

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 8 – Part 2

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: We pick up in this article where we left off in our last, with Calvin declaring that scripture is the sole guide for the church in determining truth. *“Yet this I have said, is the difference between the apostles and their successors: the former were sure and genuine scribes of the Holy Spirit, and their writings are to be considered articles of God; but the sole office of others is to teach what is provided and sealed in the Holy Scriptures. We therefore teach that faithful ministers are not permitted to coin any new doctrine, but that they are simply to cleave to that doctrine to which God has subjected all men without exception”* (pg. 1157). Calvin goes on to say that this rule, that the scriptures alone lead us to truth, applies to the church as well as to individuals. By this statement Calvin draws a clear line between the Roman church which is guided more by tradition, and the Reformed churches that are guided by scripture.

Calvin next takes up the claim of the Roman church to being infallible in matters of doctrine; meaning the Roman church claims to be able to speak for God and to speak without error. Calvin’s first objection to this doctrine (aside from his earlier statements on the role of scripture) is that while the Roman church believes that it can *“...coin dogma after their own whim, which in accordance with this rule they afterwards require to be subscribed to as articles of faith...”* (pg. 1159) the fact is that the ability to interpret God’s word and commands was given to every Christian and not only to a select few. And *“...the whole fellowship of believers, supplied with a manifold diversity of gifts, has...been endowed with a far fuller and richer treasure of heavenly wisdom than each one separately”* (pg. 1160). Even so, Calvin argues, Christians ought to not wander beyond the scriptures because as people of limited spiritual insight they need its guidance and direction.

Calvin’s second objection is that that church is composed of Spiritually gifted but imperfect people, thus there is no way for a church to be infallible. He writes that, *“Indeed, God distributes the gifts of his Spirit to each of the members...so that the whole body may not lack anything essential. But the riches of the church are always far from the supreme perfection of which our adversaries boast”* (pg. 1160). In other words, God insures that the church has what it needs to operate (to preach, teach and care), but at the same time, reminds the people within the church that they are still sinners in need of regular forgiveness. This should lead to humility and a wariness wherein the church ought to *“distrust all the devisings of its own reason...(in order to)...not believe anything that is thrust in under the title of the Spirit apart from the gospel”* (pg. 1163). To be clear, this does not mean for Calvin that the church cannot create doctrine. It only means that such doctrine (the Trinity for example) must be founded upon scripture.

Reflections: One of the great sins of the church is that of believing it can speak inerrantly for God. This sin is not limited to the Roman church. Many churches over the centuries, and especially in the modern era, have made this claim. One either believes as they do or one is not a Christian. This can be alluring to people who seek certainty in times of anxiety. If we are unsure of the truth, it is nice to know that there is someone out there that can impart truth to us. Following Calvin’s lead, we as Presbyterians have made it clear that we do not know the full truth; that as sinful people we do the best we can, but that we will never know the full truth because of our human limitations.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin’s idea that we are all able to be interpreters of scripture?
2. What do you think of churches claiming to be the only church with the truth?
3. What do you think of the idea that we as Presbyterians might not always get doctrine right?