing Israel among men in the community. Rather than serve as the

¹⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1493.

¹⁰² Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, viii-ix.

¹⁰³ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1493-1494. The translator of Calvin’s work, John T. McNeil notes that Calvin’s use of the Latin word *plures*, meaning “more” emphasizes Calvin’s belief that many should be involved in the political process.

only judge over the people, Moses chose men to represent the people and judge the people in a system in which power would be divided between different representatives.¹⁰⁴

For Calvin, this was not merely a philosophical position. It is necessary to note the political reality of the Geneva in which Calvin lived and operated as a political actor. Geneva was politically different than many other regions of central Europe. It was in many respects a political blank slate as it possessed no university, no historical political significance, it was not wealthy, and it was largely ignored by the Holy Roman Empire even though it had adopted the Reformation. While Geneva did not boast a robust democracy, it did not have the monarchical trappings of many other European cities.¹⁰⁵

A General Council made up the primary voting body in Geneva. All adult males were eligible to vote. This body elected the councils which ultimately ruled the city. James McGoldrick, author of *Presbyterian and Reformed Churches: A Global History*, affirms that “Geneva was, in practice, an oligarchy.” However, it was an oligarchy selected through a form of republicanism, which Calvin affirmed.¹⁰⁶

Geneva held elections in the city which elected a government which Harro Höpfl described as “oligarchical” and would seem restrictive by modern standards. Genevan society was rigidly hierarchical. Residents of the city were divided into three categories, *citoyen*, *bourgeois* and *habitants*. Being regarded as a *citoyen* indicated that a man was

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 1494.

¹⁰⁵ Harro Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 129.

¹⁰⁶ James Edward McGoldrick, Richard Clark Red and Thomas Hugh Spence Jr., *Presbyterian and Reformed Churches: A Global History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 14.

born in Geneva to *citoyen* parents and was baptized in the city. The *bourgeois* were residents of the city who paid for the privilege in participating in civic life on the city. Calvin was a member of the third group, *habitant*, for much of his time in Geneva. Both *citoyen* and *bourgeois* were eligible to vote, although only a *citoyen* was allowed to hold political office. *Habitants* were limited in their political rights but were given some basic legal rights. This distinction significant in that it demonstrates that Calvin was actually limited as a political actor by his status as a *habitant* and was not eligible to vote or hold office.¹⁰⁷

It was during this time as a political actor in Geneva that Calvin showed signs of democratic thought in his writings. As was stated earlier, Calvin believed that the monarch, and the government at large, should be limited. The government could kill, but only after judging a person guilty under the justice demonstrated in scripture. The king could tax, but not for any reason and not for any amount. According to Calvin, the money collected through taxation, which Calvin judged as being within the power of the king, still belonged to the people and should only be used in a responsible manner. Likewise, war should only be undertaken when completely necessary.¹⁰⁸

One of the first indications given in Calvin's writing that he believed a king was not beyond reproach was in the introduction to *Institutes*. In his introduction to *Institutes*, which was actually addressed as a letter to Francis I of France, Calvin explained what he

¹⁰⁷ Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 131, 133-134, 139. A *habitant* was a person who was legally allowed to live in Geneva and enjoyed some political rights but was not allowed to vote or hold political office.

¹⁰⁸ John T. McNeill, introduction to *On God and Political Duty*, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), xiv.

saw as the true duty of a monarch. He also used this letter to Francis I of France to address what he saw as the failings of the king to protect the reformed believers in France.¹⁰⁹ From this, John McNeill contended that Calvin and his followers believed that no one was above reproach and even above being resisted by magistrates occupying an obviously inferior office within the government. This included a monarch. Of course, this criticism needed to be based on scriptural reasoning.¹¹⁰

Allowing for well-reasoned criticism of a ruler did not lead the reformer to advocate for open rebellion. Calvin believed that a Christian could both recognize the shortcomings in a ruler while at the same time showing respect to the office held by the ruler. He emphasized this by stating,

I am not discussing the men themselves, as if a mask of dignity covered foolishness, or sloth, or cruelty, as well as wicked morass full of infamous deeds, and thus acquiring for vices and praise of virtues; but I say that the order itself is worth of such honor and reverence that those who are rulers are esteemed among us, and receive reverence out of respect for their lordship.¹¹¹

For the individual, acting on his own behalf, Calvin did not believe that outright resistance was scripturally justified. This belief would not exclude all believers in all circumstances from resisting an unjust power.

In the introduction to his book, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, Harro Höpfl drew a distinction between the ways in which the reformers envisioned government. The main distinction he drew is between Martin Luther and Calvin. Höpfl

¹⁰⁹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 9-11.

¹¹⁰ John T. McNeill, introduction to *On God and Political Duty*, ix-x.

¹¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1510.

characterized Martin Luther's vision of governmental authority as a sword, with which the governing authority would punish those who do wrong. Calvin viewed it as a bridle with which the authorities might restrain the actions of men. This distinction shaped the way in which they envisioned government. Luther saw government as the tool by which sin would be punished, while Calvin saw government as a tool which would restrain evil and prevent evil from occurring.¹¹²

One of the most important means by which evil could be restrained in Calvin's mind would be to remove power from one man and have it distributed among a group of well-intentioned leaders. While a political actor in Geneva, he encouraged the "Little Council," the more selective of the two political bodies in the city, to meet and discuss the issues at hand. While some view this as Calvin's advocating for oligarchy, it is important to note that Calvin was arguing for an expansion in political involvement. To be sure, Calvin was at best a hesitant democrat, even going as far as saying "it is easiest... to fall from popular rule to sedition." However, in his endorsement of a mixed government, oligarchy and a limited democracy, as was seen in Geneva, Calvin was opening the door for political change more than other reformers before him.¹¹³ Although Calvin never openly stated his dislike for monarchy, he did demonstrate a dislike for the office of king through his sermons. In a sermon on the book of Daniel, Calvin stated, "If

¹¹² Harro Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, xxiii.

¹¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1493. The discussion over Calvin's commitment to oligarchy or control by the aristocracy has caused disagreement among Calvin's scholars. John T. McNeill, who edited the translation of *Institutes* by Ford Lewis Battle, argues against the French historian J. Cadier who claimed Calvin was emphatically opposed to democracy and was committed to an oligarchy.

one could uncover the hearts of kings, he would find hardly one in a hundred who does not ... despise everything divine.” He also, in his sermons on Deuteronomy stated, ““It is much more enduring to have rulers who are chosen and elected.” In this statement, Calvin showed a clear preference for leaders who were elected.¹¹⁴

Just as Calvin believed that the church and the state worked toward a similar end, the establishment and protection of a reformed, Christian community, he believed that they ought to operate in a similar manner. Voting would be a vehicle by which both would be protected. Calvin believed that through the voting of people in the church, the principle of *semper reformanda ecclesiae* would be upheld.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Calvin endorsed democratic principles in the city of Geneva as well as in his religious writings. He even went as far as to comment that liberty is best protected by general suffrage and that the rule of a king “does not seem in accordance with liberty.” This is demonstrated when he said,

For the condition of the people most to be desired is that in which they create their shepherds by general vote. For when anyone by force usurps the supreme power, that is tyranny. And where men are born to kingship, this does not seem to be in accordance with liberty. Hence the prophet says: we shall set up princes for ourselves; that is, the Lord will not only give the Church freedom to breathe, but also institute a definite and well-ordered government, and establish this upon the common suffrages of all.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ John T. McNeil, “The Democratic Element in Calvin’s Thought” *Church History* 18, no. 3 (Sept. 1949): 159.

¹¹⁵ John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5. Calvin used the term *semper reformanda ecclesiae* to express the idea that Christians should be “always reforming the church.” This would ensure that false teaching would not enter the church as it had, in Calvin’s mind, entered the church in Rome.

¹¹⁶ John T. McNeill, introduction to *On God and Political Duty*, xxii-xxiii. The quote is translated by McNeil from the *Corpus Reformatorium*.

Calvin held in high esteem the liberty of the people. This was not limited to a religious liberty. In his introduction to Calvin's *On God and Political Duty*, John T. McNeill draws the reader to an important distinction. When reading the works of Calvin, it is necessary to distinguish between two separate types of liberty. The first is Christian liberty. This was Calvin's primary concern. By Christian liberty, Calvin was talking about the freedom from sin a Christian finds in "voluntary obedience to God." However, Calvin also speaks of political liberty in his writings about governmental structure.¹¹⁷

On multiple occasions, Calvin spoke of liberty as a worthy end for which to work. He went as far as to call liberty "an inestimable good," and that "nothing is more desirable than liberty."¹¹⁸ Calvin in fact endorsed the idea that natural law ought to guide the writing and enforcement of the law. He stated, "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 the conscience which God has engraved upon the minds of men. Consequently, the entire scheme of this equity of which we are now speaking has been prescribed in it. Hence, this equity alone must be the goal and rule and limit of all laws."¹¹⁹ John T. McNeill emphasized this by writing, "Not one of the leaders of the Reformation assails the principle. Instead, with the possible exception of Zwingli, they all on occasion express a quite ungrudging respect for the moral law naturally implanted in the human heart and

¹¹⁷ John T. McNeill, introduction to *On God and Political Duty*, xxii-xxiii.

¹¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1494.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1504.

seek to inculcate this attitude in their readers.” He also stated that “for the Reformers . . . natural law stood affirmed on the pages of Scripture.”¹²⁰

Calvin’s belief that natural rights afforded to men certain rights led the reformer to a similar dilemma as Luther. At what point can a Christian resist a civil authority and seemingly violate the exhortation of Paul found in Romans 13? Paul’s instruction of “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” guided much of Calvin’s writing in *Institutes* concerning a believer’s relationship with the government.¹²¹ Although Calvin had written that individuals must not resist a ruler, in his further writings on the subject he clarified his position. He focused his writing on the subject to two groups, private individuals and those who held a position in the government.

Calvin’s Right and Duty to Resist

To those who occupied a political office, Calvin was very direct. There would be times when, acting in their official capacity, it would be necessary to resist the king or any other civil authority. In this circumstance, political action would be a duty to uphold the law and to properly guide the hand of government. This was not a responsibility that

¹²⁰ John T. McNeill, “Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers” *The Journal of Religion* 26, no. 3 (July 1946): 168. McNeill states that through Calvin’s usage of the term equity should be seen as a simple replacement for natural law, as he is writing about the similarities between the Mosaic Law and other legal codes. The explanation of this term is found on page 181 of the same article.

¹²¹ Rom. 13: 1. The complete text of Romans 13: 1-7 can be found earlier in this paper.

Calvin took lightly. Calvin viewed these magistrates that the protectors of both the people's lives and liberty.¹²²

Calvin argued that it was the responsibility of magistrates to resist an unjust king under certain circumstances.¹²³ He stated that a magistrate's "sole endeavor should be to provide for the common safety and peace of all." This was emphasized by Calvin saying that if a magistrate were to ignore the misdeeds of a king, he was "dishonestly betray[ing] the freedom of the people, of which they know they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance." For Calvin, the lower magistrate had just as much of a duty to God and the people as did the king. Therefore, the magistrate had the duty to resist the king if obedience would cause the magistrate to violate his duty to God and the people.¹²⁴

In his commentary on the book of Daniel, Calvin stated "For earthly princes law aside their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy to be reckoned among the number of mankind. We ought, rather, utterly to defy them than to obey them." In his commentary on this quote, McNeil points out that Calvin actually used language which showed a complete disregard for any respect for this king. Rather than use the word defy, the actual quote from Calvin is "conspuere in ipsorum capita." This is literally translated "to spit on their heads." This is certainly a far cry from Calvin's earlier statement that "no command has been given except to obey and suffer."¹²⁵ This

¹²² Harro Höpfl, *Luther and Calvin on Secular Authority*, xviii.

¹²³ For an earlier discussion of this topic please see the section entitled The Role of the Magistrate.

¹²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1519.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 1518-1519.

command would not be applied only to those in positions of power. Calvin would also extend this to the individual.

In Calvin's conception of government, a good ruler would protect the people and their liberties. It was for this reason that he believed that a political order which protected the individual ought to be defended by the individual. However, according to Calvin, this would only apply to a government which was supporting the word of God and protecting the rights of the people. If this were not the case and the magistrate "command[ed] anything against him [God]," the believer was commanded to "let it go unesteemed." He further explained his position by stating,

There is absolutely no foundation to the charge that they make against us, that we overthrow the political order . . . and subvert the power of kinds... But if religion ever forces us to resist tyrannical edicts, which forbid giving due honor to Christ, and due Worship to God, then we too may rightly testify that we do not violate the authority of kings. For they have not been lifted to such an exalted position, that, like giants, they may endeavor to pull God from his throne. Daniel's defense was true. "I have done nothing wrong against the king," although he had nevertheless not obeyed the impious edict, for he had done no injury to a mortal man, because he has preferred God to him. So let us, in good faith, pay to princes their proper dues, but let us be ready for civil disobedience of all kinds, for if they are not content with their own station, and wish to take away from us the fear and worship of God, there is no reason for anyone to say that they are despised by us, because the authority and majesty of God are of more importance to us.¹²⁶

Calvin explained that this was not a violation of Romans 13:1 and its command to "let every person be subject to the governing authorities" because in violating scripture, the magistrate had forfeited his position of authority over the people. This was necessary

¹²⁶ Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism*, 49-51.

according to Calvin to ensure that all people were ultimately subject to God and not man.

He stated,

But so soon as rulers do lead us away from the obedience of God, because they strive against God with sacrilegious boldness, their pride must be abated, that God may be above all in authority. Then all smokes of honour vanish away. For God doth not vouchsafe to bestow honourable titles upon men, to the end they may darken his glory. Therefore, if a father, being not content with his own estate, do essay to take from God the chief honour of a father, he is nothing else but a man. If a king, or ruler, or magistrate, do become so lofty that he diminisheth the honour and authority of God, he is but a man. We must thus think also of pastors. For he which goeth beyond his bounds in his office, (because he setteth himself against God,) must be despoiled of his honour, lest, under a colour or visor, he deceive.¹²⁷

In this statement, Calvin upended the political thought of the world in which he lived. Calvin's teaching, that godly kings must be obeyed and that kings who violate scripture must be disobeyed, changed the political discourse in nations where Calvinism was accepted.

Political Calvinism Beyond Calvin

The development of Calvinist political thought did not die with Calvin in 1564. Calvin did leave a distinct political philosophy with several distinct features. Liberty was a constant strain through Calvin's religious and political writing. Much of his early writing was focused on the liberty the Reformers thought the new Protestant churches were being denied from both civil authorities and the religious authorities in Rome. John Witte Jr. argues that Calvin's political philosophy was also distinct from other Christian

¹²⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary upon The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Henry Beveridge, trans. Christopher Fetherstone (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 214-215.

political traditions from the Reformation in that unlike his Lutheran counterparts, “charted a course between the Lutherans of his day, who tended to subordinate the church to the state, and Anabaptists” who completely separated the church and the state. Rather, Calvin believed that the church and state were separate but cooperative in the effort to spread and uphold the Reformed faith that was practiced in Geneva. In this way, Calvin established the ideal of a “Christian Commonwealth” which was both dedicated to the Reformed faith as well as the political wellbeing of the citizens.¹²⁸

In the years following Calvin’s death, the Reformed faith was rapidly spreading across Europe. In Calvin’s place of birth, France, the reformed churches were expanding rapidly and could lay claim to two million adherents. This number would have seemed nearly unimaginable just a decade prior. Although there was religious conflict, Calvinists were largely still restrained by the teachings of Calvin and resistance to civil authorities. It would be Calvin’s successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, who would ultimately complete the transformation of the Calvinist resistance theory which emanated from Geneva. After the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in which thousands of French Calvinists were massacred, the tone of Calvinist writing changed rapidly. The Calvinist expansion into Catholic France was halted and gone from the Calvinist pen was the tepid and restricted right to resist a governing authority¹²⁹

¹²⁸ John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3-4.

¹²⁹ Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism*, 82-84.

The St. Bartholomew's Massacre, as well as other smaller massacres, led to a change in Calvinist thinking. In a journal article entitled "Rights, Resistance, and Revolution in the Western Tradition: Early Protestant Foundations," John Witte Jr. explains that the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre was a defining moment in Calvinist political theory. Until this time, Calvinism, in both its theological and political forms, operated within the safe confines of Geneva. With the slaughter of possibly 100,000 Calvinists in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, many Calvinists, including Calvin's successor Theodore Beza, began developing a more robust political theory with this persecution in mind.¹³⁰

As John Witte Jr. points out, Calvin's institutes were based on the assumption of a church and state that worked in conjunction and that persecution would be limited. The situation faced by his followers just a decade after his death was a much harsher reality. Out of this persecution came a completed and defined Calvinist resistance theory which was based on the idea of a covenant. To this end, Beza states, "Once the free exercise of the true religion has been granted...the ruler is so much more bound to have it observed [that] if he acts otherwise, I declare that he is practicing manifest tyranny, and [his subjects] will be all the more free to oppose him. For we are bound to set greater store and value in the salvation of our souls and the freedom of our conscience than in any

¹³⁰ John Witte Jr., "Rights, Resistance, and Revolution in the Western Tradition: Early Protestant Foundations," *Law and History Review* 26, no. 3 (2008), 546-547.

other matters, however desirable.”¹³¹ J.H.M. Salmon defines this Calvinist, and more specifically Huguenot, resistance theory as having three distinct principles:

They were: loyal resistance to malevolent and Machiavellian advisers who had usurped royal authority; constitutional opposition to a king who had overstepped limitations defined by law and history; and communal defiance of a tyrant in the name of the ultimate power, or 'popular sovereignty', of the commonwealth over the ruler.¹³²

Just as Calvin had written about the importance of covenants in the Old and New Testament, so the Reformers would apply this principle to governance. Beza and his followers argued that there was a covenant between God, the ruler and the people. John Witte Jr. explains this covenant:

God agreed to protect and bless the rulers and the people in return for their proper obedience to the of God and nature. . .The rulers agreed to honor these higher laws and protect the people's essential rights. . .The people agreed to exercise God's political will for the community by election and petitioning their rulers and by honoring and obeying them so long as the rulers honored God's law and protected the people's rights.¹³³

It was also assumed that if the people violated the covenant, they could be punished, even be put to death, depending on the circumstance. It was also assumed that if the ruler violated the covenant, he could be removed from office, or, in some cases, executed, a situation which would come to bear with the regicide of Charles I. This

¹³¹ Theodore Beza, *De Iure Magistratum*, translated as die Beza, *Concerning the Rights of Rulers Over Their Subjects and the Duties of Subjects Toward Their Rulers*, trans. Henri-Louis Gonin (Cape Town and Pretoria: 1956), 85.

¹³² J.H.M. Salmon, "Catholic resistance theory, Ultramontaniam, and the royalist response, 1580-1620," in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700*, ed. J.H. Burns and Mark Goldie (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 219.

¹³³ John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism*, 85.

change in Calvinist resistance theory would spread across parts of continental Europe and would become accepted among Calvinists in England and Scotland as well. This opened the floodgates for this theory to spread to other areas of political and religious thought. Now Calvinists claimed certain “rights and liberties” that could be actively defended so long as the believer did not violate this political covenant.

Political Calvinism Spreads across Europe

Across the English Channel from Calvin’s homeland of France, England saw a Protestant movements under the rule of Henry VIII. However, after Henry VIII split from the Roman Catholic Church, he did not move towards continental Protestantism. Rather he continued the church structure as it had been structured under the Catholic Church, with a simple replacement of the papacy with the crown. James McGoldrick, the author of *Presbyterian and Reformed Churches: A Global History*, explained the situation by stating, “like popes of the Middle Ages, monarchs of England claimed preeminence in church and state. Any reform in church government would have entailed major political consequences, and many strong Protestants feared the loss of royal patronage would damage their cause.”¹³⁴

England had struggled with challenges to the Catholic Church previously. John Wycliffe had introduced a bible in the vernacular nearly two-hundred years before Luther and challenged aspects of the church’s power. Most troublesome to Rome, Wycliffe asserted that the laity ought to be able to question the authority of the clergy and that the

¹³⁴ McGoldrick, *Presbyterian and Reformed Churches: A Global History*, 3-4.

Pope overstepped his bounds when meddling in political affairs. He also asserted that the church's only had authority when it was faithful to the teachings of scripture.

Theologically, Wycliffe affirmed a doctrines of predestination and the inability of the believer to lose salvation which both Calvin and St. Augustine would have also affirmed.

Wycliffe also repudiated the church's teaching of transubstantiation. All of these challenges to the church would be reintroduced with both Hus and, ultimately, Luther.¹³⁵

While Wycliffe's descent was stifled in the short-term, many of his beliefs would be re-introduced to the British Isles by the burgeoning Presbyterian movement.¹³⁶ Wycliffe's ideas would become the norm in England, although not without much struggle.

Scotland would be the original battleground over Protestantism in Britain.

Luther's writings were initially banned in Scotland, along with the writings of the Proto-reformer John Wycliffe and his followers the Lollards. Luther's writings came to Scotland around the same time that William Tyndale's New Testament, which was published in 1526, became accessible to the average man. The combination of a new translation of the Bible in the vernacular and the introduction of Luther's writings would help ignite the Scottish Reformation.¹³⁷

The first true Protestant leader in Scotland was George Wishart. Wishart brought the reformed faith to Scotland after being heavily influenced by Ulrich Zwingli. He also brought to Scotland the First Helvetic Confession. Wishart's execution at the hands of the

¹³⁵ Alessandro Conti, "John Wyclif" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),

¹³⁶ Lemoine G. Lewis, *Lecture on John Wycliffe*.

¹³⁷ McGoldrick, *Presbyterian and Reformed Churches: A Global History*, 106.

Catholic cardinal only served to fan the flames of Protestantism in Scotland. However, it would be one of Wishart's followers would open the flood gates to Protestantism in Scotland. The pivotal player in the Scottish Reformation would be John Knox.¹³⁸

After fleeing both Scotland and England, Knox traveled to Switzerland where he would study under Calvin himself. Upon his return to Scotland, Knox quickly, publicly and personally attacked Mary Stuart's Catholicism. Public opinion in Scotland heavily favored Knox and Mary Stuart fled to England where her Protestant cousin Elizabeth would ultimately execute her. Scotland quickly adopted Protestantism and Knox's Scots Confession of Faith. With the establishment of the Church of Scotland, the Scottish Reformation was complete and Calvin's teachings had a foothold in the British Isles. However, Calvin's teachings would have the greatest political impact to the south in Scotland.¹³⁹

After the establishment of the Church of England, and even with the adoption of a Calvinist theology, there were those in England who opposed the polity established within the church. These dissenters became known as Puritans. Two of their largest concerns with the English church were the order of worship, which still resembled Catholicism, and the fact that the church was subordinate to the civil authority, meaning Queen Elizabeth. While Elizabeth allowed the Puritans to operate in relative peace, her

¹³⁸ Ibid., 107-108.

¹³⁹ McGoldrick, *Presbyterian and Reformed Churches: A Global History*, 110-112.

successors James I and Charles I were both bitterly opposed to both the Presbyterian and Puritan movements.¹⁴⁰

It was during the reigns of James I and Charles I, that Puritans began to follow their fellow Calvinists, the separatists, to the new world. In the New World, James I saw the opportunity to relieve himself of these religious dissenters. It was also in the New World, and in Massachusetts in particular, that the political ideas of Calvin and the Reformation would most thoroughly take hold.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 174-175, 177.

CHAPTER 3

THE PURITAN CONTINUATION OF POLITICAL CALVINISM

During the early and mid-twentieth century, most historians agreed that colonists living in New England and many other colonies in America were a religious lot and that religion was a motivating factor in their decision making, both private and political. A quick sampling of the historiography points to this consensus. Writers such as Edward Humphrey, William Warren Sweet and C. H. Van Tyne all argued that the religious faith of the colonists was instrumental in both their private and public lives. Some would go so far as to claim that the Calvinistic faith of these early colonists was the driving force behind their every action in regard to political decisions. This is laid out clearly in the final paragraph of Van Tyne's article "Influence of the Clergy, and of Religious and Sectarian Forces, on the American Revolution."

I believe that we must hereafter give more weight to the religious factor among the causes of the American Revolution. After twelve years' study of the period, I am not convinced that the economic causes of which so much has been made are adequate alone to explain the bitterness of the controversy. In fact, the whole colonial period must be studied, and many conditions noted, which there is no time to mention here, before one may at all comprehend why the American people rebelled in 1775.

Van Tyne's view that religion was an important motivating factor for those living in the

revolutionary period was a rather standard view for the early twentieth century. He goes on to say:

Among the many causes, I rate religious bigotry, sectarian antipathy, and the influence of the Calvinistic clergy, which we have reviewed, as among the most important. One may argue that after all the clergy were merely a part of the American people, affected by the same conditions, and driven in their political actions by the same motives as the members of their congregations, and that, therefore, their teachings merely reflect the general views of the times, and are not to be taken as causes, but I am convinced that they have deeper significance than that.

He believed that “deeper significance” was that the clergy in the American colonies were in large measure responsible for the political ideas which took hold in the colonies in the years preceding the American Revolution.

Conflicting political ideas, and not tea or taxes, caused the American secession from the British Empire, and the Puritan clergy had a large part in planting the predominant American political ideas which were antagonistic to those dominant in England. As has been said, the Americans were not only Protestants, but Protestants from Protestantism itself, and from this fact, as Burke expressed it, a fierce spirit of liberty had grown up. This spirit the dissenting clergy communicated to a people far more influenced by what they heard in the House of God than we in these degenerate days can comprehend.¹⁴¹

For many years, historians pointed to the Great Awakening as an example of Americans’ religiosity. Recently however, even this has come under attack. Both Jon Butler and Frank Lambert claim that the lasting impact of the first Great Awakening was nothing more than “Interpretive Fiction,” drummed up by emotional evangelicals in the following decades.¹⁴² Butler makes the claim that the First Great Awakening was, “the

¹⁴¹ C. H. Van Tyne, “Influence of the Clergy, and of Religious and Sectarian Forces, on the American Revolution,” *The American Historical Review* 19, no. 1 (Oct., 1913): 64.

¹⁴² Jon Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,” *Journal of American History* 69 (October, 1982): 305-308; Frank

product of overheated imaginations,” “among the transatlantic community of evangelicals it aroused.”¹⁴³ Although both make compelling arguments for reconsidering the term “The Great Awakening,” they fail to disprove two key characteristics of the “Awakening.” First, that revivals did not abound in the colonies in the mid eighteenth century as they were reported. And secondly, that the Awakening did not have long lasting religious, philosophical and political results.

Before conclusions can be drawn concerning religion’s role in colonial politics, the American Revolution, or any other event, one must examine the role the Puritans played in the development of both the political structure of New England and in the political ideology of the people of the region. This chapter will prove that the Puritans of New England were both the founders of a new and unique political order and were also responsible for a new political ideology, based on the Calvinist political tradition, which continued to have influence through American history.

Who were the Puritans?

To fully understand the importance of religion, particularly Calvinistic theology and ministers, in colonial America, one must examine the very first Calvinists to arrive on America’s shores. Religion was certainly viewed as being important at the colony at Jamestown, however Jamestown was not an inherently religious colony and were not driven to the new world by religious zeal. For the purposes of examining religion in the context of political decisions and in the establishment of a society, one finds it necessary

Lambert, “The First Great Awakening: Whose Interpretive Fiction?” *The New England Quarterly*, vol.68, No. 4 (December, 1995): 650.

¹⁴³ Butler, 659.

to look northward towards Massachusetts.

While it would certainly be romantic to find that the few souls who faithfully established the Plymouth Bay Colony were also the founders of a great political system, which drew from their Calvinistic tradition, this is not the case. It is important to note that the Plymouth Colony left a mark on the governance of Massachusetts, as evidenced by the Massachusetts constitution. However, this credit must go to the colony founded just ten years after the faithful landed at Plymouth; The Massachusetts Bay Colony.¹⁴⁴

It is certainly understandable how the two groups have become confused. Both were religious groups who left England because of persecution and disagreements with the Church of England. Both practiced a Calvinist faith and had very few, if any, theological disagreements. Also, both groups settled in very close proximity. This makes it all the more necessary to define what a Puritan is in relation to this paper.



¹⁴⁴ George L. Haskins, “The Legal Heritage of Plymouth Colony,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 110, no. 6 (Apr., 1962): 847-848.

¹⁴⁵ *Massachusetts Bay Colony: Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies*, Map/Still, from *Britannica Online for Kids*, accessed October 21, 2013, <http://kids.britannica.com/comptons/art-179295>.

It must be understood that both groups were originally affiliated with the Church of England and had serious disagreements with the church on a wide range of issues. The distinction between the groups came in their response to these disagreements. While the Pilgrims and the Puritans may have shared Calvinistic and Covenant theology, they certainly differed in their views towards the Church of England.¹⁴⁶

The Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth were separatists. It was their simple goal to leave the Church of England and their homeland in order to escape the persecution they were experiencing.¹⁴⁷ These radicals rejected the Puritan premise that the Church of England could be, or should be, purified. To be connected in any way to the Anglicans would have put their own righteousness at risk.

It was for this reason that a small group of separatists fled England for Holland in the year 1607. But even the relative freedom of Holland would not satisfy this band in their pursuit of religious purity. In Holland they found “great licentiousness” in the people, which caused them to fear their children becoming “degenerate and . . . corrupt.” To escape this influence, they decided to make a pilgrimage to America with the “great hope and inward zeal of laying good foundations . . . for the propagation of Christ in the remote parts of the world, even though they should be but stepping stones to others in the performance of so great a work.”¹⁴⁸ It is clear that the group who became the founders of

¹⁴⁶ Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1995), 57-58.

¹⁴⁷ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation: Bradford's history of the Plymouth Settlement* (Bulverde, TX: Mantle Ministries, 2004), 8.

¹⁴⁸ Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation: Bradford's history of the Plymouth Settlement*, 21.

the Plymouth settlement had no intentions of helping purify the Anglican Church, but rather separating themselves from the Church.¹⁴⁹

The Puritans on the other hand, wanted to do just that, purify the Church from within. They wished to reform the church, not leave it. To be sure, these reforms were not simple and slight changes. Their goal was to completely change the way to the church functioned. As Maxwell states, they wanted,

the Bible, not the church hierarchy, to be the ultimate authority; membership by choice and therefore limited to those who had at least some degree of religious motivation; and an active clergy who carried out some teaching as well as purely liturgical functions.¹⁵⁰

These reforms challenged three of the most established traditions in the church, the church's authority, mandatory membership and the clergy's role in the religious activity of the church.

While in England, the Puritans who would ultimately immigrate to North America were convinced that England was deserving of God's punishment and were concerned that they enjoyed "so much comfort and peace in these so evill and declininge tymes."¹⁵¹ While the Puritans knew reform would be difficult to bring about, they thought it was necessary for the church to reform her theology in order to avoid the just reward for

¹⁴⁹ For of the differences between the Puritans and the Separatists, they were very much in agreement when it came to political thought. The most obvious evidence for this is the separatists' willingness to unite with the Massachusetts Bay Colony only seventy years after the creation of the colony. For more on the topic, see the introduction to Michael P. Winship's *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill*.

¹⁵⁰ Maxwell, "Pilgrim and Puritan: A Delicate Distinction," 3.

¹⁵¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 29. All spelling and grammar will be left as written by the original author.

England's unrighteousness. As John Winthrop wrote to his wife Margaret, "I am verily perswaded, God will bringe some heavye Affliction upon this lande, and that speedylye (speedily)." ¹⁵² This was largely caused by the outright hostility of Charles I towards the Puritans and their fear that he would return England to Catholicism. ¹⁵³

This colony was to be more than just an escape for the faithful or a profitable venture for a group of investors. As the leader of this group, John Winthrop, declared after Charles dissolved Parliament and effectively banished Calvinistic thinking from the Church,

for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, we shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake; wee shall shame the faces of many of gods worthy servants, and cause theire prayers to be turned into Curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whether we are going. ¹⁵⁴

Much like Calvin's Geneva, this colony was seen by its inhabitants an example to both the English and the rest of the world that it was possible to have a righteous polity in the modern world. In their attempt to achieve this, the Puritans established a new political system and a new set of political norms in this quickly expanding new world. The initial disagreements between the Plymouth Separatists and the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay disappeared quickly once both groups established colonies in the New

¹⁵² Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, 30.

¹⁵³ Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7.

¹⁵⁴ John Winthrop, "A Model for Christian Charity" (1630), 64.

World. Ultimately, the two groups blended into a single polity and church. For the purposes of this chapter, the term Puritan will refer to this merged polity.¹⁵⁵

The Puritans on the Purpose and Legitimacy of Governments

The Puritans were very clear as to the main purpose of government. Possibly the most concise summation of their vision of government comes from John Davenport's "A Discourse About Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design is Religion," published originally in 1663.¹⁵⁶ In his discourse, Davenport explains that the Church and the State serve different ends of the same purpose, "God's Glory."¹⁵⁷ To Winthrop and the other Puritans in Massachusetts, there was no separation between the missions of the state and the church while at the same time remaining distinct entities. Both were

¹⁵⁵ Michael Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims and a City On a Hill* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 7-8.

¹⁵⁶ This writing has probably been mistakenly attributed to John Cotton in the past. While the title page of the document states that Cotton was the author, Cotton's own grandson, Cotton Mather, said that John Davenport was the author. A few historians have looked into the document and most have come to the conclusion that Davenport was indeed the author. Although there is still debate as to the actual author, it is of little consequence, as both men were well known Puritans and agreed on this issue. It is indicative of the political agreement among Puritans that the authorship of this document is of little consequence to modern historians. This furthers the argument that they were a cohesive and agreed upon set of political principles in Puritan New England. Throughout this essay, the work will be cited with John Cotton as the author, as most manuscripts attribute the essay to Cotton. For the most convincing argument for Davenport's authorship, see: Bruce E. Steiner, "Dissension at Quinnipiac: The Authorship and Setting of a Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design Is Religion," *The New England Quarterly*, 54, no.1 (Mar., 1981): 14-32. For Cotton's authorship, see: Isabel M. Calder, "The Authorship of a *Discourse about Civil Government*," *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 167-169.

¹⁵⁷ John Cotton, "Dissension at Quinnipiac: The Authorship and Setting of a Discourse about Civil Government in a New Plantation Whose Design Is Religion," 6-7.

vehicles by which they could honor God and advance the gospel. In fact, it was seen as necessary that those who would serve in government should also be church members.

This view was expressly demonstrated in a letter John Cotton sent to Lord Say and Seal, in which he said, “none are to be trusted with public permanent authority but godly men, who are fit materials for church fellowship, then . . . it will appear, that none are so fit to be trusted with the liberties of the commonwealth as church members.”¹⁵⁸

Any historian who would attempt to formally separate the two in the mind of the Puritans would create a historical inaccuracy that would fundamentally change the way in which the group should be viewed. This view, that church and state were connected, was not radical for the time. The Puritans had long lived under a system in which the civil authority also controlled the religion of the state. In fact, the Puritans did not even seek to separate from that power even as they pointed to the deep-seated problems, as they saw them, within the Church and the King.

One of the largest problems, from the Puritans’ perspective, was the introduction of Arminianism, or the idea that man has the ability to choose faith on his own and thus salvation, into the Church of England by Charles I. This rattled the Puritans and caused them to question if the Church was able to perform her function. After this transpired, the Puritans had looked to the people’s representatives, the parliament, for protection.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Letter from John Cotton to Lord Say and Seal as quoted in Edmund S. Morgan, *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), 166-167. In regard to the word “commonwealth,” in a conversation on October 16, 2013, Dr. Christopher Dudley of East Stroudsburg University indicated that the use of the word commonwealth indicates that Cotton was sympathetic to the idea of a republic, or was at least skeptical of a monarchy.

¹⁵⁹ Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, 28.

This experience, possibly for the first time, caused the Puritans to question if Church and its leadership.

This led the Puritans to insist upon local control of their congregations. While the Puritans of New England were not able to claim exclusivity to this idea, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Calvinists of many stripes also believed in congregational control, it certainly was an issue which drove a wedge between them and the Church of England. One cause of the insistence that a congregation should control the church in which they worship stemmed from the Puritan fear that they could face God's wrath because of the sins of others. This fear was expressed in the previously quoted letter Winthrop wrote to his wife. (See footnote twelve) For it was the Puritan belief that if a country's leaders violated the laws of God, the people would ultimately be held responsible.¹⁶⁰ To understand this belief, it is necessary to understand the Puritan belief in covenants.

The Puritans were a people of covenants. It was one of their basic assumptions that God made covenants, or binding promises, with his people, and that he was faithful in completing them so long as the people honored him. This was certainly true in New England just as it had been in Geneva. In his sermon "The Lesson of the Covenant, for England and New England," which was delivered some time between his emigration to Boston in 1635 and his death in 1659, Peter Bulkeley explained that because of the covenant between the people of New England and God, the people of New England were held to a higher standard than those living elsewhere. In language which mirrored John Winthrop, he explained that if the people neglected the work of God, he would:

remove thy candlestick out of the midst of thee; lest being now as a city upon a

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 30.

hill, which many seek unto, thou be left like a beacon upon the top of a mountain, desolate, and forsaken. If we walk unworthy of the Gospel brought unto us, the greater our mercy hath been in the enjoying of it, the greater will our judgement be for the contempt. Be instructed, and take heed.¹⁶¹

In this theological system, the covenants began with the first man, Adam, who's disobedience led to the downfall of his own covenant and the creation of a new one. This new covenant, the covenant of grace, was the basis of the Puritans' faith. This grace was dispensed through a savior, whom the Puritans, and more broadly all of Christendom, believed to be to be Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁶² Calvin's theology, Calvinism, is often alternatively referred to as "Covenant Theology." This is largely because Calvin believed that at the center of the relationship between God and man are the covenants made by God to man in both the Old and New Testaments. Calvin's belief in a covenant government was diametrically opposed to the idea of a divine right of Kings as expressed by James I of England in his treatise *The True Law of Free Monarchies*. Rather, Calvinism fostered governmental systems in which the power of rulers was limited and the rights of the people were protected. The government also was responsible for "protect[ing] the church and promot[ing] the Christian faith and true reformed teaching."¹⁶³ Samuel Willard more pointedly stated this idea by saying:

When men can enjoy their libertiees and rights without molestation or oppression; when they can live without fear of being born down by their more potent

¹⁶¹ Peter Bulkeley, "The Lesson of the Covenant, for England and New England." n.d. in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: and Other Puritan Sermons*, ed. by Mary Carolyn Waldrep (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 2.

¹⁶² Edmund S. Morgan, Introduction to *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794*, by Edmund S. Morgan. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1965), xx-xxi.

¹⁶³ W.A. Dreyer, "Calvin on Church and Government," *In Die Skrifling* 44, no. 4 (2010): 171.

neighbours; when they Are secured against violence, and may be righted against them that offer them any injury, without fraud; and are encouraged to serve God in their own way, in freedom, and without being imposed upon contrary to the gospel precepts; now are they an happy people.¹⁶⁴

To the average Puritan reader of the day, Rev. John Eliot, who became known for his work of winning converts among the native peoples of Massachusetts, spoke an obvious truth when he wrote the following in his *The Christian Commonwealth*:

It is the Commandment of the Lord, that a people should enter into Covenant with the Lord to become his people, even in their Civil Society, as well as in their Church-Society. Whereby they submit themselves to be ruled by the Lord in all things, receiving from him, both the platform of their Government, and all their Laws ; which when they do, then Christ reigneth over them in all things, they being ruled by his Will, and by the Word of his Mouth.¹⁶⁵

These covenants were not limited just between God and man. The people also held covenants between themselves as a people. As Edmund Morgan submits, there was also a covenant made between the people and the king. This covenant made clear that a people were to “obey faithfully” and that the king was to “rule justly.” If both parties were faithful to their word, the government would be prosperous and legitimate in the eyes of God. However, if the king were to not rule justly and contradicted God, the people had a responsibility to remove him from power, lest they risk God’s condemnation.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Samuel Willard, “The Character of a Good Ruler,” 117-119.

¹⁶⁵ John Eliot, “The Christian Commonwealth: or, The Civil Polity Of The Rising Kingdom of Jesus Christ. An Online Electronic Text Edition.” 1-2.

¹⁶⁶ Morgan, Introduction to *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794*, xxiii-xxiv.

The Puritans on Hereditary Rule and Building a Tradition of Suffrage

On the surface, the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay left an indelible mark on the American political tradition through practicing of representative government and of a more expanded suffrage among the colony's male inhabitants than was seen in England.¹⁶⁷ In fact, the most important role the Puritans played in this early period was the formation of a coherent political ideology. This ideology, named godly republicanism, laid the groundwork for a political structure which endured in Massachusetts and spread throughout the colonies.

Throughout much of English history, the sovereign had always enjoyed the presumption of a "divine right."¹⁶⁸ Unsurprisingly, the strongest support of this theory in England can be traced to the monarchs themselves. English monarchs had long claimed a hereditary right to rule. However, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, James I attempted to convert this hereditary right to rule into an absolute divine right. James began to rule in Scotland as James VI in 1567. Upon the death of Elizabeth I, he would become king of England in 1603 and would be known as James I. In 1598, James I wrote *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, which historians have sectioned into four main points, which must be laid out to fully comprehend the political thought of the time. James I

¹⁶⁷ Michael P. Winship, "Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no.3 (Jul., 2006): 427.

¹⁶⁸ Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 189. Bonomi talks extensively about the challenges to the notion of divine right in England in the years running up to the Revolution. The colonists in New England were not alone in their rejection, or at least skepticism, of this idea. Many British Whigs, such as Edmund Burke, joined the Americans in this criticism.

declared: “Monarchy was divinely ordained; hereditary right was indefeasible; kings were accountable to God alone; and non-resistance and passive obedience were enjoined by God.”¹⁶⁹ In a speech to Parliament he would declare, “The State of the Monarchie is the supremest thing upon the earth: For Kings are not onely God’s Lietenants upon earth, and sit upon God’s throne, but even by God himselfe they are called Gods.”¹⁷⁰ This assessment was predictable coming from a king on whose legitimacy rested on the idea of hereditary right and hereditary succession. His assessment proved to be the accepted view for the time, as evidenced by Parliament’s declaration that hereditary right was the legitimate means of monarchical succession. The declaration stated, “The king holdeth the kingdom of England by birth- right inherent, by descent from the blood royal, whereupon succession doth attend.”¹⁷¹

Not long after James I made these assertions, the doctrine of divine right received greater scrutiny. The cries against the doctrine took hold in the English world and served as the reality of Winthrop and the other Puritans when they arrived in Massachusetts. While the end result of this movement was the beheading of Charles I, and the brief rule of Cromwell’s Commonwealth, the new colony at Massachusetts Bay would operate

¹⁶⁹ J. H. Burns, *The Cambridge History of Political Thought 1450-1700*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 247. J.N. Figgis, *The Divine right of Kings*. (New York: Harper, 1965), 5-6. Although this work is quite old, with the original printed in 1896, it is still referenced quite often by publications as weighty as *The Cambridge History of Political Thought*.

¹⁷⁰ Glenn Burgess, “The Divine right of Kings Reconsidered,” *The English Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 425 (Oct., 1992), 837.

¹⁷¹ J.N. Figgis, *The Divine right of Kings* (New York: Harper, 1965), 138.

under a much different political system than the monarchal system in England.¹⁷²

A central tenant of Puritan and Calvinist political thinking was the assumption that the civil power ought to be limited, an idea which was diametrically opposed to the philosophy of both James I and Charles I. Unquestionably, the Puritans believed that governments ought to be limited in power. In his sermon, “Limitation of Government,” leading Puritan thinker John Cotton demonstrated the strict limits the Puritans believed should be placed on a government. This belief was rooted in Cotton’s theological Calvinism. His belief in the Calvinist Doctrine of man’s total depravity was on display when he stated: “No man would think what desperate deceit and wickedness there is in the hearts of men.” He believed that when men were given power, they were not likely to restrain themselves. He stated, “Let all the world learn to give mortall men no greater power then they are content they shall use, for use it they will: And unlesse they be better taught of God, they will use it.” He hoped this warning “may serve to teach ...the danger of allowing to any mortal man an inordinate measure of power.”¹⁷³

When speaking of power of the civil government, including that of the King, Cotton used language which would have been just as accepted by Enlightenment thinkers as by New England Puritans. He stated, “It is therefore fit for every man to be studious of the bounds which the Lord hath set: and for the people, in whom fundamentally all power lyes, to give as much power as God in his word gives to men: and it is meat that

¹⁷² Gorgon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History*, 92.

¹⁷³ John Cotton, “Limitation of Government,” n.d. in *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: and Other Puritan Sermons*, ed. by Mary Carolyn Waldrep (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2005), 3.

magistrates in the commonwealth, and so officers and churches should desire to know the utmost bounds of their own power.” Cotton’s commitment to the principle that the people ultimately controlled their government demonstrates the uniqueness of the colonial New England political system.¹⁷⁴

When King Charles I granted the charter to allow the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, he placed the colony under the control of a governing board made up of the governor, John Winthrop, a deputy governor, Thomas Dudley, and an eleven-member Court of Assistance. Just months after the founding of the colony, Winthrop and the rest of the colony’s governing board made a decision that forever changed the Western political world. Winthrop and board gave every “freeman” in the colony the right to vote and supervisory power over the colony.¹⁷⁵ B. Katherine Brown argued that this was actually a greater number of men than is normally reported and that “. Massachusetts was not as aristocratic, as undemocratic, as we have been led to believe.”¹⁷⁶

What is even more noteworthy is that the stockholders of the company were under no obligation to allow these men to vote. This was the first time in the British Empire that men, even with the caveat that they be “freemen” were immediately granted voting rights upon the establishment of a new colony. This idea, of expanded suffrage became a

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷⁵ Michael P. Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” 443-444.

¹⁷⁶ B. Katherine Brown, “Freemanship in Puritan Massachusetts,” *The American Historical Review* 59, no. 4 (Jul., 1954), 875, 882-883.

bedrock principle on which modern political thought is built.¹⁷⁷

While politically this was a monumental decision, it must have been a natural step for the board to make. The Puritan idea that the church should influence civil life was certainly on display in this instance. In fact, Winthrop had already done something just like this while he helped lead the church at Groton when he still lived in England, where he, as acting patron of the church, gave up his right to appoint the minister on his own. Instead, he turned this decision over to the congregation.¹⁷⁸ While it has been suggested that Winthrop may have felt pressure to allow the men of Massachusetts Bay to vote, there surely would have been no such pressure from the congregants of the Groton church. Surely, this points to the fact that he and the other members of the church thought it proper to have the congregation have some power of self-determination, and may explain why Winthrop did not see the action taken at Massachusetts as particularly noteworthy.¹⁷⁹

From the birth of this new ideology, it was clear that the fingerprints of John Calvin covered the political ideas of his followers. These American colonists were quickly influenced by Calvinistic thinking and theology not just in religious terms, but also in their ideas about the crown. In his article, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” Michael Winship correctly shows that this was an

¹⁷⁷ Michael P. Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” 444.

¹⁷⁸ Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, 78.

¹⁷⁹ Michael P. Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” 444.

outgrowth of their Puritanism. While Winship attributes these ideas to the fear of the monolithic nature of the Anglican Church, he misses a key point in the theology of these early Puritans.¹⁸⁰

While it may be true that the fear of the Anglican Church was certainly on the minds of these Puritans, Winship ignores the long-standing practice of Calvinists electing their spiritual leaders. John Calvin himself declared “only election by the people’s consent flows from divine right.”¹⁸¹ He also attacked the idea of succession as faulty unless each successor “conserve safe and uncorrupted the truth of Christ which they have received from their fathers’ hands, and abide in it.”¹⁸² Of course, when one considers Calvin’s view of human nature in this light, it is easy to see why he looked down upon succession, be it hereditary or through position, in the church.¹⁸³

The new ideology of the Puritans demanded that truths found in the church must be brought into the public arena. When one examines the political thought and actions of the Puritans at Massachusetts Bay, it seems as if Calvin himself were leading the colony. As Columbia University’s Herbert Osgood claimed, “Calvin's Institutes was the chief

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 457.

¹⁸¹ John Calvin, vol. XXI of *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 1085.

¹⁸² Calvin, vol. XXI of *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1043.

¹⁸³ John Calvin, vol. XX of *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 248. To gain a full understanding of Calvin’s view of human nature, one must read in full his writing on the subject, found in chapter two of *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin described man as “defiled” and added “mankind deserved to be vitiated.” It is certainly clear that Calvin believed man was completely corrupt and unable to avoid sin and corruption. Clearly his followers were of the same mind.

religious and political textbook of the English Puritans.”¹⁸⁴ This ideas was widely accepted by historians in the early twentieth century and was supported by both George Bancroft and John Fiske. In his article “The Meaning of Freedom for George Bancroft and John Fiske,” Michael Clark described Bancroft’s view of Calvinism by saying:

He rejoiced, in his *History of the United States*, that while America was ‘the chief heir of the reformation in its purest form,’ it was also ‘the least defiled with the barren scoffings of the eighteenth century.’ Indeed, Calvinism was for Bancroft the primary fountainhead of American liberty. He praised John Calvin himself as ‘foremost among the most efficient of modern republican legislators,’ who had made Geneva ‘the impregnable fortress of popular liberty, the fertile seed-plot of democracy.’ The debt of America to the great reformer was clear.¹⁸⁵

Just as the Puritans had transferred the ideal of increased suffrage from the church to public life, so, too, would the Puritans opposition to hereditary rule burst into the political thinking of the colony. Calvin had argued that the arbitrary transfer of power in the Catholic Church led to both doctrinal distortions and had reduced “Christ’s sacred bride” to “a foul harlot.”¹⁸⁶ As can be seen in the colony at Massachusetts Bay, positions were not simply handed out. All civil and church power ruled at the consent of the governed just as had been implemented in Geneva and proscribed by Calvin.

The Puritans also adopted Calvin’s standards for leaders. Samuel Willard, a Puritan from the late-seventeenth century, demonstrated the commitment to Calvinist political philosophy in his sermon “The Character of a Good Ruler.” Willard, like all other Calvinists, believed that government was necessary due to the wickedness of man

¹⁸⁴ Herbert L. Osgood, “The Political Ideas of the Puritans,” *Political Science Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (Mar., 1891): 3.

¹⁸⁵ Clark, “The Meaning of Freedom for George Bancroft and John Fiske,” 61.

¹⁸⁶ Calvin, vol. XXI of *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1045.

and he argued that it was therefore necessary to elect moral and able leaders. The Puritans maintained the same standards for leaders that Calvin maintained in Geneva. Willard demanded that leaders must “love righteousness, and hate iniquity: that they be men of truth.” The Puritans, like Calvin did not separate the man from his office. They believed that “an unrighteous man will be an unrighteous ruler.”¹⁸⁷

Willard echoed Calvin’s teaching that rulers would ultimately answer to God for their actions while in a position of power. He explained, “He therefore that ruleth in the fear of God, is one who acknowledgeth God to be his sovereign, and carries in his heart an awful fear of him: who owns his commission to be from him, and expects ere long to be called to give an account of his managing of it: which maketh him to study in all things to please him, and to be afraid of doing any thing that will provoke him.”¹⁸⁸

It was also understood by Willard that rulers ought to be conscious of religious ideas when making laws. Like Calvin, he believed that laws made by civil government must align with scriptural standards. Willard also, like Calvin, reminded rulers that they ultimately served God and not man. He stated:

Although God doth not always peculiarly out a brannd in this world upon impious and unjust rulers, yet there is a tribunal before which they must stand e’re long as other men; only their account will be so much the more fearful, and condemnation more tremendous, by how much they have neglected to take their greater advantages to glorify GOD, and abused their power to His dishonour, by which they had a fairer opportunity than other men.¹⁸⁹

Like Luther, Calvin and Beza, the Puritans were concerned with the idea that their civil

¹⁸⁷ Samuel Willard, “The Character of a Good Ruler,” 117-119.

¹⁸⁸ Samuel Willard, “The Character of a Good Ruler,”

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 119, 122.

laws needed to stand up to scriptural scrutiny and they believed themselves responsible if they did not.

Shortly, democratic participation of the citizenry was the norm in Massachusetts. In time, this thinking became integral to the political ideology of Massachusetts and ultimately became driving force behind the American colonies' rebellion against England. If one can draw the conclusion that the Puritans influenced the American colonies with this democratic tradition, then it is not unthinkable to come to the conclusion that the Puritans at least played a small part in the political development of the Western world.

“We Had Absolute Power of Government”

As early as the late 1630's, it was clear that the government created in Massachusetts was unique in the English tradition, and was one of the most autonomous colonies in the English empire. It was also clear that the leaders as well as the people of the colony rejected hereditary rule as an illogical form of government that was likely to lead to tyranny.¹⁹⁰ Much of this opinion was based on Calvin's arguments for a mixed form of government and the sentiment expressed by Theodore Beza who stated that, “there has never been a single monarch (even if we take the best) who has not abused his office.”¹⁹¹ Because of this, an obvious question must be answered. Whom did the Puritans believe had the final say in government? To be more eloquent, in whom did the

¹⁹⁰ Michael P. Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” 446.

¹⁹¹ Michael P. Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill*, 25-26.

Puritans believe rested absolute authority?

By the late 1630's and early 1640's, the Puritans believed that they were able to operate largely independently from England and the crown. There is no clearer example of this as when John Winthrop declared, "by our Charter we had absolute power of Government." This was certainly true. Charles I had sent off his unhappy and quarrelsome subjects to a far distant continent with a charter that only limited the Puritans by stating that they were not allowed to make laws that were "repugnant to the lawes and statutes of...England."¹⁹²

It is hard to imagine that the Puritans thought that they were making any laws that would be "repugnant" to the laws of England, especially when it is considered that the General court later said that the laws of the colony were based on English common law, which in turn was based on "the Lawe of God & of Right Reason."¹⁹³ Of course, the Puritans saw themselves as God's elect and sought to do his will which would have placed them outside of doing anything to reject the law of God. This left one logical conclusion to some of the Puritans; it was necessary to be separate from the crown. At this juncture, it is important to make a clarification. These Puritans were not suggesting that a war of independence be fought with the crown, or that a formal declaration of separation be issued; rather some thought it a logical conclusion that they were already

¹⁹² Michael P. Winship, "Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity," 447. As Winthrop includes in his footnotes, the charter did state that the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay colony did have "absolute power" over all the people of the colony.

¹⁹³ Michael P. Winship, "Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity," 448.

free from England. Much of this sentiment stems from the fact that England had, for the most part, left the American colonies alone. They were allowed to develop their own form of government without impediment. Levy their own taxes, and write their own laws. It is no wonder that some of the Puritans thought of themselves as a free state.

It is also easy to see why the colony at Massachusetts Bay had been left to its own devices. As the colony was springing up, England was experiencing one of the most tumultuous times in her illustrious history. In the early 1640's, England's parliamentarians were rising up against Charles I, who certainly was much less concerned about the political climate in Massachusetts than the Scottish, to whom he was about to surrender.¹⁹⁴ Following Charles I's execution, Cromwell's commonwealth was also was unable to attend to the colonies.¹⁹⁵ From the regicide of Charles I to the restoration of Charles II, the Puritans were left in New England with little to interfere in their worship and governance of the colony. After the restoration of Charles II and his attempt to regain control of Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritans still largely controlled the political and ecclesiastic nature of the colony.¹⁹⁶ This led to a situation which Edmund Burke, when speaking in 1775 in the House of Commons against the war with the colonists, admitted,

¹⁹⁴ The Official Website of the British Monarchy, "Charles I," The Royal Household, <http://www.royal.gov.uk/historyofthemonarchy/kingsandqueensoftheunitedkingdom/thestuart/charlesi.aspx> (accessed October 24, 2013).

¹⁹⁵ Herbert L. Osgood, "England and the Colonies," *Political Science Quarterly*, 2, no. 3 (Sep., 1887): 444.

¹⁹⁶ John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism*, 279-280.

I know that the colonies in general owe little or nothing to any care of ours, and that they are not squeezed into the happy form by the constraints of watchful and suspicious government, but that, through wise and salutary neglect, a generous nature has been suffered to take her own way to perfection.¹⁹⁷

It was this very salutary neglect that led Puritan colonists such as Thomas Shepard to argue that Massachusetts was a “free state” during the 1640s and John Cotton to argue that the people had the power to “subvert the commonwealth.”¹⁹⁸ Under these conditions, it is easy to see how the colonists had come to this conclusion. Seeing as the king had granted the colony political autonomy, allowed them to develop their own political system and never assert control over that political system, how could the Puritans have arrived at any conclusion other than that Massachusetts was free to rule itself, so long as it was operating within the bounds of the English legal system. This was not unique to Massachusetts. However, it did allow the Puritans in Massachusetts to form a government which conformed to their theological and political preferences. While Winship establishes that “Whether Massachusetts was a full-blown sovereign republic was a matter of debate rather than a settled conclusion, but the colony could not be likened to an incorporated English town. Massachusetts was a deliberate, if tentative, exercise in republican state formation.”¹⁹⁹

It was also under these conditions that the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay Colony

¹⁹⁷ Edmund Burke, *Conciliation with the Colonies: The Speech by Edmund Burke*, ed. Robert Andersen (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1896), 19.

¹⁹⁸ Michael P. Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” 450; John Cotton to Lord Say and Seal as quoted in Edmund S. Morgan, *Puritan Political Ideas*, 167.

¹⁹⁹ Michael P. Winship, “Godly Republicanism and the Origins of the Massachusetts Polity,” 450.

drafted the 1641 *Massachusetts Body of Liberties*. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay quickly moved to ensure that their civil liberties would be protected. The *Body of Liberties* would codify many of the protections the Puritans strived for in Continental Europe and England. In this document, much of the reformed vision for government was realized. Property rights were defined as well as the rights of the accused. Women, children and even animals were protected from abuse. Women were even allowed to own property. Men and women were afforded some political rights. Men in good standing with the church were able to vote and serve on juries. Women, like men, were granted free speech rights and were able to speak at town meetings or in court.²⁰⁰

The greatest link between the reformers and the government which was established in New England was the link of the covenant government. The Puritans of New England carried with them the ideas of other European Calvinists, most notably Beza and the Scottish reformers, concerning the covenant between the people and their government. These New England Puritans believed that the civil government was responsible for three main tasks. Under this vision, the government was responsible for upholding the law, as long as the law squared with scriptural standards, protecting the liberties of the people, and for promoting the church's mission of continually reforming itself and the surrounding society. This vision of government clearly drew on the political philosophy which saw its beginning in Geneva under Calvin and Beza²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism*, 280-281, 283-2284.

²⁰¹ Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early and Modern Calvinism*, 287, 297.

Conclusion

John Winthrop led his small group of Puritans from England to Massachusetts Bay, with purpose; to build a colony focused on and devoted to their faith. Theirs was not an exclusionary mission and, while the colony may seem closed to the modern reader with the requirement of church membership for voting, it resulted in a society that was remarkably politically inclusive for the time. This group of religious outcasts had laid the groundwork for an unprecedented political system which held those in authority accountable to the people, allowed all free men to be politically active, and which challenged the longest and most deeply held political theories in Europe. It is easy to see the fruit of the Puritans' political thinking throughout American history, with some of their thoughts still on the minds of modern Americans.

Unfortunately, the Puritans of early America are often portrayed as a prudish people who spurned pleasure and denounced those who did not. Although historians have worked to prove this untrue, this sentiment remains and continues to cloud the true history of this colony which did so much for the political development of the American colonies.²⁰² The Puritans of New England quite clearly upheld the ideals of political Calvinism and built upon the foundation laid by Reformation thinkers such as Calvin himself. With their clear commitment to a limitation on government power, a rejection of the Divine right of Kings and suffrage for a segment of the population, the Puritans of New England ought to be seen as the recipients of and promulgators of political Calvinism as laid out during the Reformation.

²⁰² Edmund Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," *The New England Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (Dec., 1942): 591-592.

CHAPTER 4

POLITICAL CALVINISM AND REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

In May of 1776, John Witherspoon asked that God would “grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable.”²⁰³ This intersection of religious and political liberty was paramount to those living in the colonies during the time of the American revolution. In fact, some ministers of the time, and later historians such as George Bancroft, made the claim that rebellion was just as much a religious decision as it was a political and ideological decision and that resistance to the crown was as much rooted in the ideas of the English Calvinists who landed at Plymouth and Massachusetts as it was in the Enlightenment.²⁰⁴ This chapter will examine whether the clergy of

²⁰³ Ellis Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991) 1:558. This work is a collection of primary sources and provides little commentary on the sermons.

²⁰⁴ Mark L. Sargent, “The Conservative Covenant: The Rise of the Mayflower Compact in American Myth,” *The New England Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (Jun., 1998): 250-251. David W. Noble, *The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), 19-20. For an example of a minister who rallied for independence but who fell outside of the Calvinistic theological tradition on several key points, but inside of the Congregational tradition, see Jonathan Mayhew’s work. See Jonathan Mayhew, “Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers.” in *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: Political Sermons of the Period of 1776*, 56. John Adams saw this essay as demonstrative of the

Revolutionary Era America were the developers of revolutionary thought, or if they were merely the instruments by which revolutionary ideas reached their parishioners. This chapter will argue that the most prominent and influential of the Revolutionary era clergy were essential in transmitting the political thought of the Reformation, by way of the Puritans, to the people of the future United States both before and during the American war for independence.

Religion before the Revolution

In England, a monumental political shift occurred not long after the original Puritans in New England left for the New World. The English Civil War, led by Puritan Oliver Cromwell and culminated with the regicide of Charles I, threw the British Isles into a decade long violent struggle between Cromwell's Roundheads and those loyal to the monarchy. The Civil War cast a long shadow over English politics and was detrimental to the influence of Calvinists in English politics.

In America, there was quite a different story. The Puritan movement in New England began to lose the early zeal it exhibited early in the seventeenth century rather quickly.²⁰⁵ By the 1660s, Puritan ministers were beginning to baptize children of parents who were not full members of the church. This marked a significant turning point in the history of the Puritan experiment in New England. While this "halfway covenant" did

religious influence on the American Revolution. For more on this essay, see chapter four of this thesis.

²⁰⁵ Cedric B. Cowing, *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution: Colonial Thought in the 18th Century*. (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971), 46.

represent a shift in ideas concerning church membership and the significance of visible sainthood, it was not a harbinger of decreasing influence of Puritan thought in New England politics. This middle period, in which religious zeal was noticeably lacking, would not last long. Through the work of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, the First Great Awakening would take hold of the colonies and once again place a premium on religious worship.²⁰⁶

The half measures of the halfway covenant and the liberalization of Puritan churches in New England by the children of the first Puritans in America would not be long lived. During the First Great Awakening, which occurred largely in the 1730s and 1740s, there was a renewed interest in Calvinist thought in the colonies, especially in New England among Congregationalists and through the backcountry of America by Presbyterians. Driven largely by the preaching of George Whitefield, Samuel Davies and Jonathan Edwards, the First Great Awakening was a thoroughly Calvinist affair. Through the work of Edwards and Whitefield, the First Great Awakening would take hold of the colonies and once again place a premium on religious worship.

This awakening would spark a new phase in American culture and faith. Some historians even see the Great Awakening as the starting point of the Revolution. One historian, William G. McLoughlin declared that the Great Awakening was “really the beginning of America’s identity as a nation-the starting point of the Revolution.”²⁰⁷ If

²⁰⁶ Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Norte Dame Press, 2005), 84.

²⁰⁷ Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 79; William G. McLoughlin, “The Role of religion in the Revolution: Liberty of Conscience and Cultural Cohesion in the New Nation,” in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson,

this assertion is true, than it is difficult to remove Calvinism from the discussion as a progenitor of American revolutionary thought. This chapter intends to prove that the political ideas promulgated by Calvinists, both in Europe and in America, did not die out with the first generation of Puritans in the New World and that through a thorough examination of Revolution era preaching, the ideological and theological principles of those first American Puritans, and ultimately the political ideals of the Reformation can be seen in the American Revolution.

The Politics of the Great Awakening

During the 1730s and 1740s, the Great Awakening was the most influential social movement in the American colonies. Unlike previous colonial movements, the awakening was truly an inter-colonial movement which brought together, at least in religious thought, many people in the disparate and diverse colonies. Led by Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, the awakening reignited interest in Calvinist Protestantism in the colonies. Unlike the “Old Lights” who occupied the pulpits before them, the “New Light” preachers of the Awakening called for a deeply personal conversion and drew great attention from Massachusetts to Georgia.²⁰⁸

eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 198. The quote originally appeared in McLoughlin’s essay but was found in Morrison’s book.

²⁰⁸ Hannah Schell and Daniel Ott, “Religious and Political Awakenings: The Revolution,” in *Christian Thought in America: A Brief History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2015), 55-57. Both Whitefield and Edwards were outspoken Calvinists. Whitefield was originally a member of John Wesley’s “Holy Club” at Oxford. Although he and the Wesley brothers, both Charles and John, maintained contact, their theological convictions drew them apart. Whitefield’s embrace of

During the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards would rise to prominence in both America and in England. While he certainly was first and foremost a preacher and religious figure, Edwards also clearly demonstrated political ideas and a coherent political philosophy that stood alongside his religious teaching. Like John Calvin and the Puritans, his theology shaped his political thinking to a large degree. Edwards believed it necessary that for good governance to continue, government officials must necessarily “have the fear of God before their eyes.”²⁰⁹ In this, he echoed both Calvin and the Puritan’s belief that the government served alongside the church in carrying out the building of God’s kingdom.

Edwards also laid out those things that the people ought to guard against. Also like Calvin and the Puritans, Edwards held to a belief that the people had a right to defend both their political rights as well as their right to worship. Like other reformed thinkers before Edwards, he emphasized the responsibility the people had to obey God and therefore fulfill the covenant they had with Him. Aside from speaking of the people’s responsibility to God, Edwards also spoke about the way in which the people ought to behave with regard to their political rights. In a sermon which focused on I Kings 4:29, Edwards drew lessons for his parishioners from the writings of Solomon. The passage reads, “For the transgression of a land many are the princes thereof: but by a man of

Calvinism placed a wedge between the Methodists in the early years, with Wesley’s view winning out in the end within Methodist circles.

²⁰⁹ Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon: “The State of Public Affairs” (1731–32)," In *The Other Jonathan Edwards: Selected Writings on Society, Love, and Justice*, ed. Gerald McDermott and Ronald Story (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 54.

understanding and knowledge shall the state thereof be prolonged.”²¹⁰ He also referenced the life of Solomon by quoting “And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the sea shore.”²¹¹ Of these two passages, Edwards said:

This is the calamity that is directly spoken of in the text: the state of public affairs of a land being in a changeable posture, whereby a people are exposed to lose those rights, privileges, and public blessings which they enjoy by virtue of the present establishment; when a people are threatened with being deprived of their ancient privileges either in whole or in part and put under a new form of government; when the case is such that it is doubtful what of their civil enjoyments shall be continued to them, whether they ben’t²¹² about to lose all their privileges or, if not what they shall not lose; when there are powerful enemies abroad that seek the eversion [turning inside out] of the state or enemies in a people’s own bowels that are carrying on plots and designs against the present establishment, that they may have the better opportunity to advance their private interest or the interest of a party that they are attached to, or do it out of spite to any person or parties that they are enemies to.²¹³

Here, Edwards placed himself well within the mainstream of Calvinist political thought. By leaving open the possibility of the people’s resisting a regime that would strip them of their “rights and privileges,” Edwards warns that they may lose these very rights “through their own imprudence and mismanagement.”²¹⁴ Here, like Calvin and the Puritans, Edwards places the responsibility of government on the shoulders of the people.

²¹⁰ Proverbs 28:2 KJV. As an interesting side note, by the time of Edwards the Geneva Bible was supplanted by the King James Version. It is also interesting to point out that the King James Version did little to stamp out the Calvinist strain of thinking that it was, at least in part, commissioned to impact.

²¹¹ I Kings 4:29 KJV

²¹² “Ben’t” was a commonly used contraction meaning “be not.”

²¹³ Edwards, "Sermon: “The State of Public Affairs” (1731–32)," 51.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 50-51.

Much like the Calvinist political thinkers before him, Edwards saw an implicit covenant between the people of any polity and their God. This covenant is clearly seen in a sermon that Edwards delivered on a day of fasting in 1729. A clear connection is found in Edward's sermon "Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery" between the people's obedience to God and God's dealing with the people. Edwards makes clear the connection between the actions of the government and God's judgment of the people when he states:

When wickedness and immorality is countenanced or winked at by those whose business it is to suppress it, viz. by the rulers of a people, either civil or ecclesiastical: when civil rulers don't take due care to make good laws against immorality or don't take due care to execute the laws, don't show a zeal against iniquities, are no terrors to evildoers; when the reins of civil government are let loose, and wicked men can be open and barefaced with impunity; ministers don't bear a testimony; and when ecclesiastical discipline is not upheld, but scandalous persons are allowed to come to the Lord's table and to enjoy other privileges of visible Christians. . . . When wickedness prevails amongst rulers, it argues a general corruption, because they follow example. When public affairs are wickedly managed, when rulers ben't faithful to the glory and honor of God and the interest of the people that they are set to rule over.²¹⁵

It is Edward's contention that if the people refuse to obey God, he will punish them. Edwards further states:

'Tis God's manner to bring calamities and misery upon a people in judgment for the prevalency of {wickedness amongst them}. 'Tis as God has threatened in his holy Word: God rewards a public righteousness with public rewards and punishes public iniquity with {public judgments}, which can be done only in this world. In another world, mankind will be rewarded and punished only as particular persons, for the bonds by which they are united in societies will then be dissolved. Though the guilt of all the sin that is in a nation lies upon particular persons, so that it will all be punished in another world, yet a people are punished as a people only in this world, though it may be with spiritual judgments. The prosperity or adversity

²¹⁵ Jonathan Edwards, "Sermon: "Sin and Wickedness Bring Calamity and Misery" (1729)," In *The Other Jonathan Edwards: Selected Writings on Society, Love, and Justice* (Amherst; Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015), 36.

of a people in this world is much more universally according to the prevalence {of wickedness amongst them} than {the wickedness} of a particular person.²¹⁶

Edward's even states that a person's sin is even weightier if they hold a position of power with the society, be that a position within the government or the church. Edwards explains by stating:

If men live wicked lives, the guilt of prevailing iniquity amongst the people among whom they dwell is in proportion to their influence, whether it comes by their being in offices civil or ecclesiastical, or whether it be by their riches, or their reputations for learning or wisdom, or their being of an extensive relation or acquaintance.²¹⁷

This sermon places Edwards squarely in line with other, earlier Calvinist political thinkers. Edwards's description of the covenantal relationship between a people and God echoes both Calvin and John Winthrop.

Edwards is interestingly placed, both historically and theologically. Born in British North America, Edwards is typically listed as one of the great early American thinkers and theologians. While he certainly did not think of himself as an American per se, his revivalist preaching and his Congregationalist/Puritan political thought had a distinctly American flavor. Earlier in this paper, the differences between Puritanism and Separatism, as found in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay were briefly explored. While Massachusetts Bay Colony and Plymouth colony merged many years prior to Edwards, it is with Edwards and the New England Congregationalists that these subtle differences truly disappeared. While the Puritans were by far the larger of the two groups, by

²¹⁶ Ibid., 39-40.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 40-41.

Edwards' day it is obvious that the Separatists' vision of locally controlled, independent churches with Calvinist theology had won out.²¹⁸

In Edwards, the convergence of three major strands in Calvinist political thinking, that were building from the very beginning of the Reformation, can be seen. The three major strands of thinking are that the authority of the civil power is limited, that the civil power and the people are responsible to God through a covenant and that the people have the right to influence the civil power through some form of democracy, however limited that may be. These three lines of thought became significant in the years preceding the war for independence and during the war. They also were motivating factors for many colonists who maintained the religiosity of the Great Awakening.

John Witherspoon's Lockean Calvinism

Possibly the most notable reformed ministers during the Revolutionary period were, by and large, Presbyterians. This was recognized at the time by those loyal to the king and was emphasized by Joseph Galloway, a Pennsylvania Tory who fled to England during the American Revolution. He stated that the Revolution was enabled by a "faction in New England...of the *congregational and presbyterian interest* throughout the

²¹⁸ Neil T. Dugre, "Church, State, and Commonwealth: The Transatlantic Puritan Movement in England and America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2017): 346. In his book *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill*, which is cited elsewhere in this paper, Michael Winship pushes the argument that the Pilgrims were far more important than previously thought. As Dugre points out in his article, Winship especially targets the arguments made by Perry Miller in his book *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* regarding the importance of the Pilgrims in early Massachusetts religious and political thought.

colonies.”²¹⁹ He described the Presbyterians as “a dangerous combination of men, whose principles of religion and polity were equally averse to those of the established Church and Government.”²²⁰ King George himself is reported to have called the Revolution a “Presbyterian Revolt.”²²¹

A Presbyterian minister who had a lasting impact on the rhetoric of the Revolution was Samuel Davies, a man who would have an impact before Witherspoon and also a man who would hold the post of President of Princeton before Witherspoon.²²² Many times Davies is noted for his extensive work for religious tolerance and his ministry to the black population of the colonies.²²³ Davies became quite well known in his time for his impassioned sermons during the French and Indian war in which he urged

²¹⁹ Throughout this paper, words which appear in the original documents with the antiquated long “s,” which is printed as “f,” will be spelled in the more modern spelling.

²²⁰ Joseph Galloway, in *Historical and Political Reflections on the Rise and Progress of the American Rebellion*, (London: G. Wilke, 1780), 54.

²²¹ Kevin Phillips, *The Cousins' Wars: Religion, Politics and the Triumph of Anglo-America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 92.

²²² David Barton, *Celebrate Liberty! Famous Patriotic Speeches and Sermons*, (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilder Press, 2003), 227. Barton's commentary is definitely biased and although he is not an impartial source, this work contains much information on obscure revolutionary era ministers. The commentary was used only for dates and has proven itself an excellent source for primary sources.

²²³ Aside from his preaching during the Seven Years War, and his Presidency at Princeton, Davies has been acknowledged as a minister who was dedicated to the cause of the Slave population in the South. While serving as a minister in Hanover County, Davies put great emphasis on the literacy of slaves. See also:

Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, *Religion in a Revolutionary Age*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 90; Jeffrey H. Richards, “Samuel Davies and the Transatlantic Campaign for Slave Literacy in Virginia.” *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography* 111, no. 4 (September 2003): 333-378; George William Pilcher, "Samuel Davies and the Instruction of Negroes in Virginia." *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography* 74, no. 3 (June 1966): 293-300.

his congregation to bear arms in the British struggle in western Pennsylvania.²²⁴ He had declared the struggle not only a patriotic one, but also as a duty of “courageous Christians.”²²⁵ This marked one of the first appearances of the rhetoric that would be preached from Presbyterian pulpits during the American Revolution.

Possibly the most notable of the Revolutionary era preachers was John Witherspoon. Witherspoon was born in Scotland in the year 1723.²²⁶ John Witherspoon was a dyed in the wool Calvinist. He came from a family of early Presbyterians and even had a grandfather who signed the resolution that linked the Scottish Kirk and the English Parliament through the Westminster Confession of Faith, published in 1646.²²⁷

As the eldest son of a minister, he seemed an obvious choice for a future minister. At the age of thirteen, Witherspoon was enrolled in Edinburgh University and was considered well on his way towards becoming a minister in the Presbyterian Church.²²⁸ Always a precocious child, John would receive a Master of Arts degree from the University of Edinburgh at the early age of sixteen. Today, this degree would be the equivalent of an undergraduate degree.²²⁹ The next step in Witherspoon’s education

²²⁴ Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 183.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 7.

²²⁷ Gideon Mailer, “Anglo-Scottish Union and John Witherspoon’s American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (October 2010): 709-710.

²²⁸ Collins, *President Witherspoon*, 12-13.

²²⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

would be a theology degree, also from Edinburgh. This course of study was completed in four years and resulted in Witherspoon's acceptance of a parish at the young age of twenty-two.²³⁰

After a lengthy tenure as a minister in his native Scotland, Witherspoon decided to become the president of The College of New Jersey, later known as Princeton University. During this time, Witherspoon was also elected to represent New Jersey in the Continental Congress. Witherspoon was perfectly readied for the role of statesman, having taught both moral philosophy and the principles of the Scottish Enlightenment at The College of New Jersey.²³¹

Witherspoon serves as a wonderful example of the influence held by notable ministers of the time. While his political sermons and philosophical writings surely influenced political thought in the colonies, Witherspoon also influenced some of the most important figures in American history while President of the College of New Jersey. While president of the institution now named Princeton, the Scottish minister would teach students as notable as James Madison and Aaron Burr.²³² He would also oversee the educations of "twelve members of the Continental Congress; five delegates to the Constitutional Convention; ... forty-nine U.S. representatives; twenty-eight U.S. senators; three Supreme Court justices; eight U.S. district judges; one secretary of state;

²³⁰ Collins, *President Witherspoon*, 20-21.

²³¹ Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Norte Dame Press, 2005), 48-49, 51.

²³² *Ibid.*, 4.

three attorney generals and two foreign ministers.” Also included were a host of state representatives and other government officials.²³³ Madison, who would later pen the U.S. Constitution, stayed an extra year at Princeton to study under Witherspoon after his graduation, seems to have been influenced greatly by the minister.²³⁴

Of course, as a minister, Witherspoon saw religion as even more important than politics. However, this does not mean that Witherspoon was only influenced by religious thought and writings. More than almost any other founder, Witherspoon can be regarded as a great moral philosopher. Possibly his greatest contribution was his bringing together the religious ideas of Calvin and the political ideas of John Locke. Locke is tied to and advocated the idea that man has natural rights. These rights were referenced in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence, which Witherspoon would sign. The influence of Locke’s political ideas is undeniable when one examines Witherspoon’s political writings. One of the best examples of this influence can be seen in Witherspoon’s second “Druid” essay. He states: “Wherever society exists founded upon clearly established laws, this obliges us to form an idea of a state previous to the formation of society, or before such, or any laws, were made and acknowledged to be in force. This is called a state of nature.”²³⁵ In the essay, he also states that the principles of the “*law of nature*...are to be derived from the state of nature or universal liberty.”²³⁶ As

²³³ Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 4

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5. Later in the same work, Morrison examines Witherspoon’s influence on Madison’s ideology.

²³⁵ John Witherspoon, *The Works of John Witherspoon* (Edinburgh: Ogle and Aikman et al., 1805), 9:234.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 235.

Jeffrey Morrison points out, “One could scarcely find a clearer rephrasing of Locke’s state of nature.”²³⁷ He would also mirror Locke’s definition of the social compact.²³⁸

Although these are only two examples, they strike directly at the heart of Locke’s political theory.

Witherspoon also was firmly within the tradition of political Calvinism. John Calvin, whose thought was and remains central to Presbyterian and Reformed theology, was much less radical and even supported many aspects of the “divine right” argument, although he did admit that “all persons, young and old, love liberty.”²³⁹ This could have played a role in Witherspoon’s hesitation to immediately throw in with those patriots who wished to overthrow the crown from the beginning. Calvin would even go as far as declaring that earthly rulers were “equipped with divine authority, in fact they stand in the place of God and in a certain sense conduct his affairs.”²⁴⁰ In fact Calvin did not overtly endorse one form of government over any others.

However, Calvin did not mean that the civil government had free reign over the people God had given this ruler. The ruler was constrained by many factors that would ultimately render that sovereign to act as nothing more than God’s servant on earth. If the ruler were to break from the mandate given to him, the legitimacy of that ruler could

²³⁷ Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 123.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

²³⁹ Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 80.

²⁴⁰ Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*. (Philadelphia: Lutterworth Press, 1956), 230-231.

disappear.²⁴¹ Of course, this clashed with James I's assertion that hereditary right is infeasible and that there was no avenue for resisting the king.

Calvinist resistance theory rested on the idea that the magistrate is the vehicle by which a government ought to be resisted. Calvin stated that magistrates are "appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings" and were not to "betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance."²⁴²

Witherspoon followed this same line of thinking during the American Revolution.

Witherspoon argued that the Revolution was not a power grab by a monied elite and was also not a mob action. Rather, the Revolutionary cause worked through the means of elected officials, or magistrates, to use Calvin's terminology. Even before the American Revolution, Witherspoon was using language to describe Congress which was reminiscent of Calvin's description of the magistrate. In a 1774 essay entitled "Thoughts on American Liberty," Witherspoon described Congress as "the representative of the great body of the people of North America." He then asserts that "It is...an appeal to the great law of reason, the first principles of the social union, and the multitude collectively, for whose benefit all of the particular laws and customs of a constituted state, are supposed to have been originally established."²⁴³ It is only through this body that Witherspoon believes the colonists should resist the king. This is a clear demonstration of

²⁴¹ Ibid., 240-241.

²⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, 1519.

²⁴³ Witherspoon, *The Works of John Witherspoon*, 9:73-74.

Calvinist resistance theory, which relied on the magistrate, in this case the elected congress, to oppose the king when he trampled on their rights.

It is perhaps in his sermon “Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” which he delivered in May of 1776, where the clearest expression of Witherspoon’s commitment to political Calvinism can be seen. Witherspoon opens the sermon with a recounting of the doctrines of God’s sovereignty and the depravity of man. He states, “Nothing can be more absolutely necessary to true religion, than a clear and full conviction of the sinfulness of our nature and state. Without this there can be neither repentance in the sinner, nor humility in the believer. Without this all that is said in scripture of the wisdom and mercy of God in providing a Saviour, is without force and without meaning.”²⁴⁴ Witherspoon opens the sermon with a defense of Calvinist religious orthodoxy.

Witherspoon then spends much time describing how the persecution of earlier believers, and especially Protestants, drove the Gospel into lands where it had never been.²⁴⁵ He then turns to the issue at hand. He states, “You are all my Witnesses, that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season however, it is not only lawful but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in

²⁴⁴ John Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men” in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era: 1730-1805*, ed. Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991), 535.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 543-544. Witherspoon also seems to endorse the regicide of Charles I by using it as an example of “providence” and by saying that Oliver Cromwell and Mr. [John] Hampden were “The two most remarkable persons in the civil wars... one of them was the soul of the republican opposition to monarchical usurpation during the civil wars, and the other in the course of that contest, was the great instrument in bringing the tyrant to the block.”

arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature.” He further states that “our civil and religious liberties...depend on the issue.”²⁴⁶

Witherspoon then states that he believes that if the colonies were not to act, they would jeopardize their religious liberty and, ultimately, their ability to worship God as they saw fit. He also argues that the government of Britain overstepped their bounds and was attempting to seize power for itself. He states:

I am satisfied that the confederacy of the colonies, has not been the effect of pride, resentment, or sedition, but of a deep and general conviction, that our civil and religious liberties, and consequently in a great measure the temporal and eternal happiness of us and our posterity, depended on the issue. The knowledge of God and his truths have from the beginning of the world been chiefly, if not entirely, confined to those parts of the earth, where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen, and great were the difficulties with which they had to struggle from the imperfection of human society, and the unjust decisions of usurped authority. There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.²⁴⁷

Witherspoon here argues that the religious liberty which the people enjoy, is linked with the political liberty the colonies were seeking in the struggle with England. He also singles out “usurped authority” as an opponent of “the knowledge of God and his truths.” Here, Witherspoon weds the “temporal” liberty of the people with “the truly infinite importance of the salvation of your souls.”²⁴⁸

In this sermon, Witherspoon moves between the language of a Calvinist and a Lockean philosopher quite adeptly. Witherspoon’s opening dialogue places him squarely

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 549.

²⁴⁷ John Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” 549.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 545.

within Calvinist orthodoxy and his political reasoning drifts between Lockean Liberalism and covenantal, political Calvinism. After the war, Witherspoon again displayed his agreement with political Calvinism when he argued that the magistrate was responsible for suppressing evil and ought to be “a terror to evil doers.”²⁴⁹

Other sources also demonstrate that many believed that there was a confluence of Lockean political thought and Calvinist thought during the revolutionary period. One such source is a political cartoon driving an Anglican bishop back onto his ship and ultimately, back to England. The crowd holds signs which state “No Lords Spiritual or Temporal in New England,” and Liberty and Freedom of Conscience.” They also hold up a sign which says simply, “Locke.” Also, a book entitled “Calvin’s works” is being through at the bishop.

²⁴⁹ Gideon Mailer, “HOW FAR THE MAGISTRATE OUGHT TO INTERFERE IN MATTERS OF RELIGION,” 312.



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In his sermon “Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” Witherspoon showed that he was also pragmatic, and not unwilling to stress Lockean principles more than Calvin when the audience was more receptive to liberal political thought.²⁵¹ To Witherspoon, this would not have been a contradiction, but rather a logical connection between Lockean thought and Calvin. Jeffrey H. Morrison, author of *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* makes this very argument. He says, “That a reasonably sophisticated moral philosopher such as Witherspoon was able to harmonize the basic tenets of Reformed political theory with those of an English liberal such as

²⁵⁰ *An Attempt to Land a Bishop in America*. Engraving from the Political Register. London: September, 1769. John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, Providence, RI. www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/f0304.jpg. (8/4/20).

²⁵¹ Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 91.

Locke suggests that the latter may indeed have been a carrier of Puritan political theory.”²⁵²

Ultimately, John Witherspoon was, at his very core, a Calvinist. He would hold to the religious doctrines taught by Calvin, but would blend those ideas with Locke’s liberalism. This blending would result in a new era of political thought by Americans who adhered to Reformed Protestant Christianity. Witherspoon, who also introduced many aspects of Scottish Enlightenment thought to America, would influence both intellectual ministers and the layperson with his ability to show the connection between protecting civil liberties and protecting religious liberties.²⁵³

It is perhaps in his instruction of James Madison that Witherspoon saw his greatest influence. During his time at Princeton, Madison seems to have adopted Witherspoon’s Calvinist view of human nature and the need to restrain that nature. Jeffrey Morrison points out that Madison displayed a nearly identical position as Witherspoon on the issue of religious liberty, as well as a “Calvinist realism” which permeated his writing. Madison went so far as to describe human nature by saying, “There is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust.”²⁵⁴

²⁵² Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 82.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

It is in his view of nature that Madison's overlap with political Calvinism can be most clearly seen. In a sermon on Galatians 3:19-20, Calvin is expounding on the text "Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions."²⁵⁵ On this text, Calvin said:

For we know there were laws and statutes made among men, according to the vices that had need to be redressed. If all men were Angels, so as there were nothing out of square, but every man behaved himself well of his own accord, so as there needed no amendment: then were Laws to no purpose at all. What is the cause then that we have need of so many laws and statutes? The naughtiness of men, because they cease not to rush out into all evil, and therefore remedy is fain [obliged] to be provided for it: like as if there were no diseases, there should need no physic: but men's unruliness causeth diseases, and therefore remedies must needs be provided. So then seeing that men have need to be bridled and as it were retrained, it is a sure record that they are bent to all evil, and utterly forward of their own nature.²⁵⁶

Madison's language in *Federalist No. 51* so closely resembles that of Calvin that it is difficult to imagine Madison not having Calvin, or at least a Calvinist understanding of human nature, in mind. When writing as to the purpose of the law, Madison states:

It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices [checks and balances] should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ Gal. 3:19 ESV

²⁵⁶ John Calvin, *Sermons on Galatians* (Albany, OR: Books For The Ages, 1998), 306. http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-7/LIBRARY/CALVIN/CAL_SGAL.PDF (Accessed August 8, 2020).

²⁵⁷ James Madison, "The Federalist No. 51: THE STRUCTURE OF THE GOVERNMENT MUST FURNISH THE PROPER CHECKS AND BALANCES BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT DEPARTMENTS." in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Shapiro Ian, by HAMILTON ALEXANDER, MADISON JAMES, JAY JOHN, Dunn John, Horowitz Donald L., and Botting Eileen Hunt, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009),

While Madison may not have been a committed theological or political Calvinist, a Calvinist strain of thinking can be seen in his defense of the then new, American political system. This influence of John Witherspoon is clearly seen in *Federalist No. 51*. Douglas Adair goes so far as to say that Madison drew on Witherspoon on several occasions in his writing. This influence over the young Madison certainly should be held as one of Witherspoon's crowning achievements.²⁵⁸

Conclusion

John Witherspoon's contribution to the American cause would come mainly in the form of blending the liberal ideology of Locke with political Calvinism. Even with his service to the Continental Congress and his training of many future political leaders, Witherspoon's assertion that "There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entirely," would become the American ideology among many ministers who would also speak out for American independence.²⁵⁹

Although ignored, or minimized by many modern historians, the political philosophy which emanated from the Reformation, and Geneva in particular, played a large role in shaping the political philosophy which led to the American Revolution. As John Adams remembered, "the pulpits...thundered" during the war for independence and forcefully argued for separation from England.²⁶⁰ Alongside Lockean liberalism,

²⁵⁸ Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, 38-40.

²⁵⁹ Witherspoon, "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," 549.

Calvinist resistance theory ought to be regarded as one of the forces which led to the formation of American political thought and to the revolutionary ideas which led to separation from England.

²⁶⁰ John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, Charles Francis Adams, editor (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), Vol. III, p. 476, "The Earl of Clarendon to William Pym," January 20, 1766.

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