

## **Fundamentals, Study 21. Christian Liberty & Liberty Of Conscience (John 8:31-36)**

by BS Poh

o God alone is Lord over our conscience in all matters of faith and religious practice.

1. *Freedom* and *ability* must not be confused. An unconverted person is free to make choices in the sense that nothing from outside hampers him. However, he is not able to make certain choices because his sinful nature inclines him in the direction of sin. For example, he is not able to believe in Christ or to live a life of obedience to God's law. His will is in bondage to his sinful nature. When converted, God's Spirit sets him free from the power of sin. He now possesses true liberty as a child of God.<sup>1</sup> (1. John 8:34-36; Rom 8:15.)

2. This liberty may be stated negatively and positively. Negatively speaking, the believer is no longer under the bondage of sin, Satan, and the wrath of God.<sup>2</sup> He is not delivered completely from sin while in this life, but the reign of sin is broken. He now is enabled by the Holy Spirit to resist sin. The Christian is no longer burdened by the guilt of sin, and the condemning wrath of God, because Christ has paid the penalty of his sins. Satan may afflict him, and cause him to fear death, but God will work out all things for his good and deliver him from everlasting damnation.<sup>3</sup> (2. Acts 26:18; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; 3. Rom 6:17-18; 1 Cor. 15:56-57; 1 Thess 1:10; Rom. 8:28)

3. Positively speaking, the Christian has free access to God, the ability to obey Him, and the right to enjoy the blessings of salvation. The Christian is able to draw near to God freely because Christ has reconciled him to God and is still interceding for him in heaven. He now obeys God willingly, out of a heart of love. He no longer has a slavish fear of God, but enjoys all the blessings of salvation as a child of God.<sup>4</sup> The true believers in the Old Testament time also experienced the same kind of liberty.<sup>5</sup> However, New Testament Christians have a larger measure of that liberty since they do not have to keep the ceremonial laws, which have been fulfilled in Christ. They also have a greater boldness to approach God in prayer, and a fuller experience of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.<sup>6</sup> (4. Rom 8:15; Luke 1:73-75; 1 John 4:18; 5. Gal. 3:9-14; 6. John 7:38-39; Heb 10:19-21.)

4. God alone is Lord of the conscience.<sup>7</sup> No man, organisation, or government may make an individual believe or act contrary to his conscience by force, law, or threats.<sup>8</sup> The state may advise, consult, and offer help to, the church, but it may never apply any kind of force against it. The same may be said of the other institutions - the state, the church, and the family - in their relationship to one another. Each has its own sphere of authority. In matters concerning faith and worship, a Christian must never obey any doctrine or commandment of men that is contrary to the word of God, or not taught in it.<sup>9</sup> To require an implicit faith - i.e. a faith in which it is assumed that everything taught or commanded is right or good - is to destroy liberty of conscience and human reason.<sup>10</sup> (7. James 4:12; Rom 14:4; 8. Acts 4:19; 5:29; 1 Cor. 7:23; Matt 15:9; 9. Col 2:20-23; 10. 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 1:24.)

5. *Christian liberty* and the *liberty of conscience* are not to be used as excuses, or license, for sin and disorderly conduct.<sup>11</sup> Rather, they are meant to set us free to worship and serve God, in holiness and righteousness.<sup>12</sup> A person who lives in bondage to sin and man-made rules, in fear of man and of death, must be miserable indeed!<sup>13</sup> (11. Rom 6:1-2; 12. Gal 5:13; 2 Pet 2:18-21; 13. Acts 24:16)

= Let us strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men.

### Review Questions

1. State two examples of what the unconverted person is unable, although free, to do.
2. Why is he unable to do these?
3. State negatively what is meant by *Christian liberty*.
4. State positively what is meant by *Christian liberty*.
5. In what ways were the Old Testament believers similar to the New Testament believers?
6. State the three ways New Testament believers enjoy greater liberty than the Old Testament believers.
7. Why is it wrong for anyone to force an individual to believe or act contrary to his conscience?
8. What must a Christian do, w.r.t. his conscience, in matters of faith and worship?
9. State the wrong use of *Christian liberty* and *the liberty of conscience*.
10. State the actual purpose of *Christian liberty* and *the liberty of conscience*.

### Assignment/Discussion

The doctrine of “the separation of church (religion) and state” has been upheld by some and denied by many. The 1689 Confession of Faith departs from the teaching of the Westminster Confession (Chapters 19:4 & 30:3) on this. How is the position of the Westminster Confession opposed to *Christian liberty* and *the liberty of conscience*?

### Memory Passage (Rom 6:17-18)

17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~