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

Lesson 35: Ecclesiastical Power & Its Abuse by the Roman Catholic Church, Part 1 - Doctrinal (Book 4, Chapters 8-9)

**Chapter 8: The Power of the Church with Respect to Articles of Faith; and How in the Papacy, With Unbridled License, the Church Has Been Led to Corrupt All Purity of Doctrine**

1. In the next several chapters, Calvin will begin to discuss the power or authority of the church. He distinguishes 3 types of ecclesiastical power:
   1. Doctrinal authority – the church may rightly define doctrine and declare its faith against error
   2. Legislative authority – the church may establish polity for its well-ordered governance
   3. Jurisdictional authority – the church’s authority in matters of church discipline
2. Chapters 8-9 deal with doctrinal authority.
3. In 2 Corinthians 10:8 & 13:10, Paul says that the authority given to the ministers of the church is for the up building of the church and not for her destruction.
4. “The only way to build up the church is for the ministers themselves to endeavor to preserve Christ’s authority for Himself; this can only be secured if what Christ has received from his Father be left to Him, namely, that He alone is the schoolmaster of the Church.”
5. In other words, the authority of the church derives from Christ and is only valid if ministered according to the Word of God, which is all about Jesus Christ.
6. In other words, the authority granted to the church when it comes to doctrine comes from the Word of God. The authority resides in the ministry of the Word rather than the minister personally.
7. Ministers speak “from the Lord’s mouth.” Without this, a minister forfeits proper authority. So any time a minister or ministers denominational wide deviate from what God’s Word says, they no longer have authority in the name of Christ.
8. Moses proclaimed nothing to the people that he did not first receive from God. When the people embraced what Moses was saying, Scripture says, “they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.” (Exodus 14:31)
9. The Levitical instructions that God gave to the priests, the priests were then to teach to the people.
10. Malachi 2:7 – “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts.”
11. Ezekiel 3:16-17 – “And at the end of seven days, the word of the Lord came to me: **17**“Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me.”
12. “Therefore, none of the prophets opened his mouth unless the Lord had anticipated his words.” The prophets only spoke, “Thus sayeth the Lord.”
13. Isaiah said his lips were unclean and Jeremiah said he did not know how to speak since he was a youth but “they had holy and pure lips when they began to be instruments of the Holy Spirit.”
14. Ezra 7:10 – “Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the Lord, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.” Cf. Nehemiah 8
15. The apostles in the NT “are not to prate whatever they please, but are faithfully to report the commands of Him by whom they have been sent.”
16. Matthew 28:19-20 – “**19**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20**teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
17. “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 prescription and standard of His Word.”
18. 2 Peter 1:20-21 – “no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. **21**For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”
19. “God deprives men of the capacity to put forth new doctrine in order that He alone may be our schoolmaster in spiritual doctrine as He alone is true who can neither lie nor deceive.”
20. The Roman Catholic Church however teaches that Councils and the Church cannot err and therefore they may make new doctrine.
21. “Their statement that the church cannot err bears on this point, and this is how they interpret it— inasmuch as the church is governed by the Spirit of God, it can proceed safely without the Word; no matter where it may go, it can think or speak only what is true; accordingly, if it should ordain anything beyond or apart from God’s Word, this must be taken as nothing but a sure oracle of God.”
22. “The statement is true in so far as the church, having forsaken all its own wisdom, allows itself to be taught by the Holy Spirit through God’s Word. This, then, is the difference. Our opponents locate the authority of the church outside God’s Word; but we insist that it be attached to the Word, and do not allow it to be separated from it.”
23. The RCC says that the Holy Spirit continues to inspire and teach the Church (“rules the Church”) so whatever the Church decides is correct and is given under inspiration of the Spirit.
24. But the Spirit is never divorced from the Word and the Spirit certainly will never contradict the Word. The Spirit is the one who will come in the name of Jesus Christ and “will teach you [apostles] and bring to your [apostles] remembrance all that I have said to you.” Jesus speaks the words of the Father and the Spirit brings to the remembrance of the apostles the words of Jesus and all of this is in written down in Scripture.
25. John 16:12-13 – “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. **13**When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”

**Chapter 9: Councils and Their Authority**

1. Main idea: Councils are useful and necessary but they are not infallible.
2. Some key principles to keep in mind when talking about councils:
   1. We can esteem the ancient councils (Nicaea, Constantinople, Chalcedon, et. al.) without granting them infallibility. There can be true and false councils. The key concept is “gathered in Christ’s name” (Matt. 18:20) but this applies to church gatherings as much as Church Councils
   2. We must exercise discernment with regard to pastors, for the truth is not always within them. In other words, the fallibleness of human ministers renders councils fallible.
   3. It is easily demonstrated that councils are not definitive as such or infallible inasmuch they contradict one another.
      1. Example: The Iconoclastic Council held in Constantinople in 754 decreed that images in churches should be pulled down. Yet, the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 restored the use and veneration of images and icons in churches. So which is legitimate? What standard is there to judge 2 councils that contradict each other?
   4. We must test all spirits, all decisions of councils – even when they are lawfully called - by the standard of God’s Word in order to determine whether or not they are from God.
      1. Jer 23:16-17 – “Thus says the Lord of hosts: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord. **17**They say continually to those who despise the word of the Lord, ‘It shall be well with you’; and to everyone who stubbornly follows his own heart, they say, ‘No disaster shall come upon you.’”
      2. Matt. 7:15 – “before of false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves”
      3. 1 John 4:1 – “test the spirits to see whether they are of God”
3. “We indeed willingly concede, if any discussion arises over doctrine, that the best and surest remedy is for a synod of true bishops [ministers] to be convened, where the doctrine at issue may be examined. Such a definition, upon which the pastors of the church in common, invoking Christ’s Spirit, agree, will have much more weight than if each ministers, having conceived it separately at home, should teach it to the people, or if a few private individuals should compose it. Then, when the bishops are assembled, they can more conveniently deliberate in common what they ought to teach and in what form, lest diversity breed offense.”
4. “If anyone disturb the church with a strange doctrine, and the matter reach the point that there is danger of greater dissension, the church should first assemble, examine the question put, and finally, after due discussion, bring forth a definition derived from Scripture which would remove all doubt from the people and stop the mouths of wicked and greedy men from daring to go any further.”
5. “Thus, when Arius rose up, the Council of Nicaea was summoned. By its authority it both crushed the wicked efforts of that ungodly man, restoring peace to those churches which he had troubled, and asserted the eternal deity of Christ against his sacrilegious teaching. Then, when Eunomius and Macedonius stirred up new tumults, the Council of Constantinople provided a like remedy for their madness. At the Council of Ephesus, Nestorius’ impiety was overthrown. From the beginning, then, this was the ordinary method of maintaining unity in the church whenever Satan began any machinations.”
6. The RCC calls every decision of its councils an “interpretation of Scripture.” Thus purgatory, intercession of saints, confessional, etc. are nowhere found in Scripture but since church councils have sanctioned those beliefs, they are taken to be interpretations of Scripture. The Council of Constance forbade the cup of the Lord’s Supper to be given to the laity and the priest alone drank it. This expressly goes against Matthew 26:27-28 where all are bidden to drink of the cup in the Lord’s Supper. Because the church and her councils cannot err, all of these things are called “interpretation” even when they blatantly contradict God’s Word. And if one disagrees, the church calls that person a heretic, because there’s nowhere to appeal as the Church is the highest authority.
7. “Nevertheless, I shall ask this one question: If the authority of Scripture is grounded in the approval of the church, the decree of which Council will they cite on this point? They have none, I believe.”