

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 10 – Part 1  
THE POWER OF MAKING LAWS

In this chapter, Calvin offers us a look at the issue of church law and Christian conscience. The central question is, does the church have the right to “bind” the conscience of believers. Or to put it another way, does the church have the right to force believers to believe something about doctrine or church hierarchy, without the consent of the believer. The Roman church believed it had this right. Calvin will argue that neither the Roman church, nor any other church, has that right.

**Summary:** Calvin begins, *“This is the power now being discussed, whether the church may lawfully bind consciences by its laws. In this discussion, we are not dealing with the political order, but are only concerned with...how the spiritual freedom which looks to God may remain unimpaired by us”* (pg. 1179). For Calvin, there was a difference between rules which were instituted by the church to insure its orderly functioning, and rules which were said to either allow people in, or keep people out of, heaven. He calls these rules or laws, constitutions and there are not simply one or two of these but *“...one can scarcely count the constitutions which these men (leaders of the Roman church) have ...decreed under pain of eternal death, and which they with the gravest severity require as necessary for salvation...my purpose here is, therefore, to attack constitutions made to bind souls inwardly before God...as if enjoining things necessary for salvation”* (pg. 1181).

For the sake of clarity, Calvin engages in a discussion of conscience. He describes conscience as that *“...awareness of divine judgement...which does not let them hide their sins”* (pg. 1181). In other words, conscience is that still, small voice that tells people they have done something wrong. And that still, small voice, Calvin believes, is to be informed by the scriptures, which give the conscience its boundaries concerning right and wrong. The problem arises when the church creates new constitutions (laws) and gives them the same force as those found in the scriptures. Thus, when the church creates new constitutions, it is trying to bind, or control, the consciences of people beyond what God requires. For Calvin, these additions are not necessary because scripture includes *“...everything applicable to the perfect rule of the good life, so that nothing is left to men to add to that summary”* (pg. 1185).

Calvin divides constitutions created by the church into two types; those dealing with ceremonies (rites) and those dealing with discipline. He uses confession and not eating meat on Fridays as examples of rites that bind a person’s conscience. These rites try to bind the conscience because the church claims that salvation hangs on the performance of these practices, thus they ought to cause fear within a believer’s conscience when they are not practiced (pg. 1188). Calvin argues that these rules not only create great fear among Christians but that they also *“...obscure by their multitude the clarity of the gospel...”* (pg. 1194). In terms of discipline he writes, *“While commending the observance of God’s commands only coldly...they nonetheless zealously...urge an exact obedience to their own”* (pg. 1188), sometimes on the threat of excommunication and thus damnation.

**Reflections:** This issue of not “binding” the conscience is one of the great hallmarks of Presbyterianism. We believe that salvation is a gift of God and that no church has the right to tell people that they will only be saved if they believe certain doctrines or engage in a particular set of practices. By so doing we acknowledge that God alone is to be lord of the conscience, and not a church and its doctrines. Doctrines and practices are important because they help shape our faith and life. But ultimately they are just doctrines and practices and nothing more.

Questions:

1. What do you believe are church rules/practices that ought to be followed (or believed)?
2. What do you believe are church rules/practices that are not necessary to follow (or believe)?
3. What church rules/practices have become central to your life of faith and why have they?