

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 8 – Part 1

THE POWER OF THE CHURCH WITH RESPECT TO ARTICLES OF FAITH

In this chapter, Calvin deals with the question of who has the authority to set belief or doctrine for the church and how ought those beliefs and doctrines be set. He needs to do so because the Roman church and the Reformed churches hold different views. The Roman church favors tradition and the Reformed churches favor scripture.

Summary: Calvin begins this chapter by reminding his readers that the purpose of this section is to build up the church, and not simply pick quarrels with the Roman church. He then explains how the church can be built up. *“Now the only way to build up the church is for ministers themselves to endeavor to preserve Christ’s authority for himself; this can only be secured if what he (Jesus) has received from the Father be left to him, namely that he (Jesus) alone is the schoolmaster of the church”* (pg. 1150). In other words, the church should look to Christ alone for the foundational material upon which to build the church. The reason for so doing is that the church may be *“...kept within limits and (not) drawn hither and thither according to men’s whims”* (pg. 1150).

Calvin then reminds his readers that *“...whatever authority and dignity the Spirit in scripture accords to either priests or prophets, or apostles, or successors to apostles, it is wholly given not to men personally, but to the ministry to which they have been appointed”* (pg. 1150). This is critical for Calvin because it forces Christians to focus on the message and not the messenger; on the Word and not on the witness. He offers the prophets and apostles as those who focused on the message. The prophets only proclaimed what they had received from God. The apostles only proclaimed what they had received from Jesus. And because Jesus only spoke what God commanded him to speak (John 7:16), he has become God’s *“sole wisdom, light and truth”* (pg. 1153). Thus, Christians are to listen to Jesus and Jesus alone in matters of doctrine.

Christians can find what Jesus taught in the scriptures. *“But where it pleased God to raise up a more visible form of the church, he will to have his Word set down and sealed in writing that priests might seek from it what to teach people and that every doctrine to be taught should conform to that rule...this means that they should teach nothing strange or foreign to that doctrine...”* (pg. 1153). And because the scriptures are based on the Word delivered by the incarnate Christ (God’s Word made flesh) then, as the Apostle Paul declared, *“...God will not speak hereafter as he did before...through some and through others; nor will he add prophecies to prophecies, or revelations to revelations”* (pg. 1154). What this means is that scripture, and the traditions based on scripture, should be the only guide for the church because there will be no new direct word from God. Calvin sums this up this way, *“No other word is to be held as the Word of God and given place as such in the church than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the...Word”* (pg. 1155).

Reflections: The continuing struggle within any church is the issue of where do we look for truth? Do we look to an individual? Do we look to holy books? Do we look to traditions? Do we look to our feelings? As Presbyterians, we have a hierarchy for seeking truth. Scripture is first. Tradition is second. Community experience is third. Personal experience is fourth. While we believe that scripture is our primary source of truth, we also understand that all scripture is interpreted; meaning every human being reads scripture through their own lenses; thus, different people can find different things within scripture. This is the reason that tradition and experience are also important as we seek truth. Because, if we allow them to speak as we read scripture, they can open for us new and possibly better understandings of truth than we might have otherwise found.

Questions:

1. How would you explain to someone the role that scripture plays for you?
2. Where do you seek truth in your life?
3. How has a worshipping community (if they have) help you to discover truth?