

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 1 – Part 3
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: In the opening of this section, Calvin offers us the marks of the true church, meaning those things which make a true church, a true church. *“Whenever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists”* (pg. 1023). This is one of the most important concepts in the Institutes. By using these two actions and these two actions alone as the marks of the true church, it allows for a wide variety of expressions of liturgy and practice within churches. Calvin goes even further to say that while there may be churches that we do not think ought to be thought of as the true church because they do things differently from the way we do them, that as long as they rightly preach the word and administer the sacraments, then they are the true church.

At this point, Calvin reminds his readers of the importance of the church (something we dealt with in the previous article). Because the church is the place where people grow in their faith and receive God’s blessing, then God *“...counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who...leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of the Word and sacraments. He (God) so esteems the authority of the church that when it is violated (by someone leaving it) he believes his own diminished”* (pg. 1024). Though this attitude may appear a bit extreme to us, it reflects Calvin’s belief that the true church is the very body of Christ, and so for someone to wander away from it is tantamount to someone leaving Christ. As he writes, *“From this it follows that separation from the church is the denial of God and Christ. Hence we must even more avoid...a separation”* (pg. 2024-5).

After this warning, Calvin returns to his reasons for accepting a wide variety of churches as being true churches. The first, he notes again, is the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. Second he states that there are only a handful of essential doctrines (the unity of God, the divinity of Christ, and salvation through grace) that churches need to adhere to, meaning churches can disagree about other non-essential doctrines, and still be a true church. Third, Calvin notes that all churches are sinful (he uses the church at Corinth as an example) and thus no one church can be the perfect church. Calvin then spends some time unpacking the idea that all churches are sinful. Calvin writes, *“...if we are not willing to admit a church unless it be perfect in every respect, we leave no church at all”* (pg. 1031). With that in mind, Calvin believes that churches ought to try to be as holy as possible through the exercise of discipline (meaning they try to exclude from their midst those who are obviously evil), but that they ought to do so with the greatest of humility and caution. And, discipline, when exercised, ought to be exercised in an orderly fashion by the entire church and not by a single individual.

Reflection: Calvin’s idea that the true church exists wherever there is right preaching and right administration of the sacraments is one of his great gifts to the church. This is what allows us to work and worship with churches of all denominations knowing that they don’t have to be just like us. It also allows us, as Presbyterians to experiment with liturgy and practices as well as expand our understanding of how God works in the world, including the full inclusion of all people into the life and work of our church.

Questions:

1. What do you consider to be the essential functions of the church?
2. Why is it important for you to continue to be active in a church community?
3. What similarities and differences do you see in the churches you have attended?