

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 7 – Part 2

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. Please note that the Roman church of today is not the Roman church Calvin knew.

**Summary:** Calvin argues that following Charlemagne’s declaration of Rome as the head of the church universal (768CE) the power of the papacy increased for two reasons. The first was that local bishops saw that they could increase their own wealth and power by aligning with Rome. The second was that they were unaware of the history and theology of the early church which had forbidden the rise of a bishop above all other bishops. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), who was an influential abbot, believed that the declining morals of the papacy were a symptom of Rome’s increasingly abusive powers, *“Abbots are pulled away from their bishops; bishops from their archbishops, etc. strange indeed if this can be excused! By behaving in this way, you have the fullness of power but not of righteousness”* (pg. 1137).

This increasing power of the papacy led to a situation that Calvin describes in this way. *“But the pontiffs themselves when they speak of their authority...declare that the power to command is in their hands while with others rests the necessity to obey; that all of their pronouncements are to be received as if confirmed by Peter’s divine voice; that provincial synods, because they do not have the pope present, have no force (that)...they leave no jurisdiction on earth to control or restrain their lust if they abuse their boundless power...this is great imperiousness for one man to set himself up as judge of all”* (pg. 1138). These beliefs about the papacy were enhanced by documents, supposedly written by early bishops, asserting papal supremacy (all of which turned out to be forged). These led to the assertion, *“...that the pope cannot err, that the pope is above councils, the pope is the universal bishop of all churches and the supreme head of the church on earth”* (pg. 1140).

As Calvin moves toward the end of his discussion of the papacy he wants to make the argument that the pope cannot be the supreme bishop because he is not actually, by Calvin’s definition, a bishop. He argues that even if everything the Roman church says about Peter establishing the line of popes is true, *“...none of these things has any value unless there be a church and a bishop at Rome...the first task of the bishop’s office is to teach the people from God’s word. The second is to administer the sacraments...Let them say, therefore in what way they would have him regarded as a bishop, who does not even in pretense touch any part of his office with his little finger”* (pg. 1143). In other words, the pope, who at that time, did not serve as a pastoral bishop but as a ruler, or king, could not be a bishop because he did not serve like a bishop.

Calvin concludes with the following statement. *“To bind Christ, the Spirit, and the church to a place, so that whoever may rule there, even if he be the devil, is still considered to be the vicar of Christ, and head of the church because it was once Peter’s see-this is say, is not only impious and insulting to Christ, but...absurd and alien to common sense”* (pg. 1147).

**Reflections:** Power and the desire for it, are universal. Throughout history, men and women of almost all cultures have sought to control others; to dominate those around them. The church, has not been exempt. The medieval Roman church was but one example of this. Within the Protestant church, there have been pastors, assemblies and denominations, that wanted to place themselves above all other Christians; to declare themselves to be the only ones who speak for God. As Presbyterians, we are called to resist such tendencies and to live with humility knowing that only Christ speaks for God.

Questions:

1. Have you ever watched someone who was granted “all power”? What was that like?
2. Why do you think some Christians want to believe only they can speak for God?
3. Where do you go to discover what God wants you to believe and to do?