
Calvin on War

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John Calvin is unique among the leaders of the Reformation for his teachings on the sovereignty of God. While Martin Luther held firm to providence and God's active role in creation, Calvin underscored the thought that mankind remained entirely at the mercy and will of the Lord in every aspect of life. Scholars continue to label Calvin's instruction as centred on God's *sovereignty*, while Luther's teachings focused more on God's *mercy*.

Calvin viewed God's omnipresence as a fundamental part of daily affairs. He vehemently taught that the Lord still punished darkness through famines, diseases, disasters, and wars. John Knox, the Scottish Reformer who learned under Calvin, became known for carrying a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other. It is fair to remark that Knox's approach to reform was a bit more aggressive than that of Calvin. However, Calvin was not a pacifist, and he asserted that God preordained war and used it to bring judgment upon sin.

Calvin's teachings on war centred on providence, sovereignty, and judgment – doctrines that Christians have used throughout history to justify entrance into conflicts. In Calvin's teachings, he always emphasized holiness and godly living. This led to another justification for war – protecting or defending humanity. This article examines Calvin's instruction and views on war and determines when humanity should enter such a conflict. Further, within the Christian worldview, warfare obviously connects to judgment and sin, two issues that Calvin affirmed resulted in deadly clashes and encounters. Strongly adhering to the idea of providence, Calvin felt that no event in human history occurred outside the will of God.

I. Providence: A Justification for War

Both Oliver Cromwell and Stonewall Jackson openly embraced Calvin's teachings and shared similar sentiments regarding war. Jackson notably

felt a sense of comfort knowing that any involvement in warfare was at the will of God. When choosing to take up arms in the U.S. Civil War, Jackson maintained that his actions were justified as his nation (the Confederacy) was being invaded by the Union. Holding firmly to providence, Jackson once said:

Captain, my religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed. God has fixed the time for my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready, no matter when it may overtake me ... Captain, that is the way all men should live, and then all would be equally brave.¹

Cromwell highlighted God's sovereignty and providence and argued that any victory or defeat was simply God's will. He penned, 'God made them as stubble to our swords. We charged their regiments of foot with our horse and routed all we charged. The particulars I cannot relate now; but I believe, of twenty thousand the Prince hath not four thousand left. Give glory, all glory, to God.'² Both generals clearly adhered to divine providence and notably referred to themselves as Calvinists, with Jackson as a Presbyterian church member and Cromwell as a leading Puritan. Within the tenets of Calvinism, the critical teaching of providence is present. Joel Beeke quoted Calvin: 'Chance, blind fate, bad luck, and coincidences are pagan notions.'³ Adhering to divine providence in correlation to warfare inarguably positions a comfort-level of peace when the focalization is on God and not man.

To examine Calvin's position on warfare, it is imperative first to acknowledge his stance on providence. James Henley Thornwell wrote on providence:

In the calumniated doctrine of a universal Providence, extending to all events and to all things, the only depositary of real efficiency and power, we find the true explanation of an activity which is neither casual in its origin nor a dependent link in an endless chain ... In God we live and move and have our being ... He speaks and it is done. He commands and it stands fast.⁴

Thornwell, a Calvinist himself, noted that nothing occurred on earth separate from the will and preordination of God. God and his decree

¹ John D. Imboden (CSA), 'Incidents of the First Bull Run', in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. 1 (1887), p. 238.

² Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné, *The Protector* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1997), p. 53.

³ Joel Beeke, *Calvin on Sovereignty, Providence & Predestination* (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2020), p. 17.

⁴ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, Volume 3: Theological & Controversial* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), p. 94.

determined the fate of all events, leaving no room for chance or man-made occurrences. Calvin wrote on providence: 'The thing to be proved, therefore, is, that single events are so regulated by God, and all events so proceed from his determinate counsel, that nothing happens fortuitously.'⁵ Writing further, Calvin argued:

The Christian, then, being most fully persuaded, that all things come to pass by the dispensation of God, and that nothing happens fortuitously, will always direct his eye to him as the principal causes of events, at the same time paying due regard to inferior causes in their own place. Next, he will have no doubt that a special providence is awake for his preservation, and will not suffer anything to happen that will not turn to his good and safety.⁶

This statement summed up Calvin's position on the doctrine, let alone all events correlated to world affairs, including warfare. In Calvin's eyes, humanity, at the mercy and will of God, plays a role in providential events through the acts of warfare. Providing an example of God's actions with creation, Calvin conveyed:

By his command, the heaven becomes as hard as iron, the crops are destroyed by mildew and other evils, that storms and hail in devastating the fields, are signs of sure and special vengeance ... but when God himself threatens living creatures with famine, does he not plainly declare that they are all nourished by him, at one time with scanty, at another with more ample measure?⁷

Regardless of the calamity – warfare or another disaster – Providence was at work. In order to understand warfare, one must first profess that God was not only providential in his dealings but also performed all actions in a just and righteous manner.

Whether it was a devastating disaster or a global conflict, Calvin felt that God used such measures for judgment, and exercised his sovereign control over creation. Disastrous occurrences also made creation humble themselves and seek the mercy of God. One especially important doctrine is the use of prayer in connection with such catastrophes. Calvin wrote: 'The same conviction keeping us free from rashness and false confidence

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), p. 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

will stimulate us to constant prayer, while at the same time filling our minds with good hope; it will enable us to feel secure, and bid defiance to all the dangers by which we are surrounded.⁸ Such confidence earned Thomas Jackson his nickname of *Stonewall*; when engaged in enemy fire, Jackson exercised bravery that came about because of his sincere Christian beliefs and adherence to the doctrine of providence. If a Christian engaged in battle and surrendered to the notion that God knew best, this also reassured him of providence and comfort. Calvin explained such a logic:

His [Christian] mind will always be fixed on the providence of God alone, and no consideration of present circumstances will be allowed to withdraw him from the steady contemplation of it. Thus Joab, while he acknowledges that the issue of battle is entirely in the hand of God, does not therefore become inactive but strenuously proceeds with what belongs to his proper calling. ‘Be of good courage’, said he, ‘and let us play the men for our people, and for the cities of our God; and the Lord do that which seemeth him good’ (2 Sam. 10:12).⁹

While Reformers such as Calvin inarguably frowned upon the violence and death surrounding war, such conflicts are a reality in a fallen world. Jesus acknowledged the existence of war, teaching that war was inevitable (Matthew 24:6–14). Calvin taught that military engagements, like all other calamities, bring Christians to their knees, seeking heavenly wisdom from God, while reminding unbelievers that life is at the mercy of God. Calvin believed that the ideas of Providence and of warfare are inseparable. The doctrine also underscores the concept that even if a person were to die in battle, if that soldier was a Christian, he entered heaven with his Saviour. This teaching not only provided a sense of solace and understanding but also combated fear, as seen in the bravery of Jackson and Cromwell.

II. Defence: A Justification for War

Outside of submitting to providence, Calvin maintained that humanity needed to defend life, even if it meant taking up the sword. Similar to today, opinions on warfare differed during the Reformation. The Anabaptists held a reputation of being against war, most likely citing Matthew 26:52, which says, ‘Then said Jesus unto him, Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword’ (Matt. 26:52). In more recent history, countries such as the United States and Britain have

⁸ Ibid., p. 130.

⁹ Ibid.

allowed conscientious objectors to refrain from military obligations, citing their religious beliefs and convictions.

Calvin commented on Matthew 26:52 by saying, 'We ought to attend to the threatening of punishment which is immediately added; for men did not, at their own pleasure, appoint this punishment for avenging their own blood; but God himself, by severely prohibiting murder, has declared how dearly he loves mankind.'¹⁰ Calvin accurately highlights the fact that God prohibits murder (Exodus 20:13, Deuteronomy 5:17), and that man is created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). According to Israelite law, murder was a grave sin, leading to the death penalty. Calvin suggests that if humans were responsible for morality, those with malicious intentions would seek revenge and commit murder fuelled by hatred. Calvin posed, 'Is it never lawful to use violence in repelling unjust violence?'¹¹ He answered:

For though Peter had to deal with the wicked and base robbers, still he is condemned for having drawn the sword. If, in such a case of moderate defence, an exception was not allowed, Christ appears to tie up the hands of all ... Yet I shall now state my opinion ... Thus in every case when defence is made against unjust violence, the punishment which God enjoins earthly judges to carry into execution ceases ... In order that a man may properly and lawfully defend himself, he must first lay aside excessive wrath, hatred, and desire of revenge, and all irregular sallies of passion, that nothing tempestuous may mingle with the defence.¹²

Calvin acknowledged self-defence as a means of entrance into war. He warned particularly of the motives and intentions of humanity in engaging in such actions, notably confessing that evil can lie upon mankind in a manner of vengeance, which underscores his thoughts on Peter's actions in defending Jesus from capture. Calvin explained: 'It will sometimes happen, indeed, that men addicted to the shedding of blood are punished by other means.'¹³ Here, Calvin stresses that the mindset of Christians when being engaged in battle is of great importance. Does hatred, vengeance, and evil derive from the heart? If so, Christians who neglect to eliminate hatred, vengeance, and evil from their hearts are guilty of sin, and God may punish them for their wrongdoing. He taught, 'Whether punishments are to be inflicted, they must not be borne headlong by

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XVII* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 244.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 245.

¹³ Ibid.

anger, nor hurried away by hatred, nor burn with implacable severity.¹⁴ Quoting Augustine, he wrote: ‘Even pity a common nature in him in whom they punish an individual fault’; or ‘whether they have to take up arms against an enemy, that is, an armed robber, they must not readily catch at the opportunity, no, they must not take it when offered, unless compelled by the strongest necessity.’¹⁵

In the history of warfare, Christians have regularly defended entrance into war, especially in cases of ‘defence’. During the U.S. Civil War, Presbyterian minister R. L. Dabney took such a position, writing, ‘Our homes and the shelter of our families, the rights and all our fellow-citizens, everything which is included as valuable in the words, my country, is committed to his protection.’¹⁶ After becoming converted to the faith, Stonewall Jackson regularly explained that he would never engage in another conflict after his service in the Mexican-American War unless it were a war of defence. He argued, ‘I trust that through the blessing of God, we shall soon be given an opportunity of driving the invaders from this region.’¹⁷ Note the term *invaders* underlining his position on the war.

During both World War I and World War II, Southern Baptist George W. Truett preached a similar sentiment. In defence of coming to the aid of humanity in the First World War, Truett preached:

If you and I were out here in the street and saw some bullying, braggart, boastful man trampling a helpless little woman or a helpless little child, and you and I should fold our hands and said, ‘I don’t believe in war, I don’t believe in interfering in other people’s business,’ and let the child be slaughtered and the woman destroyed, manhood has left us, that’s all. We have to have regard.¹⁸

Similarly, in World War II, he maintained:

We must find a way to end war, and our boys and girls going away now, to defend our country – as I think they ought to do – it’s a defensive war we’re waging. We’re not out for anybody’s land, we’re not out for anybody’s

¹⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 978.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ R. L. Dabney, ‘The Christian Soldier’ (sermon, College Church, VA, December 14, 1862).

¹⁷ Mary Anna Jackson, *Life and Letters of General Thomas J. Jackson* (1892; reprint, New York: Harper & Brothers, 2019), p. 107.

¹⁸ George Truett, ‘The Lord Reigneth’ (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, December 14, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed January 25, 2024).

territory, we're not out for anybody's lust of gold: we're out for the defense of our homes, and civil government is ordained of God and every man and woman should be the best citizen possible, throwing off never on the great duties of citizenship.¹⁹

Recognizing the fact that not only was humanity created in the image of God, but that Jesus' instruction to his followers to 'love thy neighbour' (Matthew 22:39) allows for the interpretation to defend humanity in the acts of warfare. In Dabney's and Jackson's case, they felt that an opposing army invaded them. Truett felt that his nation was responsible for rescuing its fellow man and meeting evil head-on. Echoing the position of Truett, in a 1936 publication, the Presbyterian journal *Christianity Today* shared:

The distinction between wars of defense and wars of aggression should be clearly made. The statement frequently made by pacifists that 'all wars are wars of aggression' cannot be sustained by history. Despite the fact that some profited personally through our entrance into the World War [first] and some were most anxious for this even before it took place, the fact remains that our participation in that war was not prompted by a desire for territory, extension of power, or extension of markets.²⁰

Embracing these teachings of the Christian faith served as an apologetic tool to enter conflicts if it meant to deliver humanity from bondage. Seeking to justify war from vengeance or revenge is not possible. Calvin made this abundantly clear, 'Hence, as it is not lawful to usurp the office of God; it is not lawful to revenge; for we thus anticipate the judgment of God, who will have this office reserved for himself ... for if our petitions arise from a private feeling, and not from pure zeal produced by the Spirit, we do not make God so much our judge as the executioner of our depraved passion.'²¹ One can easily cross a dangerous boundary when entering warfare. The Christian is called to exercise the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), embrace and exercise forgiveness (Matthew 6:14), but also serve his fellow man (Mark 9:35). Calvin alluded to peace: 'Therefore, let's leave the thieves who are intent on collecting loot and the highway robbers bent on slitting

¹⁹ George Truett, 'Christ's Standard for Real Greatness' (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, January 24, 1943), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed January 25, 2024).

²⁰ L. Nelson Bell, 'Some Dangers in the Present Pacifist Movements', *Christianity Today*, March 1936, https://www.pcahistory.org/HCLibrary/periodicals/CT/1935-36/06-10_mar.pdf (accessed January 29, 2024).

²¹ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Volume XIX, pp. 471–473.

men's throats. But if we are Christians, let us remember that we have been called to all purity, innocence and holiness.²²

War is a reality in a fallen world, and Christians have long argued that the only hope any soul has is in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Saviour. During World War II, Christians such as Truett dreamed of Jesus being at the negotiation table of the conflict. Calvin argued that the principles of Jesus were the only prospect of peace in the world. J. H. d'Aubigné wrote of Calvin's thoughts:

The Word of God is the only power that can subdue the rebellion of our heart. There is a power in our fallen nature which revolts against divine truth, and which nothing human can overcome.²³

Calvin meticulously acknowledged that the justification of war should come only after exhausting all measures of negotiation and peace, and that these measures should be connected to the defence of humanity. He wrote, 'Assuredly all other means must be tried before having recourse to arms.'²⁴ Citing the role of governments (Romans 13, Colossians 1) and their place in God's sovereign plan, Calvin argued:

They must not allow themselves to be carried away by any private feelings, but be guided solely by regard for the public. Acting otherwise, they wickedly abuse their power which was given them, not for their own advantage, but for the good and service of others. On this right war depends the right of garrisons, leagues and other civil munitions. By garrisons, I mean those which are stationed in states for defences of the frontiers; by leagues, the alliances which are made by neighbouring princes, and the ground that if any disturbance arise within their territories, they will mutually assist each other, and combine their forces to repel the common enemies of the human race; under civil munitions, I include everything pertaining to military art.²⁵

It is evident that Calvin abhorred war. His writings proved as much, but he also determined that war was not only providential but part of the fallen nature of humanity. His teachings highlighted godly living and holiness in the Spirit, which, to him, tamed the soul of a warrior in battle. If the soldier

²² John Calvin, *God or Baal: Two Letters on the Reformation of Worship and Pastoral Service* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020), p. 126.

²³ Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné, *Let Christ Be Magnified: Calvin's Teachings for Today* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), p. 15.

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 978.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 978.

sought revenge or held hate within his heart, he sinned himself and faced discipline from God. While Calvin disliked the idea of warfare, he noted that it was justified in a defence-setting correlated to serving fellow man. In order for peace to prevail, humanity frequently confronted bondage and darkness through warfare.

III. Judgment: A Justification for War

Adhering to an omnipresent, omnipotent God is of the utmost importance in the Christian doctrine. The Scriptures teach of a just, loving, and active God who cares for his creation. The Bible also teaches that God loathes sin and lawlessness. Presbyterian minister R. C. Reed argued, 'In the case of those who are lost, God permits their self-destruction despite entreaties of his benevolence.'²⁶ One way God that showcases his judgment and sovereign control is through disasters such as warfare.

Writing more prominently on judgment versus defence regarding warfare, Calvin held that God preordained battles and military engagements to punish sin, rescue humanity from darkness, and demonstrate his majesty and control over creation. Calvin wrote:

He [God] bids us to live chastely and refrain from all violence. However, when wars break out in the world, when there is bloodshed and countless acts of rape, will we say when these occur that God failed in his counsel to consider what was right? Do we think that he would let fortune prevail, as if he were asleep in heaven, or was enjoying a delightful rest? What a blasphemous idea! It would be like making God into an idol ... If God did not determine everything in this world and keep Satan and all his evildoers in check, we would most certainly be doomed to perish a hundred times every minute of the day. Moreover, unless we realize that wars and similar things are judgments which God uses to punish our sins, we would surely not be brought to repentance.²⁷

According to Calvin, judgments serve as a reproof but also a realization that God has not abandoned his creation and will carry out justice to evildoers and sin. Known for his prominent teachings on sovereignty, Calvin stressed that warfare played out God's plan regardless of the outcome. On judgment, he argued, 'The reprobate are brought under the lash of God, they begin in a manner to pay the punishment due to his

²⁶ R. C. Reed, *The Gospel as Taught by Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 122.

²⁷ John Calvin and Robert White (translator), *The Doctrine of Election* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2022), p. 183.

justice; and though their refusal to listen to these proofs of the divine anger will not escape with impunity, still they are not punished with the view of bringing them to a better mind, but only to teach them by dire experience that God is a judge and avenger.²⁸

During World War II, Truett thought that punishment was the factor that led to the mass destruction experienced across the globe. He preached:

I've wondered if, in the providence of God, he hasn't allowed this great war to come down with its dark, desperate story and experience to come down; I have wondered if he hasn't let it come on the world, that Christian people might see, 'You can't get on without me. You've tried to, and you've made a shipwreck of it. You can't get on without me; you can't get on without me.'²⁹

Such a position is in line with Calvin's teachings. Cleaving not only to the idea of providence, but also to the idea of judgment explained all the darkness across the earth, including warfare. Calvin argued:

This is a remarkable passage [Romans 13:4] for the purpose of providing the right of the sword; for if the Lord, by arming the magistrate, has also committed to him the use of the sword, whenever he visits the guilty with death, by executing God's vengeance, he obeys his commands. Contend then do they with God who think it unlawful to shed the blood of wicked men.³⁰

The well-known evangelist Billy Graham agreed with such sentiments and inarguably became popular because of his revival messages underlining repentance, which were always connected to current times of war and rumours of war centring on judgment carried out by God. During his popular 1949 Crusade in Los Angeles, Graham proclaimed:

I have been to Europe six times since the war and have seen devastated cities of Germany and the wreckage of the war. I believe the only reason that America escaped the ravages and destruction of war was because God's people prayed. Many of these people believe God can still use America to evangelize the world. I think that we are living at a time in world history when God is giving us a desperate choice, a choice of either revival or

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 429.

²⁹ George Truett, 'Philip at Samaria' (sermon, First Baptist Church of Dallas, Dallas, TX, March 16, 1941), <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/search/collection/fa-gwt> (accessed January 25, 2024).

³⁰ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XIX*, p. 481.

judgment. There is no other alternative! And I particularly believe this applies to the city of Los Angeles – this city of wickedness and sin, this city that is known around the world because of its sin, crime and immorality. God Almighty is going to bring judgment upon this city unless people repent and believe – unless God sends an old-fashioned, heaven-sent, Holy Ghost revival.³¹

In the history of warfare, the notion of judgment upon humanity by the hand of God was not new. Cromwell used such a defence to justify his actions against the Papacy, as George Washington did to face the British in the American Revolution. Undoubtedly, politicians, military leaders, and pastors received their teachings from the Bible and Reformers such as Calvin. Writing a commentary on Jeremiah 51:20, Calvin explained, ‘The Prophet again teaches us that, however impregnable Babylon might be, there was yet no reason to fear but that God would be its judge.’³² Commenting on Ezekiel 5:16–17, Calvin taught:

A person might be struck by the blow of an arrow, and yet become convalescent; but God pronounces the arrows of which he speaks deadly, so that whoever is struck by them has no hope of safety left (16) ... Hence under the name of evil he embraces all adversities, as if he had said that he intended to exact the penalty from the wicked not in one or two ways only, but by those numberless troubles which surround us, and to which we are subject; so that there would be no bounds to his wrath, unless men should cease to provoke his anger ... If we look upwards, how many deaths hang over us from that direction? If we look at earth, how many poisons? How many wild and fierce beasts, how many serpents, swords, pitfalls, stumbling blocks, precipices, fall of houses, throwing of stones and darts? In short, we cannot stir a step without ten deaths meeting us. So, God here speaks of wild beasts only for the purpose of showing that they were at hand, and that by them he would execute his judgments.³³

Clearly, Calvin emphasizes the role of God’s just hand and judgment carried upon evildoers. This is not to argue that the invading armies, nor all combatants, devote themselves to God, but they are at his mercy and will execute his will. The Philistines serve as a prime example, as the Lord used them for judgment upon Israel while also punishing them in other instances by invasion or military engagements at the hands of Israel. Calvin argued:

³¹ Billy Graham, *Revival of Our Time* (Madison: Van Kampen Press, 1950), p. 70.

³² Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries, Volume XI*, p. 277.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 214–216.

For the ungodly are moved by no threats, nay, they laugh to scorn all God's judgments; while the faithful, yielding to their evils, can hardly raise up their minds, even though God promises to be a helper to them ... Hence the lively representation we see here was intended for this end – that the people, being led to view the whole event, might entertain hope of their future salvation, while they now saw God collecting his army, and mustering his forces to punish the enemies of his Church.³⁴

Within Calvin's teachings, punishment and judgment are the foundational tenets of warfare. Conversely, walking faithfully with the Lord would not only allow humanity to maintain a heavenly confidence in facing invasion or battle, but also enable them to receive the blessing of God and possibly be guided to victory. Writing on the enemies of God's people, Calvin argued:

For it is the Lord who gives us favour, not only with those who wish us well, but also in the eyes of the Egyptians (Exod. 3:21), in various ways defeating the malice of our enemies. Sometimes he deprives them of all presence of mind, so that they cannot undertake anything soundly or soberly Sometimes when he leaves them in possession of intellect, he so fills them with terror and dismay that they can neither will nor plan the execution of what they had designed.³⁵

God is righteous and will exercise his judgment upon ungodliness. Those who walk faithfully with the Lord must have confidence in dire situations. In Calvin's view, those who maintained faith are responsible for adhering to the idea of divine providence and surrendering to the will of God, as they are promised that Christ will never abandon them. Calvin wrote, 'Let us admit that his judgments are a deep abyss, and let us not inquire further than he allows us.'³⁶ Expounding Jeremiah 5:17, Calvin explained:

But in this place the Prophet, I have no doubt, introduces God as a Judge, executing vengeance, as though there was no place for mercy ... In this manner is God wont to deal with the impenitent; for such is their perverseness, that being smitten they become more and more hardened, and champ the bit, according to the old proverb. And hence is their hardness, because they think that God is, as it were, disarmed when he has punished them for their sins. He therefore declares that he has in his power different kinds of punishment and different ways of punishing.³⁷

³⁴ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XIV*, p. 127.

³⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 128.

³⁶ Calvin, *The Doctrine of Election*, p. 58.

³⁷ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume IX*, pp. 289-290.

Perhaps more than any of the Reformers, Calvin best highlighted God's sovereign control in all aspects of life, including warfare. Joel Beeke noted Calvin's connection to the teachings of God's sovereignty: 'God's sovereignty means that His standards must prevail rather than man's desired or devised code of ethics.'³⁸

Undoubtedly, Calvin underscored God's providential care and involvement in human affairs. There was no chance nor free will for humans to determine outcomes. Warfare plays a role in God's plan for creation while providing hope for those in ruin and conflict that fellow man may deliver them from such calamity per the will of God. Likewise, God's judgment reigns upon darkness, sin, and evildoers. As has been since the earliest biblical accounts, God uses war as a mechanism to carry out his vengeance upon sin and darkness.

IV. Conclusion

Calvin loathed war, but he also knew that it was a realistic part of God's sovereign plan in this fallen world. Through war, people experience God's providence and judgment. Calvin obviously embraced both doctrines, acknowledging that God carried out his power upon his creation. But according to Calvin, the Lord also allowed for arms if it was in a defensive manner or position.

Whatever the circumstances might be, Calvin strictly taught that Christians must examine their motives and intentions before they engage in battle. A Christian who sought vengeance or revenge would be sinning and could potentially face judgment from God for such a trespass. However, if a Christian was seeking to promote peace through an alliance, submitting to his government's demands, or protecting mankind, then warfare was justified as long as the heart and soul of the person had no ill intent.

Calvin undoubtedly respected that governments were at the mercy and control of God. As such, magistrates have always picked up arms to engage in military operations. In some circumstances, this was to defend humanity or to play their role in God's judgment of other nations. Calvin acknowledged both positions and held that both were biblical.

Calvin was a peaceful Reformer, making clear his opinion about the shedding of blood. Warfare was the very last resort in both negotiations or in any action to be taken. And if any Christian were to partake in it, he needed to approach the event in a heavenly manner. Men did not take vengeance into their own hands; instead, they left it up to God. If men

³⁸ Beeke, *Calvin on Sovereignty, Providence & Predestination*, p. 12.

were to take up arms, it was for fulfilling God's will and certainly not to act as a deity themselves. Calvin's teachings always underscored the call for Christians to be saints and to live holy lives in glorifying their Saviour.

Lastly, Calvin held perhaps the most prominent opinions on warfare being tied to judgment. God is a holy and just Creator who will not let sin go unpunished. Such was the position of Calvin, and this alone proved that warfare existed to awaken the souls of humanity to the reality of darkness and of God's supreme power. Warfare is devastating and brings out the worst of mankind, but in Calvin's eyes, the act also leads people to the Cross, to realising the seriousness of sin, to judgment, and to the hope found only in Christ.