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

Lesson 39: Vows (Book 4, Chapter 13)

**Chapter 13: Vows; and How Everyone Rashly Taking Them Has Miserably Entangled Himself**

1. Calvin has shown how the RCC church in history slowly degenerated into superstition and away from proper worship of God. In doing so, the RCC has created laws that bind the conscience in areas that Christ has left free. This is no less true in the area of vows to which Calvin now turns.
2. The questions Calvin seeks to address are: “What place should vows made apart from God’s Word have?” “Can they be duly undertaken by Christian men?” “To what extent are they binding?”
3. “For what is called ‘promise’ among men is called ‘vow’ with respect to God.” If we make promises to men because we think it will please them or we owe it to them, how much more should we keep our promises to God. “It is fitting that there should be a far closer observance of those vows which are directed to God himself, toward whom we must act in the greatest earnestness.”
4. Vows are made to God. “Indeed, nothing ought to be more serious for us than the duties of religion.”
5. Vows are not to be made rashly. “Let our first precaution in vows be never to proceed to any avowal without our conscience first making sure that it attempts nothing rash.” So Calvin urges us to stick to the Word of God and only make vows where we have express written instruction that it’s something God approves.
6. Next, Calvin says we should consider who we are that are making vows to God. “We should measure our strength, we should keep our calling in mind, so as not to neglect the blessing of freedom which God has given us. For he is a rash man who vows what is either not in his power or conflicts with his calling.”
7. “You are to temper your vows to that measure which God by His gift sets for you, lest if you try to go beyond what He allows, in claiming too much for yourself, you cast yourself headlong.”
8. Acts 23:12 – assassins made rash vows to not eat until they had killed Paul. Not only was this rash in thinking the power of life and death was in their hands, but it was also a vow of which God would not approve – murder (6th commandment)
9. Judges 11:30-31 – Jephthath was punished for his own folly when in hasty fervor [passion/zeal] he conceived a rash vow.
10. I didn’t cover it in last week’s chapter, but in the chapter on church discipline Calvin discusses priestly celibacy under church discipline. Calvin also takes opportunity to attack the notion here. He calls the concept of celibate priests “the first place for insane boldness.” Calvin says “this is to tempt God; to strive against the nature imparted by Him, and to despise His present gifts as if they did not belong to us at all.” Why? Because marriage is a gift from God and it is not good for man to be alone and in the RCC requirement for celibate priests they end up calling marriage, “pollution.” So in Calvin’s mind, there’s perhaps no greater example of rash vows and illegitimate vows than vow of celibacy. Later in this chapter, Calvin will also discuss at great length monastic vows as also being rash and illegitimate.
11. Next, Calvin says we should consider our intention when we make our vow. “Your intention in making a vow is important if you would have God approve it.” He continues that there are 4 purposes to which our vows ought to be directed.
    1. Vows that look to the past to attest gratitude to God for benefits received
       1. Example: In Genesis 28:20-22, Jacob vowed that if the Lord should lead him back unharmed from exile to his homeland, he would pay tithes to the Lord.
       2. “Such vows can be useful for us today whenever the Lord has snatched us either from some calamity, or from some trying illness, or from any other critical situation.”
    2. Vows that look to the past to avert punishment for sin.
       1. Example: “If anyone should, through the vice of gluttony, fall into any misdeed, nothing will stand in the way of his renouncing all dainty foods for a time in order to chastise his intemperance – doing this with the use of a vow to bind himself with a stricter bond.”
    3. Vows that look to the future to make us more cautious and arouse us to our duty to God.
       1. “A man sees himself so prone to a specific vice that in a thing otherwise not bad he cannot prevent himself from falling directly into evil. He will be doing nothing foolish if by vow he cuts off the use of this thing for a time.” Think Facebook or social media fast or fasting from Netflix.
    4. Vows that look to the future to shake off laziness and arouse us to piety.
12. “We shall say that those vows which look to one of these ends, especially in outward things, are lawful, provided they are supported by God’s approval [Word], agree with our calling, and are limited to the endowment of grace given us by God.”
13. Calvin now discusses vows in general. “All believers have one common vow which, made in baptism, we confirm and sanction by catechism and receiving the Lord’s Supper….this is the form of the vow: that, renouncing Satan, we yield ourselves to God’s service to obey His holy commandments but not to follow the wicked desires of our flesh (Rom. 13:14).”
14. So that is our foundational vow of putting on Christ and putting off the deeds of the flesh. Those other vows above should be made soberly and for a temporary time. “If from time to time you go to excess in making vows, the whole religious character of it will be cheapened by the very repetition, and will tend to lapse into superstition. If you bind yourself with a perpetual vow, either you will fulfill it with great trouble and tedium, or else, wearied by its long duration, you will one day venture to break it.”
15. But perverse vows have plagued the world for centuries. “One person vowed that he would be abstemious [sober], as if abstinence from wine were of itself worship pleasing to God. Another bound himself to fasting; a third, to abstinence from meat on certain days….Men esteemed it great wisdom to undertake votive [vowed] pilgrimages to holier places, and sometimes to make their journey either on foot or half naked, in order to obtain more merit through their weariness....However the flesh may judge it, God hates nothing more than counterfeit worship.”
16. Of these perverse vows, Calvin continues: “Hypocrites, when they have performed such follies, believe that they have procured for themselves exceptional righteousness; they place the whole of piety in external observances, and they despise all others who appear less careful of such things.”
17. Calvin finishes this chapter by talking about monastic vows, how they have degenerated over time in the church, how they don’t help one achieve perfection, how they bind the conscience, and how it is good for one to leave being a monk for an honest (even secular) living.

*ARP Vows*

1. Church Membership Question #6: “Do you accept that the doctrines and principles of the Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church are founded upon the Scriptures?”
2. WCF 21.8 – “This Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs before-hand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, (Exod. 20:8, Exod. 16;23, 25–26, 29–30, Exod. 31:15–17, Isa. 58:13, Neh. 13:15–19, 21–22) but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of His worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”
3. Church Membership Question #7: “In loving obedience, do you submit yourself to the government and discipline of this church, promising to seek the peace, purity, and prosperity of this congregation as long as you are a member of it?”
4. Here’s one for the elders and deacons: Ordination/Installation Question #7: “Do you promise in all things to promote the unity, peace, purity, and prosperity of the Church?”
5. Here’s one for the congregation: “Do you, the members of this congregation, acknowledge and receive these fellow members as elders (or deacons), and do you promise to give them all the honor, obedience, encouragement, and assistance in the spirit of love to which their office, according to the Word of God and the Standards of this Church, entitles them?”
6. Why am I compelled to say these things? Pastoral Ordination Vow #7: “Do you accept and enter upon your ministry with a desire to glorify God and to be instrumental in strengthening His Church?”