

# Freedom of Conscience

A study from Scripture as reflected in  
the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), Chapter 20.

*Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. 1 Peter 2:16 (ESV)*

The New Testament invites believers to a freedom of conscience in three respects:

- Freedom from a consciousness of sin, even though we are imperfect in this life.
- Freedom to enjoy what God does not forbid, along with freedom from the judgment of others regarding it.
- Freedom from bondage to civil authorities in how we practice the Christian faith.

## Procedure

We will study the word of God first and then see how the Westminster Confession expresses these truths.

This procedure puts students in the same posture as the 17<sup>th</sup> century divines, who had to think through issues. The result for the student is a greater confidence in reformed theology by showing that the divines were correct in their conclusions.

The question and answer format makes the process easier on the teacher. An old adage: "If the teacher is working harder than the students, he is doing it wrong."

A brief exam at the end of each lesson helps the students see where they are weak and the teacher realize where they may need help.

## Participants

This particular study is designed for an adult Sunday School or home group. It is not intended for those living in deep sin or addictions that require counseling sessions.

## Lesson one: Freedom from a guilty conscience

### A study in Hebrews 10

*let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience... Heb 10:22*

In this study, we will see why it is possible for a Christian to live without a guilty conscience, even though we know that corruption remains in this life and we still fight temptation. How do we reconcile these?

Verse 1: Why were the sacrifices under the law unable to make the worshipers perfect?

Answer: Because they were mere shadows and shadows accomplish nothing. Have we ever seen a shadow pick up something and walk away with it? The problem the Jews have, along with Christian legalists today, is that the *shadows* to which the author of Hebrews refers are tangible, while the realities they represent are invisible and ethereal.

A lamb sacrifice was very tangible. The priest burned it on an altar. Yet the lamb was only a symbol of the atonement by the Son of God.

The entire book of Hebrews is a comparison between tangible shadows and intangible realities. Once we recognize this, Hebrews makes sense. We see more clearly how this relates to living with a clean conscience by looking to the completed work of Christ rather than our own degree of personal obedience.

Verses 2-4: Why were the worshipers under the law unable to live a life free from consciousness of sin?

Answer: The author of Hebrews clarifies that even though God required animal sacrifices, they were inadequate substitutes for human sin. It wasn't animals that sinned. Adam sinned and so human rectification was necessary.

Verses 5-10: What was it about the sacrifice of Christ that made it superior to that of animals? See also Heb.5:8,9

Answer: The choice to do the will of God. This was a reversal of the sin of Adam who used his freedom of will to disobey God. This is why emphasis is on the term WILL. It refers to the obedience of Christ attributed to the believer.

Note: The meaning of *sanctify*: a) Set apart for God's usage. b) Be made holy. This distinction is important. The primary meaning of *sanctify* is not "be made holy." That is a secondary and common meaning but "set apart" is the primary significance.

Notice verse 29. This means Christ was "set apart" by his blood as the mediator of his people. His sacrifice did not make him holy because he was holy already. This refers back to Hebrews 9:11-15 where Christ earned his mediatorship by his blood sacrifice.

Verses 11-12: What is meant by *for all time*?

Answer: Once for all. This means covering past, present and future sins. The Greek construction means “continuously.” *Unto the perpetual.*

Verse 14: How do we explain the apparent dilemma between having been perfected and continuing to be sanctified?

Answer: Legal vs experiential. Sanctification is a process throughout life to conform believers to the legal righteousness of Christ, attributed to their account.

The term *legal* means conformity to God’s law. We receive this legal attribution when we come to Christ by faith. God accepts us as legally righteous, though we still struggle with sin. Throughout our lifetime, we *experience* spiritual growth that conforms us to the law of God. The legal vs experiential distinction is crucial for understanding how we can live without sin *consciously* although we are imperfect.

Verses 15-18: What are two essential differences between the Old Testament covenant and the New Testament covenant? (Compare with verses 1 & 2)

Answer: The New Testament emphasizes internal relationship with God, not external rituals; there is no remembrance on God’s part of our sins.

Verse 19: What is the conclusion the author draws regarding the above? What is an immediate practical consequence on our thinking and feeling?

Answer: We can approach God and relate to him with confidence. This is on the basis of the blood of Jesus, his obedience, not on the grounds of our personal performance.

Verses 22: In what two ways is our freedom in Christ under the New Testament expressed in this verse?

Answer: A heart of full assurance of faith; living without a guilty conscience. This is the pinnacle of the chapter, the entire point. This is how we are to live and everything previous is an explanation of how this is possible.

Verses 22: In what two ways is our freedom in Christ under the New Testament expressed in this verse?

Answer: A heart of full assurance of faith; living without a guilty conscience.

Verse 23: Whose faithfulness is in view here?

Answer: God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises.

Verses 24-25: How does living a life of freedom in grace work itself out in practical terms?

Answer: Stir up one another to good works; encouraging one another. The freedom to serve God without a sense of foreboding. Freedom in grace is the precise opposite of laziness.

Verses 26-31: What is the logical consequence of rejecting the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice and depending on one's own obedience instead?

Answer: No logical basis for mercy exists. Such an attitude is an outrage to God. Trying to be accepted by God on the grounds of our own obedience rather than that of Christ is a supreme insult to his sacrifice. It implies the cross was insufficient.

Verses 32-39: Does living by grace alleviate us from spiritual warfare?

Answer: No. The war against the world, the flesh and the devil continue.

### **How well does WCF 20-1 express the above teaching?**

*The liberty which Christ purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, from the condemning wrath of God, and from the curse of the moral law. furthermore, it consists in their being delivered from this present evil age, from bondage to Satan and the dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, from the sting of death, from the victory of the grave, and from everlasting damnation. It consists also in their free access to God and in yielding obedience to him, not out of slavish fear, but out of a childlike love and willing mind. All of these things were common to believers also under the law. Under the new testament, however, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged: they are free from the yoke of the ceremonial law to which the Jewish church was subjected; they have greater boldness of access to the throne of grace; and they experience in greater measure the gifts of God's free Spirit than believer under the law ordinarily partook of.*

(Modern Version of WCF, Great Commissions Publications 2002, Suwanee, Ga)

## Lesson two: Freedom in minor matters

### A study in Romans 14

*Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. Verse 21*

Verses 1-4: Who does Paul identify as the weak believer?

Answer: The believer who imposes restrictions on himself that God does not impose with the goal of increasing his spirituality. Note: The word *faith* here refers to the teaching known as Christianity. The weakness here is in understanding the outworking of the gospel and may not refer to weakness of faith in other ways.

Verses 1-4: In what way do these verses show that God alone is Lord of the conscience in things God does not command?

Answer: By telling us not to judge one another because God alone is the judge in matters not clearly commanded in his word.

Verses 10 & 13: What is forbidden to Christians?

Answer: Judging others in issues of conscience. Believers belong to Christ primarily and then to one another secondarily.

Verse 16: Is it right to allow weaker believers to impose restrictions on us according to this verse? (See also Colossians 2:16)

Answer: No. We are sinning to allow that. For example, a believer thinks it is sinful to go to a theater and tries to make us promise never go to a movie. We are sinning by allowing them to pressure us this way because we would be allowing them to usurp the role of Christ as Lord of our conscience. That would be a subtle form of idolatry.

Verses 20-22: When is it right to abstain from something permissible to our own conscience?

Answer: To avoid provoking another to sin by violating their conscience.

Note: Some misunderstand the meaning of *offend* in some translations of Romans 14. The original Greek is *skandolizomai* and means “cause to sin.” It does not mean, “do something that is disagreeable to another.” A fellow believer who dislikes that we go to a movie is not “offended” in the sense in which Romans 14 means it. We are free to ignore that kind of “offense.”

### Three ways to err:

- Judge others for participating in things God does not forbid.

- Allow other Christians to impose on us restrictions that God does not impose.
- Tempt weaker believers to violate their conscience by provoking them to do things they believe are wrong, even if those things are not.

### **How well does WCF 20-2,3 express the above teaching?**

*2. God alone is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are—in anything—contrary to his Word, or which—in matters of faith or worship—are in addition to it. Therefore, anyone who believes such doctrines or obeys such commands out of conscience betrays true liberty of conscience. The requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, destroys both liberty of conscience and reason.*

*3. Those who, on the pretext of Christian liberty, practice any sin or cherish any evil desire destroy the purpose of Christian liberty. This purpose is that, having been delivered out of the hand of our enemies we may serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.*

(Modern Version of WCF, Great Commissions Publications 2002, Suwanee, Ga)

## Lesson Three: Freedom of conscience and civil government

### A study in Romans 13

Verse 1: What is the source of civil authority?

Answer: God is the source. All civil authority is instituted by him.

Verse 4: When is it legitimate for a society to consider itself the source of its own authority?

Answer: Never. God is the source of the authority by delegation from him. There are no rankings of authority in the universe. The will of the people is not a source of authority. Any government that declares itself independent from God, and therefore independent from his moral law, is sinning and subject to judgment. This means that civil laws contrary to God's law are not laws at all. Christians are under no moral obligation to obey those.

Verse 5: What is to be the attitude of Christians towards legitimate civil authority?

Answer: Submit with respect.

Verse 4: What words does Paul use to describe governing authorities?

Answer: Servants of God

Verse 5: What are the primary and secondary reasons why a Christian should submit to civil government?

Answer: First, out of conscience, the desire to please God. Second, fear of punishment.

Levels of ethics for Christians should be demonstrably different. Levels of ethics: A) I don't steal because I might get caught and punished. B) I don't steal because others will think less of me and how people view me is more valuable than what I would steal. C) I don't steal because I love Jesus and pleasing him is more important than anything I may acquire by stealing. (See John 14:15- *If you love me you will keep my commandments.*)

According to Acts 4:19-20 and 1 Peter 2:13-17, when is it right to disobey civil authorities?

Answer: If the government orders us to do something contrary to God's command or forbids us to do something God commands to be done.

Considering the above, how should the church deal with members who defy civil authority without just cause?

Answer: When the testimony of the church is endangered, then it becomes an issue of church discipline, not just a matter of personal conscience or opinion.

### **How well does WCF 20-4 express the above teaching?**

*Because the powers which God has ordained and the liberty which Christ has purchased are not intended by God to destroy each other, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, those who, in the name of Christian liberty, oppose any lawful power or any lawful exercise of it, whether civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. Those who declare opinions or maintain practices contrary to the light of nature, or to the known principles of Christianity (whether concerning faith, worship, or manner of life), or the power of godliness; or who are guilty of such erroneous opinions or practices, as either in their own nature, or in the manner of publishing or maintaining them, are destructive of the external peace and order which Christ has established in the church, may lawfully be called to account and proceeded against, by the censures of the church.*

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## Final Exam: WCF Chapter 20 (teacher's copy)

### True or false: F for False or T for True

- 1)   F   In the Old Testament, animal sacrifices took away the sins of the people but in the New Testament, sins are removed only by the sacrifice of Christ.
- 2)   F   In the Old Testament, people were saved by obedience to the law, whereas in the New Testament, they are saved by grace.
- 3)   F   God took pleasure in the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament.
- 4)   F   The sacrifice of Christ satisfies the justice of God for all our sins: past, present, but not future.
- 5)   T   Believers today are legally perfect before God, though experientially imperfect.
- 6)   T   We can approach God in prayer with confidence, although we know we are imperfect.
- 7)   T   God alone is Lord of the conscience.
- 8)   T   The weak believer is one who restricts himself from things God allows because he thinks that will make him more acceptable.
- 9)   F   A good way to teach Christian liberty to other believers is to do things in their presence that are permissible to our conscience, though not permissible to theirs.
- 10)   T   It is right to abstain from things permissible to our conscience if doing them will provoke another believer to sin.
- 11)   T   Displaying our freedom of conscience before other Christians may provoke them to sin by violating their weak conscience.
- 12)   T   We must avoid judging other believers in minor matters of conscience.
- 13)   F   The apostle Paul instructs us to allow weaker believers to impose restrictions on us that God does not impose.
- 14)   F   When Paul talks about “offending” other believers in Romans 14, he means doing things disagreeable to them.

- 15) \_\_\_T\_\_\_ It is sin on our part to allow weaker believers to impose restrictions on our conscience in matters God does not prohibit.
- 16) \_\_\_T\_\_\_ There are times when it is legitimate for Christians to disobey civil authority.
- 17) \_\_\_F\_\_\_ The primary reason Christians submit to civil authority is fear of punishment.
- 18) \_\_\_F\_\_\_ Civil governments have the moral right to consider their laws to be final authority.
- 19) \_\_\_F\_\_\_ Civil disobedience on the part of an individual Christian is a question of his own personal conscience and has nothing to do with his relationship to the church.

**Fill in the blank**

- 20) What is the apostolic warning about freedom of conscience? Answer: *Do not use your freedom of conscience as a cover up for indulging sinful desires.*