

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 3 – Part 2

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 opens this part of his discussion with an examination of the Biblical words that the Apostle Paul uses to describe church leaders. These include “*bishops*’, ‘*presbyters*’, ‘*pastors*’ and ‘*ministers*’” (pg. 1060). Calvin argues that Paul uses these terms interchangeably as he describes those who are called to the ministry of the Word (meaning those called to tell people about Jesus through preaching and teaching). In addition, there are other leaders, Calvin notes, to which scripture refers, whose roles include governing and caring for the poor. Those who are called to govern are “*...elders chosen from the people, who were charged with the...exercise of discipline along with the bishops...this office of governance is necessary for all ages*” (pg. 1061).

The care of the poor is given to the deacons. Calvin believed that there were two kinds of deacons; those who distribute money (alms) and those who do the physical care for the poor. “*If we accept this...there will be two kinds of deacons: one to serve the church in administering the affairs of the poor; the other caring for the poor themselves...*” (pg. 1061). In an interesting note, Calvin mentions women as those who can be deacons because the only role (as he reads scripture) in which women were allowed to engage in the church was that of caring for the poor.

Calvin next addresses the “calling” of persons (in his case men) to the ministry of the Word. He believes that because “*...there is nothing in which order should be more diligently observed than in establishing government...if a man were to be considered a true minister of the church, he must first have been duly called, then he must respond to his calling, that is he must undertake and carry out the tasks enjoined*” (pg. 1062). Calling involves for Calvin four points. 1) that minsters should have a sincere fear of God and desire to build up the church as well as the proper education 2) that ministers must be carefully chosen by the church 3) that ministers should be called and elected by the people of the church 4) that ministers are ordained and installed by the laying on of hands.

These points were in many ways a radical departure from the practices of the medieval Roman Church. In the Roman Church, it was bishops who chose and ordained priests, and priests (and even bishops) did not have to have any theological education. Calvin’s views were not a reaction to these practices, but were based on a careful reading of scripture. In the scriptures Calvin notes that those called to leadership were to be people of faith and knowledge and were to be called by a vote of the people (Acts 14:23).

**Reflections:** The concepts of ministry offered in this chapter are still in effect in the life of the Presbyterian Church today. Deacons are still those tasked with caring for the poor. Elders are still those tasked with governing the church and are elected by the church members. Ministers (today men and women) must be able to demonstrate both adequate education and calling, have that call verified by the wider church, and must be ordained (along with deacons and elders) by the laying on of hands. This practice has served the church well and insured that as Calvin puts it, all things are done decently and in order.

Questions:

1. Why do you think that there need to be ordained leaders in the church?
2. Why do you think that it is important (if you do) that ministers have both education and calling?
3. Why do you think it is important (if you do) that ministers, elders and deacons be elected by the church and not appointed by someone else?