

## *Liberty of Conscience*

In the previous installment of this series, we pointed out the difference 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” resulted 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 their traditions fall under the heading of liberty of conscience. With an inverted sort of logic, they claim that liberty of conscience means that they have the “liberty” to invent new practices for the church. Thus the modern-day Rabbis hide their newfangled tradition in the cloak of a supposed liberty.

Sadly, few today understand liberty of conscience. The *Confession of Faith* has captured the true meaning of the doctrine however. There one reads, “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). The *Confession* calls “true liberty of conscience” the doctrine that permits Christians to say “no” to the commandments of men. If we believe doctrines that have no proof God’s Word or obey such commandments *from conscience* we actually betray our liberty. Can that be true? Would it be a betrayal? In the fourteenth chapter of the book of Romans, the inspired apostle explained how to handle differences in the church. The conclusion states, “And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.”

Some mistakenly think that Paul was saying in Romans 14 that if we think we may do something, then we have a sort of “automatic permission” to do it. That is not how Paul defined the term “faith” in the book of Romans. Paul claimed that whatever is not done with the *conviction that it is agreeable to the will of God* is sin in the doer. The person would be regarded as doubting (or “of two judgments”). God does not have a different standard for every believer. Paul asserted simply 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 Paul explained, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). For the believer to perform any act toward God and expect it to be acceptable in God’s sight, it must arise from faith. But in order for the act to arise from faith, it must be done in accordance with the Word of God. Thus Calvin rightly commented, “Now, since a pious mind can never acquiesce with certainty in anything but the word of God, all fictitious modes of worship do in this case vanish away, and whatever works there may be which originate in the brains of men; for while everything which is not from faith is condemned, rejected is whatever is not supported and approved by God’s word. It is at the same time by no means sufficient that what we do is approved by the word of God, except the mind, relying on this persuasion, prepares itself cheerfully to do its work” (*N.T. Commentaries*, Romans 14:23).

When someone claims he has the right to do something because of “liberty of conscience,” he must allow his brother the liberty not to do it. But the very nature of church government is such that a matter cannot be done by one and left undone by another. Otherwise it is not an authoritative act of government at all. A governmental act must be obeyed. 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 – one 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.