

CALVIN'S DOCTRINE OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

WILLIAM L. HIEMSTRA

It is interesting to observe that John Calvin's chapter on Christian Liberty is substantially the same in the last and the first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin thought the subject of sufficient importance to include it in his "compendious summary of evangelical doctrine."¹ He regards it as an "appendix to justification" in the sense that Christian liberty is a necessary consequence for the believer who has been justified before God through faith alone.

Calvin was fully aware of the fact that the discussion of the subject of Christian liberty would precipitate criticism. The opponents of antinomianism would think him to be encouraging those who would make his doctrine an excuse for casting off "all obedience to God."² The Reformer believed it to be his duty to expound and not discard truth, however much men wilfully distorted it. Christian liberty must be taught and believed if men are to have a "right knowledge of God" and enjoy peace of mind.

Calvin divides his treatment of Christian liberty into three parts. First, the believer is free from the law of God, its demands and condemnation. Those who are justified before God by Christ through faith are to "forget all the righteousness of the law."³ Christ is the fulfillment of the law and his righteousness of the law no one can attain. Calvin is also conscious of a twofold use of the law for he says, "nor will this authorize anyone to conclude, that the law is of no use to believers, whom it still continues to instruct and exhort, and stimulate to duty although it has no place in their consciences before the tribunal of God."⁴

Calvin is most clear on the first part of this doctrine when he says, "there must then be no consideration of the requisitions of the law, but Christ alone must be proposed for righteousness, who exceeds all of the perfections of the law."⁵

When Calvin says that the believer is through Christ free from the law, he means more than freedom from the ceremonial law. He cites Galatians 3:13 ("Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us") and Galatians 5:14 ("Stand fast, therefore,

¹*Institutes*, Book III, 19, 1.

²*Idem*.

³*Ibid.* 2

⁴*Idem*.

⁵*Idem*.

in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage”) to prove that freedom from the law includes more than freedom from ceremonies. Calvin remarks that Paul is opposing the false brethren who sought to teach that obedience to the law would grant them favor with God, making Christ of no effect.

The second part of Calvin's doctrine of Christian liberty is that the believer, though free from the condemnation of the law as well as from its galling yoke, is still free voluntarily and joyfully to obey the will of God reflected in the moral law. This is man's highest freedom.

It is only after we have an appreciation for the perfect liberty of the Christian in Christ that we can begin to engage in the performance of the law. For how could men be encouraged to attempt any work if all are to be judged as those under the law, from which only a curse would be forthcoming. The believer will, as a child, hear God's call and from the heart desire to obey his will. Calvin says, "Such children ought we to be, feeling a certain confidence that our services, however small, rude, and imperfect, will be approved by our most indulgent Father."⁶

The third part of Calvin's doctrine of Christian liberty is "that we are bound by no obligation before God respecting external things, which in themselves are indifferent."⁷ Calvin devotes ten sections of the *Institutes* to the treatment of the third part of the doctrine. He says that without this knowledge of liberty there can never be peace of conscience.

If the conscience has been freed from the terrors of the law and is joyfully bound to Christ, it may not be subject to the traditions and customs of men. If once the conscience is made subject to the regulations of men, the believer can no longer joyfully serve Christ for he will have become enmeshed in the vain ceremonies of men. Calvin suggests a practical illustration for his generation when he says, "If anyone imagine delicate food to be unlawful, he will ere long have no tranquillity before God in eating brown bread and common viands, while he remembers that he might support his body with meat of a quality still inferior. If he hesitate respecting good wine, he will afterwards be unable with any peace of conscience to drink the most vapid, and at last he will not presume even to touch purer and sweeter water than others. In short, he will come to think it criminal to step over a twig that lies across his path."⁸

Conformity in externalities is to be made to God's will, and when not bound by him, then surely the believer is not bound by men. If we are mindful that our liberty is before God, then all external things are subject to our liberty. In support of this Calvin quotes Romans 14:14, "I know that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth anything

⁶*Ibid.*, 5.

⁷*Ibid.*, 7.

⁸*Idem.*

to be unclean, to him it is unclean." If there exist a scruple of conscience, "those things which were naturally pure become contaminated to us."⁹ All things are to be received as God's good gifts and to be used in a way most conducive to edification.

Calvin stresses that Christian liberty is a spiritual entity. It is of benefit to those who are subject to doubt the remission of their sins. It removes the anxieties of those who wonder if their imperfect works are acceptable to God. It quiets the tortured conscience which is troubled by the use of things indifferent. Christian liberty is therefore a spiritual truth.

Calvin is aware of the fact that hypocrites will desire to cloak their sensuality with the covering of Christian liberty. Liberty is not license to abuse God's blessings; it is freedom to be subject only to God. The Reformer scores those who would protect themselves in riotous living with the good name of Christian liberty. He writes, "But where they [entertainment, dress, etc.] are too ardently coveted, proudly boasted, or luxuriously lavished, these things, of themselves otherwise indifferent, are completely polluted by such vices."¹⁰

In addition he speaks of the propriety of laughter, food, new possessions, music, and wine. But in the excess of any of these propriety gives way to sin. In Calvin's words, ". . . to be immersed in sensual delights, to inebriate the heart and mind with present pleasures, and perpetually to grasp at new ones, — these things are very remote from a legitimate use of the Divine Blessings."¹¹

Christian liberty is broad in that the believer may use or omit to use external things which in themselves are indifferent. Calvin would correct those who err in thinking that Christian liberty is non-existent if there is an omission of the use of externals. Christian liberty is exercised even if indulgence is greatly abridged. He deplors those "who imagine their liberty would be abridged, if they were not to enter on the enjoyment of it by eating animal food on Friday. Their eating is not the subject of my reprehension; but their minds require to be divested of this false notion; for they ought to consider, that they obtain no advantage from their liberty before men, but with God; and that it consists in abstinence as well as in use. If they apprehend it to be immaterial in God's view whether they eat animal food or eggs . . . it is quite sufficient."¹²

Calvin states that the liberty of the Christian is to be exercised with a view to the benefit of the neighbor. He distinguishes between a weak brother and a Pharisee, one whom we might call a stubborn brother. He cites many Scriptural passages which urge the strong to be mindful of the

⁹*Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹*Idem.*

¹²*Ibid.*, 10.

weak, such as Romans 14:1, 13; 15:1, 2; I Corinthians 8:9; Galatians 5:13. Because God is the friend of the weak, the Christian is to have a primary concern for the spiritual development of those weak in the faith and not provide them with an occasion for stumbling into sin.

When the believer is challenged by one possessing the spirit of the Pharisee he has a right and duty to assert his liberty before men. If our use of external things be done carelessly, we are guilty of giving offence. If discretion be employed and men take offence, the Christian is blameless. Calvin illustrates the application of the latter principal by referring to Jesus' words in Matthew 15:14, "Let them alone; they be blind leaders of the blind."¹³ The Pharisees had taken offence at Jesus' teaching concerning the contrast between ceremonial and real defilement. Jesus says that they are to be let alone, and their offence disregarded.¹⁴

Calvin refers to Paul those who desire more assistance in determining who are to be accounted as weak and who are to be considered as Pharisees. Paul arranged for the circumcision of Timothy, but he could not be induced to circumcise Titus. In the former case Paul, "though he was free from all men, yet he made himself servant unto all,"¹⁵ moderated liberty because of an advantage to be gained by this action. Paul would not permit Titus to be circumcised saying, "But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised, and that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage; to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you."¹⁶

Liberty is to be restricted in its use if it is not beneficial to our neighbor. In this way the believer loves his neighbor as himself. But love to God is prior to love for men in the sense that duties required by God are to be performed without fearing whether or not men shall take offence. Calvin says ". . . whatever dangers threaten us, we are not at liberty to deviate even a hair's breadth from his [God's] command, and that it is not lawful under any pretext to attempt anything but what he permits."¹⁷

The conscience is free from the bondage of human authority. The conscience is directed principally to God, not to human government. Governments then are to be obeyed not because of any inherent authority they possess, but because of the authority of Christ. The believer is not to subject himself to the ordinances of men because of the prime fact that he belongs to Christ. Calvin says, "Therefore, as works respect men, so

¹³*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴*Idem.*

¹⁵I Corinthians 9:19, 20, 22.

¹⁶Galatians 2:3-5.

¹⁷*Institutes*, III, 19, 13.

conscience regards God; so that a good conscience is no other than inward integrity of heart.”¹⁸

It was because of Calvin’s treatment of Christian liberty that the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith could say with conviction, “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.”¹⁹

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹*Westminster Confession of Faith* XX, 2.