John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 6
THE PRIMACY OF THE PAPAL SEE

In this chapter, Calvin begins his discussion of the Roman Church's belief that the Papacy centered in Rome is the ultimate seat of authority for the church universal (Calvin will continue this discussion in Chapter 7). The word "see" refers to a church that has primacy over other churches. In the early church, there were five sees each claiming a connection with an Apostle: Jerusalem (Peter and James), Rome (Peter and Paul), Antioch (Peter), Constantinople (Andrew) and Alexandria (Mark). All those cities other than Jerusalem were also large, wealthy centers of commerce and government within the Roman Empire, which is a major reason their churches became more powerful and important than other churches.

Summary: Calvin discusses the issue of primacy because he wants to explain to his readers why Reformed churches are not guilty of schism (breaking the bonds of Christian fellowship), a charge which had been brought against them by Rome. His argument can be summarized as follows: The issue of primacy (Rome ruling supreme) "*…originated neither in Christ's institution, nor the practice of the ancient church*" *(pg. 1102).* In other words, the concept of primacy was not mentioned by Jesus or the early church, therefore Reformed churches have not broken from the church because the church centered in Rome is not "the church." It is merely one church among many.

Calvin next offers refutation of the arguments used by the Roman church to prove they are "the church." First, Rome argues that because there was only one high priest in Jerusalem, there ought to be only one high bishop (Pope) in the church. Calvin counters that, "*…there is no reason why what has been useful in one nation (Israel) should be extended to the whole earth*" (pg. 1103). Second, Rome argues that Jesus commanded Peter to feed Jesus' sheep (John 21:15). Calvin replies, "*But as Peter received the command from the Lord, so he (Peter) exhorts all other presbyters to feed the church (1 Peter 5:2)*" (pg. 1104). Third, Rome argues that the "keys to the Kingdom" were given only to Peter. Calvin writes, "*Since heaven is opened to us by the doctrine of the gospel, the word 'keys' affords an appropriate metaphor…but then what he (Jesus) promised (the keys) to one (Peter) he confers at the same time upon all the rest…(Matt. 18:18)*" (pg. 1105). Fourth, Rome argues that Peter was given more honor than the other disciples. Calvin states, "*Run over all (scripture): you will find nothing but that he (Peter) was one of the Twelve, the equal of the rest, and their companion and not their master*" (pg. 1108).

The primacy of Christ as universal bishop is at the heart of Calvin's next argument. He contends that Christ alone is head of the church and can never be replaced by a human being. "*For it (the church) has Christ as its sole Head, under whose sway all of us cleave to one another*" (pg. 1110). Finally, he quotes two early church Fathers, Jerome (347-420) and Cyprian (200-258) who make it clear that the only true Bishop of the church is Christ, and they reject an earthly universal human bishop. Calvin concludes with these words, "*Where is the primacy of the Roman see, if the unbroken episcopate rests in Christ's hands alone, and each bishop his part of it?*" (pg. 1117-8).

Reflection: The history of the church has been one where various churches or denominations have claimed to be the only church. Included in these churches are the Roman, Orthodox and several Protestant denominations. The gift we are given in this chapter is that we can never claim to be the only, true church. We are given the freedom to see other churches and denominations as co-equal with us in the work of God in Jesus Christ.

Questions:
1. What do you think of churches' claims to be the only, true church?
2. How would you respond to someone who said their church was the only church people ought to belong to?
3. Do you consider all churches part of the universal church, or are there some you don't?