

John Calvin for Everyone  
The Institutes of the Christian Religion  
Book 4 – Chapter 13 – Part 1  
VOWS; AND HOW EVERYONE RASHLY TAKING THEM HAS MISERABLY ENTANGLED  
THEMSELVES

In this chapter, Calvin examines the issue of taking vows. The first part of the chapter deals with vows in general and the second half of the chapter deals with vows taken by monastics, as well as Calvin's views on the monastic way of life.

The issue at hand for Calvin is that within the Roman church, vows of one sort or another had been seen to elevate those taking the vows to a higher spiritual level than others. It was understood that monks who professed the vows of their order underwent a second baptism and were forgiven both the guilt and penalty of any post-baptismal sin because, according to Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE), a vow is a significant meritorious work (meritorious works in the medieval church wiped away sin). In addition, monastic vows allowed monks to die to the world and be raised to a state of perfection. It is against this backdrop that Calvin discusses vows.

**Summary:** He begins, "*Now, if we wish to avoid error in determining what vows are lawful, what ones are objectionable, it is well to consider three things: 1) who it is to whom the vow is made; 2) who we are who make the vow; 3) lastly, with what intention we make our vow*" (pg. 1255).

The answer to the first question, to whom vows are to be made, is simply put, God. What this means for Calvin, is that the only vow or promise we are to make to God is the one that God has already asked of us; that we live the kind of life to which we are called by Jesus Christ through the scriptures. We are not to invent new vows/promises that go beyond what God has already directly commanded.

The answer to the second question, who we are who make the vow, means that we are to be careful in vowing to God to do things that are beyond our ability to do. "*I mean nothing else here than that you are to temper your vows to that measure which God by his gift sets for you...*" (pg. 1256). An example of this might be someone who vows that they will be a pastor, when God has not given them the gifts to so do. Rather than making a rash vow then, individuals ought to spend time discerning God's specific call on their lives.

The answer to the third question, with what intention do we make our vows, is that our intention ought to be to please God. There are two types of vows that please God. The first are vows of thanksgiving where we vow to do something to show God our gratitude. The second are vows of repentance, where we vow to change our lives because we have sinned against God. Of this second kind of vow, Calvin says that it needs to be useful to the individual making it, rather than it being a way of seeking forgiveness, which is already offered as a free gift.

One final note about vows. Calvin wants people to avoid vows that they think will make them holier before God; including vows such as abstaining from wine, constant fasting or being celibate. These, Calvin argues are false worship because God has not commanded these through the scriptures.

**Reflections:** In the 1978 movie, "The End", the main character believes that he only has a very short time to live, and so tries to end his life. In his final attempt, he swims out to sea in order to drown. Suddenly however he has an urge to live and begins making promises to God, that if he lives, he will do all the right things in life. As he manages to make it closer and closer to the shore, his promises to God fade away. This is one of the great problems with vows, that we make deals with God that we are often not capable of keeping. The challenge for us then is to only make the kind of vows (of thanksgiving or repentance) that we know are useful to us to and that we can keep. In so doing we will become more and more the kind of people God desires us to be.

Questions:

1. Have you ever made a promise to God? Were you able to keep it?
2. What would a vow of thanksgiving look like to you?
3. What would a vow of repentance look like to you?