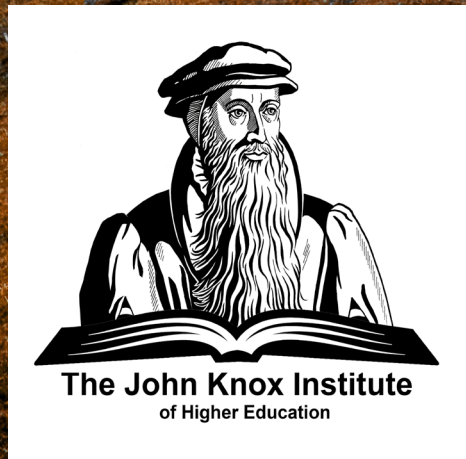


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #14
Christian Liberty



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

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PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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Lecture #14

Christian Liberty

As we continue our pastoral course, I want to look at the subject of *Christian Liberty*. Now there is much emphasis today on civil and personal liberty. Some of these claims are worthy, as, for example, the right to free speech or personal freedom from slavery. But many are based on personal demands which are perverse and unlawful, and are dealt with as though they were inalienable rights; but they are actually based upon perceived personal rights which are relative to the individual.

Think, for example of the feminist claim to absolute control over her own body, even if that means the death of an unborn child. But the Bible speaks of absolute rights and wrongs as measured by Scripture, not by men. And much of the friction, evil speaking, and breakdown in congregation or denominational harmony can be traced back to a failure to understand the doctrine of *Christian Liberty*. It is easy for church leaders, who have an interest in the gospel at heart, to try and impose on those they rule over things or behaviors which they have no right to impose. For this reason, we will briefly consider this doctrine.

1. The Nature of Christian Liberty

Think, firstly, about *The Nature of Christian Liberty*. It is not an inalienable liberty. It's common today to speak of inalienable human rights or liberties, but Christian Liberty is not an inalienable liberty. The Bible is clear that man by nature is bound by and enslaved in sin. As Satan's slave, he thinks he is free, but he is, in fact, like a prisoner on Devil's Island.¹ On that island prisoner's were held, there were no locks upon their doors, there were no chains on their feet; they were free to roam over the island, but they were still prisoners, and they were surrounded by a raging sea. The natural man's liberty is liberty to sin, so not an inalienable liberty.

Secondly, it is a purchased and gifted liberty. Christian Liberty is the result of a ransom paid to redeem the sinner and nothing less than the blood of Christ was the ransom price. It is only in Christ that Christian Liberty is enjoyed. Christian Liberty is a spiritual thing. It is connected with justification—God's gift for quieting the conscience. John Calvin² says, concerning it, "Christian liberty is in all its parts a spiritual matter. The whole force of which consists in giving peace to trembling consciences, whether they are anxious and disquieted as to the forgiveness of sins, or as

¹ Devil's Island was a French penal colony from 1852 to 1952, now part of the Salvation Islands of French Guiana.

² John Calvin, or, Jean Calvin, (1509–1564) – was a well-known French theologian, pastor, writer, and leading Reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, after whom many Reformers patterned their teachings.

to whether their imperfect work polluted by the infirmities of the flesh are pleasing to God, or are perplexed by the use of things indifferent.”

And still, under the head of *The Nature of Christian Liberty*, we see that it has as its primary focus a Godward view and not a manward view. This comes out when Paul is dealing with this matter in 1 Corinthians, where he says to his own Master he stands or falls, referring to the fact that the Christian ultimately is answerable ultimately to his Lord, even Jesus Christ, for his Christian Liberty, and must act in accordance with His commandments and His revelation. Christian Liberty, therefore, is not simply about how we live, but how we relate to God and his provisions for our justification in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, what is *The Content of Christian Liberty*?

2. The Content of Christian Liberty

This is the second thing we note, *The Content of Christian Liberty*. Well, we can think of this *positively* and *negatively*. We can think, firstly, of what we are freed from—*The Negative³ Aspects of Christian Liberty*.

We are freed from sin. We are freed from its true guilt, from its dominion—sin shall no longer have dominion over you (Romans 6:14). We are being freed from the pollution of sin—we are dying daily to sin, and living daily unto the Lord. And we are freed from the love of sin; that is no longer our first love.

Now, the pastoral application of this, of course, is immense. There is a difference, for example, between guilt and guilt feelings. Guilt is what we have before God’s law. Guilt feelings we may have, even although there is no real guilt. And that causes problems of discouragement, depression, and suchlike. Think, for example, of a man, and he’s clearing out a field, and he throws out a rock over a wall. In the Old Testament times, if that rock fell on someone and he killed them, he would have to flee to the city of refuge (Joshua 20). Assume that that happened, but what the man fleeing to the city of refuge does not know is that he merely stunned the fellow, and at once he was gone. The man got up and went on his way and lived to a ripe old age. But all the time that man is in the city of refuge, he has guilt feelings—he’s a murderer, or a man-slaughterer.

And so, we have to make the distinction. We are free from the sin in Jesus Christ, but we may still have guilt feelings. Also, we have to remember the victory of Christ over sin’s dominion and pollution, and the remaining corruption in the saint. Paul, in Romans 7, asks the question, “Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Romans 7:24). And there, he is speaking of the remaining seed of corruption within him: “The good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (v. 19). And his answer at the end of that chapter is, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (v. 25). And so, we have to see how Christian Liberty is helpful in dealing with a lack of assurance, or a sense that, perhaps, we have not been saved. You think of Matthew 1:21, where, again, Jesus is called by that name, “for he shall save his people from their sins.” A man saved from their sins is a man for whom Christ has died. A man for whom Christ has died is a man who will be saved, or is saved from his sin. So, freedom from sin, it’s true guilt, dominion, and pollution, and love [of sin].

Then, secondly, *Freedom from the Condemning Wrath God*. We are not free from the wrath of God, which is his anger against sin, but we are free from its condemnation. God is angry with the saint when he sins, but it is the anger of a Father that leads to chastisement, not the anger of a

³ In the recorded video here, the speaker says “Positive Aspects of Christian Liberty,” but later he corrects himself, and makes it clear that he meant to say “Negative Aspects of Christian Liberty” here.

Judge that leads to damnation.

Then, there is *Freedom from the Law*. We have freedom from the law in the context of justification. This is very important. We are freed from the law as a covenant of works, and from the condemnation and consequent curse of the law. As justified, however, we are called to keep the law. Jesus himself said to his disciples, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). We still, as Christians, have an obligation to keep the law, but it is an obligation of loving gratitude and thankfulness to Jesus.

Christian Liberty is not supportive of license to sin. We are free from the law in those terms I’ve just expressed, not in order we might live a licentious life, but in order that we might serve God. The law operates in different spheres. In one, it condemns the guilty. In another, it guides the saints. This difference is like a rope used by a hangman to execute a sentence on a guilty man, and the same rope being used by the hangman to rescue a drowning man. The same instrument is used, but for very different purposes and goals.

Also, we must emphasize the proper place that the law has for saints. There is no conflict between the law of God and the law of Christ; they are one. And a practical understanding of the Fourth Commandment would lead us to see that since the Fourth Commandment, for example, is part of the moral law, that it is still binding on us. It is not to be seen as part of the ceremonial law, or as the civil law that Israel was under. It is part of the Ten Commandments. The time has not come when there are only nine Commandments to be kept.

So, Freedom from Sin, Freedom from the Condemning Wrath of God, Freedom from the Law, but also, *Freedom from Satan*, from his dominion and power, his just and unjust accusations. Now, what do I mean by that? Well there are times when Satan will come to the saint, and will remind us, prompt us to reflect on our sin. These are legitimate accusations. You think, for example, of Zechariah chapter 3, where Joshua the high priest stands before the Lord—he stands in filthy garments. The garments are filthy, and Satan is standing at his right hand to accuse him. And so, these are legitimate accusations—we are sinners. But the unjust accusations—it may be that we are accused of something that we are not doing. Very often, when we are humble, we are being accused of pride. When we are trusting in God, we are being accused of recklessness, and so on. And so, we must appreciate that he is sometimes the accuser of the brethren, and sometimes appears like an angel of light.

So, pastorally, to deal with this, we have to teach about the wiles of the devil, and his ability to appear in these two ways, and we must show that the answer to Satan’s wiles is to take refuge in the finished work of Christ. That is what is revealed to us in Zechariah 3. The Savior, the Lord, stands before Zechariah, and he commands that the filthy garments be taken away, and the righteous robe be put upon him. That is what we have to remember, that, as justified saints, Christ has clothed us in his own righteousness, and therefore, our plea before God is not our own righteousness, but it is the righteousness of God in Christ. The best way to do this is by preaching much on Christ’s saving work, and the amazing grace which the sinner finds in the gospel.

So these are the Negative Points. What are *the Positive Points*? What are we freed to? So, we’re freed from those things, but what are we freed to? Well, the liberty of the New Testament saints is, in essence, no different from the Old Testament saints, but we do enjoy an enlargement of that liberty in the New Testament.

Think, for example, firstly, of the *Freedom of Access* we have. We are to come boldly to the throne of grace. There is no barrier between ourselves and the Savior himself. We need no earthly priest. We no longer need the shadows and types of the Old Testament. There is no longer a veil

that separates us from the Holiest of Holies. We are to come boldly into the throne room. We are to come trusting to Christ and Christ alone. So we have *Freedom of Access*.

Secondly, we have *Freedom to Obey*. The Christian now is able “to will and to do of his good pleasure.” You remember how we have it in Philippians chapter 2, in verse 12, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (v. 12–13). You are no longer in slavish fear, but have, in Christ, a Christlike and willing mind. Under the law, the saints of God were constantly reminded that they could not obey. Under the gospel, the saints are encouraged to remember that they can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). And that includes God-pleasing works—works done for his glory; works done out of a loving heart; not perfectly done, not perfectly loving, but done because they are accepted in the beloved, and we are enabled, therefore, to perform that which is spiritually good.

So much, then, for *The Content of Christian Liberty*.

4. The Preservation of Christian Liberty

I want us to think of *The Preservation of Christian Liberty*. In this regard, we must remember that God alone is the Lord of the conscience. The church is not the lord of our conscience. A theological position is not the lord of our conscience. And even conscience itself is not its own lord. Conscience itself is often treated as though it both sovereign and infallible. It is often seen as the end of all argument, if we can claim that what we are doing, we are doing for conscience’s sake. How many times do we hear that? “My conscience won’t let me do anything else.” But remember, friends, that conscience, like all other faculties in our being, is fallen. It is not enough simply to act according to our conscience, even if it is pure. Our conscience must be tested by the touchstone of God’s Word.

Secondly, *The Christian is Not at Liberty to Submit in Religious Matters to the Commandments and Doctrines of Men*. When these are contrary to, or added to the commands of Christ, if a civil or ecclesiastical authority should try and impose upon the people of God something that is contrary to the Word of God, or as being of equal authority with the Word of God, they are to be resisted. To believe an unbiblical doctrine, or to submit for conscience’s sake to such a command of men, is to destroy our Christian Liberty, and to act irrationally.

Thirdly, you will notice that Christian Liberty is constantly under attack. It’s under attack from the legalist and the antinomian. The legalist seeks to impose upon the people of God more than God has required of them; while the antinomian seeks to use Christian Liberty as an excuse for license. And we come, really, in a sense, to the nub,⁴ the practical nub of the doctrine of Christian Liberty, and that is the practice of Christian Liberty in things indifferent. There are many areas where the Bible does not lay any religious obligation upon us. These things are indifferent, or *adiáforos*, as the Greek has it. They are neither good nor bad in themselves, but they may be done or not done, according to what is best for the cause of Christ. Now, this is not the same as situational ethics, where what is right or wrong is determined by the circumstances. But rather, the rightness or wrongness of what is done has respect to what is best for the cause of Christ, and is the response of the person’s conscience to the circumstances in that light and before God.

Christian Liberty must not be considered as an abstract doctrine. Many doctrines are tandem doctrines. They cannot rightly be understood except they be considered in connection with other doctrines. Think, for example, of the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. We have a tandem doctrine,

⁴ “Nub” means the core, the gist, the kernel, or the point.

that of human responsibility, and that would be such a tandem pair, and should be considered together in the light of the inward sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and our obligation to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. The doctrine of Christian Liberty must be, therefore, considered in the context of brotherly love, self-discipline, and self-denial. These would be the tandem doctrines to Christian Liberty. So we should preach Christian Liberty, but we should also preach and teach self-denial. Remember Paul's exhortation to the Galatians, Let us "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage" (Galatians 5:1). And let us have the mind of Christ so that we esteem others better than ourselves (Philippians 2:3).

And so, in order to practice Christian Liberty, we have to seek to keep the balance. How do we do that?—four things:

Always Put God First. Don't be asking yourself, "Is my brother doing this to the glory of God?" but, "Am I doing this to the glory of God?" We must not judge the motives of our brethren simply by the outward actions, if they are doing something that is indifferent. It's a different matter if we're speaking about something that is condemned as sin. But in things indifferent, we must assume that it is being done to the glory of God. Think, for example, of someone who, as a recreational pastime, plays golf, or plays tennis, or some such thing; and someone else who would not play either of those sports, and they are both exercising their Christian Liberty. And you might say, "Well, there's nothing wrong with playing golf. There's nothing wrong with playing tennis." But that is us standing to our own Master. We see them as they are things indifferent. But what if you had been obsessed with those things before you became a Christian? What if your golf took up every day, every spare moment of your time; or tennis, you became obsessed with making a name on the tennis court. It may be a sin for you to do that, which has been a snare to you in the past. And so, this is the exercise of Christian Liberty. On the one hand, he's exercising his Christian Liberty to do that which is not sinful, because he's doing it as to the Lord; and the other is exercising his Christian Liberty by not doing something, and by not doing something, he is doing it to the Lord. And so, we have to remember this. Always put God first.

Secondly, *Put Ourselves Lower Still.* "Let each esteem other better than themselves," said Paul (Philippians 2:3), and he, in Philippians chapter 4, uses as his argument for that exhortation to "Euodias. and Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord" (v. 2); that they are to remember that Christ, "who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation" (Philippians 2:6–7). That is the pattern laid before us in this area.

Thirdly, remember that *Edification of the Body of Christ is More Important than the Exercise of Our Own Personal Christian Liberty.* Christian Liberty is freedom, but it's freedom to do or not to do something in connection with the edification of the saints of God. There is a mnemonic that is sometimes used to help us to keep this balance: the word J.O.Y.—Jesus first, Others second, and Yourselves last.

Again, and with this I conclude, we have to distinguish between the weak and the strong. Paul deals with this when he's dealing with Christian Liberty. There is a difference between giving offense and taking offense. Taking offense is when, perhaps, we, from a superiority think that we have the only explanation of what is right and wrong in a particular matter. And we take offense at someone who doesn't agree with us. Giving offense would be when we are of a similar spirit, and insist on doing something in the face of someone who stumbles over that thing. And so, Paul speaks about eating meat. He is able to eat meat that was bought in the shambles—in other words, that

had been offered to idols—he could eat that. But if eating meat would cause a brother to stumble, he wouldn't eat it. He would refuse to eat it. And that is not a denial of his Christian Liberty, it is the exercise of his liberty to edify the church of God. It's possible for people who are theologically strong to be morally weak in the area of Christian Liberty. And so it is, you may have someone who knows all the biblical doctrines, who is very well-read in theology, and yet has little care for his neighbor, has little concern for the poor. And that is someone who might be theologically strong, but ethically weak. Whereas, you may have—and this is often the case—you have untaught men and women, who are true Christian people, but they have little by way of doctrine or theology, but they care for their neighbors, they feed the poor, they visit the sick. You see how we have to be careful to make that distinction, what is the strength that we should have. Well, we should actually be theologically strong and ethically strong, but we must remember that there is sometimes that difference between men and women, and we must seek to distinguish between the weak and the strong. And therefore, when we are seeking to answer the question, “Should I do this indifferent thing, or should I not?” We ask, who are the weak, and who are the strong? Thank you.