

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 11 – Part 1

THE JURISDICTION OF THE CHURCH AND ITS ABUSE AS SEEN IN THE PAPACY

The issue in this chapter is how much and what kind of power ought the church possess. The Roman church had over a period of time assumed not only ecclesiastical power, but also civil power; including the creation of its own military with which it had waged war and the right to execute heretics. Calvin wants to examine the issue of church power not simply as a critique of the Roman church, but to guide the Reformed churches as well.

Summary: Calvin begins with his belief that the jurisdiction (the extent of its powers) of the church “...pertains to the discipline of morals” (pg. 1211). This means that the only power the church possesses is to set and enforce moral rules for the church and not for society at large. Even so, Calvin believes that the church, by enforcing a set of moral norms will assist society in being better ordered (because it will have better people), just as a society will be better ordered if its rules reflect Christian values (because these are rules of honesty and integrity).

The extent of the church’s jurisdiction is set by the preaching of the Word (scriptures) because it is the scriptures that offer the moral norms which guide the life of the church and its members. This reliance on the scriptures is opposed to an artificially created set of norms (which is something that Calvin believed the Roman church had done). If church members step beyond these boundaries, then the church has not only a right, but a duty to discipline/correct them. Thus, preaching and discipline go hand in hand; one guiding and the other correcting. What this means however, is that there are limits to the church’s jurisdiction. “*For the church does not have the right of the sword to punish or compel, not the authority to force; not imprisonment, nor the other punishments which the magistrate commonly inflicts...the church does not assume what is proper to the magistrate, nor can the magistrate execute what is carried out by the church*” (pg. 1215). This limited jurisdiction means that the church’s only authority is that of ecclesiastical discipline, meaning the willingness to 1) ask members who have stepped beyond the church’s moral boundaries to seek forgiveness and repent and 2) to expel people from the church if they do not repent and are unwilling to follow the scriptures’ guidance.

For Calvin, no member of the church can be exempted from the moral norms set out in preaching the Word. This includes all people in positions of authority. “*For the magistrate, if he is godly, will not want to exempt himself from the common subjection of God’s children...for a good emperor is with the church and not over the church*” (pg. 1217). To do otherwise, meaning to allow those in power to live by their own rules, would, in Calvin’s view, do a great injustice to Christ and to the church.

Finally, spiritual discipline is to be exercised with great care and is not to be “*administered...by the decision of one man but by a lawful assembly*” (pg. 1217). He quotes Bishop Cyprian (an influential early Christian bishop, 249-258 CE). “*From the beginning of my episcopate I determined not to do anything without the advice of the clergy and the consent of the people*” (pg. 1218). Though Calvin argues that discipline ought to be administered by the elders (clergy and lay), he resists any efforts to have it administered by a single bishop, who is not accountable to others.

Reflections: Calvin’s impact on our denomination can be seen in that within our denomination’s constitution there is a section on discipline. This section is intended to protect the church and its members from harm (an example would be the ongoing abuse of minors by pastors) and its members from false accusations (which occasionally occurs). All matters of discipline are handled according to a strict set of guidelines (including rules about evidence, witnesses, etc.) and are administered by a commission, composed of both clergy and lay elders. We do so because as a Jesus’ centered community we believe that who we are and what we do needs to reflect the love, grace and justice of God. Otherwise, we risk losing our way as a church.

Questions:

1. What role do the scriptures play in setting your moral compass?
2. Why do you/don’t you believe that church discipline is necessary?
3. Why would it be important to have discipline administered by more than one person?