

Liberty of Conscience

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"God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." These words of the Westminster Confession [Chapter XX, 2] enshrine one of the most fundamental emphases of Puritan theology. Unfortunately, in subsequent Evangelical thinking this aspect of truth has been at a discount and the lives of many Christians today are set in a framework of legalism which has nothing to commend it but the consensus of denominational opinion. The loss is immense, both for the individual Christian and for the Church.

This question was already in dispute in our Lord's controversy with the Pharisees. They made the Word of God of none effect by their tradition, taught for doctrines the commandments of men and applied even to questions of far-reaching importance the principle, "It was said by them of old time." The subject is explicitly raised again in the Pauline epistles. In Romans 14.3-4, for example, the Apostle addresses the believer who condemns the eating of certain meats and says, "Let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?" The same problem was at Colosse, in a more serious form, and Paul expresses his astonishment that believers, once emancipated, should ever subject themselves again to vexatious prohibitions which were no more than human impositions [Col. 2.20-23]. But it was the situation in Galatia which disturbed the Apostle most of all and perhaps first alerted him to the perilous tendencies of the remnant legalism of the Christian heart. "But now", he writes, "after that ye have known God or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days and months and times and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain . . . We are not children of the bond-woman but of the free. Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" [Gal. 4.9-11, 4.31-5.1].

The theological basis of this liberty is three-fold. It arises, first of all, out of the sonship of believers. God has sent forth His Son; and that Advent has issued in two great results — it has redeemed us from the curse of the law and it has secured for us adoption as sons [Gal. 4.5]. That is our status. We are not slaves, accountable to the steward. We are sons, accountable to God alone. The Father's will is normative for us. But only the Father's. For any outside party — be it an individual or an institution — to attempt to

dictate to us would be an intolerable meddling with the domestic economy of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is this understanding that lies behind Paul's challenge, "God hath received him. Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? To his own master he standeth or falleth" [Rom. 14.4-5]. And when we realize the price with which this adoption and its implied liberty were secured — that Christ was made under the law and was made a curse to this very end — that Christ died to make us free — then we see how magnificent is our privilege. "For freedom Christ has made us free" [Gal. 5.1], and to deprive others of this liberty or allow our own to be infringed is to frustrate the very purpose of redemption.

Secondly, this liberty is grounded in the fact that God alone is Lord of the conscience. This means at once that conscience is not autonomous. No man has an absolute and unlimited right to believe and act simply as his conscience dictates. The liberty of conscience is limited by the authority of God, and this is true whether or not the individual is a Christian. The divine sovereignty is not affected by our recognition or non-recognition of it. But conscience has no other Lord; God can bind it by precept and prohibition. But none other can. No institution, state or tradition may declare lawful what He forbids; or require compliance with laws or prejudices which conflict with privileges which He has conferred; or prevent or hinder obedience to obligations which He has imposed.

Thirdly, and above all, Christian liberty is based upon the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture as the only rule of faith and life. It is here that the heavenly Father reveals His will and that the Lord of conscience expresses His authority. All that is revealed in Scripture is mandatory. We must believe and obey. Our consciences are bound. But nothing that is contrary to Scripture can bind us; and where Church or State violate this principle the Christian believer has no choice but to state emphatically, "I must obey God rather than men." But we must go even further. The Christian is free not only from precepts contrary to Scripture but also from precepts which are beside it in matters of faith and worship. This is the so-called Puritan principle. Certainly it was the kernel of Puritanism, which was primarily not a theological or doctrinal tendency but a very definite ecclesiological stand-point. The Church must have positive Biblical warrant for all that it prescribes in the realm of faith and worship. It cannot bind the consciences of its members by saying, You must do this because it is not forbidden by Scripture. It must be able to say, You have to do this because it is commanded in Scripture. We may not feel as strongly on this matter as did John Owen, who once wrote, "That principle, that the Church hath power to institute or appoint any thing or ceremony belonging to the worship of God, either as to matter or to manner, lies at the bottom of all the horrible superstition and idolatry, of all the confusion, blood, persecution and wars, that have for so long a season spread themselves over the face of the Christian world" [Works, Vol.1 p. xxvii]. We may not feel quite so strongly as this. But the principle is the very essence of Puritanism and of first-rate importance. The Church must not lay down as a principle of Christian conduct or as a condition of Church membership anything that is not revealed as such in the Word of God.

There is no need to linger over the practical outworking of this principle. It applies, first of all, in the realm of doctrine. The Church cannot impose as an article of faith anything contrary to the Word of God or anything not revealed in the Word of God. We might instance the Roman dogmas of the infallibility of the Papacy, the Immaculate Conception and the Assumption of Mary. It applies, again, in the realm of Church order, where it means that the Christian conscience cannot be bound by such non-biblical forms of government as Diocesan Episcopacy. It applies, yet again, in the realm of worship. The power of the Church is abused when it insists on the use of such things as vestments, instrumental music, incense, forms of prayer and kneeling at Communion. The Word of God has not bound His children to such observances. And above all the principle applies in the realm of conduct. There are many rules and prohibitions which have no Biblical authority but are so firmly embedded in the evangelical tradition that many Christians are emotionally unable to distinguish them from the will of God. They forbid — to mention a few examples — the use of alcoholic liquor, participation in many forms of recreation, certain modes of dress and even membership of political parties. Stern, negative attitudes on these and associated questions are too often almost constitutive of evangelicalism.

We must, therefore, continually remind ourselves that we are not servants but sons; and school ourselves in the habit of asking: These doctrines, these offices, these forms of worship, these rules and prohibitions — are they from Scripture? are they from our Father? are they from the Lord of conscience? And if not, by what authority do men impose them upon those whom Christ has redeemed by His blood? Why do they make sad the hearts of those whom the Lord has not made sad? This is not something peripheral. It is, from one side, interference with an inalienable and fundamental right of the Christian believer; and from the other an irreverent intermeddling with the household of God and an affront to His sovereignty. Moreover, once the principle is abandoned the process of erosion will go on unchecked. "When once the conscience is entangled in the net", wrote Calvin, "it enters a long and inextricable labyrinth, from which it is afterwards most difficult to escape. When a man begins to doubt whether it is lawful to use linen for sheets, shirts, napkins and handkerchiefs, he will not long be secure as to hemp, and will at last have doubts as to tow. In fine, he will come to this, that he will deem it criminal to trample on a straw lying in his way" [Institutes III, 19, 7].

It is clear, however, that we exercise this liberty under certain restrictions. It is a privilege that can be abused. Paul reminds us of this in Galatians 5.13, "Use not this liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." We can wrest this doctrine, apply to it the logic of the pit and turn it into a license for self-indulgence and an instrument of self-destruction. It is a dangerous principle and some may be disposed to reject it for that reason, fearing that it may unsettle the inexperienced and remove the sanctions necessary to the inculcation of holiness. But this anxiety, however well-intentioned, is misplaced. The logic is wrong. The premise certainly is correct. The doctrine is dangerous. But the conclusion is false. The doctrine is not wrong. It is almost a hallmark of the great evangelical doctrines that in the wrong hands they are lethal. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is easily perverted by the inference, "Let us sin that grace may abound." The sovereignty of God in salvation, working through

election and calling, leads easily to the irreverent question, "Why doth he yet find fault?" Peter indicates very clearly that some men were wresting Paul's teaching to their own destruction [2 Pet. 3.16]. But he does not suggest that Paul should modify his teaching in the light of that. I think we must face frankly the possibility that the principle of Christian liberty may destroy certain people. But it is not for that reason to be abandoned.

The danger is unnecessarily heightened, however, when it is allied to a misunderstanding of another of Paul's great emphases, "Ye are not under the law but under grace" [Rom. 6.14]. This is sometimes interpreted as if it meant that the law had no place in the life of a Christian man. But this is a complete misunderstanding. The Christian is free from the ceremonial law and in a certain sense he is free also from the moral law. But only in a certain sense. He is free from its curse and he is free from it as covenant of works insisting on perfect obedience as the condition of God's approbation. Christ is the end of the law for justification to every believing man [Rom. 10.4]. We may even go further and say that in a certain sense we are not under the law for sanctification. We are not dependent upon it. In order to sanctification we have resources other than the illumination of the law or the constraint of its sanctions. We have the operations of grace, the power of God, perfected in our weakness, supernaturally, irresistibly and invincibly sanctifying. Yet the law is indispensable. It is the rule of Christian conduct, the expression of the Lordship of Christ and of the Fatherhood of God and compliance with its mandates is the very essence of holiness. The liberty that we have, even as sons, is the liberty of the servants of the Lord, to whom the law of the Creator-Redeemer is not an irksome restraint but a delight [Ps. 40.8].

The New Testament is not content, however, to leave us with the general consideration that our liberty is limited by the authority of divine law. It affords us more detailed guidance.

In the first place, our liberty is qualified by civil and ecclesiastical authority, lawfully exercised. The Westminster Confession is very explicit about this. "And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended 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" [Chapter XX, 4]. This is little more than a transcription of Paul's injunction in Romans 13.1-2, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God." Valuable as these statements are they leave unanswered some questions on which we urgently need guidance. How, for example, are we to recognise the civil or ecclesiastical power which is lawful? And when is that power not lawfully exercised? But the general meaning is clear: In ordinary circumstances the Christian is bound to obey the enactments of the de facto authority both in Church and State and proscribed from subverting the peace or order of either. On the other hand, however, the authority of the powers that be is also limited. Their enactments are of no validity when they violate

divine law or when they trespass beyond their province. The State must not interfere in the internal affairs of the Church nor the Church with the legitimate operations of Civil government; and neither may invade the privacy of the family or intrude into matters which are between a man and his Maker.

Our liberty is qualified, secondly, by the principle enunciated in Hebrews 12.1, "Let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." There are many things not sinful in themselves and not condemned by Scripture which are wrong for the individual Christian in his individual circumstances. "We must always remember to distinguish what God allows us," writes Calvin. "There are some things lawful in themselves but whose use by us is forbidden because of the circumstances of time or place or other things. In enjoying all the blessings of this present life we must always have regard to the fact that they should be aids to our following God and not hindrances" [Comm. ad Heb. 11.26]. One of the great premises of our personal spiritual strategy must be what Paul speaks of in Romans 8.26 as "our infirmities". In the believer, that is, in his flesh, there dwells no good thing. He is easily tempted. The edge of his devotion is soon blunted. He must therefore avoid places and practices which, although not intrinsically sinful are yet hindrances to his personal spiritual effectiveness. But in this area no believer can prescribe for another. Liberty of conscience prevents that. Each must work out for himself what are those things which are lawful in themselves but inexpedient for him. What are the lawful pursuits which in our case weaken faith, dampen zeal and set aflame the remaining depravity of our hearts?

The third restriction upon our liberty is the claim of the weaker brother. This personage figures prominently in Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye"; "We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak"; "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling-block to them that are weak"; "Through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish for whom Christ died?" [Rom. 14.1, 15.1; I Cor. 8.9, 11]. The basic difficulty here is that of identification. Who is the weak brother? He is not the sensitive person whose feelings are easily hurt. Probably he is usually sensitive but that is not the weakness which Paul has in mind here. He is thinking in terms of spiritual weakness. This person is easily destroyed. He is easily tempted and falls. In this weakness there are three elements — he is weak in faith [Rom. 14.1], weak in knowledge [1 Cor. 8.7], and weak in conscience [1 Cor. 8.12]. The weakness in faith which Paul refers to is probably related to the principle laid down in Romans 14.14, "Nothing is unclean in itself." The weak brother is unable to grasp the positive idea which underlies this, namely, that "every creature of God is good." He is unable to believe, with Calvin, that we are to use the gifts of God without any scruple of conscience, without any perturbation of mind, for the purpose for which he gave them." Weakness in knowledge, in the concrete instance of Paul's context, is the inability to understand that an idol is a nonentity. In eating meat offered to idols some men cannot disabuse their minds of the idea that this god actually exists, has been affected by the consecration of the meat to him and will be affected by their eating it. The weak conscience is one which, almost afraid of the responsibilities of emancipation, continues to submit to regulations from which Christ has made us free. Since the individual

believes that they are still in force any departure from them involves for him violation of belief and conscience.

How then are the strong to treat this believer with his weak knowledge, weak faith and weak conscience? First, he must not despise him [Rom. 14.3]. Secondly, he must not destroy him [1 Cor. 8.11]. It is clear at once that this is quite a different idea from not giving offence. Paul is not saying that we must not hurt the feelings of other Christians. Nine times out of ten that is true. "It must be admitted", writes Professor Murray, "that weak believers do often experience acute pain of heart when they observe others exercise liberties that in their esteem are improper, and a strong believer actuated by love will seek to spare his fellow-believer this pain" [The Epistle to the Romans, ad 14.15]. But situations are bound to arise in which for conscience's sake we must hurt the feelings of our brother believers. Sometimes we must do it for no other reason than the maintenance of Christian liberty against the encroachments of legalism. Offence taken by Pharisees, says Calvin, is not to be regarded. Moreover, we must not overlook the fact that the weak is under obligation so far as regards his attitude to the strong just as surely as the strong is under obligation as regards his attitude to the weak. "Let not him that eateth not judge him that eateth." The tendency of the weak to pass censorious judgment on the strong is as reprehensible as the tendency of the strong to treat the weak with contempt.

The injunction, "Destroy not", implies, I think, two things. First, the strong must not put a stumbling-block in the way of the weak [Rom. 14.13]. Some believers are able, through grace, to live to the glory of God while engaged in activities in which temptations abound. But our own ability to survive is not the only criterion. What of the weaker brother who follows our example? Will he fall and be destroyed? Secondly — and this is what Paul is immediately concerned with — the strong must not embolden the weak to violate his conscience. To enlighten and liberate conscience is one thing. To constrain to its violation is another. "To him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean to him it is unclean," [Rom. 14.14], and consideration for the religious interests of the weak demands that we must never induce him to do what his conscience denounces as wrong.

In the fourth place our freedom is limited by the demands of edification. "All things are lawful for me," writes Paul, "but all things edify not," [1 Cor. 10.23]. We are not only free men. We are also members of the body of Christ and of the Christian household and bound therefore by love to serve one another. Each must seek not his own but another's wealth. This means that with regard to our liberty we must ask not, "How may we indulge it?" but "How can we consecrate it?" It must be used for the upbuilding of the body of Christ. Any exercise of Christian liberty which is harmful to the Church is wrong. We must be motivated all the time by a loving concern for the strength, peace, effectiveness and purity of the Christian community. This is especially important in relation to the Church's commission, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations." This is something about which Paul is very emphatic. He speaks of pleasing "all men in all things; not seeking mine own profit but the profit of many, that they may be saved" [1 Cor. 10.33]. "We have not used this power," he writes elsewhere, "but suffer all things

lest we should hinder the Gospel of Christ" [1 Cor. 9.12]. Or again: "Though I be free from all men, yet I have made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more" [1 Cor. 9.19]. Christians are free. That is their inalienable right. But they must not use their liberty in such a way that evangelism is hindered. They must be prepared to forego its exercise if that is going to contribute to the effectiveness of their testimony. This was the way that Paul behaved at Corinth. He believed that the Lord had decreed that those who preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel and should be supported by those who benefit from their spiritual ministrations. But at Corinth he deliberately renounced this privilege, so that "when I preach the Gospel I may make the Gospel of Christ without charge" [1 Cor. 9.18]. He speaks to the same effect in the oft-quoted statement, "I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some" [1 Cor. 9.22]. The Christian is not bound by the purely cultural and ideological manners of local communities, but he may choose, in the interests of evangelistic effectiveness, to observe them carefully lest he diminish the value of his testimony by giving unnecessary offence.

But overriding all these factors is the great positive consideration of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 10.31, "Whether therefore ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." Our freedom is in order to this. We must hallow the Name. We are identified with it, and in us it is exposed to compromise and disgrace. We must, in the exercise of our liberty, so bear ourselves that men glorify our Father who is in heaven. It is not enough, then, that a thing is not forbidden. It must glorify God. It must admit of being consecrated to Him. This rules out the pursuit of the trivial and the frivolous as well as the pursuit of the unlawful. We must lay on others no burdens. But for ourselves we must conscientiously pursue what is to the praise of the glory of His grace.

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