

SESSION 17: Liberated to Serve

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 104-118

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| WCF | WLC | WSC |
| 20-21 | 178-196 | 98-107 |

Introduction

In our last session, we began to consider “what duty God requires of man” (WSC 3). We examined the law of God and our obligation to obey it. But fulfilling our duty to God requires more than just obedience to his law. It also requires us to understand and uphold Christian liberty, both in life and in worship. It is to these considerations that we turn in this session.

A Challenging Question

If we are not careful, “Christian liberty” can become a vacuous concept used to justify all manner of bad behavior. This is a special temptation for Westerners, whose cultural heritage includes explicit affirmations of “rights.” We are tempted to baptize our own definitions of liberty.

Consider two examples. The first was proposed by Thomas Jefferson in the American *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The second was offered by 19th century English philosopher John Stuart Mill: “The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it.”²⁰⁷

Both of these definitions have exercised great influence upon our thinking. Consequently, it is easy for us to think of Christian liberty in roughly American or libertarian terms. But this is an error. The question we need to ask is: how does the Bible define the liberty of a Christian?

An Extensive Definition

WCF 20.1 offers an extensive definition of “the liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the Gospel.” We can organize this definition in chart form:

| | Common in OT & NT | Additionally in NT |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Liberty from...</i> | the guilt of sin... | the yoke of the ceremonial law... |
| | the condemning wrath of God... | |
| | the curse of the moral law... | |
| | this present evil world... | |
| | bondage to Satan... | |
| | dominion of sin... | |
| | the evil of afflictions... | |
| | the sting of death... | |
| | the victory of the grave... | |
| | everlasting damnation. | |
| <i>Liberty To...</i> | free access to God... | fuller communications of the free Spirit of God... |
| | obedience unto Him... | |

²⁰⁷ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (reprint, New York: Bantam, 2008), 17-18.

We may notice two things from this definition. First, Christian liberty is primarily *concerned with our spiritual condition rather than our political situation*. Second, note that Christian liberty *involves obedience to God*. Part of a Christian's liberty is "their yielding obedience unto Him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind."

As Tim Keller notes, such a concept of freedom is radically different from that of secular culture:

Christianity is supposedly a limit to personal growth and potential because it constrains our freedom to choose our own beliefs and practices. Immanuel Kant defined an enlightened human being as one who trusts in his or her own power of thinking, rather than in authority or tradition. This resistance to authority in moral matters is now a deep current in our culture. Freedom to determine our own moral standards is considered a necessity for being fully human.

This oversimplifies, however. Freedom cannot be defined in strictly negative terms, as the absence of confinement and constraint. In fact, in many cases, confinement and constraint is actually a means to liberation....

A fish, because it absorbs oxygen from water rather than air, is only free if it is restricted and limited to water. If we put it out on the grass, its freedom to move and even live is not enhanced, but destroyed. The fish dies if we do not honor the reality of its nature.

In many areas of life, freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions. Those that fit with the reality of our nature and the world produce greater power and scope for our abilities and a deeper joy and fulfillment.²⁰⁸

The basic question at stake in this matter is simple: *who defines liberty*? Is liberty something humanity is free to define for itself, or is freedom defined by God? The answer of our culture is the former. The answer of Scripture and our standards is the latter.

Lord of the Conscience

It is because God defines liberty that WCF 20.2 affirms, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship." To compromise on this is in any way is "to betray true liberty of conscience... to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also."

Twice in Acts 4-5, we see the apostles of Christ brought before the civil magistrates. In both cases, the latter charge the former to stop preaching the gospel and threaten them with punishment. In both cases, the apostles make the same answer: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge..." (Acts 4.19). When any human authority commands disobedience to God, the Christian's duty is clear: "We must obey God rather than men," (Acts 5.29).

When it comes to "matters of faith or worship," the principle does not change. Not only is the believer free from anything contrary to God's Word, but also from anything added to God's Word. Why do our standards make this expansion? Because in matters of faith and worship, *anything not prescribed in God's Word is contrary to God's Word*. (We will return to this later.) See Mark 7.1-13.

Confessional Disclaimers

Because Christian liberty is so often abused, our standards include two explicit disclaimers. First, *Christian liberty is never a license to sin*. Those who pretend otherwise "do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him, all the days of our life," (WCF 21.3)

²⁰⁸ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 45-46.

Second, *Christian liberty is never an excuse for civil or ecclesiastical sedition or rebellion.* Those who pretend otherwise by “oppos[ing] any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.” Such resistance includes the “publishing of such opinions, or maintaining of such practices, as are contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or conversation), or to the power of godliness; or, such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church,” (WCF 21.4).

The application of this latter disclaimer may be tricky, for we must notice that our standards speak of “*lawful power*,” and Paul writes that the civil magistrate is “*God’s servant for your good*,” (Rom 13.4). There may be times when Christians legitimately disagree as to what is lawful or good. But especially in such times, we must remember three things. First, we must remember that *good* is defined not by men, but by God. Second we must remember that *liberty* is not defined by human constitutions, but by God’s Word. And third, we must remember that God does not approve of rebellion or sedition on our part except when his standards or Word are at stake.

Liberty in Worship

The way we worship God follows directly from our understanding of Christian liberty. If God alone is Lord of the conscience, then public worship is free only insofar as it follows a God-defined pattern. WCF 21.1 articulates this understanding: “The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may 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.” This understanding is referred to as the *regulative principle of worship*.²⁰⁹

Following this regulative principle, the free worship of God must be *exclusive in its object* (WCF 21.2) and *restrictive in its content*. God’s free worship should include only those elements which God prescribes in his Word. If we think about it, this only makes sense. If God is the infinite, transcendent Creator, and we are finite, immanent creatures, how else could we ever know the appropriate way to worship him, unless he reveals it to us?

So what elements of worship does Scripture prescribe? WCF 21.3-5 articulates four ordinary elements: corporate prayer, the reading of Scripture, the preaching and “conscionable hearing” of Scripture, the singing of ‘psalms,’²¹⁰ and the administration of the sacraments. In addition to these required elements, the OPC *Directory for Public Worship* also permits the inclusion of several others, based on biblical example or principle.²¹¹ These include: a call to worship (Ps 100.1), a salutation (Rom 1.7), a benediction (Num 6.24-26, 2Co 13.14), public confessions of faith (Dt. 26.5, Ps 136), and the bringing of offerings (1Cor 16.1-3).

²⁰⁹ Given the connection to Christian liberty and the popular connotation of ‘regulative,’ we might well question whether ‘regulative’ is the best term to use in explaining this principle. Perhaps ‘revelational’ might be more appropriate, since the point is that we worship God only in the way he reveals.

²¹⁰ It is sometimes suggested that the use of the word ‘psalms’ here implies a confessional teaching of exclusive psalmody. This suggestion is historically inaccurate. The definition of the ‘psalm’ current at the time of the Westminster Assembly was “inspired praise only,” not exclusive psalmody (though that was the practice of the majority of the Assembly). This is evidenced by the fact that in 1647, the same General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that adopted the WCF also commissioned men to prepare “scripture songs” to be used alongside the metrical psalms. The OPC understands the language of WCF 21.5 to permit the use of hymns (cf. *The Directory for Public Worship*, II.B.2.c). Even after the “Reports of the Committee on Song in Worship” (delivered to the 13th and 14th Gas in 1946-1947), the OPC has never amended its confessional standards.

²¹¹ See the second chapter of *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* (Willow Grove: OPC, 2011).

Besides these ordinary elements, our standards also recognize several extraordinary parts of worship: “religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner,” (WCF 21.5).

Worship in Context

The remainder of WCF 21 sets forth the context and setting of the free religious worship of God. It does this both negatively and positively. We can examine these sections using the journalists’ questions: where, when, and how.

Where is God to be worshipped? Negatively, WCF 21.6 tells us that “neither prayer, nor any other part of religious worship, is now, under the Gospel, either tied unto, or made more acceptable by, any place in which it is performed, or towards which it is directed; but God is to be worshipped everywhere in spirit and truth.” In other words, New Testament worship requires no *sacred space*. Yet New Testament worship does require *sacred priority*, for God is to be worshiped “in private families daily, and in secret, each one by himself; so more solemnly in the public assemblies,” (21.6).

When is God to be worshipped in the public assemblies? WCF 21.7 explains that God “hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.”

Finally, *how* is God to be worshipped on the Lord’s Day? WCF 21.8 states that the “Sabbath is then kept holy unto the Lord” when believers “not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up, the whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.” This is admittedly difficult, and thus can occur only “when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand.” Do we take our Christian liberty seriously enough to make such preparation?

Important Questions

1. Suppose the US Federal Government enacts a law that bans the possession of all firearms and requires citizens to surrender their guns. Though this law stands in conflict with the 2nd Amendment of the US Constitution, the US Supreme Court upholds it. The state government in which you reside agrees to enforce it. What is the duty of the Christian citizen?
2. Presbyterian worship is often criticized as being “too strict.” How would you answer such a criticism? What assumptions might lie behind it?

Additional Resources

OPC, *The Directory for Public Worship*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony*, 119-120, 124-125, which covers:

| WCF | WLC | WSC |
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| 22, 24 | | |