

CHAPTER 20

OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY, AND LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE

Personal spiritual liberty

“1. The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law, and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love, and a willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law: but under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.”

Liberty means freedom from undesirable restraint. Freedom is a more general term, and may include lack of restraint to do evil, although normally we think of it in a good sense. Christ came to give us true liberty—“The Son shall make you free indeed” (John 8:36). This liberty Christ gives is more than political or economic liberty (even though these too are good and come from God). Jesus’ liberty is in the spiritual realm, and belongs to all God’s children, even those who may be in physical slavery.

Our Confession divides the benefits of this liberty into two main parts, the liberty of all believers, and the special liberty to us under the New Testament dispensation.

The liberty of all believers of all dispensations:

- 1) Freedom from the guilt of sin (Titus 2:14)
- 2) Freedom from the wrath of God (1 Thess 1:10)
- 3) Freedom from the curse of the moral law (Gal 3:13)
- 4) Freedom from slavery to this evil world (Gal 1:4)
- 5) Freedom from bondage to Satan (Acts 26:18)

6) Freedom from the dominion of sin (Rom 6:14)

7) Freedom from the evil of afflictions (Rom 8:28)

Note that this freedom is not from afflictions themselves, but from afflictions stemming from God's anger and resulting in further hardening and spiritual death. The afflictions God sends to his children are for their good, and result in their increased holiness and happiness.

8) Freedom from the sting of death and the victory of the grave (1 Cor 15:54-57)

9) Freedom from everlasting damnation (Rom 8:1)

So far, these freedoms have been negative in nature, freedom from various evils. The last two mentioned are positive, freedom to do that which was impossible before:

10) Free access to God (Rom 5:1-2)

11) Obedience through free will and love, not through slavish fear (Rom 8:14-15)

While these blessed liberties have belonged to those children of God of all ages, we in this dispensation have certain additional liberties:

- Freedom from the Old Testament ceremonial law (Gal 4:1-3, 6-7)
- Greater boldness of access to God (Heb 4:14, 16)
- Fuller fellowship with and through the Holy Spirit (John 7:38-39)

Certainly when we think of these precious liberties, infinitely more important than even our civil liberties, we should realize how wonderful our salvation is.

Liberty of doctrine, conscience, and worship

“2. God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of man which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.”

Our sole authority in religious matters is the Bible, and no one has the right to tell us that we must as a Christian do something or not to do something as a religious duty, unless he can prove it from Scripture. This important idea is one of the backbones of the entire Protestant church. Verses which support this liberty are many; here are a few:

- Matt 15:9 (of the Pharisees), quoting Isa 29:13 (of the apostate Israelites of Isaiah's day)

“They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”
- Matt 23:8-10, God the only authoritative teacher
- Acts 4:19; 5:29, obeying God over man
- Gal 2:4-5; 5:1, resisting adding to the gospel
- Col 2:8, 16-23, refusing to recognize traditions as spiritually authoritative

But we must remember that we must obey the Bible correctly interpreted. When we disagree with some authority, we had better be sure that we really understand what God says about it in the Bible, and that we are not just puffed up in pride, and taking verses out of context (for example, cf. 2 Pet 3:16). The Holy Spirit will help us understand as we sincerely seek his aid in our study of the Bible.

We note that it is wrong not only to require as a religious duty doctrines or practices which are not taught or commanded in the Bible, but it is also wrong to comply with such usurpation. The Christian must believe as matters of faith only those things that can be shown from Scripture. And while he may obey rules of practice that are not commanded in Scripture, he is not to do so “out of conscience,” but as an exercise of his liberty.

Christian liberty not a license to sin

“3. They who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.”

The liberty we enjoy as Christians is not freedom to sin or to live a careless life, but freedom to serve God in a way impossible for the non-Christian (Luke 1:74-75). Those who claim liberty in order to gratify sensual lusts or to ignore Christian duties are perverting the concept of Christian liberty (Rom 6:1-2, 6-14; 1 Pet 2:16; 2 Pet 2:19).

The liberty that Christ gives to us is the liberty to be done with sin and to live a life marked by righteousness and holiness. It is a liberty of service in love. The Christian knows he has liberty to serve Christ and his church. He uses his liberty as the Lord leads him in his various circumstances. In matters indifferent he is free to adapt himself to serve Christ in various environments. Note these examples of how Christian liberty was applied in various circumstances in the early church:

- Luke 4:16; John 10:22, Jesus attended synagogue and temple services which were traditional, not commanded in Scripture

- Mark 7:1-8, Jesus on one occasion refused to abide by hand-washing tradition (similar examples in which Jesus did not live up to the Jews' arbitrary expectations: Luke 5:30; 6:1-2; 7:33-34; 13:14)
- Acts 15:1-2, 19, 28; Gal 2:1-5, Paul insisted on the liberty of Gentile Christians to refuse circumcision as a condition of acceptance in the church
- Acts 15:19-21, 28-29, 30-31; 16:4-5, council required Gentile Christians to keep some Jewish laws to avoid strife in the churches; churches complied joyfully, even though some of these laws were no longer in force (Mark 7:19 Greek; Acts 10:9-16; 1 Cor 9:3; 10:25-26, 30)
- Acts 16:1-3, Paul circumcised the half-Jewish Timothy in order to avoid offense to fellow Jews
- Acts 21:17-26, Paul complied with the order of James and the Jerusalem church leaders to perform a Jewish ritual in the temple, even though he taught that such service was no longer required (Gal 4:21-31; cf. Heb 8:13)
- 1 Cor 9:5, 12, 15, Paul forwent rights to marry, and to be paid by the church, in order to further his ministry
- 1 Cor 9:19-27, Paul submitted to all kinds of external restraints, depending on his situation, even at discomfort and frustration to his natural desires and rights, in order to be of service to Christ and the church
- 1 Cor 8; 10:23 – 11:1; Rom 14, Paul exhorted the Christians to be tolerant of one another, even when they had strong convictions in areas of Christian liberty, and not to judge each other, but to seek to help each other in love; he exhorted the weak not to judge the strong, and the strong to go out of their way to encourage the weak
- Gal 2:11-16, Paul blameed Peter for exercising his liberty in a manner that lead to misunderstanding and confusion by others (cf. F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 283-285)

In all these examples Jesus or the apostles were seeking to glorify God, not gratify their own desires. Their rule was the law of Christian love.

Christian liberty not a license to disobey rightful authority

“4. And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And for their publishing of

such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature; or to the known principles of Christianity, whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation; or to the power of godliness; or such erroneous opinions or practices, as either, in their own nature, or, in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church: they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the Church.”

God has given authority in the world, to the family head, to the state, and to the church. God has also given liberty to his children. Since God has given both, they should not contradict each other, but should be combined together in balance.

The Christian is to obey rightful authority:

- In the family
 - ◆ Wives (1 Pet 3:1-6)
 - ◆ Children (Col 3:20)
 - ◆ Slaves (even to harsh masters, 1 Pet 2:18-20)
- In the state (1 Pet 2:13-17)
- In the church (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5-7)

We should obey in all these cases, as long as we are not required to sin against God, even when we do not agree with or appreciate the order. Even Jesus lived in subjection to his parents and to his religious and political leaders. He did not preach or practice rebellion. Of course, those in authority have the obligation to rule righteously and fairly, and God will deal with them accordingly (see related applications in WLC 124-130).

The church, by its “censures,” has the responsibility to discipline its members who are rebellious to proper authority, or who advocate such rebellion (Matt 18:17). The original Confession had the additional phrase, “and by the power of the civil magistrate.” However, the American form dropped that phrase, since it is our belief that the government is not to possess the authority over spiritual matters. Of course, the government does have authority to forbid civil rebellion.