

The Abuse of Christian Liberty

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – the freedom of Christian liberty must not pervert the main objective of grace in the gospel
2. aim – to cause us to reject any justification of sinful desires due to our liberty in Christ
3. passage – Romans 6:1-7

b. outline

1. The Perversion of Christian Liberty
2. The Destruction of Christian Liberty
3. The Purpose of Christian Liberty

c. opening

1. the **source** and **substance** of Christian Liberty
 - a. **the follower of Christ possesses a liberty that the fallen world cannot understand**
 1. **one so great that the Christian should never substitute it for a lesser one (see below)**
 - b. it is a liberty:
 1. purchased by the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ – not one of our own effort
 2. *from* (vertically): the guilt of sin (**i.e.** the despair of past sin), the wrath of God (**i.e.** the fear of punishment), and the curse of the law (**i.e.** the “hamster wheel” of religious performance)
 3. *through* (horizontally): the dominion of sin (**i.e.** as Christ overcame the dominion of death, so we are free from the power of sin to control us), and the fear of death (**i.e.** a life of contentment knowing that eternal reward *in Jesus* is far greater than any temporal blessings in this life)
 4. *to* (vertically): the freedom to obey God with a childlike love – to love God *principally*
 5. **IOW**: the genuine follower of Christ has been set free *from* his reprobation (**i.e.** a hatred of God) *to* a life of obedience (**i.e.** a love of God) – not “slavish fear”; **not from one form of slavery to another**
2. the **opposites** of Christian Liberty
 - a. but ... the *point* of the chapter is its confrontation with those things that *oppose* liberty in the Christian
 1. **IOW**: Christian liberty is only valuable *when it stays free* – when it is *substituted* for another form of “liberty,” it is no longer true *Christian* liberty
 - b. legalism = “doctrines or commandments” developed by *men* to insure “conformity” of the believer to a standard of behavior *not explicitly defined in the Word of God*
 1. a “slavery” of conscience – a return to the slaveries of shame (before men), wrath (by men), and the curse of the law (as established by men) – **IOW**: substituting one slavery for another
 - c. (**now**) another “opposite” of Christian liberty in the gospel – in this case, an **abuse of Christian liberty** that actually becomes another form of slavery (**i.e.** it is an “opposite” of liberty, not legalism)

The Perversion of Christian Liberty

a. the address of Christian liberty

1. a sense in which the believer, knowing that he has been set free in Christ from shame, guilt, wrath, and the curse of the law, *purposely* accedes to the notion that he is now under *no law at all (or very limited law)*

b. the forms of addressing Christian liberty

1. **antinomianism** = the belief that the Christian is *entirely free* from any sense of the O.T. law; that – in the gospel, the N.T. believer is no longer under any aspect of the Mosaic law *and is free to live without that law as any sort of guiding principle*
 - a. or (in some circles): the only law that applies are those commands *explicitly* defined in the N.T.
 - b. **fact**: there really *aren't* any true antinomianists in the world – even the most *staunch* antinomianist *must admit* that the Moral Code still applies in a sense (**e.g.** the command against murder)
 - c. so, the Confession writers are not *specifically* speaking against the idea of *flat-out* lawlessness
2. **libertarianism** = a philosophy that advocates only *minimal* oversight by the “state” over life, that only certain *relevant* laws apply to the individual *who is free to live without the constraint of “government”*
 - a. a political ideology – the belief that the only true intention of government is to protect the basic rights of individuals (**i.e.** life, liberty, and personal property; **John Locke**) – all other forms of constraint by the state are nullified over against the individual *who is free to live his life as he chooses* (within reason, of course)
 1. **fact**: political libertarianism, although popular, has no “centralized” core (by definition), thus little political advancement – it is also negated by the sense of law noted in legalism: human beings *love law*

- b. a Baptist ideology – the belief that local churches are *utterly autonomous* from hierarchal structures
 - 1. **note:** the 4th paragraph of *this* chapter in the Westminster was *rejected* by the Baptist authors because it intimated that issues of liberty should be addressed by “the censures of the church” (**i.e.** the hierarchy)
- c. an individualistic spiritual ideology – the belief that the individual is *autonomously free* to establish for *himself* the parameters of Christian living – to live free from *external constraints* not imposed by God
 - 1. in an obvious sense, the definition of Christian liberty *on a horizontal level* – freed from self-righteousness before God *and the legalistic demands of men*, the Christian is free to enjoy all that God has declared good in the world, *without the fear of judgment where no judgment is warranted*
 - 2. **the freedom to truly live, with full access to God and a new nature that lives in childlike love**

c. the abuse of Christian liberty

“Those who use Christian liberty as an excuse to practice any sin or nurture any sinful desire pervert the main objective of the grace of the gospel ...”

1. **ultra-libertarianism** = the tendency of the flesh to “push” Christian liberty onto the **justification** of continuing sinful habits or desires (**i.e.** an individualistic determination of right vs. wrong)
 - a. **i.e.** the **abuse** of Christian “liberty” as an excuse to continue sinful actions or desires – to *presume* upon the grace of God by continuing in actions or desires *that are known to be sin*
 - b. **i.e.** to *justify* sin as *unconquerable*, or to simply *presume* that because all sin has been redeemed by Christ that it is “okay” to continue in it (“after all, my sin is forgiven, so I don’t need to worry about it”)
2. the issue as it is addressed by Paul in **Romans 6:1-7** (**i.e.** as something he *knew* would come up)
 - a. **v. 1** – a rhetorical question asking if we should “*continue in sin*” so that “*grace may abound*” = are we free to continue to sin after confessing faith in Christ *knowing* that God’s grace will cover any such sins?
 - b. **v. 2a** – an emphatic answer: by no means (or “are you kidding me?”, “what’s wrong with you people?”) – the answer to this question should be so *obvious* that no one should *dare* to even consider it
 - c. **v. 2b** – an emphatic answer: how can anyone who has *died to sin* still live in it – how can a person *freed* from the power of sin still allow himself (by choice) to actively be *enslaved by it still*
 - d. **vv. 3-4** – an illustration (clarification) from the ordinance of baptism:
 1. baptism represents (symbolically) the believer being *vicariously* connected to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus – into the water represents death and burial, out of the water represents new life
 2. **note:** which is why Baptists insist upon *immersion upon true confession of faith* – the symbolism and intention of the rite is only visible in a *confessant* being *literally* buried in water (**i.e.** joined *fully*)
 3. so, when we confess faith in the death and resurrection of Christ (and partake in the rite), we solemnly declare that **the old life of sin has been buried** and **the new life of holiness is what we now live**
 5. **vv. 5-6** – therefore, being connected to Christ’s death must imply that we are also connected to his life
 1. the “*old self*” (**i.e.** the reprobate life of *enjoying sin*) has been crucified so that it has no power (**i.e.** “*been brought to nothing*”) so that we are “*no longer ... enslaved to sin*”
 6. **v. 7** – conclusion: those who have died are no longer enslaved by sin = sin will have no dominion over you
 7. **principle: to justify continuing sin under the guise of “liberty” is fundamentally inconsistent with what has happened to us by virtue of being included in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and to what we testified before the world in our baptism**

d. the perversion of Christian liberty

1. perversion = a twisting of what is good into something wrong or evil; to change the original intention of something into *what it was never intended to be*
 - a. **question:** what is the intention of the grace of God; why has God **chosen** to redeem a people to himself?
 1. popular: so that we “go to heaven,” so that we enjoy happiness and prosperity in this life, so that we “transform the world” through his love, so that *we ...* (**i.e.** all very *man-centered* reasonings)
 2. biblical: so that we glorify God (**e.g. Catechism #1:** the chief end of man – to *glorify* God and enjoy *him* forever) – the intention of grace in the gospel is for God to redeem, sanctify, and glorify a people into his eternal presence forever, a people *reformed in holiness* out of a world filled with sin
 - a. **IOW:** the true objective of the gospel is to make a people *holy in his sight*, not *happy in this life*
 2. **principle: it is a perversion of the true intention of salvation to justify ongoing sin – our purpose is not simply to “enjoy life,” but to be transformed in every way into creatures morally acceptable in God’s sight for all eternity (Romans 12:2)**

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The Destruction of Christian Liberty

a. the destruction of Christian liberty

“... to their own destruction, and they completely destroy the purpose of Christian liberty.”

1. **thesis: like legalism, ultra-libertarianism is the opposite of Christian liberty because it submits its adherents to another form of slavery – it destroys liberty in much the same way that legalism does**

- a. legalism creates a standard *under men* that forces the conscience of the believer under a new slavery
 - 1. the believer is forced back into guilt (before men), wrath (of men), and law (established by men)
- b. ultra-libertarianism creates a standard *under the individual* that forces the conscience of the believer to a slavery *to his own passions (Romans 6:12)* and *to his own doubts (Romans 14:22f)*

"Let not sin reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions ... Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."

 - 1. it is the establishment of a standard of obedience "disconnected" from the freedom we have in Christ:
 - a. the standard of obedience to God out of a "childlike love and willing mind" is replaced by an *inborn* standard of "performance" *again* – *i.e.* if I do (or do not do) certain things, then God will *continue to be* pleased with me – or, *am I still a Christian in doing this or that ... ?*
 - 2. it is the constant "**hamster wheel**" of making the Christian life either a *cycle* of excused sin and repentance, or (more likely) a constant "second guessing" of one's place before God

The Purpose of Christian Liberty

a. the purpose of Christian liberty

"This purpose is that we, having been delivered from the hands of all our enemies, may serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our lives."

- 1. **we have been delivered from the hands of all our enemies**
 - a. delivered from Satan and his lies through the full revelation of truth in the Word of God and a regenerated heart and mind able to receive it; delivered from the dominion sin by the power of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and the sanctifying presence of the Spirit; delivered from the legalisms of men who try to destroy our liberty through new forms of slavery; and delivered (even) from our own weaknesses and doubts by the indwelling power of the Spirit
- 2. **we are able to serve the Lord without fear**
 - a. no longer under any God-imposed, man-imposed, or self-imposed "hamster wheel" of performance – no longer "looking over our shoulder" to make sure God is not waiting in ambush
 - b. "*the righteous shall live by faith*" (**Rom. 1:17; Hab. 2:4**) – our lives characterized by faith, not fear
- 3. **we are able to seek the true purpose of our lives: holiness and righteousness before him**
 - a. **Christian liberty means that we are truly free to live to our potential – not the "potential" of success in this life, but of what God has ordained for his saints to be before his glorious throne forever**