

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 11 – Part 2

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 time assumed not only ecclesiastical power, but also civil power; including the creation of its own military with which it had waged war and exercised 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: In the previous article, we examined Calvin’s belief that the church needs to ensure that its members are living according to the norms set forth in scripture. This is called spiritual discipline and it is necessary to insure the health and wellbeing of the church. Calvin asserts that spiritual discipline 1) is limited to internal church life 2) is to only be administered by the church elders and clergy after careful inquiry and attempts at reconciliation and 3) has as its goal restoration and not punishment. In this portion of the chapter Calvin examines how the Roman church forgot these concepts which were mandated by both scripture and the early church.

Calvin begins by reminding his readers that the bishops of the church began to slowly move from being pastors of the faithful, to judges who mixed civil and church issues. *“Does some poor man owe money? He is cited (by the bishop). If he appears, he is condemned. If, being condemned, he does not pay up, he is warned; after a second warning, a step is taken toward excommunication; if he does not appear...soon after excommunicated”* (pg. 1219). This mixing of roles occurred because bishops *“...through...threats...wrested from princes some increase in their power...sometime later, when cities and regions were oppressed by various difficulties, they betook themselves to the bishops for protection...turning (the bishops) from protectors to lords”* (pg. 1222). The church also used forged documents such as the “Donation of Constantine” to claim that the bishop at Rome been granted great rights and power by the first Christian Emperor.

This increase in power led to two results. First was the use of military power. *“When for two hundred years, pontiffs have practiced...bloodshed, slaughter of armies, sacking of cities...solely to seize other men’s dominions...they are carried away by...lust for dominion”* (pg. 1226-7). Second it gave clergy immunity from civil laws. *“For they count it beneath their dignity to answer in personal cases before a civil judge. And they deem both the liberty and dignity of the church to consist in their exemption from common courts and laws”* (pg. 1227). For Calvin, these do great damage to the church and to society. They damage the church because the church forgets that its task is to shepherd people in following Christ. They damage society because they diminish the role and power of civil government to create an orderly society. The one exception for Calvin is when the civil authorities attempt to *“obstruct the church in the conduct of their office”* (pg. 1228), meaning the state tries to tell the church what to believe and to do. Then the church needs to engage the state in defending its rights.

Reflection: Every society has tried to find the balance between the authority of religion and state. In some places, such as Iran, the Islamic clergy have final say. In the United States, we acknowledge the separation of church and state; where the church can critique the state on issues of morality, but it cannot dictate civil statutes; and where the state can require religious bodies to adhere to certain statues such as safety regulations in its buildings. The question for Americans is how far does religious freedom extend? Does it allow public businesses to discriminate against others based on race or sexual orientation because of the religious beliefs of the business owners? Does it allow the state to tax the property of religious organizations? These and other questions show that the struggles of Calvin’s time are still around.

Questions:

1. Where do you see the dividing line between the roles of religion and state?
2. Do you think religion has a role to play in politics? Why or why not?
3. What does freedom of religion mean to you?