

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 12 – Part 3

THE DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH: ITS CHIEF USE IN CENSURES AND EXCOMMUNICATIONS

In this chapter, Calvin will look at three topics. The first is the purpose, means, and limits of church discipline. The second is the issue of fasting as an act of penance. The third is that of the history and role of marriage and celibacy for clergy. This article covers celibacy in the priesthood.

**Summary:** Having used the first two portions of this chapter examining spiritual discipline for lay people, Calvin now turns to spiritual discipline for clergy. He begins with a short history of the rules which clergy imposed upon themselves. They were not to devote themselves to “...*hunting, gambling ore reveling. No cleric should practice usury or commerce; no cleric should be present at wanton dances- and others of this sort*” (pg. 1248). Bishops as well, met twice annually to be judged by their peers to see if they had lived appropriately and “...*they were much stricter with themselves than with the people...(because)...it is truly fitting that the common people be ruled, so to speak, by a gentler and laxer discipline*” (pg. 1248). As time passed however, the church leaders became harsher with the laity and more relaxed with themselves, except in one area, that of celibacy.

Calvin is critical of celibacy first because of its results. “*In one thing they are extremely rigid and inexorable-in not permitting priest to marry. But it is needless to speak of the extent to which fornication prevails among them (it was common among priests and popes in this time to father children) unpunished; and how relying upon celibacy, they have become callous to all crimes. Yet this prohibition clearly shows what a plague all their traditions are. For it has not only deprived the church of good and fit pastors...but it has cast many souls into the abyss of despair*” (pg. 1249-50). He is also critical of it because it does not have scriptural support, to which he now turns.

Calvin finishes this chapter with a Biblical defense not only of marriage but of marriage for priests. He begins with an exposition of Paul’s writings on marriage. First, Paul makes it clear that bishops/clergy should be the husband of one wife and that marriage is a virtue [1 Timothy 3:2]. Second, Paul writes that “...*Christ so deems marriage worthy of honor that he wills it to be an image of his sacred union with the church [Ephesians 5:23-24, 32]*” (pg. 1251). Third, Paul notes that the Apostles took their wives with them when they traveled [1 Corinthians 9:5]. Calvin continues with examples from the early church by noting that at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE) it was accepted that “*it was chastity for a man to cohabit with his own wife...(and thus)...marriage remained sacred among them; and it caused them no shame, nor was it thought to cast any spot upon the ministry*” (pg. 1252). Even so the process of canonizing the celibacy of priests became a progression “...*by which men who had come to the rank of priest were forbidden to contract marriage; next, it was forbidden for any but celibates or those who along with their wives renounced the marriage bed to be taken into that order*” (pg. 1252).

Calvin concludes with words from Chrysostom (349-407 CE). “*The first degree of chastity is sincere virginity; the second faithful marriage. Therefore, the second sort of virginity is the chaste love of matrimony*” (pg. 1254).

**Reflections:** One of the significant changes brought about by the Reformation was that of not only allowing, but encouraging, clergy to marry. It was not done simply as a reaction to the Roman church practice, but it was done because the reformers could find no good Biblical reason for celibacy. As Presbyterians, we continue this tradition of married clergy including that of clergy who marry their same-sex partners. We see marriage as appropriate for all who are led to it.

Questions:

1. What do think the advantages/disadvantages of celibate clergy might be?
2. Why do you think that the Roman church has held on to this doctrine?
3. What do you think of Chrysostom’s comments on virginity?