

Liberty of Conscience Does Not Rescue Toleration of False Religion

Romans 14:1; James 4:12

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What is the role of the conscience in matters related to national policy? The answer to this question will largely determine whether one favors a national constitution that establishes religious pluralism in which all religions (or no religion at all) are officially tolerated (and thus officially promoted and defended), or whether one favors a national constitution that establishes the one true religion of biblical Christianity as the only religion within that nation that is officially promoted, defended, and supported. Let us at the outset of this sermon lay out a few biblical principles that define and describe the role of the conscience in the individual person.

1. First, the conscience was created by God to be **a witness** or an inferior judge within each person either **to accuse** man of having violated God's Law or **to defend** man in having kept God's Law (Romans 2:15). Since God is the Creator of the conscience, the conscience can never lawfully act independently of God, the Creator. Thus, no one has the authority to grant a so-called "right" of conscience to anyone to do what is contrary to the revealed will of the Triune God of the Bible (as summarized in the Ten Commandments).

2. Second, the conscience of every person (along with every person's intellect, emotions, and will) became a partaker of Adam's original sin, because every person sinned in Adam and fell with Adam in his first transgression according to Romans 5:12 (Christ alone being the exception to that universal rule). Thus, since the fall, the conscience of man (though not entirely destroyed) has been seriously marred and distorted by sin, so that the natural, unregenerate conscience of each of us is no longer trustworthy and reliable as a faithful witness to God's revealed will (Romans 3:10-18, note especially verse 18). If we would please God, our Creator, we cannot follow the words of that famous philosopher, Jiminy Cricket, "Always let your conscience be your guide." Dear ones, our darkened conscience will by itself lead us astray. And inevitably, where the individual conscience is made supreme in all religious matters within a nation, millions of consciences will be permitted by that nation to challenge, usurp, disown, or even deny the Triune God, who has revealed in the Bible, the one true (and only true) religion. That same nation will not grant to the individual conscience any "right" to violate its own civil laws with impunity, but it will grant some alleged "right" to the individual conscience to violate God's Moral Law, who established civil government as His ordinance to rule for His glory.

3. Though this has been implied in what is said above, I state it now explicitly: third, the conscience of man is not the supreme judge or the supreme law for man's thoughts, words, or deeds. The conscience is a subordinate judge and witness before the supreme judge (namely, God) and before the supreme Law (namely, God's Law). In fact, it is treason committed against our Triune God and His absolute and supreme authority to think, speak, or act as if our conscience is the supreme judge in national policy (or in anything else). "God alone is lord of the conscience" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 20:2). National policy is not independent of God and His Law (that is atheistic policy). To the contrary, national policy is always to be agreeable to the Moral Law of God and never contrary to it (James 4:12; Acts 4:12). And sin against God is defined by God Himself as transgression of His Law, even if someone is following his/her own conscience (1 John 3:4).

4. Liberty of conscience (or Christian liberty) is the freedom purchased by Christ and graciously bestowed on all those who trust in Christ and His righteousness as their only hope of justification before a holy God. Liberty of conscience is not being set free from obedience to God's Moral Law in order to worship God in whatever way your conscience leads you to worship Him or follow Him (that is not liberty; that is bondage). To

the contrary, liberty of conscience is being set free from the guilt, penalty, and power of sin; being set free from a defiled and polluted conscience; and being set free from all arbitrary authority of men and unlawful commands of men (1 Timothy 4:1-5). Liberty of conscience is being set free to enjoy every blessing and grace purchased for us by Christ (in this life and in the life to come), and being set free by God's grace to freely submit your conscience to the Triune God and to the beauty of His holiness as revealed in His Moral Law (Titus 2:14). For the Moral Law of God in the hand of our blessed Mediator is not a curse to us, but rather a blessing to us that reveals to us His righteousness and His holy will for our lives (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

5. Though the degree of light that each conscience may have of God's Moral Law may vary from individual to individual (whether in the conscience of the Christian or in the conscience of the non-Christian), the supreme authority by which our consciences are to be ruled (whether we have lesser light or greater light than the next person) is still not any creature, any king or magistrate, any pope or minister, or any conscience in man (Luke 12:47-48—even those who have less light are still accountable to the light of God's Moral Law that they do have). Those whose consciences have been granted a greater degree of light do aggravate their sins against God, yet even those whose consciences have less light cannot be said to be immune from responsibility for violating God's Moral Law. The supreme and absolute authority for the moral person of an individual, the moral person of a family, the moral person of the Church, and the moral person of the State is the Moral Law of God—there is only one Lawgiver, not two, three, four, or 4 billion lawgivers in the world (James 4:12). This so acutely points out to us our desperate need for Christ to purge our consciences from dead works to serve the living God (Hebrews 9:14). Dear ones, we stand in need not only of a once and for all judicial purging in our justification, but also of a daily purging of our consciences in our sanctification that flows from our justification.

Having presented these foundational biblical principles that relate to the conscience, let us move on to consider the main points in today's sermon: (1) True Liberty of Conscience Does Not Promote the Official Toleration of False Religion, Idolatry, Atheism, Agnosticism, Blasphemy, Heresy, Covenant-breaking, Sabbath-breaking, or Any Other Immoral Speech or Behavior (Romans 14:1); (2) Another Argument Offered by Those Who Assert that the United States Is a Christian Nation.

I. True Liberty of Conscience Does Not Promote the Official Toleration of False Religion, Idolatry, Atheism, Agnosticism, Blasphemy, Heresy, Covenant-breaking, Sabbath-breaking, or Any Other Immoral Speech or Behavior (Romans 14:1).

A. Romans 14 has often been appealed to by Christian tolerationists throughout history to teach a religious liberty of conscience (which as we shall see is not in fact a true, biblical liberty of conscience, but rather "a pretended liberty of conscience" as Samuel Rutherford called it). It is alleged by Christian tolerationists that the Apostle Paul commands a toleration of the weak brother who does not agree with the religious views of the strong brother (in Romans 14:1). It is alleged that the weak brother cannot and must not violate his own conscience (according to Romans 14:23). Thus, a religious liberty ought to be granted to everyone with whom we may disagree in matters related to national policy. Even if his conscience is in error and has embraced false religion, idolatry, blasphemy, heresy, covenant-breaking, or Sabbath-breaking, he must be allowed to follow his own conscience; for in matters of religion, the conscience must be allowed its freedom to practice religion as it deems is right.

1. It is interesting to note that Christian tolerationists do not consistently promote the same liberty of conscience when it comes to adultery, same sex "marriages", child molestation, incest, abortion, theft, or slander. But it should be noted that just as the individual conscience may be seared and misled into false religion and yet defend that false religion, so the individual conscience may be seared and

misled into adultery, same sex “marriage”, child molestation, incest, abortion, theft, and slander, and yet defend these sins as well.

2. So the Christian tolerationist must be asked why the seared and misled conscience of an individual should be tolerated to practice false religion (which violates the First Commandment of God), but not tolerated to practice same sex “marriages” (which violates the Seventh Commandment of God) or tolerated to practice abortion (a violation of the Sixth Commandment)? What moral justification can be given for such inconsistency in two varying moral actions that are both governed by the same Moral Law of God? How can we morally defend a position that says that the individual conscience must be tolerated to grievously offend the Almighty Triune God (the King of kings and Lord of lords) by practicing a false religion (which is treason against the Triune God) and showing contempt for His Moral Law, but cannot be tolerated to offend the earthly magistrate by practicing treason against him and showing contempt for his civil laws? As was said earlier, Christian tolerationists have sought to find their justification for such an alleged “religious liberty” in the inspired teaching of Paul here in Romans 14. Let us, therefore, turn to our text.

B. Romans 14:1-15:13 addresses a problem in the Church of Rome (when it was a faithful Church) that had the potential of rending apart the unity (in truth and love) of Christ’s New Covenant people. This controversy seems to have revolved around a misunderstanding versus a proper understanding of certain dietary and ceremonial aspects of God’s Law which God Himself had instituted in the Old Testament.

1. Specifically, some Christian brethren in Rome (whom Paul addresses as “weak” brethren according to Romans 14:1, most likely consisting of converted Jews for the most part) practiced an abstinence from meat and wine wanting to be certain that the food and wine that was used was not in any way ceremonially unclean (like Daniel of old in Daniel 1:8). Also these “weak” brethren still observed the Jewish holy days instituted by God in the Old Testament.

2. Other Christian brethren in Rome (whom Paul addresses as “strong” brethren, among whom he classes himself according to Romans 15:1, most likely consisting of converted Gentiles for the most part) enjoyed and practiced the lawful liberty of eating all foods and drinking wine, and did not account the Jewish holy days instituted by God in the Old Testament to any longer bind them to obedience (Romans 14:1-5).

C. Those who are addressed as “weak” brethren are not called weak because they were less zealous for the truth or less committed to Christ as Savior and Lord than those who are addressed as “strong” brethren. Those are called “weak” because their conscience was not sufficiently informed in regard to the temporary nature of the dietary and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. On the other hand, those are called “strong” because their conscience was sufficiently informed in regard to the temporary nature of the dietary and ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, and they understood that Christ had fulfilled these temporary laws by His life and death (which were “a shadow of things to come” as Paul says in Colossians 2:17), and had set His New Covenant people free from a religious observation of these dietary and ceremonial laws. The “strong” understood they were free to obey Christ by way of eating all foods and drinking all beverages to the glory of God, and by way of being set free from obligation to observe the Jewish ceremonial calendar any longer.

D. Paul does indeed command the “strong” to receive the “weak” into the fellowship and communion of the Church (Romans 14:1), and to bear with the “infirmities” of the “weak” (Romans 15:1). But Paul neither commands anyone in the Church to receive into the fellowship and communion of the Church, nor to bear with the false religion, the idolatry and corrupt worship, the heresy and false doctrine, or the blasphemy of anyone (whether a “brother” or not). To the contrary, Paul commands us NOT to tolerate them (as is taught by him later on in Romans 16:17).

1. Dear ones, it is one thing to bear with the “weak in conscience” during a transitional period of time from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant who don’t yet fully understand that they no longer have to follow certain dietary laws or ceremonial laws that God instituted in the Old Testament but are willing to be instructed and set free from their ignorance; and quite a different thing to bear with the seared and obstinate in conscience who practice and lead others into false religion, idolatry and corrupt worship, heresy, false doctrine, and blasphemy, and are not willing to be instructed.

2. With the first group (the “weak in conscience”), Paul commands forbearance (Romans 14:1; Romans 15:1), but with the second group (the seared and obstinate in conscience), Paul commands that we not fellowship with, but rather separate ourselves from these (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:10-11).

3. With the first group (the “weak in conscience”), what they were following in that transitional period from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant were temporary laws actually instituted by God (the dietary and ceremonial laws). With the second group (the seared and obstinate in conscience), what they taught and promoted was neither instituted by God in His Law, but was altogether contrary and hostile to the Moral Law of God.

4. Thus, this passage in Romans 14 in no way promotes the toleration of false religion, idolatry, corrupt worship, heresy, false doctrine, or blasphemy as Christian tolerationists have alleged at different times. Moreover, this passage in no way addresses the civil realm at all, but rather addresses the ecclesiastical realm. And this being the case, if Romans 14 teaches the official toleration of all false religion, heresy, blasphemy etc. (as has been advocated by Christian tolerationists), it then teaches that the Church of Jesus Christ ought to receive into its communion and tolerate every false religion, heresy, and blasphemy. For as just noted, Romans 14 is addressed in context to the Church (not to the State). And if Romans 14 does not teach the toleration of all false religion, heresy, blasphemy etc. in the Church, it cannot be used to teach the official toleration of all false religion, heresy, and blasphemy in the State. Dear ones, Romans 14 only teaches a forbearance of those with a “weak” conscience in things that are indifferent in themselves (like food, drink, and days) until the “weak” can be taught and instructed in the truth. This passage in Romans 14 does not teach any forbearance of those with a seared and obstinate conscience who teach and lead others astray into false religion, idolatry or corrupt worship, heresy, false doctrine, or blasphemy; for false religion, idolatry, corrupt worship, heresy, false doctrine, or blasphemy are never indifferent in themselves (like food, drink, and days), but are always in all circumstances contrary and hostile to God’s Moral Law.

E. But what about Paul’s declaration that “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Romans 14:23)? Someone may ask, does Romans 14:23 not teach that if a nation establishes biblical Christianity as the official religion of that nation, and establishes civil laws that prohibit all false religion, that such a nation will be leading many to sin against their conscience who do not agree with the establishment of biblical Christianity? Romans 14:23 does teach us that if we do anything while we doubt in our conscience that it is agreeable to the will of God, it is sin. Let me explain.

1. There are two principles that must be upheld in this regard.

a. First, God’s Moral Law is the absolute and supreme standard that ought to regulate the conscience of every person (Romans 3:19; James 4:12). Thus, even the erring conscience that is deceived and departs from the Moral Law of God is guilty before God; for sin is the transgression of the Law of God (1 John 3:4). Thus, those who follow their own erring conscience into sin and error cannot excuse themselves before God by saying, “I am innocent because I was sincere in following my erring conscience. My conscience deceived and misled me into sin and error.” No! No! No! Sin is the violation of God’s Law even when one is simply following one’s own erring conscience.

b. Second, it is also true that we sin against God when we violate our conscience and do what we believe is wrong. God never calls or commands us to violate our conscience in obeying Him,

but rather first to inform our conscience of God's Moral Law and then to follow it out of faith and conviction. So here in Romans 14, if the "weak" in conscience (who believed it to be sin to eat meat or to drink wine) should eat meat and drink wine before their conscience is persuaded by God's Word that they are at liberty to do so to the glory of God, they have subjectively sinned by doing what they believed to be wrong, even if objectively, it was not sinful in and of itself to eat meat or to drink wine. If we violate our conscience, if we altogether disregard our conscience and treat it with contempt by doing what it forbids time after time after time, we will eventually render our conscience useless; for we will by our constant violation of it sear our conscience and render it insensitive to either good or evil. Our conscience, dear ones, is a precious gift from God, and as such, it must not be violated, but rather instructed, informed, and persuaded by God's Moral Law.

2. Back to the objection from Romans 14:23. Do the establishment of biblical Christianity and the prohibition of all false religion lead many to violate their conscience? It is not the Moral Law of God or the one true religion of biblical Christianity that lead people to violate their conscience, but rather it is their own defiled conscience that refuses to freely submit to and refuses to be instructed by the Moral Law of God that leads people to sear their conscience to the truth. For example, if the Christian Sabbath was established as law in this nation, and an atheist violated his conscience and kept the Sabbath outwardly in order to avoid a civil penalty, the atheist could never blame the Moral Law of God for the violation of his conscience. He violated his own conscience, by not being willing to embrace Christ by faith alone and by not being willing to have his conscience informed and instructed by the Moral Law of God. The violation of his conscience would be his own fault, not the fault of God or God's Moral Law.

II. Another Argument Offered by Those Who Assert that the United States Is a Christian Nation.

A. It has been claimed by Christians that not only outside the Supreme Court building, but also within the Supreme Court building (in the very room in which the justices sit to hear and try cases), there are displays of Moses and the Ten Commandments. This is true, but when one understands the context in which Moses and the Ten Commandments are displayed, it can hardly be alleged that such architecture was intended to portray the United States as a Christian nation.

1. Upon the east wall where the Supreme Court justices sit is displayed a flat sculpture (called a frieze) consisting of two male figures seated, who represent the Majesty of Law and the Power of Government. They are flanked on the left side by a group of smaller human figures representing Wisdom, and on the right side by a group of smaller human figures representing Justice. This frieze is all very Greek in style. There is no one in the frieze that even vaguely resembles a biblical character. Between the two male figures appears a single rectangular block with Roman numerals 1-5 on one side of the rectangular block and Roman numerals 6-10 on the other side of the rectangular block. Some Christians have imagined that this is a representation of the Ten Commandments. But that is not likely the case at all. For the Ten Commandments are always presented in the architecture of the Supreme Court building (whether outside or inside) as consisting of two tablets rounded at the top (rather than one single rectangular block or tablet as in this frieze). Also, when the Ten Commandments are portrayed with human personages, it is Moses that appears with the Ten Commandments (rather than personifications of ideas of law and government). Finally, there is a letter on file in the archives of the Supreme Court that is purported to have been written by the man who designed this frieze (Adolph Weinman) stating the rectangular block with Roman numerals 1-10 on it represents not the Ten Commandments, but rather the first Ten Amendments to the Constitution (also known as the Bill of Rights). Thus, this particular claim to the presence of the Ten Commandments within the Supreme Court building is not likely true.

2. The friezes that appear on the south and north walls inside the Supreme Court building were also designed by Adolph Weinman. In the frieze on the south wall appears Moses holding two rounded tablets representing the Ten Commandments. But Moses and the Ten Commandments cannot be taken in

isolation from everything else in that frieze on the south wall. For there are also sculpted representations of other historical figures from right to left such as Menes (the first king of the first dynasty of Egypt), Hammurabi (king of Babylon and known for one of the most ancient codes of law), Moses (holding the Ten Commandments), Solomon (known for his wisdom in judgment), Lycurgus (legislator of Sparta), Solon (Athenian lawgiver), Draco (one of Solon's legal predecessors in Athens—because his legal code presented harsh sentences for relatively minor offenses, his name has become synonymous with being harsh, draconian). In this frieze on the south wall there appear two biblical characters and the Ten Commandments, but once again they simply appear with many other historical lawgivers so that nothing distinctly Christian or biblical may be drawn from this frieze as indicating that the United States was founded as a distinctly Christian nation. The United States no doubt had Christian influence, but it also had the legal influence of many other lawgivers throughout history as well (as depicted in this frieze). It also should be noted that the frieze on the north wall continues the parade of historical legal figures with Confucius, Octavian (or Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman empire, who was declared to be divine), Justinian (the Byzantine emperor who encoded and published the Roman law), Muhammad, Charlemagne, King John (who was forced to affix his seal to the Magna Charta), Louis IX of France, Hugo Grotius (who wrote the book, *Concerning the Law of War and Peace*), Sir William Blackstone (who wrote *Commentaries on the Law of England*), John Marshall (4th Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States), and Napoleon. The Curator of the Supreme Court in fact stated about these friezes,

Faithful to classical sources, Weinman designed for the Courtroom friezes a procession of 'great lawgivers of history' from many civilizations, to portray the development of secular law.

Note, he says, "the development of secular law", not the articulation of biblical law or God's Moral Law. Once again, there is no attempt by the designer of these friezes to make these historical figures distinctly Christian or distinctly biblical as if the Moral Law of God is the source of America's Constitution or laws.

3. There also appears on the doors that lead into the Courtroom of the Supreme Court what appears to be an engraved representation of the tables of the Ten Commandments. But as has already been presented, how can anyone look at all of the other architecture outside or inside the Supreme Court building and honestly conclude that a distinctly Christian America is represented, or that biblical law is in any way represented as uniquely or even primarily THE source of America's Constitution or laws? All that can be concluded from these pictorial and architectural representations is that biblical law is one of the many influences that has contributed to the Constitution and laws of the United States (many other influences being pagan, oriental, and Islamic). Thus, such statements alleging a Christian America from the architecture found in the Supreme Court building are spurious. At best, the architecture presents a religious pluralistic basis for law in the United States, but more likely a secularistic basis for law in the United States (according to the designer and sculptor).

B. Dear ones, such false claims by Christians do not promote intellectual honesty or credible scholarship when the claims of Christians are so clearly built on misrepresentations of the facts. Remember, dear ones, we represent the Lord Jesus Christ in what we say and how we defend our beliefs to others. It would be better to say nothing about what we believe than to misrepresent the facts in order to build a straw man supporting what we believe. Let us, therefore, be careful that we do not violate the Ninth Commandment ("Thou shalt not bear false witness") in the way we bear testimony to the truth. Let us seek and endeavor to verify and confirm the truthfulness of the statements we make and present to others. Let us, as Covenanters, be judged as those who love the truth and truthfully represent the views of others even when dissecting those erroneous positions in order to refute them in the truth and love of Christ. Lies and misrepresentations will not promote true reformation, but speaking the truth in love will do so.

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