

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 18 – Part 3
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 two articles, we examined eight reasons Calvin objected to the Mass. In this article, we take up the rest of his discussion about the Mass, sacrifice and a short summary of sacraments.

Summary: Having offered his eight reasons for objecting to the theology of the Mass, Calvin takes a bit of time to examine the nature of sacrifice. He begins by noting that the scriptures offer a wide variety of words that are translated as sacrifice; each however, carrying a different meaning. *"Generally understood, this (meaning all those words translated as sacrifice) includes every sort of thing offered to God...(so)...although these were of various forms...they can be (put into) two classes"* (pg. 1441). Those two classes are sacrifices for forgiveness and thanksgiving. The sacrifice for forgiveness, Calvin states, has been replaced by the sacrifice of Christ, who died once for all people, for all time. Therefore, the sacrifice in the Mass is unnecessary. Sacrifices of thanksgiving however ought to still be practiced. These sacrifices can be offered in this way. *"...all that is ours ought to be consecrated and dedicated to him (Christ), so that all that is in us may serve his glory and...aspire to increase it"* (pg. 1444).

Calvin also takes a quick look at the sale of Masses. This was the practice of priests who, without a parish, would make their living by offering Masses for a price; the purpose being that the individual for whom the mass was said, would earn merit, thus helping to insure their entry into eternal life. Calvin objects to this in these words. *"We also deny that they are priests in the sense that they by (offering these personal Masses) before God and for people (have) appeased God (and) obtained atonement for sins. For Christ is the sole...Priest"* (pg. 1442). These Masses are thus not needed because they don't accomplish anything.

This chapter is summed up with a reminder that there are only two sacraments (which also sets up the next chapter in which Calvin examines the other rites which are referred to as sacraments by the Roman Church). These two sacraments are baptism and the Lord's Supper. *"Apart from these two, no other sacrament has been instituted; by God, so the church of believers ought to recognize no other; for erecting and establishing new sacraments is not a matter of human choice...let the Christian church be satisfied with these two sacraments, therefore"* (pg. 1446-47).

Reflections: Having been reared in the old PCUS (Southern Presbyterian Church) the celebration of the sacraments was done in a plain and straightforward manner. Over the years I have seen the "ceremony" aspect become more and more elaborate. I tend to agree with Calvin when he says that *"...there is too much processions, ceremonies, and mimes"* (pg. 1448), meaning the form has become more important than the function. My hope is that as we celebrate the sacraments we will, through what we say, read and do, always bring ourselves back to the promises of forgiveness and salvation which they make real in all our lives, in order that they nourish our faith and hope.

Questions:

1. How do you offer your sacrifices of praise?
2. How does the Lord's Supper help you experience forgiveness?
3. What comes to your mind when you are present at a baptism?