

CHAPTER XX.

OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY, AND LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE.

Section I.—The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the curse of the moral law; and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation; as also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a childlike love, and a willing mind. All which were common also to believers under the law; but under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected; and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.

EXPOSITION.

Civil liberty is justly esteemed an invaluable privilege and no sacrifice is deemed too great in order to recover it when lost, or to secure it when enjoyed. But valuable as civil liberty is, it cannot be questioned that the liberty wherewith Christ makes his people free is much to be preferred. In proportion to the value of the soul above the body, so must the liberty that respects the one surpass that which merely relates to the other. Those whom Christ makes free are free indeed.—John viii. 36. Christian liberty may be considered, either as common to believers in every age, or as a special immunity of the children of God under the New Testament dispensation. That liberty which is common to believers in all ages consists in their freedom—

1. From the guilt and the dominion of sin. By the guilt of sin is meant an obligation to suffer eternal punishment on account of sin. From this believers are freed by an act of pardoning mercy, which is passed upon the ground of Christ's blood. "They have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace."—Eph. i. 7. But sin is not only accompanied with guilt, it also exercises a rigorous dominion over the sinner. From the reigning power of sin Christ delivers his people in the day of their regeneration; and although sin still dwells in them, its power is gradually weakened in their progressive sanctification, and its very being shall in due

time be abolished. Hence the Apostle Paul thus addresses believers: "Sin shall not have dominion over you." "Being made free from sin, and become servants unto God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life."—Rom. vi. 14, 22.

2. From the condemning wrath of God. To the wrath of God all men are naturally obnoxious. Being children of disobedience, they are also children of wrath.—Eph. ii. 2, 3. But, upon the ground of the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, believers are completely freed from divine wrath. "There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus."—Rom. viii. 1. God may hide his face from them, but his judicial wrath is for ever turned away from them.—Isa. liv. 9,10; Rom. v. 10.

3. From the curse of the law as a broken covenant. Under that curse all men lie naturally; for it is written: "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them."—Gal. iii. 10. But Christ, having endured that curse as the Surety of his people, delivers from it all who are found in him. Hence the Apostle Paul saith: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us."—Gal. iii. 13. Though believers are under the moral law as a rule of life, they are completely freed from it as a covenant of work—freed from both its commanding and condemning power; and, therefore, they cannot be subjected to its curse on account of their transgressions. "Ye are not under the law, but under grace."—Rom. vi. 14. "Now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held."—Rom. vii. 6.

4. From this present evil world. The world is another tyrannical master, under whose power and influence all men naturally are. But believers are freed from the power of this fascinating and destructive foe. This freedom Christ has obtained for them, and bestows upon them. "He gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father."—Gal. i. 4. Through the powerful influence of his cross, believers are crucified unto the world, and the world unto them.—Gal. vi. 14.

5. From bondage to Satan. All men are by nature the captives of Satan, who is, therefore, called "the god of this world." Having taken them in his snare, they are become his prey, and are "taken captive by him at his will." But Christ "was manifested to destroy the works of the devil;" and "through death he destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil." In the gospel he proclaims liberty to the captives (Isa. lxi. 1); and, in the day of their effectual calling, he actually delivers his people from the power of Satan.—Col. i. 13. While in the present world, indeed, they are exposed to the assaults of this adversary (1 Pet. v. 8); but he shall never regain his dominion over them, and, in due time, they shall be completely freed from his temptations, and placed beyond the reach of his influence; for the promise is: "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly."—Rom. xvi. 20.

6. From the evil of afflictions. Christ does not grant to believers an entire exemption from the troubles that are common to men, but he frees them from

all the penal evil of afflictions. The cup of their affliction may be large and deep, but there is not one drop of judicial wrath mingled in it. Their afflictions are designed for their profit; and, through the divine blessing, they are rented, in various aspects, highly beneficial to them. Hence the children of God have often acknowledged that it was good for them to have been afflicted (Ps. cxix. 71); and, though they may sometimes be at a loss to perceive how their trials are to be rendered profitable to them, yet they have the fullest assurance that all things shall work together for their good.—Rom. viii. 28. See also Heb. xii. 6-11; 2 Cor. iv. 17.

7. From the sting of death. As death means the dissolution of the union between the soul and the body, believers are not exempted from its stroke.—Heb. ix 28; Ps. lxxxix. 48. Christ, however, delivers his people from death, considered as the effect of the law-curse, and the harbinger of everlasting destruction.—John xi. 25, 26. He has extracted the sting of death, and rendered it powerless to do his people any real harm.—1 Cor. xv. 56. Instead of doing believers any real injury, death has a commission to confer upon them unspeakable good. It is the termination of all their sorrows, their release from warfare, and their departure to be with Christ.—Phil. i. 21, 23.

8. From the victory of the grave. The bodies of believers must be laid in the grave, and see corruption. To them, however, the grave is not a prison, but a bed of rest; and they shall not always remain under the power of corruption, but shall be raised up, glorious and immortal, at the last day.—Job xix. 26, 27. "Now is Christ risen from the dead, and is become the first-fruits of them that slept."—1 Cor. xv. 20. His resurrection is the pledge and earnest of the resurrection of all that sleep in him. In due time the promise will be fully accomplished: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death (Hos. xiii. 14); and "then the saying shall be brought to pass, Death is swallowed up in victory."—1 Cor. xv. 54.

9. From everlasting damnation. The full punishment due to sin is never inflicted upon any in this life, but at last "the wicked shall be turned into hell."—Ps. ix. 17. At the great day, a sentence of condemnation shall be solemnly pronounced upon them, and they shall be led away "into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."—Matt. xxv. 41. But believers are secured against coming into condemnation, and are delivered from the wrath to come.—John v. 24; 1 Thess. i. 10. When the great day of God's wrath is come, they shall behold and see the reward of the wicked; but it shall not come nigh unto them.

10. Believers have also free access to God. They have liberty of access to God as a gracious Father, and may pour out their hearts, and vent their complaints unto him, with filial freedom. "In Christ Jesus we have boldness and access with confidence, by the faith of him."—Eph. iii. 12.

11. Believers have freedom of spirit in the service of God. The obedience which wicked men pay to God is like that of slaves to a tyrant, whom they hate, and whose only motive to obedience is a fear of punishment. But believ-

ers are delivered from a slavish fear of wrath, and serve God from a generous principle of love, and with a willing mind. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."—2 Cor. iii. 17. See also Luke i. 74, 76; 2 Cor. v. 14; 1 John iv. 18.

The liberty which has now been described, belonged to believers under the law, as well as under the present dispensation; but, under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians has been enlarged in several particulars, which are next to be briefly noticed.

1. Christians are now freed from the yoke of the ceremonial law. The Jewish Church was kept "in bondage under the elements of the world" (Gal. iv. 3); but that burdensome yoke is not imposed on the Christian Church.—Acts xv. 10. The ancient ceremonies were abrogated, in point of obligation, by the death of Christ; and though, for a time, the use of them was indifferent, yet, upon the full promulgation of the gospel, and the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem, the observance of them became unlawful; and the Apostle Paul exhorted Christians to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free, and not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage."—Gal. v. 1.

2. Christians have now greater boldness of access to the throne of grace. The Apostle Paul frequently mentions liberty, confidence, and boldness, in their access to God, as an especial privilege of believers under the New Testament, in opposition to the state of those who lived under the Old.—See Heb. iv. 16, x. 19; 1 John iii. 21, iv. 17, v. 14.

3. Christians enjoy fuller communications of the free Spirit of God than were ordinarily granted to believers under the law. The Spirit had, no doubt, been dispensed to the Church under the Old Testament; but the more extensive and copious effusion of the Spirit was reserved to New Testament times. Hence the Spirit is said not to have been given before that Jesus was glorified.—John vii. 39. The plentiful effusion of the Spirit was frequently foretold as the great privilege of gospel times. Isa. xlv. 3; Joel ii. 28, 29. Accordingly, upon the ascension of Christ, and the commencement of the Christian dispensation, the extraordinary and miraculous gifts of the Spirit were communicated, not only to the apostles, but often to common believers; and the ordinary gifts and gracious influences of the Spirit are still conferred in richer abundance than under the former dispensation. Hence the Apostle Paul represents it as an eminent part of the glory of the New Testament dispensation, that it is "the ministration of the Spirit."—2 Cor. iii. 8.

How excellent is that liberty we have been describing! If civil liberty be highly prized, sure the glorious liberty of the children of God is eminently precious. How highly are believers indebted to the Lord Jesus Christ, who obtained this freedom for them at the incalculable price of his Own precious blood! Sure their hearts should overflow with gratitude to their generous Deliverer, who gave his own life a ransom for them. Since he has emancipated them from the most degrading servitude, and set them free from those cruel masters who formerly tyrannised over them, ought they not to take upon them

his yoke, which is easy, and his burden, which is light? Every true Christian will reckon it his highest privilege, as well as his incumbent duty, to be the devoted servant of Christ, whose service is perfect freedom.

Section II.—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. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

EXPOSITION.

In this section the doctrine of liberty of conscience is laid down in most explicit terms. The conscience, in all matters of faith and duty, is subject to the authority of God alone, and entirely free from all subjection to the traditions and commandments of men. To believe any doctrine, or obey any commandment, contrary to, or beside, the Word of God, out of submission to human authority, is to betray true liberty of conscience. And be the power and authority whose it will—be it that of a magistrate or a minister—of a husband, a master, or a parent—that would require an implicit faith and an absolute blind obedience, it would destroy liberty of conscience.

The rights of conscience have been frequently invaded by rulers, both civil and ecclesiastical. By the Church of Rome the statements of our Confession are directly contradicted, both in doctrine and in practice. They teach that the Pope, and the bishops in their own dioceses, may, by their own authority, enact laws which bind the conscience, and which cannot be transgressed without incurring the same penalties which are annexed to every breach of the divine law. And they have actually imposed many articles of faith, and enjoined numberless rites and ceremonies, as necessary in the worship of God, which have no foundation in Scripture; and they require implicit faith in all their decrees, and a blind obedience to all their commands. Against the tyrannical usurpations and encroachments of that Church this section is principally levelled.

No person on earth can have authority to dictate to conscience; for this would be to assume a prerogative which belongs to none but the supreme Lord and Legislator. "There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy."—James iv. 12. Such a power was prohibited by Jesus Christ among his followers: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, but ye shall not be so."—Luke xxii. 25. It was disclaimed by the inspired apostles: "Not that we

have dominion over your faith," said the Apostle of the Gentiles, "but are helpers of your joy."—2 Cor. i. 24.

From the principles laid down in this section, it manifestly follows, that a right of private judgment about matters of religion belongs to every man, and ought to be exercised by every Christian. Christians are expressly required to examine and prove every doctrine by the unerring rule of the Word of God.—Isa viii. 20; 1 John iv. 1. They ought to be ready to render a reason of the hope which is in them (1 Pet. iii. 15); and this none can do who receive the doctrines and commandments of men with implicit faith and blind obedience. Whatsoever is not done in faith, nor accompanied with a personal persuasion of the obligation or lawfulness of it in the sight of God, is pronounced to be sin.—Rom. xiv. 23.

It follows no less clearly, from the principles here laid down, that when lawful superiors command what is contrary to the Word of God, or beside it, in matters of faith and worship, their commands do not bind the conscience. The obedience which Scriptures command us to render to lawful superiors—whether parents, or husbands, or magistrates—is not unlimited; there are cases in which disobedience becomes a duty. No one doubts that the precept, "Children, obey your parents in all things," is a command to obey them only in the exercise of their rightful parental authority, and imposes no obligation to implicit and passive obedience. The case is equally plain with regard to the command, "Wives submit to your own husbands." And it cannot be questioned that the obedience due to magistrates is also limited. The precept, "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers". must be understood as a command to obey magistrates only in the exercise of their rightful authority, and in all things lawful. The same inspired teachers who enjoined in such general terms obedience to rulers, themselves uniformly and openly disobeyed them whenever their commands were inconsistent with other and higher obligations. "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts v. 29), was the principle which they allowed, and on which they acted. When the apostles were charged by the Jewish Council to speak no more in the Name of Jesus, their unhesitating answer was: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard."—Acts iv. 19, 20. No command to do anything morally wrong can be binding on the conscience.

From the principles here laid down, some have inferred that civil authority is wholly inapplicable to matters of religion. Nothing, however, can be farther from the design of the Confession than to countenance this notion. That there is a lawful exercise of civil power about religious matters, the compilers of the Confession clearly teach, in the fourth section of this chapter, and also in chap. xxiii. And as it was not their design, in this section, to condemn this exercise of civil authority, so no such doctrine can justly be inferred from the words; for, "if they condemn all exercise of civil authority," to use the language of Dr M'Crie, "then they condemn also all exercise of every other species of human

authority about these things, whether ecclesiastical, parental, &c. Is it not equally true, that God hath left the conscience '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,' whether these be the doctrines and commandments of ministers or magistrates, of masters or parents? Is not 'an implicit faith,' or 'an absolute and blind obedience,' unreasonable and sinful, whether it be yielded to synods or parliaments? The design of the words is, to teach the subordination of all human power to the sovereignty and laws of God, particularly in matters of faith and worship. Nay, they seem in that passage to be more immediately levelled against invasions by Church authority, which have been fully as frequent and pernicious in religion as those of civil rulers; such as the assumed lordship of popes, councils, prelates, and convocations, in devising new articles of faith, decreeing and imposing unscriptural rights and ceremonies, canons, &c., here called 'the doctrines and commandments of men,' in contradistinction from divine institutions; as the traditions and superstitions of the Scribes and Pharisees, superadded to the divine law, are called by our Lord. If civil rulers concur in these impositions, or if they shall attempt the like by their own sole authority, and the claim of an ecclesiastical supremacy, this doctrine equally condemns their tyranny, and teaches, that no error, will-worship, or any species of false religion, by whomsoever commanded in Churches or States, can lay any obligation on conscience, which is immediately subject to God alone. But no such thing is taught, as that men's consciences are set free from obedience to any human authority, when acting in entire consistency with the Word of God, and enjoining nothing beside it, or beyond its own proper limits; which authority of any kind may certainly do."

Section III.—They who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, 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.

Section IV.—And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God. And for their 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: they may be lawfully called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the Church.

EXPOSITION.

The liberty pleaded for in our Confession is not absolute and uncontrollable. To assert that men have a right to think and act as they please, without respect to the moral law, and without being responsible to God, would be atheistic. And, if men are considered as socially united, and as placed under government, their natural rights, in religious as well as in civil things, must be liable to restraint and regulations, so far as the interests and ends of society require. Accordingly, the Confession, in the above sections, proceeds to guard the doctrine of liberty of conscience against abuse, first, in reference to the authority of God in his law; and, secondly, in reference to the authorities on earth, civil and ecclesiastical. With respect to the former it declares, that "they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, do practise any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty." God has not liberated the conscience from the obligation of his own law; on the contrary, he requires every one to yield implicit and prompt obedience to all things whatsoever he has commanded. To plead for a liberty to practise any known sin, is to plead for licentiousness; and for persons to indulge themselves in any corrupt affections and practices, under a pretence of Christian liberty, is to "use their liberty for an occasion to the flesh." With respect to the latter, the Confession mentions certain things for which persons of a certain description may be proceeded against, both by the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. It is to be observed, however, that the intention of this section is not to lay down the extent of the provinces of these powers, but only to remove the plea of conscience; and it ought to be understood, in consistency with their acting each in its own province, without the one interfering with the causes which come under the cognisance of the other. Although civil rulers may restrain, and, when occasion requires, may punish the more flagrant violations of the first table of the moral law, such as blasphemy, the publishing of blasphemous opinions, and the open and gross profanation of the Sabbath; yet they are to repress these evils, not formally as sins, which is the prerogative of God, nor as scandals, in which light they come under the cognisance of the Church, but as crimes and injuries done to society.

All sound Presbyterians disclaim all intolerant or compulsory measures with regard to matters purely religious. They maintain that no man should be punished or molested on account of his religious opinions or observances, provided there is nothing in these hurtful to the general interests of society, or dan-

gerous to the lawful institutions of the country in which he lives. The section now under consideration, however, has sometimes been represented as arming the civil magistrate with a power to punish good and peaceable subjects purely on account of their religious opinions and practices, or as favourable to persecution for conscience' sake. In vindicating the Confession from this serious charge, we shall avail ourselves of the judicious remarks of Dr M'Crie. "The design of section fourth," says that eminent author, "is to guard against the abuse of the doctrine" of liberty of conscience "in reference to public authority. 'And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another, they who, upon pretence of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God.' He who is the Lord of the conscience has also instituted the authorities in Church and State; and it would be in the highest degree absurd to suppose that he has planted in the breast of every individual a power to resist, counteract, and nullify his own ordinances. When public and private claims interfere and clash, the latter must give way to the former; and when any lawful authority is proceeding lawfully within its line of duty, it must be understood as possessing a rightful power to remove out of the way everything which necessarily obstructs its progress. The Confession proceeds, accordingly, to state: 'And for their 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 and maintaining them, are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the Church; they may lawfully be called to account, and proceeded against by the censures of the Church, and by the power of the civil magistrate.' Now, this does not say that all who publish such opinions, and maintain such practices as are mentioned may be proceeded against, or punished (if the substitution of this word shall be insisted for) by the civil magistrate; nor does it say that any good and peaceable subject shall be made liable to this process simply on the ground of religious opinions published, and practices maintained by him. For, in the first place, persons of a particular character are spoken of in this paragraph, and these are very different from good and peaceable subjects. They are described in the former sentence as 'they who oppose lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it,' and 'resist the ordinance of God.' The same persons are spoken of in the sentence under consideration, as appears from the copulative and the relative. It is not said, 'Any one for publishing,' &c., but, 'they who oppose any lawful power,' &c., 'for their publishing,' &c. In the second place, this sentence specifies some of the ways in which these persons may become chargeable with the opposition mentioned, and consequently 'may be called to account;' but it does not assert that even they must or ought to be prosecuted for every avowed opinion or practice of

the kind referred to. All that it necessarily implies is, that they may be found opposing lawful powers, or the lawful exercise of them in the things specified; and that they are not entitled to plead a general irresponsibility in matters of that kind. Notwithstanding such a plea, 'they may be called to account, and proceeded against.' For, be it observed, it is not the design of this paragraph to state the objects of Church censure or civil prosecution; its proper and professed object is to interpose a check on the abuse of liberty of conscience, as operating to the prejudice of just and lawful authority. It is not sin as sin, but as scandal, or injurious to the spiritual interests of Christians, that is the proper object of Church censure; and it is not for sins as such, but for crimes, that persons become liable to punishment by magistrates. The compilers of the Confession were quite aware of these distinctions, which were then common. Some think that if the process of the magistrate had been limited to offences 'contrary to the light of nature,' it would have been perfectly justifiable; but the truth is, that it would have been so only on the interpretation now given. To render an action the proper object of magistratic punishment, it is not enough that it be contra to the law of God, whether natural or revealed; it must, in one way or another, strike against the public good of society. He who 'provides not for his own, especially those of his own house,' sins against 'the light of nature,' as also does he who is 'a lover of pleasures more than of God;' there are few who will plead that magistrates are bound to proceed against, and punish every idler and belly-god. On the other hand, there are opinions and practices 'contrary to the known principles of Christianity; or grafted upon them, which, either in their own nature, or from the circumstances with which they may be clothed, may prove so injurious to the welfare of society in general, or of particular nations, or of their just proceedings, or of lawful institutions established in them, as to subject their publishers and maintainers to warrantable coercion and punishment. As one point to which these may relate, I may mention the external observance and sanctification of the Lord's day, which can be known only from 'the principles of Christianity,' and is connected with all the particulars specified by the Confession, 'faith, worship, conversation, the power of godliness, and the external order and peace of the Church.' That many other instances of a similar description can be produced, will be denied by no sober thinking person who is well acquainted with Popish tenets and practices, and with those which prevailed among the English sectaries during the sitting of the Westminster Assembly, and he who does not deny this, cannot be entitled, I should think, upon any principles of fair construction, to fix the stigma of persecution on the passage in question."