

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 7 – Part 1

THE ORIGIN AND GROWTH OF THE ROMAN PAPACY

In the previous chapter, Calvin described how the church in Rome claimed for itself power over the church universal. In this chapter, he examines the process whereby the bishop of Rome claimed the title of Pope, or head of the church. A note: the word “see” refers to a larger church that has authority over other churches. There were five sees in the early church: Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria.

Summary: The process of the Bishop of Rome seeing himself as head of the entire church, Calvin argues, was a rather lengthy and convoluted one. As the church first organized there was no differentiation between the bishop of Rome and other bishops. While the Council of Nicaea (325CE), gave the church at Rome the first seat in all future church councils (councils were official church gatherings to decide issues of doctrine), this position was merely one of honor and not power. Calvin makes this clear when he quotes the bishop of Rome referring to other bishops as “‘brother’, or ‘fellow bishop’ or ‘colleague’” (pg.1121). This equality among bishops would make sense because “...the Council of Carthage forbade that anyone be called ‘prince of priests’ or ‘first bishop’, but only bishop of the prime see” (pg. 1121). Jerome echoed this when he wrote, “If a bishop may be at Rome...he is of the same merit and priesthood (as other bishops)” (pg. 1121).

This understanding of the equality of bishops did not, however stop the bishops in Rome from slowly pursuing greater power. It began with bishops such as Leo (440-461CE) interfering in issues which were within the purview of other bishops. He did this by receiving bishops from smaller cities across the Empire who had complaints against their see. There were, as Calvin notes, several occasions when the bishops of Rome overturned rulings of other bishops, but were later forced to back down and accept the will of the other bishops. In addition, while the Roman bishop attempted to insert himself in other matters before the church, such as consecrations of bishops, he was still limited to being present and not presiding (pg.1125).

The rise of the Bishop of Rome as universal Pope accelerated under Gregory I (540-604) as the Roman Empire in the west was falling apart due to invasions by Germanic tribes. “In order that, amid such chaotic political conditions, the faith at least might remain whole, or surely might not utterly perish, all bishops on every side allied themselves more closely to the Roman pontiff. This resulted in the marked increase...of its power” (pg. 1131). Even so, Gregory not only allowed bishops to disagree with his rulings, but rejected other bishops calling him “‘universal pope’” (pg. 1135). This changed when in 607 CE when the Roman Emperor Phocas declared “...that Rome should be the head of all churches” (pg. 1135). The dominance of the Roman see over the church universal was later reaffirmed by Charlemagne (742-814) in exchange for the Papal blessing on his installation as Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

Reflections: Every church and every denomination is in transition. While we might like to believe that churches ought not to change, they do. Churches are impacted by social, political and scientific forces. They are also impacted by the narratives that they tell about themselves. One of those narratives for the Roman church was that Peter had established the papacy at Rome and thus the bishop of Rome held sway over the church universal. As Calvin points out, this was not so, and in fact this belief was rejected for the first five-hundred years of the life of the church. Even so, this history helps us understand why the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, etc.) rejected the claims of the papacy and felt justified in creating a new and different kind of church.

Questions:

1. Prior to reading this article, what was your understanding of how the papacy arose?
2. Where do you see your church and denomination in transition?
3. In what ways, do you think your church or denomination ought to change/remains the same?