

The Celibacy of Priests Refuted

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book IV, 12.23-28, 13.17, 21, emphasis added; English updated.

23. In one thing they are more than rigid and inexorable — in not permitting priests to marry. It is of no consequence to mention with what impunity whoredom prevails among them, and how, trusting to their vile celibacy, they have become callous to all kinds of iniquity.

The prohibition, however, clearly shows how pestiferous all traditions are, since this one has not only deprived the Church of fit and honest pastors, but has introduced a fearful sink of iniquity, and plunged many souls into the gulf of despair.

Certainly, when marriage was forbidden to priests, it was done with impious tyranny, not only contrary to the word of God, but contrary to all justice. **First**, men had no title whatever to forbid what God had left free; **secondly**, it is too clear to make it necessary to give any lengthened proof that God has expressly provided in His Word that this liberty shall not be infringed.

I omit Paul's injunction, in numerous passages, that a bishop be the husband of one wife; but what could be stronger than his declaration, that in the latter days there would be impious men "forbidding to marry"? (**1 Timothy 4:3**). Such persons he calls not only impostors, but devils. We have therefore a prophecy, a sacred oracle of the Holy Spirit, intended to warn the Church from the outset against perils, and declaring that the prohibition of marriage is a doctrine of devils.

They think that they get finely off when they wrest this passage, and apply it to Montanus, the Tatians, the Encratites, and other ancient heretics. These (they say) alone condemned marriage; we by no means condemn it, but only deny it to the ecclesiastical [church] order, in whom we think it not befitting. As if, even granting that this prophecy was primarily fulfilled in those heretics, it is not applicable also to themselves; or, as if one could listen to the childish quibble that they do not forbid marriage, because they do not forbid it to all. This is just as if a tyrant were to contend that a law is not unjust because its injustice presses only on a part of the state.

24. They object that there ought to be some distinguishing mark between the clergy and the people; as if the Lord had not provided the ornaments in which priests ought to excel. Thus they charge the apostle with having disturbed the ecclesiastical order, and destroyed its ornament, when, in drawing the picture of a perfect bishop, he presumed to set down marriage among the other endowments which he required of them. I am aware of the mode in which they expound this — i.e., that no one was to be appointed a bishop who had a second wife. This interpretation, I admit, is not new; but its unsoundness is plain from the immediate context, which prescribes the kind of wives whom bishops and deacons ought to have.

Paul enumerates marriage among the qualities of a bishop; those men declare that, in the ecclesiastical order, marriage is an intolerable vice; and, indeed, not content with this general vituperation [invective], they term it, in their canons, the uncleanness and pollution of the flesh (Pope Siricius, *Ad Episc. Hispaniar*). Let everyone consider with himself from what forge these things have come. Christ deigns so to honor marriage as to make it an image of His sacred union with the Church. What greater eulogy could be

pronounced on the dignity of marriage? How, then, dare they have the effrontery to give the name of unclean and polluted to that which furnishes a bright representation of the spiritual grace of Christ?

25. Though their prohibition is thus clearly repugnant to the word of God, they, however, find something in the Scriptures to defend it. The Levitical priests, as often as their ministerial course returned, behooved to keep apart from their wives, that they might be pure and immaculate in handling sacred things; and it were therefore very indecorous that our sacred things, which are more noble, and are ministered every day, should be handled by those who are married: as if the evangelical ministry were of the same character as the Levitical priesthood. These, as types, represented Christ, who, as Mediator between God and men, was, by His own spotless purity, to reconcile us to the Father. But as sinners could not in every respect exhibit a type of His holiness, that they might, however, shadow it forth by certain lineaments, they were enjoined to purify themselves beyond the manner of men when they approached the sanctuary, inasmuch as they then properly prefigured Christ appearing in the tabernacle, an image of the heavenly tribunal, as pacificators, to reconcile men to God. As church pastors do not sustain this character in the present day, the comparison is made in vain.

Wherefore the apostle declares distinctly, without reservation, "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled; but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4). And the apostles showed, by their own example, that marriage is not unbefitting the holiness of any function, however excellent; for Paul declares, that they not only retained their wives, but led them about with them (**1 Corinthians 9:5**).

26. Then how great the effrontery when, in holding forth this ornament of chastity as a matter of necessity, they throw the greatest obloquy [ill repute] on the primitive Church, which, while it abounded in admirable divine erudition, excelled more in holiness. For if they pay no regard to the apostles (they are sometimes accustomed strenuously to condemn them), what, I ask, will they make of all the ancient fathers who, it is certain, not only tolerated marriage in the episcopal order, but also approved it? They, indeed, encouraged a foul profanation of sacred things when the mysteries of the Lord were thus irregularly performed by them. In the Council of Nice, indeed, there was some question of proclaiming celibacy: as there are never lacking little men of superstitious minds, who are always devising some novelty as a means of gaining admiration for themselves. What was resolved? The opinion of Paphnutius was adopted, who pronounced legitimate conjugal intercourse to be chastity (Cassiodorus, *Historiae ecclesiasticae tripartitae epitome* lib. 2 c. 14). The marriage of priests, therefore, continued sacred, and was neither regarded as a disgrace, nor thought to cast any stain on their ministry.

During the Dark Ages, the Catholic Church exalted virginity as virtuous and denigrated marriage.

27. In the times which succeeded, a too superstitious admiration of celibacy prevailed. Hence, ever and anon [presently] unmeasured encomiums were pronounced on virginity, so that it became the vulgar [common] belief that scarcely any virtue was to be compared to it. And although marriage was not condemned as impurity, yet its dignity was lessened, and its sanctity obscured; so that he who did not refrain from it was deemed not to have a mind strong enough to aspire to perfection.

Hence those canons which enacted, first, that those who had attained the priesthood should not contract a marriage; and, secondly, that none should be admitted to that

order but the unmarried, or those who, with the consent of their wives, renounced the marriage-bed. These enactments, as they seemed to procure reverence for the priesthood, were, I admit, received even in ancient times with great applause.

But if my opponents plead antiquity, my first answer is, that both under the apostles, and for several ages after, bishops were at liberty to have wives: that the apostles themselves, and other pastors of primitive authority who succeeded them, had no difficulty in using this liberty, and that the example of the primitive Church ought justly to have more weight than allow us to think that what was then received and used with commendation is either illicit or unbecoming [improper].

My second answer is, that the age, which, from an immoderate affection for virginity, began to be less favorable to marriage, did not bind a law of celibacy on the priests, as if the thing were necessary in itself, but gave a preference to the unmarried over the married.

My last answer is, that they did not exact this so rigidly as to make continence [celibacy] necessary and compulsory on those who were unfit for it. For while the strictest laws were made against fornication, it was only enacted with regard to those who contracted marriage that they should be superseded in their office.

28. Therefore, as often as the defenders of this new tyranny appeal to antiquity in defense of their celibacy, so often should we call upon them to restore the ancient chastity of their priests, to put away adulterers and whoremongers, not to allow those whom they deny an honorable and chaste use of marriage, to rush with impunity into every kind of lust, to bring back that obsolete discipline by which all licentiousness is restrained, and free the Church from the flagitious turpitude [scandalous depravity / baseness] by which it has long been deformed. When they have conceded this, they will next require to be reminded not to represent as necessary that which, being in itself free, depends on the utility of the Church.

I do not, however, speak thus as if I thought that on any condition whatever effect should be given to those canons which lay a bond of celibacy on the ecclesiastical order, but that the better-hearted may understand the effrontery of our enemies in employing the name of antiquity to defame the holy marriage of priests.

In regard to the Fathers, whose writings are extant, none of them when they spoke their own mind, with the exception of Jerome, thus malignantly detracted from the honor of marriage. We will be contented with a single passage from Chrysostom, because he being a special admirer of virginity, cannot be thought to be more lavish than others in praise of matrimony. Chrysostom thus speaks: "The first degree of chastity is pure virginity; the second, faithful marriage. Therefore, a chaste love of matrimony is the second species of virginity" (Chrysostom, *Hom. de invent. s. cruxis*).

13.17. Now, then, let us see the nature of the vows by which the monks of the present day are initiated into this famous order.

First, as their intention is to institute **a new and fictitious worship** with a view to gain favor with God, I conclude from what has been said above, that everything which they vow is abomination to God.

Secondly, I hold that as they frame their own mode of life at pleasure, without any regard to the calling of God, or to His approbation [approval], the attempt is rash and unlawful; because their conscience has no ground on which it can support itself before God, and “whatever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23).

False worship is demonic.

Moreover, I maintain that in astringing themselves to many perverse and impious modes of worship, such as are exhibited in modern monasticism, **they consecrate themselves not to God but to the devil**. For why should the prophets have been permitted to say that the Israelites sacrificed their sons to devils and not to God (Deuteronomy 32:17; Psalm 106:37), merely because they had corrupted the true worship of God by profane ceremonies; and we not be permitted to say the same thing of monks who, along with the cowl [the hood or hooded robe worn by a monk], cover themselves with the act of a thousand impious superstitions?

Then what is their species of vows? They offer God **a promise of perpetual virginity**, as if they had previously made a compact with Him to free them from the necessity of marriage. They cannot allege that they make this vow trusting entirely to the grace of God; for, seeing He declares this to be a special gift not given to all (Matthew 19:11), **no man has a right to assume that the gift [of celibacy] will be his**.

Let those who have it use it; and if at any time they feel the infirmity of the flesh, let them have recourse to the aid of Him by whose power alone they can resist. If this avails not, let them not despise the remedy [i.e., marriage] which is offered to them. If the faculty of abstinence is denied, the voice of God distinctly calls upon them to marry. By abstinence I mean not merely that by which the body is kept pure from fornication, but that by which the mind keeps its chastity untainted. For Paul enjoins caution not only against external lasciviousness, but also burning of mind (1 Corinthians 7:9).

It has been the practice (they say) from the remotest period, for those who wished to devote themselves entirely to God, to bind themselves by a vow of abstinence [celibacy]. I confess that the custom is ancient, but I do not admit that the age when it commenced was so free from every defect that all that was then done is to be regarded as a rule.

Moreover, the inexorable rigor of holding that after the vow is conceived there is no room for repentance, crept in gradually. This is clear from Cyprian: “if virgins have dedicated themselves to Christian faith, let them live modestly and chastely, without pretense. Thus strong and stable, let them wait for the reward of virginity. But if they will not, or cannot persevere, it is better to marry, than by their faults to fall into the fire.”

In the present day, with what invectives would they not lacerate anyone who should seek to temper the vow of celibacy by such an equitable course? Those, therefore, have wandered far from the ancient custom who not only use no moderation, and grant no pardon when anyone proves unequal to the performance of his vow, but shamelessly declare that it is a more heinous sin to cure the intemperance of the flesh by marriage, than to defile body and soul by whoredom.

21. He who understands this solution is furnished with the means of repelling the calumnies [slanders] of the wicked against those who withdraw from monasticism to some honest kind of livelihood. They are grievously charged with having perjured themselves, and broken their faith, because they have broken the bond (vulgarly

supposed to be indissoluble) by which they had bound themselves to God and the Church.

But I say, first, there is no bond when that which man confirms God abrogates; and, secondly, even granting that they were bound when they remained entangled in ignorance and error, now, since they have been enlightened by the knowledge of the truth, I hold that they are, at the same time, free by the grace of Christ. For if such is the efficacy of the cross of Christ, that it frees us from the curse of the divine law by which we were held bound, how much more must it rescue us from extraneous chains, which are nothing but the wily nets of Satan? There can be no doubt, therefore, that all on whom Christ shines with the light of his Gospel, He frees from all the snares in which they had entangled themselves through superstition.

At the same time, they have another defense if they were unfit for celibacy. For if an impossible vow is certain destruction to the soul, which God wills to be saved and not destroyed, it follows that it ought by no means to be adhered to. Now, how impossible the vow of celibacy is to those who have not received it by special gift, we have shown, and experience, even were I silent, declares: while the great obscenity with which almost all monasteries teem is a thing not unknown. If any seem more decent and modest than others, they are not, however, chaste. The sin of unchastity urges, and lurks within.

Thus it is that God, by fearful examples, punishes the audacity of men, when, unmindful of their infirmity, they, **against nature**, affect that which has been denied to them, and despising the remedies which the Lord has placed in their hands, are confident in their ability to overcome the disease of sexual immorality by contumacious obstinacy. For what other name can we give it, when a man, admonished of his need of marriage, and of the remedy with which the Lord has thereby furnished, not only despises it, but binds himself by an oath to despise it?