

Considering the topic “Christian liberty”, it is perhaps a great irony that most people today pit “freedom” against religion and even Christianity? Why is that do you think?

The above notwithstanding, and about the Christian life especially, the scripture teaches “for *freedom*, Christ has set us *free*” (Gal.4:31). And all of creation is described as yearning to be “set *free* from its bondage” in relation to the work of Christ wherein all of creation is said to “obtain the *freedom* of the glory of the children of God.” (Rom.8:21). What do you think is meant by “Christian freedom?” Is anyone really “absolutely free,” or are we just “relatively free?” And if just “relatively free”—then what is *true* freedom?

In other words, contrary to the enlightenment “myth” of absolute freedom, the scripture teaches that we are never absolutely free—such that the Christian hope is to be set free *from* one thing in order to serve, be subservient to, or under the power of something else? For instance, in Romans 6:18, we are taught “And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.” Notice then, what are the “*froms*” and “*tos*” of Christian freedom according to WCF 20?

- Section 1: *From/To* as further qualified in section 3. (*Titus 2:14, 1Th.1:10, Gal. 1:4, 3:13, Col. 1:13, Rom. 6:14*)
  - 1: How does “sin” enslave us? How then does being in submission to Christ set us free?
  - 3: What doesn’t this mean? What would be a false application of this sort of Christian freedom? Or better, why would it not really be “free” if we return to sinning? (*Gal 5:13, 1 Pet 2:16, 2 Pet 2:19, John 8:34*)
- Section 2: *From/To* as further qualified in section 4. (*Gal 1:10, 2:2:4, James 4:12, Rom 14:4*)
  - 2: How do other people enslave us—both institutionally and perhaps more so, relationally? (Notice the title of the book *When People Are Too Big And God Is Too Small*, Edward Welch)
  - 3: What doesn’t this mean? What would be a false application of this sort of Christian freedom? How does the Bible portray the “lawful” exercise of authority; is it a blessing or curse? (e.g. Rom 13—as properly appointed, especially according to apostolic foundation with respect to the church).

What three institutions are not only recognized by God, but are by positive institution ordained by God in scripture such that we are morally responsible to them? And notice especially that to submit unto them is in each case stated freedom “to” as a blessing to us!

- Family (*Notice how Ephesians 5:21 introduces 5:22ff, 6:1-3, 6:5ff, and especially the promises attached*) cf. WCF 24
- Civil (*Romans 13:1-7, especially vs. 2-4*) cf. WCF 23
- Ecclesial (*Hebrews 13:7ff, especially vs. 17*) cf. WCF 21, 25-31

Notice then the subsequent chapters of the WCF in relation to these God-ordained powers. We will review the confessional teachings on these three institutions, and our relation to them, in subsequent studies. But in general terms, in relation to our religion especially, compare section 2 here with section 6 of chapter 1. What do you see in common? How then is God alone the Lord of the conscience?

**1.6** The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

**1.9** The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

**1.10** The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

E.g. James Bannerman has observed from all of this how "man has been made free as to his conscience from the doctrine and commandments of his fellow men, in order that he may be free to serve God" (*The Church of God*, p. 160). Under what two circumstances is the conscience free from the doctrines and commandments of men according to section 2?

We should carefully note then the teaching of section 4 in relation to the above question. How can we BOTH obey section 2 and section 4 and not, therefore, "*upon Christian pretence... oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it...*" such as to "*resist the ordinance of God?*" Consider the example of Acts 15.

*Like the state, the Church is an ordinance of God; and like the state, it is vested by God with a certain measure of authority of its own kind, which entitles it to claim and receive a certain measure of obedience from its members. The Church, for example, has power in matters of faith, not indeed arbitrarily to dictate a new truth or new doctrine of its own, but to declare the doctrine and truth of Christ; and in doing so, to determine and decide for its own purposes upon the faith and profession of its members. Such decisions in regard to controversies of faith, and such declarations of the truth of Christ, if consonant with the Word of God, are to be received and submitted to by its members, not only or merely because they are consonant with His Word, but because of the authority by which they are made being an ordinance of God for that end... In other words, there is a certain obligation which Church power carries with it, because its acts and decisions are agreeable to the Word of God; there is a second and additional obligation which Church power carries with it, because it is itself an ordinance of God, appointed expressly for such ends." (James Bannerman, p. 237) cf. WCF 31.3*

Notice that of special interest is the subject is the question of faith and worship. What duty is implied *vis-à-vis* the exercise of power by the *church* in terms of what is said and done in covenantal worship as ordained by God? Notice carefully the principle in section 2, "*Which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship.*" This principle has been historically described as the "regulative principle."

- Notice then how the "regulative principle" is a necessary extension of the teachings concerning Christian freedom and liberty of conscience."

Consider the teaching of Romans 14. How does this relate to the question of Christian liberty with respect to our duty to "welcome one another" within the communion of Christ, albeit those who are of a different conscience than us about various ethical matters?

- Note especially how this passage has often been misunderstood—as to reverse even the real exercise of Christian liberty with respect to the command to welcome one another. For example, what exactly is Paul talking about possibly being destroyed in terms of the work of God for the sake of food (notice carefully 20-21, in relation to the point of Romans "no distinction..." and 14:1-3 in terms of *Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat...*etc.)? The point of this passage is the proper exercise of Christian freedom such as not to destroy Christian unity in the body of Christ—it is NOT that some Christians are to stop doing certain things lest other "weak" Christians be tempted to do what according to Paul is a "weak" or immature application of the Bible anyway—rather it is for the weak and the strong (Paul's terms) to NOT break fellowship over such things as are not the essence of Christian union! It is a warning against unnecessary church schism!
- How then ought this to impact what the church requires as "terms" of Christian union and fellowship together around Christ's table so that on the one hand people are enabled to grow within a process that reflects this doctrine of freedom of conscience, albeit in a way that also recognizes that some things are "strong" vs. "weak" in terms of belief and practice?

*"The power of the Church has for its aim and end directly the general benefit and spiritual good of the Church as a body.... such power is instituted for the interests and spiritual edification of the whole Church and not for the advantage of the few who administer it... the spiritual edification of the whole body of believers is the one end and aim of Church power." (Bannerman, p. 252, 254) 2 Cor. 10:8; 15:10; Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 2:24-26*

Some concrete example to consider:

- Civil: Can a Christian drive 80 mph in Nebraska, or wade in a mountain stream with the sign "no wading"?
- Church: The question of the use of certain media (drama, video clips, etc) in worship?
- The question of what it means to keep the Sabbath Holy? (go out to eat, go to a game, Sunday School?, etc.)
- The question of how to spend church money—e.g. should the church, acting jointly vis-à-vis its Sunday collection, support the YMCA, the local soup kitchen, etc?
- Should the church engage politics (if so when) and should the church endorse certain political candidates?