

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 3 – Part 1

THE DOCTORS AND MINSTERS OF THE CHURCH, THEIR ELECTION AND OFFICE

In this chapter, Calvin examines the roll of leadership in the church. What we need to remember as we move through this section is that Calvin essentially offered a radically different view and form of church leadership from any that existed during his lifetime. He defends these changes on both Biblical and theological grounds.

**Summary:** Calvin begins by asking a key question, *“Why does God need men’s service?”* In other words, if God is sovereign, as Calvin claims God to be, why does God need our help at all to draw people to God and to teach them about God. Couldn’t God just do it? Calvin’s answer is *“...because he (God) does not dwell among us in visible presence we have said that he uses this ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work...just as a workman uses a tool to do his work...he takes some to serve as ambassadors in the world to be interpreters of his secret will and, in short, to represent his person”* (pg. 1053). For this reason, he argues, people should be reverent and respectful to those who teach, even though each is simply *“a puny man risen from the dust...”* (pg. 1054). The office of pastor is for Calvin, the *“sinew by which believers are held together in one body”* (pg. 1055). This is so not because of the person of the minister, but because they are the ones gifted by God to interpret the Word of God for the congregation. And it is the Word that orients people to the Spirit and to eternal life.

The leading of the church however is not limited to ministers. Those who preside over the government of the church are *“...first Apostles, then prophets, thirdly evangelists, fourthly pastors and finally teachers”* (pg. 1056). Calvin comments that while pastors and teachers have ongoing positions in the church, God raises up apostles, prophets and evangelists only when the times demand it. In fact, those three occasional offices *“...were not established in the church as permanent ones, but only for that time when churches were to be erected where none existed before or...to lead the church back from the rebellion of Antichrist. Nonetheless I call this office ‘extraordinary’, because in duly constituted churches it has no place”* (pg. 1057). This is a reference to Martin Luther whom Calvin believed to be a modern Apostle called to lead the church away from the Papacy.

Returning to the role of the pastor, Calvin states that pastors have three particular functions. They are to *“...proclaim the gospel and to administer the sacraments...and exercise upright discipline”* (pg. 1059). This teaching is to be done publicly and privately. In terms of where pastors serve, they are to be assigned to one church, but are to be available to assist other churches. In so doing however they are not to be *“...dashing about aimlessly without an assignment, rashly gathering together in one place, and forsaking their church at pleasure, because they are more concerned about their own advantage than about upbuilding the church...that each person, content with their own limits, should not break into another man’s province”* (pg. 1059). This concept is important because pastors, as ordinary people, are often tempted to become overly involved in another pastor’s church, or perhaps even “stealing” another congregation.

**Reflections:** the role of the minister in the modern church carries the same functions as it did in Calvin’s time. They are to preach, teach, counsel and help to maintain a sense of order in the life of the church. Thus, ministers, in the Reformed tradition, are trained in Bible, theology, preaching, teaching and counseling. In addition, as the church has taken on more of the trappings of the corporate world, pastors are often seen as the CEOs of the church, which requires an additional set of gifts. In terms of pastors quickly moving from church to church, or interfering in the lives of congregations not their own, most denominations have rules which attempt to minimize these situations.

**Questions:**

1. What do you see as the minister’s most important role?
2. How important do think the role of minister is and why?
3. How has the coming and going of ministers impacted your faith?