

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 3 – Chapter 4 – Part 2

DISCUSSION OF CONFESSION AND SATISFACTION

In in the previous lesson we learned that confession does not need a priest, is offered to Jesus Christ, can be communal (such as a unison prayer of confession in church) and can be to a minister, but only for the purpose of the minister assuring forgiveness in Christ. In this chapter Calvin offers us a thorough examination of confession; what it is and how it ought to work. What we need to note here is that Calvin is dealing with the Medieval and not the modern Roman Catholic Church. Even so, the discussion helps us understand confession more fully.

Summary: At this point Calvin discusses the “*power of the keys*” (pg. 638). This term, the power of the keys has to do with what Jesus says to Peter, “*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*” (Matthew 16:19). The Roman Church used this statement to claim 1) that Peter was the only one who could forgive 2) that Peter was the first Pope and thus head of the church 3) and that only those who were ordained in the church, meaning priests, were given this power which came down from Peter. Thus the power to forgive or retain sins (the power of the keys) was held by the Roman Church and its ministers.

Though Calvin will take up this doctrine at greater length later in the Institutes, at this point he wants to make sure that his readers understand what he believes about the power of the keys. For Calvin, the power of the keys does not refer to a gift given only to Peter and priests, but was instead the message, that Jesus was the messiah who had come to save the world (the context of the gift of the keys is Peter’s confession that Jesus was the messiah). The power of the keys, for Calvin then, rests in the preaching of the gospel, through which persons hear the good news that Jesus Christ gave his life for them and thus there is grace and forgiveness abounding (pg. 639). The power to retain and forgive sins then, is solely the work of Christ which is made known in and through the scriptures.

At this point, Calvin launches into an extended discourse on what he considers to be the flaws in the Roman Church’s understanding of confession, though he focuses on two particular areas. First, he critiques the church’s demand that believers confess all of their sins once a year; a feat that he does not believe that anyone can do, because it is impossible “*...to reckon up all the acts for an entire year and gather up what sins they have committed each day. For experience convinces each one that, when we have an evening to examine the transgressions of only a single day, the memory is confused*” (pg. 642). Second, he critiques the church’s ability to distinguish between those who do or do not deserve forgiveness. “*Thus, according to them, forgiveness depends upon the judgment of the priest, and unless he wisely discerns who deserves pardon, his whole action is null and void*” (pg. 648).

Calvin’s response to these concerns is to reiterate his position. “*The doctrine we teach is free and clear of all of these (problems). For forgiveness is conditional upon the sinner’s trust that God is merciful to him, provided he sincerely seek amends...The sinner can, indeed embrace true and clear forgiveness when that simple condition is applied of embracing the grace of Christ...*” (pg. 649).

Reflections: For many of us, this discussion about the power of the keys may not appear to be particularly important. So why does Calvin spend so much time with it? The answer is that in the 1500s, when Calvin was writing, the Roman Church used confession as a tool to control people and nations. If people did not do as the church commanded, they would be denied confession and thereby salvation. By returning confession and forgiveness to the individual in relationship with Christ, not only did people find comfort in knowing they were forgiven, but people were set free from the church’s political control.

Questions:

1. How good would you be at remembering an entire year’s worth of sins?
2. How do you see God as being merciful and gracious in your life?
3. Have you ever struggled with feeling forgiven? What helped you move beyond that feeling?