

## **LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE**

It was in the earliest days of the Christian Church that the Jewish authorities sought to constrain the public preaching of the Gospel. In Acts 4.18 we read that they called Peter and John 'and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus'. The response of the Apostles recorded in Acts 4.19-20 was concise but robust, 'Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.' Responsible freedom of speech in the public square is *the* hallmark of a free society. In warfare, the final battle for any city is hand to hand on the streets. When authorities seek to constrain legitimate speech on the streets to promote their public agendas a tyranny over the mind is in process. It is followed by propaganda among the young in schools and youth organizations and oppression of conscience in the workplace and elsewhere. What is at stake?

### **I. The distinction between civil and spiritual liberty**

#### **A. The Gospel is not dependent upon civil liberty but does maintain the justice of it**

The last century has illustrated that censorship and oppression of conscience do not have to be religious. Various merely political movements have been suppressed when liberty of conscience and freedom of speech have been demanded in countries controlled by repressive regimes. The record of communist states has been particularly bad in this connection. Communist governments, in their pursuit of totalitarian thought control, often seek to silence dissent in favour of the 'received wisdom' of public policy. When spiritual truth is involved, the stakes are even higher. Governments pitch themselves into conflict with God. The apostolic reply, 'Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye' called attention to the fact that the attempt to silence the preaching of God's truth is a God-provoking action. The command of the Jewish rulers sought to place their authority above

the authority of God. On a later occasion, recorded in Acts 5.27-40, the learned Gamaliel counselled, 'Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God' (verses 38-39). Gamaliel was not outright for the truth but was sensible enough to realize that religious views will be shown true or false by their outcomes.

## **B. Civil liberty is 'just' but not 'sufficient'**

The Apostles were not political activists. They were drawn into the battle for civil liberty by their duty to God and love of the truth. They had been commanded by the Saviour who is endued with all power in heaven and in earth, 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen' (Matthew 28.18b-20). The apostles' resistance to the Jewish leader's attempts at thought and speech control by autocratic censorship stemmed from their determination to be faithful to their calling. Therefore their reply was, 'we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard' (verse 20). These things had to do with an even greater liberty. The Westminster Confession wisely begins Chapter 20 on Liberty of Conscience with *spiritual* liberty. This is the liberty preached in the Gospel, which Christ purchased through his atonement. The Confession gives an excellent summation in twelve points as follows.

(i) *Freedom from 'the guilt of sin'*. Christ 'gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity' (Titus 2.14).

(ii) *Freedom from 'the condemning wrath of God'*. Jesus 'delivered us from the wrath to come' (1 Thessalonians 1.10).

(iii) *Freedom from 'the curse of the moral law'*. 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us:

for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree' (Galatians 3.13).

(iv) *Deliverance from 'this present evil world'*. Christ 'gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father' (Galatians 1.4).

(v) *Deliverance from 'bondage to Satan'*. God has 'delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son (Colossians 1.13).

(vi) *Deliverance from the dominion of sin*. 'Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace' (Romans 6.13-14).

(vii) *Deliverance from the evil of afflictions*. 'And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose' (Romans 8.28).

(viii) *Deliverance from 'the sting of death'*. 'So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?' (1 Corinthians 15.54-55).

(ix) *Deliverance from 'the victory of the grave'*. 'The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15.56-57).

(x) *Deliverance from everlasting damnation*. 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit' (Romans 8.1).

(xi) *Free access to God.* 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God' (Romans 5.1-2)

(xii) *Liberation to yield obedience to God,* 'not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind'. 'For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father' (Romans 8.14-15).

These core truths concerning spiritual liberty must be proclaimed and received for any to be saved. This is why Christians must be concerned about freedom of speech. It is when the Gospel is preached and embraced that nations prosper spiritually and under no other conditions.

## **II. Boundaries concerning true liberty of conscience**

The Apostles' words, 'Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you *more than unto God*, judge ye' puts down an important marker. We are to judge men's ways by God's Word and not vice versa. God's Word is absolute and binds the conscience in every detail. Man's laws have no authority when they contradict God's Law.

### **A. Human opinion has no absolute authority**

Every man might do that which is 'right in his own eyes', as in the period of the Judges (Judges 21.25), but the doing of it does not make it right. Are we not disgusted at behaviour recorded in the closing chapters of the Book of Judges? How could God's people behave in such a way? All that was required was their ignoring God's Word and the consequent hardening of their consciences. When every man becomes his own master there is a diversity of opinion and action and even the majority might be swayed from

what is right. God's way, however, remains right and his servants 'cannot but' maintain it.

## **B. Human religious teaching and practice contrary to or additional to God's Word has no authority to bind the conscience**

The essence of the conflict between the Jewish authorities and the Jewish Christians was *religious*. The initial question was to the point, 'By what power (specifically, *miraculous* power), or by what name, have ye done this? (Acts 4.7). Peter's answer (Acts 4.10-12) was decisive, 'Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.' Human invention in religion is futile, whether concerning a supposed way of salvation, doctrines to be believed, or ceremonies to be practiced; *only* Jesus Christ saves and he alone is the foundation of the Church. The Reformers well understood that Rome's requiring 'an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also' (Confession 20.2). 'Christians are expressly required to examine and prove every doctrine by the unerring rule of the Word of God.- Isa. viii. 20; 1 John iv. 1' (Robert Shaw, p. 206). John writes, 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world' (1 John 4.1)

## **C. Civil laws have no authority to constrain any citizen to sin**

Whether by legislation or judicial sentence any requirement to commit sin is *ultra vires*. This Latin legal term means, literally, 'beyond the powers' possessed. In my banking days managers and

assistant managers had 'discretionary powers' for signing documents or sanctioning loans. If the amount was £5,000 a decision to grant a £6,000 loan would be *ultra vires*. No power had been granted for such a decision. So it is with civil government. God has not authorized any government to make lawful what is immoral whether by legislation in parliament or judicial decision in the courts. Christians must dissent from laws contrary to the sanctity of life, such as abortion or euthanasia, or laws contrary to the sanctity of marriage, such as divorce by consent or same-sex marriage. The same applies to human laws contrary to any other moral parameters. Human laws, whether made in parliament or determined in the courts are subject to the review by conscience. A recent example is the case of Asher's Bakery. The judgement against the Bakery offended not just Christian conscience. The concept that the law should sanction citizens for not endorsing messages contrary to their conscience offended a much wider spectrum of opinion as being incompatible with what our nation has stood for. The judgement in this case in Northern Ireland is bringing the ultimate bastion of our society, our national judicial institutions, into disrepute.

### **III. Limitation on the appeal to liberty of conscience**

#### **A. The Christian argument for liberty of conscience is not an argument for every man to do what is right in his own eyes upon pretence of liberty of conscience**

On the occasion before the Jewish leaders mentioned in Acts 5, the apostolic answer was, 'We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him (verses 29-32). There can be no ultimate liberty of conscience against God's Word and law. Though the civil magistrate may leave atheists free to practice their atheism, atheists will be called to account for their

atheism at a higher tribunal.

## **B. If but one man makes a stand for God's truth, as Martin Luther did, it is enough**

The claim of justification by faith alone in Christ alone can be verified from the teaching of the Apostles recorded in the Bible as verse 31 quoted above shows. In the case of Asher's Bakery, they have been supported by many. Not only did their church session support the proprietor's right to act according to a Biblically informed conscience but so did several Presbyterian denominations. The judgement against them has also been criticized in several national newspapers. Indeed every right-minded politician will support them because this case goes to the heart of what 'Britishness' is. Civil liberty is not a *carte blanche* to every man to ignore the public good but neither is it a straight jacket to conform every man to all public policy, especially in moral matters.

## **Conclusion**

Britain is at the crossroads. To the left is the tyrant's enforcement of public policy by censorship, sanction, and propaganda. To the right is the consensus of representative government where the right of private judgement on the basis of informed conscience preserves, not only freedom to worship, but true freedom of religion in employment and business and true freedom of speech in the public square. Now is the time to speak out against a fudged 'Britishness' and a fudged 'British Constitution', which will become tools of enforcement and repression.