

Liberty in Christ

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Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter XX sections 2, 3

2. 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.

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.

These sections of the Confession teach us (1) that God alone has legitimate authority over the conscience, (2) that his Word alone is the rule thereof, (3) that the doctrines and commandments of men which are either *contrary* to or *additional* to God's Word have no authority to bind the conscience, (4) that to permit the conscience to be bound by such is sin, betrayal of true liberty of conscience, and a denial that God alone is one's Lord, and (5) that Christian liberty must be distinguished from antinomianism (which means, "freedom to sin").

Here stands one of the glorious benefits of the Reformation for which our fathers gave their all. It was this truth, so clearly taught in Scripture, that was wholly eclipsed in the apostasy of the Roman Church. It was recovered only by the blood of many martyrs. The strong determination of covenanting Presbyterians in Scotland who would surrender to no man the crown rights of Jesus Christ is to be remembered reverently. They recaptured the spirit of the Apostolic Church as they answered those who tried to

coerce them to believe or to do what was contrary to the Word of Christ: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). We must not forget that the Reformation was much more than mere separation from the authority of the Pope and the errors of Rome. It was not, after all, a struggle against something so much as a glorious witness for Christ. It was a witness made in every sphere of life. For example, there were kings on earth who were not wholly unhappy to see the structure of Roman Catholic power weakened by the rise of Reformed Christianity. Yet sometimes these same kings determined to "take charge" of the Church themselves. When it dawned on them that Reformed Christians meant to acknowledge none but Christ as "king and head of the Church," they were capable of terrible persecution. Much of the suffering endured by the authors of our Confession came at the hand of such kings. But thanks be to God, they stood by the grand truth of Scripture, and by that mighty principle such tyrants were themselves doomed. God alone is Lord in the Church and in the conscience. We are "bought with a price" and must not be "the servants of men" (I Cor. 7:23).

Today we almost take for granted the precious legacy which has accrued from this principle. The separation of Church and State, by which we mean the liberty to believe and to practice one's faith without coercion by men, is an example. We are not saying that this principle is always respected in a nation such as our own. Indeed, we believe that the state control of education increasingly threatens this very principle. A false and anti-Christian philosophy of life, in practical utterance if not in theory, is being forced upon those who teach in the public school system of this nation. And the day may come when those who teach will have to suffer in order to speak and to act as if God were sovereign in all things.

But let us give more detailed consideration to a very common violation of the principle under consideration found in many Protestant churches and even in those that claim this Confession! In such churches it is customary to make certain specific rules which are imposed upon members of the church as a matter of duty, thus binding the conscience. These rules are of two kinds: (1) some are contrary to the Word of God. Examples of rules which are contrary to the Word of God are prohibitions requiring total abstinence from the use of certain material things. The Mormon religion forbids the use of coffee. Other sects forbid the use of meat. And truly, time would fail to mention all such forbidden things for the number is legion. However, in not *one* case is it possible to show that such abstinence is required by God. This is impossible because "there is *nothing* unclean of itself" (Rom. 14:14). "*All* things indeed are pure" (14:20). If nothing is unclean, then no such rule forbidding the use of something can be legitimate. If all things indeed are pure, then all things may indeed be used by men without fear of conscience. It is true, of course, that *once a person has allowed his conscience to be bound* by such a (false) rule, he cannot partake of the forbidden thing without sinning. We have already shown how and why this is so (Ch. XVI). "To him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean . . . it is evil for that man . . . because [it is] not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:14, 20, 23). It is never right to do what we believe to be wrong, even when we believe a thing to be wrong without good reason. But even if a person faithfully obeys his conscience and scrupulously observes a rule forbidding the use of a material thing, he is *still guilty of sin*. He is guilty of the sin

of allowing someone other than God to impose a rule upon his conscience. To this it is objected that without such rules (forbidding, or at least restricting, the free use of material things) the only possible result will be "all-out intemperance." It is either total abstinence or there is unavoidable certainty of wicked abuse. We have already shown the difference between true liberty and sinful license (XX, 1). We have shown that this is a false expectation. We shall only say here that it is extremely dishonoring to the Spirit of God to maintain such an objection. For this objection is tantamount to saying that a man-made rule will keep a Christian from sin better than the Holy Spirit who dwells in him. To say that the Holy Spirit cannot guide the Christian in the free use of material things which he has not forbidden is to charge God foolishly.

(2) The second class of rules, are those that are, if not contrary, then at least additional to the Word of God. As an example we might mention many of the rules imposed upon members of the Roman Catholic Church. No doubt many of these rules are contrary to the Word of God, but even those that are not are often additions to the Bible. "The chief commandments or laws of the Church," we read in the Roman Catechism, "are these six: (1) to assist at Mass on all Sundays and holydays of obligation, (2) to fast and to abstain on the days appointed, (3) to confess our sins at least once a year, (4) to receive Holy Communion during the Easter time, (5) to contribute to the support of the Church, and (6) to observe the laws of the Church concerning marriage." We do not think that it could be proved contrary to the Bible to fast on those days which happen to be appointed by the Roman Church. Certainly the Christian ought to confess his sins (to God through Christ alone). And it would be perfectly proper to receive Holy Communion (if it were rightly administered) on that Lord's Day which Rome presumes to call "Easter." But though it is not wrong to do these things voluntarily, in a proper manner, it is wrong to permit the conscience to be bound to do them in the manner and at the time designated by Rome. Let us cite another example: the Baptist churches insist upon immersion as the form of baptism. It is not contrary to the Word of God to baptize by immersion. But it is an addition to the Word of God to require that baptism be by immersion only. And to permit the conscience to be bound by such a rule is wrong even though immersion itself is not.

It has been said that there is "a pope in every man's heart." We are all tempted to think that we could improve our fellow Christians if we had charge of their conscience. We are likewise all liable to imagine that we are doing much better than others in the use of our cherished liberty. We would restrict others and relax strictures against ourselves. But the Scripture requires the reverse: charity towards others, and carefulness in the use of our own liberty. We ought to give our brother the benefit of any doubt. We should esteem others better than ourselves. And even where it appears that our brother has abused his liberty, we should correct in meekness taking heed to ourselves. Meanwhile, we should guard against the abuse of our own liberty, taking heed that we do not make it an occasion of the flesh, and exercising care that we do not cause a weaker brother to stumble by the exercise of our liberty.

It is alleged that such a doctrine of liberty as that set forth above will lead to sin. We have already refuted this in our discussion of license. However, we wish here to

emphasize the fact that contrary to common impression, it is this doctrine (rightly understood) which really shows the full scope of God's laws in man's life. It is not because the Reformed Faith is interested in eliminating holiness and duty that it rejects all rules contrary or additional to the Word of God. It is rather precisely because it recognizes that it is the Christian's duty—whether he eats, or drinks, or whatsoever he may do—to do all to the glory of God. When man's duty is reduced from divine principles to human rules, it is falsified because it is *reduced*. The Pharisees of old multiplied rules in an effort to cover the whole of life, but they did not even come close to the holiness of Christ, who rejected their rules in favor of the law of God (Mark 7:1-13). Some people cannot imagine that the Ten Commandments cover everything and that they do so without error or defect, but this is the case nonetheless.

Paul says that when the mind is transformed and renewed (by the inward operation of the law applied by the Holy Spirit), the individual believer will be able to *prove* what the will of God is (Rom. 12:2). He says that he will know (without man-made rules) what is "good, and acceptable, and perfect." We believe that a careful exegesis of this text will show that the meaning is as follows: (1) By the knowledge of the Ten Commandments, a believer will know that which is good. For example, he will know that playing the piano is *good*, for the simple reason that it is not forbidden by any one of the Ten Commandments. "We know that the law is good" (I Tim. 1:8) ; therefore, that which is in accordance with or not contrary to one of the Ten Commandments is good. The act of playing the piano, considered in itself, is therefore good. (2) The Christian must also consider the circumstances under which a particular thing is done. A good thing is not always acceptable under the circumstances. It is good to call upon the name of the Lord. But it must be done in an acceptable time (II Cor. 6:2). Men who call upon the Lord only when it is too late will not be heard. So again, as an example, playing the piano may, or may not, be acceptable according to such circumstances as time and place. It would be wrong to play the piano when one's father has forbidden it. It would be wrong to play the piano at a "striptease" emporium. (3) Finally, it is necessary that an act be done with the right intent or motive. This is what the apostle means by the perfect will of God. Again we will take as an example the act of playing the piano. It is conceivable that a person would do this good thing under proper circumstances and yet violate one or more of the Ten Commandments. Suppose that the purpose was to gain personal fame and fortune rather than to serve God. Suppose that one played the piano only to make money and not to serve God. Then it would be wrong, not because it is a sin to play the piano, but because it is a sin to make it the chief end of one's life, or even to do it only as a means of making money without seeking to glorify him.

The truth is that when the law of God is rightly observed by a believer, it will prove much more demanding and will be much more stringent than the rules of men. But above all, such a man will be preserved from the age-old ruin of the Pharisees who thought that they were keepers of the law when they were really only keeping a few relatively easy rules. The making of rules by men deceives the heart because it reduces the breadth and depth of the Christian's duty to God. For this reason, if for no other, we should steadfastly reject them.

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