

Christian liberty, civil administration will it be faith or presumption

In this study we want examine a few practical understandings of Christian liberty, civil administration faith and presumption. This study is primarily for some who request a simpler understanding, some simple examples to illustrate the principles involved. So those who are clear in their understanding of these matters can therefore bear with the ones not yet at their level of understanding.

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (Joh 8:32 ASV)

Jesus speaks emphatically, "If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. (Joh 8:36 ASV)

So if the Son sets you free, you will be absolutely free. (Joh 8:36 GW)

Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; through whom also we have had our access by faith into this grace wherein we stand; and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Rom 5:1-2 ASV)

One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness in which is constituted freedom.

Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God, according to Rom. 10: 9: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and **believe in your heart** that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Further, "Christ is the end of the law, that **everyone who has faith may be justified**" Rom. 10:4.

Again, in Rom. 1:17, "He who **through faith** is righteous shall live." The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith.

From what has been said it is easy to see from what source faith derives such great power and why a good work or all good works together cannot equal it. Faith alone and the Word of God rule in the heart of man. The Word imparts its qualities to the soul. This is that Christian liberty, which does not induce us to live in idleness, presumption or doubtful unbelief. The incomparable benefit of faith is that it unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. Bear the above thoughts in mind as we proceed further.

In our last study A T Jones the 1888 messenger defined religious liberty thus, "Religious liberty, therefore, is man's exemption from the domination of others, or from restricting circumstances: man's freedom to make his choices and decide his conduct for himself, **spontaneously and voluntarily: in his duty to his Creator, and in the manner of discharging that duty.**" **The question is, what is the understanding gathered from this definition as given by Bro Jones. Does it express a divine truth? Does it open up clearer thoughts on the subject?**

Ellen white in various places gives the understanding that religious liberty is the voluntary love response of the creature to the creator in adherence to the eternal principles of right above any other requirement.

And the apostles said it was the submission and obedience to the divine command above any other command civil or religious in matters of faith. Acts chapters 4 and 5.

And so Christians have a peculiar liberty the nature of which is not man made and remains free in spite of any civil or human prohibition and will be innocent before God through it all.

Let me repeat, liberty is a natural or inalienable right, beyond the power of state to give or remove. It means full freedom of conscience for people of all faiths or no faith. It is also the right to practice any religion or no religion

without government control and coercion. Further when liberty of conscience is recognized it prevents both religious control over government and political control over religion. And so in the free exercise of religion every citizen is free to conclude, hold, practice and also change beliefs according to the dictates of conscience. Indeed that is why people can become Sabbath keepers or give up the Sabbath faith.

Ellen White wrote, "Very few, even of the foremost thinkers and moralists of the seventeenth century, had any just conception of that grand principle, (liberty of conscience, religious toleration) the outgrowth of the New Testament, which acknowledges God as the sole judge of human faith."--Martyn., vol. 5, p. 297. G.C 293

Ellen White commenting on the U S A constitution states, "the Declaration of Independence sets forth the great truth that "all men are created equal," and endowed with the inalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And the Constitution guarantees to the people the right of self-government, providing that representatives elected by the popular vote shall enact and administer the laws. Freedom of religious faith was also granted, every man being permitted to worship God according to the dictates of his conscience. Republicanism and Protestantism became the fundamental principles of the nation.

There are persons who believe that in the present circumstances that the civil administration of lock downs, curfews, restriction of physical worship to some extent is a restriction of their liberty of conscience, but is that correct? Does restriction of some physical or civil freedoms remove liberty of conscience or affect your right or ability to worship God according to the dictates of your conscience? If your answer is yes give me your scriptural reasoning. Did the fiery furnace of Dan 3 or the lion's den Dan 6 affect their ability to worship God according to dictates of conscience? Circumstances may have dictated the place but did it dictate anything else? What about the reformers in the reformation against popery? When in the future we shall be prohibited from working on Sunday would that affect your ability to worship or your freedom to worship on Sabbath freely according to the dictates of conscience? If you think so advance your scriptural reasons.

Consider the outcomes of this recorded case of husband and wife.

A hundred years later, (17th century) John Trask acknowledged the obligation of the true Sabbath, and employed voice and pen in its defense. He was soon called to account by the persecuting power of the Church of England. He declared the sufficiency of the Scriptures as a guide for religious faith, and maintained that civil authorities should not control the conscience in matters which concern salvation. He was brought for trial before the infamous tribunal of the Star Chamber, where a long discussion was held respecting the Sabbath. Trask would not depart from the injunctions and commandments of God to obey the commandments of men. He was therefore condemned, and sentenced to be set upon the pillory, and thence to be publicly whipped to the fleet, there to remain a prisoner. This cruel sentence was executed, and after a time his spirit was broken. He endured his sufferings in the prison for one year, and then recanted. Oh that he had suffered on, and won a martyr's crown! {4SP 181.1}

The wife of Trask was also a Sabbath-keeper. She was declared, even by her enemies, to be a woman endowed with many virtues worthy the imitation of all Christians. She was a school-teacher of acknowledged excellence, and was noted for her carefulness in dealing with the poor. "This," said her enemies, "she professed to do out of conscience, as believing she must one day come to be judged for all things done in the flesh. Therefore she resolved to go by the safest rule, rather against than for her private interest." Yet it was declared that she possessed a spirit of strange, unparalleled obstinacy in adhering to her own opinions, which spoiled her. In truth, she chose to obey the word of God in preference to the traditions of men. At last this noble woman was seized and thrust into prison. The charge brought against her was that she taught only five days in the week, and rested on Saturday, it being known that she

did it in obedience to the fourth commandment. She was accused of no crime; the motive of her act was the sole ground of complaint. {4SP 181.2}

She was often visited by her persecutors, who employed their most wily arguments to induce her to renounce her faith. In reply, she begged them to show from the Scriptures that she was in error, and urged that if Sunday were really a holy day, the fact must be stated in the word of God. But in vain she asked for Bible testimony. She was exhorted to smother her convictions, and believe what the church declared to be right. {4SP 182.1}

She refused to purchase liberty by renouncing the truth. The promises of God sustained her faith: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer. Behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison that ye may be tried." "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life." [Revelation 2:10.] For nearly sixteen years this feeble woman remained a prisoner, in privation and great suffering. The book of God alone can testify what she endured during those weary years. Faithfully she witnessed for the truth; her patience and fortitude failed not until she was released by death. {4SP 182.2}

The apostle wrote, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Rom 8:35 ASV) Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.(Rom 8:37-39 ASV)

A thin line separating Faith and presumption.

"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil doers, and for the praise of them that do well" [I Peter 2:13, 14]. This is to be looked upon as lawful and right for us to do. We should be careful to avoid leaving an impression on human minds that will cut off our influence with them, and hedge up our way. We may tie our hands and hinder our work because by some unadvised word or action of ours, we have awakened prejudice. {2MR 193.2}

"For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God" [vss. 15, 16]. Those who compose our churches have traits of character that will lead them, if they are not very careful, to feel indignant because on account of misrepresentation, their liberty in regard to working on Sunday is taken away. Do not fly into a passion over this matter, but take everything in prayer to God. He alone can restrain the power of rulers. Walk not rashly. Let none boast unwisely of their liberty, using it for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. "Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king" [I Peter 2:17]. {2MR 193.5}

This advice is to be of real value to all who are to be brought into strait places. Nothing that shows defiance, or that could be interpreted as maliciousness, must be shown. Ibid.

Now let us look a little closer at a principle brought out in the temptation of Christ and left on record to instruct Christians when they shall face difficult choices and so to escape presumption on the part of the true Christian.

The second temptation of Christ gives instruction which is important in dealing with crises when many voices are crying listen to me.

Then the devil took him into the holy city and had him stand on the highest part of the temple. He said to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God, jump! Scripture says, 'He will put his angels in charge of you. They will carry you in their hands so that you never hit your foot against a rock.'" Jesus said to him, "Again, Scripture says, 'Never tempt the Lord your God.'" (Mat 4:5-7 GW)

The sin of presumption lies close beside the virtue of perfect faith and confidence in God. Satan flattered himself that he could take advantage of the humanity of **Christ to urge Him over the line of trust to presumption. Upon this point many souls are wrecked.** Satan tried to deceive Christ through flattery. He admitted that He was right in the wilderness in His faith and confidence that God was His Father under the most trying circumstances. He then urged Christ to give him one more proof of His entire dependence upon God, one more evidence of His faith that He was the Son of God, by casting Himself from the Temple. He told Christ that if He was indeed the Son of God He had nothing to fear, for angels were at hand to uphold Him. Satan gave evidence that he understood the Scriptures by the use he made of them. {Con 48.2}

The Redeemer of the world wavered not from His integrity, and showed that He had perfect faith in His Father's promised care. **He would not put the faithfulness and love of His Father to a needless trial,** although He was in the hands of an enemy and placed in a position of extreme difficulty and peril. **He would not at Satan's suggestion tempt God by presumptuously experimenting on His providence.** Satan had brought in Scripture **which seemed appropriate for the occasion,** hoping to accomplish his designs by making the application to our Saviour at this special time. {Con 48.3}

Christ knew that God could indeed bear Him up if He had required Him to throw Himself from the Temple. **But to do this unbidden, and to experiment upon His Father's protecting care and love because dared by Satan to do so would not show His strength of faith.** Satan was well aware that **if Christ could be prevailed upon, unbidden by His Father, to fling Himself from the Temple to prove His claim to His heavenly Father's protecting care, He would in the very act show the weakness of His human nature.** *ibid*

Christians in times of pandemics.

There have been many pandemics through the centuries and Christians have had to live and work through them as others have. Therefore the question I put to you can Christians act unadvisedly, recklessly, rashly and presumptuously in such situations while thinking they are acting in faith?

The promises of God are not for us to claim rashly, to protect us while we rush on recklessly into danger, violating the laws of nature, or disregarding prudence and the judgment God has given us to use. This would not be genuine faith but presumption. The thrones and kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, were presented to Christ. Never will we have temptations as strong as those that assailed Him. {CTr 212.3}

The Bubonic Plague, or the "Black Death, existed in the days of the great reformer Martyn Luther

Nicholas Miller Lake Union Public Affairs and Religious Liberty director and a professor at the Adventist Theological Seminary at Andrews University shared some thoughts from Martyn Luther on his response and advice to others during the plague.

He says, Martin Luther, leading founder of Protestantism, and modern framer of the Priesthood of All Believers and the rights of conscience, actually had to face the issue of pandemics, quarantines, and medicines in his own day. As he lived through a plague in his own day, he wrote the following guidance, which Christians might find useful today: he now quotes from Luther's works vol 43.

“Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. . . . See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God.” LW 43:131–32.

Miller adds, Martin Luther understood the difference between faith and presumption, as well as genuine issues of conscience as opposed to legitimate public health regulations. Among our own Adventist pioneers, there were some conflicting responses to the question of required vaccinations, with some viewing it as an imposition on conscience (10). But our most credible and prominent religious liberty source of the late 19th century, the *American Sentinel*, forerunner of *Liberty* magazine, stated this difference quite clearly in one of its editorial articles.

Martyn Luther quotes Ecclesiasticus 3:26 only seen in new king James version.

²³Be not curious in unnecessary matters: for more things are shewed unto thee than men understand. ²⁴For many are deceived by their own vain opinion; and an evil suspicion hath overthrown their judgment. ²⁵Without eyes thou shalt want light: profess not the knowledge therefore that thou hast not. ²⁶**A stubborn heart shall fare evil at the last; and he that loveth danger shall perish therein** ²⁹The heart of the prudent will understand a parable; and an attentive ear is the desire of a wise man.” The great reformer now comments.

Others sin on the right hand. They are much too rash and reckless, tempting God and disregarding everything which might counteract death and the plague. They disdain the use of medicines; they do not avoid places and persons infected by the plague, but lightheartedly make sport of it and wish to prove how independent they are. They say that it is God’s punishment; if he wants to protect them he can do so without medicines or our carefulness. **This is not trusting God but tempting him** God has created medicines and provided us with intelligence to guard and take good care of the body so that we can live in good health. If one makes no use of intelligence or medicine when he could do so without detriment to his neighbor, such a person injures his body and must beware lest he become a suicide in God’s eyes. By the same reasoning a person might forego eating and drinking, clothing and shelter, and boldly proclaim his faith that if God wanted to preserve him from starvation and cold, he could do so without food and clothing. Actually that would be suicide. It is even more shameful for a person to pay no heed to his own body and to fail to protect it against the plague the best he is able, and then to infect and poison others who might have remained alive if he had taken care of his body as he should have. He is thus responsible before God for his neighbor’s death and is a murderer many times over. Indeed, such people behave as though a house were burning in the city and nobody were trying to put the fire out. Instead they give leeway to the flames so that the whole city is consumed, saying that if God so willed, he could save the city without water to quench the fire. No, my dear friends, that is no good. Use medicine; take potions which can help you; fumigate house, yard, and street; shun persons [Vol. 43, Page 132] and places wherever your neighbor does not need your presence or has recovered, and act like a man who wants to help put out the burning city. What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way: “Very well, by God’s decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly offal. Therefore I shall ask God mercifully to protect us. Then I shall fumigate, help purify the air, administer medicine, and take it. I shall avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perchance infect and pollute others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence. . . . See, this is such a God-fearing faith because it is neither brash nor foolhardy and does not tempt God. Moreover, he who has contracted the disease and recovered should keep away from others and not admit them into his presence unless it be necessary. Though one should aid him in his time of need, as previously pointed out, he in turn should, after his recovery, so act toward others that no one becomes unnecessarily endangered on his account and so cause another’s death. “Whoever loves danger,” says the wise man, “will perish by it” [Ecclus. 3:26]. If the people in a city were to show themselves bold in their faith when a neighbor’s need so demands, and cautious when no emergency exists, and if everyone would help ward off contagion as best he can, then the death toll would indeed be moderate.

An ill-judged movement in the time of the reformation

The French reformers, eager to see their country keeping pace with Germany and Switzerland, determined to strike a bold blow against the superstitions of Rome, that should arouse the whole nation. Accordingly placards attacking the mass were in one night posted all over France. Instead of advancing the reform, this zealous but ill-judged movement brought ruin, not only upon its propagators, but upon the friends of the reformed faith throughout France. It gave the Romanists what they had long desired,—a pretext for demanding the utter destruction of the heretics as agitators dangerous to the stability of the throne and the peace of the nation. {GC88 224.2}

By some secret hand—whether of indiscreet friend or wily foe was never known—one of the placards was attached to the door of the king's private chamber. The monarch was filled with horror. In this paper, superstitions that had received the veneration of ages were attacked with an unsparing hand. And the unexampled boldness of obtruding these plain and startling utterances into the royal presence, aroused the wrath of the king. In his amazement he stood for a little time trembling and speechless. Then his rage found utterance in the terrible words: “Let all be seized; and let Lutheranism be totally exterminated.” The die was cast. The king had determined to throw himself fully on the side of Rome. {GC88 225.1}

Now this final comment from Ellen White which expresses the certainty and purity of freedom, “But Christ, through the new covenant, writes that law in the heart, so that we not only have power to keep it, but His will becomes ours, and with Christ we delight to do His will, because His law is in our hearts. Here is perfect liberty. The perfectly saved will be perfectly free. Throughout eternity they will do just what they please, because they please to do just what makes liberty and joy possible *The Watchman*, May 1, 1906

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. (Joh 8:32 ASV)

In this freedom genuine faith is demonstrated and the Christian in word and deed acts in accordance to the mind of Christ and is kept in faith and kept from presumption.

It is hoped those who wanted a practical application of this area have been helped in some way to a better understanding of the matter.

Yours in Christian liberty

P L Blackman

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