

# The Opposite of Christian Liberty

## Introduction

### a. objectives

1. subject – the gospel sets the Christian free from any human doctrine or law not found in Scripture
2. aim – to cause us to reject any man-made law of conscience requiring implicit faith or blind obedience
3. passage – Romans 7:4-6

### b. outline

1. The Source of Christian Conscience
2. The Betrayal of Christian Conscience
3. The True Form of Christian Conscience

### c. opening

1. the **celebration** of liberty
  - a. it is entirely *providential* that this sermon series lands on the Fourth of July weekend (**for Family Camp**)
  - b. but, it fits wonderfully in the “white space” between **James 3** and **James 4**
2. 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; **see the last sentence of para. 1**): the freedom to obey God with a childlike love  
 “In addition, it includes their free access to God and their obedience to Him, not from slavish fear but from a childlike love and willing mind.”
      - a. “*no fear in love*” (**1 John 4:18**) = because the relationship between God and the believer is based on *love* (not performance, **see above**), the believer is free to obey God *because he wants to*, not because he is “coerced” to do so through “rules and regulations”
        1. **i.e.** faith is based on the **completed** work of Christ, not a “synergism” between our work and his
      - b. **the Christian has been given the extended freedom of being able to love God, and is free to show this love as a true child of God under a willing regenerated heart and mind**
    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**

## The Source of Christian Conscience

### a. the definition of the conscience

1. conscience = the element of the *Imago Dei* whereby human beings know the difference between what is morally right and wrong, respond positively or negatively to specific acts of right or wrong, and are deterred from doing or are compelled to do that which fits a moral standard of right and wrong established by God
  - a. **i.e.** another God-like element infused into the human race at the formation of Adam that sets man apart
    1. the conscience is a *uniquely* human attribute that distinguishes our “choice-making” from pure *instinct*
2. **element #1**: the conscience is that ability within us to *inherently* know the difference between right and wrong, a sense of **conscious awareness** of the moral value of any given thought or act (**e.g.** in children; **Rom. 2:14**)  
 “[The Gentiles without the law] show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them”
  - a. it is a *moral* sense given to us by God that induces us to know what is right and wrong **on his terms**
3. **element #2**: the conscience causes us to *respond* positively or negatively in the face of moral actions
  - a. it is the conscience where feelings of guilt and shame originate in considering/committing a sinful act
    1. **e.g.** Adam and Eve experienced *immediate* shame in eating from the tree, covering their nakedness
  - b. it is the conscience where feelings of contentment and satisfaction originate in doing good (**2 Cor. 2:12**)  
 “For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you.”
4. **element #3**: the conscience acts as the mechanism of *deterrence* or *enticement* (**1 Tim. 1:5**)  
 “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

- a. it is the God-like element within us that seeks to avoid what is evil and to do what is good, for the very *Imago Dei* flows from moral right – it is designed to “protect” us from what can destroy us *morally*
- b. **e.g.** Eve *defended* doing what was right before the serpent, criminals hide their actions, etc.

## b. the state of the conscience

1. the conscience (like all other elements of the *Imago Dei*) is corrupted by the Fall (**in Total Depravity**)
  - a. the conscience can act *faultily* (**i.e.** a lack of shame or a satisfaction in sin), or it can be *seared* (**i.e. cauterized**) by the continual action of sin “wearing it down” and making it less “useful” (**1 Tim. 4:1**)
2. but, the conscience (like all other elements of the *Imago Dei*) is subject to the redeeming work of Christ
  - a. **e.g.** like language (**see James 3:1-12**), the conscience is included in the work of the Spirit to be *transformed* into the image of Christ – to be made holy (**i.e. the reversal of cauterization: true healing**)
  - b. implying that, *in the work of sanctification*, the redemption of the conscience will result in **a greater awareness and hatred of sin and a greater desire for holiness and sinlessness**

## c. the Lord of the conscience

“God alone is Lord of the conscience ...”

1. **question:** who decides what is morally right and what is morally wrong – specifically, in relation to God, *and in relationship to him as redeemer*, who (ultimately) is the arbiter of what satisfies *his* moral standards?
  - a. **be careful:** the *natural* (**i.e.** sinful) inclination of *autonomous creatures* is to assume that *right for ourselves*
    1. that **we** are the arbiters of what is right and wrong before God; that **we** get to set the standards
    2. **note:** this is even true *in the church*, which is the *point* of the chapter (**see below**)
2. **clarification:** this statement is *not* suggesting that human law cannot “bind” the conscience and produce guilt
  - a. since all human law is *derived* from divine law, *ultimately* all matters of right and wrong belong to God
    1. **i.e.** all human laws affecting the nature of relationship between men derive from the *moral code* as their foundation, *which flows out of the nature of God himself inherent in man by virtue of his image*
    2. true, human do create laws that are *immoral* or *unjust*, but that is only a *consequence* of sin
  - b. however, this *specific chapter* is dealing with issues of conscience *in relation to spiritual righteousness*, as noted in the context of the opening paragraph (**i.e.** liberty from shame, wrath, law before God)
  - c. **IOW:** the *point* of this chapter is *Christian* liberty from those things that hinder *believers* before God
3. therefore, *God alone* is arbiter of the nature and compelling effect of the conscience in the *believer* – only God decides what is morally right *or necessary* to be imposed upon followers of Christ

## The Betrayal of Christian Conscience

### a. the context of this betrayal of Christian conscience

“... and He has left it free from human doctrines and commandments that are in any way contrary to His Word or not contained in it.”

1. the 1689 Confession was written in the fledgling days of the reformation in England – the reformed churches were attempting to establish the *doctrinal differences* between themselves and Catholicism (and Anglicanism)
  - a. the failure of the institutional church to reform itself to an “originalist” understanding of the Christian faith (under the call of the magisterial reformers) caused a number of groups to “break away”
  - b. Baptists copied the bulk of the Westminster Confession in full agreement with much of the *soteriological* differences Presbyterians had with Rome, but altered it to fit their *ecclesiological* hermeneutic
2. thus, the phrase “human doctrines and commandments” is a reference to *extra-biblical* requirements (or prohibitions) established over Christians *as a part of their right standing in the church*
  - a. **principle: God has relegated all matters of doctrine and practice of Christianity to his Word, and not to the devices of men – Scripture is the final authority of all matters of faith and its practice**

### b. the substance of this betrayal of Christian conscience

“So, believing such doctrines, or obeying such commands out of conscience, is a betrayal of true liberty of conscience. Requiring implicit faith or absolute and blind obedience destroys liberty of conscience and reason as well.”

1. **reality:** by virtue of the Fall, there is a natural tendency for human beings to “wrap” themselves in law
  - a. it is in systems of law that we feel most comfortable (**e.g.** like a child playing in a box; **anarchy = power**)
  - b. **in many ways, we see “law” as a form of freedom; it “protects” us, so we feel free**
2. the tendency of human beings, *even redeemed ones*, is to “cloak” themselves in systems of law
  - a. **way #1:** to *extend* or *modify* the requirements of “faith” (or belief) like the Pharisees (**Matt. 15:6-9**)
 

“... for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’”
  - c. **way #2:** to *extend* or *modify* the nature of “conformity” (or practice) like the Judaizers (**Acts 15**)
  - d. **reality:** every religious tradition (including *the reformed*) has this tendency
    1. **e.g.** Baptism, spiritual gifts, tithing, Bible translations, dress codes, worship styles, musicality, architecture, membership, entertainments, political affiliations, etc. (**note: Catholics don’t hide this!**)
3. “out of conscience” = the raising of *extra-biblical* beliefs or practices to the level of sinfulness or righteousness
  - a. **i.e.** that to do them [or not] is tantamount to sinning before God himself, or failing to act in ways that are consistent with what it means to be born-again **as that is defined by men** (**i.e. legalism**)

- b. **principle: it is a betrayal of the true liberty that Christ has purchased for us to submit ourselves to any sense of right or wrong not explicitly established by God in his Word, to any form of legalism**

## The True Form of Christian Conscience

### b. the true form of liberty

1. a *far greater* form of liberty, free from the “old way” of rules to a “new way” of the Spirit (**read Romans 7:4-6**)
  - a. **v. 4 = (as before)** we have died (vicariously, in Christ) to the law (**i.e.** the performance-based standard of righteousness) to be raised (vicariously, in Christ) to a new life “to bear fruit for God” (**i.e.** to actually accomplish something in our spiritual lives)
  - b. **v. 5** = in our old, reprobate life (and, by implication, any new life under man-made rules and regulations), our focus was only on our “*sinful passions*” (**i.e.** a focus only on *us*) which only “*bore fruit for death*” (**i.e.** only enslaved us more and dragged us off to guilt, wrath, and condemnation)
  - c. **v. 6** = but, in Christ, we are released from the never-ending drudgery of performance to a new way of life – the “*new way of the Spirit*” which is true freedom to experience all of what it truly means to be saved
2. **principle: when we come to Christ by faith, we must never take up again “old” forms of regulation – the freedom we have in the Spirit is a far greater freedom than any “box of laws” can ever give**
  - a. **legalism is to submit oneself (again) to a form of slavery from which we have been set free – it is to take upon ourselves (again) the shame of sin, the wrath of God, and the severity of the law**
    1. **i.e.** to feel shame for sin *we haven’t actually committed*, to assume *punishment* that is not coming, and to find ourselves back on the “hamster wheel” of performance, *this time before men*
    2. **the true form of Christian conscience is to live only under what God has prescribed over us, not what men say we must do to be a “Christian”**