

Digging Deeper

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What is Christian Freedom (and What It's Not)

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Christian freedom played a central role during the Reformation. Martin Luther wrote his famous 1520 pamphlet *On Christian Freedom*, showing how God justifies us and so gives us a free conscience. John Calvin called Christian freedom or liberty a summary of evangelical doctrine (Inst. 3.19).

Since God has justified us, no earthly power can directly bind the conscience of a believer. Certainly, God grants a certain authority to parents and governors (Eph 6:5; Rom 13). In this sense, our consciences are bound to God's general command to obey our parents or leaders (Inst. 4.10.5). But the point is that justification by faith means we have a free conscience since God alone condemns or justifies (Rom 8:1).

As so often happens today, some people during the Reformation confused Christian freedom or liberty with political liberty. Others argued that freedom meant we obey no laws—whether civil or divine. Some wanted to deconstruct all human laws and reconstruct solely mosaic laws over a state. If these opinions seem familiar, they are. Today, we often make similar errors.

Christian freedom means that no person can condemn us if Christ is for us

As fallible humans, we often mistake Christian freedom for civil freedom or by thinking our freedom means we do not obey divine or human laws whatsoever (along with many other like errors). To clarify the biblical and reformed teaching on Christian freedom, this article will look at Andreas Rivetus's disputation on Christian freedom in the justly famous Leiden Synopsis.

The Leiden Synopsis came into being during the years of 1620-1625 as a commentary of sorts on the Synod of Dort in 1618. It represents a biblical and orthodox position on various matters of theology. In other words, the synopsis has the advantage of summarizing the prior one-hundred years of reformed thinking on the important teaching of Christian Freedom.

Christian Freedom means a free conscience before God by justification

Christian Freedom refers to "spiritual freedom," explains Rivetus. While the language of freedom or liberty borrows from the political sphere, reformed theologians used the word freedom by analogy to explain our spiritual freedom in Christ.

Particularly, reformed theologians emphasized that when we believe in Jesus for our salvation, God justifies us and objectively frees our conscience from condemnation. There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1). Since God alone justifies, then no one can bind our conscience except God.

This is the doctrine of Christian Freedom that the Reformers rediscovered. No scruple or religious observance apart from God's Word can bind our conscience. And therefore many of the Roman traditions could not either. Our conscience is free before God because God justifies by faith. We are free men and women for this reason.

And despite the fact that we think of liberty or freedom primarily as political categories today, Christian liberty or freedom does not concern that kind of freedom. Andreas Rivetus explains:

"We are not dealing here with the question of that civil and corporal slavery, nor with its opposite, civil and corporal freedom. But we do use some terms and expressions from those realms in order to explain the slavery and freedom that are spiritual. Concerning that spiritual slavery and freedom Christ says: 'If the Son shall set you free, you will indeed be free' (John 8:36)'" (Disp. 35.4).

This freedom means Christ sets us free from the condemnation of law, the fear of death, and a guilty conscience before God and men. But it does not mean that Christians obey no laws.

Christian Freedom is not Freedom from all laws

Christian freedom involves the freedom to serve and servitude to righteousness (1 Pet 2:16; Rom 6:18). The Bible tells us that we obey both divine laws and human laws. We obey human laws because we serve masters as unto the Lord (Eph 6:5) and since God grants governing authority to leaders to which authority, we owe obedience (Rom 13).

Since human laws order society, they cannot straightforwardly bind our conscience and thereby make us guilty before God. At the same time, God grants a certain authority to parents and magistrates. And so, denying all human laws can in this particular sense causes us to sin against God. Rivetus goes so far as to call those who reject any human law fanatics. By contrast, he calls antinomians (anti-law) those people who say we don't have to follow God's law.

Against those who attempt to deny any authority given to human law makers, Rivetus says that Christians "seriously condemn all those who under the pretext of Christian freedom attempt to shake off the yoke of magistrates and who enslave themselves to the devil by 'turning their freedom into an opportunity for the flesh' (Gal 5:13)" (Disp. 35.47). In other words, since God gives authority to magistrates, we should follow human laws since we follow the general command of God to submit to authorities (e.g. Rom 13:1).

When a child obeys his parents and a citizen follows the laws of the land, neither parent nor law maker can bind the conscience of Christian in an unmediated way. We obey parents and magistrates based on the general commands of God ("obey your parents," "submit to governing authorities"). And when magistrates make laws that correspond to moral law, that law binds the conscience since it repeats God's law.

With that all said, It might seem that Christian Freedom means we obey all laws whatsoever. It, however, does not.

Christian Freedom does not mean we obey all laws

If Christian freedom includes human and divine laws as defined above, then does that mean we obey every sort of law? No, the Reformed believed that we should only obey laws lawfully, meaning that Christ fulfilled the mosaic law's ceremonial rites and its civil laws no longer have force over Christians, since such an arrangement was specifically in force for ancient Israel in its time and place.

Rivetius explains, "Particular to the freedom that befit the times of the New Testament is the release from the dispensationary slavery to the ceremonial law" (Disp. 35.20). The Book of Hebrews explains that Christ fulfills the priestly sacrifices and activities. Hence, we no longer sacrifice animals or have a levitical priesthood as the law of Moses requires.

A bit later on, Rivetius also affirms that the civil or judicial laws of Moses no longer have force: "From the things that have been stated about the ceremonial law given to the Israelites we should judge Christian freedom concerning the judicial laws of Moses, which, because they were given by Moses and to such a nation, they neither affect nor bind Christians" (35.28).

But that does not evacuate Mosaic law of authority and use. Far from it. Aspects of that law remain permanent. What remains permanent are those laws that the reformed called moral law. Moral law basically refers to God's abiding character, which he has inscribed into the created order (also discerned as natural law).

The Mosaic Law, as Rivetius explains, republished natural law since human sin had deceived the heart and made discerning such law difficult. And finally, when governments legislate laws that correspond to natural or moral law, then such laws bind the conscience. For practical purposes, such laws include the Ten Commandments.

By contrast, laws that are civic (and ceremonial) include burying a hanged body on the same day so as not to pollute the land of Israel (Deut 21:22-23). Since that particular law applies to a civil and ceremonial arrangement in Israel and since Christ fulfilled the ceremonial law, it no longer has force over the Christian.

These laws, however, have massive doctrinal importance, since as Rivetius explains, the Levitical rites define the theological logic and typological signs for Christ's satisfaction of sin and atonement. They are the theological map, as it were, to understanding the cross. Hence, the Reformed established even the ceremonial law for Christian use.

The point here is that we must obey the law of God lawfully or fall into grievous error. We must avoid antinomianism (anti-law) and fanaticism (to use Rivetius's language).

Christian freedom does not mean we Deconstruct Human Civil law and use Biblical law Exclusively

During the 16th century, the Netherlands had revolted against Spain. Desiring to follow the Bible, they asked Franciscus Junius (1545-1602) to help them govern according to biblical law. But that required careful thinking because one must obey the law lawfully and not rebuild what Christ has torn down.

Junius, for his part, argued that the Mosaic law republishes moral law which all people must follow. Junius also speaks of the levitical rites and sacrifices. People must not follow these laws. Lastly, Junius also speaks of civil laws. Governments must only follow civil laws if and when moral laws obviously mix into them. Some civil principles have an abiding application to modern states when mixed with moral law because moral law represents God's universal law for mankind.

No person, no doubt, and no earthy power can condemn us if God has declared us free in Christ.

However, this did not mean the deconstruction of any use of common law or enacted human laws. Junius like all the reformers affirmed natural law. God made the world this way. To deny natural law or moral law is antinomianism.

The reformed also affirmed that human laws were not to be forbidden. About thirty years after Junius wrote *The Mosaic Polity*, Rivetus spoke of people who “have constructed to eliminate Roman laws or any other laws whatsoever from Christian states, in order to foist upon judges the requirement of passing judgment in civil cases according to the forensic laws of Moses. The experts rightly consider this idea not only dangerous and confusing but also wrong and foolish” (Disp. 35.31).

The point is that nations need to create laws in their particular time and place. Today, we might have laws surrounding cryptocurrency or VPNs, which only make sense in the twenty-first century. Such laws should correspond to God’s law as expressed in natural law and republished in the Decalogue. In other words, in the words of Rivetus, it dangerous, confusing, wrong, and foolish to work for the destruction of all human law and to attempt to enforce exclusively mosaic civil or forensic law upon society. Rivetus calls that fanaticism.

Free at last

Christian Freedom points to that blessed reality that by faith God frees from everything that the law of Moses could not free us from. As Paul says, “everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). And in particular, only the Gospel can free us from slavery to sin, to the devil, and to a guilty conscience for all time, because God alone justifies us (Disp. 35.7).

The freedom of the Christian is the freedom of the conscience. It means no power on earth can bind our conscience. It means no ceremonial law of Moses can bind our conscience to its observances of rights. Christian liberty means no forensic law of Moses can condemn us because “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1).

But that does not mean we fall into antinomianism. God’s eternal character marks the created order, which we recognize as natural law. And the Law of Moses republishes natural law in what theologians have called moral law. That law remains eternal because it reflects a universal law for all people.

In the end, the freedom of the Christian means that no person can condemn us if Christ is for us. It means we can have the confidence of our justification before God even when our doubts condemn us. God justifies us by an alien righteousness outside of us. His declares us free. No person, no doubt, and no earthy power can condemn us if God has declared us free in Christ.

This is Christian freedom.