

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 5

THE ANCIENT FORM OF GOVERNMENT WAS COMPLETELY OVERTHROWN BY THE TYRANNY  
OF THE PAPACY

In this chapter, Calvin reflects on the state of the church of Rome in his day and time. He will argue that they have abandoned any semblance of church leadership/government as it is either described in scripture or as it was exhibited by the early church. In what follows you will find Calvin's utter condemnation of the Roman Church. As we read about his views, we need to remember is that the Roman Church today is not the Roman Church of the 1540s.

**Summary:** Calvin begins by condemning the practice of the church appointing persons to office who are not qualified to be presbyters. He notes that the church appoints those "...who know how to plead in a court rather than how to preach in a church" (pg. 1084), and others who are "boys scarcely ten years old" (pg. 1085) who are made bishops by the Pope, regardless of their lack of any scriptural or theological knowledge. This occurs in part because the people have no say in the selection of their presbyters or bishops. "The whole power has been transferred to the canons (higher church officials) alone. They confer the episcopate on whom they please; they introduce him directly to the people, but to be adored, not to be examined" (pg. 1085). This transfer of power happened because the church found excuses for so doing, including, that the people were too unruly to vote, the people were negligent in voting and that because as the Apostle's successors, they (the church leaders) are the only ones with the right to appoint presbyters and bishops.

The results of these actions are manifold. It creates "...not presbyters to lead and feed the people but priests to perform sacrifices" (pg. 1088), deacons who know nothing about their offices, and priests who "think themselves promoted to an honor" (pg. 1088) rather than to an office they are obligated to discharge. In the process those ordained are often illiterate and ill equipped for ministry. They have received their ordination by purchasing it (pg. 1090) and intend it only as a way of earning a living. Often, given the political connections a priest has, they might be given multiple congregations, which they only seldom if ever visit; sending someone else to preach or teach. For Calvin one of the gravest outcomes of this process is what he refers to as mercenary priests; priests who have no parish. These priests are hired for "...celebrating masses or chanting, and earn a living, so to speak, by the fees they collect for this" (pg. 1093).

In terms of bishops and parish priests he accuses them of acting as if a pastor's job "...were to do nothing" (pg. 1095) except to make an occasional visit and collect income. Bishops, he argues, see it beneath their dignity to preach to the people. He describes them as "...rude asses, who do not grasp even the...rudiments of faith...and if they are learned...they deem the bishopric nothing more than a title of splendor..." (pg. 1097). Finally, Calvin discusses church income, which he argues is a constant place for quarrels because people fight over it. And, rather than giving to the poor, most of it is used for "superfluous possessions" (pg. 1101) which benefit no one other than those who possess them; leaving little if any for the wants and needs of the people. Rather "...daily alms are consumed in this abyss (of the church)" (pg. 1101).

**Reflections:** While Calvin may appear to be a bit harsh when discussing the church, he is in fact offering a relatively accurate portrayal of the Roman Church in the 1500's. It had become a place of power, possessions and intrigue. For us, Calvin's observations can serve as a cautionary tale of what happens when a church ignores the basics of church government; the training of pastors, the division of powers between pastors, elders and people and the right of the people to choose their own leaders.

**Questions:**

1. Why, if you do, do you think it is important for the church to choose its own leaders?
2. Why, if you do, do you think it is important for the church to share with the poor?
3. Why, if you do, do you think the church ought to live modestly rather than acquire "superfluous possessions"?