

The Liberated Conscience

presented by Kirk van der Swaagh
at the Reformed Congregational Fellowship - 2015

Savoy Declaration of Faith, Chapter 21.2:

God alone is lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or not contained in it; so that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

When I suggested the original title for my presentation at this year's Pastors' Conference, "Taking a Stand: Civil Disobedience and the Christian," I misspoke. I drew my initial focus from the following language:

God alone is lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or not contained in it
...

Upon reading that language, I made the assumption that it was addressing the possibility of Christians finding themselves being required to do things that run contrary to the Word of God by forces outside of the church, some dictatorial state or deep rooted sin that had been codified into law. Principled, conscious-driven resisters to such dictates, such as Corrie ten Boom or Martin Luther King, Jr., came to mind. I was ready to pursue this line of thinking with a thorough survey of Romans 13 utilizing the dozen or so commentaries I had access to. It would also be important, I reasoned, to include Calvin's thoughts on the subject as he has proven to be one of the most influential thinkers on a host of matters, but particularly in the area of resistance toward civil authority in the very last paragraph of his *Institutes*.¹ I also intended to draw upon the dozen or so books that I have on, or by, Puritans so that I could get a sense of the historical context in which the statement was created. Having done all this, I was hoping to have a good sense of what the Bible has to say on the matter, as well as the intent behind the language of the *Savoy*, and then take up how the doctrine has been historically applied. All this led up to my

¹ Which begins, "... in that obedience which we have shown to be due the authority of rulers, we are always to make this exception, indeed, to observe it as primary, that such obedience is never to lead us away from obedience to him, to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty their scepters ought to be submitted. And how absurd would it be that in satisfying men you should incur the displeasure of him for whose sake you obey men themselves!" John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Ford Lewis Battles, tr. Vol. 2, IV.20.xxxii (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 1520-1521

titling my proposed presentation: “Taking a Stand: The Christian and Civil Disobedience.” Upon further reflection, however, I became convinced that civil disobedience is not precisely what the authors had in mind. It’s not far from the matter at hand, but it’s not the focus. Consequently, though I will still be considering article 2 of Chapter 21, my sole concern will not be civil disobedience. It will come up in the presentation, but not as the primary focus.

The Liberated Conscience a Fruit of the Gospel

Liberty of conscience is the dominant theme in section 2 of Chapter 21 of the *Savoy*. A dictionary definition explains conscience as “an inner feeling or voice viewed as acting as a guide to the rightness or wrongness of one's behavior.”² This accords well with the concerns of the *Savoy*. The believer, it asserts, has been freed to follow what he understands to be right or wrong based upon God’s Word. From where does this freedom spring? It springs from knowing Christ. When a person possesses genuine faith in Christ that one begins to understand what it means to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, strength, and mind. That is to say, that God’s revealing himself to that person awakens that one to “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, . . . any excellence, . . . anything worthy of praise,” in order that he might think on these things and pursue them.³ As a new ideology takes hold, the framework of that one’s understanding is altered, in some aspects immediately, some over time. This transformation of one’s thinking has the power to retrain one’s conscience. What one felt at liberty to do prior to this new understanding is now viewed as unacceptable, and not just unacceptable because one has traded out one set of external expectations for another, but because one has an inner conviction that something ought not to be done or something ought to be done. This is conscience at work; and in Christ, it is a conscience that has been awakened to truth.

Taken out of the context of the *Declaration*, the notion of a liberated conscience could suggest a kind of well-intentioned anarchy: each person deciding within himself or herself what the Lord requires of them and then claiming freedom to pursue that course of action without interference from any authority. “The Lord said to me . . .” is not an uncommon phrase to hear from someone who has no concept of, or is unwilling to abide by, Scriptural authority. The truth

² *New Oxford American Dictionary, 3rd ed* (Oxford University Press, Inc. 2010)

³ Philippians 4:8

that God has placed elders within the church, parents within the home, and governors within society to teach, guide, and a times discipline those under their care, goes unheeded. That being said, the Lord expects his people to live in faith and love toward *him*, and not out of fear of man, or for the praise of man. It is here that he makes allowance for conscience to govern the souls of his children.

In Romans 14, Paul urges respect for the consciences of fellow believers. “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.” The reason for exercising tolerance is due to the fact that the one who differs does so “in honor” of the Lord: “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike . . . The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord.” This is why he asks, “Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” The one who abstains, or does not abstain, has only the Lord to answer to and if they, out of conscience, believe that this is how they most honor the Lord, then they must be free to do so. What is necessary is that “each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.” This suggests that there is a certain breadth of mercy and patience in the kingdom of God for varying convictions. The point is faith and love toward God.

The mind of the regenerate believer has been liberated from the bondage of deception and falsehood.⁴ Eyes have been opened to recognize God’s salvation and out of love for God the believer has firmly held convictions about certain matters. It appears that God is more interested in the believer’s love for him than getting every part of knowledge right. So, even though the apostle describes one of the parties in the potential controversy as “weak” they are nonetheless

⁴ Ephesians 4:17-24, Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!— assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

convinced in their own minds,” and in faith they act as they do. To do otherwise, they are convinced, would be sin, for “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Douglas Moo observes, “Paul here asserts a general theological principle . . . what he here labels ‘sin’ . . . is any act that does not match our sincerely held convictions about what our Christian faith allows us to do and prohibits us from doing . . . Violation of the dictates of the conscience, even when the conscience does not conform perfectly with God’s will, is sinful.”⁵

The Liberated Conscience and Obedience

Previously I noted that I felt I had misread the language of 21.2 as validating civil disobedience. Upon further reflection I became convinced that the language of liberty of conscience in the *Savoy* appears to be primarily generated by the contemporaneous conflict with the Roman Catholic church. In fact, it would not be unreasonable to conclude that the last clause of the paragraph, *the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also*, is a conscious echo of the words of Martin Luther.

Luther’s awakening to evangelical truth from the confines of medieval Scholasticism was the product of a number of years of deliberate study so that “by the time that [he] lectured on Romans, he had become convinced that salvation is a new relationship to God, based not on any human work of merit but on absolute trust in the divine promise of forgiveness for Christ’s sake.” He had come to believe that “faith is the bond that unites the soul to God.” In early 1517 he prepared his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* in which he “overthrew the basis of all that he considered work-righteousness in the church’s traditional teaching.”⁶

By late 1517 he produced his famous Ninety-Five Theses (that he may or may not have nailed to the church door in Wittenberg), and within weeks they had been translated into German and disseminated throughout the empire. Williston Walker reports that “Luther had not anticipated the uproar.”⁷ His subsequent writings eventually provoked his being labeled a heretic and led to excommunication. The need for political stability, however, on the part of emperor

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 863-864

⁶ Williston Walker, Richard A. Norris, David W Lotz, Robert T. Handy. *A History of the Christian Church: 4th Edition*. (Charles Scribner’s & Sons, New York. 1985) 424-425

⁷ Ibid. 426

Charles V, required further deliberation, so Luther was summoned to Worms under the promise of safe conduct. Walker relates the encounter:

“A row of his books was pointed out to him and he was asked whether he would recant them or not. Luther requested time for reflection. A day was given him, and on the next afternoon he was once more before the assembly. Here he acknowledged that, in the heat of controversy, he had expressed himself too strongly against persons, but the substance of what he had written he could not retract, unless convinced of its wrongfulness ‘*by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason.*’ The emperor, who could hardly believe that such temerity as to deny the infallibility of a general council was possible, cut the discussion short. That Luther cried out, ‘I cannot do otherwise. Here I stand. God help me, Amen,’ is not certain, but seems not improbable.”⁸

Luther resisted the authority of the church as well as that of the emperor. He could not, indeed, felt that he should not, violate a conscience that had been lately retrained by the teachings of Scripture. His well known declaration is to the point: “My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right.” Whatever may have governed his conscience prior to its being liberated he put behind him and set out to free others by proclaiming the same freedom that he had discovered for himself.

Unfortunately, not everyone listened. By the middle of the century the “often spectacular growth of Protestantism had elicited a powerful reaction from the Roman church,” a reaction “appropriately called the Counter-Reformation,”⁹ the most famous manifestation of which was the Council of Trent, an effort that met intermittently from 1545 to 1563. Walker judges the fruit of the deliberations of Trent: “The doctrinal decrees of the Council of Trent were clear and definite in their rejection of Protestant beliefs . . . Scripture and unwritten ‘apostolic’ traditions are equally sources of divine truth and are to be received with equal reverence. The church alone has the right to determine the true sense and interpretation of Scripture.” He further relates that “from a Spanish Dominican theologian influential at Trent, Melchior Cano, came the ablest defense of the Roman position that had yet appeared . . . Theology, he taught, is based on authority. The authority of Scripture rests on the sifting and approving power of the church, which determines what is Scripture and what is not; but as by no means all of Christian doctrine

⁸ Ibid. 431, *emphasis added*.

⁹ Ibid. 502

is contained in Scripture, tradition, handed down and sifted by the church, is another authoritative basis.”¹⁰

To my knowledge the anathemas leveled against Reformational teaching have never been rescinded. And while we might not feel the heat of those anathemas, the framers of the *Savoy* did, understanding them to carry with them more than theological dispute. They would need only to think back to relatively recent examples of persecutions such as the martyring of like-minded men at the hands of Mary I, “Bloody Mary,” in 1555, or the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre of Calvinist Huguenots in 1572, to understand the importance, cost, and privilege of following a biblically liberated conscience. The “cloud of witnesses” testified that *to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience*. The words of Luther’s Reformational anthem anticipates their convictions, “The body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still.”

The Liberated Conscience and Ungodly Authority

While the doctrine of the article would appear to be primarily directed at the Roman Catholic church and its “tyrannical usurpations and encroachments,” which “teach that the Pope and the bishops in their own dioceses, may, by their own authority, enact laws which bind the conscience, and which cannot be transgressed without incurring the same penalties which are annexed to every breach of the the divine law,”¹¹ there are additional considerations for us to briefly consider.

The way the article is preserved in the *Savoy* differs slightly from the parent document, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

Savoy: 2. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing contrary to his Word, or not contained in it; so that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

Westminster: 2. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, [in matters of faith, or worship.] So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the

¹⁰ Ibid. 510-511

¹¹ The Rev. Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*. (Edinburgh: 1845) 205-206

requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

Note that the qualifier placed within brackets in the *WCF*, “in matters of faith, or worship,” is missing from the *Savoy*. The absence of that qualifier would suggest that the doctrine could be applied more broadly. Whether that was the intent on the part of those framing the *Savoy* I could not discover, but on its face it presents the possibility of the Christian of any era not heeding commands emanating from any sphere of authority should they feel that to do so would violate their biblically informed conscience.

In Romans 13:1-7,¹² Paul presents what appears to be unequivocal teaching about the need for the Christian to submit to those in civil authority. There are, however, a variety of interpretations of this passage leaving one to conclude that dogmatism in application is unwise.¹³ Perhaps it is best to follow Leon Morris’s lead when he comments,

“it must be borne in mind that Paul is writing in general terms to meet the need of the Romans and not legislating for every conceivable situation in which the Christian might find himself. He does not face, let alone resolve, the problems of when it is right to rebel against unjust tyranny . . . , or what to do when there are rival claimants to the crown or conflicts between civil and religious authorities. He does not distinguish between legitimate and usurped authority, nor go into the question of when a successful rebel may be held to have become a legitimate ruler. He does not speak of the situation in which the state asks the citizen to do something against the law of God. All the New Testament writers were clear that they must obey God rather than men . . . and Paul’s whole manner of life shows that he accepted this whole heartedly. He does not say what the Christian should do when the state fails in its duty. He is not trying to cover every situation. His concern is authority, however it has come to be possessed. He is writing out of a settled order where there is no doubt as to who the ruler is, and he is telling his readers something of the duty of a citizen in such a situation.”¹⁴

¹² Romans 13: Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

¹³ For a helpful outlining of the competing views see Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 490-491.

¹⁴ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 459

If Morris's interpretation of this controversial passage is valid, Paul is *in principle* expecting his readers to recognize the civil ruler as a divinely instituted authority, much as he expects children to recognize the authority of parents (Ephesians 6:1; Colossians 3:20), wives the authority of husbands (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18), and members of the church the authority of the elders (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; cf. Hebrews 13:17). The question for us, however, is how binding is this principle? In each of these biblically defined spheres of authority, is *blind obedience* called for? I think not. That Paul could not be demanding absolute and unquestioning obedience to authority is upheld by a number of biblical cases in which opposing actions were taken that were driven by conscience: the faithful service of Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who resisted Pharaoh's order to kill the male Hebrew babies after they were born and then lied about it afterward; the deception of Rahab; the favor that Jonathan showed David when he disregarded Saul's directives, despite the fact that Saul was Jonathan's king *and* father; the faithfulness of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego in the face of court commanded idolatry; the open-windowed prayers of Daniel; Jesus's transgressing the Jewish elders' accretions to the law; the Spirit-filled preaching of Peter, John and the recently empowered disciples with them; or perhaps even the Father's directing the magi to not return to Herod as the king had requested. Such incidents, and more, would provide biblical precedent enough for a man like Paul to qualify what he was saying should he have been questioned by the saints in Rome.

In truth, the church has heralded many examples of principled and conscience driven decisions to resist unbiblical demands: the martyrs of the first three centuries who refused to confess Caesar as Lord; the early reformational impulses of men like Wycliffe and Hus that caused them to run afoul of those in charge of the church; the Reformers who preached the revived Gospel in the face of state sponsored and church supported threats; the abolitionists who worked the Underground Railroad to spirit away slaves from the cruel conditions of chattel slavery; the courageous few who offered sanctuary to their neighbors when Nazi totalitarianism declared them to be unworthy of life; the efforts of the Civil Rights movement to secure justice and dignity for all who are made in the image of God; the quiet persistence of the house church movement in Communist China despite being declared illegal by those who govern; the current crop of martyrs who confess Christ in the ears of bearded barbarians who exercise brutal authority in obeisance to a false god. In all such situations, we do not question the rightness of

conscience to resist unjust rule. To *not* resist would indeed *destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also*.

Current realities in our own country are providing fresh impetus for this question. Certainly, the contemporary challenges to a biblically trained conscience are nothing that remotely approach the kind of threats faced by those spoken of above, but it is not hysterical to suggest that contemporary hysteria for redefining sexual identity and related social institutions will bring with it the demand that the scruples of biblical trained consciences not be tolerated.

In such times, the church must be careful to keep in mind what is at stake for the persecutor as well as the persecuted. For many years, our church, which is located in Greenwich Village, just a few blocks from the Stonewall Inn, the site of the 1969 riots that launched the gay rights movement, went out to “protest” the annual Gay Pride Parade that takes place in Manhattan on the last Sunday of June. Our protest consisted of holding up signs and handing out literature that attempted to communicate the gospel. Over the years, as politicians, corporations, and liberal religious institutions became more comfortable with affirming the festivities, I observed how much more comfortable those in the parade became with identifying as gay. This phenomenon has flourished even more as the highest office of the land has lent its clout and the culturally influential institutions have offered steady supportive propaganda. Assured of the righteousness of their cause their collective conscience demands that it be accepted by all. When this demand comes to the door of the church coupled with civil power, the church will be called upon to walk in the true liberty of conscience called for in the *Savoy*. To follow conscience at that point will likely cost something for those in the church, but to not do so will assuredly cost more for those who have been led astray by their secular shepherds. Despite the new found boldness among the LGBT community, I would suggest that their secular shepherds have created a flock who are “harassed and helpless.”¹⁵ Their sheep hear the proclamation of peace when, in truth, there is no peace. Eventually, they will learn the truth that “the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God,” only then it will be too late.

Out of love for Christ and love for our neighbor, we must offer the gospel that sets a conscience free from such deception. Those who now, out of moral indignation, seek to silence the message proclaimed by the church, may, by hearing and believing the good news, be numbered among those of whom it would be said, “And such were some of you. But you were

¹⁵ Matthew 9:36

washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”¹⁶

The Liberated Conscience and the Threat of Orthodoxy

At the beginning of my presentation, I suggested that the *Savoy's* portrayal of the liberated conscience in Chapter 21.2, if taken out of the context of the *Declaration*, might advocate a kind of well-intentioned anarchy. But within its context such advocacy is afforded no such support. The very fact that it resides within a detailed explanation of the Christian faith argues that liberty of conscience does not equate with individually crafted beliefs. To the contrary, Williston Walker notes the Congregationalist's determination to “define their positions doctrinally and ecclesiastically.” With the establishment of a Commonwealth under Cromwell, the Congregationalists were finding greater opportunity and favor. “Their numbers were multiplying, their preachers were respected, it seemed in every way desirable that they should now define their positions doctrinally and ecclesiastically.” As a result, the “leading Congregationalists determined to have a confession of their own; they would, without making their creed a test to which they required rigid conformity, bear testimony to their faith, and enjoy the fraternal communion to the existence of which no public declarations of Congregational ministers and churches in England had heretofore witnessed.”¹⁷ This was a worthwhile impulse, but despite an intention to not require rigid conformity, defining orthodoxy brings its own possible peril as regards liberty of conscience.

Jeremy Jackson outlines “the negative aspects of orthodoxy” in his commendable volume on church history. “These negative aspects are *both* the ossification of church leadership and life, such that the truth is no longer lived and if not lived then essentially not believed, *and* the harsh repression, even persecution, of even the mildest deviations and variations.” He notes the kind of persecution emanating from the Roman church in the wake of Protestant gains. He relates, for instance, one account in which an Englishman traveling in Prague in 1600 “saw a Hussite servant conduct his Catholic master to church and then cross the street to worship in his own assembly.”

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

¹⁷ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*. (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1991) 346

This was before “the heavy hand of the Jesuits took over in the 1620’s.” Jackson laments, “the forced and often brutal re-Catholicization . . . leave a black stain.”¹⁸

He acknowledges that among the protestants “there were no comparable outbreaks of savage proscription of Catholics.”¹⁹ However, “more obvious in Protestantism as befitting, perhaps, a movement divided unto multiple theological options, was the ominous hardening of lines against deviation, against the attempt, in some cases, to recover the sense of freedom which we may expect when the Holy Spirit is truly the leader of the church.” In particular he mentions “hyper-Calvinism, or Calvinistic scholasticism,” which he calls “an exaggeration of Calvin’s theology which many people imagine to be the real thing.” He suggests, “It was as if theologians forgot that systematic theology depends upon biblical theology, and that biblical theology must be judged by its fruits -- if of the Spirit, good; if not, then let us return to first principles and examine ourselves.” The problem he suggests is that “too often only theological textbooks, as it were, were consulted and many a believer, seeking greater reality in the middle of dead orthodoxy, was unlovingly humiliated or cast out and thereby encouraged to bitterness or real heresy.”

I have seen such hardness of heart demonstrated on web pages of chat groups and blog posts dedicated to Reformed theology. The participants are too often too confident and uncharitable in their assertions. They portray an untested assurance that comes from quoting confessions, and an uncharitableness surface when orthodoxy trumps humility. “What is rarely appreciated,” Jackson concludes, is “that Christians ill-advisedly accept party labels which do not really define their knowledge and experience of the Word of God.”²⁰ In some respects such folks are as guilty of “implicit faith,” which the *Savoy* decries, as a poor, uneducated farmer in the Middle Ages who is told to just believe in the church. Neither of them knows enough Scripture to actually articulate their faith in a personal, passionate, biblical and, therefore, humble manner.²¹

¹⁸ Jeremy C. Jackson, *No Other Foundation: The Church Through Twenty Centuries*. (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone Books, 1980) 182, emphasis in the original

¹⁹ He cites one notable exception, the treatment of Irish Catholics by Cromwell’s troops: “in several cases [the treatment] was barbaric but the situation was complicated there b the fact of long-standing racial antipathy . . . One is also talking about a military operation, not a peacetime policy.” *Ibid.* 183

²⁰ *Ibid.* 183

²¹ The above being true, it is worth encouraging patience with newly awakened Calvinists. The insights of the reformer are often so liberating to biblical study and personal faith that one’s zeal for the doctrines of grace can prove obnoxious to the “unenlightened.” Calvin would be the first to remind such a one that salvation and the knowledge of his will are gifts of grace.

The Liberated Conscience and Freedom from Ignorance

The statement *requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience* seems likewise directed toward a doctrine of the Roman Catholic church. Within the Roman Catholic church the acceptance of implicit faith on the part of adherents was deemed sufficient for salvation. The assumption was that many of the adherents could not know what was needed to be known in order to offer a clear confession of faith. Consequently, if they trusted in the wisdom of those who were capable of understanding then that was sufficient. Thomas Aquinas offers an explanation of the workings of implicit faith by first teaching that revelation is always a top down process:

“ . . . matters of faith are made explicit by revelation, since they are beyond reason. Now divine revelation reaches lower creatures through higher creatures, in a certain order. It is given to men through the angels, and to lower angels through higher angels . . . In the same way, it is through wiser men that the faith must be made explicit for the simpler. Hence just as higher angels have a fuller knowledge of divine things than the lower angels whom they enlighten, so also are wiser men, to whom it pertains to instruct others, required to have a fuller knowledge of what ought to be believed, and to believe it more explicitly.”²²

The notion that some in the church possess more understanding about what “ought to be believed” in order that they might instruct others, is supported by Paul’s teaching that Christ gifts certain people in the church to fulfill the office of teacher: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”²³ The intended goal for such is to bring those who are being taught to a protective maturity that is shared by all of the body. The goal of mutual maturity as expressed by Paul appears absent in the language of Aquinas, however. Aquinas seems to have the “simple” remaining in their simplicity and even being forgiven should they have unknowingly placed their faith in the “wiser” who ended up

²² quotes from Aquinas are taken from *Article Six: Whether all Men Equally are required to have Explicit Faith*, retrieved from http://www.ccel.org/print/aquinas/nature_grace/ix.i.ii.vi

²³ Ephesians 4:11-14

teaching “perverse” doctrine: “The simple minded are not examined in the subtleties of the faith unless there is a suspicion that they have been perverted by heretics, who have a habit of perverting the faith of the simple minded on subtle points. But if they do not hold tenaciously to a perverse doctrine, and if their error is due to their simplicity, they are not blamed for it.” Note the difference in expectation on the part of Aquinas. For Paul the teaching was to equip people to detect heretical teaching, while Aquinas seems only ready to forgive should the one taught have wrongly placed faith in the one who taught heresy, unless held to “pertinaciously . . . in opposition to that faith of the universal Church, which cannot err, since the Lord said: ‘I have prayed for thee [Peter], that they faith fail not.’”

Calvin expresses disdain for “implicit faith,” calling it a “fiction” produced by “Schoolmen” who with the term were “bedecking the grossest ignorance,” and as a result “they ruinously delude poor, miserable folk.” He felt that asserting such a notion “utterly destroys true faith” asking, “Is this what believing means -- to understand nothing, provided only that you submit you feeling obediently to the church?”²⁴ To the contrary, “faith rest not on ignorance, but on knowledge. And this is, indeed, knowledge not only of God but of the divine will.” And then to make matters perfectly clear, he asserts,

“We do not obtain salvation either because we are prepared to embrace as true whatever the church has prescribed, or because we turn over to it the task of inquiring and knowing. But we do so when we know that God is our merciful Father, because of reconciliation effected through Christ and that Christ has been given to us as righteousness, sanctification, and life. By this knowledge, I say, not by submission of our feeling, do we obtain entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. For when the apostle says, ‘With the heart a man believes unto righteousness, with the mouth makes confession unto salvation,’ he indicates that it is not enough for a man implicitly to believe what he does not understand or even investigate. But he requires explicit recognition of the divine goodness upon which our righteousness rests.”²⁵

The Reformers and their heirs considered it a privilege to know the will of God and it pursue it with zeal. In their opinion, this is why the Lord revealed and preserved the Scriptures. The first chapter of the *Savoy* sets out the understanding of its framers regarding the Bible:

²⁴ Ford Lewis Battles includes a quote from William of Ockham which exemplifies the concern which Calvin bemoans, “For whatever the Roman Church explicitly believes, this and nothing else either explicitly or implicitly I believe” *Institutes*, III.3.iii.n9. Given this affirmation, it’s surprising to find the *Catholic Encyclopedia* reporting that Ockham “has been called the ‘first protestant’,” due to his “attitude towards the established order in the Church and towards the recognized system of philosophy in the academic world of his day was one of protest.” It’s unlikely that the more traditionally labeled “protestants” would find much affinity with his confession.

²⁵ *Institutes* III.2.ii

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his Church; and afterwards for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which makes the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing His will unto his people, being now ceased.

I want to emphasize the clause, *which is necessary unto salvation*. There are many things in the world to know, and many of them profitable. There is, however, particular knowledge about Christ, revealed in the Scripture, that must be obtained and explicitly believed if one is to be saved from the wrath of God on the Day of Judgment. The apostle teaches, “For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in [Christ] will not be put to shame.’ . . . For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”²⁶ Confidence in the ability of Scripture to communicate saving truth to the “simple” as well as the “wise” is affirmed by the *Savoy* in Chapter 1.7:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

In affirmations such as these, the framers of the *Savoy* express a belief that the information that one needs to know for salvation is not reserved for those with specialized education. This is not to suggest that formal education should be neglected, rather it should be pursued with an eye toward equipping others within the body of Christ to know the truth, as Paul teaches in the previously cited passage from Ephesians.

The ability to understand advanced doctrine by those other than clergy was evident among the participants in the gathering which produced the *Savoy*. A.G. Matthews notes that by one report “there were 200 elders and messengers present of whom . . . the majority were laymen.” He suggests that this was likely intentional, for “they did not want their meeting to be as much of a clerical gathering as the Westminster Assembly had been. That would have been contrary to the Congregational way.” Despite the “preponderance of the laity” the theological acumen of the assembly was not lacking. “We can safely assume they were pretty well versed in

²⁶ Romans 10:11,13

Christian doctrine.” The reason? “It was a theological age, interest in theology was more general than it is today, preaching was more doctrinal. Baxter says that at Kidderminster, ‘some of the Poor men did competently understand the Body of Divinity and were able to judge in difficult Controversies.’”²⁷

What is to be taken from this? Those who teach in the church should do so with the expectation that those whom God has called to faith he will endow with an increasing ability to understand the salvation that has been granted them. The people under the care of the local leadership will be of varying stages of progress in the knowledge of God, but none should be considered, apart from organic maladies, unable to understand what has been revealed to us in the Scriptures. The pursuit of deeper understanding is the means by which God offers safe passage through the difficulties of a fallen world.

Carry On, Mr. Bowditch, an historically based novel of the genre of juvenal literature, is a recounting of the life of Nathaniel Bowditch (1773-1838), a self-taught polyglot and mathematician, who rose from a boyhood of indentured servitude to inclusion within the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, who was eventually offered the chair of mathematics and physics at Harvard University. He spent much of his life at sea and during that time he perfected the science of navigation through the use of mathematics. His work, *The New American Practical Navigator*, initially published in 1802, is apparently still carried on board every commissioned United States naval vessel.²⁸ One of the discoveries he made, as portrayed in the book, was a new way of “taking a lunar.”

A lunar is a calculation that determines the angle between the moon and another celestial body, or bodies, that allows a navigator to determine how far they have traveled in relation to Greenwich time. It was a specialized technique that was mastered by a relative few. In the novel, an incident based upon a real event is related. The ship on which Bowditch was sailing was headed to purchase cargo in Indonesia. During the voyage, Bowditch takes it upon himself to teach the entire crew how to take a lunar. The cargo they hoped to purchase at the original destination was not available so the decision was to press on to Manila despite the threat of the monsoon season. It was an arduous journey but they eventually made it. Upon arriving in Manila an exchange is imagined by the author between another American ship’s captain and the captain

²⁷ *The Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order*, A.G. Matthews ed. first publish by Independent Press Ltd (London: 1959) reprinted Quinta Press (Shropshire, England: 2009) 19

²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Bowditch

of the vessel on which Bowditch had sailed. The first captain inquired how their journey had been, and when told of the route they had taken despite the presence of harsh conditions, he incredulously responds, “You’d have to have a man that could work lunars,” to which the second captain responds, “What’s so hard about lunars? Every man in my crew can work a lunar.” To prove his point he asks the cabin boy standing by to explain to how it’s done. ““Aye, aye, sir!” Charlie stiffened, stared straight ahead and rattled off the formula. “That’s the way we do it, sir.”” When a third captain joins them and learns of their route to Manila he too expresses incredulity that they had anyone who could work a lunar. The second captain replies, ““They have a crew that can work lunars! The cabin boy just explained it to me! I tell you . . . there’s more knowledge of navigation on this American ship than there as ever been before in the whole of Manila bay!””²⁹

Isn’t this the task of the teacher as Paul outlines it in the passage quoted above from Ephesians? To keep souls from being “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” and crashing upon the rocks of error, or being overwhelmed by waves of doubt, those tasked with teaching should be training everyone on the “crew” to take doctrinal “lunars.” While everyone, even the most learned among us, continue in our discipleship exercising a certain amount of implicit faith for we “see in a mirror dimly,” and know only “in part,”³⁰ those tasked with teaching should nevertheless strive to “make the word of God fully known,” proclaiming Christ, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”³¹

A liberated conscience is a fruit of the Gospel. A mind awakened to the reality of God and his will sets the believer on a course of life in which he lives by faith in the Son of God, who loved him and gave himself for him. What a contrast this is to the life that was lived “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience”!³² The Gospel turns a child of the serpent into a child of the woman. The spirit that prompted a person to walk in disobedience, has been overcome by the

²⁹ Jean Lee Latham, *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955, reprint 1983) 204-205

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:12

³¹ Colossians 1:25-28

³² Ephesians 2:1

Spirit by whom he cries, “Abba, Father.” This is all a work of God, of his mercy, grace, and immeasurable love.

The awakened mind is being trained in a new way of understanding as it encounters the truth of God. But this is more than just a new set of principles by which one should live, this is life itself. It is what Jesus alluded to when he told his disciples, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.”³³ As such, the conscience, present in all, is now being shaped by God’s truth so that it can be responsive to the things of God in order that the one so awakened can walk in faith and love toward God. This new vitality, this new desire for holiness, is dear to God. It is a triumph of his grace and something that brings him glory.³⁴ He is personally at work in that person shaping and molding him to be like Jesus so that as his Son brought him glory through his obedience in all things, so will the one adopted through his Son. It is imperative, therefore, that the liberated conscience not be violated by being forced to yield to *the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word*, or by *absolute and blind obedience* to any authority, be it the state, parents, husband, or board of elders. To do so would be to ask the one so forced to sin, something which his liberated soul could not bear to do.

³³ John 6:63

³⁴ Ephesians 1:3-6