

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 1 – Part 1
THE TRUE CHURCH WITH WHICH AS MOTHER OF ALL THE GODLY
WE MUST KEEP UNITY

The focus of Book 4 of the Institutes is the church. In this book, Calvin will discuss all aspects of the church including its unity, its worship, its sacraments and all the means the church uses to draw people to Christ. Chapter 1 covers some of the basics.

Summary: Calvin opens with the reminder that we come to faith by the preaching of the Gospel, and that God “...deposited this treasure (the Gospel) in the church” (pg. 1012). In addition, God “...instituted ‘pastors and teachers’ (Ephesians 4:11) through whose lips he might teach his own;” (pg. 1012). God also made sure that the church was equipped with all that it needed for its life together including, but not limited to, the sacraments, government, orders (ministers, teachers, etc.) power and civil order. Calvin examines each of these aspects of the church in Book 4.

Calvin begins his discussion of the church by examining the references to the church in the Apostles’ creed. “I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints.”

He wants his readers to understand two general things about the church. The first is that “the church” in the creed refers “...not only to the ‘visible’ church but also to all of God’s elect, in whose number are also included the dead” (pg. 1012). For those unfamiliar with the term ‘visible’ church, it refers to all of those who are members of the church here on earth at any given moment; the people we see in church if you will. Calvin extends the term church to go beyond those presently in the church to include all of those whom God has elected (even if they are not yet in the visible church) as well as those who once were part of the church and have since died. The church then becomes a community that stretches across time and space.

Second, Calvin wants people to be clear that the church is composed of those elected for salvation, and those not so elected (the Biblical image of wheat and tares (i.e., weeds)/sheep and goats). However, only God knows the who is in and who is out. “But because a small contemptible number are hidden in a huge multitude and a few grains of wheat are covered by a pile of chaff, we must leave to God alone the knowledge of his church whose foundation is his secret election” (pg. 1013). In other words, we are never to assume that we have the wisdom to decide who are among the elect and who are not.

Calvin then moves on to the term catholic. “The church is called ‘catholic’ or ‘universal’ because there could not be two or three churches unless Christ be torn asunder- which could not happen...they are made truly one since they live together in one faith, hope and love, and in the same Spirit of God” (pg. 1014). For many people this is one of the surprising aspects of Calvin, that, he is willing to acknowledge that churches do not have to believe exactly as he believes, in order to be the church.

Next, he looks at the phrase, the communion of saints. Calvin applies this phrase to both the visible church and the entirety of the elect. He suggests that in terms of the visible church it reminds us that we should act “...as one flock” (pg. 1014). In terms of the elect, it reminds us that God will never forsake those with whom God is in communion.

Reflection: Christians across the ages have tended to claim, for their particular church, the title “the church.” Calvin rejects this concept and embraces the radical idea that all Christians are bound together in a single, worldwide community. This has been the basis for our worshipping and working with other churches, of other denominations; that even though we do not agree on all things (sacraments, worship style, theology, etc.) we are still a single body, called to a single purpose.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin’s description of the church as composed of wheat and chaff?
2. What does it mean to you to be part of the church that stretches back across time?
3. How do you see churches acting like, or not acting like, one flock?