

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 4 – Chapter 13 – Part 2

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. In this article, we will look at Calvin's critique of the monastic world in the 1500s.

Summary: Calvin begins by noting that early monastic life was not about living in isolation to gain spiritual perfection, but it was about training clergy. "...monastic colleges were, so to speak, seminaries of the ecclesiastical order...and Augustine show that in his day the monasteries usually supplied the clergy for the church...it is clear...that pious men customarily prepared themselves by monastic discipline to govern the church, that thus they might be fitter and better trained to undertake so great an office" (pg. 1261-62). Thus, for Calvin, there was a purpose for the monastic life. Unfortunately, in his view, the monastic orders had not only abandoned their original purpose, but had exchanged them for unhelpful alternatives.

The first unhelpful alternative was that the monastic orders created rules that were not Biblical and overshadowed any greater purpose for which the monastery might have been founded. "*For they count it as a crime for anyone to depart even in the slightest degree from what is prescribed in color or appearance of clothing, in the kind of food, on in other trifling...ceremonies*" (pg. 1264). This mattered because the focus of monastic life became following rules, rather than learning or serving.

The second unhelpful alternative was that the monks proclaimed that their lifestyle was the only "holy" lifestyle. "...I should ask them (monastics) why they dignify their order alone with the title of perfection, and take the same title away from all God's calling" (pg. 1265). This belief was echoed among the populace. "...such admiration of monasticism remains among the people that they think the monastic life alone angelic, perfect, and purged of all fault" (pg. 1265). This mattered because it caused ordinary Christians to forget that every vocation was a gift of God as well as the fact that all Christians, and not merely monastics, were called to live faithful lives.

The third unhelpful alternative was that monks separated themselves from the people. "*Do they not separate themselves from the lawful society of believers, in adopting a peculiar ministry and a private administration of the sacraments?*" (pg. 1269). This mattered because persons called to ministry were to care for all the people and not merely for themselves.

The fourth unhelpful alternative was that women took vows of perpetual virginity (nuns) at early ages, not simply serve the poor but to closet themselves away from the world, often to escape marriage. "*They (single women in the early church) did not vow celibacy to present to God some sort of service abstaining from marriage, but only because they were thus freer to perform their tasks (of service)*" (pg. 1274). This mattered because part of the Reformed tradition was that men and women were to engage in family life (marrying and having children), which was a gift from God.

Reflections: As Presbyterians, the monastic life is probably not one which most of us spend much time thinking about. Even so, Calvin's unhelpful alternatives, as I call them, are good reminders for us of what ought to matter for Christians. These include simplicity in worship (not worrying about clergy outfits), a reminder that our vocations are all gifts from God, that we are all called to Christ-like living, that we are a community of faith in which we are called to care for one another, and that part of our general vocation as Christians is to look for and to help meet the needs of those beyond our walls.

Questions:

1. What if any, has been your experience with monasticism? How is it similar to or different from what Calvin describes?
2. Which one of Calvin's "unhelpful alternatives" most strikes a chord with you?
3. How do you see your life as "holy" (meaning dedicated to God)?