

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 1 – Part 4
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: We pick up Calvin’s discussion of the church as he examines what it means to call the church holy. He believes this examination is important because if we define holy as being perfect in every respect then there will be “...no church at all” (pg. 1031). Holiness for Calvin is not a static state in which the church is supposed to find itself, but it is instead “...the sense that it is daily advancing and is not yet perfect: it makes progress from day to day but has not yet reached its goal of holiness...” (pg. 1031). To be holy then is to be the church at work striving to live the Christ-like life, knowing that while it cannot obtain absolute perfection, it ought to still strive after it. In addition, while the church is not perfect, it is forgiven and thus lives in a new, holy relationship with God. Calvin puts it this way, “...but because they...aspire to holiness and perfect purity, the cleanliness (perfection) that they have not yet fully attained is granted them by God’s kindness” (pg. 1032), meaning God sees us as forgiven and holy people.

Calvin defends this view of holiness by referencing the history of the people of God in that there was never a perfect community, either in the Old Testament or in the New. The church was always composed of imperfect people. Some of whom were more faithful and others who were less faithful. Even so, “...neither the vices of the few or the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith...” (pg. 1033), meaning that even as a community of imperfect people the church could still profess what it believes, even if it cannot fully live it. Also along the way, Christians are to be humble and not “...to be cocksure of our perfection” (pg. 1034). They are simply to give thanks that they are admitted into the church and the Kingdom of God through forgiveness of sins. “Not only does the Lord through forgiveness of sins receive and adopt us once and for all into the church but through the same means he preserves and protects us there” (pg. 1035). As many have said, Christians are not perfect, just forgiven.

At this point, Calvin moves into a discussion of the “keys of the church” (pg. 1035). This is a reference to the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus gives to Peter, the keys of the Kingdom, which include the forgiveness of sins. The Roman Church claimed that it alone possessed this power to forgive. Calvin disagrees and sees it instead as a gift for the true church (whatever brand it might be) to “...perpetually discharge this office among believers” (pg. 1035) in order that sins be continually forgiven. It is to be offered not by a priest, but by “...the preaching of the gospel or by the administration of the sacraments...” (pg. 1036). In other words, wherever the Good News of Christ’s forgiving love is preached and demonstrated in the sacraments, there is the invitation for all to be forgiven regardless of the severity of their sins. He sums up how generous the church is to be with offering forgiveness. “Therefore, let us not by our unkindness bar the way to God’s mercy, which manifests itself so generously” (pg. 1040).

Reflections: One of the great statements about the church is that it is a hospital for sinners and not a hotel for saints. This the way we view the church; that it is composed of people on both individual and collective journeys, striving to follow Jesus as best they can. The role of the church is to give guidance and forgiveness, so that when we mess up, and lose our way, we can once again find the path that God has set for us in Christ. We are a community of imperfect people, working together to profess our faith in order that Spirit can guide as best it can.

Questions:

1. What images come to mind when you hear the word holy associated with the word church?
2. How do you strive to be more faithful every day?
3. How has forgiveness impacted your life?