

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 10 – Part 2
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: As a reminder, in the first half of the chapter Calvin argued that no church can “bind” someone’s conscience, meaning forcing someone to believe particular religious doctrines or engage in particular religious practices, in order to be saved, since salvation is an act of the grace of God in Christ. He also claimed that the Roman church had created many of these doctrines and practices that created fear rather than freedom for believers.

He continues with some general observations about such practices. *“First, they prescribe observances for the most part useless...secondly, pious consciences are oppressed with an immense multitude of them...(that they)...so cling to shadows that they cannot reach Christ”* (pg. 1189). What Calvin means by this is that the church was so focused on rites and rituals that its members never heard the simple gospel of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ; a grace that brings freedom. Even so, Calvin is aware that there is a need for ceremonies to assist in the growth of faith. *“Shall no ceremonies then be given to the ignorant to help them in their inexperience. I do not say that. For I feel that this kind of help is very useful to them. I only contend that the means used ought to show Christ, not hide him”* (pg. 1192). Thus, all ceremonies ought to show forth the love and grace of Christ, so as to replace fear with freedom in people’s consciences.

Calvin next takes up the claim that the Roman church was given the authority to create such doctrines and rituals by the apostles. He comments that *“...to trace the origin of these traditions back to the apostles is pure deceit. For the whole doctrine of the apostles has this intent: not to burden consciences with new observances, or contaminate the worship of God with our own inventions”* (pg. 1197). He offers several examples. The first is that of the Lord’s Supper which *“...was administered with great simplicity”* (pg. 1198) by the apostles and not in the elaborate fashion of the medieval mass. The second is in the Book of Acts where the apostles did not believe that Gentile believers had to follow all the Jewish laws, but instead were given great freedom in Christ in terms of religious practices.

Calvin’s views on church practices can be summed up with the Apostle Paul’s declaration that *“all things be done decently and in order”* (pg. 1205) and that they be done to focus us on Christ and not on the church. What this means is that there is *“no one form (of practices) for all ages...and because these things are not necessary for salvation...the church ought to be variously accommodated to the customs of each nation and age...”* (pg. 1208). Meaning, each church can choose its own rituals and practices, and each individual can decide for themselves which of these rituals and practices have meaning for them.

Reflections: This chapter offers Presbyterians a great gift. That gift is the freedom to pursue a wide variety of church practices depending on the needs of the individual church and its members. This freedom is why our communion liturgy can be different at our different services, why we may or may not use the lectionary for choosing scripture for worship and why we can have different styles of music from one week to the next. We can do so because there is no mother church that tells us what to believe, what to do or how to do it. We are free to express our Christian life in the manner that has meaning for us.

Questions:

1. How important are church rituals to you and why?
2. Are there particular church rituals that give you comfort?
3. Are there church traditions that you miss from a previous church life? What about them do you miss?