

# Liberty of Conscience in the Westminster Confession and its Application to Modern “Worship Wars”

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“The doctrine of Christian liberty, detached from its dogmatic basis, becomes an invitation to free oneself from the oppression of religious ordinances . . .”

— A. S. P. Woodhouse<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

As I researched into Liberty of Conscience,<sup>2</sup> one aspect of Christian liberty, it became increasingly clear that I was entering a theological, ethical, and ecclesiastical minefield, a minefield that included today’s “worship wars”. The importance of this topic was emphasized for me by a conversation with a professor in the Geneva College Bible Department. When I shared my project, he said he wanted to read my paper because this was a problem area for him. The extreme individualism that marks the lifestyle of many American readers creates a high probability that my words might be misinterpreted or taken out of context to justify sinful practices that are or can be harmful to both readers and the church. Therefore, I ask my readers to read my work with prayerful care. To do less may lead you to misunderstand God’s teaching on this topic and lead to even more disrespect for, and/or even rebellion against, the teaching and discipline of the glorious bride of Jesus Christ.

I also realized that the Westminster Assembly was called in part to settle the “worship wars” of seventeenth-century Great Britain. The keystone of their solution to their worship controversy, the doctrine of Liberty of Conscience, is discussed here. I hope that a better understanding of this doctrine will contribute to the glory of God by giving more peace and harmony to our congregations.

My approach will be as follows: I. First, this essay will briefly define the meaning of Liberty of Conscience, explaining which of the several definitions is used in this

essay. II. Secondly, it will explain the historical context in which Liberty of Conscience was developed. It will begin with the Vestments controversy and conclude with the historical context of the Westminster Confession. III. Third, it will explain the Confession’s teaching on Liberty of Conscience in its relation to church authority, Scripture and other confessional doctrines including Christian liberty and worship. The seventeenth-century theologians cited were members of the committee that wrote the Westminster Confession.<sup>3</sup> Some applications of this doctrine to our present day will be discussed, and IV. some case studies presented to illustrate and help congregations avoid problems.

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1. A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed. *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates: 1647–9* (London: J. M. Dent, 1951) 55.

2. This article is an expansion of a version which previously appeared in *Semper Reformanda* 11.1–2 (Spring-Winter 2002) 27–52.

3. The men who wrote the Confession were Cornelius Burges, Thomas Gataker, Robert Harris, Charles Herle, Joshua Hoyle, Edward Reynolds, Thomas Temple, Robert Baillie, George Gillespie, Alexander Henderson, and Samuel Rutherford. This method of research was pioneered by Jack Rogers in *Scripture in the Westminster Confession* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1966) 40, 161–182.

## I. DEFINING LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE

My research turned up four definitions of Liberty of Conscience that are to some degree overlapping. I will begin with the ones this essay either does not discuss or rejects. The first definition is the freedom of the church from the state. The second definition is the freedom of the individual from the state. The third was used by men like William Penn to justify denominationalism. For Penn it meant the freedom of denominationalism, the freedom to form and belong to a denomination of your choice. Penn summarized his view thus:

To Conclude ... we have not defended any Dissenters, whose Quarrel or Dissent is rather Civil and Political, rather than Religious and Conscientious; for both we really think such unworthy of Protection from the English Government, who seek the Ruin of it; and that such as Contributors to the Preservation of it, (thought Dissenters in Point of Faith or Worship) are unquestionably intitled to a Protection from IT.<sup>4</sup>

Penn's position on denominationalism is similar to that practiced by the United States government and supported by much of the Evangelical community. The Westminster Assembly condemned Penn's position because it allows freedom of heresy and antinomianism.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth definition, which was incorporated into the Westminster Confession, and is the subject of this essay, focuses on the role of practices neither forbidden nor commanded by Scripture—the “things indifferent.”

4. William Penn, “The Great CASE of Liberty of Conscience,” in *The Political Writings of William Penn* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002) 119. Unless otherwise noted emphasis is in the original.

5. See L. John Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea* (N. p.: The Craig Press, 1972).

6. Some editions of the Confession use the word “in” here instead of the more emphatic “if.” I have followed Carruthers. See S. W. Carruthers, ed., *The Confession of Faith of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster: From the Original Manuscript* written by Cornelius Burges (London: Presbyterian Church of England, 1946) 16. Carruthers calls this difference in combination with a punctuation change the most serious corruption in the text of the Confession. S. W. Carruthers, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Being an account of the Preparation and Printing of its Seven Leading Editions ...* (Manchester: R. Aikman & Son, [1937]) 127–128. I believe the Divines saw the areas of worship and faith as more restrictive than the rest of life. The general rule is that we are free to do anything not forbidden in Scripture. The two exceptions to this rule are faith and worship, where we are limited to only what God commands.

7. James Reston, *Our Father Who art in Hell* (New York: Times Books, 1981). This book tells the story of Jonestown and the events leading up to it.

Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2 says,

God alone is the Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrine and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if<sup>6</sup> matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrine, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

What does this definition say? It teaches that there are three types of works. Works of the first type are called good works, which are the positive commands of God such as feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. The second type are sins, which are transgressions of or failures to conform to the law of God. The third type are actions that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God. These are called “things indifferent,” or “adiaphora. The Westminster Confession continues by naming the biblical exceptions to Liberty of Conscience. It says that the areas of “faith and worship” are areas where there are no things indifferent. The Confession continues by warning believers against obeying or believing man-made religious commands or doctrines ‘out of conscience.’ Many of us have seen the damaging effects of man-made doctrines and practices in the lives of members of liberal denominations, or in the lives of cult members. A very tragic example of obeying human commands in a religious body was the mass suicide that took place at Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, this definition assumes two truths taught in Chapter 1 of the Confession, Of the Holy Scripture. First, that Christians can know with absolute certainty God's commands and doctrines, and tell the difference between human and divine commands. Secondly, it assumes that there is a balance between four sources of authority: biblical authority, church authority, state authority and individual authority. The latter three authorities hold delegated authority limited and regulated by the Holy Scriptures. In the background given below, please pay special attention to how these authorities interacted.

## II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE FIRST VESTMENTS CONTROVERSY

Historians normally date the beginning of the Puritan-Anglican tensions, and hence the Liberty of Conscience controversy, to the first Vestments controversy.

We begin by defining the term “vestments.” John Primus defined them as follows:

It is necessary to understand at the outset, that the vestments about which there was controversy were not garments or robes or gowns in general, nor were they simply ecclesiastical garments or robes or gowns, but they were, most specifically, those ecclesiastical garments which had gained liturgical stature in the course of the history of the medieval church. The Vestments controversy with which we are concerned then, was a dispute in the early English Protestant church regarding the question whether her clergy could legitimately use the liturgical apparel which had been introduced and was still worn by the Roman Catholic clergy. Involved, therefore, in this ostensibly insignificant controversy were implicative questions regarding the relationship, which the new Church of England should maintain over against the old.<sup>8</sup>

The key man in the Vestments controversy was John Hooper, an early English reformer.<sup>9</sup> He spent time on the continent with Calvinistic reformers and returned to England in 1549. When he was appointed bishop of Gloucester, he hesitated to take the position because of the oath of supremacy (which King Edward altered for him) and because of the use of vestments. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer refused to consecrate him without vestments. Meanwhile, in July of that year Bishop Nicholas Ridley of London was assigned to discuss the matter with Hooper. Ridley refused to approve of his consecration. However, on August 5, 1550, the king gave Hooper a dispensation on the rule requiring vestments. Ridley appealed that decision to the king’s council. Primus said of this controversy:

Here we see the first emergence of an issue that became very important in every later vestments debate, an issue that is basic in every struggle that pits conformity against nonconformity. It is the question of the authority of the individual over against the authority of the organization. The council on May 15 had declared vestments indifferent and therefore left it to the judgment of the individual whether they were worn or not. The council only requested that bishops who differed on this score should nevertheless mutually recognize each other in love as fellow bishops. Ridley, however reasoned from the same premise—that vestments are indifferent—to quite a different conclusion—that therefore they may properly be retained and enforced without exception by church and state (Primus, 14–15).

Ridley won the debate. Hooper was eventually consecrated with vestments in 1551.

The Vestments controversy was important in the formation of the Puritan movement. It also influenced the development of the Westminster standards because of the fundamental issue, authority. The controversy left many questions unanswered such as:

Who is permitted to judge what is or is not godly ecclesiastical polity? Who may determine what is or is not contrary to God’s Word? How is a civilly ordained, ungodly practice of ecclesiastical polity to be resisted? How is the magistrate to be restrained from initiating ungodly church practices (Primus, 31)?

The Westminster Assembly would attempt to answer some of these questions.

The Vestments controversy was important for another reason. It showed that question of authority could not be considered by itself, because it involved issues such as Christian liberty, freedom of conscience, the role of the individual in the church, the priesthood of all believers, and the role of things indifferent in and to the church.

### *The Second Vestments Controversy*

The second Vestments controversy occurred under the reign of Queen Elizabeth. After the death of Edward VI, his Roman Catholic sister, Mary, became queen. Her goal was to reestablish the Roman Catholic Church in England. The Roman bishops imprisoned during the reign of Edward VI were released and reappointed. Some Protestants were executed; many fled to Europe for their lives. In Europe, they were exposed to the Reformed churches, and were influenced by their theology and practice. After the death of Mary, the Protestant Elizabeth came to the English throne in 1558. The refugees returned home. Mary’s bishops refused to serve under a Protestant queen. Underlings who supported Mary could not be trusted, so Elizabeth was forced to appoint the dedicated exiles to the vacant sees. Their

8. John Henry Primus, *The Vestments Controversy* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1960) xii–xiii. The entire Latin text of Hooper’s defense is found in C. Hopf, “Bishop Hooper’s ‘Notes’ to the King’s Council,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 44 (January–April 1943) 194–199. This was its first publication.

9. For more on Hooper’s beliefs see, John Hooper, “The Regulative Principle and Things Indifferent,” in Iain Murray, ed., *The Reformation of the Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965; repr. 1987) 55–62. This book also contains another work on vestments, John à Lasco, “The Abolition of Vestments,” 63–74.

Puritan or near Puritan convictions were out of sympathy with Elizabeth.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the second Vestments controversy arose.

This second controversy is discussed simply with the goal of further understanding the Liberty of Conscience issues that serve as a background of the Westminster Assembly, and of understanding how the Bible speaks to this issue. Therefore, only one document will be selected for consideration, the letter of Jerome Zanchi to Queen Elizabeth on the Vestments controversy. Primus described this as “a very impressive letter, containing some of the most cogent pro-Puritan reasoning of the entire controversy.”<sup>11</sup> On August 8, 1571, Zanchi, professor of divinity at Heidelberg, wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth on the subject of vestments. It was one of the few attempts to deal directly with the one person who could resolve the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

#### Summary of Zanchi's Letter

Following is a summary of Professor Zanchi's letter. Zanchi greeted Queen Elizabeth and introduced the subject. The apostle Paul commanded in 1 Timothy 2:2 that prayers be made for those in authority so that Christians may lead a quiet life, meaning a life in godliness and honesty. This lifestyle required certain things of rulers that are summarized by the following three responsibilities of kings: They should either restore the true religion and true worship if it has been banished, and if restored, preserve it in all its integrity. Second, men should live holy and honest lives. Therefore, licentiousness should be outlawed. Third, peace and friendship should be cultivated among people, by removing all occasions of discord (*Zurich Letters*, 339–341).

These responsibilities apply to the Vestments controversy as follows: Because the magistrate is to maintain the worship of God in all its integrity, he is to remove practices that violate worship either by their own nature

or incidentally. Worship is to be restored according to the ancient, apostolic and pure rule of God's word, and not to have even the appearance of evil. How can the Queen allow “indifferent” practices that bring mischief and do not edify (*Zurich Letters*, 341–342)?

Zanchi urged the Queen to avoid bad company by not using Roman religious practices unless the practices were used by the apostles, because Roman practices would corrupt the true church. The Bible teaches “a little leaven leavens a whole lump” (1 Cor. 5:6). Zanchi says Hosea (9:10, 10:1) rebuked the Jews for “having transplanted the shoots of superstition from Israel into their garden, that is into the true church.” Why were some godly kings rebuked in Scripture for allowing Jehovah's worship at the high places, where believers worshiped before the temple was built (1 Kings 15:14, 22:43)? The answer is because the temple had been built and God no longer permitted other places of worship. These passages apply to the Christian era, because in Christ's kingdom Aaronic ceremonies no longer have any standing. “Wherefore the apostles very properly took care that they should be done away with after the ascension of Christ, so that not even any relics should remain” (Acts 15), but the impious papists restored them (342–343).

Zanchi found other problems with papal practices. The use of vestments served to confirm the Romanists in their religion (they will say that the Queen of England is beginning to return to Rome gradually). For evidence, Professor Zanchi cited Old Testament passages on purity. In 2 Chronicles 19:2 it is taught that the godly must not help the ungodly. The prohibitions against mixing such as not plowing with an ox and an ass hitched together (Deut. 22:9–11) apply here (343–344).

What is the reason for vestments? The only reason the professor found was to disgrace England by wearing the garments of a harlot. The purpose of the Roman pomp and ceremony is to lure men to commit spiritual fornication. It is a shame to have them in the church of Christ. King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent because the people were abusing it contrary to the Word of God (2 Kings 18:4). The same should be done to the garments that the apostles never used, but were adopted by Rome. Both things indifferent, which have been used by Rome to dishonor God, and vestments, the invention of Satan, should be forbidden (*Zurich Letters*, 345–346). Zanchi charges the English church with guilt by association.

The second responsibility of a ruler is to see that people live holy and honest lives. Nations have laws against wearing strange garments, because they corrupt good

10. Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Berkeley: University of California, 1976) 61–62.

11. Primus, *Vestments Controversy*, 154. The reasons for the detail in which Zanchi's letter is examined here are, first, because the letter cogently states the main Anglican-Puritan issues that are behind the Westminster Assembly's positions discussed in this essay. Second, it summarizes the Scripture proofs supporting the Puritan positions. These Scripture proofs are necessary for understanding the background of the Westminster Assembly, and this letter serves as a way of giving them in their historical context.

12. Hierome Zanchius to Queen Elizabeth, 10 September 1571, *The Zurich Letters (Second Series)*, Haſting Robinson, ed. and trans. (Cambridge, 1845) 339–353. The original is found in *Epistolae Zanchii* (Hanoviae, 1609) 1.423. N.B. From this point, multiple citations in one paragraph from the same author are cited in one note at the end.

morals [this probably referred to decency laws]. How can Queen Elizabeth receive counsel to introduce garments unknown to the Christian kingdom of the apostles? This principle is proved by Bible passages such as the prohibition of a man wearing clothing which pertains to woman and vice versa (Deut. 22:5). Protestants are of a different religion, and should be distinguished from Rome by a different sign (*Zurich Letters*, 356).

The third responsibility of the ruler is keeping peace. Vestments disturb the peace as do all novelties, and the disturbance is always greatest in the area of religion. To disturb the peace to cause a reformation is good because it disturbs an ungodly peace. But peace should not be disturbed by insisting on things indifferent. In the apostolic church, the troublemakers insisted on the observance of circumcision and the ceremonial law. This caused a lot of trouble, and would have caused even more if the synod at Jerusalem had not rejected them (Acts 15). It is the Queen's duty to follow the apostles: "you must imitate the apostles in this matter: neither must you impose this yoke upon the necks of the disciples of Christ yourself, nor allow it to be imposed on them by others." If there is disagreement among the bishops on this matter, call a Synod and have the issue decided by Scripture. Then order it observed by act of Parliament (347–348).

Zanchi continues. The majority of the Reformed churches have rejected vestments. The exceptions, who for the sake of peace accepted vestments, made a mistake because the papists are not going to change their errors (348–349).

Another problem with vestments is that they are offending the sensitive consciences of English believers. As the apostle Paul teaches, it is a grievous offense to disquiet the consciences of the godly and to offend the consciences of the weak.

"If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (1 Cor 8:13.) For in these words he affords by his example a general rule taken from the doctrine of Christ; namely, that nothing indifferent is to be admitted, much less enforced upon others, and still less commanded by act of parliament, if in admitting, enforcing, or commanding it the consciences of the faithful are offended. For a tender and God-fearing conscience is a most precious thing, and very acceptable to God.<sup>13</sup>

Zanchi then applies the argument from the liberty of Christian conscience to vestments in detail. There are two possible sources for use of vestments. They are

Divine, that is, from God, through Moses, Christ, and the Holy Spirit acting through the apostles; or human through godly or ungodly men. It cannot be through Moses because the Levitical vestments were to cease at the death of Christ as is taught in Colossians and Hebrews. "For which reason they cannot be restored without a transgression of the divine will." It cannot be said that Christ or the apostles instituted them, since there is not a word of proof for vestments. If godly men instituted them, they did it for reasons of edification, or order, or decency. However, they are not edifying, they promote disorder, and do not add to the beauty of the bride of Christ. Therefore "the church, as in doctrine, so also in ceremonies and vestments, is to be framed after the model of the apostolic church" (*Zurich Letters*, 350–351).

Zanchi closed with a plea that Her Majesty not listen to improper counsel about vestments, but instead use her time and energy seeing that the bishops did their duty to their flocks "watch over the flock; teach sound doctrine; refute heresies; drive away the wolves; keep everyone to his duty, and exhort, incite, and stimulate all persons to a life becoming a Christian man." The true vestments of a Christian bishop are those Paul listed in writing to Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 3:2–4 and Titus 1:7). "For the garments and ornament of the Aaronic priest were types of these true ornaments: they were the shadow, there the substance" (*Zurich Letters*, 352–353). This ends the letter of Jerome Zanchi to Queen Elizabeth, a theological high point of the second Vestments controversy.

Zanchi's letter included Scriptural proofs and hermeneutical assumptions that were of great significance in the Westminster Assembly. These included the assumptions that the apostolic church was the model for the later church to follow, that the Bible had priority over all other sources of authority, that the Old Testament was useful in proving the regulative principle of worship, the attack on vestments from the priesthood of Christ, and the argument for Liberty of Conscience in the church.

The Vestments controversies included several major issues summarized by John Primus as follows:

The vestments controversy involved, probably more than anything else, the problem of authority—

13. *Zurich Letters*, 349–50. Zanchi is defining Christian liberty in terms of the individual's right to be protected from the church requiring things indifferent, a view shared by Puritans and Presbyterians. Anglicans tended to define Christian liberty in terms of the church's right to add things indifferent.

individual authority, church authority, Scriptural authority, state authority, apostolic authority—in ecclesiastical affairs. It involved a profound doctrinal question related to the whole opposition between Roman Catholics and Protestants, the question of the nature of the clerical office in the light of the doctrine that all believers are priests. It involved a methodological question: the tempo of reform. It even involved an ecumenical question: Oneness with 'best reformed churches' on the continent (Primus, 67).

Unfortunately, the English church did not resolve the issues behind the Vestments controversy at that time. They would continue to be a source of friction between Puritan and Anglican, and eventually become a cause of the English Civil War.

As Queen Elizabeth lay dying, she named King James VI of Scotland as her heir. The Puritans hoped that the king of Presbyterian Scotland would be sympathetic to the establishment of some form of Presbyterian government and worship. However, King James had developed an intense dislike for Presbyterianism, and the English bishops appealed to his ego. Therefore, he not only embraced Anglicanism but attempted to force it on Scotland as well. Two results of his reign were heightened Puritan-Anglican tensions, and increased Scottish support for Puritanism. Under the reign of James's son, Charles I (1625–1649), the tensions exploded into a civil war. Charles was a poor administrator and frequently ignored the laws of England. He was forced to call Parliament into session in 1640 when Scotland invaded England. He wanted to raise taxes to meet military and other expenses. However, Parliament required political and ecclesiastical reforms as the price of higher taxes. The King dismissed Parliament, broke more laws, and called Parliament into session again later in the year. Tensions were very high. Parliament moved to protect itself by impeaching the Earl of Strafford and Archbishop William Laud. In January 1642, Charles I attempted to arrest some leading members of the House of Commons for treason. On August 22, Charles raised the Royal Standard at Nottingham and the English Civil War began. It resulted in a victory for Parliament.

This Parliament, the Long Parliament, called the Westminster Assembly into session. The reasons for this calling included the strength of the Puritan move-

ment, the persecution of Puritans by bishops, and the administrative problem of replacing the old, abolished form of church government with a new one. The bill establishing the Assembly was passed in 1643. After England and Scotland adopted the Solemn League and Covenant, Scottish treaty commissioners were added to the Assembly. One major goal, perhaps the major goal, of the Westminster divines was to write a constitution for an ecumenical reformed church. One of their important undertakings was to determine the biblical priorities and balance among four authorities: God speaking in Scripture, the state, the church, and the individual's conscience. Finding the biblical balance between these often competing authorities was one of the great accomplishments of the Westminster Assembly.

### III. LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE EXPLAINED

#### *The Roles Of Church Authority And Scripture*

To properly understand Liberty of Conscience in the Westminster Confession, we must clearly understand the places given to four authorities, namely Scripture, the church, the state and the conscience of the individual. We will begin with Holy Scripture. Chapter 1.6 of the Confession declares,

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

Question 3 of the Shorter Catechism summarizes this section saying:

*Q. What do the scriptures principally teach?*

*A. The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.<sup>14</sup>*

Confession 1.5 teaches that the Bible is inerrant or "infallible truth" and is "the Word of God."<sup>15</sup>

The above quotations make some important points. First, the Bible is of divine authority. It is a perfect love letter from a perfect God. Secondly, it is a sufficient love letter. It could not be perfect if it was not sufficient for "salvation, faith and life" (emphasis added). Because it is sufficient for all of life, nothing—absolutely nothing—is to be added to it. Neither church, nor state, nor individual are allowed to add one thing to the Christian

14. Cited from *The Westminster Confession* (Glasgow: FPP, 1990).

15. When used in the Confession, the word "infallibility," means "inerrancy." See John Allen Delivuk, "Inerrancy, Infallibility, and Scripture in the Westminster Confession of Faith," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 54.2 (Fall 1992) 349–355.

religion. The “no additions” clause was a key Puritan/Anglican difference. In his excellent study of the differences between the two groups, John New observed,

In reality the antagonisms arose from two incompatible habits of Biblical exegesis, each consistent with its own rationality. Puritanism claimed that Scripture revealed the model for Church organization, and for all behavior; that what was in Scripture ought to be implemented, and what was not explicitly there ought not to be practiced. Anglicanism considered the Scriptures authoritative for all things that pertained to redemption, but permissive for those that did not, in which case men might adjust their own affairs.<sup>16</sup>

The Puritan/Presbyterian position gives church authorities great power, but sees these powers as subordinate to the written Word of God. These are stated in Chapter 31, Of Synods and Councils, in paragraph three.

It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word.

There are some important points to attend. The first is the use of the term “ministerially.” Americans will tend to read this word as meaning “pastorally.” The historical and linguistic context of the Confession supports the traditional meaning of “Pertaining to, or entrusted with, the execution of the law, or of the commands of a superior; pertains to or possessing delegated executive authority.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, ministerial refers to the church’s God given authority to execute His will as revealed in His Word. The role of the church is comparable with the kings of Israel in the sense that they were not to legislate laws, but to execute the laws God had already revealed. This contrasts with the Anglicans who wanted to legislate rites, ceremonies, and change the form of church government.

This position also contrasts with the Roman Catholic position, which holds to twin sources of authority, Scripture and tradition. Rome believes that the Apos-

ties left a revelation of tradition as well as a written revelation. The Roman church examines the Bible and church history to determine true doctrine and practice. Below we will see how the Westminster divines refuted the seventeenth-century skeptics who resemble modern relativists.

The second teaching of the Confession is that biblically consistent church synod decisions are to be given the reverence and submission befitting an ordinance of God, for they are the application of the Word of God to the doctrine or situation they address. In our day, the decrees of synods are too often ignored or otherwise disobeyed. The Westminster Assembly realized that God wants His will, as expressed through the church, to be reverently and submissively obeyed, not treated like the words of a fool and ignored.

#### *“Additionalism”*

The third teaching of this paragraph is that the decisions of synods and councils are to be “consonant,” that is, in agreement or accord with the Bible. Since this limitation on church authority is important in understanding Liberty of Conscience, I will discuss what the authors of the Confession taught concerning the error of adding man-made commands to Scripture, a practice called “additionism” in this essay. Robert Harris enlightens us by contrasting the Assembly’s limitation on church authority with the greater power of the Roman church.

And for the matter of our obedience, we must obey in all things: Wee owe that to God our Father, which the Papiſts teach wee owe to our Mother the Church, and that is unlimited ſubjection in all parts and points of duty: a man muſt winke (as Abraham did) and put himſelfe into Gods hands, to be guided and ordered by him in all things. They goe farre for their viſible head of the Church, as they call him, when they tell us, that whether hee command truth or falſhood, good or evill, yea though hee ſhould ſay that vice were vertue, and vertue vice, yet `twere our part to lay our hands upon our mouthes, and to ſet our ſelves to worke without diſpute: But though wee acknowledge no ſuch law as this, yet for God, it is true, that whatſoever it be that hee commends to our faith, wee muſt beleeve it, whatſoever he commends to our obedience, that wee muſt practice,

16. John F. H. New, *Anglican and Puritan: The Basis of Their Opposition, 1558–1640* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964) 28.

17. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 13 vols. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1933) 6.474.

and whatsoever by his providence hee is pleased to lay upon us, wee must willingly stoope to it.<sup>18</sup>

Edward Reynolds argues that claiming human commands are commands of God is a very serious sin against God.

But to stamp any thing of but a human original with a divine character, and obtrude it upon the consciences of men (as papiſts do their unwritten traditions), to bind unto obedience; to take any dead child of ours (as the harlot did, 1 Kings iii.20), and lay it in the bosom of the Scripture, and father it upon God; to build any structure of ours in the road to heaven, and stop up the way;—is one of the highest and most dangerous presumptions that the pride of man can aspire unto. To erect a throne in the consciences of his fellow-creatures, and to counterfeit the great seal of heaven for the countenancing of his own forgeries,—is a sin, most severely provided against by God, with special prohibitions and threatenings (Deut. 12:32, 18:20. Jer. 26:2. Prov. 30:6).<sup>19</sup>

George Gillespie applied the limitation of church authority to worship in his exposition of the second commandment.

... we say that the Christian Church hath no more liberty to adde to the commandements of God then the Jewish Church had. For the second commandment is morall and perpetuall, and forbiddeth to us as well as them the additions and inventions of men in the worship of God.<sup>20</sup>

18. Robert Harris, *The Workes of Robert Harris, Bachelor in Divinity and Pastor of Hanwell, in Oxford-Shire. Revised and in Sundrie Places Corrected, and Now Collected into One Volume* (London: Printed by R. Y. for J. Bartlet, 1635) 574–575.

19. Edward Reynolds, *The Whole Works of the Right Rev. Edward Reynolds, D. D.* (London: B. Holdsworth, 1826) 3.416. The biblical texts are from his footnotes.

20. George Gillespie, *A Dispute against the English-Popish Ceremonies, obtruded vpon the Chvrch of Scotland. Wherein not only our owne Arguments against the same are strongly confirmed, but likewise the Answeres and Defense of our Opposites, svch as Hooker, Mortovne, Byrges, Sprint, Paybody, Andrewes, Saravia, Tilen, Spotswood, Lindsey, Forbesse, &c particularly confuted*, (N. p.: n. p., 1637) 3.118. See also, idem, *A Dispute, etc.*, ed. Christopher Coldwell (Dallas, Tex.: Naphtali Press, 1993) 3.7.11.289.

21. William Cunningham, *The Works of William Cunningham*. Edited by his literary executors. *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870) 1:53–54.

22. Samuel Rutherford, *The Divine Right of Church-Government and Excommunication: or a Peaceable Dispute for the Perfection of the Holy Scripture in Point of Ceremonies and Church Government; in Which*

While Gillespie's conclusion is frequently ignored in modern Presbyterian practice, he clearly states that individuals and congregations have no say in determining the liturgical acts of worship. However, they do have some authority over the circumstances of worship such as time and place.

A more recent presbyterian theologian, William Cunningham, observes that the biblically consistent decisions of synods are “to be received with reverence and submission ... as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word.”<sup>21</sup> This teaching puts a heavy responsibility on members of sessions, presbyteries, and general assemblies to be totally certain of the biblical evidence before making any decision. It also lays a heavy, God-given responsibility on those disagreeing with the decisions to do serious research and show strong biblical evidence before deciding the denomination made an error. God does not run a cafeteria where people are free to choose what to obey and what to believe; He runs a kingdom, where people are expected to obey the king and his bride whether they agree with them or not.

Closely related to church authority is church social pressure. For example, a Presbyterian believing in the regulative principle of worship may join an evangelical church that includes liturgical actions in her worship service that are additions to Scripture. The pastor and the lay leadership will say, “We understand your position and we do not expect you to participate in the parts that are against your conscience.” Nevertheless, there is a social pressure to conform, and the better the congregation, the greater the desire to join them will be. Samuel Rutherford was aware of how social pressure can make an indifferent practice into a requirement. Rutherford could not understand the argument that the ceremonies are left free to the conscience because the church can alter them. Practices like kneeling at communion are common in the entire world. Crossing and surplices signify dedication to Christianity in the entire world, so these cannot be called national, alterable rites, but must be universal. The unintentional result of a universal practice is to create a *de facto* doctrinal demand.<sup>22</sup> In other words, an indifferent practice can become a tradition, and a tradition can develop the power of a doctrine or a command. The more common the practice, the sooner this will happen and the more powerful it will be. The power of a tradition yells so loud I can't hear anyone saying, “This is adiaphora and you don't have to do it.”

In this section, we have looked at the relationship between two pillars of authority, the Bible and the

church. We have seen the sufficiency and supremacy of the Bible as the accurate revelation of the will of God. We have seen that the church is given executive authority to implement and to insure obedience to the biblical commands, and to teach biblical doctrines. We have also noticed special limitations on church authority in the areas of faith and worship. We noted how allowing indifferent practices into worship services could result in them becoming commands. Now we will look at the broad context of Christian liberty and then move to the conscience of the individual.

### Christian Liberty

The Westminster Assembly wisely set Liberty of Conscience in the context of Christian liberty. The Confession at Chapter 20.1 defines and lists the important benefits of Christian liberty as follows,

freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and, in their being delivered from the present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin; from the evil of affliction, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation ... free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto Him ... freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law ... greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than the believer under the law did ordinarily partake of.

The freedom in 20.1 is tempered by strong warnings in paragraphs 3 and 4. Paragraph 3 warns that those who use Christian liberty as an excuse to practice “any sin, or cherish any lust” destroys the goal of Christian liberty, i. e., the serving of God in holiness and righteousness. Paragraph 4 focuses on the sin of rebellion against “lawful powers.” We will discuss the limits on Christian liberty before moving to the detailed discussion of Liberty of Conscience.

Samuel Rutherford enlightens us on the limits. In agreement with the Confession, he teaches that Christian liberty is not a license to sin. It is a changing of a condemning and cursing law yoke for the sweet and easy yoke of Christ, to serve God in holiness and righteousness. It is not using our liberty as an occasion for the flesh (Gal. 5:13–14). The service of sin is the greatest bondage, but the Son of God has freed us from this (John 8:24–26), and we should not fall back into it. The whole Gospel urges the service of God; for example, it tells us to honor our parents, have an honest walk

among the Gentiles, and abstain from fleshly lusts (Eph. 6:1; 1 Pet. 2:12; Col. 2:6).<sup>23</sup>

Later in the same source, Rutherford stresses that Christian liberty does not give us an excuse to disobey the civil laws:

*Christian liberty is not in freedom from subjection and obedience to Magistrates, Masters, Kings, Parliaments; for this, Peter (1 Pet. 2.16) saith, is to use our liberty as a cloake of maliciousness, and that opened the mouthes of the ignorant and foolish heathen ... (Rutherford, Spiritual Antichrist, 2.99).*

As the above shows, the Westminster doctrine of Christian liberty forbids sin or rebellion against lawful authorities. This emphasis targets the antinomians. Scholars have recognized this emphasis. For example, E. Morris, commenting on Confession 20.3, said;

As the chief end of every man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, this must preeminently be the chief end of the Christian, and the indulgence of any lust or the practicing of any sin must be intrinsically and absolutely incongruous with such a supreme purpose.<sup>24</sup>

Having seen how the Assembly avoided the ecclesiastical additionism of Romans and Anglicans, and having seen the definition of Christian liberty and the rejection of antinomianism, we will now consider how the Westminster divines used Liberty of Conscience to avoid the double traps of an over emphasis on commands and antinomianism.

### Liberty Of Conscience

Our discussion of Liberty of Conscience will examine the role of the conscience, the definition of Liberty of Conscience, and the limitations and abuses of this doctrine as taught by the authors of the Westminster Confession. The abuses emphasized here are those most often seen in our time and culture.

*the Removal of the Service Book is Justified* (London: Printed by John Field for Christopher Meredith, 1646) 2.57–58.

23. Samuel Rutherford, *A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist. Opening the Secrets of Familisme and Antinomianisme in the Antichristian Doctrine of John Saltmarsh, and Will. Del, the Present Preachers of the Army Now in England, and of Robert Town, Tob. Crisþ, H. Denne, Eaton, and Others. In Which Is Revealed the Rise and Spring of Antinomians, Familists, Libertines, Swenck-feldians, Enthysiaists, &c.* (London: Andrew Croke, 1648) 2.94–95.

24. Edward Morris, *Theology of The Westminster Symbols*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cincinnati: Lane Seminary, 1911) 559.

### The Role Of Conscience

Samuel Rutherford taught the following concerning the conscience. The Bible must be the rule followed by the conscience. The role of the conscience is as “servant, and an under-Judge” not a lord. The conscience does the following: it directs, it discerns, it excites, it approves, it executes, it absolves, it reproveth, it accuses and it condemns.<sup>25</sup> The conscience is to work in accord with the law of God so that it binds “us to obedience with a knot that neither king nor kirk can loose.” It is a watchdog in the soul. It can become blind or dead “through presumption” and a failure to fear God. It can mislead people into hell.<sup>26</sup> In short, the conscience is a very valuable tool when it reinforces obedience to God and encourages repentance from sin. However, because it can be misled, it has a subordinate position to Scripture like church and state.

### Definition Of Liberty Of Conscience

The definition of Liberty of Conscience requires some expansion. We must learn what it means and does not mean. Liberty of Conscience is a kind of freedom. It is the freedom to enjoy and use creation within biblical limits, such as love for our neighbors, and where no command of God is broken. It is freedom in things indifferent.

Thomas Gataker’s defense of gambling for small stakes<sup>27</sup> increases our understanding of this doctrine. Gataker’s opponent argued, because there is neither a precept nor an example of gambling in the Bible, either literal or implied, the practice of casting lots is therefore forbidden. This argument comes very close to saying

25. Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience Tending to Resolve Doubts Moved by Mr. John Goodwin, John Baptist, Dr. Jer. Taylor, the Belgick Arminians, Socinians, and Other Authors Contending for Lawlesse Liberty, or Licentious Toleration of Sects and Heresies* (London: Andrew Crook, 1649) 10–11.

26. Samuel Rutherford, “Ane Catachisme containing the Soume of Christian Religion,” *Catechisms of the Second Reformation*, Alexander F. Mitchell, ed. (London: James, 1886) 165–166.

27. I am using gambling to illustrate how the doctrine of Liberty of Conscience is used, not to take a position on its morality.

28. Thomas Gataker, *A Ivst Defence of Certaine Passages in a former Treatise concerning the Nature and Vse of Lots, Against such Exceptions and Oppositions as haue beene made thereunto by Mr. I. B.* (London: Printed by Iohn Haviland for Robert Bird, 1623) 244.

29. Thomas Gataker, *Of the Natvre and Vse of Lots; A Treatise Historically and Theologically* (London: Printed by Edward Griffin and are to be sold by William Bladen, 1619) 175.

30. George Gillespie, *Male Audis; or, An Answer to Mr. Coleman’s Male Dicis* (London: Printed for Robert Bostocke, 1646); repr. in

what is not commanded is forbidden. Gataker replies as follows: An action may be permitted without precept or example. Where God has not determined the use of any creation or ordinance, He has left its use free.<sup>28</sup> Gataker, in agreement with the Confession, defines Liberty of Conscience as follows,

For where God hath not limited the vse of any Creature or ordinance, there he hath left the vse of it free. Where he hath not determined the circumstances of any action, there what he hath not prohibited, that hath he permitted, and that is warrant sufficient for it.<sup>29</sup>

The Westminster divines believed Liberty of Conscience protects the rights of laity. It protects church members against arrogant bishops, proud elders, and egotistic music directors who want to enforce their preferred human practices and ceremonies on church members. The doctrine of Liberty of Conscience thus serves a role similar to the Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution. It is a protection against church bureaucrats who make and enforce rules with no basis in Scripture, such as the ordination of elders and/or deacons by a quota system. Liberty of Conscience is also an issue in missions when the missionary must be careful to distinguish between “essential” or biblical Christianity and “cultural” Christianity. One thinks of the problems caused by missionaries like John G. Paton, who expected his south sea island converts to wear wool clothing, like modest Englishmen.

The Westminster divines lived in a state church context. They were victims of state-mandated adiaphora under King Charles, and were supported by Parliament during the English Revolution. These experiences as a victim and beneficiary are evident when Gillespie defends Liberty of Conscience against state-mandated adiaphora. He said,

... Mr. Hussey here engaged himself to hold it free and lawful to the Christian magistrate, yea, to private Christians (for he calls it Christian liberty, not parliamentary liberty—now Christian liberty belongs to all sorts of Christians), to make laws to themselves for taking sacrament anniversary on Christmas, Good-Friday, and Easter, or to appoint a perpetual monthly fast or thanksgiving; yea, another Parliament may, if so it should seem good to them, impose against the surplice and cross ... yea, what ceremonies, Jewish, popish, heathenish, may they not impose, provided they only hold the foundation, and keep to those essentials which he calls matters of duty?<sup>30</sup>

This quotation contains some important points. First, Christian liberty does not give people an excuse to legislate adiaphora, like man-made holy days such as Christmas and Easter. Second, Gillespie denies that the excuse, “We hold to the basics of the faith,” can be used by the state to legislate adiaphora. Third, if legislating adiaphora begins, where will it end? Will not such legislation make the worship wars even worse?

The last section demonstrates that Liberty of Conscience is the right of all believers and is to be maintained against church and state. Since Liberty of Conscience can be abused, we will now discuss its limitations.

#### *Limitations On Liberty Of Conscience Tolerance And Its Limits*

One of the differences between the seventeenth-century and ours is the view of tolerance. In the seventeenth century, Roman Catholics and Presbyterians persecuted each other. In our time, conservative Romanists and conservative Presbyterians pray together at pro-life rallies and march together against abortion (sometimes accompanied by orthodox Jews and Mormons). Both groups condemn denominations that ordain practicing homosexuals and clergy who perform homosexual marriages. While God has changed our circumstances so that it is easier to love and dialog with other Christian traditions, truth has not changed. It is still true that whenever two Christians disagree on a doctrine or a continuing obligation of an Old Testament law, at least one of them is wrong.

In the modern United States, there is too much tolerance of heresies and sins. Many, if not most, American Christians are reluctant to admit that if two Christians differ on a doctrine, either one or both of them are guilty of heresy. Or if they do admit it, they often do not love their believing neighbors enough to compare the biblical and theological proofs for their doctrinal positions in order to determine which position is God’s truth. The results of this lack of love for the Word of God and our neighbors are not surprising. Major denominations have become liberal because heresy was tolerated. Toleration leads congregational officers not to apply discipline in moral matters. As a result, the moral standards of far too many church members are little different from those of the world.

How extreme is tolerance in the United States today? George Barna and his organization asked Americans if they agreed with the statement, “freedom meaning being able to do anything you want to do.” A disturbing

40% agreed with this statement. Barna observed that the 40% agreement “raises interesting, if not frightening, questions about the direction which we may be moving.”<sup>31</sup> This survey shows the extent of irresponsible individualism. One critic of modern liberty summarized the present American position as, “Whatever it is permitted to do, it must be permitted not only to advise others to do, but to do in public, and, moreover, to be paid by the public to so advise and so do.”<sup>32</sup>

Next, we will examine the position of the Westminster Assembly on tolerance and the limits placed on Liberty of Conscience.

#### *The Issue Of Individual Authority*

The main Liberty of Conscience problem faced by today’s American Christians is how to deal with unbridled individualism. The Westminster divines give us several insights on this problem. While individualism was not the main problem they faced, they were aware of its dangers. We will begin with the limitations on individual liberty.

The Confession sets two definite limits on Liberty of Conscience in 20.3 and 20.4, licentiousness and heresy. For example, Edward Reynolds distinguished between “... true Christian liberty, from loose, profane, and wanton licentiousness, and a liberty to vent and publish what perverse things soever men please...” (Reynolds, *Whole Works*, 3.407–408).

George Gillespie lists three views of tolerance that give us insight into the Westminster divines’ understanding of tolerance. First is the Papist view. The Papists hold that it is “good service to God” to totally destroy adversaries of the Catholic religion. The second opinion reflects the other extreme, the civil authorities should not inflict any punishment or use coercive power on heretics and sectarians, but grant them liberty and toleration. The third view was that the state should use

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*The Presbyterian’s Armory* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, and Oliver & Boyd, 1844) 2.17.

31. George Barna, *Absolute Confusion* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1993) 45–46.

32. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1994) 91. The immediate context of this quotation is the justification for the National Endowment for the Arts funding indecent and offensive ‘art.’ The comment comes from her excellent essay on liberty in the United States today titled, “Liberty: ‘One Very Simple Principle?’” This discusses the view of John Stuart Mill that anything should be permitted unless it harms another person, and its effect on today’s society. Many evangelicals tend to view Liberty of Conscience in Mill’s individualistic terms rather than in terms of God’s revelation.

force to suppress heretics according to the seriousness of the crime. Gillespie said Calvin taught this when he distinguished between three kinds of errors; some to be tolerated with a spirit of meekness, these are not to separate the brethren; others not to be tolerated, but to be suppressed with a limited degree of severity, and the third type that are to be dealt with by the most severe punishments.<sup>33</sup>

Other authors of the Confession also allow for limited toleration. Edward Reynolds recognizes a place for academic freedom for scholars who struggle with difficult Bible passages, if they exercise Christian virtues in their teaching. He said,

... God alloweth the learned a Christian liberty, with submission of their opinions always to the spirits of the prophets, so long as they do therein nothing contrary to the analogy of faith,—to the general peace and unity of the church,—to the rules of charity, piety, loyalty, and sobriety; to abound in their own sense, and to declare, for the further edifying of the church, what they conceive to be, in such difficult places, principally intended (Reynolds, *Whole Works*, 3.407–408).

A third author of the Confession, Cornelius Burges, allows tolerance for those having doubts and differences on minor and undecided points. He insists these differences must not lead to separation.

**Holding fast the faithfull word** (Tit. 1.9): not quarrelling to separation for euery difference in opinion touching points not fundamentall, and vndecided. In which case no man must be **iudged for his doubting** (Rom. 14.1); nor may any doubting man iudge others who (Jude ver. 3) **doubt not**.<sup>34</sup>

33. George Gillespie, *Wholsome Severity Reconciled with Christian Liberty, or, The True Resolution of a Present Controversie Concerning Liberty of Conscience* (London: Christopher Meredith, 1645) 1–4. Gillespie follows with a defense of this position on 5–15. See also, idem, “Wholesome Severity,” etc., in Christopher Coldwell, ed., *An Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature* 4 (Dallas, Tex.: Naphtali Press, 1991) 179–181.

34. Cornelius Burges, *The Fire of the Sanctuarie Newly Uncovered, Or A Compleat Tract of Zeale* (London: Printed by George Miller and Richard Badger, 1625) 27–28. Bible verses added from Burges’ footnotes.

35. George Gillespie, *A Sermon Preached before the Right Honourable the House of Lords, in the Abbey Church At Westminster, August 27, 1645* (London: Printed for Robert Bostock, 1644; repr. in *The Presbyterian’s Armory* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, and Oliver & Boyd, 1844) 2.12. See also, idem, “A Sermon Preached,” etc. in Christopher Coldwell, ed., *An Anthology of Presbyterian & Reformed Literature* 1.3 (Dallas, Tex.: Naphtali Press, 1988) 26–27.

Burges’ pastoral response to persons with minor doubts helps us understand why he was considered one of London’s leading ministers.

In a sermon before the House of Lords, George Gillespie attacked the policy of giving heretics and antinomians political liberty. Notice, however, that he also allows toleration for persons with small differences.<sup>35</sup>

Now compare this case with the case of a Socinian, Arminian, Antinomian, or the like: they both plead for liberty of conscience; they both say our conscience ought not to be compelled, and if we do against our conscience, we sin. I beseech you, how can you give liberty of conscience to the heretic, and yet refuse liberty of conscience to him that is the conscientious recusant in point of the war?... When I speak against liberty of conscience, it is far from my meaning to advise any rigorous or violent course against such as, being sound in the faith, and holy in life, and not of a turbulent or factious carriage, do differ in smaller matters from the common rule.

In another source, Gillespie taught that “liberty of heresie and schisme is no part of the Liberty of Conscience which Christ hath purchased to us at so dear a rate.” The context of this quotation is particularly relevant to our time. Gillespie is objecting to the sectarians’ claim for Liberty of Conscience. He observes that they are refusing to have claims judged and examined by the Word of God, as Christians had formerly done (*Wholesome Severity*, Introduction, 2–3). Gillespie is aware that Liberty of Conscience was, and continues to be, used by those who refuse to allow their beliefs and practices to be evaluated in public trial by biblical standards. Gillespie’s opponents remind us of those who interpret Liberty of Conscience as meaning all Christian opinions are equally valid, so we do not have to subject them to the biblical standard of truth.

Gillespie and the other divines cited above provide the answer to the question, whether a presbytery should ordain a minister who refuses to obey a major denominational practice or teach a denominational doctrine? For example, the Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenant) of North America practices exclusive psalmody. Suppose a candidate for ordination disagrees with the doctrine. Should the denomination, on the basis of Liberty of Conscience, allow his ordination? The Westminster divines would say no. The citation above implies Gillespie, at least, would probably want the man to read the best sources on all sides of the question, write a paper on his position, and, if he still disagreed

with the church, discuss his paper with a learned committee of presbytery.

From the evidence above, we learn that the Confession's position on the liberty of the individual is simple. Individuals are free in matters of adiaphora. People with small doubts are to be accepted providing they do not disrupt the peace and unity of the church. Heretics and immoral persons are to be disciplined. Liberty of Conscience is not to be used as an excuse for ignoring the truth of the Bible. The Confession teaches love for our neighbor, not tolerance of his sins and heresies.

As we apply these insights to our congregations today, let us recall that the authors of the Confession wanted Liberty of Conscience to be limited by the virtues of charity, peace, piety, and a desire to preserve the unity of the church. A biblical example of the loving way to practice Liberty of Conscience is the dispute over meat sacrificed to idols. Paul, the apostle, said that eating this meat was a matter of indifference, but out of love for other believers he would refrain from anything that put a stumbling block in their way (1 Cor. 8). A second example of love is Paul urging the Corinthian church to punish fornication in 1 Corinthians 5. Clearly, the church is to discipline unrepentant sinners and unrepentant heretics with the goal of their repentance.

#### *Arguments Against Liberty Of Conscience*

Some of the arguments used against the Westminster Assembly's doctrine of Liberty of Conscience are being repeated today. One "modern" basis for justifying liberty of sin and heresy is skepticism. One form of skepticism says that since we cannot know truth with total certainty, we should be utterly tolerant. Another form comes from the relativism of our age, which argues against the very existence of truth. These arguments are old ones in a new form. The seventeenth-century form of this argument stated that there was no infallibility since the apostles died, therefore "we know nothing with any certainty." Confession author Samuel Rutherford rejects this argument. He declares that there are two forms of infallibility, one flowing from immediate inspiration, peculiar to the apostles and prophets, and a second kind common to all believers. For proofs he gives Luke 1:1; Acts 5:23; 21:34; 22:30; 25:26; Col. 2:2; 1 Thess. 1:5 and Rom. 4:21 (Rutherford, *Survey*, 274, 277-78).

Rutherford's position is assumed in chapter 1.7 of the Confession, where the perspicuity of Scripture is taught. This doctrine assumes that absolute truth can be learned and taught from the Bible. The result of the

skeptical position is to leave us uncertain about all biblical truths. For example, there is no way we could be certain that Jesus died for our sins unless we can learn absolute truth from the Bible. Otherwise, a minister would have to go into a pulpit and preach, "There is a 95% probability that Jesus died for our sins," and we could never be certain of our salvation.

In another source, Rutherford defends his position against the Libertines. They argued, since men are fallible they may err, therefore they cannot teach infallible truth. This position reminds us of the relativist who says, "You cannot teach me infallible truth because it does not exist." Rutherford proves this position false by example. He said that the Apostles and Prophets, Nathan, Samuel, David and Peter could and did err when they were deserted by the inspiring Holy Spirit. In a like manner the church and her pastors can and do err when deserted by the Holy Spirit. He cites Romans 3 to prove that all men, including the Apostles and Prophets, are liars, but all men can and do carry infallible truth to others as a blind man may hold a candle to others.<sup>36</sup> Otherwise, the preaching of the Gospel would be impossible, for there would be no way of knowing it as absolutely true.

What conclusions can be drawn from the authors of the Confession concerning the limitations of Liberty of Conscience? The first conclusion is that Liberty of Conscience is limited in its extent. It does not allow individuals to break God's moral law. It does not allow one to believe heresy or encourage schism. It does allow individuals freedom in things indifferent, within the general framework of love for our neighbor and the peace of the church, when our freedom does no harm to others. It is a biblical limit on church and individual power. It forbids church members, boards, or synods from requiring the church to have practices that are not clearly commanded in the Bible, and to teach doctrines that are not clearly taught in the Bible.

It also forbids individual members from imposing their preferences on church boards and members. A lay businessman, Jack Bupp, in a conversation with this author, said he observed several laymen who had a personal arrogance about them that made them rate their individual opinions as more important than the biblically based decisions of the church. They either change churches if they are not followed, or cause dissension

36. Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation*, 24-25. Additional evidence for the Holy Spirit as the giver of infallible truth to fallible men is inferred from the roles of the Spirit in bearing witness (Rom. 8:16; Heb. 10:5), illuminating the mind (1 Cor. 2:12-13; Eph. 1:16-17), and revealing the things of God (1 Cor. 2:10-12).

by grumbling and complaining and/or gossiping about those who oppose them. These “petty popes” frequently believe their opinions to be right without biblical proof. These individuals need to be lovingly disciplined.

### *Liberty Of Conscience Applied To Worship*

In order to understand Liberty of Conscience better, we will examine one of its applications, the Regulative Principle of Worship.<sup>37</sup> From the time of the Vestments Controversy, the Anglican additions to the acts of worship listed in the Bible and the bishops’ totalitarian insistence on conformity to them caused many sincere believers serious conscience problems. They believed that these innovations were not worship, and therefore had problems of conscience every time they participated in them. Thus, a major pastoral concern of the Westminster Assembly was to protect the rights of believers with sensitive consciences from the commands of men in the guise of bishops’ rules.

In Chapter 20 of the Confession, one learns that the Westminster Assembly distinguished the several parts of Christian liberty. Liberty of Conscience found in section 2 established freedom “from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to his Word; or beside it, if matters of faith or worship.” The authors of the Confession used this freedom most often and enthusiastically to prove the Regulative Principle. Because God left men’s consciences free from the doctrines and commands of men, the church is forbidden to teach or command anything, which the Bible does not. This prohibition extends to adiaphora as well as sins. In worship, the church is forbidden to add rites and ceremonies to those found in the Bible, because the conscience is to be free of human requirements, as mentioned above, Liberty of Conscience doctrine functions as an ecclesiastical equivalent to the United States’ Bill of Rights. It is to protect individuals from the bureaucrats.

Note the parallels in the Confession’s statement of the Regulative Principle of Worship (Chap. 21:1) with its statement on Liberty in the previous paragraph.

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own re-

vealed will, that He man not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.

Let us now see how some authors of the Confession related the two doctrines. Samuel Rutherford used Christian liberty to derive the regulative principle of worship. Rutherford defined Liberty of Conscience as: 1. Freedom from the Ceremonial Law (Gal. 5:1–5) and the commandments of men, “for all these Ceremonies being now not commanded, but forbidden of God, become the Commandements of (Col. 2:18, 19, 20) men, from which the *Jewes* and *Gentiles* were freed in Christ” (*A Survey of the Spirituall Antichrist*, 2.93).

Rutherford realized that the Anglicans refused to accept his position that Christian liberty was harmed by the additions to worship that Anglicans believed were indifferent and voluntary. In answer to an opponent, Rutherford gave his position on Christian liberty, worship, and things indifferent. The opponent declared that Christian liberty is not restrained by doing or not doing a thing indifferent, for no laws should be made by the church concerning things indifferent. The opponent continued by saying that, Christian liberty is not harmed if the ceremonies are voluntary and are not made requirements, if they are not made necessary to salvation, and if they are held as alterable by human authority. Rutherford replied saying that the objection was incorrectly stated. The issue is not whether the use of things indifferent places a limit on Christian liberty, but whether the church has the authority to “... make a law of things indifferent; when there is no intrinsic necessity in the things themselves ...” (Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church Government*, 2.57). He continued citing Colossians 2:21 and Galatians 2:18 to show men are dead with Christ to external observations and thus free from them. In other words, Samuel Rutherford attacked the *right* of the church to make rules on things indifferent, and thus restrain Christian liberty. If the church has no authority from God to make rules concerning adiaphora, then there will always be Christian liberty, because the church will only be requiring precepts commanded by God.

Rutherford gave another reason for opposing the Anglican position. He could not understand how the ability of the church to alter her ceremonies meant their practice was free to the individual’s conscience. He concluded that practices like crossing and surplices signified dedication to Christianity in all the world, hence, these cannot be called national, alterable rites, but must be

37. For a longer discussion on the relationship between worship and Liberty of Conscience see John Allen Delivuk, “The Defense of the Regulative Principle of Worship by the Authors of the Westminster Confession,” in *Semper Reformanda* 2.1 (Spring 1993) 34–53. A longer form of this article was published in *The Westminster Theological Journal* 58.2 (Fall 1996) 237–256.

called universal rites, which are therefore “at all times, and in all places doctrinall.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, these practices were so deeply imbedded into the church by their traditional use that they could not be considered alterable, but had to be considered doctrinal.

George Gillespie also advocated Christian liberty against the Anglican additions to worship. He accused the prelates of enforcing ceremonies “after the heathenish and popish manner.” In contrast Gillespie desired the “the ancient apostolical simplicity and singleness,” because ceremonies distract the minds of the people “from the spiritual and inward duties.”<sup>39</sup> Here Gillespie combined the Christian liberty argument with the frequently used Puritan-Presbyterian argument that the early church, which includes the practice of Jesus in synagogue worship, exemplifies the normative pattern for Christian worship and other matters.

Gillespie was also aware of the adiaphora question. He observed that, although Anglican prelates called their religious innovations “things indifferent,” their ceremonies were a cause of great scandal among the godly who considered the ceremonies ungodly and contrary to the word of God. To protect these people the Puritan movement had adopted the loving, pastoral principle that “things indifferent ought not to be practiced with the scandal and offence of the godly” (*Miscellany Questions*, 1.83).

Gillespie continued declaring that the prelates’ policy was destructive to liberty of conscience because it compelled practices by the will and authority of the prelates, an authority not established by God. He concluded,

We say that no canons nor constitutions of the church can bind the conscience ... except in so far as they are grounded upon and warrantable by the word of God, at least by consequence, and by the general rules thereof; and that canons concerning things indifferent bind not ... when they may be omitted without giving scandal, or showing any contempt of the ecclesiastical authority (*Miscellany Questions*, 1.83).

It is clear that the authors of the Confession believed that the Christian’s liberty from the commands of men forbade the church’s adding man-made ceremonies to worship even if these ceremonies were considered matters indifferent. This limitation of ecclesiastical authority was an application of the Westminster doctrine of Christian liberty to worship. The Puritan-Presbyterian party believed that the Bible thoroughly furnished men with complete knowledge of all the acts of the worship of God (1 Tim. 3:16–17). They believed additions to

worship usurped God’s authority. God as revealed in the Bible is the only ruler of men’s consciences and thus is the sole judge of what is allowable in worship. Thus, the Regulative Principle of Worship was an application of Liberty of Conscience.

#### CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGE

I would fail my generation if I stopped here. The problem facing American Christians at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not corruption of powerful Anglican bishops or kings forcing adiaphoristic practices on laymen. Our problem is the corruption caused by liberty turned to license, which can be as troublesome as the corruption of power. It is the individual church members who make themselves judges of religion, often with no regard for God’s Word. One astute observer summed up the situation in these words:

As we turn to our own day we find liberty debased and clothed in rags. The word is often on our lips these days. But much of our talk about liberty is frothy talk. To the common man, liberty means escape from obligation, the right to do as we carelessly please, with little or no interference from neighbors or governments. Liberty today is clothed with mean garments. In education it becomes the satisfaction of self-centered whims ... In morals it is license and chaos. In religion it becomes indifference.<sup>40</sup>

George Barna has surveyed and studied American evangelical churches in great detail. He has found two common elements in churches with a healthy ministry and churches that have turned around from severe decline. These are “the presence of a visionary leader, and a deep, lasting commitment to prayer” (Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, 144). Below are some suggestions for acquiring a vision and prayer life that will help develop a healthy doctrine of Liberty of Conscience in our churches.

The first is to resist the strong social pressures to ignore sin and not teach truth. The position of many

38. Rutherford, *Divine Right of Church Government*, 2.57–58. I believe Rutherford is referring in part to the strength of social practice. If every one is doing it, we feel a lot of pressure to conform. The pressure takes away our freedom.

39. Gillespie, *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions* (Edinburg: printed by G. Lighgow for G. Swintoun, 1649); repr. in *The Presbyterian’s Armory* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle, and Oliver & Boyd, 1844) 1.83.

40. J. Henry Cotton, “The Sovereign God and Human Liberties” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 12 (June and September 1943) 96–97.

godly ministers and elders can be summed up by a cartoon published when Pope John Paul II was visiting the USA. The cartoon showed the Pope and President Clinton looking at a newspaper survey that said the Pope was unpopular with American Catholics. President Clinton said to him, "You must have broken your promises." A surprised President Clinton listened to the Pope say, "No, I kept them." Purging sin is usually an unpopular, thankless business with men. On the other hand, God loves holiness. Whose approval do you love more?

Our membership and ordination vows require us to resist social pressures. Many of my readers will be church officers. Your promises to work for the peace and purity of the church must be kept. Sometimes, keeping these promises requires a high price. For example, the First Orthodox Presbyterian Church of San Francisco learned her organist was a homosexual. The congregation acted righteously and fired the man. First OPC won the court case when the organist sued the congregation. The story did not end there. The congregation and her pastor were the objects of numerous attacks, including a potentially fatal arson attack on the parsonage.<sup>40</sup> The experience of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (Covenanters) may encourage harassed believers. The Covenanters went through a great period of persecution in the seventeenth century. More than three hundred years later, many members can trace a believing family member back to that period. Men and women were faithful in their lifetime, and God was faithful to their posterity.

As implied above, the battle must be fought in the public sphere as well as in the churches. We must be active in opposing legal sins like Sabbath breaking, adultery, abortion, and homosexuality.

We need to educate our members. There is always a battle between the church and the world, and we need to teach the differences between the secular view of liberty and the Christian view. I once asked a Rabbi how he educated the young men in his synagogue to prepare for their Bar Mitzvah at age thirteen. He said that he began when they were six years of age. He met with them twice a week for an hour to an hour and a half teaching them. This continued for six years. At the end, they would know Hebrew, the Bible, especially the Torah, and Jewish traditions. I wish our families and churches trained their children as diligently.

Liberty of Conscience can help us in the "worship wars" that trouble many churches. Much of the fight-

ing over styles of worship is fighting over matters God has neither commanded nor forbidden. Liberty of Conscience says these indifferent matters are forbidden in the Church. A large category of causes of contention would vanish if this doctrine was enforced. Liberty of Conscience teaches that worship is only what the Bible clearly defines as worship. Obviously, Liberty of Conscience will not solve all problems. Some will sinfully argue for matters indifferent. Also, there are some circumstantial matters such as the hour of the worship service, which are to be decided by the wisdom of church leaders, and these may cause some disagreement.

Liberty of Conscience is also an imperative to add to our confession. While the Bible contains all the revelation the church needs, our understanding of God's truth keeps growing as the discipline of historical theology shows. The new understandings are frequently products of the church addressing a problem using the revelation found in the Bible. As can be seen from this article, Liberty of Conscience was a doctrine that became well understood as a result of a challenge faced in a historical context. The Westminster Assembly used the opportunity of their increased understanding to add this doctrine to its confession to help seventeenth century believers and future Christians. A modern example of a doctrine we are coming to understand better is the biblical teaching on life as it relates to pro-life issues. The impetative for adding to our confession comes from Liberty of Conscience forbidding the teaching any doctrine not agreed on by the church as absolute truth. When the church adds a doctrine to her confession, she says this is true and is to be taught in the churches. Put another way, before it can be preached, it must be confessed as truth by the denomination. See case study 4 below for more on this topic.

Finally, we need to stress the goal of Liberty of Conscience. It is not to give us the freedom to do whatever we want heedless of the needs and concerns of others. It gives freedom to serve God and our neighbor in peace and love. It is to prevent the church from wasting her time and energy on things indifferent and concentrate her effort on making disciples and teaching them to love Jesus by following His commands (Matt. 28:20; John 14:15). As the Apostle Paul observed concerning the Corinthian adiaphora dispute over Paul and Apollos, Christians are "not to think beyond what is written." (1 Cor. 4:6 NKJV) We are to be content with God's Word and peacefully enjoy it with our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

40. The story can be read in Chuck and Donna McIlhenny with Frank York, *When the Wicked Seize a City* (Lafayette, La.: Huntington House, 1993).

## IV. CASE STUDIES

Since worship is the application I chose for Liberty of Conscience the majority of the case studies concern it. The studies assume the congregation is committed to the application of Liberty of Conscience called the Regulative Principle of Worship, which is found in Westminster Confession 21. This chapter lists the ordinary acts of worship, Bible reading, prayer, sound preaching, “conscientious hearing,” singing Psalms, and the sacraments. Occasional acts of worship are vows, fasting and thanksgiving. It is significant that the ordinary acts of worship are the means of grace. This implies that our spiritual growth is one of God’s goals for His worship, and a result of biblical worship. Direct biblical proof for spiritual growth as **the** (not **a**) goal of worship is found at the end of the description of a NT church worship, “Let all things be done for edification” or the building up of the church (1 Cor. 14: 26).

*Case Study 1. A Request for Worship Time.*

Our first case study is on worship. One of the elders is a member of a para-church Christian group that solicits churches for money to support its cause. It is a worthy ministry, and has spread the Gospel in the community and the world. This elder asks that session for a portion of the worship service in order to report on the activities of the ministry, and request funds and prayer support. Should this session allow this group to have part of the worship service?

*Analysis.* There are three parts to the elder’s request. One is for worship time, the second is for financial support and the third is for prayer support. If we review the Westminster Confession Chap. 21, we find that there is no place for such an activity in the worship service. We must say no to that request. However, we can still help the elder and the ministry. The session can request that the deacons consider this ministry for an annual donation from the congregation. The ministry can also be allowed to make bulletin announcements reminding members to pray for this group. Its work can be included in the pastoral prayer. Finally, there are non-worship church activities, such as the family night dinner where the ministry can be given an opportunity to present its work. This case study shows two things. First of all, we can not add anything to worship not prescribed in Scripture, per the Regulative Principle of Worship. Secondly, there are ways to handle reasonable requests without transgressing Liberty of Conscience. We can obey God and still love our neighbors.

*Case Study 2. Liturgical Dance in Worship.*

Some young ladies in the congregation are taking dancing lessons. They want to glorify God with their dance, and note that in Psalm 150:4, the Bible says to praise God with dancing. They want to dance during a worship service. Can the session permit this?

*Analysis.* The answer is no, because dancing does not come under the worship acts permitted in Scripture (see WCF 21). The session can give them non-worship opportunities to glorify God by dancing. One common misconception is the equating of praise with worship. That these are different, but sometimes overlapping, good works is taught in the Old Testament. In the law of Moses we have the acts of worship spelled out in great detail. Dancing is not listed as one of them. However, dancing and other practices not found in the Old Testament acts of worship are all listed as good works of praising God. That there is a place outside of worship for praise is clearly shown when David and the Israelites brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. David danced before the Lord, and numerous acts of praise were done in this public celebration (2 Sam. 16). Obviously, some acts of praise, such as singing Psalms, are also acts of worship. We must be careful to distinguish between them. This request could be granted when the church meets for a social activity such as the annual picnic.

*Case Study 3. Dramatic Reading in Worship.*

The pastor is taking a drama course to improve his preaching. He requests permission to do a dramatic reading from the book of Job during the worship service.

*Analysis.* The reading of Scripture is a biblical worship practice. If the dramatic reading is limited solely to Bible passages it is permissible under our confessional understanding of worship. The session will wish to make sure it is done in a competent and respectful manner, as sloppiness does not glorify God.

*Case Study 4. Political Teaching in the Church.*

One of the men in the congregation is interested in developing a Christian view of politics. He has great teaching skill and has done a great deal of study on Christianity and politics. He wishes to teach a congregation sponsored Christian education class on this topic. When his teaching material is reviewed, it is found to have some viewpoints that are controversial among

Christians, and on which the denomination has taken no stand either for or against. Should the session permit this class to be taught under its supervision?

*Analysis.* The doctrine of Liberty of Conscience teaches that the church cannot teach anything unless it can be proven with 100% certainty from the Bible. In this case, the teacher wishes to teach topics on which the denomination has not taken a stand. In other words, the church does not know if these positions are biblical or not. Since these teaching go beyond the position of the denomination, the session cannot allow them to be taught with the church's sponsorship. Since there is no evidence the positions are heresy, the man could teach these at his home without church sponsorship.

One of the problems faced by denominations holding the Westminster standards is that the evangelical churches have increased their knowledge of scriptural truths since the 1640's. For example, Jesus used our Dutch reformed brothers to add to our understanding of culture and Christianity. Not all Presbyterian churches have chosen to include these truths in their confessional documents. Since the denomination has not verified and borne witness to the additional truths, pious church teachers are faced with the dilemma of whether to violate Liberty of Conscience or to not teach the whole counsel of God. One solution, adopted by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, is to have an additional confessional document, *The Reformed Presbyterian Testimony* to supplement the Westminster standards. Members petition the denomination to add additional truth to the Testimony, and a committee is appointed to study the issue. If the committee and Synod approve, the denomination's elders vote on whether to add the additional truth.

As cited above, Edward Reynolds allowed virtuous Christian scholars the freedom to discuss and develop ideas. For us to test and gain an understanding of additional truth, greater freedom to explore doctrines needs to be allowed in our colleges and seminaries than in our churches. This freedom must be responsibly handled and practiced in the context of our confessional truths. It needs to be handled as a chemist studies poison, with great safeguards. Participation in such activities should be limited to faculty and students firmly grounded in the truth. It does not include freedom of heresy and antinomianism.

#### *Case Study 5. The Time of Worship.*

The families with young children are concerned about their bedtimes due to the lateness of the evening service.

They request that the Sabbath evening service be moved to 6:30 PM so the children can be put to bed earlier.

*Analysis.* The Confession at 1:6 makes a distinction between the acts of worship and the circumstances of worship. Circumstances are things common to any human meeting—things like seating, the time and place. The circumstances are to be determined “by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word.” This matter is one that each congregation is free to determine depending on the needs of her members. When the parents in the congregation I belong to made this request, we moved the time of worship to help the parents.

#### *Case Study 6. A Satire.*

Due to incessant demands for many members, the session adopts the view that all of life is worship. This results in the opening up of the worship service to any practices not forbidden in the Bible. At first, these new practices were limited to fine arts like music and dancing. However, some of the blue-collar workers in the congregation became upset that their daily worship was not included in the Congregational worship. They complained that the worship was being dominated by a fine arts chauvinism. The most vocal were the slaughterhouse workers. They argued that their daily work was used in Old Testament worship, and the session agreed to accommodate them. The next Lord's day, the workers brought in enough sheep so that every family in the congregation could participate in slaughtering. The teenager boys were looking forward to it for weeks, and brought their unbelieving friends. The workers had the trumpets sound, as they did in the Old Testament sacrifice, and the throats of the sheep were cut. The blood gushed, people vomited, and the majority of members left and never came back.

*Analysis.* If you adopt the principle of worship that “any act not forbidden by God is acceptable worship,” there is no logical reason to say no to the slaughterhouse workers. You can refuse their request, but only if you commit an act of discrimination. (I picked slaughtering sheep because there is a strong Old Testament basis for it.)

#### *Epilogue:*

Having lived with this topic for years, let me close with my two strongest impressions.

First, the doctrine of Liberty of Conscience serves

*Continued on Page 255.*