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CHAPTER XIX

CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

(Necessity of a doctrine of Christian freedom, which has three parts, the first seen in Gal., chs. 1 to 3)

1. Need for a right understanding of the Christian doctrine of freedom*

^aWe must now discuss Christian freedom. He who proposes to summarize gospel teaching ought by no means to omit an explanation of this topic. For it is a thing of prime necessity, and apart from a knowledge of it consciences dare undertake almost nothing without doubting; they hesitate and recoil from many things; they constantly waver and are afraid. ^eBut freedom is especially an appendage of justification and is of no little avail in understanding its power. Indeed, those who seriously fear God will enjoy the incomparable benefit of this doctrine, one that impious and Lucianic men¹ humorously satirize with their witticisms. For in the spiritual drunkenness that has laid hold upon them every sort of impudence is lawful. Accordingly, here is the right place to introduce this topic. ^aIt was profitable to put off a

¹ "*Lucianici homines*," i.e., men of the spirit of Lucian of Samosata (d. ca. 200), who satirized Christian belief and practice in his *De morte Peregrini*.

✓ sists that believers should not suppose they can obtain righteousness before God by any works of the law, still less by those paltry rudiments! And at the same time he teaches that through the cross of Christ they are free from the condemnation of the law, which otherwise hangs over all men [Gal. 4:5], so that they may ✓ rest with full assurance in Christ alone. This topic properly pertains to our argument. Finally, he claims for the consciences of ✓ believers their freedom, that they may not be obligated in things unnecessary.⁵

(The second, freedom of conscience willingly obeying without compulsion of the law, 4-6)

② 4. Freedom from the constraint of the law establishes the true obedience of believers

“The second part, dependent upon the first, is that consciences observe the law, not as if constrained by the necessity of the law, but that freed from the law’s yoke they willingly obey God’s will.”⁶ For since they dwell in perpetual dread so long as they remain under the sway of the law, they will never be disposed with eager readiness to obey God unless they have already been given this sort of freedom. By an example we shall more briefly and clearly arrive at the meaning of this. The precept of the law is that “we love our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength” [Deut. 6:5]. To bring this about, our soul must first be emptied of all other feeling and thought, our heart cleansed of all desires, and our powers gathered and concentrated upon this one point. They who have progressed farther than all others on the Lord’s way are yet far distant from that goal. For even though they love God deeply and with sincere affection of heart, they have a great part of their heart and soul still occupied with fleshly desires, by which they are drawn back and prevented from hastening forward to God. Indeed, they struggle with much effort, but the flesh partly weakens their powers, partly draws them to itself. What are they to do here, while they feel that there is nothing they are less able to do than to fulfill the law? They will, they aspire, they try, but they do nothing with the required perfection. If they look upon the law, whatever work they attempt or intend they see to be accursed. And there is no reason for any

⁵ Calvin asserts liberty of conscience “*in rebus non necessariis*.” Cf. Rupert Meldenius (Peter Meiderlin), *Paraenesis votiva pro pace ecclesiae* (1626), motto at end: “*In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas*.” (McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism*, pp. 267 f., note 12; 311.)

⁶ Cf. Melancthon, *Loci communes*, ed. Engelland, p. 137; tr. Hill, p. 224: “They who are in Christ as driven by the Spirit to do the law . . .”

man to deceive himself by concluding that his work is not entirely evil because it is imperfect, and that God nonetheless finds acceptable what is good in it.⁷ For unless its rigor be mitigated, the law in requiring perfect love condemns all imperfection. Let him therefore ponder his own work, which he wished to be adjudged in part good, and by that very act he will find it, just because it is imperfect, to be a transgression of the law.

5. Freedom from constraint makes us capable of joyous obedience

“See how all our works are under the curse of the law if they are measured by the standard of the law! But how, then, would unhappy souls gird themselves eagerly for a work for which they might expect to receive only a curse? But if, freed from this severe requirement of the law, or rather from the entire rigor of the law, they hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness by God, they will cheerfully and with great eagerness answer, and follow his leading. To sum up: Those bound by the yoke of the law are like servants assigned certain tasks for each day by their masters. These servants think they have accomplished nothing, and dare not appear before their masters unless they have fulfilled the exact measure of their tasks. But sons, who are more generously and candidly treated by their fathers, do not hesitate to offer them incomplete and half-done and even defective works, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted by their fathers, even though they have not quite achieved what their fathers intended. Such children ought we to be, firmly trusting that our services will be approved by our most merciful Father, however small, rude, and imperfect these may be. Thus also he assures us through the prophet: “I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him” [Mal. 3:17]. The word “spare” is clearly here used in the sense of “to be indulgent or compassionately to overlook faults,”⁸ while also mention is made of “service.” And we need this assurance in no slight degree, for without it we attempt everything in vain. For God considers that he is revered by no work of ours unless we truly do it in reverence toward him. But how can this be done amidst all this dread, where one doubts whether God is offended or honored by our works?

⁷ Fisher, *Confutatio*, art. xxxi, p. 492.

⁸ “*Parcere pro indulgere vel humaniter ad vitia connivere*” (VG: “*dissimulant les vices*”). For Calvin’s explanation of the Hebrew word לָנָח as “to overlook or spare” and hence “to pardon or take pity on,” see Comm. Jer. 15:5; Comm. Joel 2:18.

6. *Emancipated by grace, believers need not fear the remnants of sin**

*And this is the reason why the author of The Letter to the Hebrews refers to faith all the good works of which we read as being done among the holy fathers, and judges them by faith alone [Heb. 11:2 ff.; 11:17; etc.]. In the letter to the Romans, there is a famous passage on this freedom, wherein Paul reasons that sin ought not to rule us [Rom. 6:12 and 6:14, conflated], for we are not under the law but under grace [Rom. 6:14]. For he had exhorted believers not to let "sin reign in" their "mortal bodies" [Rom. 6:12], nor to "yield" their "members to sin as weapons of iniquity," but to "give" themselves "to God as those who have come to life from the dead, and" their "members to God as weapons of righteousness" [Rom. 6:13]. On the other hand, they might object that they still bore with them their flesh, full of lusts, and that sin dwelt in them. Paul adds this consolation, in freedom from the law. It is as if he said: "Even though they do not yet clearly feel that sin has been destroyed or that righteousness dwells in them, there is still no reason to be afraid and cast down in mind as if God were continually offended by the remnants of sin, seeing that they have been emancipated from the law by grace, so that their works are not to be measured according to its rules. Let those who infer that we ought to sin because we are not under the law understand that this freedom has nothing to do with them. For its purpose is to encourage us to good."

Freedom in "things indifferent" with proofs from Romans, 7-9

7. "The third part of Christian freedom lies in this: regarding outward things that are of themselves "indifferent," we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently. And the knowledge of this freedom is very necessary for us, for if it is lacking, our consciences will have no repose and there will be no end to superstitions. Today we seem to many to be unreasonable because we stir up discussion over the unrestricted

⁹ "ἀδιάφοροι," things indifferent, a topic discussed in many contexts in Calvin's time. Cf. Melancthon's *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* XV. 52 (*Concordia Triglotta*, pp. 328 f.: "For love's sake we do not refuse to observe adiaphora with others"). For Calvin, the subject has been examined by T. W. Street, *John Calvin on Adiaphora, an Exposition* (doctoral dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, New York, 1954). Referring to this section, Dr. Street stresses the high importance for Calvin of liberty in adiaphora (pp. 66 f.). Cf. IV. x. 22. See also R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life*, pp. 309 f.

eating of meat, use of holidays and of vestments, and such things, which seem to them vain frivolities.

But these matters are more important than is commonly believed. For when consciences once ensnare themselves, they enter a long and inextricable maze, not easy to get out of. If a man begins to doubt whether he may use linen for sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, and napkins, he will afterward be uncertain also about hemp; finally, doubt will even arise over tow. For he will turn over in his mind whether he can sup without napkins, or go without a handkerchief. If any man should consider daintier food unlawful, in the end he will not be at peace before God, when he eats either black bread or common victuals, while it occurs to him that he could sustain his body on even coarser foods. If he boggles at sweet wine, he will not with clear conscience drink even flat wine, and finally he will not dare touch water if sweeter and cleaner than other water. To sum up, he will come to the point of considering it wrong to step upon a straw across his path, as the saying goes.¹⁰

Here begins a weighty controversy, for what is in debate is whether God, whose will ought to precede all our plans and actions, wishes us to use these things or those. As a consequence, some, in despair, are of necessity cast into a pit of confusion; others, despising God and abandoning fear of him, must make their own way in destruction, where they have none ready-made. For all those entangled in such doubts, wherever they turn, see offense of conscience everywhere present.

8. *Freedom in the use of God's gifts for his purposes**

"I know," says Paul, "that nothing is common" (taking "common" in the sense of "profane"), "but it is common for anyone who thinks it common" [Rom. 14:14 p.]. With these words Paul subjects all outward things to our freedom,¹¹ provided our minds are assured that the basis for such freedom stands before God.

¹⁰ Calvin's discerning comment here on the conscience entrapped in a compulsive and progressively severe austerity may be compared with his counsels of moderation in the enjoyment of God's temporal gifts in III. x. 1-4. Some early monastic texts contain warnings against such extremes, especially with reference to fasting. See, for example, Cassian, *Conferences* xxi. 13, 14 (MPL 41. 1187-1190; CSEL 13. 587-590; tr. NPNF 2 ser. XI. 508 f.); *Sayings of the Fathers* X. 1 (LCC XII. 105). However, in the instance of Dioscorus of Nisias, a protracted resolute reduction of food and drink is held exemplary; *Sayings of the Fathers* IV. 13 (LCC XII. 50).

¹¹ "Res omnes externas libertati nostrae subiicit." Cf. III. x. 4: "in rebus externis libertas." In this and the following section Calvin's Christian view of the adiaphora finds expression. This is not to deny his debt to the Stoics in clarification of the concept. Cf. E. F. Meylan, "The Stoic Doctrine of Indiffer-

But if any superstitious opinion poses a stumbling block for us, things of their own nature pure are for us corrupt. For this reason, he adds: "Happy is he who does not judge himself in what he approves. But he who judges, if he eats, is condemned, because he does not eat of faith. For whatever is not of faith is sin" [Rom. 14:22-23 p.].

Amidst such perplexities, do not those who show themselves rather bold by daring all things confidently, nonetheless to this extent turn away from God? But they who are deeply moved in any fear of God, when they are compelled to commit many things against their conscience, are overwhelmed and fall down with fright. All such persons receive none of God's gifts with thanksgiving, yet Paul testifies that by this alone all things are sanctified for our use [I Tim. 4:4-5]. Now I mean that thanksgiving which proceeds from a mind that recognizes in his gifts the kindness and goodness of God. For many of them, indeed, understand them as good things of God which they use, and praise God in his works; but inasmuch as they have not been persuaded that these good things have been given to them, how can they thank God as the giver?

To sum up, we see whither this freedom tends: namely, that we should use God's gifts for the purpose for which he gave them to us, with no scruple of conscience, no trouble of mind. With such confidence our minds will be at peace with him, and will recognize his liberality toward us. For here are included all ceremonies whose observance is optional, that our consciences may not be constrained by any necessity to observe them but may remember that by God's beneficence their use is for edification made subject to him.

9. Against the abuse of Christian freedom for gluttony and luxury!

*But we must carefully note that Christian freedom is, in all its parts, a spiritual thing. Its whole force consists in quieting frightened consciences before God—that are perhaps disturbed and troubled over forgiveness of sins, or anxious whether unfinished works, corrupted by the faults of our flesh, are pleasing to God, or tormented about the use of things indifferent. Accordingly, it is perversely interpreted both by those who allege it as an excuse for their desires that they may abuse God's good gifts to their own lust and by those who think that freedom does not

exist unless it is used before men, and consequently, in using it have no regard for weaker brethren.

Today men sin to a greater degree in the first way. There is almost no one whose resources permit him to be extravagant who does not delight in lavish and ostentatious banquets, bodily apparel, and domestic architecture; who does not wish to outstrip his neighbors in all sorts of elegance; who does not wonderfully flatter himself in his opulence. And all these things are defended under the pretext of Christian freedom. They say that these are things indifferent. I admit it, provided they are used indifferently. But when they are coveted too greedily, when they are proudly boasted of, when they are lavishly squandered, things that were of themselves otherwise lawful are certainly defiled by these vices.

Paul's statement best distinguishes among things indifferent: "To the clean all things are clean, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is clean, inasmuch as their minds and consciences are corrupted" [Titus 1:15, cf. Vg.]. For why are the rich cursed, who have their consolation, who are full, who laugh now [Luke 6:24-25], who sleep on ivory couches [Amos 6:4], "who join field to field" [Isa. 5:8], whose feasts have harp, lyre, timbrel, and wine [Isa. 5:12]? Surely ivory and gold and riches are good creations of God, permitted, indeed appointed, for men's use by God's providence. And we have never been forbidden to laugh, or to be filled, or to join new possessions to old or ancestral ones, or to delight in musical harmony, or to drink wine. True indeed. But where there is plenty, to wallow in delights, to gorge oneself, to intoxicate mind and heart with present pleasures and be always panting after new ones—such are very far removed from a lawful use of God's gifts.

Away, then, with uncontrolled desire, away with immoderate prodigality, away with vanity and arrogance—in order that men may with a clean conscience cleanly use God's gifts. Where the heart is tempered to this soberness they will have a rule for lawful use of such blessings. But should this moderation be lacking, even base and common pleasures are too much. It is a true saying that under coarse and rude attire there often dwells a heart of purple,¹² while sometimes under silk and purple is hid a simple humility. Thus let every man live in his station, whether slenderly, or moderately, or plentifully, so that all may remember God nourishes them to live, not to luxuriate. And let them regard this as the law of Christian freedom; to have learned with Paul, in whatever state they are, to be content; to know how to be humble and exalted; to have been taught, in any and all circum-

¹² The source of this saying has not been identified.

stances, to be filled and to hunger, to abound and to suffer want [Phil. 4:11-12].

(Relation of Christian freedom to the weak and to the question of offenses, 10-13)

10. Against the abuse of Christian freedom to the injury of the weak!

✓ In this respect also many err; they use their freedom indiscriminately and unwisely, as though it were not sound and safe if men did not witness it. By this heedless use, they very often offend weak brothers. You can see some persons today who reckon their freedom does not exist unless they take possession of it by eating meat on Fridays.¹³ I do not blame them for eating meat, but this false notion must be driven from their minds. For they ought to think that from their freedom they obtain nothing new in men's sight but before God, and that it consists as much in abstaining as in using. If they understand that it makes no difference in God's sight whether they eat meat or eggs, wear red or black clothes, this is enough and more. The conscience, to which the benefit of such freedom was due, is now set free. Consequently, even if men thereafter abstain from meat throughout life, and ever wear clothes of one color, they are not less free. Indeed, ✓ because they are free, they abstain with a free conscience. But in having no regard for their brothers' weakness they slip most disastrously, for we ought so to bear with it that we do not heedlessly allow what would do them the slightest harm.

✓ But it is sometimes important for our freedom to be declared before men. This I admit. Yet we must with the greatest caution hold to this limitation, that we do not abandon the care of the weak, whom the Lord has so strongly commended to us.

11. On offenses

✓ Here, then, I shall say something about offenses¹⁴—how they are to be distinguished, which ones avoided, which overlooked. From this we may afterward be able to determine what place

¹³ In 1522 some Zurich citizens, to celebrate their Scriptural liberty, held meat dinners on Fridays, and on Ash Wednesday the printer Christopher Froschauer and others, in Zwingli's presence, ate "two dried sausages." (Kidd, *Documents*, p. 390.) These, or similar, incidents may have been remembered here.

¹⁴ "De scandalis." The topic of giving offense in religious practices is treated by Calvin in his treatise *De scandalis* (1550) (OS II. 162-240; CR VIII. 1-84; tr. A. Golding, *A Little Booke Concernyng Offences*, 1567). Cf. Melancthon, *Loci communes* (1521) at end; ed. Engelland, *op. cit.*, pp. 161 ff.; tr. Hill, *op. cit.*, pp. 265 ff.

there is for our freedom among men. Now I like that common distinction between an offense given and one received, inasmuch as it has the clear support of Scripture and properly expresses what is meant.

If you do anything with unseemly levity, or wantonness, or rashness, out of its proper order or place, so as to cause the ignorant and the simple to stumble, such will be called an offense given by you, since by your fault it came about that this sort of offense arose. And, to be sure, one speaks of an offense as given in some matter when its fault arises from the doer of the thing itself.

An offense is spoken of as received when something, otherwise not wickedly or unseasonably committed, is by ill will or malicious intent of mind wrenched into occasion for offense.¹⁵ Here is no "given" offense, but those wicked interpreters baselessly so understand it. None but the weak is made to stumble by the first kind of offense, but the second gives offense to persons of bitter disposition and pharisaical pride. Accordingly, we shall call the one the offense of the weak, the other that of the Pharisees. Thus we shall so temper the use of our freedom as to allow for the ignorance of our weak brothers, but for the rigor of the Pharisees, not at all!

For Paul fully shows us in many passages what must be yielded to weakness. "Receive," he says, "those weak in faith." [Rom. 14:1 p.] Also: "Let us no more pass judgment upon one another, but rather not put a stumbling block or occasion to fall in the way of our brother" [Rom. 14:13 p.], and many passages with the same meaning, which are more suitably sought in their place than referred to here. The sum is: "We who are strong ought to bear with the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves; but let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him" [Rom. 15:1-2 p.; for v. 2, cf. Vg.]. In another place: "But take care lest your freedom in any way cause offense to those who are weak." [I Cor. 8:9 p.] Likewise: "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience." [I Cor. 10:25.] "Now I say your conscience, not another's."¹⁶ . . . In short, be so that you may give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God." [I Cor. 10:29, 32 p.] Also, in another passage: "You were called to freedom, brothers, only do not use your

¹⁵ In this section, Calvin varies his language by using without distinction "offensio" and "offendiculum" as well as "scandalum." Cf. Melancthon: "A scandal is an offense by which either faith or charity is injured in a neighbor" (ed. Engelland, *op. cit.*, p. 161; tr. Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 265 f.).

¹⁶ An inversion of I Cor. 10:29: it is given correctly in sec. 16, near the end.

freedom as an opportunity for the flesh but through love be servants of one another." [Gal. 5:13.] So indeed it is. Our freedom is not given against our feeble neighbors, for love makes us their servants in all things; rather it is given that, having peace with God in our hearts, we may also live at peace with men.

We learn from the Lord's words how much we ought to regard the offense of the Pharisees: He bids us let them alone because they are blind leaders of the blind. [Matt. 15:14.] His disciples had warned him that the Pharisees had been offended by his talk. [Matt. 15:12.] He answered that they were to be ignored and their offense disregarded.

12. *On the right use of Christian freedom and the right renunciation of it*

^aStill the matter will remain in doubt unless we grasp whom we are to consider weak, whom Pharisees. If this distinction is removed, I do not see what use for freedom really remains in relation to offenses, for it will always be in the greatest danger. But Paul seems to me most clearly to have defined, both by teaching and by example, how far our freedom must either be moderated or purchased at the cost of offenses.¹⁷ When Paul took Timothy into his company, he circumcised him. [Acts 16:3.] But he could not be brought to circumcise Titus. [Gal. 2:3.] Here was a diversity of acts but no change of purpose or mind. That is, in circumcising Timothy, although he was "free from all," he made himself "a slave to all"; and "to the Jews" he "became as a Jew" in order to win Jews; to those under the law he "became as one under the law . . . that" he "might win those under the law" [I Cor. 9:19-20 p.]; "all things to all men that" he "might save many" [I Cor. 9:22 p.], as he elsewhere writes. We have due control over our freedom if it makes no difference to us to restrict it when it is fruitful to do so.

What he had in view when he strongly refused to circumcise Titus he testifies when he thus writes: "But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek, but because of false brethren surreptitiously brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom, which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage—to them we did not yield submission, even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved among you" [Gal. 2:3-5 p.]. We have

¹⁷ "*Vel moderanda . . . vel offendiculis redimenda.*" The answer lies in care for charity and the neighbor's good, but this principle is to be guarded from hypocritical pretense (sec. 13).

need also to assert our freedom if through the unjust demands of false apostles it be endangered in weak consciences.

We must at all times seek after love and look toward the edification of our neighbor. "All things," he says elsewhere, "are lawful to me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good but another's." [I Cor. 10:23-24 p.] Nothing is plainer than this rule: that we should use our freedom if it results in the edification of our neighbor, but if it does not help our neighbor, then we should forgo it. There are those who pretend a Pauline prudence in abstaining from freedom, while there is nothing to which they apply it less than to the duties of love. To protect their own repose, they wish all mention of freedom to be buried; when it is no less important sometimes to use our neighbors' freedom for their good and edification than on occasion to restrain it for their own benefit. "But it is the part of a godly man to realize that free power in outward matters has been given him in order that he may be the more ready for all the duties of love."

13. *We must not on pretext of love of neighbor offend against God**

^aAll that I have taught about avoiding offenses I mean to be referred to things intermediate and indifferent. For the things necessary to be done must not be omitted for fear of any offense. ^bFor as our freedom must be subordinated to love, so in turn ought love itself to abide under purity of faith. ^aSurely, it is fitting here also to take love into consideration, even as far as to the altar [cf. Matt. 5:23-24]; that is, that for our neighbor's sake we may not offend God. We must not approve the intemperance of those who do nothing without raising a tumult and who prefer to tear into everything rather than open a matter gently. But those people also are not to be listened to who, after making themselves leaders in a thousand sorts of wickedness, pretend that they must act so as not to cause offense to their neighbors [cf. I Cor. 8:9]; as if they were not in the meantime building up their neighbors' consciences into evil, especially when they ever stick fast in the same mud without hope of getting out. And suave fellows are they who, whether their neighbor is to be instructed in doctrine or in example of life, say he must be fed with milk while they steep him in the worst and deadliest opinions. Paul recalls that he fed the Corinthians with milk. [I Cor. 3:2.] But if the papal Mass had then been among them, would he have performed sacrifice to furnish them with milk? No, for milk is not poison. They are therefore lying when they claim to be feeding those whom they

are cruelly killing under the guise of blandishments. Granted that this sort of dissimulation is to be approved for the moment—how long will they feed their children with this same milk? For if these never grow up sufficiently to be able to bear even some light food at least, it is certain that they were never brought up on milk.

Two reasons prevent me from contending with them more sharply: first, their banalities are scarcely worth refuting, since they are deservedly despised among all sane men; secondly, I do not want to do again what I have already abundantly demonstrated in special treatises.¹⁸ Only let my readers remember this: with whatever obstacles Satan and the world strive to turn us away from God's commands or delay us from following what he appoints, we must nonetheless vigorously go forward. Then, whatever dangers threaten, we are not free to turn aside even a fingernail's breadth from this same God's authority, and it is not lawful under any pretext for us to attempt anything but what he allows.

(Freedom and conscience in relation to traditions, and to civil government, 14–16)

14. Freedom of conscience from all human law

Now, since believers' consciences, having received the privilege of their freedom, which we previously described, have, by Christ's gift, attained to this, that they should not be entangled with any snares of observances in those matters in which the Lord has willed them to be free, we conclude that they are released from the power of all men. For Christ does not deserve to forfeit our gratitude for his great generosity—nor consciences, their profit. And we should not put a light value upon something that we see cost Christ so dear, since he valued it not with gold or silver but with his own blood [I Peter 1:18–19]. Paul does not hesitate to say that Christ's death is nullified if we put our souls under men's subjection [cf. Gal. 2:21]. For in certain chapters of the letter to the Galatians, Paul is solely trying to show how to us Christ is obscured, or rather extinguished, unless our consciences stand firm in their freedom. They have surely fallen away from it if they can, at men's good pleasure, be ensnared by the bonds of

¹⁸ These writings include: *Epistolae duae de rebus hoc saeculo cognitu apprime necessariis* (Basel, 1537) (OS I. 287–362; Epistle i tr. in Calvin, *Tracts* III. 360–411: *On Shunning the Unlawful Rites of the Ungodly*); *What a Believer Ought to Do . . . Among the Papists* (1543) (CR VI. 537–578; tr. R. G. [1548]: *The Mynde of John Calvayne, What a Faithful Man Ought to Do, Dwelling Among the Papists*); *Excuse of John Calvin to the Nicodemites* (1544) (CR VI. 589–614); *On Avoiding Superstition* (1549) (CR VI. 617–640); *De scandalis* (1550) (OS II. 162–240).

laws and constitutions¹⁹ [cf. Gal. 5:1, 4]. But as this is something very much worth knowing, so it needs a longer and clearer explanation. For immediately a word is uttered concerning the abrogating of human constitutions, huge troubles are stirred up, partly by the seditious, partly by slanderers—as if all human obedience were at the same time removed and cast down.

15. The two kingdoms

Therefore, in order that none of us may stumble on that stone, let us first consider that there is a twofold government in man: one aspect is spiritual, whereby the conscience is instructed in piety and in reverencing God; the second is political, whereby man is educated for the duties of humanity and citizenship that must be maintained among men. These are usually called the “spiritual” and the “temporal” jurisdiction²⁰ (not improper terms) by which is meant that the former sort of government pertains to the life of the soul, while the latter has to do with the concerns of the present life—not only with food and clothing but with laying down laws whereby a man may live his life among other men holily, honorably, and temperately. For the former resides in the inner mind, while the latter regulates only outward behavior. The one we may call the spiritual kingdom, the other, the political kingdom. Now these two, as we have divided them, must always be examined separately; and while one is being considered, we must call away and turn aside the mind from thinking about the other. There are in man, so to speak, two worlds, over which different kings and different laws have authority.

Through this distinction it comes about that we are not to misapply to the political order the gospel teaching on spiritual freedom, as if Christians were less subject, as concerns outward government, to human laws, because their consciences have been set free in God's sight; as if they were released from all bodily servitude because they are free according to the spirit.

Then, because there can be some delusion in the constitutions that seem to apply to the spiritual kingdom, among these also we should discern what must be considered lawful, as consonant with God's word, and on the other hand what ought to have no place among the godly. Of civil government we shall speak in another

¹⁹ By “constitutions” Calvin has reference to the papal constitutions mentioned in IV. x. 8, 9.

²⁰ Cf. the thirteenth-century papal claim of “*plenitudo potestatis in temporalibus et in spiritualibus*,” combatted by Marsiglio of Padua and William of Ockham. See esp. Ockham, *De imperatorum et pontificum potestate*, ed. C. K. Brampton, chs. i–iv, pp. 5–10; ch. xi, p. 24.

place.²¹ Concerning ^(c)church laws ^(c)also I forbear to speak for the present, for a fuller treatment will more appropriately come in the fourth book, where the power of the church will be discussed.²²

Let this be the conclusion of the present discussion. "The question, as I have said, is not of itself very obscure or involved. However, it troubles many because they do not sharply enough distinguish the outer forum, as it is called, and the forum of conscience."²³ Moreover, the difficulty is increased by the fact that Paul enjoins obedience toward the magistrate, not only for fear of punishment, but for conscience' sake [Rom. 13:1, 5]. From this it follows that consciences are also bound by civil laws. But if this were so, all that we said a little while ago and are now going to say about spiritual government would fall.

To resolve this difficulty it first behooves us to comprehend what conscience is; we must seek the definition from the derivation of the word. For just as when through the mind and understanding men grasp a knowledge of things, and from this are said "to know," this is the source of the word "knowledge," so also when they have a sense of divine judgment, as a witness joined to them, which does not allow them to hide their sins from being accused before the Judge's tribunal, this sense is called "conscience."²⁴ For it is a certain mean between God and man, because it does not allow man to suppress within himself what he knows, but pursues him to the point of convicting him. This is what Paul understands when he teaches that conscience also testifies to men, where their thought either accuses or excuses them in God's judgment [Rom. 2:15-16]. A simple knowledge could reside, so to speak, closed up in man. Therefore this awareness which hales man before God's judgment is a sort of guardian appointed for man to note and spy out all his secrets that nothing may remain buried in darkness. Whence that ancient proverb: "Conscience is a thousand witnesses."²⁵ For the same reason, Peter

²¹ IV. xx.

²² IV. x, xi.

²³ "Conscientiae forum." Cf. IV. x. 3. See R. J. Deferrari and others, *A Lexicon of St. Thomas Aquinas*, s.v. "forum," p. 443; *Catholic Encyclopedia*, art. "forum."

²⁴ See HDRE IV, art. "conscience," opening paragraph, and section "Greek and Roman," esp. pp. 39 ff.; Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* III. xxxv. 85 (LCL edition, pp. 370 f.); Plutarch, *Moralia* 476 (LCL Plutarch, *Moralia* VI. 234 f.); Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* I. lxxix. 13; I IIae. xix. 5; *De veritate* xvii. 5 (A. T. Gilby, *St. Thomas Aquinas: Philosophical Texts*, p. 115); and literature cited in W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. "συνηθης."

²⁵ Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* V. xi. 41 (LCL Quintilian II. 294 f.). Cf. Comm. Seneca, *On Clemency* I. xiii: "magis vis conscientiae" (CR V. 102).

also put "the response of a good conscience to God" [I Peter 3:21] as equivalent to peace of mind, when, convinced of Christ's grace, we fearlessly present ourselves before God. And when the author of The Letter to the Hebrews states that we "no longer have any consciousness of sin" [Heb. 10:2], he means that we are held to be freed or acquitted, so that sin may no longer accuse us.

16. Bondage and freedom of conscience

"Therefore, as works have regard to men, so conscience refers to God. A good conscience, then, is nothing but inward integrity of heart. In this sense, Paul writes that the fulfillment of the law is love from a clear conscience and sincere faith [cf. I Tim. 1:5]. Afterward, also, in the same chapter, he shows how much it differs from understanding, stating that "certain persons made shipwreck of their faith" [I Tim. 1:19] because they had forsaken good conscience. By these words he signifies a lively inclination to serve God and a sincere effort to live piously and holily.

Sometimes, indeed, it is also extended to men, as when the same Paul, according to Luke, declares that he "took pains" to walk "with a clear conscience toward God and men" [Acts 24:16]. But this was said because the fruit of a good conscience flows forth and comes even to men. But properly speaking, as I have already said, it has respect to God alone.

Hence it comes about that a law is said to bind the conscience when it simply binds a man without regard to other men, or without taking them into account. For example: God not only bids us keep our minds pure and undefiled from all lust but also forbids all obscenity of speech and outward licentiousness. My conscience is subject to the observance of this law, even if no man lived on earth. So he who conducts himself intemperately not only sins because he gives a bad example to his brothers but has a conscience bound by guilt before God.

In things of themselves indifferent there is another consideration. For we ought to abstain from anything that might cause offense, but with a free conscience. Thus Paul speaks concerning meat consecrated to idols. "If anyone," he says, "raises a scruple, do not touch it, for conscience' sake. Now I mean the other man's, conscience—not yours." [I Cor. 10:28-29 p.]²⁶ A believer who, though previously warned, nonetheless ate meat of this sort would sin. But however necessary it may be with respect to his brother for him to abstain from it, as God enjoins, he still does not cease to keep freedom of conscience. We see how this law, while binding outward actions, leaves the conscience free.

²⁶ Cf. sec. 11, note 16.