

OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

BY

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## CHAPTER 19

### OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

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The three divisions of this chapter are:

- I.** Necessity of the doctrine of Christian Liberty, sec. 1. The principal parts of this liberty explained, sec. 2-8.
- II.** The nature and efficacy of this liberty against the Epicureans and others who take no account whatever of the weak, sec. 9 and 10.
- III.** Of offense given and received. A lengthened and not unnecessary discussion of this subject, sec. 11-16.

#### SECTIONS

- 1.** Connection of this chapter with the previous one on Justification. A true knowledge of Christian liberty useful and necessary.
  - 1.** It purifies the conscience.
  - 2.** It checks licentiousness.
  - 3.** It maintains the merits of Christ, the truth of the Gospel, and the peace of the soul.
- 2.** This liberty consists of three parts. First, Believers renouncing the righteousness of the law, look only to Christ. Objection. Answer, distinguishing between Legal and Evangelical righteousness.
- 3.** This first part clearly established by the whole Epistle to the Galatians.
- 4.** The second part of Christian liberty, viz., that the conscience, freed from the yoke of the law, voluntarily obeys the will of God. This cannot be done so long as we are under the law. Reason.
- 5.** When freed from the rigorous exactions of the law, we can cheerfully and with much alacrity answer the call of God.
- 6.** Proof of this second part from an Apostle. The end of this liberty.
- 7.** Third part of liberty, viz., the free rise of things indifferent. The knowledge of this part necessary to remove despair and superstition. Superstition described.
- 8.** Proof of this third part from the Epistle to the Romans. Those who observe

it not only use evasion.

1. Despisers of God.
2. The desperate.
3. The ungrateful.

The end and scope of this third part.

**9.** Second part of the chapter, showing the nature and efficacy of Christian liberty, in opposition to the Epicureans. Their character described. Pretext and allegation. Use of things indifferent. Abuse detected. Mode of correcting it.

**10.** This liberty maintained in opposition to those who pay no regard to the weak. Error of this class of men refuted. A most pernicious error. Objection. Reply.

**11.** Application of the doctrine of Christian liberty to the subject of offenses. These of two kinds. Offense given. Offense received. Of offense given, a subject comprehended by few. Of Pharisaical offense, or offense received.

**12.** Who are to be regarded as weak and Pharisaical. Proved by examples and the doctrine of Paul. The just moderation of Christian liberty. Necessity of vindicating it. No regard to be paid to hypocrites. Duty of edifying our weak neighbors.

**13.** Application of the doctrine to things indifferent. Things necessary not to be omitted from any fear of offense.

**14.** Refutation of errors in regard to Christian liberty. The consciences of the godly not to be fettered by human traditions in matters of indifference.

**15.** Distinction to be made between Spiritual and Civil government. These must not be confounded. How far conscience can be bound by human constitutions. Definition of conscience. Definition explained by passages from the Apostolic writings.

**16.** The relation which conscience bears to external obedience; first, in things good and evil; secondly, in things indifferent.

## OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

**1.** We are now to treat of Christian Liberty, the explanation of which certainly ought not to be omitted by any one proposing to give a compendious summary of Gospel doctrine. For it is a matter of primary necessity, one without the knowledge of which the conscience can scarcely attempt any thing without hesitation, in many must demur and fluctuate, and in all proceed with fickleness and trepidation. In particular, it forms a proper appendix to Justification, and is of no little service in understanding its force. Nay, those who seriously fear God will hence perceive the incomparable advantages of a doctrine which wicked scoffers are constantly assailing with their jibes; the intoxication of mind under which they labor leaving their petulance without restraint. This, therefore, seems the proper place for considering the subject. Moreover, though it has already been occasionally adverted to, there was an advantage in deferring the fuller consideration of it till now, for the moment any mention is made of Christian liberty lust begins to boil, or insane commotions arise, if a speedy restraint is not laid on those licentious spirits by whom the best things are perverted into the worst. For they either, under pretext of this liberty, shake off all obedience to God, and break out into unbridled licentiousness, or they feel indignant, thinking that all choice, order, and restraint, are abolished. What can we do when thus encompassed with straits? Are we to bid adieu to Christian liberty, in order that we may cut off all opportunity for such perilous consequences? But, as we have said, if the subject be not understood, neither Christ, nor the truth of the Gospel, nor the inward peace of the soul, is properly known. Our endeavor must rather be, while not suppressing this very necessary part of doctrine, to obviate the absurd objections to which it usually gives rise.

**2.** Christian liberty seems to me to consist of three parts. First, the consciences of believers, while seeking the assurance of their justification before God, must rise above the law, and think no more of obtaining justification by it. For while the law, as has already been demonstrated, (supra, chap. 17, sec. 1,) leaves not one man righteous, we are either excluded from all hope of justification, or we must be loosed from the law, and so loosed as that no account at all shall be taken of works. For he who imagines that in order to obtain justification he must bring any degree of works whatever, cannot fix any mode or limit, but makes himself debtor to

the whole law. Therefore, laying aside all mention of the law, and all idea of works, we must in the matter of justification have recourse to the mercy of God only; turning away our regard from ourselves, we must look only to Christ. For the question is, not how we may be righteous, but how, though unworthy and unrighteous, we may be regarded as righteous. If consciences would obtain any assurance of this, they must give no place to the law. Still it cannot be rightly inferred from this that believers have no need of the law. It ceases not to teach, exhort, and urge them to good, although it is not recognized by their consciences before the judgment-seat of God. The two things are very different, and should be well and carefully distinguished. The whole lives of Christians ought to be a kind of aspiration after piety, seeing they are called unto holiness, (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:5.) The office of the law is to excite them to the study of purity and holiness, by reminding them of their duty. For when the conscience feels anxious as to how it may have the favor of God, as to the answer it could give, and the confidence it would feel, if brought to his judgment-seat, in such a case the requirements of the law are not to be brought forward, but Christ, who surpasses all the perfection of the law, is alone to be held forth for righteousness.

**3.** On this almost the whole subject of the Epistle to the Galatians hinges; for it can be proved from express passages that those are absurd interpreters who teach that Paul there contends only for freedom from ceremonies. Of such passages are the following: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." "Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace," (Galatians 3:13; 5:1- 4.) These words certainly refer to something of a higher order than freedom from ceremonies. I confess, indeed, that Paul there treats of ceremonies, because he was contending with false apostles, who were plotting, to bring back into the Christian Church those ancient shadows of the law which were abolished by the advent of Christ. But, in discussing this question, it was necessary to introduce higher matters, on which the whole controversy turns.

*First*, because the brightness of the Gospel was obscured by those Jewish shadows, he shows that in Christ we have a full manifestation of all those things which were typified by Mosaic ceremonies.

*Secondly*, as those impostors instilled into the people the most pernicious opinion, that this obedience was sufficient to merit the grace of God, he insists very strongly that believers shall not imagine that they can obtain justification before God by any works, far less by those paltry observances.

At the same time, he shows that by the cross of Christ they are free from the condemnation of the law, to which otherwise all men are exposed, so that in Christ alone they can rest in full security. This argument is pertinent to the present subject, (Galatians 4:5, 21, etc.) Lastly, he asserts the right of believers to liberty of conscience, a liberty which may not be restrained without necessity.

4. Another point which depends on the former is, that consciences obey the law, not as if compelled by legal necessity; but being free from the yoke of the law itself, voluntarily obey the will of God. Being constantly in terror so long as they are under the dominion of the law, they are never disposed promptly to obey God, unless they have previously obtained this liberty. Our meaning shall be explained more briefly and clearly by an example. The command of the law is, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,” (Deuteronomy 6:5.) To accomplish this, the soul must previously be divested of every other thought and feeling, the heart purified from all its desires, all its powers collected and united on this one object. Those who, in comparison of others, have made much progress in the way of the Lord, are still very far from this goal. For although they love God in their mind, and with a sincere affection of heart, yet both are still in a great measure occupied with the lusts of the flesh, by which they are retarded and prevented from proceeding with quickened pace towards God. They indeed make many efforts, but the flesh partly enfeebles their strength, and partly binds them to itself. What can they do while they thus feel that there is nothing of which they are less capable than to fulfill the law? They wish, aspire, endeavor; but do nothing with the requisite perfection. If they look to the law, they see that every work which they attempt or design is accursed. Nor can any one deceive himself by inferring that the work is not altogether bad, merely because it is imperfect, and,

therefore, that any good which is in it is still accepted of God. For the law demanding perfect love condemns all imperfection, unless its rigor is mitigated. Let any man therefore consider his work which he wishes to be thought partly good, and he will find that it is a transgression of the law by the very circumstance of its being imperfect.

**5.** See how our works lie under the curse of the law if they are tested by the standard of the law. But how can unhappy souls set themselves with alacrity to a work from which they cannot hope to gain any thing in return but cursing? On the other hand, if freed from this severe exaction, or rather from the whole rigor of the law, they hear themselves invited by God with paternal levity, they will cheerfully and alertly obey the call, and follow his guidance. In one word, those who are bound by the yoke of the law are like servants who have certain tasks daily assigned them by their masters. Such servants think that nought has been done; and they dare not come into the presence of their masters until the exact amount of labor has been performed. But sons who are treated in a more candid and liberal manner by their parents, hesitate not to offer them works that are only begun or half finished, or even with something faulty in them, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted, although the performance be less exact than was wished. Such should be our feelings, as we certainly trust that our most indulgent Parent will approve our services, however small they may be, and however rude and imperfect. Thus He declares to us by the prophet, “I will spare them as a man spareth his own son that serveth him,” (Galatians 3:17;) where the word spare evidently means indulgence, or connivance at faults, while at the same time service is remembered. This confidence is necessary in no slight degree, since without it every thing should be attempted in vain; for God does not regard any sock of ours as done to himself, unless truly done from a desire to serve him. But how can this be amidst these terrors, while we doubt whether God is offended or served by our work?

**6.** This is the reason why the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews ascribes to faith all the good works which the holy patriarchs are said to have performed, and estimates them merely by faith, (Hebrews 11:2.) In regard to this liberty there is a remarkable passage in the Epistle to the Romans, where Paul argues, “Sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law, but under grace,” (Romans 6:14.) For after he had exhorted believers, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts



thereof: Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin; but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God;” they might have objected that they still bore about with them a body full of lust, that sin still dwelt in them. He therefore comforts them by adding, that they are freed from the law; as if he had said, Although you feel that sin is not yet extinguished, and that righteousness does not plainly live in you, you have no cause for fear and dejection, as if God were always offended because of the remains of sin, since by grace you are freed from the law, and your works are not tried by its standard. Let those, however who infer that they may sin because they are not under the law, understand that they have no right to this liberty, the end of which is to encourage us in well-doing.

7. The third part of this liberty is that we are not bound before God to any observance of external things which are in themselves indifferent, (“*adiafora*”) but that we are now at full liberty either to use or omit them. The knowledge of this liberty is very necessary to us; where it is wanting our consciences will have no rest, there will be no end of superstition. In the present day many think us absurd in raising a question as to the free eating of flesh, the free use of dress and holidays, and similar frivolous trifles, as they think them; but they are of more importance than is commonly supposed. For when once the conscience is entangled in the net, it enters a long and inextricable labyrinth, from which it is afterwards most difficult to escape. When a man begins to doubt whether it is lawful for him to use linen for sheets, shirts, napkins, and handkerchiefs, he will not long be secure as to hemp, and will at last have doubts as to tow; for he will revolve in his mind whether he cannot sup without napkins, or dispense with handkerchiefs. Should he deem a daintier food unlawful, he will afterwards feel uneasy for using loafbread and common eatables, because he will think that his body might possibly be supported on a still meaner food. If he hesitates as to a more genial wine, he will scarcely drink the worst with a good conscience; at last he will not dare to touch water if more than usually sweet and pure. In fine, he will come to this, that he will deem it criminal to trample on a straw lying in his way. For it is no trivial dispute that is here commenced, the point in debate being, whether the use of this thing or that is in accordance with the divine will, which ought to take precedence of all our acts and counsels. Here some must by despair be hurried into an abyss, while others, despising God

and casting off his fear, will not be able to make a way for themselves without ruin. When men are involved in such doubts whatever be the direction in which they turn, every thing they see must offend their conscience.

**8.** “I know,” says Paul, “that there is nothing unclean of itself,” (by unclean meaning unholy;) “but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean, to him it is unclean,” (Romans 14:14.) By these words he makes all external things subject to our liberty, provided the nature of that liberty approves itself to our minds as before God. But if any superstitious idea suggests scruples, those things which in their own nature were pure are to us contaminated. Wherefore the apostle adds, “Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin,” (Romans 14:22, 23.) When men, amid such difficulties, proceed with greater confidence, securely doing whatever pleases them, do they not in so far revolt from God? Those who are thoroughly impressed with some fear of God, if forced to do many things repugnant to their consciences are discouraged and filled with dread. All such persons receive none of the gifts of God with thanksgiving, by which alone Paul declares that all things are sanctified for our use, (1 Timothy 4:5.) By thanksgiving I understand that which proceeds from a mind recognizing the kindness and goodness of God in his gifts. For many, indeed, understand that the blessings which they enjoy are the gifts of God, and praise God in their words; but not being persuaded shall these have been given to them, how can they give thanks to God as the giver? In one word, we see whither this liberty tends viz., that we are to use the gifts of God without any scruple of conscience, without any perturbation of mind, for the purpose for which he gave them: in this way our souls may both have peace with him, and recognize his liberality towards us. For here are comprehended all ceremonies of free observance, so that while our consciences are not to be laid under the necessity of observing them, we are also to remember that, by the kindness of God, the use of them is made subservient to edification.

**9.** It is, however, to be carefully observed, that Christian liberty is in all its parts a spiritual matter, the whole force of which consists in giving peace to trembling consciences, whether they are anxious and disquieted as to the forgiveness of sins, or as to whether their imperfect works, polluted by the infirmities of the flesh, are pleasing to God, or are perplexed as to the use of

things indifferent. It is, therefore, perversely interpreted by those who use it as a cloak for their lusts, that they may licentiously abuse the good gifts of God, or who think there is no liberty unless it is used in the presence of men, and, accordingly, in using it pay no regard to their weak brethren. Under this head, the sins of the present age are more numerous. For there is scarcely any one whose means allow him to live sumptuously, who does not delight in feasting, and dress, and the luxurious grandeur of his house, who wishes not to surpass his neighbor in every kind of delicacy, and does not plume himself amazingly on his splendor. And all these things are defended under the pretext of Christian liberty. They say they are things indifferent: I admit it, provided they are used indifferently. But when they are too eagerly longed for, when they are proudly boasted of, when they are indulged in luxurious profusion, things which otherwise were in themselves lawful are certainly defiled by these vices. Paul makes an admirable distinction in regard to things indifferent: "Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled" (Titus 1:15.) For why is a woe pronounced upon the rich who have received their consolation? (Luke 6:24,) who are full, who laugh now, who "lie upon beds of ivory and stretch themselves upon their couches;" "join house to house," and "lay field to field;" "and the harp and the viol, the tablet and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts," (Amos 6:6; Isaiah 5:8, 10.) Certainly ivory and gold, and riches, are the good creatures of God, permitted, nay destined, by divine providence for the use of man; nor was it ever forbidden to laugh, or to be full, or to add new to old and hereditary possessions, or to be delighted with music, or to drink wine. This is true, but when the means are supplied to roll and wallow in luxury, to intoxicate the mind and soul with present and be always hunting after new pleasures, is very far from a legitimate use of the gifts of God. Let them, therefore, suppress immoderate desire, immoderate profusion, vanity, and arrogance, that they may use the gifts of God purely with a pure conscience. When their mind is brought to this state of soberness, they will be able to regulate the legitimate use. On the other hand, when this moderation is wanting, even plebeian and ordinary delicacies are excessive. For it is a true saying, that a haughty mind often dwells in a coarse and homely garb, while true humility lurks under fine linen and purple. Let every one then live in his own station, poorly or moderately, or in splendor; but let all remember that the nourishment which God gives is

for life, not luxury, and let them regard it as the law of Christian liberty, to learn with Paul in whatever state they are, “therewith to be content,” to know “both how to be abased,” and “how to abound,” “to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need,” (Philippians 4:11.)

**10.** Very many also err in this: as if their liberty were not safe and entire, without having men to witness it, they use it indiscriminately and imprudently, and in this way often give offense to weak brethren. You may see some in the present day who cannot think they possess their liberty unless they come into possession of it by eating flesh on Friday. Their eating I blame not, but this false notion must be driven from their minds: for they ought to think that their liberty gains nothing new by the sight of men, but is to be enjoyed before God, and consists as much in abstaining as in using. If they understand that it is of no consequence in the sight of God whether they eat flesh or eggs, whether they are clothed in red or in black, this is amply sufficient. The conscience to which the benefit of this liberty was due is loosed. Therefore, though they should afterwards, during their whole life, abstain from flesh, and constantly wear one color, they are not less free. Nay, just because they are free, they abstain with a free conscience. But they err most egregiously in paying no regard to the infirmity of their brethren, with which it becomes us to bear, so as not rashly to give them offense. But<sup>[1]</sup> it is sometimes also of consequence that we should assert our liberty before men. This I admit: yet must we use great caution in the mode, lest we should cast off the care of the weak whom God has specially committed to us.

**11.** I will here make some observations on offenses, what distinctions are to be made between them, what kind are to be avoided and what disregarded. This will afterwards enable us to determine what scope there is for our liberty among men. We are pleased with the common division into offense given and offense taken, since it has the plain sanction of Scripture, and not improperly expresses what is meant. If from unseasonable levity or wantonness, or rashness, you do any thing out of order or not in its own place, by which the weak or unskillful are offended, it may be said that offense has been given by you, since the ground of offense is owing to your fault. And in general, offense is said to be given in any matter where the person from whom it has proceeded is in fault. Offense is said to be taken when a thing otherwise done, not wickedly or unseasonably, is made an occasion of offense from malevolence or some sinister feeling. For here offense was not given, but

sinister interpreters ceaselessly take offense. By the former kind, the weak only, by the latter, the ill-tempered and Pharisaical are offended. Wherefore, we shall call the one the offense of the weak, the other the offense of Pharisees, and we will so temper the use of our liberty as to make it yield to the ignorance of weak brethren, but not to the austerity of Pharisees. What is due to infirmity is fully shown by Paul in many passages. "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye." Again, "Let us not judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumbling-block, or an occasion to fall, in his brother's way;" and many others to the same effect in the same place, to which, instead of quoting them here, we refer the reader. The sum is, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification." elsewhere he says, "Take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumbling-block to them that are weak." Again "Whatsoever is sold in the shambles, that eat, asking no question for conscience sake." "Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other." Finally, "Give none offense, neither to the Jews nor to the Gentiles nor to the Church of God." Also in another passage, "Brethren, ye have been called into liberty, only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another."<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, indeed, it is: our liberty was not given us against our weak neighbors, whom charity enjoins us to serve in all things, but rather that, having peace with God in our minds, we should live peaceably among men. What value is to be set upon the offense of the Pharisees we learn from the words of our Lord, in which he says, "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind," (Matthew 15:14.) The disciples had intimated that the Pharisees were offended at his words. He answers that they are to be let alone that their offense is not to be regarded.

**12.** The matter still remains uncertain, unless we understand who are the weak and who the Pharisees: for if this distinction is destroyed, I see not how, in regard to offenses, any liberty at all would remain without being constantly in the greatest danger. But Paul seems to me to have marked out most clearly, as well by example as by doctrine, how far our liberty, in the case of offense, is to be modified or maintained. When he adopts Timothy as his companion, he circumcises him: nothing can induce him to circumcise Titus, (Acts 16:3; Galatians 2:3.) The acts are different, but there is no difference in the purpose or intention; in circumcising Timothy, as he was free from all men, he made

himself the servant of all: “Unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; to them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Corinthians 9:20-22.) We have here the proper modification of liberty, when in things indifferent it can be restrained with some advantage. What he had in view in firmly resisting the circumcision of Titus, he himself testifies when he thus writes: “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,” (Galatians 2:3-5.) We here see the necessity of vindicating our liberty when, by the unjust exactions of false apostles, it is brought into danger with weak consciences. In all cases we must study charity, and look to the edification of our neighbor. “All things are lawful for me,” says he, “but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not. Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s wealth,” (1 Corinthians 10:23, 24.) There is nothing plainer than this rule, that we are to use our liberty if it tends to the edification of our neighbor, but if inexpedient for our neighbor, we are to abstain from it. There are some who pretend to imitate this prudence of Paul by abstinence from liberty, while there is nothing for which they less employ it than for purposes of charity. Consulting their own ease, they would have all mention of liberty buried, though it is not less for the interest of our neighbor to use liberty for their good and edification, than to modify it occasionally for their advantage. It is the part of a pious man to think, that the free power conceded to him in external things is to make him the readier in all offices of charity.

**13.** Whatever I have said about avoiding offenses, I wish to be referred to things indifferent.<sup>[3]</sup> Things which are necessary to be done cannot be omitted from any fear of offense. For as our liberty is to be made subservient to charity, so charity must in its turn be subordinate to purity of faith. Here, too, regard must be had to charity, but it must go as far as the altar; that is, we must not offend God for the sake of our neighbor. We approve not of the



intemperance of those who do every thing tumultuously, and would rather burst through every restraint at once than proceed step by step. But neither are those to be listened to who, while they take the lead in a thousand forms of impiety, pretend that they act thus to avoid giving offense to their neighbor, as if in the meantime they did not train the consciences of their neighbors to evil, especially when they always stick in the same mire without any hope of escape. When a neighbor is to be instructed, whether by doctrine or by example, then smooth-tongued men say that he is to be fed with milk, while they are instilling into him the worst and most pernicious opinions. Paul says to the Corinthians, "I have fed you with milk, and not with meat," (1 Corinthians 3:2;) but had there then been a Popish mass among them, would he have sacrificed as one of the modes of giving them milk? By no means: milk is not poison. It is false then to say they nourish those whom, under a semblance of soothing they cruelly murder. But granting that such dissimulation may be used for a time, how long are they to make their pupils drink that kind of milk? If they never grow up so as to be able to bear at least some gentle food, it is certain that they have never been reared on milk.<sup>[4]</sup> Two reasons prevent me from now entering farther into contest with these people, first, their follies are scarcely worthy of refutation, seeing all men of sense must nauseate them; and, secondly, having already amply refuted them in special treatises, I am unwilling to do it over again.<sup>[5]</sup> Let my readers only bear in mind, first, that whatever be the offenses by which Satan and the world attempt to lead us away from the law of God, we must, nevertheless, strenuously proceed in the course which he prescribes; and, secondly, that whatever dangers impend, we are not at liberty to deviate one nail's breadth from the command of God, that on no pretext is it lawful to attempt any thing but what he permits.

**14.** Since by means of this privilege of liberty which we have described, believers have derived authority from Christ not to entangle themselves by the observance of things in which he wished them to be free, we conclude that their consciences are exempted from all human authority. For it were unbecoming that the gratitude due to Christ for his liberal gift should perish or that the consciences of believers should derive no benefit from it. We must not regard it as a trivial matter when we see how much it cost our Savior, being purchased not with silver or gold, but with his own blood, (1 Peter 1:18, 19;) so that Paul hesitates not to say that Christ has died in vain, if we

place our souls under subjection to men, (Galatians 5:1, 4; 1 Corinthians 7:23.) Several chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians are wholly occupied with showing that Christ is obscured, or rather extinguished to us, unless our consciences maintain their liberty; from which they have certainly fallen, if they can be bound with the chains of laws and constitutions at the pleasure of men. But as the knowledge of this subject is of the greatest importance, so it demands a longer and clearer exposition. For the moment the abolition of human constitutions is mentioned, the greatest disturbances are excited, partly by the seditious, and partly by calumniators, as if obedience of every kind were at the same time abolished and overthrown.

**15.** Therefore, lest this prove a stumbling-block to any, let us observe that in man government is twofold: the one spiritual, by which the conscience is trained to piety and divine worship; the other civil, by which the individual is instructed in those duties which, as men and citizens, we are bold to perform (see Book 4, chap. 10, sec. 3-6.) To these two forms are commonly given the not inappropriate names of spiritual and temporal jurisdiction, intimating that the former species has reference to the life of the soul, while the latter relates to matters of the present life, not only to food and clothing, but to the enacting of laws which require a man to live among his fellows purely honorably, and modestly. The former has its seat within the soul, the latter only regulates the external conduct. We may call the one the spiritual, the other the civil kingdom. Now, these two, as we have divided them, are always to be viewed apart from each other. When the one is considered, we should call off our minds, and not allow them to think of the other. For there exists in man a kind of two worlds, over which different kings and different laws can preside. By attending to this distinction, we will not erroneously transfer the doctrine of the gospel concerning spiritual liberty to civil order, as if in regard to external government Christians were less subject to human laws, because their consciences are unbound before God, as if they were exempted from all carnal service, because in regard to the Spirit they are free. Again because even in those constitutions which seem to relate to the spiritual kingdom, there may be some delusion, it is necessary to distinguish between those which are to be held legitimate as being agreeable to the Word of God, and those, on the other hand, which ought to have no place among the pious. We shall elsewhere have an opportunity of speaking of civil government, (see Book 4, chap. 20.) For the present, also, I defer speaking of



ecclesiastical laws, because that subject will be more fully discussed in the Fourth Book when we come to treat of the Power of the Church. We would thus conclude the present discussion. The question, as I have said, though not very obscure, or perplexing in itself, occasions difficulty to many, because they do not distinguish with sufficient accuracy between what is called the external forum, and the forum of conscience. What increases the difficulty is, that Paul commands us to obey the magistrate, “not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake,” (Romans 13:1, 5.) Whence it follows that civil laws also bind the conscience. Were this so, then what we said a little ago, and are still to say of spiritual governments would fall. To solve this difficulty, the first thing of importance is to understand what is meant by conscience. The definition must be sought in the etymology of the word. For as men, when they apprehend the knowledge of things by the mind and intellects are said to know, and hence arises the term knowledge or science, so when they have a sense of the divine justice added as a witness which allows them not to conceal their sins, but drags them forward as culprits to the bar of God, that sense is called conscience. For it stands as it were between God and man, not suffering man to suppress what he knows in himself; but following him on even to conviction. It is this that Paul means when he says, “Their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing, or else excusing one another,” (Romans 2:15.) Simple knowledge may exist in man, as it were shut up; therefore this sense, which sists man before the bar of God, is set over him as a kind of sentinel to observe and spy out all his secrets, that nothing may remain buried in darkness. Hence the ancient proverb, Conscience is a thousand witnesses. For the same reason Peter also employs the expression, “the answer of a good conscience,” (1 Peter 3:21,) for tranquillity of mind; when persuaded of the grace of Christ, we boldly present ourselves before God. And the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, that we have “no more conscience of sins,” (Hebrews 10:2,) that we are held as freed or acquitted, so that sin no longer accuses us.

**16.** Wherefore, as works have respect to men, so conscience bears reference to God, a good conscience being nothing else than inward integrity of heart. In this sense Paul says that “the end of the commandment is charity, out of a pure heart, and of a good consciences and of faith unfeigned” (1 Timothy 1:5.) He afterwards, in the same chapter, shows how much it differs from intellect when he speaks of “holding faith, and a good conscience; which

some having put away, have made shipwreck,” (1 Timothy 1:19.) For by these words he intimates, that it is a lively inclination to serve God, a sincere desire to live in piety and holiness. Sometimes, indeed, it is even extended to men, as when Paul testifies, “Herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men,” (Acts 24:16.) He speaks thus, because the fruits of a good conscience go forth and reach even to men. But, as I have said, properly speaking, it refers to God only. Hence a law is said to bind the conscience, because it simply binds the individual, without looking at men, or taking any account of them. For example, God not only commands us to keep our mind chaste and pure from lust, but prohibits all external lasciviousness or obscenity of language. My conscience is subjected to the observance of this law, though there were not another man in the world, and he who violates it sins not only by setting a bad example to his brethren, but stands convicted in his conscience before God. The same rule does not hold in things indifferent. We ought to abstain from every thing that produces offense, but with a free conscience. Thus Paul, speaking of meat consecrated to idols, says, “If any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that showed it, and for conscience sake:” “Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other,” (1 Corinthians 10:28, 29.) A believer, after being previously admonished, would sin were he still to eat meat so offered. But though abstinence, on his part, is necessary, in respect of a brother, as it is prescribed by God, still he ceases not to retain liberty of conscience. We see how the law, while binding the external act, leaves the conscience unbound.

## FOOTNOTES:

[1] French, “Mais quelcun dira;” — But some one will say.

[2] Romans 14:1, 13; 15:1 1 Corinthians 8:9; 10:25, 29, 32; Galatians 5:13.

[3] The French adds, “Lesquelles ne sont de soy ne bonnes ne mauvais;” — which in themselves are neither good nor bad.

[4] French, “de bon laict;” — good milk.

[5] See Epist. de Fugiendis Impiorum Illicitis Sacris. Also Epist. de Abjiciendis vel Administrandis Sacerdotiis. Also the short treatise, De Vitandis Superstitionibus.