

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 9
COUNCILS AND THEIR AUTHORITY

In this chapter, Calvin deals with the issue of the power of councils. A council is nothing more than an official gathering of church leaders (in the case of the Roman church, a gathering of bishops) that makes doctrinal decisions for the church. The most famous council was the Council of Nicaea (325CE), from which we get the Nicene Creed, which sets out the most basic beliefs about the relationship between Jesus, God and the Spirit; or as many of us know it, the Trinity. The role of councils mattered to Calvin because the Roman church claimed that its councils had the authority to set doctrine for all Christians everywhere and those who disagreed with them could be excommunicated from the church.

Summary: Calvin begins this chapter noting that he would love nothing more than to have every council “*honored by all*” (pg. 1166), but that to do so councils must be “*governed by his (Christ’s) word and Spirit*” (pg. 1166); meaning governed by scripture. What this means is that simply having bishops gather does not make for a true Council (one that speaks truly for Christ in matters of doctrine). “*As a consequence, it will benefit our adversaries but little to mention councils of bishops a thousand times over...(because)...ungodly and evil bishops can just as much conspire against Christ as good and honest ones can come together in his name*” (pg. 1167). Calvin continues, “*I deny that they are gathered in his (Christ’s) name...who not content with...scripture...concoct some novelty out of their own heads*” (pg. 1167). In other words, only when scripture undergirds all of a council’s discussions and decisions, ought their pronouncements be held as true by the church.

Calvin offers several additional arguments as to why all councils should not be seen as always speaking for Christ. First, they may contain false teachers. As the Apostle Peter put it, “*As there were false prophets among the ancient folk, so also among you there will be false teachers*” (pg. 1168). Second, their pronouncements may not agree with scripture (pg. 1171). Third, councils often disagree with other councils. “*However it may be, we cannot otherwise distinguish between councils that are contradictory...unless we weight them all (in)...the Word*” (pg. 1173). Finally, the councils themselves are fallible because of the undue influence one attendee might have on the others (pg. 1174).

Fortunately, Calvin offers a way of judging whether a council’s doctrine is true to Christ. “*But whenever a decree of any council is brought forward, I should like men first of all...to ponder at what time it was held, on what issue and with what sort of intention, what sort of men were present; then to examine the standard of scripture...(and if)...scripture would stand out in the higher place, with everything subject to its standard*” (pg. 1171). This discernment allows Christians to decide for themselves between true councils such as Nicaea, which affirmed the Biblical concept of the divinity of Jesus, and false councils that created the concepts “*...of purgatory, of intercession of saints, of articular confession*” (pg. 1177) and the doctrine that only the priest can drink from the cup at communion (pg. 1178), none of which had scriptural backing.

Reflection: One of the great Presbyterian beliefs that flows from this section of Calvin, is that “*All councils do err*”, meaning no council will ever get everything right. While we do not have the same sort of councils as the Roman and Orthodox churches do, we still have historical documents (confessions and catechisms) that are supposed to help us understand what it is that we believe. The difference is that we do not give them the status of eternal doctrine, but instead, we can disagree with these documents when we believe that scripture is telling us something different. And in fact, we believe that we are to be continually discerning what scripture tells us, even when it disagrees with previous beliefs.

Question:

1. How do you decide what to, or not to, believe?
2. What role does the church play in those decisions?
3. What role do you think the historical church, and its documents, ought to play in those decisions?