

LECTURE 11: ETHICS AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

Within the church there is to be the enforcement of God's ethical standards through church discipline. The church's power is ministerial and declarative. Through preaching, prayer, personal witness, and formal discipline the church leadership brings the saints to more consistent obedience to God's law.

Some areas of ethical application are not as clear as others. In these areas Christians are to exercise mutual toleration and forbearance. Since only God may bind the conscience, the church does not have the right to impose laws for its members or officers which are contrary to or in addition to Scripture.

- "God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men 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." (WCF 20:2)

The visible church has erred in this area in two ways:

(1) Requiring for belief or practice that which is contrary to Scripture. Some examples:

- Belief in purgatory
- Belief in transubstantiation
- Celibacy of the clergy
- Absolute obedience to the pope

(2) Requiring for belief or practice that which is in Scripture considered a matter of debate or of indifference. Some examples:

- Date of Easter
- Reading of secular literature, etc.
- Attending movies, or watching them at home
- Type of communion bread or wine

- Slave owning
- Use of alcoholic beverages
- Use of particular Bible versions
- Particular models of creation
- Eschatological system and details
- Home schooling
- Many political questions or candidates

While the Christian in the church is to defend true Christian liberty, he is to do it in a manner which will strengthen other Christians. Certain principles found in Rom 14 and 1 Cor 8 are to be always observed:

1. There is to be mutual acceptance in the church (Rom 14:1-4).
2. The stronger Christian is not necessarily the one who lives a more restricted life style (Rom 14:2; 1 Cor 8:4-11).
3. Each person is to live in the way he believes is right (Rom 14:5-8).
4. Christians should not judge those who disagree with them in matters indifferent (Rom 14:9-13).
5. Weak Christians should not imitate the free actions of strong Christians until they are fully persuaded that the actions themselves are right (Rom 14:14, 22-23; 1 Cor 8:7, 10-11; cf. Jas 4:17).
6. Strong Christians should limit their freedom in order to be a blessing and a help to their weaker brethren (Rom 14:13-21; 1 Cor 8:9-13).
7. Strong Christians should help weak ones to become strong (as Paul is doing here).