

Reformed Theological Seminary

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN
LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE AND CHURCH AUTHORITY
IN TODAY'S EVANGELICAL CHURCH

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By

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Chapter One: The Conflict between Liberty of Conscience and Church Authority

Introduction¹

The elders at Grace Evangelical Church are trying to discipline John Dillard, who has been an elder in the church for twelve years. The elders have recently become aware of a number of offenses about which they desire to confront John. For one, they have found out that he is addicted to prescription pain-killers. Not being able to get a prescription, he has regularly been seeking “leftovers” from members of the congregation. He has also purportedly been using his position of authority to exploit congregants for his own financial advantage. John is even accused of attempting to convince a recent widow that she should give him, as her elder, a cut of her insurance money. Moreover, the elders have come to find out that John’s wife has been dabbling in New Age astrology and counseling other church members to do the same.

John prides himself in his understanding of theology and church history. In response to the elders’ summons, he focuses his defense of his behavior on the doctrine of liberty of conscience. Recalling the words of Jesus in John 8:36, he contemplates that the truth is to set us free not put us in bondage to church authority. It was, after all, the Pharisees who tried to lord their authority over the Jews in the time of Jesus. Is not this the genius of the Protestant Reformation? Martin Luther stood up against the authoritarianism of the Roman Church for his right to follow God according to his own conscience.

¹ The case study followed throughout this introduction is essentially fictitious (especially the names). The names and events in subsequent hypothetical scenarios are also fictitious.

John recalls that the Puritans were also renowned for their emphasis on the conscience in their fight against the authority of the Church of England. In fact, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* has a whole section “Of the Liberty of the Conscience,” in which they declare that God alone is the Lord of the conscience.² John knows that, although the early Reformers and Puritans admittedly still had a healthy dose of authoritarianism in them, they planted the seeds of independence that would later find fruition in the more mature and evolved doctrine of liberty of conscience. The Dillards feel that they have no choice but to exercise their liberty of conscience by leaving Grace Evangelical.

* * * * *

The Dillards, however, are not satisfied with saving only themselves out of this authoritarian church. Thinking it would be selfish of them to just help themselves, they sense a calling to help other victims of the abuse that they suffered, so they begin a “ministry” of their own. They begin sending mass e-mails to current members of Grace Evangelical to explain why they left the church and to warn them of the authoritative, and even abusive, nature of the church.

One family the Dillards manage to “help” is the Johnsons. The Dillards contact them because they know that they were upset with the way the elders recently treated their son. When the young man came to the elders for the third time in four years to repent of years of sexual immorality and apostasy, the elders forgave him but also solemnly charged him to “prove his repentance by his deeds.” Interpreting this to be a harsh rejection of their son’s sincere repentance, The Johnsons also leave the church. As they go around to other churches, looking for a new church home, they are delighted to

² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter XX.

find that many churches are willing to embrace them, no questions asked. Moreover, a number of evangelical churches and presbyteries are eager to hear their stories and are deeply sympathetic to their plight.

The Johnsons write an editorial about the abuse they experienced (though they do not disclose the name of Grace Evangelical) for the religion section of the local newspaper. Then, they send e-mail inquiries to leading evangelical and Reformed seminary professors asking for their opinions about their situation. Without attempting to contact the elders at Grace Evangelical to hear their side of the story, most of the professors assure the Johnsons that they did the right thing by leaving the church. In fact, one professor, who has heard a similar complaint about Grace Evangelical from one of his students, passionately urges the Johnsons “to run far away from the church as quickly as you can.”

* * * * *

The Johnsons also try to engage in conversation with other members of Grace Evangelical whom they know are dissatisfied for various reasons. Brad Hunter and his wife were particularly upset because they had recently been counseled not to miss church on account of their children playing sports on the Lord’s Day. The Johnsons assure the Hunters that they have a valid complaint and that this is one sure sign that Grace Evangelical is an authoritarian and abusive church.

What the Johnsons say about authoritarian and abusive churches resonates with Brad because he, being an avid reader of evangelical literature, has recently read a book called *Churches That Abuse* by Ronald Enroth.³ Although Brad has to admit that Grace

³ Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). This book is closely analyzed in the final chapter in the section titled “Feeding the Fear of Church Authority.”

Evangelical has not been as blatantly extreme in their abuse as most of the churches described in *Churches that Abuse*, he cannot help but notice that the leaders follow many of the same practices as the “abusive” churches that Enroth describes. For example, the elders occasionally speak of the duty of its members to obey their leaders and submit to their authority. They also discourage dissent and are accused of “meddling” in family affairs. In addition, the elders seem to focus on sexual sins, not having the decency to leave such “personal” matters up to an individual’s conscience. Connecting this book to their own experience, the Hunters begin to see themselves as victims and decide to renounce their membership.

Brad has also read Rick Warren’s *Purpose Driven Church*⁴ and notices that the emphasis of Warren’s ministry seems to be much more “positive” than Grace Evangelical’s. Warren seems to be much more interested in winning the unchurched to Christ than in wasting time wrangling over “petty” issues with those who are already saved, such as whether or not the Hunter children should participate in Sunday morning soccer. Brad cannot help but think that part of the reason why Grace Evangelical has not experienced rapid church growth is because the pastors are not as committed to God’s purposes, as defined in Warren’s book. The Hunters find themselves longing to be in a church that they could invite their unchurched friends to and not have to worry that they might be offended by the pastors’ preaching about such unpleasant subjects as sin, hell, and holiness. The Hunters are especially convinced that their three struggling children would do better in a church that emphasized the “love” of God, more than his holiness and justice.

⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). This book is also closely analyzed in the final chapter in the section titled “The Purpose-Driven Conscience.”

Later, the Dillardards, Johnsons, and Hunters hear that the elders of Grace Evangelical have “denounced” them at a members-only meeting, and members of the church begin to “shun” them when they see them around town. These actions further cement their conviction that they have been victims of an abusive, authoritarian church. Months after departing from Grace Evangelical, the three families put together an anonymous “care package” for the church elders and other members of Grace Evangelical including an article written by John Dillard explaining the “liberty of conscience,” copies of the Johnsons’ letters of support from the seminary professors, and select chapters copied out of *The Purpose Driven Church* and *Churches that Abuse*. Accompanying these items is a brief note reading: “Our consciences are clear before God.”

The Conflict

This hypothetical situation is all too common in some evangelical churches today. Churches attempting to be faithful to God’s charge of exercising discipline in order to promote the holiness of the church too often find themselves combating an antinomian and anti-authority spirit veiling itself under the guise of Christian liberty. Any exercise of church discipline is perceived as an infringement on one’s personal independence and autonomy. Even the mildest discipline exercised is quickly labeled as an “abuse of church authority.” Many today declare that church authority has no right to bind an individual whose conscience has already been set free by Christ.

The individual’s conscience, however, is not entirely autonomous. The foundational confession that “Jesus is Lord” clearly attests to the fact that at least God

has authority over the conscience. Moreover, those that agree that the Bible is indeed the infallible Word of God must then agree that the Scriptures have authority over the individual's conscience. If a church authority is requiring an individual to obey Scripture, the rejection of such teaching based on "liberty of conscience" is really a rejection of the authority of God as revealed in Scripture.

A consistent rendering of the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*, the declaration that the Bible is to be the Christian's ultimate authority, should also establish the role of church authority in the life of the believer. The Bible reveals that Christ has blessed his church with leaders who strive to help bring God's people to walk in holiness and so be conformed to the image of Christ. Not only does the Bible bind the conscience, but by inference it also authorizes church leaders to bind the conscience in areas in which the Bible explicitly or implicitly binds the conscience. The Bible in no way endorses using the guise of liberty of conscience to justify disobedience to legitimate church authority, especially in the proper exercise of church discipline. Nowhere do the Scriptures promote placing the conscience above the plain teaching of Scripture.

The Power Struggle between Church Authority and Individual Conscience

You are driving down a straight road, which has a ditch on either side. On the left side is the ditch of over-asserting the doctrine of liberty of conscience. You fall into this ditch when you demand that you have complete authority (via your conscience) to determine how the Bible calls you to live. You do not need anyone to tell you what the Bible says because your conscience is your guide. On the right side is the ditch of over-asserting the authority of the church over the individual. You fall into this ditch when

you offer blind and absolute obedience to church authority. You obey what church leaders command, regardless of what the Bible says.

Both of these ditches need to be avoided. A delicate balance must be struck between liberty of conscience and church authority. Falling into either ditch inevitably results in heavy costs. The question, however, must be asked—into which ditch is the modern evangelical more prone to fall? Wisdom calls for a pastor to warn most adamantly against the side in which he finds his flock more prone to fall. A wise shepherd does not preach to his overly charismatic flock a string of messages about the danger of quenching the Spirit. Nor does the wise pastor preach to those who suffer from dead orthodoxy a series of sermons about the dangers of emotionalism.

The American Puritan John Winthrop argues that “the difference of persons and places” ought to make “a difference in the season of the doctrine.” Winthrop maintains that there are some sermons that “ill suit the season, as old bottles do new wine.”⁵ An honest look at the church landscape today demonstrates that the average evangelical is in far greater danger of falling into the ditch on the left side. Because of the cultural emphases of individuality and freedom, a modern churchgoer is more prone to assert the rights of individual conscience over the authority of the church. J. I. Packer points out that the modern church is tempted more toward licentiousness than legalism. Packer poignantly asks: “We profess anxiety to keep clear of legalistic bondage, but are we not in much greater danger of Antinomian license?”⁶

⁵ John Winthrop, “A Short Story,” *The Antinomian Controversy*, ed. David Hall (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 296.

⁶ J. I. Packer, *Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 108.

High Churchmen

It is important to realize that it *is* possible to err on either side. In *The Church of Christ* James Bannerman, a nineteenth century theologian, defines these two extremes by describing High Churchmen and Low Churchmen. Bannerman describes High Churchmen as “those who overrate the extent of Church power, and stretch the limits of Church authority beyond the warrant of Scripture.”⁷ These people often forget that not only is church authority delegated by God, but it is also regulated by his Word. High Churchmen rarely encourage their hearers to check their teaching by the Word of God.

Positively, High Churchmen recognize that the church has legitimate authority delegated by God. Moreover, they take seriously the Scripture verses that exhort church members to honor and submit to their leaders. The problem is, however, that High Churchmen tend to call on the congregation to render obedience to the church leaders’ decrees solely on the basis of their own authority. High Churchmen demand (either implicitly or explicitly) that the clergy be recognized as the supreme and absolute authority—a label that is appropriate for God alone. Rousas Rushdoony warns against human authorities taking unto themselves the privilege of ultimate authority. Rushdoony states:

The authority of the state over its citizens and the authority of the church over its members are always subject to the prior authority of God and the supremacy of His law. In every area, God undergirds legitimate authority, which is His creation, by His word and law. But, in every area, God also limits all human authority by His own sovereignty and by His word. No

⁷ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (1869), vol. 1 (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1991), 235. In Bannerman’s time, there was likely a higher percentage of High Churchmen among evangelicals than there are today, but the nineteenth century undoubtedly marks the beginnings of the rise of the Low Churchmen. Much of the evangelical movement towards a lower view of the church stems from the influence of nineteenth century liberalism.

human authority can claim to be ultimate, nor can any authority speak with final power.⁸

High Churchmen reigned in the medieval Roman Catholic Church, which viewed itself as possessing authority on the same level as Scripture. People were always to submit to the authority of the clergy. William Webster asserts: “For the Roman Catholic, the *church* is ultimate truth and authority, not Scripture. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church affirms the full inspiration of Scripture, it is not the *only* truth or ultimate and final authority.”⁹ James Drane describes the Roman abuses: “Theology frequently was founded not on scripture or philosophy, but rather on the statements of Church authority. Authority was enshrined on a pedestal which towered high above everyone. The bearers of authority were almost idolized.”¹⁰ This abuse of church authority was one of the factors that led the Reformers to formulate the doctrine of liberty of conscience during the Protestant Reformation.

Low Churchmen

The precarious view of the Low Church is much more rampant today. According to Bannerman, Low Churchmen are those “who unduly limit and under-estimate the extent of Church power, and the exercise of Church authority.”¹¹ They tend to emphasize both the individual’s and the state’s authority over the church. Bannerman warns against the dangers of the Low Churchmen’s views:

⁸ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law & Liberty* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1977), 33-34.

⁹ William Webster, “Did I Really Leave the Holy Catholic Church?” *Roman Catholicism*, ed. John Armstrong (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 270.

¹⁰ James Drane, *Authority and Institution: A Study in Church Crisis* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1969), 1.

¹¹ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 235.

Such views, consistently carried out, go to the opposite extreme, and evacuate Church power of all that belongs to it by the institution of God in the way either of authority or grace, reducing it to the level of a mere human appointment, binding no Divine obligation on the conscience, and communicating no Divine blessing to the soul.¹²

Low Churchmen refuse to recognize the authority that God has delegated to officers in His Church; instead, they laud the freedom of the individual believer given by Christ. To be under any human authority is to cease to be free. The believer can follow the leading of the Holy Spirit through the sufficient means of his own understanding of the Word of God and the guidance of his own conscience. There is no room left for church authority.

In the Low Churchmen's demand that their own consciences reign supreme, Rushdoony points out how they effectively deify themselves:

They recognize no God or man as authoritative, and they exalt their own thinking to a position of ultimacy. They become gods in their own eyes. In essence, their faith is that every man should be his own god, but that no man can be free or become his own god unless he agrees with them. This position is essentially anarchism, and it is as intolerant and exclusive a kind of authoritarianism as any.¹³

They demand for their consciences an authority that God never authorized. Simply put, a man essentially makes an idol of himself by placing his conscience over the authorities that God has appointed. God never intended that man's conscience be exalted above God's own authority and the authority he has vested in his delegates. The Apostle Paul makes this principle clear in Romans 13:1-2:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so

¹² Ibid., 236.

¹³ Rushdoony, 31.

will bring judgment on themselves.¹⁴

This passage refers to the individual's relationship to civil authorities, but there are underlying principles of authority here that are unquestionably applicable to how a man is to relate to all authorities that God appoints. A. W. Pink remarks on these principles of authority: "God requires from His people a subjection to the ministerial office, as truly as he does to the magisterial in the civil realm (Rom. 13) and to the husband and parent in the domestic (Eph 5:22; 6:1)."¹⁵ F. F. Bruce explains this principle of authority when commenting on Romans 13:1-7: "Paul places the whole question on the highest plane. God is the fount of all authority, and those who exercise authority on earth do so by delegation from him; therefore to disobey them is to disobey God."¹⁶

The Church Today

In the American evangelical church today, Low Churchmen are ubiquitous. Suspicion of all authority reigns in American culture. Americans tend to think that any and all exercise of power in the church is somehow an abuse of power. Mark Dever addresses the underlying distrust that modern Americans display toward all authority and calls it "the latent suspicion of authority in our society." He then theorizes as to the core cause of this suspicion:

Perhaps it has to do with the fact that our national government was established in revolt against the claims and demands of the Parliament in London. Perhaps it has to do with the fact that for many Americans, the government that now works to ensure their equal opportunity was the same government that in the past worked to make sure they had none.

¹⁴ All quotations from the Bible will be from the NIV, unless otherwise noted.

¹⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Joshua* (Chicago: Moody, 1976), 47.

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 220-221.

Perhaps it has to do with a vision of human nobility—the American optimism that believes people are so good that, if we merely leave them to themselves, ‘we, the people’ will be the best we can possibly be.¹⁷

His conclusion, though less sophisticated, gets to the heart of the matter: “Or perhaps the explanation of our anti-authoritarianism is more simple. Perhaps it has to do with selfishness.”¹⁸ John Piper articulates this same sentiment:

Culturally, the defining spirit in America today is self-determination, not submission to the will of another. The ultimate value in America is the unencumbered self. Anything that enhances my individual liberty to do as I please is good. Anything that encumbers me and limits my ability to do as I please is bad. Self is king. And autonomy is the highest law.¹⁹

In the final analysis, the major reason why people distrust authority may simply be that they want to be their own bosses.

Rebellion against authority has come to be thought of as a sort of badge of honor in American society, which has exalted the value of “individualism.” Rebellion has become a sign of having come of age. Packer not only recognizes the Western world’s growing antipathy toward the very concept of authority, but he also comments on the way our society has come to glorify rebellion against authority:

‘Authority’ is a word that makes people think of law and order, direction and restraint, command and control, dominance and submission, respect and obedience....One tragedy of our time is that, having these associations, ‘authority’ has become almost a dirty word in the Western world, while opposition to authority in schools, families and society generally is cheerfully accepted as something harmless and perhaps rather fine.²⁰

¹⁷ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 204.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹⁹ John Piper, “Obey Your Joyful Leaders, Part Two (Hebrews 13:17),” 12 October 1997, <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper97/10-12-97.htm> (5 May 2005).

²⁰ J.I. Packer, *Freedom and Authority* (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1981), 6.

Packer even calls this anti-authority attitude “the crisis of authority which marks our time,” “the anti-authority syndrome now current in the West,” and “a major human tragedy.”²¹

The growing cultural emphases on individualism, autonomy, and rebellion have helped tear down the authority of the church. Pastors today find themselves attempting to guide and instruct a distrusting flock. The conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority cannot easily be resolved. Ed Hayes offers wise advice concerning the cautious approach with which pastors ought to handle this growing conflict: “Churches need to exercise humility, prayer, study, and reflection to resolve the conflict between conscience and authority.”²²

²¹ Ibid. 7, 9.

²² Ed Hayes, *The Church: The Body of Christ in the World of Today* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), 87.

Chapter Two: The Bible on Liberty of Conscience and Church Authority

Liberty of Conscience in Its Proper Place

Though a professing Christian, Jennifer decides to move in with her boyfriend. Jake, a Presbyterian minister, confronts his younger sister on her sexual immorality. He tells her that this decision is contradictory to her Christian profession. She is appalled at Jake's audacity in confronting her. Who does he think he is to correct her? How can Jake correct her for not following the Bible, when he is not following the biblical injunction to "judge not"? She knows that she can move in with her boyfriend with a good conscience because they truly love each other. If her own conscience says that her action is permissible, then who is Jake to tell her that it is not?

The above is but one example of the idolatry of the self, in which the individual enthrones his own conscience as supreme. Although this example demonstrates abuse of the conscience, there *is* a legitimate role for the conscience. The solution to the conflict between the individual's conscience and church authority is obviously not to discard the ideas of Christian liberty and liberty of conscience altogether; rather, the solution is to transform our minds according to God's Word and not be conformed to the pattern of the world. We will begin our study of the conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority by exploring what the term "conscience" means (and does not mean) when used in the Bible. Perhaps even more important for our purposes, we must examine the role of the conscience allowed by the Scriptures by considering the limitations placed upon it and the degree to which it can function as a check on illegitimate forms of church authority.

Biblical View of the Conscience

There are a few difficulties in explicating the biblical view of the conscience. The first challenge comes from the fact that the Bible itself does not offer a clear and convenient definition of the concept of conscience. In fact, although the Scriptures certainly speak of the conscience, it is not a subject emphasized throughout the Bible. *Suneidesis*, which is Greek for *conscience*, is only used once in the Septuagint and never occurs in the four gospels. Out of the thirty times the term is used in the New Testament, it is used by Paul twenty times. The significance of these statistics is that they highlight the danger of putting more emphasis on the concept of “conscience” than the Bible itself does.

Moreover, defining *conscience* in the New Testament is also made more difficult by the fact that when Paul speaks of the *conscience*, he is most likely doing so in order to use the language of his surrounding culture. *The Interpreter’s Dictionary* argues that Paul most likely derived the term *conscience* from his opponents in Corinth and that it was no particular favorite of his.¹ C.A. Pierce offers evidence that the Corinthians were throwing the concept of *conscience* in Paul’s face by claiming that their consciences were clear in spite of their immoral acts. Pierce comments: “This is the first recorded occasion in Christian history—but very far from the last—when disruptive tendencies within the Church have made a battle-cry of conscience.”²

¹ George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 674.

² C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 65.

Another major difficulty facing the definition of the conscience is the fact that the conscience of modern colloquialism bears little resemblance to the conscience of which Paul speaks. Movie actor Christopher Reeve accurately conveys the popular view of the conscience held today: “I think we all have a little voice inside us that will guide us. It may be God, I don’t know. But I think that if we shut out all the noise and clutter from our lives and listen to that voice, it will tell us the right thing to do.”³ This view equates our conscience with some sort of deity. The idea is that the conscience is the voice of Truth residing in every person. To discover and do what is right, all one must do is learn to listen to his conscience. Even many Christians would readily give assent to the view that the conscience can be defined as the voice of God within, but the idea has very little biblical warrant.

What then is the biblical definition of the conscience? While a whole treatise can be given to this subject alone without resulting in a perfect definition, we must at least offer a brief, but biblically sound, definition of conscience. The conscience is that aspect of the inner man’s understanding which bears witness to God’s truth and influences personal judgment.⁴ This definition focuses on four important aspects of the conscience: (1) its relation to the inner man, (2) its relation to the understanding, (3) its task of bearing witness, and (4) its influence on personal judgment. The conscience’s association with the inner man and its affiliation with the understanding relate to the

³ Jone Johnson Lewis, “Wisdom Quotes: Quotations to inspire and challenge,” http://www.wisdomquotes.com/cat_conscience.html (5 May 2005).

⁴ This definition is articulated in my own words, but it relies heavily on the definitions given by the Puritans William Ames, in his *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* of 1639 (reprint, Edmonton: Still Waters Revival), and William Perkins, in his *Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience* of 1606 (New York: De Capo Press, 1972). Conscience can biblically be defined in other ways, but I am focusing on a definition that is most germane to our study of the conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority.

nature of the conscience, while the conscience's task of bearing witness and its responsibility in personal judgment relate to its *role*.

Many frequently overlook the important connection that the Bible draws between the *conscience* and the *heart* and the *mind*, which all are overlapping aspects of what the Bible calls "the inner man."⁵ In Romans 14:5, Paul treats *mind* and *conscience* as synonymous terms when discussing the observation of holy days: "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced *in his own mind*." Charles Hodge takes the *mind* and *conscience* as synonymous when he expresses the principle of Romans 14:5 as being "that one man should not be forced to act according to another man's conscience, but everyone should be satisfied in his own conscience, and be careful not to do what he thought wrong."⁶ In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul speaks of the *conscience*, instead of *mind*, in a similar manner when discussing whether believers should eat food dedicated to idols.⁷ *The New Bible Dictionary* also notes the connection between *heart* and *conscience* in 1 Samuel 24:5: "In the phrase 'David's heart smote him,' [heart] plays the part of conscience, and conforms to the usual meaning of 'conscience' in popular Greek."⁸ One reason why the relation that conscience has with the inner man is important is because it

⁵ Certainly subtle nuances can be detected between the terms. For example, the biblical writers tend to use *conscience* (rather than *heart* or *mind*) when they are speaking of "the inner man" in the context of private judgment.

⁶ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1989), 420. William Hendriksen also shows that he interprets *mind* in Romans 14:5 as being synonymous with *conscience* when he comments on this verse: "No one must do what is contrary to the dictates of his own conscience as illuminated by the Word!" (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 458).

⁷ Buttrick, 675.

⁸ I. Howard Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman, eds. *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 221.

reminds us that the conscience, like the mind and the heart, has suffered the ill effects brought about by the fall of man.

The Bible closely affiliates the conscience with the understanding. After all, *suneidesis* literally means “a knowing with” or “a knowledge shared with another.”⁹ The English Puritan William Perkins explains: “Conscience is a part of the mind or understanding....from whence knowledge and judgment proceed as effects.”¹⁰ William Ames, a student of Perkins, adds: “[The Conscience] belongs to the Understanding, not to the Will. The very name Conscience showeth it to be so. But this proveth it, because all those actions, which in the Scriptures are attributed to man’s Conscience, do properly belong to the reasonable power, or faculty.”¹¹ The conscience does not *determine* truth and morality; rather, it is the aspect of the understanding that endeavors to *comprehend* truth and morality. This distinction is seen in Romans 2:14-15, in which Paul speaks of the conscience as bearing witness to the law of nature which abides within each person. In commenting on this passage, John Murray gives three reasons why the “conscience must not be identified with ‘the work of the law written in their hearts.’” In his second reason he gives a helpful description of the conscience: “Conscience is a function; it is the person functioning in the realm of moral discrimination and judgment, the person viewed from the aspect of moral consciousness. The work of the law written in the heart is something ingenerated in our nature, is antecedent to the operations of conscience and

⁹ Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 1704.

¹⁰ William Perkins, *William Perkins: 1558-1602: English Puritanist*, ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Netherlands: B. De Graaf, 1966), 5. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

¹¹ William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (1639) (reprint, Edmonton: Still Waters Revival), 1.

the cause of them.”¹² The law of nature is an objective standard, while the conscience is a subjective understanding of that objective standard.

Since the conscience is a subjective understanding, it is not fixed and immutable. Ames argues that the Bible does not present the conscience as an autonomous and independent faculty that can in no way be affected by anything external to it.¹³ Positively, the conscience can be persuaded toward truth by an external influence (i.e., the conscience can be trained by the Scriptures). Leon Hynson points out the role of Scripture in teaching the conscience: “[Liberty of conscience] means liberty to hear and heed the voice of conscience; the freedom to study *the word of Scripture which informs conscience*, to engage in the hermeneutical task so that Scripture may be opened; and taught by the Spirit of truth.”¹⁴ By the same token, the conscience is subject to error and can be deceived by something outside of it to accept what is false.

The Role of the Conscience

One of the primary roles of the conscience is bearing witness to God’s truth. *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* describes the *conscience* as being “roughly, and mainly, a witness within man which condemns his sin.”¹⁵ Ames explains the feature of

¹² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, volume I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 75. James Boice similarly adds: “Some have confused the law of nature and the conscience, but they are two very different concepts. The first is an objective standard of which we are all aware; it involves knowledge, knowledge of the right. The conscience is the part of our being that tells us we ought to do the right thing personally” (James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Volume 1: Justification by Faith: Romans 1-4* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991], 239).

¹³ Ames, 1.

¹⁴ Leon O Hynson, “John Wesley’s Concept of Liberty of Conscience,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 43 (Italics added).

¹⁵ Buttrick, 671.

the conscience that differentiates it from other aspects of the understanding: “Conscience being referred to judgment, it is distinguished from the bare apprehension of truth. For conscience doth always suppose an assent that is firm and settled.”¹⁶ The proper role of the conscience is to supply the individual with a settled conviction of apprehended truth. The conscience particularly acts to convince an individual when he is guilty of committing sin by allowing him to suffer the pains of a guilty conscience.¹⁷ Though in its fallen condition the conscience cannot bear an infallible witness to the truth of God, the Bible does speak of the law of God being written on the hearts of men and their consciences bearing witness to its truth (Romans 2:14-15). This is a far cry, however, from the common belief that the conscience is a sort of flawless moral guide dwelling in each person.

Another aspect of the biblical role of the conscience is its influence on personal judgment. The Bible generally speaks of the conscience in the context of the individual apprehending practical, rather than merely theoretical, knowledge.¹⁸ Ames argues that the conscience aims to make “a practical judgment, by which, that which a man knoweth is particularly applied to that which is either good or evil to him, to the end that it may be a rule within to direct him.”¹⁹ The Bible indicates that the conscience in at least some way is to be a regulative principle, a crucial factor in determining how one ought to

¹⁶ Ames, 1-2.

¹⁷ Pierce, 117.

¹⁸ One example of *conscience* being used in the context of practical knowledge would be 1 Peter 3:15-16: “But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2. Ceslas Spicq states that Paul uses the conscience as “the interior faculty for the personal discernment of good and evil” (Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, vol. 3 [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994], 335).

live.²⁰ For example, Paul alludes to the conscience as a reason for obeying God's will: "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience" (Rom. 13:5).²¹

The Bible, however, never allows for the view that the individual is to be solely guided by his conscience. One illustration of this is depicted in the way Paul deals with the question of believers eating food that has been devoted to idols in 1 Corinthians 8. His chief purpose in this section is to prevent the strong in faith from forcing the weak to submit to "pains of conscience." Although in 1 Corinthians 10:27-30 Paul reminds his readers that the freedom of the strong is not to be fettered by the weak, his main burden in 1 Corinthians 8 is that the strong should avoid forcing the weak to act against their conscience. Even if the conscience of the strong says that it is acceptable to eat pagan meat, the strong still ought to consider not eating the meat for the sake of the weaker brethren. Paul himself "submits even his Christian liberty to the principle of love" by expressing his intention not to eat meat if it might cause his brother to stumble.²² The relevant point Paul is making here is that the Corinthians ought not to let their consciences be the only determining factor in their decisions. Hynson argues that the

²⁰ Buttrick, 674.

²¹ Before carelessly exalting the conscience as the sole factor to consider in decision-making, it is important to remember that there is still much disagreement over this role of the conscience. For example, Herman Ridderbos downplays the role of the conscience in making moral decisions altogether by arguing that Paul's primary understanding of the use of conscience had more to do with consciousness of guilt before God than it does a believer making moral decisions. Paul did not view the conscience as a moral compass by which one makes moral decisions. Ridderbos points out: "The liberty given in Christ therefore is mirrored in the conscience not as liberty from moral decision, but as freedom from guilt before God. That which is characteristic of Christian liberty of conscience does not lie in the sphere of the forming of moral judgments, but in that of the religious relationship to God" (Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: an outline of his theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 293). Pierce also emphasizes that the New Testament focuses on the conscience as being "the *subsequent* pain which indicates that sin has been committed by the man who suffers it" and not "the guide to future action" (Pierce, 117).

²² Simon Kistemaker, *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 277.

principle of liberty of conscience does not award the conscience exclusive rights to decision-making: “In a word, [liberty of conscience] implies liberty to follow where conscience, word, and Spirit lead.”²³

Proper Limitations of the Conscience

The Bible clearly sets limitations on the conscience and nowhere teaches that the conscience is to function as the ultimate determiner of moral truth. A man’s conscience is not completely free to determine what is right and wrong. This would essentially be a reversion back to the time of Judges when “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25, KJV). Bannerman points out that when the conscience is given final authority, the door is opened for the justification of all sorts of sinful behavior:

“Absolute and unlimited liberty to believe and act in religious matters as his conscience may dictate is *not* the right of any man, and from the very nature of the case cannot be.

There are bounds beyond which freedom of conscience becomes not a right, but a wrong, and liberty degenerates into licentiousness.”²⁴ Pierce similarly argues against the conscience’s ultimate authority:

Modern English usage regards conscience as a guide to future action independent of and superior to any other such guide, and to the counsel or command of any authority whatever. It can therefore be claimed as sufficient justification of a course of action adopted or contemplated, or opinion held, even although no facts are taken into account and all authority is defied. The New Testament, however, emphatically denies this.²⁵

²³ Hynson, “John Wesley’s Concept of Liberty of Conscience,” 37.

²⁴ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: a Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (1869), vol. 1 (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1991), 165.

²⁵ Pierce, 117.

The Bible nowhere supports the notion that the individual's conscience is the final authority in determining how one ought to live.

Some exaggerate the role of conscience, as Charles Finney does in his claim: "The Bible and the human conscience are at one and entirely agree in all their moral decisions and teachings. This fact proves conclusively that they both come from the same author."²⁶ This approach tends toward the dangerous deification of the conscience and the de-emphasis of the authority of the Scriptures. After all, if the Bible is the word of God, and the Bible and the human conscience are "at one," it is logical to conclude that conscience is also the word of God. Conscience becomes as authoritative as the Bible. Donald Macleod argues against the absolute freedom of the conscience: "No man has an absolute and unlimited right to believe and act simply as his conscience dictates. The liberty of conscience is limited by the authority of God.... Our consciences are bound."²⁷

In 1 Corinthians 4:4, Paul makes clear that we are not to put our consciences on par with the Word of God: "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me." The conscience is not to be considered the ultimate court of appeal. The conscience is fallen and fallible and, therefore, cannot be entirely trusted as a guide. Likewise, in commenting on 1 Corinthians 4:4, Ridderbos remarks: "Paul does not here speak so much of the inadequacy as indeed of the incompetence of his own conscience to justify him before men as the servant of the Lord."²⁸ Ridderbos further

²⁶ Charles Finney, "Conscience and the Bible in History," *The Gospel Truth: The Oberlin Evangelist*, 6 June 1855, http://www.charlesfinney.com/1855OE/550606_conscience_bible.htm (5 May 2005).

²⁷ Donald Macleod, "Liberty of Conscience," *The Banner of Truth magazine*, July-August 1971, <http://www.the-highway.com/articleMar99html> (3 May 2004).

²⁸ Ridderbos, 292.

points out that “the judgment of the conscience can never be the end of all dispute.”²⁹

Pierce highlights the universally fallible nature of the conscience: “The defect of conscience as an ethical norm is common to every man.”³⁰ Anthony Thiselton also interprets Paul’s statement to be referring to the unreliability of the conscience as an authoritative moral guide:

The main point is that human judgment remains fallible and inadequate whether it be positive or negative, or whether it be Paul’s or another human agent’s.... Thus a person’s conscience may be oversensitive and overreact, or undersensitive and underreact. Thus Paul can place no trust in the relativity of human conscience *as over against the absolute verdict of God*, although conscience has value as a *relative* indicator of self-approval or self-disapproval.³¹

Although the testimony of conscience carries weight, its subjective nature prevents it from being correctly accredited as a final authority in determining questions of truth and morality.

In his article entitled “The Conscience,” Dave Arch reminds his readers that there is more than one type of conscience spoken about in the Bible. It is possible to have a “seared conscience” (1 Tim. 4:2), a “weak conscience” (1 Cor. 8:1-13), and a “defiled conscience” (Tit. 1:15). Arch warns his readers against treating the conscience as an infallible guide:

The Bible and NOT our conscience is the final guide for living life God's way. 1 Corinthians 4:3, 4 tells us that it is possible for our conscience to indicate to us that nothing is wrong and still there is. Remember that our conscience is limited by the knowledge of the Bible we possess. Therefore, the Bible is our final guide, not only how we might feel about a

²⁹ Ibid., 293.

³⁰ Pierce, 89.

³¹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 340.

matter.³²

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia gives a similar warning against treating the conscience as infallible:

Those who would limit the conscience to the faculty which utters the major premises of moral reasoning are wont to hold that it can never err and does not admit of being educated; but such a use of the term is too remote from common usage, and there must be room left for the conscience to enlighten itself by making acquaintance with such objective standards as the character of God, the example of Christ, and the teaching of Scripture, as well as with the maxims of the wise and the experience of the good.³³

In commenting on Romans 2:14-15, Wayne Grudem points out that “at times this evidence of God’s law on the hearts of unbelievers is distorted or suppressed.”³⁴

Geoffrey Wilson adds: “The conscience of the natural man is blurred, though not extinguished by sin.”³⁵

Moreover, liberty of conscience cannot be used to oppose legitimate church authority exercised by those acting as God’s delegates. Bannerman points out that the right of liberty of conscience is limited by the enactments of divine law, the ordinance of civil authority, and the ordinances of ecclesiastical authority.³⁶ In arguing that liberty of conscience “does not override the obligation to obey authorities acting according to God’s Word,” Michael Wagner quotes Thomas M’Crie: “He who is the Lord of the

³² Dave Arch, *Ask a Pastor*, <http://www.askapastor.org/conscience.html> (5 May 2005).

³³ James Orr, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 702.

³⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 122.

³⁵ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Romans: A Digest of Reformed Comment* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1969), 42.

³⁶ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 165-169.

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.”³⁷ Pierce similarly warns: “To allow men to suppose [the conscience] infallible, while understanding it in a sense wider to a ludicrous degree than any it has in the New Testament is as great a disservice to them as can be imagined. It is nothing less than a complete abdication of the office to which [the church] is appointed.”³⁸

A guilty man cannot escape the discipline of God exercised through his church by simply invoking “liberty of conscience.” P.G. Mathew points out that “conscience” is too often misused as “the final refuge for the autonomous Christian scoundrel.” Mathew comments: “Only a scoundrel will use the argument of liberty of conscience to disobey parents, state government, or church leaders.”³⁹ A man is certainly permitted to resist church authority when it is unbiblical in practice or in purpose, but he has no right to resist the legitimate and biblical practice of church authority simply on the basis of his conscience.⁴⁰

³⁷ Thomas M’Crie, *Statement of the Difference Between the Profession of the Reformed Church of Scotland, as Adopted by Seceders, and the Profession Contained in the New Testimony and Other Acts Lately Adopted by the General Assemblies Synod* (Edinburgh: C. F. Lyon, 1871), 162. Quoted in Michael Wagner, “A Presbyterian Political Manifesto: Presbyterianism and Civil Government” <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/presbpol.htm> (5 May 2005).

³⁸ Pierce, 124.

³⁹ P.G. Mathew, “God’s Delegated Authorities,” 25 April 2004, http://www.gracevalley.org/sermon_trans/1999/How_Is_Your_Conscience.html (13 June 2005).

⁴⁰ The obligation that believers have to obey church authority is dealt with more fully in the section entitled “Church Authority: the obligation of obedience.”

Church Authority Limited by the Conscience

Although the conscience cannot simply overrule the ordinances of the church, Bannerman insists that there *is* a definite sense in which “the right of Church power is limited by the rights of conscience.”⁴¹ One legitimate role of the conscience is to determine whether what the authority is asking one to do *is*, in fact, something morally (or biblically) wrong or if it is a matter of moral indifference. If a church leader demands the congregant to do something that is morally wrong, then he is bound to disobey that church’s authority.⁴²

God does not call the believer be naïve and believe whatever any church authority teaches or do whatever any leader commands; rather, his solemn duty is to test everything in light of the Scriptures to see if it is truly from God (1 Thes. 5:21; 1 John 4:1). This is liberty of conscience properly practiced because it is operating under the authority of the Bible rather than setting itself up as the ultimate authority. Jesus himself implies this role for the conscience when he exhorts his followers to beware of false prophets (Matt. 7:15). The renewed conscience guided by the Word and the Spirit alerts the believer when the prophet speaks falsehood. Similarly, the risen Lord commends the Ephesian believers for properly using their consciences to discern false apostles: “I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false” (Rev. 2:2). Donald Barnhouse comments: “We should not forget that the [Ephesians’] testing and their judging were in obedience to God’s Word. God

⁴¹ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 248.

⁴² If it is a matter of indifference, there is debate over whether or not the individual is bound to obey that authority. The issue of the boundaries of church authority in areas of moral indifference is treated later in this chapter in the section entitled “The Scope of Church Authority.”

tells us that we must judge.”⁴³ Likewise, Luke commends the Bereans for always testing what Paul taught by the Scriptures (Acts 17:11).

A believer’s conscience must be bound by Scripture, and he is to judge all that he is taught and commanded in the light of Scripture, which is his ultimate authority. Ed Hayes explains this role of the conscience: “Freedom of soul means that Christians are to search the Scriptures prayerfully. It does not mean that any person’s idea of truth goes.”⁴⁴ A believer who chooses to remain ignorant of the Word of God forfeits true liberty of conscience and enslaves himself to his own darkened conscience, sinful passions, and fallen reasoning.

Because it is such a delicate subject, orthodox theologians usually hesitate when it comes to giving definition to the limits of church authority as it relates to liberty of conscience. They do not want to maintain one at the expense of the other, and they are keenly aware of the tendency to do so. Take Bannerman for instance: “And [Christ] delegates a part of this authority to the Church, to be held and exercised under certain restrictions for the spiritual good of its members; and makes the Church His organ to express, and His minister to wield, something of this authority over the conscience and the heart.”⁴⁵ Bannerman imprecisely notes that Christ delegates “a part” of his authority over the conscience to the church. He then nebulously speaks of the minister as possessing “something of this authority” over the believer’s conscience. Bannerman’s ambiguity is more a testimony of the difficulty of this subject than it is of any purposeful

⁴³ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 39.

⁴⁴ Ed Hayes, *The Church: The Body of Christ in the World of Today* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), 88-89.

⁴⁵ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 224.

evasiveness on his part. He knows that the High Churchmen can take a statement that asserts the authority of the church over the conscience to justify authoritarian forms of church government, while the Low Churchmen can take a statement of the authority of the conscience over the church to justify libertinism and antinomianism.⁴⁶

Summary

Theologians can wrangle without end about how to define the conscience accurately and what its proper role is, but the chief point here is not so much to pin down a complete and universally satisfying definition of the conscience. Instead, the major concern here is to establish that, however one interprets the Bible's view of the conscience, the Scriptures clearly teach that the individual's conscience does not have final authority in determining how one ought to live. As a matter of fact, the conscience is not even to be considered the ultimate factor in decision-making. As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* unequivocally teaches: "The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him."⁴⁷

If we concur that the Bible is the proper authority for the believer, then we must admit that our consciences are bound by the Scriptures. Where our consciences are in conflict with God's recorded revelation, our consciences must be bound and adjusted to

⁴⁶ Bannerman writes in the nineteenth century, a time in which there is a relative mixture of High Churchmen and Low Churchmen (see page 8), though history proves that the trend toward the radical Low was well under way. In the Reformation times, they tended to emphasize the vital role of the conscience because they were faced with so many who held to the radical High view. We must know our times and realize that the evangelical church is now steeped in the radical Low view and the call must be to reclaim the rights of churches to exercise authority for the care of the congregation.

⁴⁷ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question # 2. Found in *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), 287.

conform to the Word of God. P.G. Mathew offers a simile that is helpful in clarifying how we ought to view the conscience: “Conscience is like a sundial. It functions somewhat accurately only when the sun is shining upon it. It is not at all accurate in the moonlight. Even so, when a Christian knows the word of God, is led by the Spirit of God, and is living a holy life, he will have a good conscience.”⁴⁸ In the context of this conflict between church authority and liberty of conscience, the most important matter in any particular issue is not what the church says or what the conscience says; rather, *what the Bible says* must be awarded paramount importance.

Church Authority: The Obligation of Obedience

The pastor steps up to the pulpit of his evangelical church to instruct the people on practical Christian living, especially in terms of how to function under God’s delegated authorities. The pastor begins by declaring that children are to obey their parents in the Lord, for this is right (Eph. 6:1). In response, the congregation bellows an enthusiastic “Amen!” The pastor proceeds to exhort everyone to submit themselves to the governing authorities of the state (Rom. 13:1). In response, the people shout a hearty “Amen!” The pastor moves on to charge wives to submit to their husbands as to the Lord (Eph. 5:22). In response, the church gives a more subdued and uncomfortable “Amen.” Finally, the pastor admonishes the church members to obey the church leaders and submit to their authority (Hebrews 13:17). In response, the congregation glowers at the pastor with suspicious eyes and murmur to themselves, “Whatever happened to liberty of conscience?”

⁴⁸ Mathew, “God’s Delegated Authorities,” http://www.gracevalley.org/sermon_trans/1999/How_Is_Your_Conscience.html.

Having studied in the previous section what the Scriptures teach about the conscience, it is now necessary to examine what they teach about church authority. We will consider first the exhortation in Hebrews 13:17 for church members to submit to the authority of their leaders; second, the biblical principle that church leaders are God's delegated authorities; and lastly, the congregation's obligation to obey church authority.

Exhortation to Obey Church Leaders in Hebrews 13:17

The clear call to submit to church authority can cause a hullabaloo in modern American churches. In preparing a sermon on Hebrews 13:17, Mike Hays points out: "Whenever people today hear the word 'authority' or the phrase 'obey your leaders,' many bristle and automatically call their best defense mechanisms to the ready."⁴⁹ John Piper describes the charge to "obey your leaders and submit to them" as being "culturally outrageous" in today's society.⁵⁰ The writer to the Hebrews' exhortation to obey the church leaders certainly swims against the American cultural current, even within the evangelical church.

The author of Hebrews begins his epistle with an emphasis on Christ's authority. He teaches the divinity of Christ (chapter 1) and proceeds to declare his authority over angels (chapter 2), Moses (chapter 3), and Aaron (chapter 5). No evangelical Christian would argue with the authority of Christ, but the writer goes further. Paul Ellingworth points out: "In Hebrews, the sole priesthood of Christ does not obviate the need for

⁴⁹ Mike Hays, "Shepherds of the Soul," *SermonCentral.com*, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=4> (5 May 2005).

⁵⁰ John Piper, "Obey Your Joyful Leaders," <http://www.soundofgrace.com/piper97/10-12-97.htm> (5 May 2005).

pastoral leadership in the community.”⁵¹ After expounding the high and lofty doctrine of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the author gives an eminently practical admonition in Hebrews 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority.”

The context makes plain that the leaders being referred to in Hebrews 13:17 are church leaders.⁵² Even liberal-leaning scholars are compelled to agree with the judgment of John Calvin on this point: “I have no doubt that he is speaking of the pastors and other governors of the Church. There were then no Christian magistrates, and when he says that *they watch in behalf of your souls*, he is referring properly to spiritual rule.”⁵³ Arthur Pink echoes this interpretation: “It is quite clear from the balance of the verse that its opening words have reference to religious leaders, and not to civil rulers.”⁵⁴ The writer to the Hebrews waits until the end of the epistle to explain how Christ exercises His authority in the church through the authority delegated to church leaders.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Paul Ellingworth, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 723.

⁵² The writer certainly refers earlier to church leaders in Hebrew 13:7, when he admonishes: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you.” Church leaders, after all, are primarily entrusted with the task of speaking God’s word to the people. Moreover, the second part of Hebrews 13:17 reads: “They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” The call to obey those who keep watch naturally refers to church leaders who are given the task of keeping watch over God’s flock (Acts 20:28).

⁵³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries: Hebrews and I and II Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 212.

⁵⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 1227.

⁵⁵ The writer to the Hebrews most likely wrote his exhortation based on the observation that the second generation of leaders was not as readily being given the same respect as their predecessors (William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker, *Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995], 426). F.F. Bruce also sees Hebrews 13:17 as referring to the successors to the first generation leaders referred to in verse 7 (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 385).

Church Leaders as God's Delegated Authorities

Jesus' teaching on the principle of delegated authority is recorded in Matthew 10. In this passage, Jesus sent out the Twelve to the surrounding villages: "He called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness" (Matt. 10:1). Christ gave his apostles the authority to represent him. Knox Chamblin states: "Jesus here authorizes the disciples to go forth as extensions of his own ministry."⁵⁶ Moreover, Jesus promised that when they faced trouble, God would help them by his Spirit to speak his words as his representatives: "At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matt. 10:20). Undoubtedly, God alone has ultimate authority, but his practice is to delegate his authority to certain human beings to be exercised here on earth in his behalf.

Christ is unquestionably the sole head of the church, but he also calls individuals into the ministry and designates these pastors and elders to be his delegated authorities in the church. God gives pastors and teachers as gifts to the church to exercise proper authority in his name. Ellingworth points out that the principle of God establishing delegated authorities has ancient biblical roots: "The theme of obedience to human leaders within the believing community goes back to the Old Testament (Gen. 41:40; Ex. 16:20; Jos. 1:18) and Judaism; soon after [the book of] Hebrews, it was strongly emphasized in the Christian community."⁵⁷ The Old and New Testament alike describe how God delegates human authorities to represent him to his people.

⁵⁶ Knox Chamblin, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to Matthew* (Charlotte: Reformed Theological Seminary Virtual Campus, 1993), 92.

⁵⁷ Ellingworth, 723.

A few of the many Old Testament examples of God delegating authority will suffice. Moses and Aaron declare to the Israelites who complain about their leadership and lack of provision: “Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the Lord” (Ex. 16:8). Later on, these same Israelites again rebel against Moses and Aaron and are ready to stone them for their failures as leaders. God, however, interprets this as rebellion against himself: “How long will these people treat me with contempt?” (Num. 14:11). To treat God’s delegated authorities with contempt is to treat God himself with contempt. Shortly thereafter Moses rebukes Korah for his rebellion against God’s delegated authority: “It is against the Lord that you and all your followers have banded together. Who is Aaron that you should grumble against him?” (Num 16:11). About this verse Calvin comments:

Although they might have never confessed to themselves that they had to do with Him, but only with that they were contending for the pre-eminence with men; still, because it was their aim to overthrow the order established by God, Moses casts aside all false pretences, and sets before them the simple fact that they are waging war with God, when they are fighting with His servants.⁵⁸

To complain against Moses and Aaron was to complain against the God whom they represented as leaders. Likewise, in 1 Samuel 8:7, God assured Samuel when the people asked for another leader: “It is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king.” Their rejection of Samuel was a rejection of the God who called Samuel to be a prophet.

Even common sense attests to the truth of this principle. If a local governor rejects a royal ambassador, he is not rejecting the ambassador but the king that the ambassador represents. A biblical example of this principle is when David sends a

⁵⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses: Arranged in the Form of a Harmony, volume fourth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 104.

delegation to express sympathy to Hanun, the king of the Ammonites, for the death of his father (2 Samuel 10:1-7). Hanun responds by shaving half the beards of the ambassadors and cutting off their clothes at the buttocks. This was not merely an insult to the ambassadors; rather, it was an insult to the king whom they represented. Furthermore, the prophet Hosea speaks: “The Lord used a prophet to bring Israel up from Egypt, by a prophet he cared for him” (Hos. 12:13). The Lord exercises pastoral care for his people through divinely-sent human beings.

God’s practice of delegating authorities within the covenant community to represent him is just as clear in the New Testament. When Ananias and Sapphira lie to Peter and the Jerusalem church leaders about their donation, they are accused of lying to God himself (Acts 5:4). Lying to God’s representatives is as immoral as lying to God himself. While Jesus is certainly the supreme Good Shepherd who cares for his flock, the New Testament makes clear that he also sends pastors to care for his people in his behalf. Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). John MacArthur describes the New Testament office of the pastor as a teaching shepherd, whose primary goal is to bring his flock to perfection.⁵⁹ God provides shepherds as representatives of the Good Shepherd in order to lead and care for his people. “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:11-12).

⁵⁹ John MacArthur, *Body Dynamics: A Blueprint for the Church as a Body* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988), 89.

In order to carry out their God-given tasks successfully, God grants His ministers authority to exercise in the church. Geoffrey Thomas reminds us of the authority that God delegates to the pastors and teachers that he sends as gifts: “It is Christ who provides pastors and teachers. The church has recognized that Christ has sent this man to be His ambassador. That is where his authority lies.”⁶⁰ God grants ministers authority so that they can maintain an ordered environment, in which the Word of God can do its work without hindrance. MacArthur states: “Order is the responsibility of gifted men whom God gives to the Church.”⁶¹

The Obligation to Obey Church Authority

The right of church leaders to exercise authority carries with it an implied obligation of church members to obey their leaders. Packer explains: “Authority is a relational word which signifies the right to rule. It is expressed in claims and is acknowledged by compliance and conformity.”⁶² When God sets up leaders, we ought to understand that his will is that his delegated authorities will lead, and his people will follow. Hayes asserts: “Submission to governing authorities, both within and outside the church, is to be the norm.”⁶³ In his analysis of Paul’s theology, Ridderbos makes clear the obligation of the church to obey God’s appointed leaders: “Thus the authority and those who hold it are given by Christ for the upbuilding of the church, and thus the

⁶⁰ Geoffrey Thomas, “The Pastoral Ministry,” *Practical Theology and the Ministry of the Church: 1952-1984*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1990) 76.

⁶¹ John MacArthur, *Body Dynamics*, 90.

⁶² J.I. Packer, *Freedom and Authority* (Oakland: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1981), 7.

⁶³ Hayes, 127.

church has to acknowledge, honor, and subject itself to them, and obey them.”⁶⁴ Some would like to argue that this kind of authority is unique to the first century apostles, but Ridderbos emphasizes that this authority is not due to Paul exclusively because of his apostolic appointment by Christ:

That Paul is himself conscious of bearing this authority and on that ground requires obedience of the church to his ordinances has already been sufficiently evident to us. But he does not restrict this authority to himself. He also ascribes it to those who in virtue of the *charismata* given them or their position in the church from the beginning give leadership and stand in the forefront.⁶⁵

If no one is bound to obey an authority, then the authority is not much more than a figurehead. Bannerman speaks of “the inherent right of the rulers to rule, and the no less inherent duty of the ruled to obey.”⁶⁶ In other words, inherent in the idea of a ruler is the obligation of the ruler’s subjects to render obedience. Bannerman states:

A right of government dependent for its validity and binding obligation upon the giving or withholding sanction to it by those who are governed—which there is no duty in yielding submission to, and no blame in refusing to obey—considered simply as authority, can, it is plain, be no government at all, in the proper meaning of the word, and was never practically realized in any community under heaven.⁶⁷

Government does not truly exist if there is no one being governed. Whether in the church or in society, structure and order require obedience to legitimate authority. Bannerman

⁶⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 475.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 474. Certainly, the apostles have a unique authority as authors of Scripture, but their authority as church leaders is not unique in every way.

⁶⁶ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: a Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (1869), vol. 1 (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1991), 242.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

asserts the legitimate role of the church as “the Divine and public organ for representing and administering His authority” over the inward and spiritual estate of man.⁶⁸

If church authority represents God’s authority, then it must be obeyed. Arthur Pink makes this point: “To ignore those rulers or to rebel against their authority is to despise the One who has appointed them.”⁶⁹ Pink also writes of our obligation of “rendering unto those officers in the church that submission and respect to which they are entitled by virtue of the position and authority which Christ has accorded them... which can only be disregarded to the manifest dishonor of the Lord and to our great loss.”⁷⁰

MacArthur also echoes the importance of submission to delegated authority: “But for believers, God’s most important rule is through Spirit-controlled men. Someday God will rule all the earth through His Son, the King of kings, but in the meanwhile He rules His church through godly men. Submission to these men, therefore, is submission to God.”⁷¹

MacArthur reiterates this same point: “When a man is placed in the rule of a local church, our submission and obedience to him is equivalent to submission and obedience to Christ.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Ibid., 225.

⁶⁹ Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 1239-1240.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 1227.

⁷¹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1977), 444.

⁷² Ibid., 445. This quote appears to favor a church being ruled by single individual, but wisdom dictates that church authority be exercised by a group of leaders rather than one individual.

Summary

At this point, it may appear that all of this smacks of authoritarianism—just another attempt by megalomaniac ministers to quench their thirst for power. Too often, the difference between authority properly exercised and authoritarianism is blurred or ignored. Packer emphasizes the distinction: “Exercise of authority in its various spheres is not necessarily *authoritarian*. There is a crucial distinction here. Authoritarianism is authority corrupted.... Authoritarianism appears when the submission that is demanded cannot be justified in terms of truth or morality.”⁷³ Contrary to popular belief, not every exercise of authority is authoritarianism.

Certainly, authoritarianism does exist, and God does not grant church leaders limitless and absolute authority. The boundaries of church authority will be spelled out in the following section, but the purpose here is to offer a strong reminder that God has vested church leaders with authority to rule over affairs in his church. This authority carries with it an obligation of church members to obey their leaders and submit to their authority (Heb. 13:17). This is a message sorely needed in our decidedly individualistic, anti-authority age. Packer warns that the modern Western “anti-authority syndrome” inevitably results in “lives of haphazard hedonism in which my feelings of like and dislike are the only authority I recognize.” Packer further comments on the resulting lifestyle: “You could hardly get further from the way we are meant to live.”⁷⁴

⁷³ Packer, *Freedom and Authority*, 8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

The Scope of Church Authority

In *Democratic Religion*, Gregory Wills retells the account of the discipline procedure of “brother Lancaster” in 1817. His crime was that he allowed the young people to dance at his house for his daughter’s wedding. Though the practice of dancing is nowhere plainly condemned in the Bible, the leaders of the Powelton Baptist Church adjudged modern dancing to be sensual and lascivious, banning it for being unbiblical in principle.⁷⁵

This historical situation raises several pertinent questions. Is this an example of faithful shepherding or rank legalism? Did the church step outside of its realm of authority by disciplining brother Lancaster for participating in a practice that is not explicitly banned in the Bible? Should the decision be left up to Lancaster to decide whether or not the dancing that took place at his house was appropriate? When has the church gone too far in exercising authority? Even if many can agree that members of a church are in some sense obligated to “obey your leaders and submit to their authority” (after all, it is difficult for a professing evangelical to openly disagree with a plain reading of Scripture), the debate still rages over the extent of the members’ obligation to obey their leaders.

In this section, we will attempt to ascertain the extent of the church members’ obligation to obey their leaders. We will consider various views concerning that which the Bible does not speak definitively about (the *adiaphora*), i.e., matters of moral indifference. Does the church or the individual conscience have authority in such matters? *Adiaphora* issues (like the one given in the example above) are often thorny and

⁷⁵ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26-27.

debatable, but we will also examine the definite limits placed on church authority in the Bible.

Church Authority and Adiaphora

The debate over church authority is especially touchy when it comes to the question of *adiaphora*, or “things indifferent.” This conflict is most poignant in the area of corrective church discipline. Some will argue that the church can correct a congregant only for doing something that clearly and directly violates a biblical command (i.e., “thou shalt not steal”), and that the church has no authority over that which is not directly forbidden in Scripture. Many modern Christians insist that the *adiaphora* must be entirely left up to the individual and his conscience. In other words, the church authority can tell me not to steal, but I am the one who determines whether or not it is to be considered stealing when I use office supplies without the permission of the boss for printing out thousands of church fliers. If my conscience tells me it is not stealing, then I am innocent of the charge.

Before discussing who has authority in areas of *adiaphora*, the more important issue is how *adiaphora* is defined. The trend in the evangelical church has been an ever-broadening view of *adiaphora*, which has come to be defined as any and every practice that is not directly forbidden in Scripture. John Wecks’ definition serves as an example of this broad view:

A neutral issue is anything that the Bible does not clearly say is either right or wrong but that someone could hold as wrong based on personal conviction.... At the same time another Christian may see nothing wrong with the same issue and feel complete freedom before God to participate,

thus being free to practice what some describe as Christian liberty or Christian freedom.⁷⁶

This type of broad view severely limits the scope of what a church can discipline. After all, the Bible says nothing directly against things like cocaine addiction or drinking and driving. The Bible also never directly forbids the act of downloading child pornography off the Internet. In fact, one can even make an argument that the Bible does not explicitly forbid the practices of abortion and pre-marital sex. The Bible, however, clearly prohibits all of these practices *in principle*.

Many assume that if the direct practice is not condemned in Scripture, then the act is morally indifferent. The flaw with this assumption is that the Bible can condemn an act in principle. The Feinbergs make this important distinction between practices and principles when discussing Romans 14: “The *practices* under question are eating meat offered to idols and observing one day as special above another, but the *principles* Paul teaches cover morally indifferent practices in general.”⁷⁷ For example, the Bible may not speak directly against the practice of pornography, but it is certainly a form of lust, a principle clearly condemned in Scripture. The church must have the right to apply discipline to that which the Scriptures condemn in principle. After all, a practice is nothing more than a principle applied. John Frame points out how the Westminster divines appropriately articulate this idea:

Therefore the Westminster Confession of Faith is correct when it says (I, vi) that the whole counsel of God is found not only in what Scripture explicitly teaches but also among those things that ‘by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.’ This statement has been attacked even by professing disciples of Calvin, but it is quite

⁷⁶ John Wecks, *Free to Disagree: Moving Beyond the Arguments over Christian Liberty* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996) 20.

⁷⁷ John and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), 43.

unavoidable. If we deny the implications of Scripture, we are denying Scripture.⁷⁸

In other words, if an action (or inaction) is condemned by the Bible in principle, then it ought not be considered *adiaphora*.

The example of Paul's stern rebuke of Peter in Galatians 2 will help to clarify how a practice can be morally indifferent in essence, yet judged to be culpable in principle. "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong" (Gal. 2:11). There was nothing inherently wrong with Peter choosing to eat with his Jewish brethren. Many would argue that where one chooses to eat is purely a matter of moral indifference to be left to the individual's conscience. Peter has the right to sit wherever he wants. Apparently, however, Paul saw the situation differently. He rebuked Peter because his action of not eating with the Gentiles broke a biblical principle of accepting anyone into fellowship on the basis of faith in Christ. Peter's conduct effectively denied the truth of justification by faith.⁷⁹ The point here is that a practice that appears on the surface to be morally indifferent is, in fact, deemed sinful because of the principle that lies behind the practice. Paul did not leave it up to Peter to decide for himself whether or not his action was wrong.

There remains, however, the question concerning matters that are morally indifferent *even in principle*. In other words, what about that which is truly *adiaphora*? The debate continues to rage over who has the right to determine how the biblical principle ought to be applied. Is the determination made by the church or the individual? Although the majority opinion since the Reformation tends to hold that the individual's

⁷⁸ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 253.

⁷⁹ John Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986), 54-55.

conscience has the authority to determine in matters which are truly morally indifferent (in practice and in principle), a sound biblical case can also be made for the authority of the church in such matters. This argument rests on a comprehensive understanding of the Bible's view of authority.

People tend to hold a different view of church authority than the other authorities spoken of in Scripture. For example, most understand from Romans 13 that we are bound to obey the civil governors *in everything*, unless they command us to sin or prevent us from worshiping God. Stott remarks: "We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God... Whenever laws are enacted which contradict God's law, civil disobedience becomes a Christian duty."⁸⁰ In other words, in the things morally indifferent, I am under the authority of the government. Stopping at a red light may be morally neutral (why not just yield and see if there are other cars coming?), but I am bound to stop because it is the law of the land. Our consciences are not free to determine that we no longer want to stop at red lights because the Bible binds us to obey our governing authorities even in matters that are morally neutral both in practice and in principle.

The same principle is widely understood when it comes to parents' authority over their children. The assigned chore of taking out the garbage is morally neutral, but most would agree that the children are bound to do it if the parents command. "I don't feel like it" is simply an unsophisticated way that children wrongly apply their liberty of conscience. Children are commanded to obey their parents "in everything" (Col. 3:20). The same principle holds true, but is not as easily applied, in the cases of husband/wife and employer/employee relationships. The wife is to submit to her husband "in

⁸⁰ John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), 342.

everything” (Eph. 5:24) and the slave is to obey his master “just as you would obey Christ” (Eph. 6:5). It should go without saying (and often does in the Bible) that this call to comprehensive obedience does not include the case in which the authority figure commands the subordinate to sin or somehow impedes the worship of God.⁸¹

One may justly wonder why we should suddenly hold an entirely different view of authority when it comes to the authority that God delegates to the church. The Bible supports the idea that these general principles of authority ought to apply to the authority of the church as well. Jesus declares in Matthew 18:18: “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” This “whatever” is as comprehensive as the “in everything” clause in Ephesians 5:24 and Colossians 3:20. C. H. Spurgeon explains: “Each church has the keys of its own door. When those keys are rightly turned by the assembly below, the act is ratified above.”⁸² Another text that supports the idea of our obedience to church leaders being as comprehensive as it is in the case of family and state is Jesus’ statement about the Pharisees in Matthew 23:2-3: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you.” Certainly Jesus is not here giving a ringing endorsement to the Pharisees as sound religious leaders; rather, He is recognizing the principle that he who sits “in Moses’ seat” is to be obeyed in everything, insofar as he does not command that which results in sin. “Moses’ seat” is

⁸¹ John Stott comments on Ephesians 6:1: “Children are not to obey their parents in absolutely everything without exception, but in everything which is compatible with their primary loyalty, namely to their Lord Jesus Christ” (John Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986], 242).

⁸² C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 253.

best interpreted to refer to the authorized community religious leaders.⁸³ Although Jesus proceeds to give a diatribe on the wicked and hypocritical practices of the Pharisees, it is interesting that he begins with the people's obligation to obey their religious leaders in "everything."

In his sermon on Hebrews 13:17, John Wesley argues at length for the Church's authority even over the areas of *adiaphora*. He maintains that the call to obey church leaders must go beyond just obeying the Bible:

In things forbidden of God, we dare not obey them; for we are to obey God rather than man. In things enjoined of God, we do not properly obey *them*, but our common Father. Therefore, if we are to obey them at all, it must be in things indifferent. The sum is, it is the duty of every private Christian to obey his spiritual Pastor, by either doing or leaving undone anything of an indifferent nature; anything that is no way determined in the Word of God.⁸⁴

He is saying that obedience to church leaders is meaningless if all it means is to obey them when they only parrot exactly what the Bible commands. To obey the church leader in that case is to obey the Scriptures not the church leader. The fact that Wesley's statement sounds so radical to our ears could be evidence that we have been influenced by the postmodern and autonomous spirit of our age.⁸⁵

⁸³ Robert H. Mounce, *New International Biblical Commentary: Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 213.

⁸⁴ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986), 114.

⁸⁵ A common counter-argument to the argument favoring church authority over areas of *adiaphora* is that of sphere-sovereignty, which says that authorities only have the right to exercise authority in the sphere that God has given them to rule. "Each institution was created for a purpose, and therefore was given certain powers and a specific jurisdiction" (L. John Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea*. [Craig Press, 1972], 22).

While this view certainly has merit, it is difficult to carry it out to its logical end. Does this mean that the church has no authority whatsoever to address issues of the state or home? Surely it is foolish to conclude that the church cannot discipline a man for sin he commits in his own home because it is outside the church's sphere of sovereignty.

Limits of Church Authority

Although my chief goal is to expand the modern boundaries that have been wrongfully set up in order to stifle church power, there are definite biblical limits to church authority that must be recognized. This is not a call to revive the medieval Roman Catholic authoritarianism that took advantage of the rampant ignorance of the laity. The Puritan Samuel Bolton describes the Roman Catholic authoritarian views in his own day: “The Romish doctrine requires absolute submission to the authority of the Church, an authority which neither men nor angels may usurp without high treason to Jesus Christ.” Bolton then gives a quote from the Roman Catholic St. Bellarmine in order to demonstrate the Roman Church’s abusive perspective on church authority: “You are ignorant and unskilled; therefore if you wish to be saved, there is no other course open to you but to render a blind obedience to our authority.”⁸⁶ The purpose here is not to promote the cause of Bellarmine by calling people to blind obedience, discarding entirely the role of the individual’s conscience. All human authority must be limited in one way or another. Jay Adams comments: “Authority is not limitless. Authority in the Bible is limited by the Bible itself.”⁸⁷

The authority of the church leader is never absolute or inherent. Their authority is derived from God and must always be submitted to his revealed Word. James Bannerman insists that ministers, possessing no authority of their own, have a derived and subordinate authority and that “church power is limited by the rule prescribed for its

⁸⁶ Samuel Bolton, *True Bounds of Christian Liberty* (1645) (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 208.

⁸⁷ Jay E. Adams, *More Than Redemption: A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979), 288. Note that this is contrary to Wesley’s statement above about matters of moral indifference.

exercise, or by the Word of God.”⁸⁸ A church leader does not have the power to speak *ex cathedra* with flawless precision, unlike the claim of the Pope. The ordinances and teachings of the church must always be checked with Scripture. A church authority who credits infallibility to himself has clearly overstepped his God-given bounds. God alone is perfectly flawless (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 18:30; 19:7). Just as the king’s ambassadors must come under the authority of the king, so also church authorities, as ambassadors of Christ (2 Cor. 5:20), must come under the authority of Christ, the head of the church.

The first limit on church authority is that the church (as well as the family or the state) plainly has no right to command that which contradicts the Bible, either *in practice* or *in principle*. The church can neither command a man to do that which the Bible either explicitly or implicitly forbids nor forbid a man to do that which the Bible either explicitly or implicitly commands. Bannerman describes the church’s limited power: “She has no power of legislation for herself, according to her own wisdom or discretion, but must be contented to abide within the limits of that constitution and those laws appointed for her in the Word of God.”⁸⁹ Ronald Enroth’s *Churches That Abuse* gives many examples of purported abuses of authority that can help define the limits of authority.⁹⁰ Enroth gives an example of a pastor who counseled a couple to divorce, although neither the husband nor the wife wanted to separate. The couple followed the pastor’s counsel and agreed to the divorce because they thought that since he was a

⁸⁸ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* (1869), vol. 1 (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1991), 219, 248.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹⁰ The sundry problems of this book are duly examined in Chapter 4.

pastor, “anything he did had to be right.”⁹¹ Elsewhere, Enroth tells of a church that “has reportedly paid for abortions for members, including teenagers.”⁹² In these cases one must invoke the words of Peter and John to the high priest’s charge to stop teaching in the name of Christ: “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29).⁹³

Even if we allow that the church has authority in areas of *adiaphora*, this authority should be used sparingly. After all, the biblical principle of exasperation can be applied to all forms of authority. Paul expressly articulates this principle in an exhortation to fathers in Ephesians 6:4: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Stott describes how parents can exasperate their children:

Parents can easily misuse their authority either by making irritating or unreasonable demands which make no allowances for the inexperience and immaturity of children, or by harshness and cruelty at one extreme or by favoritism and over-indulgence at the other, or by humiliating or suppressing them, or by those two vindictive weapons sarcasm and ridicule.⁹⁴

These insights on the principle of exasperation can be applied to all forms of authority because all God-appointed leaders are not supposed to lead in ways that are controlling

⁹¹ Ronald Enroth, *Churches That Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 20.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹³ A.W. Pink points out that all human authority is subject to this limitation: “There is but one qualification, namely, when the powers that be require anything from me which is obviously contrary to the revealed will of God, or prohibit my doing what His Word enjoins: where such a case arises, my duty is to render allegiance unto God and not any subordinate authority which repudiates His requirements” (*Gleanings in Joshua* [Chicago: Moody, 1976], 56).

⁹⁴ Stott, *The Message of Ephesians*, 246.

and overbearing. This means that even if we grant that authorities have the right to govern in areas of *adiaphora*, it is often unwise to do so.⁹⁵

Jesus also warns his disciples against “lording” their authority over others (Matt. 20:25-28). This means that church leaders never ought to lead in “a domineering and oppressive manner.”⁹⁶ The Pharisees were not culpable simply because they made extra-biblical rules; rather, they were guilty of creating a burden that was too heavy for the people to bear. It is appropriate to be suspicious of a church whose leaders want to regulate the congregation’s hairstyles and the colors of their cars. Over-regulation in areas of *adiaphora* smacks of legalism and runs the risk of stifling the spiritual vitality of the church. After all, “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17). Murray comments on this verse: “When questions of food and drink become our chief concern, then it is apparent how far removed from the interests of God’s kingdom our thinking and conduct have strayed.”⁹⁷

Moreover, Romans 14 sets forth the principle of allowing the weaker brethren freedom in matters of moral indifference. The *adiaphora* ought not to become the cause of division. “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (Rom. 14:1). Paul encourages the strong to be patient with the weak and allow them to live according to their consciences concerning what they eat. Why divide over a matter so unessential? If there is division between the strong and the weak over an area

⁹⁵ A wise pastor generally leaves matters of moral indifference to the individual’s conscience. Even if the church’s scope of authority reaches the *adiaphora*, church leaders that deal too much in the morally indifferent will soon exasperate their members.

⁹⁶ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 195.

⁹⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, volume II (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 193.

of *adiaphora*, Paul lays the fault at the feet of the strong. The general principle is that matters of moral indifference ought to be left alone for the sake of maintaining peace in the body of Christ. Paul admonishes: “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food” (Rom. 14:19, 20). For these reasons alone, church authority ought to proceed with care when dealing with matters of moral indifference.

Even many holding that church leaders do not have authority in areas of *adiaphora*, however, will affirm that there are times when the church may deem it necessary to judge in a matter of inherent moral indifference for the purpose of further promoting peace and order in the church. Bannerman states: “Although there is not any discretion allowed to the Church itself in regard to its laws or its institutions, yet there is a discretion permitted to the Church in regard to matters simply of ‘decency and order.’”⁹⁸

The Bible gives examples of such exceptions to the general principle. The prime example is the decision of the Jerusalem council, in which James forbids the Gentiles to participate in certain matters of moral indifference: “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (Acts 15:20). All these except “sexual immorality” are *adiaphora* in the New Testament age. Notice that the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 is ordering (not merely suggesting) that these things be done. MacArthur notes about the Council’s decision: “The practices mentioned were not in themselves sinful, but the council advised the churches to abstain from them in order not to

⁹⁸ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 216.

needlessly offend Jewish brothers who had strong convictions about them.”⁹⁹ These are certainly not presented as requirements for salvation, but they are things that the Gentiles are commanded to do in order to preserve peace and unity in the church.¹⁰⁰ While most evangelicals prefer not to claim church authority over areas of *adiaphora* in general, many will at least admit its legitimacy when given the qualification that it is for maintaining peace and order in the church.

If a church demands that its leaders only govern in areas that are explicitly covered in the Bible, it is likely that there will not be much effective and practical government in that church. The fact of the matter is that the Bible remains silent concerning many specific matters of government and discipline. God grants the freedom and authority to church leaders in local congregations to decide how best to govern their affairs. Bannerman argues that when “there is nothing expressed in Scripture directly... something ought to be left to the discretion of the Church and its office-bearers.”¹⁰¹ Pink

⁹⁹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 189. This same Jerusalem council commands (not merely suggests) that Paul ceremonially purify himself upon his return to Jerusalem: “They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you... Take these men, join in their purification rights and pay their expenses” (Acts 21:23, 24). The council commands Paul to do what was morally neutral in order to avoid unnecessary conflict. The same principle lies behind Paul’s decision to have Timothy circumcised before he brings him on his mission (Acts 16:3). Likewise, Paul often issues injunctions to churches on the basis of promoting peace and order (cf., 1 Cor. 14:26-40).

¹⁰⁰ Note also from the Acts 15 example that the Jerusalem council embraces the spirit of the exasperation principle by only giving a few requirements to the Gentile believers. They do not overload them with regulations on matters that are morally indifferent. Scholars often point out that the council is justified in giving regulations in this case because they are attempting to promote harmony in the early church and maintain order. John Stott comments on the requirements of the Jerusalem council: “James’ proposal of Gentile Christian abstinence in four cultural areas seemed a wise policy to promote mutual tolerance and fellowship” (John Stott, *The Spirit the Church and the World* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1990], 250). I. Howard Marshall agrees that “Paul could assent to some measures for the sake of peace with Jewish Christians which involved no real sacrifice of principle” (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 247).

¹⁰¹ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 216.

similarly asserts that church leaders often need wisdom to govern in situations in which there is not a clear biblical code of conduct:

Therefore, while on the one hand he must act within the bounds of certain general rules and principles prescribed for his conduct, and must not introduce anything which would dishonor his royal Master or be inimical to His interests; yet on the other hand he is required to use his own judgment in applying those general rules to particular cases and to make whatever minor arrangement he deems most for his Master's glory and the good of His household; and when he is in doubt as to his right or best course, it is his privilege to plead and count upon the promise of James 1:5.¹⁰²

MacArthur also insists that church leaders must have this same freedom to rule:

In many churches today, the congregation rules the leaders. This sort of government is foreign to the New Testament... The command is unqualified: Obey your leaders, and submit to them. It is the right of such men, under God and in meekness and humility, to determine the direction of the church, to preside over it, to teach the word in it, to reprove, rebuke, and exhort (Titus 2:15).¹⁰³

Summary

The question of whether the church or the conscience has authority in areas of true *adiaphora* is certainly open to further debate. I am willing to put this question aside because it is not an essential part of the overall argument. I am more concerned to condemn the pernicious practice of inflating the definition of *adiaphora* to cover areas that are fundamentally unbiblical in principle. Not every matter claimed to be *adiaphora* is truly *adiaphora*. A call for freedom of conscience in areas or *adiaphora* is too often a tact plea for a license to sin.

¹⁰² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954), 1238. The promise of James 1:5 is that God will give wisdom to those who ask.

¹⁰³ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody, 1977), 445.

Although church authority is certainly flawed and fallible, we must keep in mind that it is also an authority through which God has especially chosen to operate. Having said this, we must not respond by falling into the error of the High Churchmen by fully equating the authority of the church with the authority of God. Church power is not unlimited, nor is it absolute. R. B. Kuiper affirms the church's right to make rules for the maintenance of order, but he cautions that when the church "makes certain rules and regulations in the interest of good order, as it often must, these are never to be equated with the law of Christ."¹⁰⁴ The error of the High Churchman is that he pushes to confer upon the rulers of the church the same infallible status that is due to God alone. Although I am convinced that the majority in the evangelical world today are more prone to denigrate church authority than to exalt it, it is proper to sound the warning that the solution to this conflict between church authority and liberty of conscience is not to allow the pendulum to swing from one extreme to the other.

Church Discipline: The Practical Application of Church Authority

Pastor Reynolds cannot sleep. He and the elders must decide whether or not to pursue excommunication for Doug, a member who denies any wrongdoing in his decision to divorce his wife. The elders went through various Scriptures with him concerning divorce, but Doug responded by noting that the application of these verses to his situation is open to interpretation. He no longer loves his wife and does not want to "abuse" her by pretending that he does. The decision to divorce his wife belongs to him,

¹⁰⁴ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 314.

not the elders, and he is confident that he can do it in good conscience. Besides, though his wife is not necessarily in favor of the idea, she has given her assent.

The choice to excommunicate seems obvious at first, but Pastor Reynolds is still smarting over the last time they excommunicated someone. That time Janice was excommunicated for her refusal to repent of her sin of gossiping and slandering in the church. Not only was Janice's ire stirred up, but local evangelical churches also voiced their concern that the church was too judgmental. The other churches could see how Pastor Reynolds could correct or censure her, but excommunication seemed exceedingly harsh. How can you justify excommunicating someone for gossip? One local pastor reminded Pastor Reynolds that Christ sat and ate with "tax-collectors and sinners," rather than banning them from the table of fellowship. Janice, along with a number of her friends, left the church because it seemed "too harsh."

Although the call to obey and submit to church authority can have a variety of applications, the most obvious application is in the area of church discipline. God institutes church discipline for the purpose of making for himself a holy and blameless church. George Davis defines church discipline as "the faithful application of biblical principles and procedures within a local congregation to preserve doctrinal purity, holiness of life, and useful efficiency among its membership."¹⁰⁵ Even within the evangelical church, the cultural ideals of independence and autonomy, advanced through the abuse of liberty of conscience, have certainly contributed to the general demise of the practice of church discipline. We will examine the biblical establishment of church discipline and comment on its inevitable conflict with the individual conscience.

¹⁰⁵ George B. Davis, "Whatever Happened to Church Discipline?" *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (Spr 1987): 345.

The Lost Practice of Church Discipline

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones identifies the tragedy of the modern evangelical church as being the near complete absence of any true church discipline:

Indeed, if I were asked to explain why it is that things are the way they are in the Church; if I were asked to explain why statistics show the dwindling numbers, the lack of power and the lack of influence upon men and women; if I were asked to explain why it is that so many churches seem to be incapable of sustaining the cause without resorting to whist drives and dances and thing like that; if I were asked to explain why the Church is in such a parlous condition, I should say that the ultimate cause is the failure to exercise discipline.¹⁰⁶

Daniel Wray, in agreement with Lloyd-Jones' analysis, adds:

Today the church faces a moral crisis within her own ranks. Her failure to take a strong stand against evil (even in her own midst) and her tendency to be more concerned about what is expedient than what is right, has robbed the church of biblical integrity and power. It is true that, historically, the church has sometimes erred in this matter of discipline, but today the problem is one of outright neglect. It would be difficult to show another area of Christian life which is more commonly ignored by the modern evangelical church than church discipline.¹⁰⁷

R. Albert Mohler likewise observes: "The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most visible failure of the contemporary church. No longer concerned with maintaining purity of confession or lifestyle, the contemporary church sees itself as a voluntary association of autonomous members, with minimal moral accountability to God, much less to each other."¹⁰⁸ Harold O.J. Brown narrows the criticism down to the lack of

¹⁰⁶ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Church and the Last Things* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 14.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Wray, *Biblical Church Discipline* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 1.

¹⁰⁸ R. Albert Mohler, "The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover?" *The Christian Post* (16 May 2005) http://www.christianpost.com/article/editorial/355/section/the_disappearance_of_church_discipline--how_can_we_recover/1.htm (20 May 2005).

church discipline even in the Reformed church: “Despite Calvin’s insistence on discipline as a necessary mark of the true Church, even churches in the Calvinist tradition now exercise discipline only in the rarest cases. Consequently, by Reformation-era standards, it is hard to claim that present day congregations, with rare exceptions, possess this mark.”¹⁰⁹ Today’s idea of church discipline tends not to go much further than the question of whether or not an adulterer or a homosexual can continue to serve in the pastorate—even in these issues there usually is not a unanimous consensus. Brown remarks, “In our own [Reformed] circles, discipline would still be enforced for false doctrine or moral deviations, but—almost exclusively—only against the clergy, not against the laity.”¹¹⁰

Noting the prevailing attitude of disdain for church discipline Lynn Buzzard and Thomas Brandon point out that the modern church is unique in its failure to carry out discipline: “Church discipline is by no means a mere medieval relic of an authoritarian church. As we have seen, it was a prominent feature of almost every age of the church and our own American tradition... Yet such discipline is rarely seen in today’s church.”¹¹¹ Many evangelical churches today seem “dispensational” in their thinking, counting discipline as something applicable in the church past but not appropriate for the church present or future. Some, perhaps of the more conservative bent, will applaud discipline practiced yesterday (exercised by John Calvin or the Puritans) but will refuse to practice it in their churches today. Still others, having thoroughly imbibed the spirit of

¹⁰⁹ Harold O.J. Brown, “The Role of Discipline in the Church,” *Covenant Quarterly* 41 (1983): 52.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹¹ Lynn R. Buzzard and Thomas S. Brandon, *Church Discipline and the Courts* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 64.

the age, outright scorn the whole concept of church discipline as rank intolerance: “The very words *church discipline* rarely invite positive images to mind. The general attitude is ‘good riddance’; it is something whose time has passed, like witch-hunts and stocks in the main squares of Massachusetts towns. The idea of ‘shunning,’ practiced in Anabaptist circles, seems as antique as an Amish buggy.”¹¹²

People too often kick against church discipline by falsely asserting liberty of conscience and accusing the church of trying to be the master of a man’s conscience. Mohler observes, “Consumed with pragmatic methods of church growth and congregational engineering, most churches leave moral matters to the domain of the individual conscience.”¹¹³ Edmund Clowney observes:

Individualism is the unwritten assumption in most evangelical churches...Free to attend the church of their choice, individuals choose when and where to go. Any whiff of church discipline signals rapid departure to some other congregation where the newcomer is welcomed (no questions asked about former commitments).¹¹⁴

Clowney’s commentary identifies the church’s concern that it will drive people away when they practice discipline as one of the leading causes for the lack of the exercise of church discipline. Along these lines, Kuiper remarks, “As for discipline, many churches neglect it because they fear it will reduce their membership and thus detract from their glory.”¹¹⁵

Karl Menninger wrote *Whatever Became of Sin?* The answer to the title of his book is that sin is still as prevalent as ever (if not more), but it is routinely overlooked in

¹¹² Ibid., 64.

¹¹³ R. Albert Mohler, “Church Discipline: the missing mark,” *The Compromised Church: the present Evangelical crisis*, ed. John Armstrong (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 173.

¹¹⁴ Edmund P. Clowney, “Authority: the Church and the Bible,” *ibid*, 42-43.

¹¹⁵ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 305.

churches today. Menninger himself realizes this fact: “The vanishing of sin has really been a disappearance of harsh reprisal... Thus sin, or designating something sinful, began to disappear because it was too expensive in terms of current standards of comfort.”¹¹⁶ Many churches wrongly apply the call to cover over evils simply because it makes for a more comfortable environment. This is done at the expense of their primary charge to maintain Christ’s goal to present to the Father a radiant church. Christ appoints church leaders to work toward the end of forming a holy and blameless Church. Daniel Wray comments: “We must maintain the purity of Christ’s visible church to the full extent of our knowledge and power.”¹¹⁷ Toleration of sin in the church is damnable, not commendable. Ben Patterson agrees: “It is unthinkable that the kingdom of God should tolerate within its fellowship unrepentant sin, open rebellion. That belongs to the kingdom of the world.”¹¹⁸

The Biblical Practice of Church Discipline

Any study of church discipline ought to begin with the reality that God disciplines His people. The writer of the Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3:11,12: “My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Heb. 12:5-6). God’s discipline is given as an evidence of our being his children. God disciplines his children in order that they “may share in his holiness” (Heb. 12:10). Mark Dever explains: “God Himself disciplines us and... He commands us to do the same for

¹¹⁶ Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1974), 29.

¹¹⁷ Wray, 4.

¹¹⁸ Ben Patterson, “Discipline: the backbone of the church,” *Leadership* 4 (Winter 1983): 109.

each other. The local church congregation has a special responsibility and a special competence in this regard.”¹¹⁹ Church discipline is merely an extension of God’s discipline. The church is God’s chosen instrument whereby he carries out his discipline on his people.

Buzzard and Brandon point out that the holiness of God’s people is the basis for discipline also in the Old Testament: “‘Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (Lev. 19:2) sets the stage for the expectations of a holy God [for His] chosen people.”¹²⁰ There are numerous examples in the Old Testament of God disciplining his people. Sometimes, God carries out the discipline himself (i.e., when he swallows up those involved in Korah’s rebellion in Num. 16), while other times he uses the community (i.e., he sends the Israelites throughout the camp to kill the worshipers of the golden calf in Ex. 32). Another prime example of God disciplining his people through the instrumentality of his delegated authority is Joshua’s severe discipline of Achan in Joshua 7. Although Achan’s sin is exposed by divine intervention, he is punished through the instrumentality of Joshua and the Israelite community.

It has become common for evangelicals to paint the picture that the idea of a wrathful God who would discipline his people is only an Old Testament concept.¹²¹ The evidence in the New Testament suggests, however, that God still intends to discipline his children. For example, Stott recognizes in the incident of Ananias and Sapphira, who are

¹¹⁹ Mark Dever, “[Biblical Church Discipline](#),” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (Winter 2000): 31.

¹²⁰ Buzzard and Brandon, 37.

¹²¹ These evangelicals avoid dealing with such harsh Old Testament passages and even take offense at their being subjects for discussion or passages on which to preach. They may even say things like, “The God I serve does not get angry in that way.” In these ways they conform to the pattern set by liberal theologians over a century ago.

both killed for their sin, a clear argument for “the necessity of church discipline.”¹²²

God’s discipline in this case is no less severe than that of Achan. The call to holiness and sanctification is just as clear in the New Testament, and God will discipline his people in order to bring about this holiness. Paul states straightforwardly, “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified” (1 Thes. 4:3). Peter makes this point no less clear, “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (1 Peter 1:15). Buzzard and Brandon argue this point from the New Testament emphasis on the Lordship of Christ: “Consider the central confession of the New Testament: Jesus is Lord! The very notion of Lord evinces a claim of obedience that brooks no diminution. Lordship assumes discipline, obedience, and correction.”¹²³

The Bible makes clear that the church is given the authority by God to carry out discipline. This is especially clear in Christ’s awarding the church “the power of the keys” in Matthew 16:19: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” In this text Christ especially grants the church the right to excommunicate. Spurgeon remarks: “For practical purposes the people of God would need discipline, and the power to receive, refuse, retain, or exclude members.”¹²⁴ Jesus later makes it clear that the church ought to excommunicate those who are impenitent: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the

¹²² John Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 112.

¹²³ Buzzard and Brandon, 39.

¹²⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1987), 225.

church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17).¹²⁵ Church discipline is the meting out of God’s discipline on His straying sheep in order that they may be brought to repentance.

Moreover, the practice of discipline is not just the *right* of the church; it is the church’s solemn obligation. Paul severely rebukes the Corinthian church for being unfaithful in carrying out the duty of discipline on a sexually immoral man (1 Cor. 5:1-11). Kistemaker remarks: “Both the man, because of his act of incest, and the church, because of its failure to act, are guilty of sin.”¹²⁶ Paul first rebukes them for their negligence: “Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?” (1 Cor. 5:2). He proceeds to demand that they discipline him: “Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Cor. 5:5). Paul impresses upon the Corinthians that they should be ashamed of their failure to faithfully carry out God’s discipline on the incestuous man.

Church discipline is a means of grace that church leaders have no right to withhold from their members. Jay Adams highlights the church’s solemn obligation to carry out God’s discipline: “The failure to discipline church members amounts to withholding from them the privilege of being confronted by others, and by the church, when they err in doctrine or life. Christ granted them this right; we have no right to

¹²⁵ Paul goes so far as to describe excommunication as the handing over of a man to Satan in order to be taught not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:20). Note that discipline is not something that the church grants itself; instead, they are given the right by God himself. Bannerman writes: “The power of discipline is a right conferred on the Church by positive Divine appointment” (James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: a Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church* [1869], vol. 2 [reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1991], 189).

¹²⁶ Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 155.

withhold it from them.”¹²⁷ Kuiper similarly warns: “The Word of God plainly requires church discipline. Those who disparage it presume to be wiser than God.”¹²⁸ Failing to exercise discipline is a grievous sin of omission, a failure to do that which God commands his people to do.

Implied in the obligation to practice church discipline is the obligation of the one being disciplined to submit to the discipline of the church. Paul illuminates the necessity of obeying church discipline when he demands that the Thessalonians follow the rules that he made concerning idleness: “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed.” (2 Thes. 3:14).¹²⁹ Bannerman points out the obligation of the church to obey discipline: “And such discipline, too, is to be revered and submitted to because of the authority of the Church, as divinely appointed to exercise it.”¹³⁰

Ultimately, a man is only excommunicated for one sin—the sin of not submitting to the discipline of the church. In other words, church discipline is always moved forward only when a person refuses to acknowledge his sin and repent of it after being confronted by the church leaders. Adams explains: “Finally, if he refuses to hear even the church, then they are to excommunicate him, not for the particular sin that he committed, but for his arrogance, his refusal to heed the authority of Jesus Christ,

¹²⁷ Jay Adams, *More Than Redemption: A Theology of Christian Counseling* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1979), 286.

¹²⁸ Kuiper, 306.

¹²⁹ Some may argue that Paul could demand obedience to his commands because of his unique apostolic authority, but Paul here does not assert that the Thessalonians ought to obey him alone as an apostle. Rather, he insists that they obey “our instruction,” not just his own. The “our” refers at least to Silvanus and Timothy, who are cited as co-authors of the epistle. Paul does sometimes emphasize his unique apostolic authority, but in the context of exercising discipline he sees the need to recognize the authority of non-apostolic leaders as well.

¹³⁰ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 169.

exercised by His church.”¹³¹ If a man is a thief, he is not excommunicated for his stealing; rather, he is excommunicated for refusing to heed the discipline of the church when they exhorted him to repent from his sin of stealing. The church is bound to forgive and receive back into fellowship the penitent sinner.

The person being disciplined is not the only person bound to accept the discipline. First of all, the other church members are to recognize and enforce the discipline. Discipline is to be carried out by the whole church not just its leaders. After exhorting the Corinthians to discipline the sexually immoral in the church, Paul proceeds to give instruction for how the congregation must treat the one disciplined: “You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat” (1 Cor. 5:11). Of the congregation’s duty, Ridderbos says: “He also requires that the congregation act in the way of church order or church law against the one who pays no attention to admonition or by his gross aberration can no longer be suffered as a member of the church.”¹³²

Other churches are also bound to heed the discipline of another church. This means that a church ought not to receive into their membership one who has fled a church that rightly disciplined him. Adams points out the unfortunate frequency of this occurrence:

Discipline, when exercised, must be recognized and supported by other pastors and churches. Typically, in the rare cases in which a church *does* exercise discipline, it is undermined by other congregations.... The disciplined person simply runs down the street to the next evangelical church, where he is received—no questions asked—with open arms. That

¹³¹ Adams, *More Than Redemption*, 290-9.

¹³² Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 470.

practice is wrong, self-defeating, a disgrace to Christ, and must be remedied.¹³³

The church down the street needs to hear both sides of the story before passing judgment. They must not just assume, based on the testimony of the one disciplined, that the other church is abusive. To undercut and ignore the authority of a church when it exercises proper biblical discipline is to undercut and ignore the authority of God, who desires the discipline of his children.

The Conflict with Liberty of Conscience

Church discipline and liberty of conscience are bound to butt heads. After all, “no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful” to the one receiving it (Heb. 12:11). The sinful nature wants to continue practicing sin and will resist any attempt at thwarting its efforts. In our age of moral relativism, it is commonplace to argue that people have the right to choose their own lifestyles. A church that disciplines a member for being a homosexual will surely have to at least answer the charges of being judgmental, intolerant, unconstitutional, discriminatory, and homophobic. Churches that faithfully practice discipline are in danger of being labeled legalistic and abusive.

Bannerman notes that church discipline often and inevitably comes into conflict with liberty of conscience: “Here too, then, we have the lawful exercise of a lawful authority that must oftentimes come into contact with the liberty of conscience in the case of individuals.”¹³⁴ Although the church must certainly discipline with care and take into account the conscience of the member being disciplined, it is incorrect to assume that

¹³³ Adams, *More Than Redemption*, 291.

¹³⁴ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 1, 169.

church discipline can simply be nullified by the individual's conscience. If the church leaders are disciplining a member for a legitimate sin that needs to be repented of, then the individual's conscience has no right to eschew the church's discipline. Bannerman explains at length:

Shall we say that the spiritual sword is to be stayed, and the authority of the Church disarmed, in consequence of the argument of conscience on the part of the offender? Shall we say that the exercise of that authority is unlawful, and its censures null and void, because of the liberty of conscience that is pleaded in opposition to them? To do so would be to deny the right of Church authority altogether; it would be to set aside, in any case in which conscience might be alleged, all ecclesiastical judgment or restraint as regards the offender, and to make religion entirely a matter of personal and individual concern, in regard to which the Church had no right to interfere and no commission to act. Such an interpretation of the liberty of conscience on the part of her members must destroy Church authority altogether, and must leave the kingdom of Christ without government or order, utterly helpless to redress wrong or restrain offences, and without power to guard its own communion from open profanation and dishonor. The plea of absolute and unlimited liberty of conscience is inconsistent with the authority and existence of a Church.¹³⁵

If church discipline only applies when the recipient's conscience agrees with it, then excommunication would be impossible. After all, the church only properly proceeds with the excommunication of a member when he refuses to heed the church's exhortation to repent of his sins. If conscience can always be used to trump church authority, then whenever a member wants to reject the church's counsel he could argue it is a matter of conscience. If church authority is entirely subservient to the individual's conscience, then it simply cannot be exercised.

Church authority, when functioning properly, binds the conscience of the man being disciplined. In other words, he cannot nullify the church's discipline by simply arguing that he has a "good conscience" about the matter. Bannerman explains:

¹³⁵ Ibid., 170.

[The church's judgment] binds the conscience with an obligation, and carries with it a supernatural blessing or judgment, which no power or act of any voluntary human society can confer, and which can only be explained on the principle of an authority and virtue bound up in the ordinance by the positive appointment of God.¹³⁶

To refuse to submit one's conscience to the decision of the God-ordained ecclesiastical authority is to refuse to submit one's conscience to God himself, who is the Lord of the conscience.¹³⁷

There are, of course, limits to the church's authority to carry out discipline. The most obvious limitation, is the Bible—the church must be careful to carry out discipline in a biblical manner. The person being disciplined must have failed in some way to conform to the Bible in practice or in principle. Bannerman articulates it thus:

The judicial power of the Church in the way of discipline is limited by the Word of God as the rule of its exercise...Such a penalty, but no more, Scripture gives authority to the Church, in the exercise of its judicial powers to impose upon offenders...In this respect, it is strictly limited by the authority of Scripture as its rule.¹³⁸

The Bible sets up boundaries within which the church must operate when seeking to discipline its members.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, vol. 2, 190.

¹³⁷ What if a man is not guilty of the sin for which he is being corrected? If this is truly the case, then God will not uphold or support the church's discipline. The church, which is not infallible in its discipline, has failed to represent correctly the judgment of God and will have to give an account to God for this failure. The debate, however, is over who decides if the church was right or wrong in its decision. Only God ultimately knows. The point is that the individual cannot just clear himself from guilt by the authority of his own conscience. Certainly, if he is truly innocent, his good conscience will legitimately be a comfort to him. It is just as likely, however, that a man's fallen and fallible conscience will attempt to comfort him when he is, in fact, guilty as charged.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 196-7.

¹³⁹ Books of church order and manuals for discipline can prove helpful as clear articulations of how to exercise church discipline in a consistently biblical manner. They are, however, just empty "words on paper" if church leaders and church members lack the resolve to abide by them. Making more biblically-based books of church order is not the solution to our problem; rather, renewing our commitment to pre-existing books of church order will prove more valuable.

Conclusion

In reference to the Puritans, D. Downham highlights the connection between church authority and the exercise of discipline. He speaks of “the Puritan pastor’s consciousness that he had received power to exercise rule and discipline from the great Head of the church Himself.” The Puritans understood from Scripture the authority that church leaders had been given, and they put it into practice by exercising church discipline. Downham, however, contrasts this with the prevailing church culture in his own day: “Today this consciousness has been largely lost, and a low view of the Christian ministry prevails. This is doubtless one reason why ecclesiastical discipline has fallen into disrepute.”¹⁴⁰

Patterson argues that widespread individualism in the church today leads many to resist “submission to a spiritual director as a means of practical submission to Jesus Christ.” “To belong to the Lord is to belong to his church and to submit to the discipline of his church.... I fear the church of Jesus Christ means too little to its members for it to discipline them—at least the church in modern North America. The chief reason for this devaluation is the individualism of most evangelicals.”¹⁴¹ A loss of appreciation for and understanding of church authority inevitably results in the demise of church discipline.

¹⁴⁰ D. Downham, “Discipline in the Puritan Congregation,” *Puritan Paperbacks*, ed. J.I. Packer (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 292.

¹⁴¹ Patterson, “Discipline: the backbone of the Church,” 110.

Chapter Three: The History of Liberty of Conscience and Church Authority

The Reformed Conscience

Occasionally even secularists today applaud Martin Luther and the other Reformers for their fight for freedom of conscience. They depict the Reformers as a group that rebelled against the oppressive authority of the Roman Church in order that people could be free to worship God according to their consciences. Joseph Fiennes starred in a recently released movie on Luther and commented on the “modern umbilical cord which ties us to Martin.” He comments on the central idea of the film:

I think it’s very much about the minority and the suppressed. Particularly in this story, it’s about the control the Catholic church had on the masses through language and interpretation. I think if anything is relevant it shows that you can’t keep man down, you can’t control. And sooner or later, people will gain knowledge and through the knowledge power to be liberated-- freedom of conscience.¹

Many see the greatest contribution that the Protestant Reformation gave to the modern world as being the advancement of the individual’s liberty from the authority of the church.

The doctrine of liberty of conscience certainly has distinctly Protestant roots. Church authority, being so clearly established throughout the Bible, was relatively assumed and unquestioned from the time of the early church fathers until the time of the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Church’s abuses of authority uncovered by the Reformers led to a new questioning of the church’s authority over its subjects. Richard De Ridder writes: “The Reformers of the sixteenth century were in agreement that the

¹ This quote is found on the Bonus Features of the DVD version of *Luther*, released by MGM DVD and directed by Eric Till.

Roman Church had placed a very heavy burden on the consciences of the people. The Church, they held, was imprisoned by a sacerdotal system, which included the power of the clergy (the pope) to excommunicate.”²

The early Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, fought to maintain the authority of the church, even while asserting the right (and obligation) of individuals to break from the corrupt and unbiblical Roman Church. Other Protestants, however, saw the Reformation as a chance to throw off the fetters of church authority in general. For example, the English Separatist Robert Browne “challenged all civil and ecclesiastical claims of authority over the local congregation.”³ In the conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority, the camp of Protestants that over-emphasized liberty of conscience has unfortunately had the most enduring influence. In this section we will

² Richard R. De Ridder, “John Calvin's Views on Discipline: A Comparison of the Institution of 1536 and the Institutes of 1559,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986): 224.

³ Slayden A. Yarbrough, “The English Separatist Influence on the Baptist Tradition of Church-State Issues,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 20 (July 1985): 14. See also James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church, vols. 1* (1869), (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1991), 182. Bannerman categorizes four types of abusers of the doctrine of the liberty of the conscience among the English Dissenters during the time of the Commonwealth. The first group is the Antinomians, who “pretended liberty of conscience against the practical authority of the law of God...as a rule of duty.” He describes the Libertines as “those who pretended the liberty of conscience against the authority of God as a standard of belief conveyed to us in the Scriptures.” The Fifth Monarchy Men are “those who pretended liberty of conscience against all civil authority.” The group that most directly relates to the issue at hand is the Brownists, who are “those who pretended liberty of conscience against all Church authority... [and] held that no man should be brought under Church discipline or excommunicated for any action or opinion in behalf of which he could urge that plea.”

The above does not seem to be an altogether fair description of the position held by the Brownists. Robert Browne was more concerned with asserting the independence of a local church from the authority of higher church bodies, not the independence of the individual believer against any church authority. “In the course of 1581 Browne developed his rejection of episcopal authority to the point of repudiating the established church itself” (Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978] 28). Although this can be misunderstood to mean that he rejects all church authority, Browne is simply rejecting the authority of the corrupt Church of England, just as Luther rejected the authority of the corrupt Church of Rome. It could be, however, that the movement for independence for the individual church from the Church of England dissipated into a fight for the independence of the individual believer against any church authority. While Browne’s ideas were often unfairly caricatured by his Puritan and Anglican brethren, it is easy to see how his ideas could begin a slippery slope that results in the general demise of church authority and discipline.

examine the views of Martin Luther and John Calvin, the two colossal figures of the Reformation, on liberty of conscience and church authority.

Luther on the Conscience and Church Authority

Sympathetic secularists often think of Luther as being the great liberator of the conscience.⁴ Luther certainly fought for liberty against ungodly secular and ecclesiastical powers, but he was never a champion of the unbridled form of freedom that is celebrated in society today. Luther himself recognizes that many of his contemporaries view Christian liberty in that way, and he criticizes that mentality: “There are very many who, when they hear of this freedom of faith, immediately turn it into an occasion for the flesh and think that now all things are allowed them.”⁵ While Luther’s exact view on many issues is sometimes difficult to discern, he certainly never viewed Christian liberty in such a way as to give anyone license to sin.

Although people often fondly refer to Luther’s famous “Here I Stand” speech as a classic assertion of the rights of a free conscience, the statement actually makes clear the fact that his conscience is bound by Scripture:

Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot recant and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen.⁶

⁴ One example of a secularist commending the contribution of Luther for the sake of conscience can be found in the article written for *German Life* magazine by David Peevers entitled “A Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther and the Reformation” (30 November 1995).

⁵ Martin Luther, *Christian Liberty*, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 35.

⁶ Martin Luther quoted by Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1990), 144.

The Bible is guiding Luther's conscience. Packer affirms: "The Christian's conscience... as Luther memorably declared at Worms in 1521, is and must be subject to the Word of God—which means the teaching of Holy Scripture, which is God's own teaching about Himself and about us."⁷ Luther's stand against the Roman Church is not just because his autonomous conscience tells him that they are wrong; instead, his conscience tells him that he must stand against Rome because its teaching is in clear violation of the Scriptures.

Luther fought for liberty of conscience, but he meant something different than what many people mean today. He was not talking about the inherent freedom of every man to determine his own truth and morality. He was not saying that a man's conscience had authority over the church or the state. As is the case in most of the early debates about liberty of conscience, Luther was speaking in the context of the state not having the right to compel an individual toward a particular religion (even if it is the right and true religion):

Furthermore, every man is responsible for his own faith, and he must see to it for himself that he believes rightly.... Since, then, belief or unbelief is a matter of every one's conscience, and since this is no lessening of the secular power, the latter should be content and attend to its own affairs and permit men to believe one thing or another, as they are able and willing, and constrain no one by force. For faith is free work, to which no one can be forced.⁸

The early Reformers usually spoke of liberty of conscience merely as the fact that no authority can compel a person to believe the truth.

⁷ J. I. Packer, "The Comfort of Conservatism," *Power Religion*, ed. Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 297-298.

⁸ Martin Luther, "Secular Authority: to what extent it should be obeyed," *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (NY: Doubleday, 1961), 385.

We must confront the undeniable fact that Luther frequently criticizes church authority in his writings. This is understandable considering the fact that the ecclesiastical structures that surrounded him in the sixteenth century were exceedingly unbiblical. In fact, Luther spoke of the Pope as the anti-Christ. He found it necessary in his life to emphasize that the church had no authority outside the bounds of Scripture: “Hence it is the height of folly when they command that one shall believe the Church, the fathers, the councils, though there be no word of God for it. The devil’s apostles command such things, not the Church; for the Church commands nothing unless it is sure it is God’s Word.”⁹

Luther, not always careful with his words, tends to exaggerate his statements for the purpose of emphasis. He certainly is guilty of this in his treatise on “Secular Authority,” where he seems at one point to take the priesthood of all believers as grounds to deny the existence of all authority within the church: “Among Christians there shall and can be no authority; but all are alike subject to one another.... Christians can be ruled by nothing but by God’s Word.”¹⁰ Although this point can be carefully defended, Luther fails to do so; hence, he unwittingly opens the door for succeeding generations of Protestants to use his statements to deny the legitimacy of all spiritual authority.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., 383.

¹⁰ Ibid., 391-2.

¹¹ Although Luther certainly believed in church order, some of his unclear statements concerning his ideas about church authority led to his own infrequent and inconsistent exercise of church authority in the practice of discipline. “The Lutheran wing of the Reformation showed little interest in formal structures of church discipline. Though Luther wrote a treatise on the subject of the ban and occasionally utilized church discipline, he rejected the ban itself, expressed reservations about any involvement of the secular authorities in enforcing church discipline, and never formally instituted procedures for church discipline” (Lynn R. Buzzard and Thomas S. Brandon, *Church Discipline and the Courts* [Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987], 49).

Calvin on the Conscience and Church Authority

Although Luther is undoubtedly the key figure in the Reformation, perhaps Calvin is more helpful in understanding the Reformation position on the conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority, since he purposes to carefully articulate his theological positions in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin frequently makes statements of full-fledged support of liberty of conscience that sound similar to the statements of Luther above. For example, Calvin asserts: “The restraint thus laid on the conscience is unlawful. Our consciences have not to do with men but with God only.”¹² Calvin, however, is more thorough in his treatment of the matter and recognizes the dire need to explain at length what he means when saying that men’s consciences “are exempted from all human authority:”

The knowledge of this subject is of the greatest importance, so it demands a longer and clearer explanation. For the moment the abolition of human constitutions is mentioned, the greatest disturbances are excited, partly by the seditious, and partly by calumniators, as if obedience of every kind were at the same time abolished and overthrown.¹³

When Calvin first treats the subject of Christian liberty in chapter nineteen of book three in *Institutes*, he proceeds with caution by immediately warning his readers of the potential dangers surrounding the abuse of this liberty: “The moment any mention is made of Christian liberty lust begins to boil, or insane commotions arise, if a speedy restraint is not laid on those licentious spirits by whom the best things are perverted into the worst.”¹⁴ Calvin expresses his abhorrence of the suggestion that Christian liberty

¹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV.x.5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 416.

¹³ *Ibid.*, III.xix.14, 140.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, III.xix.1, 131.

legitimately offers an individual a free license to sin: “It is, therefore, perversely interpreted by those who use it as a cloak for their lusts, and they may licentiously abuse the good gifts of God.”¹⁵

Calvin admits that the individual is not freed in every sense from the obligation of obeying “human laws” that the church issues. He is speaking specifically of the individual’s freedom from “human traditions,” which he carefully defines as “all decrees concerning the worship of God, which men have issued without the authority of his word.” Calvin further explains the abuse that authorities inflict on people when they champion “human traditions:”

Our aim is to curb the unlimited and barbarous empire usurped over souls by those who would be thought pastors of the Church, but who are in fact its most cruel murderers. They say that the laws which they enact are spiritual, pertaining to the soul, and they affirm that they are necessary to eternal life. But thus the kingdom of Christ, as I lately observed, is invaded; thus the liberty, which he has given to the consciences of believers, is completely oppressed and overthrown.¹⁶

Calvin insists, however, that not all rules given by a church are to be equated with “human traditions.” He juxtaposes the questioning of “human traditions” with those who improperly oppose “the sacred and useful constitutions of the Church, which tend to preserve discipline, or decency, or peace.”¹⁷ He argues that there is also a sense in which it is necessary for the individual to obey human laws:

Human laws, whether enacted by magistrates or by the Church, are necessary to be observed (I speak of such as are just and good), but do not therefore in themselves bind the conscience, because the whole necessity of observing them respects the general end, and consist not in the things commanded. Very different, however, is the case of those which prescribe

¹⁵ Ibid., III.xix.9, 135-6.

¹⁶ Ibid., IV.x.1, 414.

¹⁷ Ibid., IV.x.1, 414.

a new form of worshipping God, and introduce necessity into things that are free.¹⁸

Calvin's apparent equivocation in the above statement can be attributed to the difficulty of balancing church authority and liberty of conscience.

Our obligation to obey God's law, Calvin argues, supersedes our obligation to act upon our conscience: "Whatever dangers impend, we are not at liberty to deviate one nail's breadth from the command of God, that on no pretext is it lawful to attempt anything but what he permits."¹⁹ The Word of God has authority to bind the conscience. The Scripture alone, not the conscience, must be man's final authority. Calvin articulates and establishes the Reformation claim of *sola scriptura*, which asserts that "no source other than Scripture need be consulted in matters of Christian faith and practice."²⁰ To Calvin, Christian liberty is the freedom to carry out God's commands freely and voluntarily. "Consciences obey the law, not as if compelled by legal necessity; but being free from the yoke of the law itself, voluntarily obey the will of God."²¹ Liberty of conscience does not mean that I am free from God's law; rather, it means that God gives the Christian the desire to obey him.

Calvin also addresses the vexed question of the role of the conscience in settling matters of indifference (i.e., "eating of flesh" and "use of dress and holidays"): "We are not bound before God to any observance of external things which are in themselves

¹⁸ Ibid., IV.x.5, 417.

¹⁹ Ibid., III.xix.13, 140.

²⁰ Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 61.

²¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xix.4, 132.

indifferent (*adiaphora*), but that we are now at full liberty either to use or omit them.”²²

Calvin is especially burdened because the Roman Catholic clergy in his time was especially guilty of superstitiously piling obligations of human traditions onto the laity. Meanwhile, Calvin also points out that not everything that passes as *adiaphora* in theory is actually a matter of moral indifference in practice: “They say that they are things indifferent: I admit it, provided they are used indifferently. But when they are too eagerly longed for, when they are proudly boasted of, when they are indulged in luxurious profusion, things which otherwise were in themselves lawful are certainly defiled by these vices.”²³ The individual’s heart motivation behind the matter makes a significant difference. An inherently morally indifferent matter ceases to be so when motivated by a contumacious nature.

What Calvin states about liberty of conscience must be interpreted in light of his teaching on church authority. He begins Book IV of his *Institutes* by differentiating between the true and the false church. The true church is the church in which the Word of God is “sincerely preached and heard” and the sacraments are administered “according to the institution of Christ.” Calvin asserts that where these two marks are clearly present “we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence... so that each of them justly obtains the name and authority of the Church.”²⁴ Only the true church can appropriately claim God-given authority. Calvin stands amazed at the condescension of God in delegating his authority to fallible human beings: “Among the many endowments with which God has adorned the human race, one of the most remarkable is, that he

²² Ibid., III.xix.7, 134.

²³ Ibid., III.xix.9, 136.

²⁴ Ibid., IV.i.9, 289.

deigns to consecrate the mouths and tongues of men to his service, making his own voice to be heard in them.” Those who refuse to observe God’s ordinary method of using external means inevitably “entangle themselves in fatal snares.”²⁵ Calvin asserts the solemn obligation of church members to recognize the authority of their leaders:

No man may with impunity spurn her [the church’s] authority, or reject her admonitions, or resist her counsels, or make sport of her censures, far less revolt from her and violate her unity... All who contumaciously alienate themselves from any Christian society, in which the true ministry of the word and sacraments is maintained, he regards as deserters of religion. So highly does he recommend her authority, that when it is violated he considers that his own authority is impaired.²⁶

While not explicitly addressing the issue of how the church’s delegated authority relates to the individual’s conscience, Calvin’s emphasizing the loyalty that an individual owes to a true church proves relevant to the issue at hand. He denies the individual a right to revolt against a true church.

Revolt from the Church is denial of God and Christ. Wherefore there it is more necessity to beware of a dissent so iniquitous; for seeing by it we aim as far as in us lies at the destruction of God’s truth, we deserve to be crushed by the full thunder of his anger. No crime can be imagined more atrocious than that of sacreligiously and perfidiously violating the sacred marriage which the only begotten Son of God has condescended to contract with us.²⁷

Calvin buttresses this sentiment shortly thereafter: “How perilous, then, nay, how fatal the temptation, when we even entertain a thought of separating ourselves from that assembly in which are beheld the signs and badges which the Lord has deemed sufficient to characterize his Church!”²⁸ Calvin offers the dissident no excuse for abandoning a

²⁵ Ibid., IV.i.5, 285.

²⁶ Ibid., IV.i.10, 290.

²⁷ Ibid., IV.i.10, 290.

²⁸ Ibid., IV.i.11, 290.

place of worship that bears the marks of an authentic church. “There is no excuse for him who spontaneously abandons the external communion of the church in which the word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered.”²⁹ These severe warnings imply that Calvin in no way favors the individual’s using his right of liberty of conscience to justify his own separation from a true church.

Calvin insists that one of the chief exercises of the authority that God gives the church is the exercise of church discipline. The definitive penalty that the church is to administer is the sentence of excommunication: “When churches are well regulated, they will not bear the wicked in their bosom, nor will they admit the worthy and unworthy indiscriminately to that sacred feast.”³⁰ Calvin applies the authority of the church over the individual conscience in an unexpected way at this point. He argues that if a church does not carry out discipline strictly enough according to a given individual’s whim, that individual does not have the right to rebel against the decision of the church. Calvin does not advocate the church’s shortcomings in properly carrying out discipline, but he maintains that “although the Church fails in her duty, it does not therefore follow that every private individual is to decide the question of separation for himself.”³¹

Whereas Luther was purportedly erratic in his own maintenance of church discipline, Calvin’s greater precision in his articulation of church authority led to his own much more consistent practice of church discipline. As a matter of fact, before returning to Geneva in 1541, Calvin insisted on the implementation of church discipline as a

²⁹ Ibid., IV.i.19, 297.

³⁰ Ibid., IV.i.15, 293.

³¹ Ibid., IV.i.15, 294.

condition of his return.³² Downham says, “On his return [to Geneva], he established a church court, composed of six city ministers and twelve elders from their congregations, who met each Thursday to put under discipline ‘without respect of persons, every sort of evil-doer.’”³³ Philip Benedict describes Calvin’s Geneva as “an exceptionally active church consistory backed by the power of the civil authorities [which] summoned one adult resident in eight to appear before it each year in the decade after 1555 for a wide range of shortcomings from adultery to disrespect for one’s elders.”³⁴

Seeing how common it was for Protestants to turn liberty into licentiousness, Calvin found it necessary to emphasize the authority that God vested in the church. Bernard Cottret sees in Calvin’s 1550 treatise *On Scandals* a reflection of the discipline Calvin had to enforce while in Geneva: “Calvin mentions ‘those who make war on us every day’ because they are angry that someone takes away their liberty to live according to their own will.”³⁵ Calvin offers an unqualified endorsement of the practice of church discipline:

Let no one, therefore, contumaciously despise the judgment of the Church, or account it a small matter that he is condemned by the suffrages of the faithful. The Lord testifies that such judgment of the faithful is nothing else than the promulgation of his own sentence, and that what they do on earth is ratified in heaven.³⁶

³² Buzzard and Brandon, 50.

³³ D. Downham, “Discipline in the Puritan Congregation,” *Puritan Paperbacks*, ed. J.I. Packer (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 284.

³⁴ Philip Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed: a social history of Calvinism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 460.

³⁵ Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 189.

³⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xi.2, 441. In his biography on Calvin, Cottret tells of a case of discipline in which the authority of the church met the liberty of conscience head on. “On Thursday, June 23, 1547, several women appeared before the consistory for having danced.... (Francoise Favre) calmly refused to be talked to about it and sharply told the elders that it was not for them to admonish her” (Cottret, 189-190). This case provides interesting insight into Calvin’s view of “matters of indifference.” It would be certainly

Summary

While the Reformers can certainly be considered pioneers in the founding of the doctrine of liberty of conscience, J.I. Packer points out the perversion of imagining that they would support using this doctrine to undercut the legitimate use of church authority. “The Reformation is often misrepresented as having taught the *right* of private judgment of Scripture in terms of the Christian’s being privileged to disagree with the church, the Bible, and every external authority if his heart moves him so to do.” Packer proceeds to observe that the Reformers spoke of private judgment as a *duty* rather than a *right*. Liberty of conscience meant that “no adult may take his or her faith secondhand, but all must accept the discipline of verifying from Scripture whether what they have been told is so.”³⁷ Those looking to the Reformers to promote rebellion against legitimate church authority founded in the Scriptures will simply have to seek out another source.

The Puritan Conscience

Much is made of the Puritan emphasis on liberty of conscience, which was most famously articulated in the twentieth chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* entitled “Of Christian Liberty, and Liberty of Conscience.” Donald MacLeod calls this

difficult to make a biblical argument for the banning of dancing per se, but apparently given the context of his time period, the church ruled that it was unbiblical in principle.

³⁷ J. I. Packer, “The Comfort of Conservatism,” 297.

doctrine “one of the most fundamental emphases of Puritan theology.”³⁸ The Puritan interest in the conscience, however, cannot be separated from their fundamental interest in knowing God’s truth. Packer points out that the Puritans only spoke so much of the conscience because they viewed it as “the mental organ in men through which God brought his word to bear on them.”³⁹

Some today attempt to pervert this Puritan teaching in order to promote the cause of unbridled individual freedom. For example, The Interfaith Religious Liberty Foundation celebrates the Puritan contribution in ensuring “liberty of conscience for all, whether Protestant, Catholic, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, pagan, atheist or other.”⁴⁰ This may (or may not) be an accurate interpretation of the First Amendment Establishment Clause, but it certainly is a far cry from what the Puritans meant when they spoke of the liberty of the conscience. In this section we will explore the background of the Puritan views of liberty of conscience and church authority and examine their expressions by the Westminster divines, particularly those of Samuel Rutherford.

Background of the Puritan View

As with the early Reformers, the Puritans’ statements about Christian liberty and the conscience often have inadvertently produced all types of perverted and licentious offspring. The irony is that the Puritans were usually using the doctrine of liberty of conscience to oppose the licentiousness that they were convinced the Church of England

³⁸ Donald MacLeod, “Liberty of Conscience,” <http://www.the-highway.com/articleMar99.html> (3 May 2004).

³⁹ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 107.

⁴⁰ Interfaith Religious Liberty Foundation, <http://www.interfaithreligiouslibertyfoundation.org/pages/725252/index.htm> (5 May 2005).

wanted to allow. The Puritans spoke of liberty of conscience because they wanted to obey God's Word, not have men diminish or change its teaching. The liberty they fought for was not liberty to disobey, but freedom to obey. It was freedom to teach the truth and oppose falsehood. For example, when King James I, as the head of the Church of England, demanded that churches read to their congregations "The Book of Sports," which declared people free to participate in lawful recreations on the Lord's Day, the Westminster divine Simeon Ashe refused to read it to his congregation.⁴¹ These were the Puritans who were suspended, silenced, and censured by the Church of England for not complying with Bishop Wren's 139 Visitation Articles of 1633. These Articles included such absurd requirements as digging their graves east and west and burying the bodies with their heads to the west and requiring parishioners to do reverence toward the Chancel at going in and out of the church.⁴²

One might argue that these requirements are *adiaphora*, under which the Puritans ought to have submitted. The Puritans, however, saw many of these requirements as being unbiblical in principle and contributing to mass confusion over the requirements for salvation. Certainly many Puritans very clearly argued that individuals have freedom of conscience in areas of indifference; however, they did not have nearly as wide a view of what falls under the *adiaphora* umbrella as evangelical churches tend to have today. A prime example is matters concerning the Lord's Day. Many evangelicals today treat issues surrounding the Lord's Day as solely a matter of personal conscience. Most

⁴¹ James Reid, *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 115. It should be noted that many other Puritans also refused to read "The Book of Sports" to their congregations. For more information on the Book of Sports controversy of 1617-18 and other issues regarding the Sabbath, see Kenneth Parker, *The English Sabbath: A Study of Doctrine and Discipline from the Reformation to the Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 138.

Puritans, on the other hand, saw practices like playing sports on the Lord's Day as breaking principles clearly established in the Scriptures.

The Puritans were not asserting that the church had no right to decide in issues not directly prescribed by the Bible; instead, they were saying that what the Church of England was prescribing went against biblical principles. Liberty of conscience was not used to assert the individual's authority over the church; rather, it was used to help determine if what the church demanded was consistent with the Bible. For example, when the Church of England demanded in 1662 that the Puritan preachers give assent to the Act of Uniformity, many refused to comply. They did not refuse, however, simply because they did not think the church had the right to assert its authority; instead, they refused because they determined that many things they were being told to do were fundamentally against the teaching of the Bible.⁴³ The Puritans spoke much on this freedom because they were fighting for their consciences to be freed from the shackles of the Church of England. They zealously fought for freedom to practice the teachings of Scripture.

When the Puritans asserted liberty of conscience, did it mean to them that all matters are to be left up for the person to decide in his individual conscience? Is the individual conscience to be exalted above the authority of the Church? A comprehensive survey examining the answer to these questions is far beyond the scope of this chapter. It is also a gratuitous assumption that every Puritan held the same view of liberty of conscience. It is important to note, however, that liberty of conscience most often referred simply to the idea that civil authorities did not have the right to regulate religious belief. Leonard Busher gives a typical statement for the early defense of liberty of

⁴³ Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 120-121.

conscience in his 1614 “A Plea for Liberty of Conscience” written to King James I: “Let it please your majesty and parliament to be intreated to revoke and repeal those antichristian, Romish, and cruel laws, that force all in our land, both prince and people, to receive that religion wherein the king or queen were born, or that which is established by the law of man.”⁴⁴

L. John Van Til explains that there are especially two major views of liberty of conscience that the Puritans held, which find their origins in William Perkins and William Ames. The essential difference is that Perkins emphasizes that God gave individual conscience authority over church and state, while Ames focuses on liberty of conscience as being “liberty to believe orthodoxy.”⁴⁵ Rather than an in-depth look at Perkins and Ames, we will look at two important manifestations of their schools of thought. In this section we will look at the Westminster divines as representatives of the Perkins school, and in the next chapter we will examine the Massachusetts Bay Puritans as representatives of the Ames school.

Westminster Confession of Faith

A careful study of the wording of chapter twenty in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and relevant historical backgrounds shed light on what the divines purpose to express when declaring liberty of conscience. Van Til highlights the influence Perkins had on the divines and asserts that they wrote on the conscience in words strikingly, but

⁴⁴ Leonard Busher, “A Plea for Liberty of Conscience,” *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution: 1614-1661*, ed. Edward Underhill (London: J. Haddon, Castle Street, Finsbury, 1846), 16.

⁴⁵ L. John Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Craig Press, 1972), 57.

not coincidentally, similar to those of Perkins.⁴⁶ “Collectively and individually, the assembly embraced liberty of conscience in the way that it had been stated a half-century earlier by William Perkins.”⁴⁷ Perkins emphasizes both the authority of God over the conscience and the authority of the conscience over man: “The natural condition or property of every man’s conscience is this; that in regard of authority and power, it is placed in the middle between man and God, so as it is under God, and yet above man.”⁴⁸ Van Til’s articulation of Perkins’ view of the conscience helps shed light on the view of the Westminster divines, as expressed in their confession:

It posited conscience as a faculty of man that transcended all other forms of authority. Conscience stood above the authority of men and institutions because it was immediately subject to God. While conscience was bound in certain cases, it was bound only in those instances clearly spelled out in God’s Word. In terms of sphere sovereignty, conscience stood apart from the jurisdictions of the state and church. In other words, the conscience of the individual was at liberty, was a sphere by itself.⁴⁹

Though the conscience is not free from God’s rule, Perkins and the divines emphasize that the conscience is not bound by human authority.

A closer look at the second and fourth parts of chapter twenty of the *Westminster Confession* proves beneficial. The second part of chapter twenty reads:

God alone is the 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, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an

⁴⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁸ William Perkins, *William Perkins: 1558-1602: English Puritanist*, ed. Thomas F. Merrill (Netherlands: B. De Graaf, 1966), 99. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized.

⁴⁹ Van Til, 25.

absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.⁵⁰

This statement is making two clear points: the individual's conscience is bound by God and the authority of the human institutions over the individual's conscience is bound by Scripture. Many who would wrongly insist on the absolute sovereignty of the individual conscience over all human authorities would use this section as a defense for their views. The divines, however, are not finished yet with what they have to say about liberty of conscience. They go on in the fourth part of the twentieth chapter to recognize the legitimate obligation that the individual has to God-appointed authorities and to deal with the pernicious problem of pretended liberty of conscience being used to dismiss divinely instituted authorities:

And because the powers which God has ordained, and the liberty which Christ has 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 has 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.⁵¹

While asserting the legitimacy of delegated authorities, the divines have probably raised more questions than they have settled. They almost seem to cancel out the second section by adding this fourth. Michael Wagner, however, asserts that "section 4 was not included to cancel out the rest of the chapter. The confession does genuinely allow for liberty of

⁵⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), 86-87.

⁵¹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 87-89.

conscience. But liberty of conscience is not absolute.”⁵² The point here is that though the conscience has been freed, there is a limit to that liberty.

The divines leave specifically where the limits of liberty of conscience are and who decides the limits (the individual or the church authority) up to debate. This fourth section does not attempt to settle these matters; instead, it is added because the divines had much first hand experience of abuses committed under the pretence of Christian liberty. Bannerman explains the motivation behind this section:

There were not wanting men at that period who interpreted the right of conscience so as to be inconsistent with the lawful exercise of authority, whether civil or ecclesiastical, -- accounting that the plea of conscience, when urged by any man, justified him in resisting both the commands of the civil magistrate and the authority of the Church.⁵³

Though the Puritans fought for liberty of conscience in order to have the freedom to oppose some of the unbiblical ordinances of the Church of England, they also had seen the corruption which results in not putting limits on the scope of the conscience’s authority.

Although *The Westminster Confession of Faith* leaves the limits of liberty of conscience open to debate, *The Larger Catechism* provides helpful insight into how the divines view the individual’s duty to church authority. The divines ask: “What is the honour that inferiors owe to their superiors?” Their answer:

The honour which inferiors owe to their superiors is, all due reverence in heart, word, and behaviour; prayer and thanksgiving for them; imitation of their virtues and grace; *willing obedience to their lawful commands and*

⁵² Michael Wagner, “A Presbyterian Political Manifesto: Presbyterianism and Civil Government,” <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/presbpol.htm> (5 May 2005).

⁵³ Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church, vol. 1* (1869) (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival, 1991), 182.

*counsels; due submission to their corrections; fidelity to, defence, and maintenance of their persons and authority, according to their several ranks, and the nature of their places; bearing with their infirmities, and covering them in love, that so they may be an honour to them and to their government.*⁵⁴

This answer demonstrates that the divines clearly did not view liberty of conscience as having the authority to disregard the valid authority of the church. Their view of liberty of conscience ought to be interpreted in light of their high regard for church authority.

Samuel Rutherford

Although certainly not all the Westminster divines had the same view of liberty of conscience, a closer look at the view of one member of the divines will prove helpful. Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish Commissioner of the Westminster divines, serves as a sufficient representative of the general view of the divines. Rutherford, like many of his Puritan brethren, wrote much on liberty of conscience and its relation to church authority, but his most developed and famous works on these subjects are *The Divine Right of Church Government and Excommunication & A Dispute Touching Scandal and Christian Liberty*, which he published in 1646, and *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*, published in 1649.

Rutherford, like virtually all other Puritans, did not view the conscience as an infallible faculty in man with innate and absolute authority. He decries as “mere skepticism” and rank Arminianism the notion that the conscience is “to be a bible and a

⁵⁴ *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Question #127. Italics added.

rule of faith.”⁵⁵ Rutherford forcefully argues that a man can be guilty of idolatry by treating his own conscience as having absolute authority.

[Conscience] is not a Scripture, nor a Canonical book and rule of faith and conversation, it often speaketh Apocrypha, and is neither God, nor Pope, but can reel, and totter, and dream; to ascribe more to conscience than is Just, and to make new and bold opinions of God, broad and venturous and daring affirmations, the very Oracles of heaven, because they are the brood (as is conceived) of an equal and unbiased Conscience, is presumption, near to Atheism; the grossest Idolatry is to make your self the Idol.⁵⁶

Rutherford identifies that to attempt to make your conscience the absolute authority is gross idolatry. Like the serpent’s ancient enticement in Eden, the temptation is to be like God, knowing good and evil.

A chief reason why the conscience cannot be the absolute authority is that it is not an infallible guide into all truth. Rutherford not only recognizes that a conscience can be good or bad, but he also concedes that there are only two times (outside of the incarnation of Christ) in which human beings will have experienced a perfect conscience: “The conscience in Adam, before the fall was in a great perfection, and the Glorified spirits carry a good conscience up to heaven with them.”⁵⁷ In other words, the fact that the individual conscience proves fallible attests to the fact that it cannot possess ultimate supremacy. Rendell, a biographer of Rutherford, summarizes his position:

To Rutherford, conscience was far too subjective a guide, since conscience, even when enlightened and activated by the Holy Spirit, is such a delicate mechanism. It is subjected to social pressures, and may well be fashioned by the thought and feeling of the age to which it

⁵⁵ Samuel Rutherford, *A Free Disputation against Pretended Liberty of Conscience* (1649) (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival), 32. The spelling of the Rutherford quotes has been modernized, but the capitalization and punctuation have been kept the same.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

belongs. It can so easily be seared or silenced. Rutherford was justified in maintaining that it was no infallible guide.⁵⁸

Rutherford maintains that an erring conscience cannot possibly be binding: “We are...not to follow the erroneous conscience, nor are we obliged to follow what our conscience sayeth is true and good, because, or upon this formal reason and ground, that the conscience sayeth so.”⁵⁹ The accuracy of what the conscience says is not to be assumed simply because the conscience says it.

Rutherford defines a good or tender conscience as being a conscience that deliberately subordinates itself to the absolute authority of God. Rutherford asserts, along with his Westminster brethren, that God must be the Lord of the conscience. When the conscience ceases to be under God’s authority, it becomes exceedingly corrupt and untrustworthy. Since Rutherford defines conscience as being “but a knowledge with a witness,” knowledge of God’s will is essential to having a good conscience.⁶⁰ Rutherford asserts that a bad conscience is synonymous with an ignorant conscience and that “a Conscience void of knowledge is void of goodness.” “An innocent toothless conscience that cannot see, nor hear, nor speak, cannot bark, far less can it bite before it have teeth, such a conscience covenanteth with the sinner, *Let me alone, let me sleep till the smoke of the furnace of hell waken me.*”⁶¹ Only a conscience renewed by the Holy Spirit and filled with the knowledge of God can be of good use to an individual as a guide for how to live.

⁵⁸ Kingsley G. Rendell, *Samuel Rutherford: A New Biography of the Man and His Ministry* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 137.

⁵⁹ Rutherford, *A Free Disputation*, 134.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

The knowledge of God that can rightly inform the conscience is, of course, principally to be found in the Scriptures. This leads to the most apparent limit on liberty of conscience that all Puritans consistently espouse: the conscience must be bound by Scripture. Rutherford asserts:

The Word of God must be the rule of Conscience, and Conscience is a servant; and a under-Judge only, not a Lord, nor an Absolute and independent Sovereign, whose voice is a Law, therefore an Idolatrous and exorbitant rule of Conscience is here also to be condemned. Conscience is ruled by Scripture.⁶²

Rutherford warns that we are to try the dictates of our own conscience by the word of God, “otherwise we make a Pope, and a God of our own conscience.”⁶³

Like many other members of the Westminster Assembly, Rutherford expresses his views on the conscience’s relation to church authority. For the most part, he articulates his argument for the individual conscience not being bound by the authority of the church. This sentiment, however, must be understood in its proper context. Rutherford, like many of the other divines, came to the Westminster Assembly with a background of being persecuted by both the state and the church for espousing what he considered to be biblical views. For example, Rutherford was called to court by the Bishop of Galloway for writing a book that disparaged Arminianism.⁶⁴ This point is significant because it highlights why Rutherford so often emphasizes the liberty of conscience in relation to church authority. Contrary to what tends to happen today, the divines were not fighting for liberty of conscience in order to protect the right of the individual believer to follow his own version of what he thought the Bible was saying,

⁶² Ibid., 10.

⁶³ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁴ Reid, *Memoirs*, 346-7.

regardless of the teaching or judgment of his church. Instead, they were asserting the validity of the Puritan movement, which was based on the notion that the Church of England had significantly strayed from the path of Scripture and was in dire need of reform and purification.

Likewise, the Puritans often stress liberty of conscience in the context of making the theological assertion that the individual's conscience could not be effectively compelled by the state or the church to believe truth. In other words, often the Puritans were speaking of the conscience as being free only in the sense that they cannot be forced into compliance in matters of faith. Rutherford makes this point frequently throughout his treatise: "Religion cannot be compelled, nor can mercy and justice and love to our neighbor commanded in the second table be more compelled than faith in Christ.... Religion cannot be forced but must be persuaded by the word and Spirit."⁶⁵ The church has the right and the duty to discipline its members, but it cannot "under the pain of censures compel any to think well of Christ or ill of the Antichrist."⁶⁶

Rutherford also periodically makes clear that the individual conscience's authority over the church is not without limits. Although Rutherford did not allow absolute authority to the church, he did comment on the individual's duty to obey church authority. He states: "God keeps ever that order in his Church of some to teach and some to be taught, of some to obey and some to be over others in the Lord."⁶⁷ He argued that the Church had the same authority to command obedience as did the Acts 15 Jerusalem

⁶⁵ Rutherford, *A Free Disputation*, 50.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

council, which “was not formally Scripture, yet to be observed as a secondary rule.”⁶⁸

Rutherford vehemently opposes the Roman view that the church’s judgment is infallible, yet he maintains that “in controversies of Religion which the Scriptures doth not evidently decide...the fallible Church may determine infallible points.”⁶⁹ Rendell posits that Rutherford “held that it is the business of the Church to interpret the Word and to act as a guide for conscience.”⁷⁰

Summary

It will be helpful to conclude our brief survey of the Puritan view of liberty of conscience by summarizing how it is essentially different than modern perversions of this doctrine. The first major difference is that for the Puritans the liberty of conscience never gave license to immorality. Rutherford asserts: “Liberty to sin is fleshly license not liberty.”⁷¹ Though most Puritans held that the conscience was free in matters of moral indifference, their view of what was morally indifferent was radically narrower than what would be common in the evangelical church today. For example, how and when people engaged in their worldly amusements were not considered matters of indifference. One example is the general Puritan view of the theater: “So strong was the Puritan feeling against the theater that the first plays staged in America did not come about until the mid-

⁶⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁷⁰ Rendell, 137.

⁷¹ Rutherford, *A Free Disputation*, 24.

eighteenth century!”⁷² The Puritans, as noted earlier, famously took a firm stand against the validity of engaging in worldly amusements on the Lord’s Day.⁷³

Moreover, the Puritans in general did not believe the individual should be given freedom to decide his own morality. “If liberty of conscience meant that every man could do whatever he thought right in his own eyes, then Rutherford would have none of it.”⁷⁴ The individual must not only come under the authority of the Word of God, but he must believe and follow the orthodox understanding of the Bible, as articulated by the Puritans themselves. This is a far cry from the “anything goes” type of tolerance that prevails today. The Puritans fought tirelessly for their freedom to practice and believe orthodoxy, not for the right of heretics to espouse and enjoy heterodoxy. Although it is certainly true that the Puritans were early defenders of liberty of conscience, it is also fair to wonder if they would so vigorously champion its cause if they were to see the state of the evangelical church today.

Evolution of the American Conscience

Since the early American Pilgrims, the Puritan group that settled in Massachusetts Bay, heavily influenced early colonial life, studying the Puritan view of conscience prepares us for examining the American scene. Many of the Pilgrims fled to New England in order to avoid imprisonment for nonconformity to the Church of England in

⁷² Wayne A. Wilson, *Worldly Amusements: Restoring the Lordship of Christ to Our Entertainment Choices* (Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 1999), 36.

⁷³ The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* reads: “Q. 60. How is the sabbath to be sanctified? A. The sabbath is to be sanctified by a holy resting all that day, *even from such worldly employments and recreations as are lawful on other days*; and spending the whole time in the public and private exercises of God’s worship, except so much as is to be taken up in the works of necessity and mercy.” Italics added.

⁷⁴ Rendell, 136.

the 1630's. They were asserting that the Church of England did not have the right to command them to participate in worship they deemed to be against biblical principles. They opened the door for the questioning of church authority and it did not take long for history to prove that there was a cost to opening that door.

Even a brief overview of the landscape of American evangelicalism throughout the centuries will demonstrate the gradual changes that have taken place. Liberty of conscience went from being used to promote orthodoxy to being an excuse to oppose it. Church authority went from being exalted and revered to being disregarded and ignored. The practice of church discipline nearly became extinct. We will begin our study of the change in how American evangelicals viewed liberty of conscience by looking at how liberty of conscience was treated in colonial America. We will then use the Southern Baptist denomination as a case study in order to trace the story of the evolution of American evangelical approach to the conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority.

Liberty of Conscience in Colonial America

While the Westminster divines represented William Perkins' view of the conscience, the other major Puritan version of liberty of conscience was articulated by William Ames, who directly influenced the group of Puritans that settled in Massachusetts Bay. Under Ames' system, problems of the conscience did not have to be left up to the individual to decide.⁷⁵ Van Til summarizes the Amesian view: "The single most important feature of the Amesian view of conscience was the fact that it was tied to

⁷⁵ Recall that Perkins tended to put more emphasis on the autonomy of the conscience and its authority (albeit limited) over the state and the church.

the dialectical method, the method acting in an authoritative capacity as problems of conscience were solved. Use of this method eliminated the need to think in terms of conscience as having liberty.”⁷⁶ For our purposes, the details of Ames’ dialectical method are not as important as knowing that it meant that problems of conscience were not left solely up to the individual to decide. Ames emphasizes that the conscience must be conformed to God’s will as it is expressed in his Word: “God’s will as it is understood, or may be understood, binds the Conscience to assent; As it is acknowledged and received by Conscience, it binds the whole man to obey and do it presently.”⁷⁷

Contrary to what many assume to be true, the early American Pilgrims did not fight for the freedom of the individual to decide what orthodoxy was for himself. They were not seeking a haven for anyone being free to worship in whatever way he wanted. They were not aiming for religious liberty in that sense. Instead, they fought for the individual’s “liberty to believe orthodoxy.”⁷⁸ This ambition is what is behind John Winthrop’s famous ambition for the Puritan community to be “a City upon a hill” to the rest of the world: “For we must consider ourselves that we shall be as a City upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his presence from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”⁷⁹ The Pilgrims were going to the New

⁷⁶ L. John Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Craig Press, 1972), 57.

⁷⁷ William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (1639) (reprint, Edmonton: Still Waters Revival), 7-8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁹ John Winthrop, “A Model for Christian Charity,” *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, ed. William C. Placher (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 109.

world in order to establish a society in which orthodoxy could flourish, not a place in which people felt free to oppose orthodoxy as a matter of conscience.

The first full-fledged controversy in Puritan New England was the Antinomian controversy of 1636-1638, in which Anne Hutchinson was put on trial for teaching Antinomianism. Although it wears the mask of a theological debate, what was really at stake was to what extent an individual could exercise his liberty of conscience. David Hall asserts: “The ‘mis-called’ controversy was, in any case, not about matters of doctrine but about power and freedom of conscience.”⁸⁰ Puritans such as John Winthrop and Thomas Shepard argued vehemently that allowing the individual conscience to override church authority began a slippery slope that would inevitably lead to the type of disregard for God’s moral law that Paul fervently condemned in Romans 6: “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!” (Rom. 6:1-2).

The way the early Puritans of Massachusetts Bay approached the conflict of church authority and liberty of conscience can perhaps best be seen in Ms. Hutchinson’s trial before the General Court at Newton in 1637. In articulating the charges to which she was to give answer, Governor Winthrop demonstrated his view that the church possessed authority to bind the individual conscience. He began by accusing Ms. Hutchinson of promoting heterodox opinions and offering hospitality to ministers whom “the court had taken notice and passed censure upon.” In other words, the assertion was that she did not have the right to decide for herself whether the judgment of the church court was fair and just. When Winthrop asked Hutchinson why she harbored the censured ministers, she

⁸⁰ Hall, David D., ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990, 11.

responded by tellingly asserting, “That’s matter of conscience, Sir.” This type of response has made Hutchinson a hero in American folklore, but in her time it simply earned her the following curt and revealing reproof by the Governor, “Your conscience you must keep or it must be kept for you.”⁸¹ Winthrop’s important truism exhibits the fact that the Massachusetts Bay Puritans fervidly denied that a person could trump church authority by simply making an appeal to his conscience.

Roger Williams, best known as the founding father of Rhode Island, was at one point banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony largely for his zealously championing liberty of conscience. Where he differed from his Puritan peers was in his defense of those with erroneous consciences.⁸² Williams did not think it the role of the civil magistrate to act as Defenders of the Faith by persecuting those with erroneous consciences.⁸³ For Williams, liberty of conscience was a principle meant primarily to limit the government control over the individual’s conscience in the area of religion. In other words, the government has no right to force people to follow any particular religion. “If the Civil Magistrate be a Christian... he is bound to be far from destroying the bodies of men, for refusing to receive Jesus Christ, for otherwise he should not... be ignorant of the sweet end of the coming of the Son of Man, which was not to destroy the bodies of Men, but to save both bodies and souls.”⁸⁴

⁸¹ “The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newton,” *The Antinomian Controversy*, ed. David Hall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 312.

⁸² Roland H. Bainton, *The Travail of Religious Liberty* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), 220. John Cotton quotes Williams’ defense of the erroneous conscience and answers it in his 1647 work *The Bloody Tenent, Washed, and Made White in the Blood of the Lamb* (26-28).

⁸³ Roger Williams, “The Bloody Tenent of Persecution,” *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams: volume three*, ed. Samuel L. Caldwell (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 120.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 132. Spellings have been modernized but capitalizations left the same.

Although Williams represents a shift in thinking concerning liberty of conscience in America, his views are still a far cry from the modern notion of the individual conscience exercising sovereignty over church authority. Williams argues that God and his church (not the state) reserve the right to discipline those who breached the first four Commandments.⁸⁵ He says that the “censure of the Lord Jesus” is to be “in the hands of his Spiritual governors, for any spiritual evil in life or doctrine.”⁸⁶ This statement clearly demonstrates that even Roger Williams, the great champion for liberty of conscience in colonial America, cannot be referenced as a supporter of those seeking to strip the church of its authority to discipline. It was only in later generations that liberty of conscience became perverted to mean that in spiritual matters the conscience could not possibly be bound in any way.⁸⁷

Although Williams mainly advocated liberty of conscience as an aspect of fighting for religious liberty, “liberty of conscience, as would be repeatedly demonstrated, could mean many things.”⁸⁸ Even in Williams’ own time, many discovered that liberty of conscience was a sword that could be easily utilized to justify all kinds of depraved practices. Some of Williams’ contemporaries already began to pervert the idea of freedom of the conscience. Edwin Gaustad concludes: “Liberty of conscience was not infinite [according to Williams]... Some of his fellow colonists,

⁸⁵ Pahl, Larry. “The 17th Century Roger Williams-John Cotton Debate.” *The New Christian Right Is the Old Christian Wrong*. <http://members.aol.com/larrypahl/wm-cotlb.htm> (17 January 2005).

⁸⁶ Williams, 132.

⁸⁷ Edwin Gaustad, a biographer of Roger Williams, contrasts Williams with the attitude of some of his later “followers.” Gaustad describes the ideology of these “followers”: “In the realm of religion, each individual was a law unto himself or herself. In the realm of politics, each individual had positive duties to perform, positive restraints to observe” (Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* [Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1999], 147).

⁸⁸ Gaustad, 89-90.

however, acted as though liberty had no limits and government no valid place in the affairs of humankind.”⁸⁹ Gaustad gives the example of Joshua Verin, who savagely beat his wife for attending church. When accused of violating his wife’s liberty of conscience by preventing her church attendance, he responded that *his* liberty of conscience was being interfered with because the wife should submit to the husband. These abuses of liberty of conscience early on in American history were only a foreboding of the evolutionary shift to the unrestrained autonomy that was to come.

The Southern Baptist Example

The history of the American church has been a tale of the demise of church authority and the converse rise of individualism. One good measure of the decline of church authority and the development of an evangelical individualism can be seen in the history of the American Baptists, who have historically been renowned both for exercising strict church discipline and for promoting the doctrine of liberty of conscience. In *Democratic Religion*, Gregory Wills surveys the Southern Baptist practice of church authority between 1785 and 1900. He also purposes to examine how and why the practice of church discipline declined among the Southern Baptists in the twentieth century. Although church authority and discipline may have been most heavily emphasized by the Southern Baptists, the trends that took place in the development of the Southern Baptists basically mirror what happened in the other major American evangelical denominations (i.e., the Presbyterians and Methodists).

Genuine evangelicalism spread like wildfire across denominational lines as a result of the Great Awakening in the eighteenth century. Wills comments that one effect

⁸⁹ Ibid., 145.

of this revival was an emphasis on holiness: “Indeed, the brands of American Protestantism that flourished after the Great Awakening shared an exclusivist temperament that rested on a vision of the church as separate from the world.”⁹⁰ This emphasis on separation from the world naturally resulted in church discipline taking up a prominent place in church life. Churches saw it as their duty to discipline their straying members, as Joseph Baker articulates in his 1847 “Queries Considered or an Investigation of Various Subjects involved in the Exercise of Church Discipline:” “To be faithful to God, and just and impartial in our administration of the laws of Christ’s kingdom, we must subject to the censures of the church, not only those who do evil, but those also who neglect to do good (James 4:17).”⁹¹ Wills argues that it was the loss of this emphasis on holiness that later led to the demise of the practice of church discipline in evangelical churches in general: “Dissent from this vision fueled many a denominational controversy, and, as evangelical churches relinquished it for an inclusivist one in the twentieth century, the character of evangelical Protestantism changed.”⁹²

This stress on church discipline was predicated on the recognition of the need of submission to church authority. In his 1743 “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church” Benjamin Griffith writes of the duty of church members: “Ministers, who are the stewards of the mysteries of the Gospel, are in an eminent manner to be regarded, as being ambassadors of peace, 2 Cor 5:20 though they are not to

⁹⁰ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

⁹¹ Joseph Baker, “Queries Considered or an Investigation of Various Subjects involved in the Exercise of Church Discipline,” *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington DC: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 278.

⁹² Wills, 5.

hunt for it, like the Pharisees of old, Matt 23:5-7. The duties [include]...to obey them in the Lord, in whatsoever they admonish them, according to the word of God (Heb 13:17, 22).”⁹³ In 1846 South Carolinian Baptist W. B. Johnson articulated the authority that God has delegated to his church in “The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ.” “In every well regulated society, rulers are necessary for the management of its affairs. The King of Zion, therefore, provided such for his churches, whom he clothes with authority, and to whom he requires that obedience and respect be rendered.”⁹⁴ Wills summarizes the early American evangelical view of church authority which dominated the discussion amongst Baptists: “Submission to the authority of the church was at the heart of the disciplinary apparatus. A particular transgression was secondary. The issue was submission to divine authority mediated by the community of believers. To oppose the church’s discipline was to oppose the authority of God.”⁹⁵

Becoming a church member meant forfeiting your right to decide matters of morality unilaterally: “Undergoing baptism was a radical step, for it meant crossing the wide chasm from a life of moral autonomy to a life of submission to the moral authority of the church, and Baptists made that passage narrow.”⁹⁶ The evaluation of how one lived was not left up to his own conscience to decide unilaterally. In P. H. Mell’s 1860 “Corrective Church Discipline with a Development of the Scriptural Principles upon

⁹³ Benjamin Griffith, “A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church,” *Polity*, ed. Dever, 103.

⁹⁴ W. B. Johnson, “The Gospel Developed through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ,” *Polity*, ed. Dever, 189-190.

⁹⁵ Wills, 49.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

Which It Is Based,” he asserts: “Rebellion against the lawful authority of the Church—a refusal to heed its citations, or, in other ways, a denial of its lawful jurisdiction over him—is, on the part of a member, a ‘public offense.’ He neglects to hear the Church, and, if he persists, -- by Divine direction,-- is to be considered by her in the light of a ‘heathen man and a publican.’”⁹⁷

The Baptists may have emphasized liberty of conscience, but this liberty primarily meant that the state and the church could not force anyone to believe or act in a certain way religiously. Soul liberty did not mean, however, that there were no consequences to one’s religious behavior. One may have a right to choose to be an apostate, but his apostasy will have consequences. The Baptists fought for freedom to exercise church discipline. Mark Dever explains: “A great part of the historic Baptist commitment to religious liberty was motivated by a desire that churches be free to exercise church discipline without interference from the state.”⁹⁸ The church is duty-bound to bring discipline to the apostate. Isaac Backus, a nineteenth century Baptist church historian, records that Baptist leaders of the Revolutionary War era interpreted religious liberty as fundamentally the church having freedom from the state in its exercise of discipline: “Thus those that use secular force in religious affairs, violate the divine command both ways; they obstruct discipline in the church, and invade the rights of conscience and humanity in the State.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ P. H. Mell, “Corrective Church Discipline with a Development of the Scriptural Principles upon Which It Is Based,” *Polity*, ed. Dever, 425.

⁹⁸ Mark Dever, “[Biblical Church Discipline](#),” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (Winter 2000): 34.

⁹⁹ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England with Particular Reference to the Baptists* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), II:74

Baptists believed strongly in the freedom of the individual to choose his own belief, but this does not mean they condoned the ideology that people could determine their own truth. Wills contrasts Baptist philosophy with what became known as American individualism, which finds its origins in the Revolution: “The American Revolution gave impetus to individualism—‘the principle that all values, rights, and duties originate in the individual.’ Mainstream evangelical leaders touted private judgment, personal autonomy, and individual conscience over creedal systems.”¹⁰⁰ Wills points out that Baptists were always suspicious of the type of individualism that advocated unlimited liberty for the individual: “They repulsed the privatizing trend of democratic individualism. The church, they believed, had prerogatives that superseded those of individuals.”¹⁰¹

Religion was not viewed as a fundamentally a private matter; therefore, the church had the right to exercise authority over the individual. In fact, when a famous Baptist proponent of individual autonomy erroneously exercised his right of private judgment in Scripture interpretation, he was disfellowshipped by his association. “Baptists opposed this kind of individualism. Conscience was not supreme.”¹⁰² What is clear here is that when the eighteenth century Baptist spoke of liberty of the conscience (which he often did), he certainly did not mean that an individual did not have to submit to church authority.

In the early nineteenth century, it became more common for people to object to church disciplinary measures by appealing to liberty of conscience. Wills refers to a

¹⁰⁰ Wills, 33.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 33.

protracted dispute in Georgia that took place over Mary Dunning, who pled that she acted in good conscience and should, therefore, not be excommunicated for her infractions.

The church and the association to which the church appealed went back and forth until reaching a final decision in 1814:

It decided that no member had a right to leave a church ‘without general consent; otherwise, he despises the church, breaks fellowship, and should be dealt with as the gospel directs, in the case of disorderly members.’ Because a member joined by assuming the covenant of obedience to Christ and his discipline, the attempt to withdraw was an immoral act, a breach of the vow of submission.¹⁰³

In other words, neither Mary Dunning nor anyone else could escape the discipline of the church by excusing themselves on the basis of their own judgment.

In the 1774 “A Summary of Church Discipline” formulated by the Charleston Association, they argued that a member of a church could not perform the act of excommunication on himself. The Association called the person who attempts to leave the church without the consent of the church a “self-murderer:” “To attempt it is to break covenant with the church, and, as much as in a man lies, to break up the church.... Those, therefore, who are guilty of it, ought to be looked on as trucebreakers, proud arrogant, dangerous persons, and to be dealt with as such.”¹⁰⁴ The Charleston Association goes on to say that such a man ought to be avoided by all other churches. Although they wanted to pay due respect to the conscience, they foresaw the slippery slope that would be set in motion by allowing the individual conscience to override the judgment of the church.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁴ Charleston Association, “A Summary of Church Discipline,” *Polity*, ed. Dever, 129.

The beginning of the decline of church discipline among the Southern Baptists began in the latter-half of the nineteenth century. Wills describes some of the signs of this decline and reasons for it:

After the Civil War, Baptist observers began to lament that church discipline was foundering, and it was. It declined partly because it became more burdensome in larger churches. Young Baptists refused in increasing numbers to submit to discipline for dancing, and the churches shrank from excluding them. Urban churches, pressed by the need for large buildings and the desire for refined music and preaching, subordinated church discipline to the task of keeping the church solvent. Many Baptists shared a new vision of the church, replacing the pursuit of purity with the quest for efficiency. They lost the resolve to purge their churches of straying members.¹⁰⁵

Efficiency replaced holiness as the paramount virtue of the church throughout the evangelical denominations. “Churches across the nation were abandoning old models of congregational life. They instituted more efficient systems of church finance and transformed themselves into centers of social life and recreational activity.”¹⁰⁶ The value of tolerance naturally accompanied this new emphasis on efficiency. This lack of emphasis on holiness is also a chief cause for the absence of church discipline today. Church discipline will never be practiced in a church that does not take seriously the charge to be holy.

Conclusion

What is interesting about the demise of discipline is that it usually happens in silence. Although church discipline is rare in the evangelical church today, it is very hard

¹⁰⁵ Wills, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 131.

to find an evangelical who will directly speak against it. Wills notes a similar phenomenon in the way church discipline declined among the Southern Baptists:

No one publicly advocated the demise of discipline. No Baptist leader arose to call for an end to congregational censures. No theologians argued that discipline was unsound in principle or practice. No 'freedom' party arose to quash the tyranny of the redeemed. It simply faded away, as Baptists had grown weary of holding one another accountable.¹⁰⁷

Part of the reason that church discipline is covered over in silence is because churches cannot soundly argue against its biblical warrant. Not only is church discipline warranted, but it is also required (recall especially the rebuke of Paul in 1 Cor. 5). The silence is a silence of shame.

By the twentieth century, church discipline had become a distasteful relic of the past across denominational lines. Among Southern Baptists the demise of church discipline was accompanied by a dramatic rise of emphasis on liberty of conscience.

Wills states:

Throughout the twentieth century, they had placed the ideas of soul liberty and the priesthood of the believer near the center of Baptist theology. These doctrines, many Baptists urged, established the inviolable character of the individual conscience in matters spiritual: No person had a right to sit in judgment of another's religious convictions.¹⁰⁸

Liberty of conscience had gone from meaning freedom from governmental control over beliefs to the idea that no authority can be exercised in any way when it comes to spiritual matters. To discipline somebody for erroneous belief or practice became viewed as being judgmental and intolerant.

The Southern Baptist story of the diminishing role of church authority in exercising discipline over the flock is only one illustration of an evolution that has run its

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 4.

course throughout American evangelicalism. Individual accountability to church authority has given way to individual freedom from church authority.

The changing character of individualism is an important part of the story of the transformation of American evangelicalism. The church-oriented evangelicalism of early nineteenth-century American Protestantism continued the Puritan pursuit of the pure, primitive church. Twentieth-century American evangelicalism preferred pietism's traditional approach: the promotion of an individual spirituality that was loosely connected to the institutional churches.¹⁰⁹

The early Puritans' fight for the liberty to practice orthodoxy was a far cry from what has evolved into the modern battle for individual freedom to live according to one's autonomous conscience.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 139.

Chapter Four: Application for Today

Postmodernism in the Church

About ten years ago, George Barna conducted a survey that found that 72 percent of young adults agreed that there are no moral absolutes.¹ In a recent similar survey, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that only six percent of professing Christian teenagers claimed to believe in moral absolutes. Among teenagers who make the claim to be born again, the number only increases to nine percent.² If these numbers are accurate, the indication may be that the belief in moral absolutes is in the process of suffering a dramatic decline. What is even more shocking about these statistics, however, is how much the church appears to have imbibed the postmodern philosophy of the world. Once the ideas of truth and morality are relativized, the foundation for many other things (including the conscience) is taken away. Nancy Pearcey explains: “This is the tragedy of the postmodern age: The things that matter most in life—freedom and dignity, meaning and significance—have been reduced to nothing but useless fictions.”³

With no absolute standard for guidance, truth and morality become relative to the individual’s perceptions, opinions, and feelings. In the minds of many, “my conscience does not allow me to do this” has become synonymous with “I do not feel like doing this.” This section aims to demonstrate how the prevalent postmodern *zeitgeist* has managed to exasperate the conflict between the liberty of conscience and church authority.

¹ George Barna, *The Barna Report: What Americans Believe* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1991), 83-85. Quoted in Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994), 16.

² Dale Buss, “Christian Teens? Not Very,” *Wall Street Journal*, 9 July 2004.

³ Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 110.

The Influence of Post-Modernism on Views of Conscience

Undoubtedly the prevailing postmodern philosophy has heavily influenced modern views on liberty of conscience. Postmodernism, best summarized as the rejection of absolute truth, offers the individual a new type of freedom. Ron Sider describes the ideology of our postmodern culture: “This culture is radically individualistic and relativistic. Whatever feels right for me *is* right for me; whatever feels right to you *is* right for you. That’s the dominant value. It’s considered outrageous for somebody to say somebody else is wrong.”⁴ Postmodernism awards the individual the privilege of deciding what is right and true for him. No longer simply free to choose whether or not you want to *do* what is right, postmodernism allows you freedom to choose what *is* right. You can now *determine* truth for yourself, rather than just determining if you are going to live by the truth. Os Guinness describes the essence of postmodernism: “Truth in any objective sense, truth that is independent of the mind of the knower, no longer exists. At best—truth is relative—it’s all a matter of interpretation and it all depends on perspective.”⁵ Harold O. J. Brown accuses the human race in our modern sensate culture of “pretending that it is a law unto itself and that whatever it wills or chooses to do is by definition right and good.”⁶

In a postmodern world, no one has the authority or right to tell an individual what is right or wrong; he can decide that for himself. This is where the concept of conscience

⁴ Ron Sider, “The Evangelical Scandal,” *Christianity Today* (April 2005) <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/004/32.70.html> (24 May 2005).

⁵ Os Guinness, *Time for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 12.

⁶ Harold O.J. Brown, *Sensate Culture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 141.

enters for the postmodernist. If there is no absolute right or wrong, then my personal “conscience” ought to decide the question for myself. The conscience becomes almost synonymous with the notion of personal “feeling” or opinion—what is “true for me.” In commenting on Ephesians 5:24, Lloyd-Jones points out the mistake of confusing conscience with one’s own opinion or personal desires. The conscience ought not to be considered synonymous with personal opinion.⁷ In a postmodern age, the personal conscience is bound to be exalted as the only legitimate authority for determining “truth” for the individual.

Postmodernism may begin as an abstract philosophy, but it inevitably becomes an ethic by which people live. Gene Veith points out how what you believe naturally affects how you live: “The rejection of truth is not just a fine point in philosophy.... Relative values accompany the relativism of truth.”⁸ As a result the battle cry for ethics in a post-modern age is “pro-choice,” which means that the individual has the right to decide for himself whether or not an action ought to be done. The “pro-choice” plea has come to cover numerous moral issues, including abortion, homosexuality, infanticide, and euthanasia. If anyone attempts to oppose these positions, he is often accused of imposing his morality on others and taking away other people’s freedom to choose for themselves how they should live.

The similarities here between the perverted view of liberty of conscience and the postmodern “pro-choice” mentality are striking. This “pro-choice” mentality promotes the idea that moral decisions should always be left to the individual. Take the moral

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Life in the Spirit in Marriage, Home and Work* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 127. For more on how to properly define the conscience, see the section in chapter two entitled “Liberty of Conscience in Its Proper Place.”

⁸ Veith, 17.

argument over homosexuality for example. Many who oppose homosexuality have traditionally argued, based on anatomy, that it is unnatural; whereas the proponents of homosexuality have argued, based on genetics, that it is natural. In a postmodern world, the “pro-choice” mentality dismantles the whole argument from the start, by declaring that homosexuality may be natural for some and unnatural for others. It is relative to each individual and his conscience. Abortion, of course, is the chief “pro-choice” issue. The 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* verdict relegated the decision of whether or not to abort a child to a matter of personal conscience. Former presidential candidate John Kerry recently articulated this common “pro-choice” position: “I oppose abortion, personally. I don’t like abortion. I believe life does begin at conception. But I can’t take my Catholic belief, my article of faith, and legislate it on a Protestant or a Jew or an atheist... who doesn’t share it.”⁹ When someone uses the “pro-choice” defense, he implies that the issue lacks moral relevance; likewise, the call to the conscience often carries with it the same implication.

The Influence of Post-Modernism on Views of Church Authority

The whole postmodern philosophy radically opposes the biblical notion of an absolute truth. Without absolute truth, there is no ground for an authority of any kind. Guinness offers the “leveling of authorities” and the “elevation of autonomous self as sole arbiter of life and reality” as two of his eight “fingerprints of postmodernism.”¹⁰ David Wells comments on how the postmodern philosophy of the world endorses a highly individualized view of religion: “A Christian mind sees truth as objective. It seeks

⁹ “The Week,” *National Review* (26 July 2004), 6.

¹⁰ Guinness, 52.

to understand reality as it is in itself, not as it seems to the subject.... Today, reality is so privatized and relativized that truth is often understood only in terms of what it means to each person. A pragmatic culture will see 'truth' as whatever works for any given person."¹¹ For the postmodern Christian all truth is personal and pragmatic, so there can be no legitimate authority for the church.

This postmodern anti-authority spirit has infected the evangelical church sometimes in a subtle way. One example of this can be found in Jerry Bridges' *Transforming Grace*, in which he charges his readers to resist church leaders that try to control their flock. He calls these leaders "controllers" and describes them as being those that "are not letting you live your life before God as you believe God is leading you." Bridges also says their ideas of how we ought to live often "will not match up with how you feel God is guiding."¹² Of course, it is true that church leaders ought not to "control" their flock, but this warning is out of place in this postmodern age. The much greater danger today is that of the flock refusing to be led. According to these statements, one's feelings and beliefs about God's leading takes supreme authority. This is but one example of how postmodernism has subtly and dangerously affected evangelical expressions and emphases.

Postmodernism has undoubtedly had a severe impact on the exercise of church authority, especially in the realm of church discipline. Without moral absolutes, administering church discipline is an utter impossibility. The process of discipline begins with someone having committed a wrong. Discipline, therefore, cannot commence if

¹¹ David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 280.

¹² Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God's Unfailing Love* (Colorado Springs: NAVPress, 1991), 129-130.

there can be no definitive and objective wrong committed in the first place. Guinness points out that we live in a culture in which it is forbidden to forbid, and all forms of censoring are classified as censoring.¹³

In examining how church discipline has increasingly fallen under attack in the American court system, Buzzard and Brandon attribute this to our atomized society being caught up in a quest for individual self-fulfillment, which promises a glorious autonomy.¹⁴

We live in a day when the whole concept of discipline, accountability, judgment—even guilt—is not simply passé but is perceived as unhealthy, if not dangerous. The spirit of our age is hostile to the very principles that underlie the biblical concepts of the church, including moral absolutes, spiritual accountability, and individual responsibility.¹⁵

Buzzard and Brandon draw attention to the way religion today is “perceived as a private matter, a sort of bilateral negotiable contract.” To many the church is simply to be a gathering together of these “private contractors,” but it should deliberately purpose “not to disturb their personal agreement with God.” They point out the modern implausibility of practicing church discipline given this privatized viewpoint. “If religion is simply a private, individual question, then church discipline becomes an intrusion, indeed, an invasion of the sanctuary of the soul.”¹⁶

Without moral absolutes, which resoundingly denies postmodernism, there is no room for any practical exercise of church authority. Legitimate authority and discipline must be based on an absolute standard of truth. When you take away the standard, it is

¹³ Guinness, 24.

¹⁴ Lynn R. Buzzard & Thomas S. Brandon, *Church Discipline and the Courts* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

only a matter of time before the authority crumbles along with it. Buzzard and Brandon add: “[The loss of authority] is a natural consequence of a distorted version of individualism combined with a loss of any reference point for established norms and values.”¹⁷ They conclude:

In an age without norms, in a culture that has rejected absolutes, it is not surprising that ‘guilt’ is forbidden as a relic of a past age, a disabling remnant of authoritarian interests. The only thing to feel guilty about is guilt itself. And of course, without real guilt, there can be no valid judgment, no need for confession, repentance, or restoration. In one fell swoop, a mass of Christian doctrine has been declared heresy. Perhaps in no other area does contemporary culture, particularly the modern god of psychology clash so sharply with biblical thought.¹⁸

To practice a biblical form of discipline has become heterodoxy in the postmodern church, since the concepts of sin and guilt are now considered obsolete.

Summary

Many evangelicals today “confuse unfettered freedom of choice with freedom of conscience.”¹⁹ They find historical justification for liberty of conscience in the history of the Protestant church, all the while failing to seriously come to grips with what the Reformers and Puritans meant by this doctrine. The cry for liberty of conscience, even in evangelical circles, far too often is symptomatic of a pursuit of autonomy. The cry of the people today sounds much like the clamor that Isaiah heard in his own time: “They say to the seers, ‘See no more visions!’ and to the prophets, ‘Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and

¹⁷ Ibid., 25.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹ Guinness, 85.

stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!’” (Is. 30:10-11). J. Alec Motyer’s comments on these verses shed light on the exaltation of the individual conscience in the postmodern church:

They did not want a supernatural message, nor a message of moral demand, but a ministry that left the surface of life unruffled, pleasant, and smooth. They did not want holiness, in a life that follows ‘the way...the path’ and certainly not the holiness of God himself. ‘Leave this way’ request the preachers to pioneer a new morality. They did not ask that preaching should cease but only that it be innocuous, void of moral imperatives and without the backing of the ultimate moral absolute of the nature of God.²⁰

Although it may seem to be a significantly different age, the truth remains that there is “nothing new under the sun.” The endorsement for liberty of conscience today far too often is simply an attempt to be one’s own boss. Behind its promotion frequently lies a tacit rejection of the very Lordship of Christ.

The Purpose Driven Conscience

Rick Warren, pastor of the 10,000 member Saddleback Church in southern California, is perhaps the best representative of modern mainstream evangelicalism. The cover of his wildly popular book *The Purpose Driven Life* boasts of over six million copies sold. In fact, his official web-site informs us that his bestseller was awarded the Book of the Year by the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association for the last two years.²¹ This reason alone warrants the use of Warren as a representative of mainstream evangelicalism.

²⁰ J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 248.

²¹ *Purpose Driven Life.com*, <http://www.purposedrivenlife.com/> (17 January 2005).

Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* is less well-known (though boasting of over a million copies sold worldwide). In it he aims to articulate, especially to fellow pastors, his philosophy of the church. Though there is much else that could be criticized in this book (i.e., the whole "seeker-sensitive" approach), I studied it with the particular purpose of trying to glean what I could about his attitude toward church authority and discipline.²² As it turns out, it is really what he does *not* say that is perhaps most interesting. The subjects of church authority and discipline are conspicuous by their absence. His silence on these subjects naturally leads one to assume that they really are not important enough, in Warren's mind, to even deserve significant attention.

When seeking to justify his use of contemporary worship methods, Warren offers fellow Baptist minister Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) as an example because Keach fought to allow hymn-singing in the seventeenth century church. Ironically, Keach wrote extensively on the themes of church authority and discipline in his 1697 work "The Glory of a True Church and Its Discipline." We will use this work by Keach as a seventeenth century sounding board with which we can compare Warren's contemporary views of church authority and discipline. In this section, we will particularly compare what Warren and Keach have to say about church authority and church discipline.

Church Authority

Warren says very little directly about church authority; nevertheless, his attitude toward church authority is discernible. One way to measure one's view of church authority is the way he encourages the congregations to view the ministers. A low view

²² I am not going to denounce Warren's book as being rank heresy, nor am I going to carefully dissect every aspect of what he says about the church. Warren, as an evangelical, professes to believe in the authority of the Bible, and he says very little that is blatantly unorthodox.

of church authority would emphasize that church leaders should be treated just like anyone else because they are not inherently or ontologically superior to anyone else. A high view of church authority, on the other hand, would emphasize that the church member should hold the leaders in reverence because of the office to which God has called them.

Warren certainly demonstrates a low view of church authority in this sense. Warren downplays the authority of church leaders by consistently undercutting their (and his own) dignity. One way he does this is by insisting that pastors should come across as just “regular guys.” Tim Stafford, in his 2002 *Christianity Today* article on Rick Warren, remarks how this “regular guy” mentality shows itself in Warren’s preaching: “Warren preaches with the voice of a Regular Guy, making light of his partiality to Krispy Kreme donuts, stuttering a little, stepping on his own lines. In the pulpit or out of it, he drapes a Hawaiian shirt over a shapeless middle-aged body.” In this same article, Warren’s own wife publicly deprecates her husband’s dignity: “He’s not sophisticated in any way. This is a man who will come out in an Elvis costume. He’s a ham. He’s a goofball.”²³ Perhaps the clearest case of Warren undercutting the respect due to church leaders is when he reveals the way he desires his own congregation to relate to him: “We don’t use reverential titles for our pastors at Saddleback. No one ever refers to me as ‘Dr. Warren’ at our church; I’m just called ‘Rick.’”²⁴

Keach, representing the higher view of church authority, does not demonstrate such an aversion to “reverential titles.” Instead, Keach emphasizes the duty of church

²³ Tim Stafford, “A Purpose Driven Guy,” *Christianity Today* (18 November 2002) <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/012/1.42.html> (5 May 2005).

²⁴ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 273.

members to show respect to their pastors: “They ought to show a reverential Estimation of them, being Christ’s Ambassadors, also called Rulers, Angels, &c. they that honor them, and receive them, honor and receive Jesus Christ.”²⁵ This statement highlights the principle that pastors represent Christ as His delegated authorities in the Church.

Keach also later underscores the church members’ duty to render obedience to their minister:

Tis their Duty to submit themselves unto them, that is, in all their Exhortations, good Counsels and Reproofs; and when they call to any extraordinary Duty, as Prayer, Fasting, or days of Thanksgiving, if they see no just cause why such days should not be kept, they ought to obey their Pastor or Elder, as in other cases also. ‘Obey them that have the Rule over you, and submit yourselves’ (Heb. 13:5,17).²⁶

Keach is arguing here that church members are bound to obey their leaders even in matters of seemingly moral indifference, such as a call to fast, as long as there is not a “just cause” to disobey the command.

A related test of one’s view of church authority is the way one treats the distinction between clergy and laity. While most Protestants agree on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and would not say that the clergy is somehow ontologically superior to the laity, Warren takes it a step further by eliminating the distinction entirely:

There are no laypeople in a biblical church; there are only ministers. The idea of two classes of Christians, clergy and laity, is the creation of Roman Catholic tradition. In God’s eyes, there is no difference between volunteer ministers and paid ministers. We should treat those who serve without pay with the same respect we treat those who are paid for their service.²⁷

²⁵ Benjamin Keach, “The Glory of a True Church and Its Discipline,” *Polity*, ed. Dever (Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 67. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized, but capitalization has been kept the same. Of course, the use of certain titles is not the main issue here. The issue is whether or not the church teaches its members to honor and obey authority. The use of titles, however, is just one indicator of this.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁷ Warren, 391.

Warren’s radical egalitarianism may sound nice in a postmodern, anti-authoritarian age, but God simply does not agree with this position: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17).

In articulating the duties of members to their pastors and of pastors to their members, Keach recognizes a clear difference between the clergy and laity in terms of office. For example, Keach denies the church member the right to excommunicate himself. He calls a member’s unjustly leaving the church without being dismissed by the church governors “a particular Member’s assuming to himself thense of the Keys; or rather stealing of them.”²⁸ The church leaders are not given the right of the keys on the basis of their supposed ontologically superiority to the church members; rather, they are given the keys on the basis of a superiority of order and function that God wills His Church to have. They, and they alone, have been entrusted with the keys of the kingdom.

Church Discipline

In nearly 400 pages of explaining his church philosophy, Warren mentions the subject of church discipline only twice. In the first instance, Warren insists that his church does practice church discipline. “Saddleback practices church discipline—something rarely heard of today. If you do not fulfill your membership covenant, you are dropped from our membership. We remove hundreds of names from our roll every year.”²⁹ Later in the book, Warren makes his second and final reference to church

²⁸ Keach, 78.

²⁹ Warren, 54.

discipline: “Members of our church are expected to abide by the lifestyle guidelines of our membership covenant. Those who engage in immoral activities are subject to church discipline.”³⁰ These five sentences are the whole of Warren’s mention of church discipline in *The Purpose Driven Church*.

At first glance these statements appear solid and serious. If someone does not fulfill the membership covenant, then he is dropped from membership. Moreover, Warren reports that they practice this discipline on hundreds of members every year. A statement later on in the book, however, suggests that the “church discipline” Warren refers to consists of removing people from the roll who have already stopped coming: “At Saddleback we see no use in having nonresident or inactive members on a roll. As a result, we remove hundreds of names from membership each year.”³¹ This is indeed a far cry from the traditional understanding of the diligent exercise of church discipline.

A look at the membership covenant, on the other hand, shows that the church requires her members to make very orthodox commitments, such as protecting the unity of the church, sharing the responsibility of the church, serving the ministry of the church, and supporting the testimony of the church. It even calls on members to follow the leaders and refers to the Hebrews 13:17 injunction.³² While these are all wonderful commitments, church discipline is best understood as a matter of enforcement. Warren offers very little evidence throughout the rest of the book that the members are required to keep their covenant commitments. In fact, later on in the book he admits that commitments are in fact not enforced in the context of members’ participation in

³⁰ Ibid., 217.

³¹ Ibid., 132.

³² Ibid., 321.

ministry: “Although we usually ask for a one-year commitment to a ministry, we never enforce it.”³³ According to this statement, Warren is in the habit of not requiring members to fulfill their vows to the church. Apparently, he deliberately and intentionally allows people to break their vows.

If Warren does practice church discipline, it is not clear where this actually takes place. Warren has five “purpose-based teams” that handle different aspects of the church’s ministry—Missions, Magnification, Membership, Maturity, and Ministry Teams. When he delineates their tasks, it becomes clear that none of these five are responsible for handling church discipline issues. The closest would seem to be the Membership Team because “it is their business to care for the flock.”³⁴ When he runs down the list of the Membership Team’s responsibilities, however, it is clear that discipline is not a top priority. “They oversee all support groups, weddings, funerals, pastoral care, hospital visitation, and benevolence within the congregation, and they operate the counseling center... [and] all major fellowship events within our church family.”³⁵

In Tim Stafford’s *Christianity Today* article on Rick Warren, he gives a similar assurance of Saddleback’s church discipline: “Saddleback practices church discipline—removing hundreds of members for nonparticipation or for unrepented sin.”³⁶ This statement appears at the end of the article as a “Saddlefact” almost as an afterthought,

³³ Ibid., 387.

³⁴ Ibid., 148-9.

³⁵ Ibid., 149.

³⁶ Stafford, “A Purpose Driven Guy,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/012/1.42.html>.

which is certainly the impression the reader gets from the book. If church discipline is practiced, it certainly is not a vital part of the church's ministry.

Although it is certainly a biblical idea, Warren never refers to "unrepented sin" as a condition for carrying out church discipline in his book (he only uses the term "immoral activities" to describe actions that warrant church discipline). In fact, he downplays the whole idea of striving after a pure church by weeding out the unrepentant:

Are there unrepentant pagans mixed into Saddleback's crowd of 10,000?
Without a doubt! When you fish with a big net you catch all kinds of fish.
That's okay. Jesus said in one parable, "Don't worry about the tares mixed in among the wheat. One day I'll separate them" (Matt. 13:29-30).
We are to leave the weeding to Jesus because he knows who the real tares are.³⁷

Although it is true that there will not be a perfectly pure church on earth, Warren does not express a serious concern about doing his share of "weeding" as a pastor. Just because church leaders cannot have perfect effectiveness in practicing church discipline does not mean that they are excused from performing their duty and striving after the purity of the church.

Keach, on the other hand, sees church discipline as vital for maintaining the health of the church. "Scandalous persons guilty of gross immorality" must be censured by the church, and the censure is to be removed only if they demonstrate "true Repentance, by the Reformation of [their] Life and holy walking afterwards."³⁸ Keach, however, goes even further to point out that, even if the offense is not "gross" or "scandalous," a person ought to be disciplined for any sin of which he does not repent.

If any Member walks disorderly, though not guilty of gross scandalous Sins, he or she, as soon as it is taken notice of, ought to be admonished,

³⁷ Warren, 237.

³⁸ Keach, 74.

and endeavors to be used to bring him to Repentance (e.g., “busy-bodies” in 2 Thes. 3:11,12)... But if after all due Endeavors used he is not reclaimed, but continues a disorderly Person, the Church must withdraw from him (2 Thes. 3:6)...It appears that such who refuse to adhere to what the Pastor commands and exhorts to (Heb 12:25), in the Name of Christ, are to be deemed disorderly Persons... and ought to be proceeded against according to this Rule, or divulge the private Resolves of the Church, as well as in many like cases.³⁹

Although Warren’s purposes for the church are biblical on many levels (i.e., his evangelistic goals), he seems to lack one area of emphasis that is stressed throughout the Bible—the holiness (or purity) of the church. Paul makes this primary purpose of God clear in Ephesians 5:25-27: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” Ed Hayes bemoans the loss of emphasis on the pursuit of holiness in the modern evangelical church:

Emphasis on evangelical expansionism has replaced ethical and moral purity in the church.... While the church is a great missionary agency in the world reaching out to sinners, it must not forget that it is first of all an assembly of the saints.... When purity of life and doctrine are disregarded, discipline must be exercised, as painful as it may be.⁴⁰

God’s purpose is for his church to reflect his holiness (cf., Lev. 11:44a; 19:2; Heb 12:10-14; 1 Pet 1:15-16; 2:9-12; 1 John 3:2-3). The church’s pursuit of holiness is what makes church discipline necessary.

³⁹ Ibid., 72-73.

⁴⁰ Ed Hayes, *The Church: The Body of Christ in the World of Today* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), 126.

Summary

In *The Glorious Body of Christ*, Kuiper points out that churches often neglect discipline because they want to maintain peace in the church. Kuiper counters, “Nothing disturbs the peace of the church as much as impurity. And while insistence on purity may temporarily disturb the peace, in the end it is sure to prove conducive to peace.”⁴¹ He goes on to argue that the glory of God must be the highest aim for practicing church discipline. He indicts churches that, out of fear of driving people away, are unfaithful in practicing biblical discipline: “The church which neglects discipline is not only destroying its own glory but also shows serious disregard for the glory of Christ. The faithful exercise of discipline is in very deed a mark of a true church. The church which is not deeply concerned about the honor of Christ simply is no church of His.”⁴² The primary purpose of the church must be in agreement with the chief end of man: “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”⁴³

Warren is only one example of many in the modern evangelical world who have shelved the topics of church authority and discipline. It is difficult to find any serious evangelical attempting to directly deal these two topics a death blow; rather, these subjects are left to die a slow death as a result of neglect. Instead of being openly opposed, church authority and discipline have simply been swept under the carpet and ignored.

⁴¹ R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 312.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 310.

⁴³ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, question #1.

Feeding the Fear of Church Authority

Ronald Enroth's purpose in his work *Churches that Abuse* is to highlight examples of churches in America that are purportedly guilty of abusing their authority. While there certainly are churches that are guilty of abusing authority, ultimately this book probably does more harm than good by promoting and perpetuating the suspicion of all church authority. Even if it is not his intention, Enroth's book has the effect of discouraging the practice of legitimate church authority, particularly the exercise of biblical church discipline.

In spite of some of Enroth's questionable research methods, I will assume throughout this section that the churches he attacks are indeed as bad as those who he interviews say they are, since my goal is not to defend the churches he criticizes.⁴⁴ My purpose is only to show how many of Enroth's criticisms can be used to wrongly incriminate churches that are sincerely attempting to exercise authority in a biblical

⁴⁴ My purpose is not to defend churches that Enroth criticizes in his book, but it is fair to question the validity of some of his research methods. I am surprised that Enroth, with all his purported understanding of psychology and sociology, so readily accepts the perspectives of dissidents and recipients of church discipline. Might not their perspective of the church that disciplined them be a bit colored? Even when discussing his research methods, Enroth displays a naive readiness to believe all that the "victims" profess, while refusing to accept the defense of the church leaders involved. "Let me assure the reader that the information I convey in this book is based not on my own fanciful imagination, but on the actual experiences of real people whose accounts can be independently verified and who, to the best of my knowledge, have been truthful about their encounters with churches that abuse. Despite the defensive protestations of authoritarian leaders that ex-members of their churches lie, distort the facts, and are 'accusers of the brethren,' there is abundant evidence that a serious problem of abuse exists in the Christian community" (Enroth, 10). It is hard not to give the benefit of the doubt to those who left the churches when you consistently refer to them as "victims." The leaders, on the other hand, seem to be taken as guilty until proven innocent.

Moreover, oftentimes those interviewed make statements that should cause the reader to be suspicious of their reliability. For example, one former church member suggests, "Although we didn't come right out and say it, in our innermost hearts we really felt that there was no place like our assembly. We thought the rest of Christianity was out to lunch" (Enroth, 118). The "we" in this statement is meant to refer to the whole church. One might wonder how this person knows what all the other members felt in their innermost hearts, especially since no one came out and said it. On another occasion, Enroth himself is guilty of a gratuitous generalization, when he offers: "Betty, like all other COBU members, was afraid to do anything without Stewart Traill's stamp of approval" (Enroth, 76). It is reasonable to trust from Betty's testimony that she felt this way, but do we really know what "all other COBU members" felt?

fashion. Although most of the churches Enroth examines seem to be involved with obviously unbiblical practices, he also condemns them for practices that are reasonably derived from Scripture. We will begin with a consideration of the broad implications of Enroth's criticisms followed by specifically examining the biblical practices censured by Enroth. We will conclude by observing how Enroth promotes spiritual autonomy at the expense of church authority.

The Broad Implications of Enroth's Criticisms

The main problem is that Enroth tends to lump all practical forms of exercising church authority in with the radical fringe of abusive practices. For example, Enroth uses the following general descriptors of abusive churches:

Subjective experience is emphasized and dissent is discouraged. Many areas of members' lives are subject to scrutiny. Rules and legalism abound. People who don't follow the rules or who threaten exposure are often dealt with harshly. Excommunication is common. For those who leave, the road back to normalcy is difficult.⁴⁵

Many of these descriptions can be easily, albeit unjustly, applied to an orthodox church that is taking seriously its charge to carry out biblical church discipline. After all, is dissent *not* to be discouraged? Is subjecting many areas of members' lives to scrutiny really an abuse of authority or just diligent shepherding? Are churches allowed to have rules? If so, is it somehow wrong to enforce them? Is excommunication really a sign of authoritarianism? All of these concepts can be amply supported by the Bible, but they can also be distorted—either by the church leaders or by the dissidents.

⁴⁵ Ronald Enroth, *Churches the Abuse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 31.

Enroth seems to denounce even all legitimate uses of authority by a church. He first gives examples of obvious abuses, such as the church in which at a women's prayer meeting "one woman was told to remove her dress in order to become 'more vulnerable.'"⁴⁶ He proceeds, however, to attack any use of authority and encourages his readers to be suspicious of any church that teaches the principle of submission to authority. This is evident in his criticism of the "shepherding movement."

According to a former member of the shepherding movement, so-called because its members had 'shepherds' who required full submission and taught the need for 'spiritual authority,' these 'leaders' had the true story of what was going on. Pastors exercised control and manipulation through their sermons. Certain themes came through regularly: covenant, authority, obedience, submission, serving, honoring...⁴⁷

These themes are completely biblical and important emphases when championing the cause of the Lordship of Christ. Geoffrey Thomas argues for the importance of church leaders to focus on the theme of authority: "It is scarcely possible to conceive of a fellowship open to the leading of the Holy Spirit that is not at the same time saturated in the understanding of authority."⁴⁸

Not only does Enroth frown upon any teaching of submission to church authorities, but he also sees any practical exercise of authority as abusive. For example, he tells of a "livid" pastor who rebuked someone for showing up a day late to a

⁴⁶ Enroth, 131.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁸ Geoffrey Thomas, "The Pastoral Ministry," *Practical Theology*, ed. Harvie M. Conn (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1990), 75. Enroth often adds qualifying adjectives like "full" and "unquestioning" to the call to submit and obey, but it is clear that more often than not this is his language rather than the language of the leader himself. One might wonder if Enroth is not guilty of "setting up a straw man" in order to strengthen his case. Never does he deal directly with the biblical view of authority and submission. Nowhere does he even recognize the charge of Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account."

conference in which the man was supposed to speak a message, saying, “There was no excuse for being late.”⁴⁹ This can easily be taken to mean that the act of rebuking someone for being irresponsible is being abusive. This certainly is not consistent with the teaching of Proverbs 6:23: “For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light, and *the corrections of discipline are the way to life.*” Moreover, Jesus Himself instructs: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3).

It is hard to imagine how any pastor who takes seriously his biblical call to shepherd God’s flock could avert Enroth’s accusation of abuse. Enroth even censures the act of information gathering (which he calls a “surveillance system”): “Most abusive churches make use of some kind of reporting system or surveillance pattern to insure conformity with group norms.”⁵⁰ If a church is genuinely interested in holding people accountable to their commitment to Christ, however, the practice of information gathering seems quite reasonable. The “group norm” could simply be the pattern for Christian living revealed in the Bible. Enroth even goes so far as to encourage his readers to leave churches that practice any form of reporting: “When an evangelical church institutes a surveillance system and encourages its members to keep close tabs on one another, it’s time to look for another church.”⁵¹ Apparently Enroth, like Cain in Genesis 4:9, does not believe that God calls us to be our “brother’s keeper.”

Further, Enroth views the establishment of any rules by a church as be an abuse of authority. He criticizes a pastor for publishing dancing guidelines designed to bring more order to his church service. The dance guidelines read: “Do not obstruct aisles or block

⁴⁹ Enroth, 102.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 107.

⁵¹ Ibid., 204.

vision; return immediately to your seat after dancing. Keep ‘locked into’ Jesus during worship, but be watchful for collisions. If it is crowded, confine your movements to a smaller area.... Watch where you swing your arms.”⁵² While the practice of worship dancing in church is open to much criticism, it is not an abuse of authority for the pastor to make rules to ensure order and safety in the service. Was the apostle Paul wrong for making rules to control the practice of speaking in tongues in the Corinthian church?

Apparently, a church is not allowed to create rules that are basic to even public high schools. Enroth criticizes one pastor’s rules for a leadership training class that included the following: “No unexcused absences from any meetings will be tolerated.... All the trainees are charged to participate in no gossip or negative talk against any individual or any church.”⁵³ Even a public school teacher does not allow unexcused absences. Is it really an abuse of spiritual authority for a pastor to make the same requirement for his leadership class? Enroth also condemns a church for having a dress code for its members that includes: “No exposure of cleavage showing. Examine what is exposed when bending over; nothing should be seen.”⁵⁴ This could be the dress code at a local public high school, and yet very few would accuse school administrators of being abusive for saying girls must not show cleavage and young men must not show underwear.

⁵² Ibid., 137.

⁵³ Ibid., 138.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 136.

Censuring Biblical Practices

Enroth also regularly encourages his readers to be suspicious of churches that encourage certain practices that are legitimately supported by Scripture. The clearest example of this is his objection to the exercise of church discipline: “Virtually all authoritarian groups that I have studied impose discipline, in one form or another, on members.”⁵⁵ In his *Handbook of Church Discipline*, Jay Adams points out, however, that church discipline is not only a good idea, but it is the obligation that every church is bound to perform. Adams states: “(God) has ordered His church to enforce strict rules of discipline.... Discipline is not an option, something that ‘might be nice if we decide we want it.’ It is commanded by Christ and is, therefore, the right and privilege of every student.”⁵⁶ Traditional Reformed thought asserts that church discipline is one of the three key marks of a true church. In other words, if a church does not practice discipline, then it forfeits its rights to be counted as a true church.

Enroth is particularly troubled by the disciplinary practice of excommunication: “As we have seen, another sign of impending trouble in a church is an obsession with discipline and excommunication.”⁵⁷ He especially has a problem with churches shunning excommunicated members: “The ultimate form of discipline in authoritarian churches is excommunication or disfellowshipping, followed by strict avoidance procedures, or shunning.... The congregation is told to disassociate from such persons.”⁵⁸ As unpleasant

⁵⁵ Ibid., 152.

⁵⁶ Jay Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 17.

⁵⁷ Enroth, 203.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 157.

as it may sound, the shunning of excommunicated members is clearly mandated by the Bible.⁵⁹ Adams shows the biblical foundation for “shunning”:

The congregation may no longer fellowship with him as though nothing were wrong. They are told, ‘Don’t mix, or mingle, with him’ (2 Thessalonians 3:14; 1 Corinthians 5:9, 11), ‘withdraw from him’ (2 Thessalonians 3:6; the word translated ‘withdraw,’ means ‘stand aloof; keep away from’), and ‘don’t eat’ with him. All these commands (they are not good advice, but commands) say one and the same thing: the congregation must treat the so-called brother ‘as a brother,’ but only as one whose status is in question.⁶⁰

This description is just when the member has been excommunicated, before he is even officially removed from church membership.

Enroth also chastises the practice of treating those who have left the church as unbelievers. Enroth reports one woman’s complaint of the church’s attitude toward her after she left: “I had (in their minds) turned my back on God. I was the worst kind of heathen there was.”⁶¹ The clear teaching on discipline in Matthew 18:17, however, supports such a practice in the case of someone illegitimately leaving a church: “And if he refuses to listen to the church, treat him as a heathen and a tax collector.” Adams sheds some light on this text and emphasizes the seriousness of a lack of submission to church authority: “This means that, while making no *final* judgment about his actual heart condition, the church is to treat him *as if* he were an unbeliever. He gives no evidence of being a believer since he refuses to heed the authority of Christ vested in His officers in

⁵⁹ A couple of examples will suffice. Romans 16:17: “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. *Keep away from them.*” Titus 3:10: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, *have nothing to do with him.*”

⁶⁰ Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline*, 73.

⁶¹ Enroth, 181.

the church.”⁶² After the member is removed, Adams even suggests that it is appropriate to evangelize the removed member (thereby treating him as an unbeliever).⁶³

Enroth also disparages churches for giving practical counsel that is consistent with biblical principles. For example, he hints that a symptom of an authoritarian church is that they encourage strict discipline of children: “A great number of children raised in the movement are subjected to stern discipline from an early age in order that their ‘wills can be broken.’”⁶⁴ He fails to mention that the Bible, especially in the book of Proverbs, frequently encourages parents to discipline their children. Proverbs 13:24 is one plain example: “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.” Enroth finds fault with a church that gave seminars on practical and personal issues, such as: “How to Keep Your Yard,” “Masturbation,” “Child Rearing,” “Dress Standards,” “How to Be a Good Wife,” “How to Be a Good Employee,” “How to Be a Minister’s Wife,” “How to Choose Make-up.”⁶⁵ Throughout the book, he demonstrates an antipathy for churches getting too personal. He disapprovingly tells of people who confided their “most intimate details of life” to their pastor.⁶⁶ His implication is that the readers ought to beware of churches that attempt to deal with matters that are too practical and personal.

⁶² Adams, *Handbook*, 80.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁴ Enroth, 134.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

Moreover, he goes down a dangerous line of reasoning when he first points out: “Leaders who are abusive usually develop their heavy-handed style over time.”⁶⁷ This statement may seem harmless enough, but he then combines it with a piece of advice given from Cheryl Forbes’ *The Religion of Power*: “Church bosses must be spotted and rescued early, or they may never be rescued at all.”⁶⁸ In other words, even if your church is not necessarily abusing authority, if it imitates the churches described in the book in any significant way, it most likely will be abusive someday. Enroth is calling his readers to resist even the earliest signs of a pastor trying to exercise authority—even before he abuses it! This cannot but be damaging to the effectiveness of a church’s ministry and destructive to the practice of legitimate church authority.

Since most of the churches Enroth evaluates are also involved in some fairly outlandish sins, one could argue that Enroth is only denouncing the above practices when they are done in clearly unbiblical churches. Enroth, however, nowhere makes this point clear in his book. For example, never does he qualify his judgments by pointing out that a church is not *necessarily* abusing authority just because it exercises church discipline or practices excommunication. He simply does not seem to see that there is an opposite error against which we must also be on guard. He apparently does not see the lack of church discipline being exercised as a legitimate danger.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 216.

⁶⁸ Cheryl Forbes, *The Religion of Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 87. Quoted by Enroth, 216.

Church Authority vs. Spiritual Autonomy

There are admittedly churches that abuse authority, but this has too often been used to justify a distrust of all church authority. Some of the distrust surely has to do with legitimate past and present abuses by leaders, but undoubtedly modern man's desire to be his own boss is also a significant factor. Behind much of Enroth's criticism is this struggle between liberty of conscience and church authority. Enroth emphasizes the importance of the believer maintaining his "spiritual autonomy:" "If you value your spiritual autonomy, you must resist any teaching that brings into question Christ's role as the sole mediator (go-between) between God and humankind. No Christian is ever called upon to give unquestioning obedience to anyone."⁶⁹

The way this relates to the fight for liberty of conscience becomes clear when Enroth conveys his concern about a pastor who counseled people to not trust their feelings (which is often a postmodern way of speaking of the conscience):

At the same time members were taught not to trust their feelings, intuition, and emotions, lest they find themselves 'walking in the flesh.' 'We stifled the voice of God within, mistaking common-sense reactions for the rising up of the flesh.' Tom believes that 'It was probably this very doctrine that disabled most of us from ever obeying the gut feelings of apprehension within. Many times we stifled our own conscience in the desire to walk spiritually.'⁷⁰

Are pastors abusing their authority when they warn their people against being guided by their feelings? Enroth also criticizes a pastor who told a member of his church that "her heart was 'exceedingly deceitful.'⁷¹ However, this pastor was just quoting to this

⁶⁹ Enroth, 201.

⁷⁰ Enroth, 131.

⁷¹ Enroth, 114.

woman what God reveals about the heart of man in Jeremiah 17:9: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure.”

Although it comes across as an attack on the churches’ exercise of authority, it often spills over into an obvious complaint about the all-consuming Lordship of Christ. This becomes clear in Enroth’s criticism of the “Lordship baptism” practice of the Boston Church of Christ: “In other words, one must confess Jesus as Lord of every area of his life and demonstrate that he is a disciple before being baptized.”⁷² Enroth is here criticizing the church’s emphasis on the comprehensiveness of the Lordship of Christ.⁷³ It is Jesus, however, who speaks of the all-encompassing nature of the commitment He expects from His disciples when he exhorts: “In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33).

Summary

The great mistake of Enroth’s endeavor is his utter failure to base his judgments on the norms established in the Scriptures. Instead, the modern schools of psychology and sociology act as his authority. Lynn Buzzard and Thomas Brandon recognize this tendency throughout the modern church world: “The concept of ‘church’ so prevalent in our culture is increasingly out of touch with biblical understandings. It is a quasi-church. At times it is a co-opted church whose patterns of thought are shaped by culture rather

⁷² Enroth, 117.

⁷³ There are certainly other things wrong with the Boston Movement’s baptismal practices, but their emphasis on the comprehensiveness of the Lordship of Christ is not one of them.

than by biblical perspectives.”⁷⁴ The Scriptures alone must be the evangelical’s standard to determine the validity of any belief or practice.

Enroth is not the only one culpable of judging abuse of authority through non-biblical norms. Richard Helmstadter, a champion for religious freedom, lists the following practices as ways churches in nineteenth century America “tyrannized” their followers: “Particular interpretations of the Bible might be mandated or disallowed; the dress of the clergy, or even the laity, might be regulated; the theater or other areas of cultural life might be declared out of bounds; various foods and drinks might be forbidden; Sabbath observance might be defined; sexual behavior might be dictated; any area of life might be touched.”⁷⁵ Helmstadter is not talking here about the state not allowing these freedoms; rather, he is belittling churches that “tyrannize” through excommunication on account of these various practices. Following his logic, even asking members to agree to a church confession of faith or preaching against sexual immorality are forms of tyranny. Enroth and his followers need to beware lest they lump the first century church generally, and the Apostle Paul, the writer to the Hebrews, and even the Lord Himself particularly, in with their definition of churches that abuse.

We can agree with Enroth that churches at times have (and even do) abuse their authority. George Davis points out, however, that past abuses of authority do not excuse the rejection of legitimate church authority: “Abuse [of church discipline] in the past, however, can never justify neglect in the present.... The neglect of church discipline often carries with it more serious consequences than the abuse of it. Many have failed to

⁷⁴ Lynn R. Buzzard & Thomas S. Brandon, *Church Discipline and the Courts* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 32.

⁷⁵ Richard Helmstadter, ed., *Freedom and Religion in the Nineteenth Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 10.

realize that the sin of omission can often be more damaging to the individual, not to mention the church, than even the abuse in implementation.”⁷⁶ Enroth’s solution to abuses of authority in the church seems to be to get rid of all exercise of church authority. The practice of church discipline is in itself labeled an abuse of authority against which the congregant must be on guard.

Practical Implications

Undoubtedly, many evangelicals would agree with most of what we have discussed so far regarding the conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority. The problem, however, is not primarily the lack of understanding. Most evangelicals are perfectly willing to give intellectual assent to the importance of church authority and very few would openly support spiritual autonomy, but the bigger problem lies in the realm of practical application. Having learned about this conflict between liberty of conscience and church authority, what ought we to do about it? Following are a few practical implications of this study:

Beware of the rise of antinomianism

James Thornwell defines Antinomians as “those who deny that the law of God is the measure of duty, or that personal holiness should be sought by Christians.”⁷⁷ The notion that Jesus can be one’s personal Savior without being one’s Lord is becoming more pervasive throughout the evangelical church. John MacArthur notes: “Anyone who

⁷⁶ George B. Davis, “Whatever Happened to Church Discipline?” *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (Spring 1987): 349.

⁷⁷ James H. Thornwell, *Antinomianism* (1871) (reprint, Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival), 383.

claims to be a Christian can find evangelicals willing to accept a profession of faith, whether or not the person's behavior shows any evidence of commitment to Christ."⁷⁸

Even when this is not directly taught, it is often implied by churches neglecting to teach that the moral law of God, as revealed throughout the whole of Scripture, is the revealed rule for Christian living.

Antinomianism certainly is not a new phenomenon in the church; after all, man's sinful nature has never liked the idea of being told it has to follow a set of laws regulating how one ought to live. The evidence of the Bible shows that even in the first century, antinomianism had already begun to infiltrate the church. The epistle of Jude especially was written for the expressed purpose of combating antinomianism, and Paul had to deal with those who were using his teachings of justification by faith as a license to sin (cf., Rom. 6). John's first epistle also combats people who are counting themselves Christians even though they are walking in sin. Nevertheless, antinomianism (tacit or otherwise) has never been as rampant in the church as it is today—not just in the liberal churches but also in the evangelical.

Liberty of conscience is being used by many (however implicitly) to rationalize and promote widespread antinomianism. When someone argues that he is only bound to his own conscience, he is asserting his own autonomy. This is true even when he manages to mix in spiritual language (i.e., "prayer," "Holy Spirit," "guidance").⁷⁹

Autonomy is self-rule. In other words, an autonomous man refuses to be ruled by

⁷⁸ John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 27. See also Ernest C. Reisinger's *Lordship and Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994) for information on the pervasiveness of the non-lordship movement.

⁷⁹ Note how in the charismatic wing of the evangelical church liberty of conscience is often given the language of being "led by the Holy Spirit." However it is stated, the bottom line is that it is a way people justify doing their own will rather than God's.

anything outside of himself, including God. Personal conscience has become synonymous with the “self,” for all practical purposes. People generally mistake whatever feelings they have for the voice of conscience. In the end, they simply do what they *feel* like doing, rather than what the Lord commands. Through liberty of conscience, the “self” finds a stratagem to usurp the throne that belongs to God alone. The temptation today is the same as it was in the very beginning. Finally, man has found a way to be like God—knowing good and evil. The clear teaching of the Bible, however, is that the Christian is bound to obey God’s will as it is revealed in His Word.

Recognize the biblical principle of delegated authority

The teaching of Paul in Romans 13:1 is plain—God establishes all authority. A part of the Christian worldview is that this world is ordered by God. This means more than the fact that God accomplishes His will *in spite of* human authority; rather, it means that God’s common practice is to work out His will *through* the human authority that He has put in place. There are always exceptions to the rule, and there are certainly limits to the authority delegated to any human institution, but the key here is to recognize that God’s common practice is to rule society (whether it be civil or ecclesiastical) through human instruments. We need to strive to become “men under authority,” like the centurion who sought Jesus in order to heal his servant (Luke 7:1-10). Being himself “a man under authority,” the centurion demonstrated that he understood the principle of authority in a practical manner.

We need to beware of the temptation of viewing church leaders as “controllers” bent on infringing on our personal freedom. In the realm of the church, we need to

remind ourselves that church officers are established by God especially to represent him in the church. This does not make the church officer flawless or inherently superior to any other human being, but it *does* put him in a position of authority in the church. This is the principle of ontological equality and economic subordination, modeled perfectly in the Trinity. The person in authority is not superior in nature but in rank or office. To use an example from daily life, even though I have the same inherent worth as the police officer, I am obligated to come under his authority. Likewise, the elders are no better in being than their flock, but they are still given authority by God to rule the flock in a godly manner. This is a tough pill to swallow in our current anti-authority culture. We as Christians, however, are called to be different than our surrounding culture. Instead of constantly complaining about the church authorities that God has graciously gives us, we ought to strive to assist, honor, and serve them as they pour out their lives in service to the flock.

Purpose to submit to church authority

All of this understanding of delegated authority is worthless if it does not translate to how we live. The authority of the church ought to have a practical outworking in the lives of its members. In the Scriptures, we learn that God appoints leaders in the church in order to ensure that His people obey His Word. The man who says he only obeys the authority of God's Word and rejects the authority of human institutions proves his own claim to be false. To refuse to render obedience to God's delegated authority *is* to refuse to render obedience to the God who revealed in His word our obligation to "obey your

leaders and submit to their authority” (Heb. 13:17). We are not to give absolute and blind obedience to human leaders, but we are called to recognize their God-given authority.

The first step in learning how to submit to authority is learning how to listen. We must take seriously the wisdom of Proverbs 15:31-32: “He who listens to a life-giving rebuke will be at home among the wise. He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.” Practically speaking, when we are given a “life-giving rebuke,” especially by a church authority, we must resist the temptation of invoking our right to “liberty of conscience.” We should listen carefully and look at ourselves before pointing the finger at the authority who is speaking. Our constitutional right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” ought to take a backseat to God’s charge for us to pursue holiness.

Throughout church history, one common way that churches have sought to institutionalize the obligation of church members to submit to the authority of the church officers is through the establishment of church membership. An explicit part of entering into church membership usually has been to agree to submit to the authority of the church leaders. Moreover, many denominations commonly made the same kind of commitments in the form of church covenants. Gregory Wills elucidates this point:

The Scottish Presbyterians and English Independents employed covenants widely. Although some English Baptists did not employ covenants, most Particular Baptists followed earlier Separatists in their use. Methodists similarly pledged to follow a covenant-like “Rule” and held “covenant services.” American Puritans and Baptists uniformly employed church covenants and taught their apostolic origin.⁸⁰

Church covenants were especially common among the early American Puritans. In the Salem Covenant of 1629, church members agreed to the following: “We Covenant with

⁸⁰ Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 21.

the Lord and one with another; and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his Blessed word of truth.”⁸¹ Thomas Hooker, an American Puritan, asserts the necessity of a church covenant in his 1648 work entitled “A Survey of the Sum of Church-Discipline:” “Mutual covenanting and confederating of the Saints in the fellowship of the faith according to the order of the Gospel, is that which gives constitution and being to a visible church.”⁸² In other words, Hooker argues that a church cannot be a true church without being bound in covenant to God and to one another.

Though increasingly rare, church covenants still exist in some churches today. Bethlehem Baptist Church (pastored by John Piper) requires its members to enter into a formal covenant in which the members vow “to walk together in Christian love, to strive for the advancement of this Church in knowledge, holiness and comfort; to promote its prosperity and spirituality; to sustain its worship, ordinances, discipline and doctrines.”⁸³ The covenant goes on specify as to how to carry out these commitments. The covenant of Reformation Covenant Church of Oregon City, Oregon includes: “I will submit to the leadership and participate in the government of the church.” The covenant goes on to require its members to promise to keep other biblical commitments, such as: “I will neither marry nor give in marriage outside the Christian faith” and “I will attend this

⁸¹ Donald Lutz, *Documents of Political Foundation Written by Colonial Americans* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1986), 75. Spelling has been modernized but capitalization has been kept the same.

⁸² Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church-Discipline(1648)* (reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), 46.

⁸³ Bethlehem Baptist Church, <http://www.bbcmpls.org/> (23 May 2005).

church's worship services unless providentially hindered.”⁸⁴ Though less specific, the Presbyterian Church of America requires its members to enter into covenant by answering the following question affirmatively, with uplifted hand: “Do you, in reliance on God for strength, solemnly promise and covenant that you will walk together as an organized church, on the principles of the faith and order of the Presbyterian Church in America, and that you will be zealous and faithful in maintaining the purity and peace of the whole body?”⁸⁵

These church covenants undoubtedly offend the sensibilities of those seeking to be autonomous. Many would call these covenants breaches of liberty of conscience. It is difficult, however, to assert that these covenants are unbiblical. After all, God not only made a solemn covenant with His people, but he also required that they renew this covenant on a regular basis.⁸⁶ Like Israel, the church is to be God's covenant community—not only a people in covenant with their God, but a people in covenant with one another. Not surprisingly, church membership and church covenants are fast disappearing. Even in the churches that still utilize church covenants today, they are too often employed only out of a sentimental drive to keep the denominational tradition. If we are to truly be a covenant community, then making a pledge to a local body of Christ, including an agreement to submit to the authority of its officers, is entirely proper. We

⁸⁴ Reformation Covenant Church of Oregon City, Oregon, <http://www.reformationcovenant.org/Page.asp?ID=covenant> (26 March 2004).

⁸⁵ *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, Sixth Edition. Charlotte: The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2003. <http://www.pcanet.org/BCO/BCO1-10.htm> (23 May 2005), 5-8.

⁸⁶ Note the following examples of covenant renewal ceremonies: the whole book of Deuteronomy, Joshua 8, and the efforts of Jehoida (2 Chronicles 23), Josiah (2 Chronicles 34) and Nehemiah 9.

not only ought to make this commitment, but we also ought to make every effort to fulfill this solemn vow.

Defend church discipline

Any exercise of church discipline is too often perceived as an infringement on one's personal independence and autonomy. Who gave the church the right to meddle in *my* affairs? Even the mildest discipline exercised for the most obvious reason is too often quickly labeled as an "abuse of church discipline." Mark Dever highlights the trials that await the church officer who attempts to emphasize the importance of church membership through faithfully exercising church discipline:

It will not be easy for us to be faithful in this matter of church discipline when so many churches are unfaithful in this regard. It is hard enough to try to reestablish a culture of meaningful membership in a church. Personally, I have often become the focus of someone's anger because they don't appreciate the importance of having membership taken so seriously.⁸⁷

Knowing the difficulties of the exercise of church discipline, every member of the body of Christ ought to strive to support the process of church discipline in every way.

A major way that church members are to support church discipline is to participate in it. Church discipline is not just the responsibility of church leaders; rather, it is the responsibility of the whole church. While explicating Matthew 18:15-17, Jay Adams differentiates between formal discipline, which is specifically the responsibility of church leaders; and informal discipline, which is generally the responsibility of all church members. Adams points out that if the church as a whole is faithful to discipline one

⁸⁷ Mark Dever, "Biblical Church Discipline," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (Winter 2000): 38.

another, then most discipline never has to reach the formal stage.⁸⁸ To understand our role in church discipline, we need to have a greater view of the larger purpose of church discipline. The point is not just to drive out sinners from the church; instead, the point is to promote holiness in the church. Buzzard and Brandon observe:

Understood biblically, however, church discipline is not the narrow existence of a private morality, not a way of ridding the church of ‘sinners’ so that only the pure are left in a church without spot or wrinkle, nor a means of dealing with ‘embarrassments’ in the church. It is not chiefly about excommunication. Rather, church discipline includes all the ways and means by which the church invites and exhorts persons to live in faithfulness and obedience to Christ.⁸⁹

Anything we do that assists the call for the church to walk in holiness contributes to the exercise of church discipline. Glenn Sunshine speaks of the responsibility of church members of “mutual, fraternal admonition on the part of all church members, together with [the] oversight on the part of the pastors and elders of the church—the ministers to whom obedience was particularly promised.”⁹⁰

The church sorely needs a revival of church discipline. George Davis makes a “clarion call for the recovery of a sound and biblical approach to church discipline,” which he calls “one of the pressing needs of local churches.”⁹¹ Harold O. J. Brown agrees that the church is in dire need of a renewal of church discipline:

From the perspective of Scripture, as well as from that of the early Church and of the Reformation, discipline seems essential, yet in contemporary

⁸⁸ Jay E. Adams, *Handbook of Church Discipline* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 26, 46.

⁸⁹ Lynn R. Buzzard & Thomas S. Brandon, *Church Discipline and the Courts* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 64.

⁹⁰ Glenn S. Sunshine, “Discipline as the Third Mark of the Church: Three Views,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (1998): 471.

⁹¹ George B. Davis, “Whatever Happened to Church Discipline?” *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (Spring 1987): 361.

experience it appears virtually unattainable. Spiritual renewal today requires the reestablishment of the local congregation as a true community of committed believers—and that will require precisely the discipline that is in such short supply.⁹²

R. Albert Mohler warns: “And yet, without a recovery of functional church discipline—firmly established upon the principles revealed in the Bible—the church will continue its slide into moral dissolution and relativism.”⁹³ Ron Sider looks back at the history of the evangelical church and observes that “all of the great traditions at the core of American evangelicalism, whether the Reformed tradition, the Wesleyan Methodist tradition, or the Anabaptist tradition, understood church discipline when they were strong and thriving.”⁹⁴

The difficulty, however, is in knowing how to help bring about this renewal of church discipline. The first step is for churches to require a greater commitment from their members. Many evangelical churches in the past required their members to enter into types of covenants with the church they joined. Usually included in these covenants was an agreement to submit to the authority of the church officers and their discipline. These churches also produced many effective manuals for church discipline to regulate the process of church discipline.⁹⁵ Entering into a solemn agreement with the local

⁹² Harold O.J. Brown, “The Role of Discipline in the Church,” *Covenant Quarterly* 41 (1983): 52.

⁹³ R. Albert Mohler, “The Disappearance of Church Discipline—How Can We Recover?” *The Christian Post* (16 May 2005) <http://www.christianpost.com/article/editorial/355/section/the.disappearance.of.church.discipline--how.can.we.recover/1.htm> (20 May 2005).

⁹⁴ Ron Sider, “The Evangelical Scandal,” *Christianity Today* (April 2005) <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/004/32.70.html> (24 May 2005).

⁹⁵ Two helpful examples of books of church order that some Presbyterian churches use to facilitate the process of church discipline are *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, Sixth Edition (Charlotte: The Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2003) and *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church: Containing the Standards of Government, Discipline, and Worship Together with Suggested Forms for Use in Connection with the Book of Discipline and Particular Services and The Recommended Curriculum for*

church to submit to its authority is entirely proper and biblical. The next (and more difficult) step is to enforce this greater degree of commitment. Church leaders must be willing to carry out appropriate church discipline even when it will surely lead to personal persecution. This type of courage and boldness can only be garnered through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Protect the proper role of the conscience

Perhaps the best way to avoid abusing liberty of conscience is to have a proficient understanding of the right use of the conscience. Not only is it important to understand the biblical view of the conscience, but it is also important to realize how the doctrine of liberty of conscience has evolved throughout church history since the Reformation. The Reformers fought for liberty of conscience against the oppressive and unbiblical rule of the Roman Church. Their cry was not for freedom to do as they pleased; rather, it was a fight for freedom to live according to God's Word. Likewise, the Puritans battled for liberty of conscience against the Church of England, in which many of the Romish practices still thrived. In battling the Church of England, they were also battling the civil government since the King was considered the head of the church. Liberty of conscience often meant to them the freedom of the church to determine its own affairs instead of having to answer to the authority of the king. In these senses, liberty of conscience meant protection from an unbiblical form of government. A right use of this kind of liberty of

Ministerial Preparation (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2000).

conscience for us would be to resist the attempts of the government to legislate in matters of the church (i.e., civil courts interfering with the exercise of church discipline).⁹⁶

Liberty of conscience was also traditionally employed in order to accent the principle that belief in the truth cannot be compelled by any civil or ecclesiastical authority. Today this sense of liberty of conscience has been essentially forgotten since freedom of belief is usually taken for granted in the Western world. People endorsing liberty of conscience in this way throughout history were especially arguing the impropriety of the state or the church using the power of the sword to oppose those holding false beliefs.

An appropriate application of liberty of conscience is recognizing our responsibility to “test the spirits” and measure the validity of all teaching by the Scriptures. Especially with the ubiquity of false prophets and religious charlatans today, this proper use of the conscience remains indispensable. We must use our biblically informed consciences for the purpose of discerning errors in their various forms. This is the proper sense in which the Lord alone has authority over a man’s conscience. Ultimately, God’s Word is the source of all human authority; therefore, if any human authority commands that which contradicts the Bible, then the conscience must sound the alarm and refuse to go the way of degeneracy.

Conclusion

It is certainly important to recognize that there are two ditches into which the Christian is prone to fall, namely legalism and antinomianism. At the same time, we also

⁹⁶ Buzzard and Brandon’s *Church Discipline and the Courts* is an alarming indictment of this escalating predicament.

must admit that the twenty-first century church, being heavily influenced by the postmodern *zeitgeist*, is generally in a much greater danger of falling into the ditch of antinomianism. The call that needs to be most clearly sounded is that we must not let our liberty of conscience become an excuse to promote sinful autonomy. Too often the “pro-choice” mentality of our age has been spiritualized and presented in the church cloaked with the veil of the historic doctrine of “liberty of conscience.” The general understanding of Christian liberty has come to mean that we have been set free to choose our own right and wrong. Christian liberty has become the battle-cry of modern antinomianism, even within the confines of the evangelical church.

The doctrine of liberty of conscience requires a balance. On the one hand, we must admit that there is a legitimate role for the conscience in restraining evil and giving a consciousness to all mankind of God’s moral standards.⁹⁷ On the other hand, the conscience is fallen and fallible and cannot be depended upon to always make wise life decisions. Without a doubt, in the modern evangelical church, with its progressively pervasive spirit of independence and selfism, the current tendency is to put too much stock in the conscience and not sufficiently heed its limitations. Declaring liberty of conscience has too often become an excuse for justifying rank antinomianism and sin-indulging autonomy.

Our conscience is an important aspect of our makeup, but it lacks sufficiency, perspicuity, and inerrancy. We must bind our consciences to the authority of God’s infallible Word because the Scriptures have exclusive normative authority. If we are to be true to our commitment to obey the Bible, we will heed its injunction for us to submit to the authorities of the church, which Christ gives in order to bless and guide His body.

⁹⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 660.

The church leader's charge is to enforce God's rule as He has revealed it in His Word. The church authorities that faithfully attempt to apply the Scriptures to their members will inevitably exercise church discipline. The man who uses liberty of conscience to escape church discipline will lose in the end. Even if he is able to escape from the discipline of the church, his conscience will not clear him from the guilt he incurs by breaking the principles set forth in the Word of God.

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