

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 - Chapter 2

A COMPARISON OF THE FALSE AND TRUE CHURCH

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 2 is Calvin's justification for the Reformed churches breaking from the Roman Church. What we need to understand is that the Roman church of Calvin's day is not the Roman Catholic church of today. The Roman church of Calvin's day, especially the Papacy, was focused on wealth, power and privilege as much as or more than on the proclamation of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

**Summary:** Calvin begins with a reminder of his definition of the true church. It is where the ministry of Word and sacrament is rightly conducted and where, even in the face of "*trivial errors*" (pg. 1041), the central doctrines of the church are mostly maintained. However, he continues, "*...as soon as falsehood breaks into...religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of sacraments destroyed, surely the death of the church follows*" (pg. 1041). Calvin sees this destruction happening in the Roman Church. It is happening where 1) the proclamation of the Word has been exchanged for the superstitions of the mass and 2) the Roman church claims that the true church exists only where there is Apostolic succession (meaning where leadership has been passed from bishop to bishop).

By superstitions in the mass he is referring to the belief that the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus (transubstantiation) and that the sacrament is in the sole possession of the Roman Church. This Calvin, argues is not Biblical. In terms of Apostolic succession, Calvin notes that the Eastern churches (what we call the Orthodox Churches) can make the same claim to Apostolic authority as does Rome, even though Rome does not recognize them (the two churches split in 1054 CE). Thus, Rome has not only lost its way theologically (the mass) but in its understanding of the nature of church authority (Apostolic succession rather than proclamation of the Gospel). For Calvin, this means that the Roman church is at risk of being a false rather than a true church.

Though it might appear otherwise, this declaration, that the Roman church may not be a true church is a difficult one for Calvin to make. It is difficult because Calvin believes in the unity of the church. Therefore, he takes seriously the call to avoid schism and seek unity. However, he believes that he cannot join with the Roman Church because the Roman Church is "*...contaminated with idolatry, superstition and ungodly doctrine*" (pg. 1051). Even so, Calvin believes that there are traces of the true church within the Roman Church. These traces include baptism and what he refers to as "*other vestiges*" (pg. 1052), meaning doctrines such as the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ. Thus, Calvin makes a distinction between the Papacy (which he considers to be corrupt) and local congregations (which still retain some of the truth of the church).

**Reflection:** For those of us of a certain age (I am 62 as I write this) we can remember when the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant and Reformed churches would not recognize one another. We each wanted to lay claim to being the true church. Over time we have come to realize that while we do not agree on all matters (mass/communion and ordination among them) we have far more that unites us, than separates us. We recognize each other as true churches and we recognize each other's baptisms (The PCUSA and the Roman Catholic Church have a formal agreement on baptism). Together, we are working to unite the church in the light and love of Jesus Christ.

**Questions:**

1. What is your view of what makes for a true church?
2. How do you see your church living up to your understanding?
3. Are there churches you would consider not to be true churches? Why or why not?