

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 1 – Chapter 12

HOW GOD IS TO BE DISTINGUISHED FROM IDOLS THAT PERFECT HONOR MAY BE GIVEN TO
HIM ALONE

In this chapter, Calvin concludes his discussion of God and idols. For Calvin this was an important task because in an era of illiteracy and great superstition, much power and influence had been seeded over to saints, their statues and relics. Most Christians, rather than turning to the scriptures for guidance, turned to the traditions associated with saints.

Summary: Calvin returns to his main argument that the scriptures not only assert that there is but one God, but that *“nothing belonging to his (God’s) divinity is to be transferred to another.”* (pg. 117) What this means is that any statue or icon of Jesus or a saint, takes away from God’s divinity. In order to prove his point, Calvin discusses “pure religion” as opposed to superstition. The basis of pure religion is that of honoring and clinging to the one true God; something which most human beings have never done. This pure worship is set forth in the law (Torah or in this case the first of the Ten Commandments), which God gave in order to direct people’s hearts and minds to God and God alone. This law was offered in order that it direct people into appropriate worship rather than into *“vicious rites.”* (pg. 117)

Calvin next returns to the issue of the saints (be they associated with a statue, icon or relic) taking away from God’s divinity by surrounding God with *“...a throng of lesser gods, among whom it (the church) parcels out his functions. The glory of his divinity is so rent asunder, although stealthily and craftily, that his whole glory does not remain with him alone...thus a few centuries ago the saints who had departed this life were elevated in co-partnership with God, to be honored and also invoked and praised in his stead...”* (p. 118) Calvin, as a way to going deeper into this concept looks at two terms which were used by the Roman Church during this period. Those terms are “latria” and “dulia”.

Latria and dulia can be broadly defined as reverence. Both the Roman and Orthodox churches however make a distinction between the two. Latria is the reverence that can only be given to God. Dulia is the reverence that can be given to saints and holy beings and carries with it some sense of servants honoring their masters. The difference was originally discussed by Augustine of Hippo (354-430) but later clarified by Thomas Aquinas (1270). While the Roman church states that there is a difference between the two, Calvin sees two problems with these arguments. First there is very little difference in practice. People approach the saints in the same way they approach God. Second, the idea of being a servant ought to be reserved for serving God alone.

Calvin reinforces his argument with some Biblical examples. He quotes Paul as saying that the Galatians “exhibited dulia toward beings that by nature were no gods.” (Galatians 4:8) Thus Paul is condemning giving the reverence/servitude to anyone but God. In Revelation 19:10 Calvin sees another example of inappropriate reverence when John kneels before an angel and is told not to kneel before anyone but God. In the same way in Acts 10:25 Cornelius prostrates himself before the Apostle Peter, yet Peter forbade Cornelius to do so.

Reflections: It was an interesting encounter. I had gone to attend a funeral mass for a friend of mine in San Antonio. The mass was held in a church on the north-side of the city. Looking around I didn’t see any “saints”. When I asked about this, I was told that “They did not do that sort of thing. We believe in Jesus, not saints.” In a sense, that diocese and become more Protestant in its outlook. Somehow the veneration of saints was something for those other Catholics to do, but that this church had left behind all of the “superstitious” aspects of their faith and moved to a more enlightened view.

Questions:

1. How would you differentiate between pure religion and superstition?
2. How would you differentiate between reverence for God and others?
3. What does it mean to you to give all honor to God and to God alone?