

John Gill:

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 6—Chapter 10

OF THE LIBERTY OF THE SONS OF GOD

Among the several effects, or privileges of adoption, liberty is one, and a principal one; and requires to be treated of particularly and distinctly. "Then are the children free", as our Lord says in another case; such are so, who are made free by him; "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36). And as it is the Son that makes free, they are sons only who are made free. Freedom is the fruit and effect of sonship, and follows upon it; "Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God, through Christ" (Gal. 4:6, 7), sonship and servitude, a son and a servant, are opposed to each other, and a spirit of adoption and a spirit of bondage; where the one is, the other is not (John 8:35; Rom. 8:15), hence this liberty is called, "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21), being proper and peculiar to them; and is twofold, a liberty of grace, and a liberty of glory; the one is enjoyed in this life, and the other in that to come.

1. First, The liberty of grace; which lies,

1a. In a freedom from sin, Satan, and the law.

1a1. From sin; it is a liberty not to sin, but from it; liberty to sin is licentiousness, and cannot be that liberty wherewith Christ makes free; for it is contrary to his nature, who loves righteousness and hates iniquity; to his gospel, the truth of which makes free, for that is a doctrine according to godliness; and contrary to the Spirit of Christ, who, as he is a free Spirit, so he is the Spirit of holiness; and contrary to the principle of grace in the saints, and is confuted and condemned by the holy lives of the children of God in all ages: but it is a freedom from sin; not from the being of it; for the most eminent saints that have been in the world, have not been free from the indwelling of sin, and acts of it; but from the guilt of it, through the blood and righteousness of Christ applied to them; and from condemnation by it, as well as from the dominion of it, through the grace of God in conversion; when, though sin has reigned in them, in a very powerful and tyrannical manner; yet shall no more have dominion over them, because not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14, 17, 18).

1a2. From the power of Satan, who has usurped a dominion over the sons of men, and leads them captive at his will, until the Spirit of God comes and dispossesses him, and turns men from the power of Satan to God, and translates them from the power of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son; when they are no more slaves and vassals to him, nor do his works and lusts; but the will of their heavenly Father: though they are not freed from his temptations, which the best of men have been beset with; yet they are not overcome by them, nor shall be destroyed through them.

1a3. From the law, and the bondage of it. From the moral law, as a covenant of works, obliging to work for life; but not from it as a rule of life, walk, and conversation; from it as the ministration of Moses; but not from it as in the hands of Christ: from it, so as not to be obliged to seek for justification by it, which is not to be had by the works of it; and from the curses and condemnation of it, Christ being made a curse for them; and from the rigorous exaction of it, requiring perfect and sinless obedience; and from that bondage of spirit, which, for want of it, it leads into: and from the ceremonial law, as a sign of guilt, that handwriting of ordinances being taken away, and nailed to the cross of Christ; and as a type of Christ, and its ordinances, as shadows of good things to come; which are all done away, Christ, the substance, being come; and as a severe, rigid schoolmaster, as it was, till Christ, the object of faith, came; and as a partition wall between Jew and Gentile, which is now broken down, and all are one in Christ: and from the judicial law, so far as any of the statutes of it were peculiar to the Jewish nation; but such as are founded on nature, reason, justice, and equity, are still binding. Nor are the sons of God, by their Christian liberty, freed from the laws of nations, which are not contrary to religion and conscience; subjection to civil magistrates is not inconsistent with Christian liberty; and which is inculcated by the apostles, in their epistles to the churches, and others (Rom. 13:1-4; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13, 14).

1b. Christian liberty consists in a freedom from all traditions of men; such as those of the Pharisees, among the Jews, which were before the times of Christ, and were risen to a very great bulk in his time; and which were imposed as a heavy burden on the consciences of men, and by which the word and commandments of God were transgressed, and made of none effect (Matthew 15:1-6), and such as among heathens, heretics, and false teachers, which the apostle exhorts to beware of, and not conform unto; which he calls philosophy and vain deceit, the tradition of men, the rudiments of the world; ordinances and commandments of men, which forbid the touching, tasting, and handling of some things (Col. 2:8, 20-23) and such as the unwritten traditions of the Papists, respecting their hierarchy, doctrines, and practices, which have no foundation in the word of God; as the several orders, offices, and sacraments, not to be found in scripture, the doctrines of transubstantiation, purgatory, &c. rites and customs, as the observance of fasts and festivals, on certain days, and at certain times

of the year; baptism of infants, signing with the sign of the cross, &c., such like things Christian liberty sets us free from, and our consciences are not bound to pay any regard to them.

1c. Christian liberty lies in the free use of the creatures, which God has provided for food and nourishment, and which were granted to men originally, without any distinction; for though there was very early a distinction of creatures into clean and unclean, with respect to sacrifice, yet not with respect to food, until the Levitical law took place, which made the use of some creatures unlawful; but now, under the gospel dispensation, we are at full liberty to eat of every kind, that is fit, proper, and convenient for food: as Peter, by the vision, was taught to call nothing common and unclean; so we may be persuaded, with the apostle Paul, that there is nothing common and unclean of itself; but that every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving; and provided it is used with moderation, and not indulged to excess, to luxury and intemperance; or used as an occasion to the flesh, to pamper that, and fulfil the lusts of it (Acts 10:14, 15; Rom. 14:14; 1 Tim. 4:3, 4). The injunction by the synod at Jerusalem, to abstain from blood, and things strangled, was only "pro tempore", for the peace of the churches, till things could be settled in them, between Jews and Gentiles, to mutual satisfaction.

1d. Another part of Christian liberty respects things indifferent; things which are neither commanded nor forbidden of God, and which may be used and abstained from at pleasure; and which, in the first times of the gospel, chiefly concerned the eating, or not eating, some certain things (Rom. 14:2, 3), which might be made use of by those who thought fit to use them, provided they did it in faith; for if they made use of them, doubting whether they should or not, they sinned (Rom. 14:22, 23), and that they did not lay a stumbling block in the way of weak Christians, and so offend, grieve, and wound them, and destroy their peace (Rom. 14:13, 15, 20, 21; 1 Cor. 8:9-13), and such that abstained from the use of them, were not to reckon it as a point of merit, thereby obtaining the favour of God, and the remission of their sins, and becoming more holy and more perfect; nor as a part of religious worship, and as necessary for the peace of conscience, and continuance in the divine favour; for the "kingdom of God", true, real religion, and godliness, "is not meat and drink"; it does not lie in what a man eats or drinks, or wears, provided moderation, decency, and circumstances, are attended to (Rom. 14:17), and care should be taken, on the one hand, lest such things should be reckoned indifferent, which are not indifferent, and so any precept, or ordinance of God, be neglected; and on the other hand, such as are indifferent, should not be imposed as necessary, which may lead to superstition and idol worship.

1e. Christian liberty lies in the use of ordinances, which God has enjoined; it is a privilege to come to mount Zion, the city of the living God; to have a place and a name in the church of Christ; to be of the family and household of God, and partake of the provisions which are there made for spiritual refreshment. Subjection to gospel ordinances is not contrary to Christian liberty; but accords with it, and, indeed, is a part of it; but to be subject to the ordinances and commandments of men is contrary to it; but not subjection to the ordinances of God. Carnal men may reckon them bonds and cords, and be for breaking and casting them away; but spiritual men account them their privileges, and receive Christ's "yoke" as "easy", and his "burden" as "light"; and they yield subjection to them, not with a mercenary and servile spirit, but under the influence, and by the assistance, of the Spirit of God, who is a free spirit; they act from a principle of love; they love the house and worship of God, his word and ordinances, and in love observe them (John 14:15, 21, 23). Christian liberty does not lie in a neglect of gospel ordinances, or in an attendance on them at will and pleasure; men are not to come into a church, and go out when they please, or attend an ordinance now and then, or when they think well: this is not liberty, but licentiousness. The ordinances of Christ, particularly the supper, are perpetual things, to be observed frequently and constantly, unto the second coming of Christ; and it is both well pleasing to God, to keep the ordinances, as they were delivered; and it is profitable to the saints; since these are for the perfecting of the saints, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till they come to be perfect men, and arrive to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.

1f. Christian liberty lies in worshipping God according to his word, and the dictates of conscience, without the fear of men, which indulged to, brings a snare, and leads to idolatry, superstition, and idol worship: though Christians are obliged to regard the laws of men, respecting civil matters, yet not what regard religion and conscience, and are contrary thereunto; by such they are not bound, but should serve God rather than men; as the cases of the three companions of Daniel, of Daniel himself, and of the apostles, and of the martyrs and confessors in all ages, show; who chose rather to suffer imprisonment, confiscation of goods, and death itself, than part with this branch of Christian liberty, to serve God, according to his word, and that light which they had in it. Nor does it become rulers and governors to infringe this liberty of theirs.

1g. Another glorious part of Christian liberty is freedom of access to God, through Christ the Mediator, under the influence of the blessed Spirit (Eph. 2:18), this is a great privilege the sons of God have, that they can come to God as their Father; not as on a throne of justice, requiring at their hands satisfaction for their sins; but as on a throne of grace, communicating pardoning grace and mercy, and all supplies of grace to them, as the God of all grace; and this access they have through Christ, the Mediator between God and man, through his blood, righteousness, and sacrifice; and by the Spirit, who is a Spirit of grace and supplication, under whose influence saints can pour out their souls to God with great freedom, and make known their requests to him with thankfulness.

1h. It also lies in a freedom from the fear of death, both corporal and eternal; Christ, through his incarnation, sufferings, and death, has delivered them, who, through fear of death, were all their lifetime subject to bondage: death, as formidable as it is, is no king of terrors to them; in a view of interest in Christ, and in the exercise of faith, and hope of being for ever with him, they choose to depart; knowing, that to die is gain; and in a prospect of death and eternity, can sit and sing, and say, "O death, where is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victory!" And as to an eternal death, they are comfortably assured, they shall not be hurt by it; that shall have no power over them, though it is the just desert of sin; yet being justified by Christ, and having access, through him, into a state of grace, they rejoice in hope of the glory of God; and being made spiritually alive, they believe they shall never die, neither a spiritual nor an eternal death.

2. Secondly, The liberty of glory, or that which the sons of God will be possessed of in the world to come; and this will be entirely perfect; the soul, in its separate state, will be perfectly free from sin, be with the spirits of just men made perfect; free from all corruption and defilement, from the very being of sin, and any consequences of it; from all unbelief, doubts, fears, and distresses of mind; from all evil thoughts and vain desires; and from all the temptations of Satan: and at the resurrection their bodies will be no more subject to pains, griefs, disorders, and diseases of any kind; but be entirely free from corruption, and mortality, and death; and be, both in soul and body, perfectly pure and holy, and live for ever in the enjoyment of God, and in the company of angels and saints; and be in no danger of ever being brought into bondage in any sense: and as this state is called the adoption, so it may be said to be "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21, 23).

The author, or "efficient cause", of this liberty, is Christ; it is a liberty with which Christ has made his people free, (Gal. 5:1) it is of his procuring, he has obtained it with the price of his blood, by which he has redeemed them from sin, Satan, and the law: and it is his proclaiming; for he was anointed with the Holy Spirit, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; and it is by his Spirit that they are put into the possession of it, who is a spirit of liberty, being the Spirit of adoption, and so opposed to the Spirit of bondage; and Christ is the author and finisher of faith, by which they receive this privilege; so that it may be truly called, as it sometimes is, by divines, "Christian liberty"; both from Christ, the author of it, and from the subjects of it, Christians, such as truly believe in Christ.

The "instrumental cause", or the means by which liberty is conveyed to the sons of God, is the word of God, the truth of the gospel; which is not only a proclamation of this liberty, made by Christ, the great Prophet, in the church, and by his apostles and ministering servants; and was prefigured by the jubilee trumpet, which proclaimed liberty throughout the land; but is the means, attended with the Spirit and power of God, of freeing souls from the bondage they are in by nature, and when first under a work of the law; "ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32), and the clearer knowledge men have of the gospel, and the truths of it; and the more they are evangelized, or cast into a gospel mould by it, the farther off they are from a spirit of bondage again to fear. So that this liberty may be rightly called "gospel liberty"; which, though not restrained entirely to the gospel dispensation, yet is more peculiar to that; since the saints under the former dispensation were as children in bondage, under the elements of the world, the law, which gendered to bondage, and brought upon them that servile bondage spirit which prevailed in them.

Both from the nature of this liberty, and from the influence the Spirit of God has in it, it may be, with great propriety, called "spiritual liberty"; as well as from its having its seat in the spirits, or souls of men; and may be distinguished from corporal liberty, and from civil liberty. Nor does it at all interfere with the latter; it does not dissolve the ties, obligations, connections, and dependencies of men, one with, and on, another; nor free from subjection to parents, masters, and civil magistrates. It is in its nature, pure, holy, and spiritual; it is not a liberty to sin, as has been observed; but a liberty from sin. It is a real liberty, and not a shadow, an appearance of one; "If the Son make you free, ye shall be free indeed": and it is perpetual; such who are once made free, shall never more be servants, or come into a state of bondage; they shall never be disfranchised, or lose their freedom; and the fruits and effects of it are, peace, joy, and comfort, and a capacity and disposition of worshipping and serving the Lord, in the most spiritual, evangelical, and acceptable manner!