

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 18 – Part 2
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. In the first article, we examined four reasons Calvin objected to the Mass. In this article, we take up the rest of his objections.

Summary: Fifth, the Mass is "*a...nullification of the Lord's Supper*" (pg. 1435). Calvin writes, "*The Sacrament promised that by Christ's death we are not merely once restored to life, but are continually received, for all parts of our salvation have been fulfilled*" (pg. 1435). In other words, the nature of the Lord's Supper is that it causes us to remember what Christ has done for us, once and for all; meaning offering to us forgiveness and salvation. By the Mass' focus on continual sacrifice, we forget the original purpose of the sacrament.

Sixth, the Mass can be offered in private to individuals. Calvin objects to this because, in the scriptures, the Lord's Supper is always offered to the church entire body of believers (think of the Last Supper where all are invited to eat and drink). In addition, Paul is very clear that the meal is to be shared. "*But because Christ's and Paul's words are clear enough, we may briefly conclude that wherever there is not this breaking of the bread for the communion of believers, it is not the Lord's Supper*" (pg. 1437).

Seventh, the Mass was not part of the practice of the early church. Calvin argues that even though some of the early church Fathers used the term sacrifice, they "*...meant nothing else than the remembrance of that one true sacrifice which Christ, our sole-Priest...made upon the cross.... Augustine (354-430 CE) himself, in many passages, interprets it as nothing but a sacrifice of praise...a memorial, an image, and a testimony of that singular, true and unique sacrifice by which Christ atoned for us*" (pg. 1438-39).

Eighth, there is a significant difference between the use of Sacrifices in the Old Testament and the Lord's Supper. Calvin argues that the Levitical Priests "*...were commanded (by sacrificing on an altar) to prefigure the sacrifice that Christ was to perform)...but after Christ's sacrifice was accomplished, the Lord instituted another method for us, that is, to transmit to believing folk the benefit of the sacrifice offered to himself by his Son. Therefore, he has given us a table at which to feast, not an altar upon which to offer victims; he has not consecrated priests to offer sacrifice, but ministers to distribute the sacred banquet...*" (pg. 1440).

Reflections: When my wife Cindy and I married, we wanted to have communion at our wedding. Being completely ignorant of either the theology or polity of the matter, we thought that perhaps just we, or our bridal party could receive communion. The pastor in charge explained to us that this was not possible, that everyone would have to be serviced because communion was a "communal" meal to be shared by all present. I was and continue to be grateful for that instruction, because it was the beginning of my discovering a deeper meaning to the Lord's Supper.

Questions:

1. How does communion help you to remember what Christ has done for you and for others?
2. How old were you when you started taking communion? What meaning did it hold for you?
3. How do you understand the communal nature of the sacrament?