

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 1 – Part 2  
THE TRUE CHURCH WITH WHICH AS MOTHER OF ALL THE GODLY  
WE MUST KEEP UNITY

The church is the focus of Book 4 of the Institutes. 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 begins this section by discussing the importance of Christian education. He quotes the Apostle Paul who wrote that Christ, “...appointed some to be ‘apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until all reach the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to perfect manhood, to the measure of the full mature age of Christ’” (pg. 1017). And God does so because God, “...desires them (God’s people) to grow up into (full faith) solely under the education of the church” (pg. 1017). In other words, God desires that all people become more and more Christ-like with each passing day and that they are to become more and more like Christ through the education they receive from the church.

While Calvin acknowledges that God could teach us individually, he argues instead that God chooses to teach us as a community. “For although God’s power is not bound to outward means, he has nonetheless bound us to this ordinary manner of teaching...Surely...believers have no greater help than public worship, for by it God raises his own folk upward step by step” (pg. 1019). Calvin’s point is that the church is the God given vehicle for the transmission of the faith. This is so because not only is there a benefit of the collective wisdom of the church but that the church is led by those who have been gifted by God for the transmission of the faith. So, when people remove themselves from common worship, they risk wandering off into beliefs and actions that do not build them up as followers of Jesus.

Next, Calvin returns to his discussion (from an earlier chapter) of the invisible and visible churches. To understand these terms, we need to recall Calvin’s doctrine of Election that states that God chooses some, but not all people, and some but not all church goers, to be God’s adopted children. The invisible church then is composed of those whom God has chosen to be God’s own children. The visible church is the church that consists of all of those who happen to be members of churches around the world even though they may not then be actual children of God. Calvin understands that this differentiation will often lead people to try to discern which people are in the invisible church and which people are not. So, Calvin issues a stern reminder that we, as human beings, cannot figure this out. And in fact, we might often get it wrong. Calvin puts it this way. “For those who seemed utterly lost and quite beyond hope are by his goodness called back to the way; while those who more than others seemed to stand firm often fall” (pg. 1022). And because of this, we are to “...recognize as members of the church those who by confession of faith, by example of life and by partaking of the sacrament, profess the same God and Christ with us” (pg. 1023).

**Reflections:** One of the great Biblical themes is that God calls communities and not simply individuals. This is true with Abraham (called to be a great nation), with Jesus (who called multiple disciples) and with the church (at Pentecost where the church is created as a community of mutually supportive believers). This sense of the importance of community can be lost in the American context. As a people of “rugged individualism,” we often see our faith as a personal one in which we do not need the church. It’s just me and Jesus. The problem with this individualized faith is that it often becomes no more than a faith that places our wants, needs and desires at the center of our religious universe; rather than the command and call of Christ to love God and neighbor.

Questions:

1. Why, if you do, do you attend church?
2. How has what you have learned in worship or Bible study helped you in your faith journey?
3. What do you think of Calvin’s discussion of the visible and invisible churches?