

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 18 – Part 1
THE PAPAL MASS

In the previous chapter Calvin spent a great deal of time explaining his view that the sacrament of communion was one in which Christ was spiritually present, made real and applied the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection (forgiveness and salvation), and offered encouragement and support for Christ-like living. In this chapter, he describes why he believes that the Roman Mass is an inappropriate expression of the sacrament of communion. To understand his arguments, we need to remember that in Medieval Roman Catholicism, the bread (the host) and wine, when consecrated become the real body and blood of Christ, the person who performs the mass is a priest (someone who sacrifices), when the host is broken, it is understood to be Christ being sacrificed once again for the people and finally when people participate in the mass they earn "merit" which helps assure their entry into heaven.

Summary: It does not take long in this chapter to begin to get a sense of Calvin's disdain for the mass. Even so, he wants his readers to know that he objects strenuously to the mass not simply to be argumentative, but because he finds no scriptural support for it. He lays out his objections as follows:

First, Jesus Christ is the only priest that is needed. Speaking of Jesus, Calvin writes, *"For he was consecrated priest and pontiff by his Father, not for a time, in the way in which we read of priests being appointed in the Old Testament. Their priesthood could not be immortal because their life was mortal"* (pg. 1430). Calvin continues that since Christ is the eternal priest, any priests appointed in his place *"...not only deprive Christ of his honor but snatch from him the prerogative of that eternal priesthood, (and) try and cast him down from the right hand of his Father..."* (pg. 1430). Calvin's comments here rely heavily on the book of Hebrews which implies that Christ needs no partners in his work of forgiveness and salvation.

Second, the Mass *"suppresses and buries the cross and Passion of Christ"* (pg. 1431). Calvin believes this because his understanding is that Christ's death on the cross was a sufficient sacrifice for all people, in all places and for all of time. He puts it this way then in terms of the Mass. *"Therefore, we shall have to confess either that Christ's sacrifice, which he fulfilled upon the cross lacked the power to cleanse eternally, or that Christ carried out one sacrifice, once for all unto the ages"* (pg. 1431). To be clear, this argument arises out of the Roman Catholic belief that the Mass offers a sacrifice equal to the sacrifice on the cross.

Third, the Mass *"...wipes out the true and unique death of Christ and drives it from the memory of men"* (pg. 1433). This is an interesting argument based in the idea of a "testament"; a testament being a person's last will and testament where they bequeath their goods to another. In this case Jesus, by his death on the cross, bequeathed to humanity forgiveness of sins and eternal life. By having new forgiveness and new righteousness (meaning a new right relationship with God) offered every time the Mass is offered, it is as if a new testament is replacing the old one. Thus, people forget the original testament and the death that made it possible.

Fourth, the Mass *"...robs us of the benefit of Christ's death"* (pg. 1434). This argument can be summed up as follows. *"For who can think himself redeemed by Christ's death, when he has seen new redemption in the mass? Who can trust that his sins are forgiven, when he sees new forgiveness?"* (pg. 1434-35).

Reflections: Over the past fifty years or so, the Roman Catholic and Presbyterian churches have worked diligently to rebuild the relationship that was broken during the Reformation, and remained broken until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in which the Roman Church stated that, while the Roman Church was the only true church, truth could be found in other churches (such as the Presbyterian Church). Since that time, we have recognized each other's baptisms and have engaged in mutual worship and work. Even so, one area in which there will always be disagreement is in the mass, because we cling to Calvin's arguments and focus our understanding of the sacrament of communion on Christ being spiritually and not physically present.

Questions:

1. What new information if any have you discovered about the Mass in this article?
2. What is your response to Calvin's points?
3. Which, if any, of Calvin's points speaks most meaningfully to you?