

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 4 – Part 2
THE CONDITION OF THE ANCIENT CHURCH, AND THE KIND OF GOVERNMENT IN USE
BEFORE THE PAPACY

In this chapter, Calvin offers a brief history of church government prior to the rise of the Papacy. The role of the Papacy (the Bishop of Rome) and the organization of the government of the Roman Church as it was in Calvin's age and now in ours, is very different from the organization of church government for the first several hundred years of the early church.

Summary: One of the central questions that Calvin needed to deal with was, how ought the church spend the money it receives. He begins by noting that *"You will frequently find both in the decrees of the synods and in ancient writers that all that the church possesses, either in lands or in money, is the patrimony of the poor"* (pg. 1074). And those who handle it *"...should remember that they are not handling their own goods but those appointed for the needs of the poor"* (pg. 1074). Even so he writes, *"It is fair and sanctioned also by the law of the Lord, that those who work for the church be supported at public expense...consequently the distribution was then such that the ministers did not lack food and the poor were not neglected...having only enough for their needs"* (pg. 1074). Meaning, that ministers and other church workers ought to be cared for by the church.

With that in mind Calvin offers his fourfold division of church income; *"one for clergy, another for the poor, a third for repair of churches and other buildings, a fourth for the poor, both foreign and indigenous"* (pg. 1075). The second mention of money for the poor was money that went to the bishops to be dispersed in areas not ordinarily reached by individual churches. Calvin makes it clear that *"the bishop was not allowed to take anything for his own use, except what was sufficient for moderate and frugal food and clothing. If anyone began to go to excess...he was deprived of office"* (pg. 1075). Calvin next addresses money spent on sacred things. He admired the early church leaders because *"At first they spent very little on the embellishment of sacred things; afterward, although the church became gradually richer, they still kept moderation in this respect"* (pg. 1075). Calvin also tells stories of bishops melting down their golden vessels in order to give the money to the poor for food.

At this point Calvin shifts to the preparation of persons for ministry. He states that the early church spent years preparing men for the ministry. This preparation began with taking on small tasks (opening and closing the church) and only slowly allowed them to take on the tasks of sub-deacon and then presbyter (Minister). Once these individuals had been through their apprenticeship they would have to be approved by the clergy and the people before they could be ordained. *"The freedom of the people to choose their own bishops was long preserved; no one was to be thrust into office who was not acceptable to all"* (pg. 1079). This was even the case with the Bishop of Rome (Pope) and was confirmed by Pope Leo (440-461) in multiple statements. Nonetheless, the church did not simply hold elections for which people ran for presbyter or bishop. Instead the larger church would train and then recommend clergy for the people to approve or reject them. If a candidate was rejected, the larger church would have to make another recommendation. Finally, all ordinations were accomplished by the laying on of hands.

Reflections: In many ways, the church today still follows these practices. Money is used to support pastors, care for the poor and is used to maintain church property. In the PCUSA, the people have final say over who their pastors are and how much they get paid. In addition, pastors are vetted by the larger church before the people can accept or reject them.

Questions:

1. What do you think of the fourfold use of church funds?
2. Do you think people working for the church ought to be paid and why/why not?
3. What sort of preparation do you think clergy need before they are ordained?