

Christian Liberty

In the previous installment of this series, I pointed out the bifurcation in biblical teaching between *sola Scriptura* and “the tradition of men.” Jesus was on one side of the issue and the ancient Rabbis (Pharisees and Scribes) were on the other – and thus the wrong – side. Jesus explained to the Rabbis that what they called “the tradition of the elders” ended in their rejection of the commandments of God. Of course it would have been possible for Jesus to undermine their practices based upon the fact that the practices were ineffectual. But instead of pruning the shrubbery, Jesus laid the axe to the root of it.

Yet there are some today who would maintain that such Pharisaic tradition of men falls under the heading of Christian liberty or liberty of conscience. With a strange and inverted sort of logic, they claim that the doctrine of Christian liberty means that they have the “liberty” to invent modern “tradition” for the church. Thus it is that the modern-day counterpart to the Rabbis who condemned Jesus’ disciples in the Gospel accounts hide their newfangled tradition in the cloak of a supposed liberty to innovate.

Sadly, it is the case that few today have a biblical understanding of the doctrine of Christian liberty and liberty of conscience. The *Confession of Faith* has captured the true meaning of the doctrine however. There we read, “God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience” (WCF 20.2).

Significantly, the *Confession* calls “true liberty of conscience” the doctrine that allows Christians to say “no” to the doctrines and commandments of men. It proceeds to maintain that if we believe doctrines that have no proof God’s Word or obey such commandments *from conscience* that we actually betray this doctrine. Can that be true? Would it be a betrayal? Yes, it certainly would be. In the fourteenth chapter of the book of Romans, the inspired apostle explained how to handle differences in the church over such matters as do not arise from a commandment of God. The conclusion of Paul’s discourse at Romans 14:23 states, “And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.”

Many people mistakenly think that Paul is saying that if we think we may do something, then we have a sort of “automatic permission” to do it. But that is not how Paul has defined the term “faith” in the book of Romans. Paul was claiming that whatever is not done with the conviction that it is agreeable to the will of God is sin in the doer. Paul was not maintaining that God has a different standard for every believer. Instead he was claiming that it would be a betrayal of true liberty of conscience, and thus a sin, to do anything based upon the commandments and doctrines of men.

Earlier in the epistle Paul asserted, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). In short, for the believer to perform any act toward God and expect that act to be acceptable in God’s sight, it must be an act arising from faith. But in order for the act to arise from faith, it must be according to the Word of God. Further, if it does not arise from faith, Paul claimed it would be a sin.

Anytime someone claims he has the right to do something because of “liberty of conscience,” then he must at the same time allow his brother the same liberty to leave the act undone. But the very nature of church government is such that a matter cannot be done by one and left undone by another, else it is not an authoritative act of government at all. As Paul said, “none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself” (Romans 14:7). What then? When it comes to the rules of church government – clearly a matter of life and godliness – it is good “neither to eat flesh [meat], nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak” (Romans 14:21). In other words, if a precept of church government cannot be demonstrated from Scripture to be according to the mind of God, then we do *not* have the liberty to impose it upon a believer’s conscience in the name of *liberty* of conscience.

