**Calvin’s *Institutes of Christian Religion***

Lesson 31: True vs. False Church (Book 4, Chapter 2)

**Chapter 2: A Comparison of the False and the True Church**

1. Main idea: The Roman Catholic Church has departed from true doctrine and worship, thus it is a false church.
2. Recap from last week: The right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments are the marks of where the true Church of God is. Calvin’s mentor and later Reformers added “discipline” to the true marks of a church.
3. “But as soon as falsehood breaks into the citadel of religion and the sum of necessary doctrine is overturned and the use of the sacraments is destroyed, surely the death of the church follows – just as a man’s life is ended when his throat is pierced or his heart mortally wounded.”
4. Take away the foundation of the teaching of the apostles and prophets [Eph 2:20], and the building will crumble. “Therefore, the church must tumble down when that sum of religion dies which alone can sustain it. Again, if the true church is the pillar and foundation of truth [1 Tim 3:15], it is certain that no church can exist where lying and falsehood have gained sway.”

*The Roman Catholic Church*

1. “Since conditions are such under popery, one can understand how much of the church remains there. Instead of the ministry of the Word, a perverse government compounded of lies rules there, which partly extinguishes the pure light, partly chokes it. The foulest sacrilege has been introduced in place of the Lord’s Supper. The worship of God has been deformed by a diverse and unbearable mass of superstitions. Doctrine (apart from which Christianity cannot stand) has been entirely buried and driven out. Public assemblies have become schools of idolatry and ungodliness.”
2. The RCC claims to be the only true church due to its unending succession of bishops [Popes], that supposedly preserve the truth of Christ’s teachings. Anybody who breaks away from the RCC is schismatic and a heretic. But Calvin asks, what about the Greek Orthodox [broke away from the RCC in 1054]? They have a succession of bishops yet you call them heretics and departed from the true faith. If their succession of bishop doesn’t guarantee them to be the true church, how can you make the same claim for yourself?
3. Then Calvin begins to liken the RCC to the error of the Jews in the OT: “The Romanists, therefore, today make no other pretension than what the Jews once apparently claimed when they were reproved for blindness, ungodliness, and idolatry by the Lord’s prophets. For like the Romanists, they boasted gloriously of Temple, ceremonies, and priestly functions, and measured the church very convincingly, as it seemed to them, by these. So in place of the church the Romanists display certain outward appearances which are often far removed from the church and without which the church can very well stand.”
4. “So, although the glory of God sat between the cherubim in the sanctuary [Ezek. 10:4], and he promised his people that this would be his abiding seat; when the priests corrupt his worship with wicked superstitions, he moves elsewhere and strips the place of holiness. If that Temple, which seemed consecrated as God’s everlasting abode, could be abandoned by God and become profane, there is no reason why these men should pretend to us that God is so bound to persons and places, and attached to external observances, that he has to remain among those who have only the title and appearance of the church [Rom. 9:6].”
5. Even the Jews had an unbroken line of priests that began with Aaron but then you have wicked Caiaphas in the time of Jesus. “Especially in the organization of the church nothing is more absurd than to lodge the succession in persons alone to the exclusion of teaching.”
6. “Therefore, although they put forward Temple, priesthood, and the rest of the outward shows, this empty glitter which blinds the eyes of the simple ought not to move us a whit to grant that the church exists where God’s Word is not found.”
7. “Jerusalem is to be distinguished from Babylon, Christ’s church from Satan’s cabal, by the very difference with which Christ distinguishes between them. He says: “He who is of God hears the words of God. The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God.” [John 8:47]”

*Responding to the RCC charge that the Protestants are heretics and schismatics*

1. A heretic is one who “corrupts the sincerity of the faith with false dogmas.” A schismatic is one who “while sometimes even of the same faith, breaks the bond of fellowship.”
2. Calvin responds that true communion in the church is held together by 2 bonds: 1. Agreement in sound doctrine; 2. Brotherly love;
3. Calvin quotes Cyprian approvingly: “The church is one, which is spread abroad far and wide into a multitude by an increase of fruitfulness. As there are many rays of the sun but one light, and many branches of a tree but one strong trunk grounded in its tenacious root, and since from one spring flow many streams, although a goodly number seem outpoured from their bounty and superabundance, still, at the source unity abides. Take a ray from the body of the sun; its unity undergoes no division. Break a branch from a tree; the severed branch cannot sprout. Cut off a stream from its source; cut off, it dries up. So also the church, bathed in the light of the Lord, extends over the whole earth: yet there is one light diffused everywhere.” Heresies and schisms arise because men return not the Source of truth, seek not the Head, and keep not the teaching of the Heavenly Master.
4. Since the Protestants agree in the major tenets of sound doctrine and have not broken away from the true church, then they are neither heretics or schismatics. Rather the shoe is on the other foot and it is the RCC that is heretical.
5. “Christ, I say, forewarned his apostles that they would be cast out of the synagogues for his name’s sake [John 16:2]. Now those synagogues of which he speaks were then considered lawful churches. Since, therefore, it is clear that we have been cast out, and we are ready to show that this happened for Christ’s sake, surely the case ought to be investigated before any decision is made about us, one way or the other. But I willingly grant them this point, if they so desire. For it is enough for me that it behooved us to withdraw from them that we might come to Christ.

*There can be some individual believers within the RCC even though she herself is not the true Church*

1. Just as the OT church fell away by degrees [things got progressively worse], so the RCC has also fallen away by degrees to the point where it is no longer the true church. “The condition of religion among them [RCC] is as corrupt and debased as it was in the Kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam.”
2. Yet, there was always a remnant in Israel, even when evil kings like Ahab reigned. However, just because idolatry and sin prevailed, didn’t mean the remnant were forced to follow those ungodly practices and superstitions.
3. Here’s how Sinclair Ferguson summarizes Calvin: “Yet, it remains true, Calvin acknowledges, that there are believers--however confused--within the pale of Rome. Correspondingly there are "traces of churches," but Rome itself cannot be considered a true church or part of the one true church. In fact Rome gives expression to the spirit of antichrist. Here again is Calvin's ability to see with both eyes. In some Roman communities he was sure there were true believers; in that sense they are churches. Even major distortions of truth and failures with respect to grace do not necessarily mean there are no believers in the community.

The truth is that the heart may be regenerated while the head is not finally cleansed. Calvin appears to have thought that some of them were in fact true believers, however inconsistent theologically and perhaps intimidated personally they were. He understood, and while he disapproved he struggled to exercise wisdom and patience.”

1. Just as the Jews still had circumcision [the sign of the covenant], so too the RCC still has baptism [the sign of the New Covenant], even though it has been twisted in their understanding. Calvin says baptism, “retains its force despite the impiety of men.” He continues, “just as often happens when buildings are pulled down the foundations and ruins remain, so he did not allow his church either to be destroyed to the very foundations by Antichrist or to be leveled to the ground, even though to punish the ungratefulness of men who had despised his word he let it undergo frightful shaking and shattering, but even after this very destruction willed that a half-demolished building remain.”

*The Necessity of Leaving the False Church*

1. “If anyone recognizes the present [RCC] congregations— contaminated with idolatry, superstition, and ungodly doctrine— as churches (in full communion of which a Christian man must stand— even to the point of agreeing in doctrine), he will gravely err. For if they are churches, the power of the keys is in their hands; but the keys have an indissoluble bond with the Word, which has been destroyed from among them. Again, if they are churches, Christ’s promise prevails among them; “Whatever you bind,” etc. [Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23]. But on the contrary, they disown from their communion all that genuinely profess themselves servants of Christ. Accordingly, either Christ’s promise is vain, or they are not, at least in this regard, churches. Finally, instead of the ministry of the Word, they have schools of ungodliness and a sink of all kinds of errors. Consequently, by this reckoning either they are not churches or no mark will remain to distinguish the lawful congregations of believers from the assemblies of Turks.”
2. “Daniel [Dan. 9:27] and Paul [II Thess. 2:4] foretold that Antichrist would sit in the Temple of God. With us, it is the Roman pontiff we make the leader and standard bearer of that wicked and abominable kingdom. The fact that his seat is placed in the Temple of God signifies that his reign was not to be such as to wipe out either the name of Christ or of the church. In them [RCC] Christ lies hidden, half buried, the Gospel overthrown, piety scattered, the worship of God nearly wiped out. In them, briefly, everything is so confused that there we see the face of Babylon rather than that of the Holy City of God.”
3. In sum, the marks of the true Church are so lacking from the RCC that neither any of their congregations nor their whole body constitutes a lawful form of the church, though enough vestiges remain that there can be true believers, though they will be small in number.