

CHAPTER 21:

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY AND LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE

The Freedom That A Christian Has

1. *Christ has purchased for all believers a liberty inherent in the Gospel. It comprises freedom from the guilt of sin, from the condemnation that follows upon guilt, from the wrath of God, and from the severity and curse of God's law. It also includes deliverance from this present evil world, and from all such things as bondage to Satan, sin's dominion, the hurtfulness of afflictions, the fear and sting of death, the victory of the grave, and eternal damnation. Furthermore, it includes free access to God and the yielding of obedience to Him, not as it were with the fear of a slave for his master, but with a childlike love and readiness.*

All these blessings were more or less enjoyed by believers in Old Testament days, but under New Testament conditions Christian liberty becomes more extensive. It includes freedom from the burdens imposed by the ceremonial law to which the Jewish church was subjected, greater boldness in approaching to the throne of grace, and a larger measure of the free Spirit of God than was normally granted to saints in the pre-Christian era.

The background of this chapter must first be understood as this subject of liberty is not one that is much heard these days. Three different views are dealt with that are very dangerous:

- (1) Church authoritarianism – Especially the Catholics claim total authority over men's consciences to believe whatever it teaches even when it is not in the Bible, e.g. about Mary.
- (2) State authoritarianism – This is the other extreme where it is believed that the State is the final human authority. Even leaders like Martin Luther appealed to the state for religious reform.
- (3) Libertinism – The throwing off of all authority in a false liberty which becomes indulgence.

(a) Freedom **under the Gospel** – It is expressed both negatively and positively.

1. What the Christian is freed from:

- Sin's guilt and condemnation (lines 1-3) – Jn. 3:18, Rm. 8:1,33, so that there is no expectation of God's wrath (1 Thess. 1:10) as the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13).
- Sin's power over our lives (lines 3-5) – the world (Gal. 1:4), the devil (Heb. 2:14-15), and the flesh or indwelling sin (Rm. 6:12-14).
- Sin's punishment (lines 5-6) – afflictions that no longer hurt (Rm. 8:28), death and the grave that no longer damn (1 Cor. 15:54-57), not afflictions or death themselves.

2. What new freedoms the Christ has (lines 6-7):

- Free access to God (Eph. 2:18, Heb. 10:19).
- Childlike obedience – not out of fear but out of love because God is now our Father having adopted us as sons through Jesus Christ (Rm. 8:15).

(b) Compared with Freedom **under the Law** (Old Testament times) – Basically the same freedoms because the OT saints were also justified by faith (Abraham in Rm. 4:1-5). But in the following ways our freedom is more "extensive" than under the law (lines 8-12).

- "Freedoms from burdens imposed by the ceremonial law" (see Acts 15:10, Gal. 4:3).
We are no longer burdened by dietary laws, laws about contact with gentiles, sacrificial and temple worship laws, which would be a great hindrance to the missionary work of the church (see Gal. 2:11-21, Col. 2:16-17).
- Greater boldness in prayer, because of the full revelation of God in Christ.
- Fuller supplies of the Spirit as a baptism, outpouring, river (Jn. 7:37-39, Acts 2:17).

Freedom of Conscience

2. *God alone is Lord of the conscience. He has set it free from all obligation to receive or obey any such doctrines or demands of men as are in any respect in opposition to His Word or not contained in it. Indeed, to believe and obey such doctrines and demands is tantamount to a betrayal of true liberty of conscience. It is against all reason, and nothing less than the destruction of liberty of conscience, when men demand of their fellows an implicit faith, in other words, an absolute and blind obedience.*

Freedom of conscience depends upon the spiritual freedom in Christ by the gospel. Christians are free from the necessity of obedience to any command of men not in the Bible.

(a) **Basic principle** – “God alone is Lord of the conscience” (line 1). Read the following verses in their context: Rm. 14:4, Gal. 5:1, Jas. 4:12. It is only to the commands of God in the Bible that we must give “implicit faith” and “absolute obedience”.

(b) **Implication** – We have been “set free from all obligation to receive or obey and such doctrines or demands of men as are in any respect in opposition to His Word or not contained in it” (lines 1-3). The teaching and commands of men, unless contained in the Bible, should not be submitted to as if they were the commands of God. Read the following verses in their contexts: Matt. 15:9, Acts 4:19, 5:29, 1 Cor. 7:23. For example, the Bible commands that we must submit to church leaders (Heb. 13:17), so that this must become a matter of conscience with us, but only if what they command is true to the Word of God.

(c) **Requirements** – Obey men in the family, work, state and church relationships of authority because such authority is from God and from the principle of seeking to please men in order to win them to Christ (1 Cor. 9:19-23). This is why Paul had Timothy circumcised, but refused to have Titus circumcised (Acts 16:3 & Gal. 2:3). But men must never be required to give to us an “absolute obedience” as if our commands are the commands of God, or a “blind obedience” because there is no Scripture proof.

(d) **Applications** - This section was written against the background of the authoritarianism of the Roman Catholic Church that demands belief in doctrines (e.g. purgatory) and obedience to practices (e.g. prayer to Mary) that are not in the Bible. The State has often ‘lorded’ it over men’s consciences, such as in Scotland when it sought to impose prelacy (bishops) as the only method of Church government, or in England when it sought to impose the Prayer Book as the only way of worship. Our cry must be, “What says the Scripture?” (see Is. 8:20, Acts 17:11). Do not believe anything, or obey anything, unless you are convinced that it is the Word of the Lord in the Scripture. Do not let your conscience be brought again into bondage.

Christian Liberty Corrupted

3. *To practise any sin, or harbour sin’s evil desires, on a pretence of enjoying Christian liberty, perverts the main purpose of gospel grace, and imperils those guilty of such an offence, for thereby they destroy the very purpose of Christian liberty, namely, that the Lord’s people, ‘being delivered out of the hand of their enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all their days’.*

Christian freedom must never be an excuse for following our own evil desires. This is because Christian freedom is first of all deliverance **from** sin in order to serve God. ‘Freedom’ is not the right to do what *I* want, but to do what *God* wants. Such an abuse of freedom was an ever-present danger in the early church (see Rm. 6:1,2, Gal. 5:13-15). The example of the deliverance of the Jews from Egypt is helpful. They were freed from Egyptian slavery with the purpose that they might serve God and Him alone (for example read Deuteronomy 6).