

WCF 20: OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY, AND LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE

Introduction

The human soul knows the value of freedom. When the devil tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Gethsemane, he was appealing to their love for freedom. They, of course, had freedom. They were created to live within the bounds of freedom which God intended for them, for outside of this bound, they would die,—just as a fish out of its watery bounds will die, though it not longer restricted. Satan managed to persuade them to jump out of the water, and bondage and death came upon all man.

Christ came to set us free. But it pleases God not only to leave a remnant of corruption in us so that we do not have perfect freedom by ourselves to do His will, but also that us should dwell in this sinful world with all its encroachments upon our liberty due to the demands of sinful man upon one another. For this reason, while in this side of eternity, we shall experience much of the tug and pull of the conflict between freedom and bondage in all aspects of our lives.

This chapter deals with this subject. It teaches us about the freedom that has been purchased for us by Christ and of how we may enjoy the freedom within the bounds of freedom both legitimate and ordained of God, as well as illegitimate and imposed by sinful demands.

On the Aspects of Christian Liberty

20.1a 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;¹ and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin,² from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation;³ as also in their free access to God,⁴ and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind.⁵

¹Tit 2:14; ¹Thes 1:10; ²Gal 3:13; ²Gal 1:4; ³Col 1:13; ⁴Acts 26:18; ⁵Rom 6:14; ³Rom 8:28; ⁴Ps 119:71; ¹Cor 15:54–57; ⁵Rom 8:1; ⁴Rom 5:1–2; ⁵Rom 8:14–15; ¹Jn 4:18.

This first part of the first paragraph teaches us what liberty comprises.

a. *Negatively* it comprises:

- i. Freedom from guilt of sin, and thus the condemning wrath of God and the curse of the moral law. This is clear from Scripture which teaches us that Christ “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Tit 2:14). In redeeming us, Christ was “made a curse for us” (Gal 3:13) and thus delivering us “from the curse of the law” (Gal 3:13a) and “from the wrath to come” (1 Th 1:10).
- ii. Freedom from bondage to Satan and dominion of sin as well as attraction to the world. God the Father “hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col 1:13). Before our conversion, we were unable not to sin. We were under Satan’s bondage and the power of sin. By regenerating us with His spirit, Christ frees us from this bondage so that we are now able not to sin and also able to resist the lure of the world and of worldliness.
- iii. Freedom from the sting of death and the evil of afflictions. We are freed from the sting of death because we shall be resurrected: “So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:54–57). Christ does not grant believers exemption from all afflictions in this world, but He promises us to deliver us from the evil of the affliction. We are delivered from the evil of affliction not only because nothing can separate us from the love of God, but because affliction in this life is always beneficial for a Christian: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28).

b. *Positively* it comprises:

- i. Freedom of access to God. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom 5:1–2). “In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him” (Eph 3:12).
- ii. Freedom of spirit to serve God. A child of God has a new willingness and desire to yield obedience to God: “yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind.” This is the case both because the child of God is both changed in heart and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (Rom 8:14–15). “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love” (1 Jn 4:18).

On the Advantage of the NT Saints over the OT Saints

20.1b All which were common also to believers under the law;¹ 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,² and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace,³ and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.⁴

¹Gal 3:9, 14; ²Gal 4:1–3, 6–7; 5:1; *Acts 15:10–11*; ³Heb 4:14, 16; 10:19–22; ⁴Jn 7:38–39; 2 Cor 3:13, 17–18.

The liberty which has been described in the previous sub-paragraph are enjoyed by Old Testament believers as well as New Testament believers. However, New Testament believers enjoy additional benefits such as:

- a. They are freed from the ceremonial laws. The ceremonial laws comprise shadows and types pointing to Christ. Now that Christ has completed His work of redemption, there is no more need for the ceremonial laws. Thus Peter chided some of the members of the council at Jerusalem for thinking that the ceremonial laws were applicable to the disciples of Christ: “Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (Acts 15:10–11).
- b. They have greater boldness of access to the Throne of Grace. When Christ finished His work of substitutionary atonement on the cross of Calvary, the curtain that covered the Holy of holies in the temple was rent into two, symbolising that there is now free access to the Throne of Grace. The author of Hebrews seem to have this event in mind when he wrote:

“Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:19–22; cf. Heb 4:14).

- c. They have a fuller communication of the free Spirit of God. “The Spirit had, no doubt, been dispensed to the Church under the Old Testament; but the more extensive and copious effusion of the Spirit was reserved to New Testament times” (Shaw, 253). This is why Christ spoke of the Spirit as being withheld until He is glorified: “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)” (Jn 7:38–39). This greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit under the New Covenant was already prophesied in the Old Testament, e.g.:

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit” (Joel 2:28–29; cf. Isa 44:3).

Thus, Paul, comparing the old dispensation and the new dispensation, likens the Old Covenant saints as being covered with a veil, whereas the New Covenant saints enjoy the privilege of liberty and beholding the glory of the Lord in a mirror (2 Cor 3:13, 17–18).

On the Liberty of Conscience

20.2 *God alone is Lord of the conscience,¹ 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.² So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience;³ and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.⁴*

¹Jas 4:12; Rom 14:4; ²Acts 4:19; 5:29; 1 Cor 7:23; Mt 23:8–10; 2 Cor 1:24; Mt 15:9; ³Col 2:20, 22–23; Gal 1:10; 2:4–5; 5:1; ⁴Rom 10:17; 14:23; Isa 8:20; Acts 17:11; Jn 4:22; Hos 5:11; Rev 13:12, 16–17; Jer 8:9.

- Conscience is the faculty by which we distinguish between the morally right or wrong. It is like a subordinate court which God’s has set in the heart of man. A conscience instructed and held captive to the Word of God must be taken as authoritative for the individual Christian. “God is the Lord of the conscience,” i.e., God alone has the right to dictate the conscience, and so our conscience must be subjected to His authority alone and not to any traditions or doctrines of men.
- The carefully worded statement in our Confession teaches that our conscience must be “free from,” i.e., not bounded to: (1) Doctrines and commandments *of men* pertaining to the Christian Life [cf. *WCF* 20.4, “faith, worship, or conversation”], which are in any way *contrary* to the Word of God; (2) Doctrines and commandments *of men* pertaining to faith and worship which are in any way *beside*, i.e., not sanctioned or taught in the Word of God.
- In other words, in cases of faith and worship, the conscience must only be bounded to what is explicitly taught in the Word of God. The Christian, for example, must not be bounded to any ceremonies or rituals not sanctioned in the Word of God. In 1551, John Knox became the chaplain to King Edward VI. At that time, the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Anglican church was being revised. It was already at the printers when Knox discovered that the liturgy required kneeling while partaking the elements of the Eucharist. Knox recognised that the statement had no biblical basis and was a vestige of the Romish Mass, and that its inclusion would bind the conscience of believers to a matter of indifference. He spoke so vehemently on the subject that the king had a rubric, known as the ‘Black Rubric’ inserted into the book to say that kneeling is not mandatory.
- In cases pertaining to the Christian’s daily life, however, our Confession teaches us that where it is contrary to the Word of God, we must not be subject to it. However, if it is a matter of indifference, but required by the civil or ecclesiastical authority, then the Christian ought to submit to the demands of the law. Take, for example, a Christian in Singapore is bound to obey the anti-jay walking law which prohibits a pedestrian from crossing a road at a traffic when the red light for pedestrians is on—even if there are no cars on the road. But a Christian must not submit to a law that will require the Christian to sin against God. If the government should forbid anyone from witnessing for Christ in public, the conscientious Christian must **not** be bounded by such a law. He ought rather say with Peter and John: “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye” (Acts 4:19; cf. 5:29).
- Such being the case, we may not believe such doctrines or obey such commandments, nor should we impose them upon others or to require of them implicit faith. Doing so would destroy the liberty of conscience.

On Licentiousness

20.3 *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.¹*

¹Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 2:16; 2 Pet 2:19; Jn 8:34; Lk 1:74–75.

Christian liberty does not mean freedom from Moral Law of God as a rule and standard of life. In fact, our liberty from the bondage of sin is applied to our souls individually by an act of regeneration in which the soul is given a new desire and will to obey the Law of God. This is why both Ezekiel and Jeremiah emphasise a new ability and will to obey the Law when they spoke about regeneration as a benefit of the New Covenant (Ezk 36:27; Jer 31:33). This is why James calls the Moral Law, the “perfect law of liberty” (Jas 1:25). Since sin is lawlessness (1 Jn 3:4; ‘transgression of the law’ = Grk. *anomia* = ‘lawlessness’), true liberty from sin must involve an ability to obey the Law.

Moreover, when the Ten Commandments, which summarises the Moral Law of God, was delivered by the LORD on Mount Sinai, He prefaced it with the words: “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out

of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex 20:1–2). In other words, Israel was being enjoined to obey the Law on the basis of their deliverance from Egypt. The New Testament teaches us that this deliverance from Egypt was a type of our deliverance from the bondage of sin and Satan (cf. Lk 1:72–75; Gen 15:8–21; Heb 6:13–20; Rom 4:13; Gal 3:16ff). Thus the preface of the Ten Commandments has a very important spiritual bearing for us, for it teaches us that “because God is the Lord, and our God, and Redeemer, therefore we are bound to keep all His commandments” (*WSC* 44).

A Christian is not only granted the ability and desire to obey the Law of God, but is obliged to obey it. But the Christian does not find obedience to the Law to be grievous (1 Jn 5:3). Indeed, he finds his liberty in obedience to the Law. His liberty is like that of a fish in water,—swimming freely, rather than that of a fish out of water,—free from constraints but dying. In other words, a Christian may not plead liberty to practise any known sin. To do so, is to plead for licentiousness and to use his liberty “for an occasion to the flesh” (Gal 5:13). A married Christian man, for example, may not plead liberty to live with a woman who is not his wife. To do so would be to sin against God.

Licentiousness destroys the goal of Christian Liberty, which is that “we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life.”

On the Duty of a Church Member or a Citizen

20.4 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.¹ 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,² and by the power of the civil magistrate.³

¹Mt 12:25; 1 Pet 2:13–14, 16; Rom 13:1–8; Heb 13:17; ²Rom 1:32; 1 Cor 5:1, 5, 11, 13; 2 Jn 10–11; 2 Thes 3:14; 1 Tim 6:3–5; Tit 1:10–11, 13; 3:10; Mt 18:15–17; 1 Tim 1:19–20; Rev 2:2, 14–15, 20; 3:9; ³Deut 13:6–12; Rom 13:3–4; 2 Jn 10–11; Ezra 7:23, 25–28; Rev 17:12, 16–17; Neh 13:15, 17, 21–22, 25, 30; 2 Kgs 23:5–6, 9, 20–21; 2 Chr 34:33; 15:12–13, 16; Dan 3:29; 1 Tim 2:2; Isa 49:23; Zech 13:2–3.

The section may be summarised in the following points:

- a. A church or the civil government of the land may make laws. These rules are to be obeyed as long as they do not contradict the Word of God. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (Rom 13:1). “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme” (1 Pet 2:13; cf. Fifth Commandment).
- b. Therefore, no one may claim to be exercising Christian liberty, if he fails to obey such rules. “Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation” (Rom 13:2). “As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God” (1 Pet 2:16).
- c. A person may disrupt the external peace of the church or nation by disobeying or by publishing his opinions contrary to the principles of the nation or the church; or more broadly, if by “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.” Such a person may rightly be disciplined either by the church or by the state (depending on the offence). (Cf. Discipline of civil powers: Rom 13:3; Discipline of the church: Matt 18:15–17; 1 Cor 5:1–13; 2 Thes 3:6, 14–15).
 - Note carefully: “It is not sin as *sin*, but as *scandal*, or injurious to the spiritual interests of Christians, that is the proper object of Church censure; and it is not for sins as such, but for *crimes*, that persons become liable to punishment by magistrates” (Shaw, 260).
 - What if a person disagrees with the practices or doctrine of the church? He may continue to be a member of the church, just as he may be a member of a nation though he may disagree with the laws of the nations. However, as long as he is a member, he is duty bound not to speak disparagingly against the doctrine of the church or the law of the nation or to act in a way that will disrupt the external peace of the church or nation. What if the church acts or teaches

unconstitutionally? Then the member has a right and perhaps even duty to protest. The same goes for a nation.