

Liberty of Conscience and Legalism

I. Liberty of Conscience

WCF 20.2	a	God alone is Lord of the conscience,
	b	and has 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.
	c	So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience:
	d	and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

- Line a:
 - James 4:12: “There is only one lawgiver and judge.” Eph 4:5: There is “one Lord.” Matt 23:10: “you have one instructor, the Christ.”
 - Romans 14:4: Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls.
- Line b:
 - Rev 22:18: “if anyone adds to [the words of this book], God will add to him the plagues described in this book” (see Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:6).
 - “In anything, contrary to his word”: that is, we can never command the opposite of what God commands.
 - “Beside it, in matters of faith and worship”: we cannot add new commands in these areas.
 - Faith: No one else can bind our conscience with absolute commands: “everybody must do this or they are sinning.”
 - Worship:
 - We are allowed to add commands in areas of God-given authority.
 - God commands: honor your father and mother, honor the civil authorities, honor your masters, etc.
 - Thus to keep God’s commands, we need to do the dishes when told by our parents, obey traffic laws, and do the work our masters assign to us. These are “beside” God’s law, but not in matters of faith and worship. Hence these commands are acceptable, as long as the authority is legitimate and the commands are not contrary to God’s word.
- Line c:
 - Galatians 5:1 “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”
 - If we obey human commands as a matter of religious duty, we have compromised and lost the freedom from obeying man-made commands that Christ has earned for us.
- Line d:
 - Implicit faith means: “just trust me.”
 - Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox church authorities say, “Do these extra things that the Bible doesn’t command (e.g., pray to Mary, believe in purgatory). Take our word for it; don’t ask why.” This is magisterial authority: they claim to be able to declare commands and teachings that are not in the Bible.

- In contrast, the reformed understand all church power to be *ministerial*. We can only bind people's consciences based on Scripture.
- Rom 10:14: "And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" People can understand the Bible, and it is on the basis of God's word that we know what to believe. Ministers can only bind people's consciences by proving their teaching from the Bible.

II. Legalism

- Legalism is the rejection of liberty of conscience. It is when people require others to follow man-made rules.
- Examples: "If you're not homeschooling, you're not doing right." "Skirts must be x inches long to be modest." "A divorced person can never remarry." "Alcohol is inherently evil."
- Matt 15:9: God said, "in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (cf. Isa 29:13).
- Col 2:20–23: "why ... do you submit to regulations ... according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom..., but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh."
- 1 Cor 7:23: "You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men."
- Why are we so prone to elevate the teaching of people over God's word?
 - Gal 1:10: embracing extra-biblical teaching is because we are seeking the approval of man, not of God.
 - Longing for strong authority and instruction. Not wanting to have to think and pray and act with wisdom.
 - Our view of God is wrong. We view him as a stingy killjoy who says that we should abstain from lawful pleasure (e.g., marriage and certain foods), when God actually created these things for our good (1 Tim 4:1–5)!
 - Ferguson: legalism and antinomianism have the same bad view of God at their heart. They both see God as holding back good things from us. Legalism grudgingly says ok, but fumes against God (recall the older son in the parable of the prodigal). Antinomianism says, "I'm going to seize it anyway."
- What should we do when another Christian falls prey to legalism?
 - Paul calls this person the weaker brother (Rom 14).
 - In this case, we do not urge them to go against their conscience, for anyone who does what they think is wrong (even if it isn't wrong) is still sinning because they *think* they are going against God (Rom 14:23).
 - It may even be necessary to refrain from things that are lawful when we are with them because we care more about them following Christ than about enjoying our liberty (Rom 14:20). We don't want to make them stumble (cf. 1 Cor 8:9–12).