

Liberty of Conscience and Christian Freedom

From John Calvin, *Tracts*, Vol. II, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 133, 147-149, English updated and emphasis added.

The following comes from the *Brief Form of a Confession of Faith*, for the use of those who desire to have a compendium of the Christian religion always at hand, written and edited by John Calvin.

The complete sufficiency of God's Word

I confess that both the whole rule of right living, and also instruction in faith, are most fully delivered in the sacred Scriptures, to which nothing can, without criminality, be added, and from which nothing can be taken away.

Liberty of conscience explained

I therefore detest all of men's imagining which they would obtrude upon us as articles of faith, and bind upon our consciences by laws and statutes.

And thus I repudiate in general whatever has been introduced into the worship of God without authority from the word of God. Of this kind are all the Popish ceremonies.

In short, I detest the tyrannical yoke by which miserable consciences have been oppressed — as the law of auricular confession [confession to a priest], celibacy, and others of the same description.

The following comes from the *Confession of Faith in the name of The Reformed Churches of France*: Drawn up during the war, for presentation to the Emperor, Princes, and States of Germany, at the Diet of Frankfort; but which could not reach them, the passes [roads] being closed. Now published for the advantages which may accrue from it, and even because necessity requires it. Anno [in the year of our Lord] M.D.LXII. (1562)

17. OF THE SERVICE OF GOD.

What does it mean to serve God? What binds men's consciences as to how we are to serve God rightly?

The second principal point in which we differ from the custom and opinion received in the world, is **the manner of serving God**.

Now on our part, in accordance with His declaration, that obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22), and with His uniform injunction to listen to what He commands, if we would render a well regulated and acceptable sacrifice, we hold that **it is not for us to invent what to us seems good, or to follow what may have been devised in the brain of other men, but to confine ourselves simply to the purity of Scripture**.

Wherefore we believe that **anything which is not derived from Scripture, but has only been commanded by the authority of men, ought not to be regarded as the service of God**.

And in this we have two articles as a kind of axioms.

The one is, that men cannot bind the conscience under pain of mortal sin: for not in vain does God insist on being regarded as the only lawgiver, saying (James 4:12), that it is for Him to condemn and acquit, nor in vain does He so often reiterate, that we are not to add to His ordinances. This indeed cannot be done without taxing Him with not having known all that was useful (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32), or with having forgotten this thing or that through inadvertence.

The second axiom is, that when we presume to serve God at our own hand, He repudiates it as corruption. And this is the reason why He exclaims by His prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:13,) that **all true religion has been perverted by keeping the commandments of men**. And our Lord Jesus Christ confirms the same by saying, (Matthew 15:9), that **in vain would we know God by human tradition**. It is with good reason, therefore, that His spiritual supremacy over our souls remains inviolable, and that at the very least **His will as a bridle should regulate our devotions**.

18. OF HUMAN TRADITION.

We have in this matter such notable warnings from common experience, that we are the more confirmed in **not passing the limits of Scripture**.

For since men began to make laws to regulate the service of God, and subject the conscience, there has been neither end nor measure, while, on the other hand, God has punished such temerity, blinding men with delusions which may make one shudder.

When we look nearer to see what **human traditions** are, we find that **they are an abyss, and that their number is endless**. And yet there are abuses so absurd and enormous, that it is wonderful how men could have been so stupid, were it not that God has executed the vengeance which He announced by His prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 29:4), blinding and infatuating the wise who would honor Him by observing the commandments of men.

19. OF IDOLATROUS INTENTIONS.

Since men have turned aside from pure and holy obedience to God, they have discovered that **good intention was sufficient to approve everything**. This was to open a door to all superstitions.

It has been the origin of the worship of images, the purchase of masses, the filling of churches with pomp and parade, the running about on pilgrimages, the making of vows by each at his own hand. But the abyss here is so profound that it is enough for us to have touched on some examples. So far is it from being permitted to honor God by human inventions, that there would be no firmness nor certainty, neither bottom nor shore in religion: everything would go to wreck [ruin], and Christianity would differ in nothing from the idolatries of the heathen.

20. OF THE TYRANNICAL ORDINANCES OF THE POPE.

There is another evil which we have alleged in the tyranny by which poor souls are oppressed. When men are commanded to confess their sins once a year to a priest, it is just to throw the whole world into despair. For if a man cannot keep count of the faults of a single day, who can be able to collect them at the end of a year? And yet the decree

declares that pardon cannot otherwise be obtained. This is to close the gate of paradise against all mankind. Moreover, though the observance of human laws were not impossible, there is always sacrilege in encroaching on the jurisdiction of God, as when it is said that sins will not be pardoned unless they are confessed in the ear of a priest. This is to append a condition to the promise of God, so as to render it false or vain. The same may be said of the prohibition to eat meat on certain days under pain of mortal sin. We confess, indeed, that fasting and abstinence is a laudable virtue, but such a prohibition trenches on the authority of God. The prohibition of marriage to priests, as well as monks and nuns, contains in itself two vices. First, it belonged not to mortal men to prohibit what God has permitted, and secondly, to constrain those who have not the gift of celibacy to refrain from the remedy, is as it were to plunge them into an abyss. And, in fact, we see the fruits which have been produced by it, and have no need to say what we are even shamed to think.