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

Lesson 34: The Roman Catholic Abuse of Church Government, Part 2 (Book 4, Chapter 7)

**Chapter 7: The Origin and Growth of the Roman Papacy Until It Raised Itself to Such a Height that the Freedom of the Church was Oppressed, and All Restraint Overthrown**

1. Main idea: Calvin traces the history of the church in Rome and how it had modest power in the early history of the church, but increased in importance and status over time to outright usurpation. As the Roman bishop came to have first place, decay set into the Church. The current Pope of Calvin’s day is even more corrupt. Calvin continues to argue that the Pope has apostatized from the faith and his reign is the kingdom of Antichrist.
2. The Council of Nicaea (325) established Rome as a patriarchy, but only one of four and it’s listed fourth on the list at that! So also in later councils, Rome generally did not preside or rule.
3. Early writers like Cyprian address the Roman pontiff as an equal and did not hesitate to harshly rebuke him as they deemed necessary. Nor did any early pope dare to take up high titles over the other bishops, in which case such claims would have been vigorously opposed. As late as Pope Gregory (540-604), from whose time the current institution of the Roman Catholic Church may be dated, the Roman pontiff did not claim supremacy. In fact, when the patriarch of Constantinople sought to claim a superior status Gregory railed in opposition, describing such an attempt to rule the whole church as the action of Antichrist.
4. Calvin’s 4 arguments from church history against Roman jurisdiction over the whole church:
   1. Ordination: The ancient councils granted the rite of ordination to each of the metropolitans, but overall supremacy to none. Calvin summarizes: "it is certain that anciently the Roman bishop had no power of ordaining except within the bounds of his own patriarchate." Moreover, it was the ancient practice of new patriarchs to present their orthodoxy to the other patriarchs, a practice observed by the Bishops of Rome at least through Gregory (540-604), a sign, Calvin observes, "of equality, not of lordship.”
   2. Censures: Bishops of Rome both inflicted and received censures in the ancient church. Cyprian is quoted: "The brotherly fellowship which binds us together requires that we should mutually admonish each other." "Therefore," Calvin notes, "it does not yet appear in this respect that the Roman bishop possessed any jurisdiction over those who did not belong to his province.”
   3. Councils: Under the empire, ecumenical councils could only be summoned by the emperor. Therefore, Calvin says, "we are unwilling to admit what the Romanists now contend for - i.e. that [the pope] had power over all.”
   4. Appeals: Whoever is the court of final appeal must also be the highest jurisdiction. With this in mind, and ever seeking supremacy, a succession of popes sought to assume authority over appeals in the ancient church, but were "stoutly resisted" by the bishops of France and Africa. The latter were so wearied by pernicious Roman interference that they threatened with excommunication anyone who made appeal to the pope. In this matter, Calvin brings out his horns, noting several fraudulent attempts by Rome, including the use of faked documents, to claim jurisdiction over appeals. These attempts disgraced the dignity of the Roman pontiff and shed light on the avarice for power so notable among the popes.
5. So how did it happen in church history that the Roman bishop/pope/pontiff came to claim supreme authority for itself over the whole church?
   1. Rome took in believing exiles under her protection. Athanasius was expelled from his province during the Arian controversy (affecting the Eastern church) and came to Rome to strengthen her and the Western churches against Arius and his followers. He and other pious exiles looked to Rome as their best help and granted as much power as they could to Rome to defend the Biblical nature of Christ.
   2. Rome took in unbelieving exiles. Some presbyters or bishops who were rightly condemned immediately appealed to Rome and took in some who were actually heretics and should have remained condemned. Think about it as somebody who rightly is under church discipline leaves and tries to join another church. Calvin says, “In Africa, as soon as any rascal came under regular judgment, he fled at once to Rome and heaped many calumnies [lies/slanders] upon his countrymen [in Africa].”
   3. Rome began to ordain bishops outside of her province. The early councils order bishops to be ordained by their metropolitans and nowhere order the Roman bishop to do this except in his own region. Eventually, all Italian bishops came to Rome to be ordained and Rome started sending a representative when metropolitans were being ordained elsewhere.
   4. The Roman pontiff began to use forged documents to claim authority for itself. As more and more began to appeal to Rome, Roman tried to extend his power and authority to provinces in the East and Africa. He claimed that the Council of Nicaea granted this power but was caught using a different council and calling it Nicaea. Then he used a forged letter supposedly written to the Nicaean council.
   5. The Destruction of the Roman Empire. As the Roman empire began to lose territories from other people groups, there was political chaos. In order to preserve the faith and keep it from being shaken, the majority of bishops everywhere allied more closely to the Roman pontiff. The effect was an increase in prestige and power. This would be in the time of Gregory (540-604) and marks when Calvin begins to equate the beginning of the modern Catholic Church in its abuse of power.
   6. Conflict with the Bishop of Constantinople. When the empire was moved to Constantinople (Byzantine Empire), the bishop decreed that Constantinople should have the power that was at Rome since Constantinople was the “New Rome.” So the Roman Pontiff, Leo I (440-461), began to argue more and more that the Roman Pope was the apostolic successor to Peter. It didn’t matter whether the Roman Pope was qualified or had Biblical character. What mattered was apostolic succession from Peter.
6. By the time we get to Calvin’s day, corruption and immorality wreck the Roman Catholic Church. “But what is most unbearable of all, they leave no jurisdiction on earth to control or restrain their lust if they abuse such boundless power.” Or to put it another way, absolute power corrupts absolutely.
7. The Pope is nothing more than a bishop but he doesn’t preach, he doesn’t administer the sacraments, he doesn’t admonish and exhort to correct those who sin and encourage the people in holiness. “The world today is flooded with so many perverse and impious doctrines, full of so many kinds of superstitions, blinded by so many errors, drowned in such great idolatry – there is none of these evils anywhere that does not flow from the Roman see, or at least draw strength there.”
8. But is it right to go so far as to call the Pope the Antichrist? Calvin begins to exegete 2 Thessalonians 2:4 and relevant passages from Daniel and Revelation.
   1. The Antichrist will sit in God’s Temple (2 Thess. 2:4)
   2. The Antichrist’s kingdom will consist of boasting and blaspheming God (Dan 7:25, Rev 3:10, 13:5) so that it’s a spiritual tyranny rather than a physical tyranny.
   3. This spiritual tyranny misuses a semblance of Christ and lurks under the name of the church as under a mask.
   4. When Paul foretells a falling away that is to come (2 Thess 2:3) he means that the seat of abomination will be raised up when a universal apostasy seizes the church.
   5. The Antichrist will deprive God of His honor in order to take it upon himself (2 Thess 2.4)
9. “Since is is clear that the Roman pontiff has shamelessly transferred to himself what belonged to God alone and especially to Christ, we should have no doubt that he is the leader and standard-bearer of that impious and hateful kingdom.”
10. Some Popes have been atheists, denied the truth of Scripture about Jesus, denied the afterlife and realities of heaven and hell. Calvin openly calls out Pope John XXII (1244-1334) who denied the immortality of the soul and said that the soul dies along with the body until the resurrection. John was called to account by the King of France and eventually recanted his position. The implication is that a Pope made a theological error and is therefore not infallible, the mouthpiece of Christ, in the line of apostolic succession of Peter, etc.
11. In church history, you’ve had times where there were multiple Popes all excommunicating each other. The Catholic Church likes to point to history to justify her errors and Calvin willingly takes her on and says, “Let’s look at the history of the church.”