

Christian Liberty

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In the opening article of this series, (“The Law and the Saint”) we affirmed that the unregenerate sinner is, in heart and practise, an Antinomian; that is, one who is *opposed* to the Law of God. Proof of this is furnished by Rom. 8:7, which tells us, “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the Law of God, neither indeed can be.” It needs to be remembered that the “carnal mind” still remains in the believer. It is true that the Christian has a new mind (2 Tim. 1:7), which is part of the new nature—a mind which “*serves the Law of God*” (Rom. 7:25); and it is this, alone, that explains the conflict waged daily within every saint. But the presence of the carnal mind within, reveals the urgent need there is for the “casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought *to the obedience of Christ*” (2 Cor. 10:5). This can be accomplished only as the believer yields his members (not only the members of his body, but every “member” of his complex personality) “servants to righteousness unto holiness” (Rom. 6:19).

But does not this expression “yielding our members as *servants* to righteousness” savor of *legality*, and is not that entirely at variance with Christian *liberty*? [See the author’s booklets on “The Law and the Saint” and “The Christian Sabbath.”] And here we reach, perhaps, what has seemed a real difficulty to many who have read the previous articles. Probably our readers have felt the force of what has been set before them. The various scriptures cited are so plain that their meaning is not open to question. The binding obligations of the Law of God upon every Christian has, we trust, been unequivocally established. But now the question naturally arises, What, then, of Christian liberty? Did not the Lord Himself promise, “If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be *free indeed*” (John 8:36)? Did not the apostle Paul, under the Holy Spirit, write, “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*” (Gal. 5:1)? How are we to understand these statements? Are they to be evacuated of all meaning? If not, how is it possible to fairly and satisfactorily harmonize them with the affirmation that Christians are under bonds to obey the Ten Commandments?

In seeking an answer to the above questions several things need be borne in mind. First, we may be fully assured that the Holy Scriptures contain no contradictions. Second, we need to be very careful in defining our terms: and to define them correctly we must make a patient and thorough search of the Word. In the third place, whatever true Christian liberty is, certainly, *obedience to God* does not conflict with it. It was to men whom He had *already* “made free” that the Son said, “If ye love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). And it was to those who were in the enjoyment of Christian liberty that one of His Apostles was moved to write, “And whatsoever we ask,

we receive of Him, because *we keep His commandments*" (1 John 3:22). Thus, it is evident that we must distinguish sharply between Christian liberty and lawlessness.

The term "Christian liberty," like many another, is used very loosely by our moderns. We greatly fear that to many, who though bearing the name of Christians have never been born again, Christian liberty means *license to do as one pleases*. We are far from affirming, or even insinuating, that this is true of all those who deny that believers are under obligations to "serve the Law of God." With many their hearts are better than their heads: their lives superior to their creeds. But, nevertheless, it cannot be gainsaid, that to the popular mind Law and liberty are opposing terms. Many of the Lord's own people are being taught that legal restrictions are incompatible with true Christian liberty, and this in the face of the words of the Saviour— "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have *commanded you*" (Matt. 28:20).

It is now being proclaimed on almost every side that grace rules out all Law. Nor is this to be wondered at, for Christ plainly foretold that lawlessness *should* abound (Matt. 24:12). But though it is not to be wondered at, it is to be deeply deplored that some, whom we have good reasons to look upon as the Lord's servants, should be found lending themselves to forwarding this incoming tide of spiritual anarchy. The Word of truth declares that "grace reigns *through righteousness*" (Rom 5:21), not at the expense of it; and there can be no righteousness apart from law. Righteousness is right doing; and right doing is conformity to law. The only other alternative is what the writer of the book of Judges speaks of, namely, "Every man doing that which was right *in his own eyes*" (21:25), which is a state of anarchy.

Liberty and license are as far apart as the poles. True liberty is *subjection to Law*, paradoxical as that may sound. To the unregenerate mind the terms of Christian life must appear to abound in paradoxes. "When I am *weak*, then am I *strong*" (2 Cor. 12:10), will seem a contradiction in terms to one who is devoid of spiritual intelligence. But is it meaningless to the real Christian? We trow not. Whether he understands it or not, he knows full well that it is the inspired declaration of God's Word. Equally foolish must it appear to the unbeliever to read, that, When a man becomes the *slave* of Christ, then is he *free*! Nevertheless, that is what God's Word affirms, and it is what Christian experience confirms. Little as the mind of the flesh may be able to grasp it, is it not nevertheless a fact that, when we are the *most elevated* spiritually we take the *lowest* place before God? that when we are the holiest we are most conscious of our sinful defilements? Equally so is it true that we enjoy the greatest spiritual freedom when we are most in subjection to God's Law. What saith the Scriptures? This: "I will walk at liberty, for I seek Thy *precepts*" (Psa. 119:45). The natural man imagines that to be subject to God's "precepts" is to be confined to a narrow place; but the mind illumined by the Holy Spirit will acknowledge, "Thy commandment is *exceeding broad*" (Psa. 119:96).

After these preliminary considerations we shall now attempt to define the scriptural import of *Christian liberty*. Not that we profess to give here a complete or exhaustive definition, nevertheless, we believe it will include the primary elements and aspects of it.

1. Christian liberty is deliverance from the Wrath of God. The relation which the Christian, before conversion, stood to God (because of sin) was that of a condemned criminal. By nature he was a child “of wrath, even as others” (Eph. 2:3). By birth he belonged to a race which is under the curse of God. In Adam he sinned, and upon him rested the righteous condemnation of a sin-hating God (Psa. 58:3). Because of this he was together with all others of Adam’s race, looked at as a criminal in prison, awaiting execution. But, all praise to His peerless name, it was to deliver just such that the Son of God became incarnate. He was sent “to proclaim *liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison, to them that are bound*” (Isa. 60: 1). This was His *first* ministerial utterance (see Luke 4:16-18). Nor was this to be confined to Jewish sinners. Of old the Lord declared, I will “give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles. To open the blind eyes, *to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house*” (Isa. 42:6, 7).

The Gospel, then, proclaims “*liberty to the captives*” (Isa. 61:2), and the one who believes its joyous message is immediately and forever freed from that awful prison in which he lay as a culprit condemned. The Gospel tells him *how* this could be righteously accomplished. Another took his place; a Substitute suffered in his stead. And of Him it is written, “*He was taken from prison and from judgment*” (Isa. 53:8). He entered, for His people, the place of condemnation, and from it He was taken to judgment—that is one reason why He was crucified between two “malefactors,” to show us the more plainly the *place* He took! Only thus could we be liberated. When the Judge delivers the culprit to the officer and he is “cast into prison,” the Divine sentence is, “Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing” (Matt. 5:25, 26). And because we had “nothing (with which) to pay” (Luke 7:42), the Lord Jesus paid the full redemption price for us, by suffering in our stead “the whole of wrath Divine.” In consequence of this we are delivered. No longer prisoners, but free men are we. No longer under God’s righteous wrath, but delivered from all condemnation (Rom. 8:1). Here, then, is the first aspect of Christian liberty: deliverance from the wrath of God. The disobedient are “spirits in prison” (I Pet 3:19); but those who have obeyed God’s command to believe on His Son have been “made free” (John 8:36), free from the sentence of condemnation.

2. Christian liberty is deliverance from the Power of the Devil. Christians in their unregenerate state, “walked according to the course of this world, according to the Prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Eph. 2:2). The ungodly are the slaves of Satan. Said our Lord to the Pharisees, “Ye are of your father the Devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do” (John 8:44). Men are “taken *captive* by him (the Devil) at his will” (2 Tim. 2:26).

Now the Gospel is God’s appointed agency for delivering men from their awful bondage to the Devil. When the Lord commissioned the apostle Paul to go unto the Gentiles, He sent him “to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and *from the power of Satan* unto God” (Acts 26:18). Christians are a people who have been delivered from “the Power of darkness (Satan) and translated into the kingdom of God’s

dear Son" (Col. 1:13). Heb. 2:14, 15 tells how this was made possible for us: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; that He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the Devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Here, then, is the second aspect of Christian liberty: believers in Christ have been *delivered* from that *bondage* to which they had been, all their lifetime, subject. Consequently, to them the promise now is "Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

3. Christian liberty is deliverance from the Bondage of Sin. The unregenerate are the slaves of sin: "Whosoever committeth sin is the bondslave of sin" (John 8:34). So completely are the wicked under the dominion of sin they *cannot* of themselves think a godly thought, beget a godly aspiration, or perform a godly deed. They *cannot* come to Christ (John 6:44). They *cannot* hear His Word (John 8:43). They *cannot* believe (John 12:39). They *cannot* receive the Holy Spirit (John 14: 17). They *cannot* please God (Rom. 8:8). And in each case the reason why they cannot is because they are the bondslaves of sin. And in that condition they will remain unless the Son shall "make them free."

That the natural man is ignorant of this bondage only evidences how completely he is under the dominion of sin. His understanding is darkened. That he boasts of being a free-agent only demonstrates the derangement of his mind. The same men who call darkness light, and light darkness; who term wisdom, folly, and deem folly to be wisdom; also regard true freedom as bondage; and consider their own bondage, freedom. Ever since man drank in that deadly poison, "Ye shall be as God" (Gen. 3:5), his descendants have affected a dominion over themselves, and have disregarded the Lordship of their Maker. Their boast is, "With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: *who* is lord over us?" (Psa. 12:4). They suppose that the only true liberty is to be at the command and under the control of none above themselves. They think that to live according to their own heart's desire is to assert their free- agency. But *that* is bondage and thralldom of the worst kind.

The natural man may cherish the delusion that *he* is not hampered by the bonds which restrict the liberty of the saints. He may think himself free to go where he wills, and free to do as he pleases, untrammelled by Divine restraints. But this only proves that the god of this world (Satan) *has* "blinded his mind" (2 Cor. 4:4)). Instead of being free he "*serves divers lusts*" (Titus 3:3). Instead of carving his own career, he is simply walking "according to the Prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). Instead of being master of himself, he is doing the desires of his father, the Devil (John 8:44). And little as he knows it, *God Himself* "restrains" him (Psa. 76:10). The truth is, that the most awful punishment which God ever inflicts upon men in this world is to abandon them to themselves. "So I *gave them up* unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels" (Psa. 81:12).

But believers have been *delivered* from the dominion of sin: "Being then made free from sin" (Rom. 6:18). Christians have been emancipated from their former bondage: "Sin shall not have *dominion over you*" (Rom. 6:14) is now the Divine promise to them. It is not that the sinful nature has been removed from them, but that its sovereign power has been broken. Sin may harass them but they are no more its slaves. Believers may fall but they shall not be utterly cast down (Psa. 37:24). Here, then, is the third aspect of Christian liberty: believers have been delivered from the bondage of sin, and if they will but avail themselves of God's all-sufficient grace, they will find that full provision has been made for them to enjoy *complete* deliverance from the servitude of sin. That we do not enjoy this is entirely our own fault.

4. Christian liberty is *deliverance from the Authority of Man*. The Christian belongs to Christ. He has been bought with a price. He is "the Lord's freeman" (I Cor. 7:22). Consequently no man and no set of men have any right to impose any restraints on his conscience. No man and no set of men have any right to tell the Christian what he must believe or what he must do (his civic life excepted). For the State to interfere in connection with spiritual things is iniquitous tyranny. If the State were to demand my subscription to a man-made creed, that would be an attack upon my Christian freedom. If the State were to demand that my children should be baptized and join some church, that would be an unlawful infringement of my Christian liberty. The Lord's people in the United States cannot be sufficiently thankful to God for the religious liberty which is granted them in this favored land. And the least they can do in return is to earnestly pray the Lord for His blessing to rest on the President and the members of Congress, that such privileges may be continued.

It is this particular aspect of Christian freedom which the apostle pressed upon the Galatian saints. They had been harassed by certain Judaizers who demanded that they be circumcised; and it was in view of *this* (and of this alone) that the apostle said to them, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (5:1). He hereby reminds them that to submit to the demand of the Judaizers would be to repudiate the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free. Mark that Paul is not here addressing Jewish believers, but Gentile believers. Proof of this is found in the very next verse: "*If ye be circumcised.*"

From *what*, then, had the Galatian believers been "made free" by Christ? The answer is, from the requirements and commandments, from the rites and ceremonies of man-made religions. "When ye knew not God," said the apostle, "ye did service ("ye were in *bondage*," Bagster's Interlinear) unto them which by nature are no gods" (4:8). They had been slaves to human traditions and authority. In principle, then, these Judaizers, unauthorized by God, were seeking to drag them back again into that from which they had been delivered. Hence, continues the apostle, "after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye *again* to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?" (Gal. 4:9). To submit to circumcision at the hands of men, was not better than a return to their heathen rites. Therefore said the apostle, "stand fast in the liberty where with Christ hath made you free, and be not entangled

again with the yoke of bondage.” Disdain these Judaizers. Refuse to heed them. Do not allow them to rob you of your Christian liberty. *They* have no right to issue commandments nor impose ordinances. You belong to Christ: heed *His* commandments and submit to *His* ordinances.

Our comments above on Gal. 5:1 are confirmed by what we read of in 5:11-13: “And I, brethren, if I yet preach *circumcision*, why do I yet suffer persecution? Then is the offence of the Cross ceased. I would *they* were even cut off *which trouble you*. For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty.” Thus it is clear that the “liberty” of which the apostle treats in this epistle is emancipation from all human authority in religious matters, for it was not the moral Law but *circumcision* that these Judaistic “troublers” were pressing upon these Galatian saints.

It is this particular aspect of Christian freedom which the apostle also pressed on the Colossian saints. The Colossian church had been troubled by Gnostics, who sought to impose their system of asceticism upon the Lord’s people. They had drawn up a series of prohibitions which the apostle summarizes in the words, “Touch not; taste not; handle not, which are all to perish with the using” (Col. 2:21, 22). With these saints the apostle expostulates: “Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, after the commandments and doctrines of *men*?” (vv. 20, 22). His argument here is parallel with the one he used with the Galatians. You belong to Christ, he reminds them (“dead with Him”), why then descend from this privileged place and heed the rules of men. Such rules, admits the apostle, “have indeed a *show* of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body,” etc. But a “show” is *all* they have, for they are “to perish with the using.” Well would it be if many of our moderns would study these verses, for there are not a few today who are seeking to impose *their own* “commandments and doctrines” of “touch not, taste not, handle not.” Insofar as Christians heed them they are robbed of their liberty. When a man believes the Gospel, with enlightened faith, he accepts Christ as the alone Lord of his conscience, faith and conduct. “One is your Master, even Christ” (Matt. 23:8), therefore, should he refuse to allow any man (or any woman) to dictate to him what he should touch or taste or handle. Let him give himself, unreservedly, to learning the mind of *Christ* and responding to it, and leave others to be brought into bondage to “the commandments and doctrines *of men*” if they are so determined. Let others “neglect” their “bodies” if they wish to; for our part, we believe that “Every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving” (1 Tim. 4:4); and we desire grace to use them all to God’s glory.

5. Christian liberty is *deliverance unto the Service of God*. Thus far we have considered only the negative side — what Christians have been delivered from. Now we take up the positive—what Christians are delivered unto. True liberty is not the right to live as we please, but the power to live as we ought. It is being delivered from the bondage of condemnation, Satan, sin, and men, so that the Christian is now free to serve *God*. Regeneration effects a *change of masters*. The one who before was the captive of Satan and the slave of sin is now free to serve God. The lawless rebel has

become a loyal subject. This is the central truth in the second half of Rom. 6. We confine ourself now to vv. 16-18 and 22, and as these are so pertinent we give a brief, but clause by clause, exposition:

Verse 16. "Know ye not": I appeal to a common fact of observation. "That to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey". If I see a number of laborers working in a field, I at once conclude they are the servants of the proprietor of that field. This illustrates the principle which the apostle here develops and applies. If men are doing the work of Satan, they must be his servants; if they are engaged in the work of God, they must be *His* servants. Sin is here personified, and sinners are termed its "slaves". "Whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness". Death is the wages which sin pays its servants. "Obedience" is also personified here.

V. 17. "But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine whereto ye were delivered." Those who had formerly been the slaves of sin were now the servants of righteousness, and for this the apostle returns thanks to God. They had obeyed "from the heart," for Christian obedience is spontaneous and cordial, not constrained by fear or produced by force. "That form of doctrine whereto ye were delivered." The Greek words here refer to the moulding of metal. When the melted metal is transferred to a mould, it obeys or conforms to its form. So believers respond to and take their form of character from the mould of Divine doctrine.

V. 18. "Being then made free from sin." In their unregenerate state, God's saints were the slaves of sin; but the Gospel has emancipated them. This emancipation is an intrinsic part of their freedom, though it is far from signifying a state of sinless perfection, or even entire deliverance from the influence of sin. "Ye became the servants of righteousness." Servants of righteousness are men obedient to righteousness.

V. 22. "But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life." Believers have been emancipated from the state of sin's slavery, and have become the bond-slaves of God. There has been a complete change of masters. The subjection of a slave is absolute and continuous. The slave does not obey his own will, but that of his master. He is under an influence which secures obedience. This is true in spiritual as in natural and external relations. But there is this vital difference: the slaves of sin are in the most direful bondage; whereas the bond-slaves of God enjoy true liberty. The slave of sin is the helpless victim of his depraved nature; but the bond-slave of God serves freely — his obedience is from *the heart!* [In this brief exposition we have given a digest of Mr. R. Haldane's.]

"Christians are free in reference to God. They are 'the Lord's freeman' (1 Cor. 7:22). By this we do not mean that they are not under the strongest obligations to conform their minds and wills to the mind and will of God, and to regulate the whole of their temper and conduct according to the revelation of that mind and will revealed in His Word. They

are not free in the sense of being without law to God; to be so, would be the reverse of a privilege; they are 'under the law to Christ' (1 Cor. 9:21)" (Dr. John Brown).

In a word, then, Christian liberty is the freedom of *children* in contrast from the bondage of *prisoners*, and just as children are (normally) subject to the government of their parents, so are God's children subject to His government; and the Law is for the regulation of their conduct.

But one more question needs to be faced ere we conclude, namely, If we *are* under the Law as a rule of life, are we not then subject to its *curse*? If we break it, must not its curse, necessarily, come upon us? Decidedly not, is our answer. And why? Because Christ suffered its "curse" in the stead of His people (Gal. 3:13). David, Elijah, Daniel were "under the Law" (not for salvation, but governmentally), and they broke it. Were *they*, then, under its curse? Surely not. On what principle, then (governmental principle) does God act toward His *children* who break the Law? A pertinent question, and one to which a clear scriptural answer may be returned. Let the reader turn to Psalm 89 and there he will read, "If his children forsake My Law and walk not in My judgments; if they break My statutes, and keep not My commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes, Nevertheless My lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer My faithfulness to fail" vv. 30-33)!

In closing, let us repeat, that Christian liberty is not only emancipation from sin and Satan, but it is deliverance unto the service of God: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, **but the keeping of the commandments of God** * * he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant," that is, "bond-slave" (1 Cor. 7:19- 22). Freedom that does not issue in "keeping the commandments of God" is a delusion. "As free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the *bondslaves of God*" (1 Pet. 2:16). The greatest freedom is enjoyed by him who is most subject to the Law of God which is "holy and just and good." That is why God's Law is termed "the Law of *liberty*" (James 2:12), an expression which must be utterly unintelligible to the carnal mind, but one that is perfectly simple to the man who is controlled by the Holy Spirit. Anything short of this complete subjection to the Law is bondage. Let us not be deceived, then, by those who promise a *spurious* liberty, for "they themselves are the slaves of corruption" (2 Pet. 2:19). Let us not be found "turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness" (Jude 4). Rather let us heed that word of the apostle Paul, "For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). Be these the breathings of our soul: Lord, my sweetest liberty is obedience to Thee; my highest freedom wearing Thy yoke; my greatest rest bearing Thy burden. O, how love I Thy Law after the inward man! I delight to do Thy will, O my God! The Lord grant unto us that we "being *delivered* out of the hand of our enemies might *serve Him* without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life" (Luke 1:74, 75).

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