

Lesson 25: 2LCF Chapter 21: Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

Galatians 5:13

When you think of the terms “Christian liberty” or “liberty of conscience”, what first comes to mind? When some Christians think about “Christian liberty”, they may be inclined to think of particular behaviours that they are free to engage in. Some may reason that their freedom of conscious allows them to drink or smoke, so long as they are not prone to excess. Others may feel that they are free to attend (or not attend) church on the Lord’s day or during a mid-week prayer meetings. Those in the medical field may think about the importance of being able to conscientiously object to certain job duties, so as to not perform anything that violates their conscience (ie. aiding in abortions, prescribing contraceptives, etc.).

Perhaps a more important questions is this: what does Scripture mean when it speaks to freedom of conscience or Christian liberty? As our Puritan forefathers faced ecclesiastical totalitarianism and civil totalitarianism, they were forced to grapple with this very question. Out of this wrestling came chapter 21 of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (after chapter 20 of the Westminster Confession of Faith).²⁷²

Chapter 20 of the Second London Baptist Confession of Faith addresses this issue in three paragraphs. They have been divided as follows:

Paragraph 1

I. The composition of Christian liberty

A. Under the gospel

1. Described negatively

Freedom from the guilt of sin

Freedom from the power of sin

Freedom from the punishment of sin

2. Described positively

Free access to God

Child-like obedience to God

B. Under the law

I. Its common substance

II. Its subsequent enlargement

Ceremonial freedom from the law

Greater boldness in prayer

Fuller supplies of the Spirit

²⁷² Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 301.

Paragraph 2

- II. The corollary of Christian liberty: liberty of conscience
 - A. Its foundational principle
 - B. Its basic implications
 - C. Its necessary requirements
 - 1. Of followers
 - 2. Of leaders

Paragraph 3

- III. The Corruption of Christian Liberty
 - A. Its essence
 - B. Its fruits
 - 1. Its impact on gospel grace
 - 2. Its impact on Christian liberty²⁷³

Paragraph 1.

The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the gospel, consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the severity and curse of the law, and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the fear and sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation: as also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind.

All which were common also to believers under the law for the substance of them; but under the New Testament the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of a ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected, and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.

Gal. 3:13; Gal. 1:4; Acts 26:18; Rom. 8:3; Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 15:54-57; 2 Thess. 1:10; Rom. 8:15; Luke 1:73-75; 1 John 4:18; Gal. 3:9,14; John 7:38,39; Heb. 10:19-21

Exposition

Paragraph one deals with the believer's freedom in terms that many would not expect. Firstly it deals with Christian freedom under the gospel and under the law. The first section speaks to the believers freedom in the gospel both positively and negatively.

Freedom Under the Gospel

1. Described negatively

Freedom from the guilt of sin

John 3:36

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.

Romans 8:33

²⁷³ Ibid.

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

Freedom from the power of sin

Galatians 1:3-4

3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4 who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father

Romans 6:14-18

14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. 15 What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Hebrews 2:14-15

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Freedom from the punishment of sin

Romans 8:1

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

1 Corinthians 15:54-57

54 When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

“Death is swallowed up in victory.”

O death, where is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Galatians 3:13

13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”

2. Described positively

Described positively, the believer enjoys free access to God and the ability to render child-like obedience to God.

Jim Savastio writes on this point:

Just as the law is no longer a source of condemnation to the believer, so too the pursuit of holiness ought not to be a source of grief. Instead, holiness is pursued with the confidence of a child accepted in the Beloved.

The liberty we have in Christ is furthermore not a self-centered or selfish liberty. We are freed from the condemnation of the law, not from the essence of God's law or will for our

lives. That is to say that the freedom from the condemnation of the law due to our sin is not a freedom from the clear command that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and our neighbor as we do ourselves. We do not view the law as that which will damn us, but as the words coming from a loving Father to His children who want to please Him.²⁷⁴

Freedom Under the Law

On this point, the Confession states: *“under the New Testament the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of a ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected, and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.”*

Here we see that the Christian is freed from the ceremonial law, while experiencing an enlarged with added New Testament Revelation.

John 8:31-32

31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Sam Waldron comments:

The guiding principle of Scripture is stated in one of the classic texts on Christian liberty (John 8:32). It is the truth that makes free. It is knowing the truth that liberates men, imparts to them Christian liberty. Did Old Testament saints savingly know redemptive truth? Was this truth substantially the same truth as that known by New Testament saints? Yes! Then, if they knew it, knew it savingly, it set them free in the same way as New Testament saints are set free by it.

Do New Testament saints have an enlarged, more clear, revelation of truth by means of progressive revelation? Yes! For that reason, they must enjoy a larger measure of the freedom, the Christian liberty, that the truth imparts.

This clear and basic truth of Scripture will clarify and guide us in this matter. It leads us to expect that Christian liberty, as to the substance of it, will be common to all saints in every age. It also leads us to expect that Christian liberty will be enjoyed, ordinarily, in a greater measure by those who enjoy the brighter light of the New Covenant.²⁷⁵

Paragraph 2.

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to His word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also.

James 4:12; Rom. 14:4; Acts 4:19,29; 1 Cor. 7:23; Matt. 15:9; Col. 2:20,22,23; 1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 1:24

²⁷⁴ Jim Savastio “Chapter Twenty-One: Of Christian Liberty and Liberty of Conscience,” in *A New Exposition of the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, ed. Rob Ventura (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022), 385.

²⁷⁵ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 305.

Exposition

In paragraph two, the Confession addresses the concerns that are as pronounced today as they were in framers' day. Some have called this paragraph one of the most important statements on freedom of the conscience outside of Scripture.

The Puritan William Perkins writes on this theme:

Conscience is a knowledge joyned with a knowledge. For by conscience we knowe what we know; and by it we knowe that thing of our selves which God knoweth of us. The natural condition of every man's conscience is this; that it is placed in the middle betweene man and God, under God and above man. And this natural condition hath two parts: the one is the subiection of conscience to God and his word; the second is a power whereby the conscience is over the man to urge and binde him. Of the first, we have this rule, that *God alone by his word doeth onely binde conscience properly: for he is the onely Lord of the conscience, which created it, and governs it. He againe is the onely lawe-giver, that hath power to save or destroy the soule, for the keeping and breaking of his Lawes.*

Againe, mans conscience is knowne to none but to God, and it is he onely that gives libertie to the conscience, in regard of his owne lawes. Upon this it followeth, that no mans commandement or Lawe can of it selfe, and by it owne soueraigne power binde conscience, but doeth it onely by the authoritie and vertue of the written word of God, or some part thereof.²⁷⁶

Paragraph 3.

They who upon pretence of Christian liberty do practice any sin, or cherish any sinful lust, as they do thereby pervert the main design of the grace of the gospel to their own destruction, so they wholly destroy the end of Christian liberty, which is, that being delivered out of the hands of all our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our lives.

Rom. 6:1,2; Gal. 5:13; 2 Pet. 2:18,21

Exposition

Sam Waldrom provides this commentary:

Liberty is not the ultimate good. It is to be limited by higher values. There is a difference between Christian liberty and the cult of liberty. Liberty is not the right to do as I please. Liberty is the right to do as God pleases without fear. This understanding of Christian liberty will prevent us from sinfully insisting on the exercise of our rights and liberties. Yet we may not so give up our liberty as to misrepresent the faith (Galatians 2:3; Colossians 2:16-23).²⁷⁷

Ryan McGraw adds:

Christian liberty for Paul is freedom from sin to serve the triune God freely in all things, which should be our definition of Christian liberty too. Christian liberty speaks directly of

²⁷⁶ William Perkins, *The First Part of the Cases of Conscience* (Cambridge: John Legat, 604), 43.

²⁷⁷ Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 310.

our relationship with God in Christ and how the Spirit governs what we do when we worship, work, rest, play, eat, drink, and sleep, all guided by God's commandments in relation to Him, to others, and to ourselves... Christian liberty is freedom to be who God made us to be. We are free to worship the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, having "free access to God" ...²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ Ryan M. McGraw, *The Misuse of Christian Liberty*, Tabletalk Magazine, March 2024, Retrieved from: <https://tabletalkmagazine.com/article/2024/03/the-misuse-of-christian-liberty>.