

## WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XX

*(Reading: Galatians 3:26-4:7; 5:1-18)*

### How We Are Free

Some of us may have seen an interesting historical documentary on Great Britain screened a few years ago. It was narrated by a Simon Schama, a university lecturer.

It was quite evident at times the kind of secular humanistic view Schama had. And when it came to Oliver Cromwell, well, he couldn't help but tear that sincere Christian down.

There was one enlightened act which Schama had to acknowledge of Cromwell, though, a thing particularly close to home for him because he is a Jew, for it was Oliver Cromwell who first gave the Jews the freedom to publicly worship in England, and in London in particular.

To Schama it was a puzzle. In his scheme of things that act of granting Jews religious liberty seems to be out of character for Cromwell. But it's actually very much in character for the man of puritan principles which Cromwell was. He was a man who saw what he was doing as very much being under God's rule.

And it's exactly in God's Word that you find the ultimate dimension of liberty. So it's no wonder that it appears in the Westminster Confession written in Cromwell's time.

We can also see this in the American Declaration of Independence. It names liberty as an inalienable right bestowed upon all men by their Creator. Coming out of a situation of being under an oppressive government, those framers of the Declaration drew out what they had been brought up in. And what they had been brought up in wasn't the liberty that lets me do what I want but the freedom to serve the Lord God.

### The Basis for Christian Liberty

In the same way that we often hear and read of Americans appealing to their right of liberty, because they're citizens of that nation, so, too, every believer has Christian liberty. It's this greatest of all liberties which Article 1 describes. So, in the first place, we consider THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN LIBERTY.

Now, we have already met with the concept of liberty in the Westminster Confession. The First Article of Chapter 9 spoke of a "natural liberty" with which "God has endued the will of man" so "that it is neither forced, nor by any absolute necessity of nature determined to good or evil."

But because of the fall of man into sin he has this liberty without the ability to do good because of his total depravity. As G.I. Williamson notes, "He is free to do as he pleases, but he's not pleased to do good at all."

The liberty here, however, is the liberty bought for every believer by Christ and given by the Holy Spirit. It is liberty which has the ability, and because it has it's true liberty. This is real freedom! In those immortal words of the Lord in John 8 verse 36, "if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed."

Article 1 details exactly what we have been freed from. For faith in Jesus frees us from the guilt and dominion, from the condemning wrath of God, from the curse of the law as a broken covenant, from this present evil world, from bondage to Satan and the power of sin, from the evil of afflictions, from the sting of death, from the victory of the grave, and from everlasting damnation.

This is some freedom! With Charles Wesley we can indeed sing, “Long my imprisoned spirit lay / fast bound in sin and nature’s night. Your sunrise turned that night to day; I woke the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, your voice I knew; I rose, went out, and followed you.” Which is exactly what Article 1 goes on to describe, for all believers of every time and place have free access to God and the freedom of spirit in service to God. He’s our Heavenly Father and we’re His children!

This is the freedom that we all truly need. No other freedom compares – it’s not until a man gets this freedom he is a slave, no matter what degree of political or economic freedom he may possess. You see, the real power of freedom isn’t in freedom from but in freedom for. You aren’t truly free until you are free for God - free to commit yourself to Him in faith and trust and willing obedience.

But this is not a freedom you can gain for yourself. This is the liberty of God’s children - these are the inalienable right of the citizens of heaven. This is the gift which God gave to His people from the beginning of His covenantal relationship with them, and it’s ours in its fullness through Christ.

This is why Article 1 does bring in a distinction. It ends, saying, “But, under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.”

Here we have the answer to the question many have asked about what it would have been like as a believer in the Old Testament. It is quite clear, especially from the psalms, of the rich spirituality they had, and yet it’s also clear that there were limitations then. There was no essential difference between them and us in the deliverance from the moral law, from sin, or death.

What difference there is in the greater degree or measure of liberty because what came before through types or ordinances - those ceremonies - now comes completely by Christ through the Spirit. So the liberty of Christians is based upon their relationship to God, a relationship where they freely and willingly acknowledge His authority. It’s when you come under the rightful authority of God that you are set free.

This doesn’t suddenly mean you’re free from being under anyone else, though. The Church and the State both have authority. That’s what we’ll see later in Articles 3 and 4.

### **The Place of a Christian’s Conscience**

But there’s also something else you’re under, because it’s in Article 2 that we see THE PLACE OF A CHRISTIAN’S CONSCIENCE.

You know, I’m always interested when someone mentions their conscience. Because it seems that most of the time this word is used is when someone is trying to justify himself. A politician says in Parliament that his conscience is clear concerning the allegations raised against him. A sportsman might say his conscience is clear about the performance-enhancing drug he’s alleged to have taken. And Christians when caught in a dispute will say they have a clear conscience about how they’ve acted.

If you didn’t know any better you might get the idea that a person’s conscience is something set above the law and certainly above the interests of everyone else! Because in the majority of those cases those people had done something wrong. It did eventually come out.

You see, I don't think you can ever appeal to your conscience in that way. Like Christian liberty, you have to show not what you're freed from but what you are freed for – in everything we need to be under God's law.

How much wouldn't this aspect have been so relevant at the time of the Confession! In fact, this Article shows one of the glorious benefits of the Reformation. Our forefathers there stood with the apostolic church. Together with Peter they declared in the words of Acts 5 verse 29, "We must obey God rather than men!" And didn't Reformed Christians lay their lives on the line for the rule of Christ in their lives? From the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day through to the murdering of covenanting Presbyterians in Scotland, the blood of many martyrs showed us the right consciences.

This is what Article 2 does. It gives us two tests to show THE PLACE OF A CHRISTIAN'S CONSCIENCE.

The first of these is whether something is not contrary to God's Word. Examples of this would be rules prohibiting total abstinence from certain foods. The Mormon religion bans the use of coffee. Other sects ban eating meat. And the list goes on – but in not any single one of them can you show it is what God's Word says. In fact, in Romans 14 verse 14 the apostle says, "I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself."

But then Paul goes on to say, in the same verse, "But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean." He recognises that once a person has had his conscience bound by the wrong rule he may not be able to eat or drink what was once forbidden to him.

Yet that person must be made fully aware that he could well be guilty of sin – the sin, in this case, of allowing someone other than God to impose a rule upon his conscience.

The second test concerns whether or not something is added to the God's Word. There would have been plenty of examples around the time the Confession was framed, because how many rules hadn't been added by the Roman Catholic Church?

Now, there would be a number of those rules we could apply the first test to. But there are those that don't actually go against God's Word. Here is what the Roman Catholic Catechism says, "The chief commandments or laws of the Church are these six: (1) to assist at Mass on all Sundays and holydays of obligation, (2) to fast and to abstain on the days appointed, (3) to confess our sins at least once a year, (4) to receive Holy Communion during the Easter time, (5) to contribute to the support of the Church, and (6) to observe the laws of the Church concerning marriage."

While it's not wrong to do any of these things per se, it is wrong to bind them on the consciences of believers. And mucking up people's consciences is not a good thing. Much as people are quite wrong to talk about their souls being damaged by the hurts they feel done to them, this is one area a believer's faith can be quite affected. That's why each of us should be careful what we lay upon our fellow believers.

In Reformed-Presbyterian churches there have been some terrible travesties against the Christian's conscience. And it's because we are so close to God's Word that those abuses are all the more terrible.

The teaching of theonomy in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand in the late 1970's and early 1980's is but one example. While the word 'theonomy' simply means 'God's Law' these men used it to teach that we must return to literally following Old Testament ceremonial and civil law. Anyone caught in adultery, for example, should be publicly stoned they said. One of their leaders went even to the extent of circumcising his baby son eight days after his birth. It was a teaching

that later was seen by the RCNZ to be bringing believers back under the yoke of the ceremonial law Article 1 says has been removed.

Once a visiting Christian was confronted by a zealous young man with these views. He asked him intensely, "Have you seen the light?"

Well, what could he say, but, "Yes, I have. I thank the Lord that He has saved me."

But this wasn't the answer he was after. "Have you see the real light?" he asked, "The theonomist light!"

It can seem that a church which has lots of rules has a certain aura to it. I'm sure the people of Jesus' time felt that with the Pharisees. And you get the same attraction today in an Orthodox or Roman Catholic Church. But what have **we** got?

Actually, in the Ten Commandments we've got the lot! It is all we need because it has everything in it.

### **The Excuse of Christian Liberty**

At this point, though, we may meet another challenge. While we have answered, in Article 2, those who may have rules contrary or besides God's Word, there are also those who say that Christian liberty is having no rules whatsoever! This is what Articles 3 and 4 deal with. And so, in the third place, we consider THE EXCUSE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY.

Many believers have confused Christian liberty with licence. They think it throws off all controls, and there are many examples of that throughout history.

So throughout the Christian community today you'll find professing believers doing all kinds of things. There are even so-called Christian Nudist Camps. They've literally thrown off everything! But as we've seen already, we are not free from something but free for someone! We are truly free when we're doing what God loves us to do!

Many people are confused today about this. They think that the opposite of freedom is authority, thus modern worship is said to free from all the rules and traditions of the past. It's really being 'alive in the Spirit,' they say.

But the opposite of freedom is actually slavery. Freedom is only possible when it's joined with true authority, the authority of God. Serving Him is perfect freedom.

The end result of those who confuse this is the end of Christian liberty itself. They become enslaved all over again! As you can indeed see happening in Christianity today.

Because what is happening but a return to Rome? Christians have become captured by rules all over again - the rules of ceremonies, of having to have experiences, of having to do certain spiritual exercises.

If you don't have the balance of Christian liberty you are severely imbalanced! Article 3 says that "they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do hereby destroy the end of Christian liberty."

This is what the apostle warned against in Galatians 5. There in verse 13 he said, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But don't use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."

Having warned earlier in this letter against those who had added to God's Word, Paul is also aware of the other extreme. Living by the Spirit means keeping in step by the Spirit!

Article 3 is especially helpful as it deal with us personally. Christian liberty is not an excuse to do whatever you want.

Article 4 turns to look how we act publicly. And here we see how Christian liberty is not an excuse to do whatever individually. Here we are put in a community. We were not saved by ourselves.

There are individuals and groups who might think that. They are a law unto themselves. But He who is the Lord of the conscience has also instituted the authorities in Church and State.

Rebelliousness is ungodliness.

This is what the Dutch Reformed people of the 19th century showed when they formed their political party. Amongst the leaders involved in this were Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper.

So, what did they name their political party? They called it the Anti-Revolutionary Party. They very much showed what we have in Article 4 here. As Robert Shaw says, “it would be in the highest degree absurd to suppose that the Lord has planted in the breast of every individual a power to resist, counteract, and nullify His own ordinances. When public and private claims interfere and clash, the latter must give way to the former. And when any lawful authority is proceeding lawfully within its line of duty, it must be understood as possessing a rightful power to remove out of the way anything which necessarily obstructs its progress.”

This is what Romans 13 is clear about. We are to submit to the governing authorities for they have been placed there by God. As verse 2 there goes on, “Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”

Now, we all know of the trouble that there is when the respective authorities of Church and State clash. The State will sometimes tell the Church to keep its morals to itself. Meanwhile the State is being very religious itself in setting a curriculum for the State schools which promotes another religion!

These we have and will oppose as they fail to recognise the political liberty we should have. And any government bringing them in reaps a bitter harvest, as history has shown us.

It would be great to have a Christian State. Then we would have the kind of laws we once had, based on the principles of the word of God. And we must pray and work to that end.

In the meantime, however, let's show whose we are by the freedom we have. The freedom we use to worship and serve Him in everything. In the words of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2 verse 12, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”