

“Christian Liberty”

Liberty of Conscience, Religious Freedom, and True Religion Explained

From John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Book III, 19.2-3, 14-15; Book IV, 10.1-15, 16-18, 23-26 English updated and emphasis added.

2. Christian liberty seems to me to consist of three parts.

First, the consciences of believers, while seeking the assurance of their justification before God, must rise above the law, and think no more of obtaining justification by it. For while the law, as has already been demonstrated (*supra*, chap. 17, sec. 1) leaves not one man righteous, we are either excluded from all hope of justification, or we must be loosed from the law, and so loosed as that no account at all shall be taken of works. For he who imagines that in order to obtain justification he must bring any degree of works whatever, cannot fix any mode or limit, but makes himself debtor to the whole law. Therefore, laying aside all mention of the law, and all idea of works, we must in the matter of justification have recourse to the mercy of God only; turning away our regard from ourselves, we must look only to Christ.

For the question is, not how we may be righteous, but how, though unworthy and unrighteous, we may be regarded as righteous. If consciences would obtain any assurance of this, they must give no place to the law.

Still it cannot be rightly inferred from this that believers have no need of the law. It ceases not to teach, exhort, and urge them to good, although it is not recognized by their consciences before the judgment-seat of God. The two things are very different, and should be well and carefully distinguished.

The whole lives of Christians ought to be a kind of aspiration after piety, seeing they are called unto holiness (Ephesians 1:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:5). **The office of the law is to excite them to the study of purity and holiness, by reminding them of their duty.** For when the conscience feels anxious as to how it may have the favor of God, as to the answer it could give, and the confidence it would feel, if brought to His judgment-seat, in such a case the requirements of the law are not to be brought forward, but Christ, who surpasses all the perfection of the law, is alone to be held forth for righteousness.

3. On this almost the whole subject of the Epistle to the Galatians hinges; for it can be proved from express passages that those are absurd interpreters who teach that Paul there contends only for freedom from ceremonies. Of such passages are the following: “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.” “Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage. Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law. Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Galatians 3:13; 5:1-4). These words certainly refer to something of a higher order than freedom from ceremonies.

I confess, indeed, that Paul there treats of ceremonies, because he was contending with false apostles, who were plotting, to bring back into the Christian Church those ancient shadows of the law which were abolished by the advent of Christ. But, in discussing this question, it was necessary to introduce higher matters, on which the whole controversy

turns. First, because the brightness of the Gospel was obscured by those Jewish shadows, he shows that in Christ we have a full manifestation of all those things which were typified by Mosaic ceremonies.

Secondly, as those impostors instilled into the people the most pernicious opinion, that this obedience was sufficient to merit the grace of God, he insists very strongly that believers shall not imagine that they can obtain justification before God by any works, far less by those paltry observances. At the same time, he shows that by the cross of Christ they are free from the condemnation of the law, to which otherwise all men are exposed, so that in Christ alone they can rest in full security. This argument is pertinent to the present subject (Galatians 4:5, 21, etc.). Lastly, he asserts the right of believers to liberty of conscience, a liberty which may not be restrained without necessity.

14. Since by means of this privilege of liberty which we have described, believers have derived authority from Christ not to entangle themselves by the observance of things in which He wished them to be free, we conclude that their consciences are exempted from all human authority. For it were unbecoming that the gratitude due to Christ for His liberal gift should perish or that the consciences of believers should derive no benefit from it. We must not regard it as a trivial matter when we see how much it cost our Savior, being purchased not with silver or gold, but with His own blood (1 Peter 1:18, 19); so that Paul hesitates not to say that Christ has died in vain, if we place our souls under subjection to men (Galatians 5:1, 4; 1 Corinthians 7:23).

Several chapters of the Epistle to the Galatians are wholly occupied with showing that Christ is obscured, or rather extinguished to us, unless our consciences maintain their liberty; from which they have certainly fallen, if they can be bound with the chains of laws and constitutions at the pleasure of men. But as the knowledge of this subject is of the greatest importance, so it demands a longer and clearer exposition. 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.

Two kingdoms explained—The kingdom of God (spiritual) and the kingdom of man (earthly)

15. Therefore, lest this prove a stumbling-block to any, let us observe that **in man government is twofold: the one spiritual**, by which the conscience is trained to piety and divine worship; **the other civil**, by which the individual is instructed in those duties which, as men and citizens, we are bold to perform (see Book 4, chap. 10, sec. 3-6).

To these two forms are commonly given the not inappropriate names of **spiritual and temporal jurisdiction**, intimating that the former species has reference to the life of the soul, while the latter relates to matters of the present life, not only to food and clothing, but to the enacting of laws which require a man to live among his fellows purely honorably, and modestly. The former has its seat within the soul, the latter only regulates the external conduct. We may call the one **the spiritual kingdom**, the other **the civil kingdom**.

Now, these two, as we have divided them, are always to be viewed apart from each other. When the one is considered, we should call off our minds, and not allow them to think of the other. For there exists in man a kind of two worlds, over which different kings and different laws can preside. By attending to this distinction, we will not erroneously transfer the doctrine of the gospel concerning spiritual liberty to civil order, as if in regard

to external government Christians were less subject to human laws, because their consciences are unbound before God, as if they were exempted from all carnal service, because in regard to the Spirit they are free. Again because even in those constitutions which seem to relate to the spiritual kingdom, there may be some delusion, it is necessary to distinguish between those which are to be held legitimate as being agreeable to the Word of God, and those, on the other hand, which ought to have no place among the pious. . . .

1. We come now to the second part of power, which, according to them [the Papists], consists in **the enacting of laws**, from which source **innumerable traditions** have arisen, to be as many deadly snares to miserable souls. For they have not been more scrupulous than the Scribes and Pharisees in laying burdens on the shoulders of others, which they would not touch with their finger (Matthew 23:4; Luke 11:16).

I have elsewhere shown (Book III. chap. 4. sec. 4-7) how cruel murder they commit by their doctrine of auricular confession [i.e., confession to the priest]. The same violence is not apparent in other laws, but those which seem most tolerable press tyrannically on the conscience.

Manmade worship and human traditions rob God Himself, who is the only Lawgiver, of His rights.

I say nothing as to the mode in which they adulterate the worship of God, and rob God Himself, who is the only Lawgiver, of His right.

The power we have now to consider is, **whether it be lawful for the Church to bind laws upon the conscience?** In this discussion, civil order is not touched; but the only point considered is, how God may be properly worshipped according to the rule which He has prescribed, and how **our spiritual liberty**, with reference to God, may remain unimpaired.

The term “human traditions” defined

In ordinary language, the name of **human traditions** is given to **all decrees concerning the worship of God, which men have issued without the authority of His word**. We contend against these, not against the sacred and useful constitutions of the Church, which tend to reserve discipline, or decency, or peace. 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**. I say nothing as to the great impiety with which, to sanction the observance of their laws, they declare that from it they seek forgiveness of sins, righteousness and salvation, while they make the whole sum of religion and piety to consist in it.

What I contend for is, that necessity ought not to be laid on consciences in matters in which Christ has made them free; and unless freed, cannot, as we have previously shown (Book III. chap. 19.), have peace with God. They must acknowledge Christ their deliverer, as their only king, and be ruled by **the only law of liberty** — namely, **the sacred word of the Gospel** — if they would retain the grace which they

have once received in Christ: they must be subject to no bondage, be bound by no chains. . . .

3. . . . Many are greatly puzzled with this question, from not distinguishing, with sufficient care, between what is called the external forum and the forum of conscience (Book III. chap. 19. sec 15). Moreover, the difficulty is increased by the terms in which Paul enjoins obedience to magistrates, “not only for wrath, but also for conscience’ sake” (Romans 13:5); and from which it would follow, that civil laws also bind the conscience. But if this were so, nothing that we have said of spiritual government, in the last chapter, and are to say in this, would stand.

Conscience defined

To solve this difficulty, we must first understand what is meant by conscience. The definition must be derived from the etymology of the term. **As when men, with the mind and intellect, apprehend the knowledge of things,** they are thereby said to know, and hence the name of science or knowledge is used; **so, when they have, in addition to this, a sense of the divine judgment, as a witness not permitting them to hide their sins, but bringing them as criminals before the tribunal of the judge, that sense is called conscience.** For it occupies a kind of middle place between God and man, not suffering [allowing] man to suppress what he knows in himself, but following him out until it bring him to conviction.

This is what Paul means, when he says that conscience bears witness, “our thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing each other” (Romans 2:15). Simple knowledge, therefore, might exist in a man, as it were, shut up, and therefore the sense which sits men before the judgment seat of God has been placed over him as a sentinel, to observe and spy out all his secrets, that nothing may remain buried in darkness. Hence the old proverb, **conscience is a thousand witnesses.** For this reason, Peter also uses the “answer of a good conscience towards God” (1 Peter 3:21); for tranquility of mind, when, persuaded of the grace of Christ, we with boldness present ourselves before God. And the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, that we have “no more conscience of sins,” that we are freed or acquitted, so that sin no longer accuses us (Hebrews 10:2).

4. Wherefore, as works have respect to men, so **conscience bears reference to God;** and hence **a good conscience is nothing but inward integrity of heart.** In this sense, Paul says, that “the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned” (1 Timothy 1:5). He afterwards in the same chapter, shows how widely it differs from intellect, saying, that “some having put away” a good conscience, “concerning faith have made shipwreck.” For by these words he teaches that it is a living inclination to worship God, a sincere desire to live piously and holily. Sometimes, indeed, it is extended to men also, as when Paul declares, “In this do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offense toward God, and toward men” (Acts 24:16). But this is said, because the benefits of a good conscience flow forth and reach even to men. Properly speaking, however, it respects God alone, as I have already said. Hence a law may be said to bind the conscience when it simply binds a man without referring to men, or taking them into account. For example, God enjoins us not only to keep our mind chaste and pure from all lust but prohibits every kind of obscenity in word, and all external lasciviousness. This law my conscience is bound to observe, though there were not another man in the world. Thus he who behaves intemperately not only sins by setting a bad example to his brethren, but stands convicted in his conscience before God. Another rule holds in the case of things which are in themselves indifferent. For we ought to abstain when they give offense, but

conscience is free. Thus Paul says of meat consecrated to idols, "If any man says to you, This is offered in sacrifice to idols, do not eat for his sake that showed it, and for conscience sake;" "conscience, I say, not your own, but of the other" (1 Corinthians 10:28, 29). A believer would sin, if, after being warned, he should still eat such kind of meat. But however necessary abstinence may be in respect of a brother, as prescribed by the Lord, conscience ceases not to retain its liberty. We see how the law, while binding the external work, leaves the conscience free.

5. Let us now return to **human laws**. If they are imposed for the purpose of forming a religious obligation, as if the observance of them was in itself necessary, we say that the restraint thus laid on the conscience is **unlawful**. Our consciences have not to deal with men but with God only. Hence the common distinction between the earthly forum and the forum of conscience.

When the whole world was enveloped in the thickest darkness of ignorance, it was still held (like a small ray of light which remained unextinguished) that conscience was superior to all human judgments. Although this, which was acknowledged in word, was afterwards violated in fact, yet God was pleased that there should even then exist an attestation to liberty, exempting the conscience from the tyranny of man.

But we have not yet explained the difficulty which arises from the words of Paul. For if we must obey princes not only from fear of punishment but for conscience' sake, it seems to follow, that the laws of princes have dominion over the conscience. If this is true, the same thing must be affirmed of ecclesiastical [church] laws. I answer, that the first thing to be done here is to distinguish between the genus and the species. For though individual laws do not reach the conscience, yet we are bound by the general command of God, which enjoins us to submit to magistrates. And this is the point on which Paul's discussion turns — namely, that magistrates are to be honored, because they are ordained of God (Romans 13:1).

Meanwhile, he does not at all teach that the laws enacted by them reach to the internal government of the soul, since he everywhere proclaims that the worship of God, and the spiritual rule of living righteously, are superior to all the decrees of men. Another thing also worthy of observation and depending on what has been already said, is, that **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 consists not in the things commanded. Very different, however, is the case of those which prescribe a new form of worshipping God, and introduce necessity into things that are free.

6. Such, however, are what in the present day are called ecclesiastical [church] constitutions by the Papacy, and are brought forward as part of the true and necessary worship of God. But as they are without number, so they form innumerable fetters to bind and ensnare the soul. Though, in expounding the law, we have adverted to this subject (Book III. chap. 4, 5), yet as this is more properly the place for a full discussion of it, I will now study to give a summary of it as carefully as I can. I shall, however, omit the branch relating to the tyranny with which false bishops arrogate to themselves the right of teaching whatever they please, having already considered it as far as seemed necessary, but shall treat at length of the power which they claim of enacting laws.

The Christian Church is to adhere strictly to the word of God, as written. The Church's leaders have no right to legislate and invent new laws and impose them upon the people (to be observed as a matter of necessity).

The pretext, then, on which our false bishops burden the conscience with new laws is, that the Lord has constituted them spiritual legislators, and given them the government of the Church. Hence they maintain that everything which they order and prescribe must, of necessity, be observed by the Christian people, that he who violates their commands is guilty of a twofold disobedience, being a rebel both against God and the Church. Assuredly, if they were true bishops, I would give them some authority in this matter, not so much as they demand, but so much as is requisite for properly arranging the polity of the Church; but since they are anything but what they would be thought, they cannot possibly assume anything to themselves, however little, without being in excess. But as this also has been elsewhere shown, let us grant for the present, that whatever power true bishops possess justly belongs to them, still **I deny that they have been set over believers as legislators to prescribe a rule of life at their own hands or bind the people committed to them to their decrees.** When I say this, I mean that **they are not at all entitled to insist that whatever they devise without authority from the word of God shall be observed by the Church as matter of necessity.**

Since such power was unknown to the apostles, and was so often denied to the ministers of the Church by our Lord Himself, I wonder how any have dared to usurp, and dare in the present day to defend it, without any precedent from the apostles, and against the manifest prohibition of God.

Scripture is all-sufficient!

7. Everything relating to a perfect rule of life the Lord has so comprehended in His law, that He has left nothing for men to add to the summary there given. This object in doing this was, first, that since all rectitude of conduct consists in regulating all our actions by His will as a standard, He alone should be regarded as the master and guide of our life; and, secondly, that He might show that there is nothing which He more requires of us than obedience. For this reason James says, "He who speaks evil of his brother, and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law, and judges the law:" "There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy" (James 4:11, 12).

The Lord exercises His divine right through the three branches of government: the judicial, the legislative, and the executive. As God, He is the King of kings.

We hear how **God claims it as His own peculiar privilege to rule us by His laws.** This had been said before by Isaiah though somewhat obscurely, "The Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; He will save us" (Isaiah 33:22).

Both passages show that the power of life and death belongs to Him who has power over the soul. No, James clearly expresses this. This power no man may assume to himself. God, therefore, to whom the power of saving and destroying belongs, must be acknowledged as the only King of souls, or, as the words of Isaiah express it, He is our King and Judge, and Lawgiver and Savior. So Peter, when he reminds pastors of their duty, exhorts them to feed the flock without lording it over the flock (1 Peter 5:2); meaning by flock the body of believers. If we properly consider that it is unlawful to transfer to man what God declares to belong only to Himself, we shall see that **this completely cuts off all the power claimed by those who would take it upon them to order anything in the Church without authority from the word of God.**

8. Moreover, since the whole question depends on this, that God being the only lawgiver, it is unlawful for men to assume that honor to themselves, it will be proper to keep in mind the two reasons for which God claims this solely for Himself. The one reason is, that **His will is to us the perfect rule of all righteousness and holiness, and that thus in the knowledge of it we have a perfect rule of life.** The other reason is, that when the right and proper method of worshipping Him is in question, He whom we ought to obey, and on whose will we ought to depend, alone has authority over our souls.

When these two reasons are attended to, it will be easy to decide what human constitutions are contrary to the word of the Lord. Of this description are all those which are devised as part of the true worship of God, and the observance of which is bound on the conscience, as of necessary obligation. Let us remember then to weigh all human laws in this balance, if we would have a sure test which will not allow us to go astray. The former reason is urged by Paul in the Epistle to the **Colossians** against the false apostles who attempted to lay new burdens of the Churches.

The second reason he more frequently employs in the Epistle to the **Galatians** in a similar case. In the Epistle to the Colossians, then, he maintains that the doctrine of the true worship of God is not to be sought from men, because the Lord has faithfully and fully taught us in what way He is to be worshipped. To demonstrate this, he says in the first chapter, that in the gospel is contained all wisdom, that the man of God may be made perfect in Christ. In the beginning of the second chapter, he says that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ, and from this he concludes that believers should beware of being led away from the flock of Christ by vain philosophy, according to the tradition of men (Colossians 2:8-10). In the end of the chapter, he still more decisively **condemns all fictitious modes of worship which men themselves devise or receive from others, and all precepts whatsoever which they presume to deliver at their own hand concerning the worship of God.**

We hold, therefore, that all traditions are impious in the observance of which the worship of God is pretended to be placed. The passages in the Galatians in which he insists that fetters are not to be bound on the conscience (which ought to be ruled by God alone), are sufficiently plain, especially chapter 5. Let it, therefore, suffice to refer to them.

9. But that the whole matter may be made plainer by examples, it will be proper, before we proceed, to apply the doctrine to our own times. The traditions which they call ecclesiastical [church], and by which the Pope, with his adherents, burdens the Church, we hold to be pernicious and impious, while our opponents defend them as sacred and salutary. Now there are two kinds of them, some relating to ceremonies and rites, and others more especially to discipline. Have we, then, any just cause for impugning both? Assuredly a more just cause than we could wish.

First, do not their authors themselves distinctly declare that the very essence of the worship of God (so to speak) is contained in them? For what end do they bring forward their ceremonies but just that God may be worshipped by them? Nor is this done merely by error in the ignorant multitude, but with the approbation [approval] of those who hold the place of teachers. I am not now referring to the gross abominations by which they have plotted the adulteration of all godliness, but they would not deem it to be so atrocious a crime to err in any minute tradition, did they not make the worship of God subordinate to their fictions. Since Paul then declares it to be intolerable that the

legitimate worship of God should be subjected to the will of men, in what way do we err when we are unable to tolerate this in the present day? especially when we are enjoined to worship God according to the elements of this world — a thing which Paul declares to be adverse to Christ (Colossians 2:20).

On the other hand, the mode in which they lay consciences under the strict necessity of observing whatever they enjoin, is not unknown. **When we protest against this, we make common cause with Paul, who will on no account allow the consciences of believers to be brought under human bondage.**

10. Moreover, the worst of all is, that when once religion begins to be composed of such vain fictions, the perversion is immediately succeeded by the abominable depravity with which **our Lord upbraids the Pharisees of making the commandment of God void through their traditions** (Matthew 15:3). I am unwilling to dispute with our present legislators in my own words—let them gain the victory if they can clear themselves from this accusation of Christ. But how can they do so, seeing they regard it as immeasurably more wicked to allow the year to pass without auricular confession [confession to a priest], than to have spent it in the greatest iniquity: to have infected their tongue with a slight tasting of flesh [meat] on Friday [during Lent], than to have daily polluted the whole body with whoredom: to have put their hand to honest labor on a day consecrated to someone or other of their saintlings [i.e., working on a saints' day or holiday], than to have constantly employed all their members in the greatest crimes: for a priest to be united to one in lawful wedlock [marriage], than to be engaged in a thousand adulteries: to have failed in performing a vow [in fulfillment of a vow] pilgrimage, than to have broken faith in every promise: not to have expended profusely on the monstrous, superfluous, and useless luxury of churches [i.e., giving to lavish “building projects”], than to have denied the poor in their greatest necessities: to have passed an idol without honor, than to have treated the whole human race with insolence: not to have muttered long unmeaning sentences at certain times, than never to have framed one proper prayer?

What is meant by making the word of God void by tradition, if this is not done when recommending the ordinances of God only frigidly and perfunctorily, they nevertheless studiously and anxiously urge strict obedience to their own ordinances. As if the whole power of piety was contained in them; — when vindicating the transgression of the divine law with trivial satisfactions, they visit the minutest violation of one of their decrees with no lighter punishment than imprisonment, exile, fire, or sword? — When neither severe nor inexorable against the despisers of God, they persecute to extremity, with implacable hatred, those who despise themselves and so train all those whose simplicity they hold in thralldom, that they would sooner see the whole law of God subverted than one iota of what they call the precepts of the Church infringed.

First, there is a grievous delinquency in this, that one condemns, judges, and casts off his neighbor for trivial matters, — matters which, if the judgment of God is to decide, are free. But now, as if this were a small evil, **those frivolous elements of this world (as Paul terms them in his Epistle to the Galatians, Galatians 4:9) are deemed of more value than the heavenly oracles of God.** He who is all but acquitted for adultery is judged for eating meat [during Lent]; and he to whom whoredom is permitted [i.e., the priest] is forbidden to marry. This, forsooth [in truth], is all that is gained by that prevaricating [false] obedience, which only turns away from God to the same extent that it inclines to men.

11. There are other **two grave vices** which we disapprove in these constitutions [traditions]. **First**, They prescribe observances which are in a great measure useless, and are sometimes absurd; **secondly**, by the vast multitude of them, pious consciences are oppressed, and being carried back to a kind of Judaism, so cling to shadows that they cannot come to Christ.

My allegation that they are useless and absurd will, I know, scarcely be credited by carnal wisdom, to which they are so pleasing, that the Church seems to be altogether defaced when they are taken away. But this is just what **Paul says, that they “have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body” (Colossians 2:23)**; a most salutary admonition, of which we ought never to lose sight. **Human traditions, he says, deceive by an appearance of wisdom.** What is the source of this show? Just that being framed by men, the human mind recognizes in them that which is its own, and embraces it when recognized more willingly than anything, however good, which is less suitable to its vanity.

Secondly, That they seem to be a fit training to humility, while they keep the minds of men groveling on the ground under their yoke; hence they have another commendation. Lastly, Because they seem to have a tendency to curb the will of the flesh, and to subdue it by the rigor of abstinence, they seem to be wisely devised. But what does Paul say to all this? Does he pluck off those masks lest the simple should be deluded by a false pretext? **Deeming it sufficient for their refutation to say that they were devices of men, he [the apostle Paul] passes all these things without refutation, as things of no value. No, because he knew that all fictitious worship is condemned in the Church, and is the more suspected by believers, the more pleasing it is to the human mind** — because he knew that this false show of outward humility differs so widely from true humility that it can be easily discerned; — finally, because he knew that this tutelage is valued at no more than bodily exercise, he wished the very things which commended human traditions to the ignorant to be regarded by believers as the refutation of them.

12. Thus, in the present day, not only the unlearned vulgar [the illiterate common people], but everyone in proportion as he is inflated by worldly wisdom, is wonderfully captivated by the glare of ceremonies, while hypocrites and silly women think that nothing can be imagined better or more beautiful. But those who thoroughly examine them, and weigh them more truly according to the rule of godliness, in regard to the value of all such ceremonies, know, first, that they are trifles of no utility; secondly, that they are impostures which delude the eyes of the spectators with empty show. I am speaking of those ceremonies which the Roman masters will have to be great mysteries, while we know by experience that they are mere mockery. Nor is it strange that their authors have gone the length of deluding themselves and others by mere frivolities, because they have taken their model partly from the dreams of the Gentiles, partly, like apes have rashly imitated the ancient rites of the Mosaic Law, with which we have nothing more to do than with the sacrifices of animals and other similar things. Assuredly, were there no other proof, no sane man would expect any good from such an ill-assorted farrago [conglomeration].

And the case itself plainly demonstrates that **very many ceremonies have no other use than to stupefy the people rather than teach them.** In like manner, to those new canons which pervert discipline rather than preserve it, hypocrites attach much importance, but a closer examination will show that they are nothing but the shadowy and evanescent phantom of discipline.

13. To come to the second fault, **who does not see that ceremonies, by being heaped one upon another, have grown to such a multitude, that it is impossible to tolerate them in the Christian Church?** Hence it is, that in ceremonies a strange mixture of Judaism is apparent, while other observances prove a deadly snare to pious minds.

Augustine complained that in his time, while the precepts of God were neglected, prejudice everywhere prevailed to such an extent, that he who touched the ground barefoot during his octave was censured more severely than he who buried his wits in wine [i.e., getting drunk]. He complained that the Church, which God in mercy wished to be free, was so oppressed that the condition of the Jews was more tolerable (Augustine, *Epist.* 119). Had that holy man fallen on our day, in what terms would he have deplored the bondage now existing? For the number is tenfold greater, and each iota is exacted a hundred times more rigidly than then.

This is the usual course; **when once those perverse legislators have usurped authority, they make no end of their commands and prohibitions until they reach the extreme of harshness.** This Paul elegantly intimated by these words, — “If ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances? Touch not, taste not, handle not” (Colossians 2:20-21). For while the word, *haptesthai*, signifies both to eat and to touch, it is doubtless taken in the former sense, that there may not be a superfluous repetition. Here, therefore, he most admirably describes the progress of false apostles. The way in which superstition begins is this: they forbid not only to eat, but even to chew gently; after they have obtained this, they forbid even to taste. This also being yielded to them, they deem it unlawful to touch even with the finger.

14. We justly condemn this tyranny in human constitutions, in consequence of which miserable consciences are strangely tormented by innumerable edicts, and the excessive exaction of them. Of the canons relating to discipline, we have spoken elsewhere (*supra*, sec. 12; also chapter 12). What shall I say of ceremonies, the effect of which has been, that we have almost buried Christ, and returned to Jewish figures? “Our Lord Christ (says Augustine, *Epist.* 118 ad Januar.) bound together the society of His new people by sacraments, very few in number, most excellent in signification, most easy of observance.”

How widely different this simplicity is from the multitude and variety of rites in which we see the Church entangled in the present day, cannot well be told. I am aware of the artifice by which some acute men excuse this perverseness. They say that there are numbers among us equally rude as any among the Israelitish people, and that for their sakes has been introduced this tutelage, which though the stronger may do without, they, however, ought not to neglect, seeing that it is useful to weak brethren.

I answer, that we are not unaware of what is due to the weakness of brethren, but, on the other hand, we object that the method of consulting for the weak is not to bury them under a great mass of ceremonies. It was not without cause that God distinguished between us and His ancient people, by training them like children by means of signs and figures, and training us more simply, without so much external show.

Paul’s words are, “The heir, as long as he is a child”—“is under tutors and governors” (Galatians 4:1, 2). This was the state of the Jews under the law. But we are like adults who, being freed from tutory and curatory, have no need of puerile [juvenile, childish] rudiments. God certainly foresaw what kind of people He was to have in His Church, and

in what way they were to be governed. Now, He distinguished between us and the Jews in the way which has been described. Therefore, it is a foolish method of consulting for the ignorant to set up the Judaism which Christ has abrogated.

Christian worship is simple.

This dissimilitude between the ancient and His new people Christ expressed when He said to the woman of Samaria, “The hour comes, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23). This, no doubt, had always been done; but the new worshippers differ from the old in this, that **while under Moses the spiritual worship of God was shadowed, and, as it were, entangled by many ceremonies, these have been abolished, and worship is now more simple.** Those, accordingly, who confound this distinction, subvert the order instituted and sanctioned by Christ.

Therefore you will ask, Are no ceremonies to be given to the more ignorant, as a help to their ignorance? I do not say so; for I think that help of this description is very useful to them. All I contend for is the employment of such a measure as may illustrate, not obscure Christ. Hence a few ceremonies have been divinely appointed [e.g., Baptism and the Lord’s Supper], and these by no means laborious, in order that they may evince a present Christ. To the Jews a greater number were given, that they might be images of an absent Christ. In saying He was absent, I mean not in power, but in the mode of expression. Therefore, to secure due moderation, it is necessary to retain that fewness in number, facility in observance, and significance of meaning which consists in clearness. Of what use is it to say that this is not done? The fact is obvious to every eye. . . .

16. Although I seem not to be delivering the general doctrine concerning human constitutions, but adapting my discourse wholly to our own age, yet nothing has been said which may not be useful to all ages. For whenever men begin the superstitious practice of worshipping God with their own fictions, all the laws enacted for this purpose at once degenerate into those gross abuses. For **the curse which God denounces—namely, to strike those who worship Him with the doctrines of men with stupor and blindness—is not confined to any one age, but applies to all ages.** The uniform result of this blindness is, that there is no kind of absurdity escaped by those who, despising the many admonitions of God, spontaneously entangle themselves in these deadly fetters.

But if, without any regard to circumstances, you would simply know the character belonging at all times to **those human traditions which ought to be repudiated by the Church, and condemned by all the godly,** the definition which we formerly gave is clear and certain — namely, That they [human traditions] **include all the laws enacted by men, without authority from the word of God, for the purpose either of prescribing the mode of divine worship, or laying a religious obligation on the conscience, as enjoining things necessary to salvation.**

If to one or both of these are added the **other evils** [of human traditions]
of obscuring the clearness of the Gospel by their multitude,
of giving no edification,
of being useless and frivolous occupations rather than true exercises of piety,
of being set up for sordid ends and filthy lucre [for the purpose of financial gain],
of being difficult of observance, and contaminated by pernicious superstitions,
we shall have the means of detecting the quantity of mischief which they occasion.

17. I understand what their answer will be — namely, that these traditions are not from themselves, but from God. For to prevent the Church from erring, it is guided by the Holy Spirit, whose authority resides in them. This being conceded, it at the same time follows, that their traditions are revelations by the Holy Spirit, and cannot be disregarded without impiety and contempt of God. And that they may not seem to have attempted anything without high authority, they will have it to be believed that a great part of their observances is derived from the apostles. For they contend, that in one instance they have a sufficient proof of what the apostles did in other cases. The instance is, when the apostles assembled in council, announced to all the Gentiles as the opinion of the council, that they should “abstain from pollution of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood” (Acts 15:20, 29). We have already explained, how, in order to extol themselves, they falsely assume the name of church (Chap. 8. sec. 10-13).

The sin of adding to or taking away from God’s Word.

If, in regard to the present cause, we remove all masks and glosses (a thing, indeed, which ought to be our first care, and also is our highest interest), and consider what kind of church Christ wishes to have, that we may form and adapt ourselves to it as a standard, **it will readily appear that it is not a property of the Church to disregard the limits of the word of God, and wanton and luxuriate in enacting new laws.** Does not the law which was once given to the Church endure forever? “What things soever I command you, observe to do it: you shall not add to it, nor diminish [subtract, take away] from it” (**Deuteronomy 12:32**). And in another place, “Do not add to His words, lest He reprove you, and you be found a liar” (**Proverbs 30:6**).

Since they cannot deny that this was said to the Church, what else do they proclaim but their contumacy [rebelliousness], when, notwithstanding of such prohibitions, they profess to add to the doctrine of God, and dare to intermingle their own with it? Far be it from us to assent to the falsehood by which they offer such insult to the Church.

Let us understand that **the name of Church is falsely pretended wherever men contend for that rash human license which cannot confine itself within the boundaries prescribed by the word of God, but petulantly breaks out, and has recourse to its own inventions.** In the above passage there is nothing involved, nothing obscure, nothing ambiguous; **the whole Church is forbidden to add to or take away from the word of God, in relation to His worship and salutary precepts.**

But that was said merely of the Law, which was succeeded by the Prophets and the whole Gospel dispensation! This I admit, but I at the same time add, that these are fulfillments of the Law, rather than additions or diminutions. Now, if the Lord does not permit anything to be added to, or taken from the ministry of Moses, though wrapped up, if I may so speak, in many folds of obscurity, until He furnish a clearer doctrine by His servants the Prophets, and at last by His beloved Son, why should we not suppose that we are much more strictly prohibited from making any addition to the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Gospel?

The Lord cannot forget Himself, and it is long since **He declared that nothing is so offensive to Him as to be worshipped by human inventions.** Hence those celebrated declarations of the Prophets, which ought continually to ring in our ears, “For I did not speak to your fathers, or command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices. But this thing commanded I them,

saying, "Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people. And walk in all the ways that I have commanded you" (Jeremiah 7:22, 23). "I earnestly exhorted your fathers in the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, even unto this day, rising early and exhorting, saying, "Obey My voice"" (Jeremiah 11:7).

There are other passages of the same kind, but the most noted of all is, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry" (1 Samuel 15:22, 23).

It is easy, therefore, to prove, that whenever human inventions in this respect are defended by the authority of the Church, they cannot be vindicated from the charge of impiety, and that the name of Church is falsely assumed.

18. For this reason we freely inveigh against **that tyranny of human traditions** which is haughtily obtruded upon us in the name of the Church. Nor do we hold the Church in derision (as our adversaries, for the purpose of producing obloquy [vilification], unjustly accuse us), but we attribute to her the praise of obedience, than which there is none which she acknowledges to be greater. They themselves rather are emphatically injurious to the Church, in representing her as contumacious to her Lord, when they pretend that she goes farther than the word of God allows, to say nothing of their combined impudence and malice, in continually vociferating about the power of the Church, while they meanwhile disguise both the command which the Lord has given her, and the obedience which she owes to the command.

But if our wish is as it ought to be, to agree with the Church, it is of more consequence to consider and remember the injunction which the Lord has given both to us and to the Church, to obey Him with one consent. **For there can be no doubt that we shall best agree with the Church when we show ourselves obedient to the Lord in all things.**

But to ascribe the origin of the traditions by which the Church has up until now been oppressed to the apostles is mere imposition, since **the whole substance of the doctrine of the apostles is, that conscience must not be burdened with new observances, nor the worship of God contaminated by our inventions.**

Then, if any credit is to be given to ancient histories and records, what they attribute to the apostles was not only unknown to them, but was never heard by them. Nor let them pretend that most of their decrees, though not delivered in writing, were received by use and practice, being things which they could not understand while Christ was in the world, but which they learned after His ascension, by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. The meaning of that passage has been explained elsewhere (Chap. 8. sec. 14).

In regard to the present question, they make themselves truly ridiculous, seeing it is manifest that all those mysteries which so long were undiscovered by the apostles, are partly Jewish or Gentile observances, the former of which had anciently been promulgated among the Jews, and the latter among all the Gentiles, partly absurd gesticulations and empty ceremonies, which stupid priests, who have neither sense nor letters [literacy], can properly perform; no, which children and mountebanks [con-artists, tricksters, hawkers of quack medicine] perform so appropriately, that it seems impossible to have fitter priests for such sacrifices.

If there were no records, men of sense would judge from the very nature of the case, that such a mass of rites and observances did not rush into the Church all at once, but crept in gradually. For though the venerable bishops, who were nearest in time to the apostles, introduced some things pertaining to order and discipline, those who came after them, and those after them again, had not enough of consideration, while they had too much curiosity and cupidity [excessive desire, covetousness], he who came last always vying in foolish emulation with his predecessors, so as not to be surpassed in the invention of novelties. And because there was a danger that these inventions, from which they anticipated praise from posterity, might soon become obsolete, they were much more rigorous in insisting on the observance of them. This false zeal has produced a great part of the rites which these men represent as apostolical. This history attests....

23. But though such laws are hundreds of times unjust and injurious to us, still they contend that they are to be heard without exception; for the thing asked of us is not to consent to errors, but only to submit to the strict commands of those set over us—commands which we are not at liberty to decline (1 Peter 2:18).

Christian liberty and liberty of conscience

But here also **the Lord** comes to the succor of His word, and **frees us from this bondage by asserting the liberty which He has purchased for us by His sacred blood**, and the benefit of which He has more than once attested by His word. For the thing required of us is not (as they maliciously pretend) to endure some grievous oppression in our body, but to be tortured in our consciences, and brought into bondage: in other words, robbed of the benefits of Christ's blood.

Let us omit this, however, as if it were irrelevant to the point. Do we think it a small matter that the Lord is deprived of His kingdom which He so strictly claims for Himself? Now, He is deprived of it as often as He is worshipped with laws of human invention, since **His will [the Holy Scriptures] is to be sole legislator of His worship**.

And lest anyone should consider this as of small importance, let us hear how the Lord Himself estimates it. "Forasmuch as this people draw near Me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precepts of men therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among the people, even a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid" (**Isaiah 29:13-14**). And in another place, "But in vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (**Matthew 15:9**).

And, indeed, when the children of Israel polluted themselves with manifold idolatries, the cause of the whole evil is ascribed to that impure mixture caused by their disregarding the commandments of God, and framing new modes of worship. Accordingly, sacred history relates that the new inhabitants who had been brought by the king of Assyria from Babylon to inhabit Samaria were torn and destroyed by wild beasts, because they knew not the judgment or statutes of the God of that land (**2 Kings 17:24-34**). Though they had done nothing wrong in ceremonies, still their empty show could not have been approved by God.

Meanwhile **He did not cease to punish them for the violation of His worship by the introduction of fictions alien from His word**. Hence it is afterwards said that, terrified by the punishment, they adopted the rites prescribed in the Law; but as they did not yet worship God purely, it is twice repeated that, they feared Him and feared not. Hence we

infer that **part of the reverence due to Him consists in worshipping Him simply in the way which He commands, without mingling any inventions of our own.**

And, accordingly, pious princes are repeatedly praised (2 Kings 22:1, etc.) for acting according to all His precepts, and not declining either to the right hand or the left; I go further: although there be no open manifestation of impiety in fictitious worship, it is strictly condemned by the Spirit, inasmuch as it is a departure from the command of God.

The altar of Ahaz, a model of which had been brought from Damascus (2 Kings 16:10), might have seemed to give additional ornament to the temple, seeing it was his intention there to offer sacrifices to God only, and to do it more splendidly than at the first ancient altar: yet we see how the Spirit detests the audacious attempt, for no other reasons but because human inventions are in the worship of God impure corruptions. And the more clearly the will of God has been manifested to us, the less excusable is our petulance in attempting anything. Accordingly, the guilt of Manasseh is aggravated by the circumstance of having erected a new altar at Jerusalem, of which the Lord said, "In Jerusalem will I put my name" (2 Kings 22:3, 4), because the authority of God was thereby professedly rejected.

24. Many wonder why God threatens so sternly that He will bring astonishment on the people who worship Him with the commandments of men, and declares that it is in vain to worship Him with the commandments of men. But if they would consider what it is in the matter of religion, that is, of heavenly wisdom, to depend on God alone, they would, at the same time, see that it is not on slight grounds the Lord abominates perverse service of this description, which is offered Him at the caprice of the human will.

Beware of human tradition and worldly wisdom!

For although there is some show of humility in the obedience of those who obey such laws in worshipping God, yet they are by no means humble, since they prescribe to Him the very laws which they observe. This is the reason why **Paul would have us so carefully to beware of being deceived by the traditions of men, and what is called voluntary worship, worship devised by men without sanction from God.**

Thus it is, indeed: **we must be fools in regard to our own wisdom and all the wisdom of men, in order that we may allow Him alone to be wise.**

This course is by no means observed by those who seek to approve themselves to Him by paltry observances of man's devising, and, as it were, against His will obtrude upon Him a prevaricating [dishonest, equivocating] obedience which is yielded to men. This is the course which has been pursued for several ages, and within our own recollection, and is still pursued **in the present day** in those places in which the power of the creature is more than that of the Creator, where **religion (if religion it deserves to be called) is polluted with more numerous, and more absurd superstitions, than ever Paganism was.** For what could human sense produce but things carnal and fatuous [absurd, foolish], and savoring of their authors?

25. When the patrons of superstition cloak them, by pretending that Samuel sacrificed in Ramath, and though he did so contrary to the Law, yet pleased God (1 Samuel 7:17), it is easy to answer, that he did not set up any second altar in opposition to the only true one; but, as the place for the Ark of the Covenant had not been fixed, he sacrificed in the town where he dwelt, as being the most convenient. **It certainly never was the**

intention of the holy prophet to make any innovation in sacred things, in regard to which the Lord had so strictly forbidden addition or diminution [subtraction].

The case of Manoah I consider to have been extraordinary and special. He, though a private man, offered sacrifice to God, and did it not without approbation [approval], because he did it not from a rash movement of his own mind, but by divine inspiration (Judges 13:19).

How much God abominates all the devices of men in His worship, we have a striking proof in the case of one not inferior to Manoah — namely, Gideon, whose ephod brought ruin not only on himself and his family, but on the whole people (Judges 8:27). In short, every adventitious [additional] invention, by which men desire to worship God, is nothing else than a pollution of true holiness.

Jesus warned to beware of whatever of human invention is mixed with the pure word of God.

26. Why then, they ask, did Christ say that the intolerable burdens, imposed by Scribes and Pharisees, were to be borne? (Matthew 23:3). No, rather, why did He say in another place that we were **to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees?** (Matthew 16:6), **meaning by leaven, as the Evangelist Matthew explains it, whatever of human doctrine is mingled with the pure word of God.** What can be plainer than that we are enjoined to shun and beware of their whole doctrine? From this it is most certain, that in the other passage **our Lord never meant that the consciences of His people were to be harassed by the mere traditions of the Pharisees.** And the words themselves, unless when wrested, have no such meaning.

Our Lord, indeed, beginning to inveigh against the manners of the Pharisees, first instructs His hearers simply, that though they saw nothing to follow in the lives of the Pharisees, they should not, however, cease to do what they verbally taught when they sat in the seat of Moses, that is, to expound the Law. All He meant, therefore, was to guard the common people against being led by the bad example of their teachers to despise doctrine.

But as some are not at all moved by reason, and always require authority, I will quote a passage from Augustine, in which the very same thing is expressed. “The Lord’s sheepfold has persons set over it, of whom some are faithful, others hirelings. Those who are faithful are true shepherds; learn, however, that hirelings also are necessary. For many in the Church, pursuing temporal advantages, preach Christ, and the voice of Christ is heard by them, and the sheep follow not a hireling, but the shepherd by means of a hireling. Learn that hirelings were pointed out by the Lord Himself. The Scribes and Pharisees, says He, sit in Moses’ seat; what they tell you, do, but what they do, do ye not. What is this but to say, Hear the voice of the shepherd by means of hirelings? Sitting in the chair, they teach the Law of God, and therefore God teaches by them; but if they choose to teach their own [wisdom], hear [them] not, do not [what they say].” Thus far Augustine” (Augustine, *In Johann.* 46). . . .