

# **Self-Government, Conscience and True Liberty**

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## INTRODUCTION

People often talk about the family as the most basic unit of society, but that is not true. The most basic unit of society is the individual. Each individual person is a creation of God, and is something you must be born into. In this respect, each individual is an *institution* as much as a family, a nation, or the universal Church (all things created by God into which people are born). All of which are contradistinguished from *voluntary associations* (*i.e.*, relationships formed by men which people become a member of by joining).

Self-government is also the most basic unit of government. That the individual is also a unit of government should be obvious, when you consider that each person is a moral being, made in the image of God, such that each person is ultimately responsible for their own individual behavior. And, should anyone seek God's forgiveness for the wrongs they have done, that is a matter utterly dependent on individual choice. We all stand condemned or forgiven based on our own choice - no one else can do it for us.

In fact, all natural rights, and all natural freedoms, are bestowed exclusively on individuals. There are no group rights or corporate freedoms, and no collective salvation. We each stand alone before God as a moral agent - and God fully expects us to govern ourselves accordingly, *i.e.*, as responsible moral agents. Each person is morally aware of certain fundamental principles of right and wrong as evident in our consciences, which awareness guides us in our behavioral decisions.

I daresay that without self-government, none of the other social institutions would be *sustainable*. Thus, a family cannot maintain itself where the husband and wife do not love and respect each other, where either is unwilling to put the interests of others above their own self-interest, or where either spouse engages in serious self-destructive behavior. Before the family unit can be strong, the spouses/parents must first govern themselves responsibly, and each must really want - truthfully neither can be forced - to fulfill their obligations to the other family members.

Similarly, where the members of a society are unwilling to refrain from unlawful or criminal behavior, no amount of civil government coercion will be able to fully restrain them. As individual unlawful behavior rises, anarchy also rises. And the witness of history is that anarchy is always followed by tyranny. Both anarchy and tyranny are essentially failures of civil government, and both have as their root cause a mass failure of self-government. One inevitably leads to the other.

When the members of a local church or any other association throw off the shackles of self-restraint and turn against each like ungoverned beasts, the result is very predictable - namely, church splits and disintegrations. A house divided against itself cannot stand, and the only thing which prevents deepening divisions in any institution or association is continual self-government and self-restraint. Hence, it is of supreme importance that every person know how God intends that each of us should function as an individual first, before we can function well in greater society.

In recent decades, the fundamental units of society have been subjected to an unrelenting attack. Much attention has been paid to the decline and redefinition of the family, and to be sure, the attacks

on (and the weakening of) the family unit are very real and accelerating. Much less attention has been paid to the recent unrelenting attacks on individual self-government, and the lengths to which even well-intentioned people will go to deny others of the right of self-government. The so-called *progress* in that area has been staggering.

These attacks follow a predictable pattern, because it is one that has worked exceedingly well over the years. First, people are denied the right to exercise rightful self-government, then they are not only permitted but encouraged to make personal decisions that God never authorized or intended anyone to make. The end result is a warped and perverted view of personal liberty (calling good things bad and bad things good), which when fully realized, will undermine and destroy the fabric of society which holds everything together.

## THE BASIS OF SELF-GOVERNMENT

### Personal Responsibility

Let's begin our examination by considering the most fundamental principles which form the basis of all self-government.

*First, man is made in the image of God.* "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gen. 1:27). While there are a number of principles which flow from this fact, the one I want to focus on here is that every person is a *moral being*. This is evidenced in the biblical account of creation by comparing Gen. 1:28 with Gen. 2:7. In the one, God gave mankind dominion over every *living thing* on the earth, by which is meant the animal kingdom, excluding man. In the other, man is referred to as a *living soul* (KJV) or a *living being* (NASB).

So the comparison is between living things and living beings (souls), by which the image of God is bestowed on mankind but not the animals, making mankind *moral beings* and animals merely *amoral things* (life without morality). Meaning, there is no expectation that animals will be self-governing. They are either *dominated* (or governed) by men, or they are *wild* (untamed, and thus ungoverned). In either case, animals cannot exercise self-control. Further, we do not speak of animals as being subject to the behavioral laws of God.

This moral character means that the behavioral decisions of men are morally charged, *i.e.*, our decisions raise issues of *right and wrong*. Not all decisions are right, and not all are wrong. There is a set of rules, called *laws*, which tells us what is right and wrong. This is the fundamental purpose of all laws. Right decisions are encouraged, and wrong decisions are punished. Learning the difference between them is where personal responsibility comes in.

*Second, each person is ultimately responsible only for himself.*

The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon

himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. (Ezek 18:20). [To the same effect are Deut. 24:16; 2 Ki 14:6 and Jer. 31:30.]

The immediate question is whether fathers and sons are a special or unique case, or whether they are merely illustrative of a broader principle. Is this rule of personal responsibility one that applies to all people no matter what their relationship? I can think of no rationale whereby fathers and sons are a unique case under *lonang* (the laws of nature and nature's God) - only that historically they would pose the most common case of abuse of the principle.

Thus, I conclude that personal responsibility is a general rule. Further, it is founded in the law of nature and is a foundational concept in understanding the nature of all government. What kind of world would it be, where people are held accountable for the wrongs of others? And is that, in fact, the kind of world we have? What evidence would support the idea that we live in a world where people are accountable for the sins (*i.e.*, moral wrongs) of others before God?

A cardinal principle of all scripture is that I cannot choose either to bring salvation to any other person, or condemn them. Sin and redemption are profoundly individual, not collective. This is, if ever there was, a self-evident truth. It is ironclad, admitting of no possible exceptions. There are no strange cases or weird circumstances whereby the rule does not apply. It is universal and inescapable.

*What is government?*

Which brings us to the matter of government. What is government? *Government is restraint.* Government - all government - is the mechanism by which people are encouraged to make right decisions, and punished for making wrong ones. Since right decisions are always to be encouraged and one can never make too many right decisions, the restraint exercised by government is always a *restraint of evil* (or certain morally wrong decisions). Any government which works to restrain right decisions is perverse and wicked, and must not be allowed to continue.

We see this play out every day. Civil government is charged with the authority to punish certain wrong behavioral decisions which constitute *crimes*, and we refer to this as the administration of justice. The other side of the coin is that civil rulers are to *praise those who do good.* (1 Pet. 2:14.) But where would society be if that were the only restraint on evil that we had? Civil government can only do so much (and some things, it does very poorly).

A stable society cannot exist where there is not also a pervasive and decentralized system of family government. The family is where parents teach their children to distinguish between right and wrong and use corrective discipline to make the lessons stick. Churches have a collaborative function (not being vested with the authority to punish wrongs), to provide additional moral guidance to all who would listen. In other words, to strengthen and reinforce the moral fabric of society by encouraging good behaviors.

Yet, even these are insufficient to fully restrain evil in society. The society which is governed best,

is that which requires the least external restraint, because its citizens govern themselves well.

Consequently, *self government is self-restraint*. Self-restraint is the process by which the person ultimately responsible for making right and wrong decisions restrains his own decisions to comply with the rules of law. Self-restraint, when it exists, is always the best way to restrain evil, and is therefore primary. All other methods are less effective, and secondary.

### *The law of promulgation*

However, before an individual can be held responsible under any law (whether God or man's), he must first know what that law is, and what it requires. This is the *law of promulgation*.

It [law] is likewise "a rule prescribed." Because a bare resolution, confined in the breast of the legislator, without manifesting itself by some external sign, can never be properly a law. It is requisite that this resolution be notified to the people who are to obey it.<sup>1</sup>

That a law may be obeyed, it is necessary that it should be known: that it may be known, it is necessary that it be promulgated. ... To promulgate a law, is to present it to the minds of those who are to be governed by it in such manner as that they may have it habitually in their memories, and may possess every facility for consulting it, if they have any doubts respecting what it prescribes.<sup>2</sup>

Although Blackstone and Bentham were speaking solely of human laws, the same principle holds true for the Creator, who is the *supreme lawgiver*. (Isa. 33:22). God is fully aware of the law of promulgation. For "through the law comes knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20). Also, "sin is not counted where there is no law," (Rom. 5:13) and "if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin." (Rom. 7:7).

Thus, in order for God to hold anyone personally responsible for their own wrongs, each person must first know what God requires. Logically, this means that if individual responsibility is to attach to every single person, then every single person must have a knowledge of God's laws, without exception. Do all people in fact possess this knowledge? Yes, indeed.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. (Rom. 1:18-19).

God is certainly capable of keeping secrets, but when it comes to His laws and the standards of conduct He requires, He has taken great pains to reveal those to all people. "The secret things

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<sup>1</sup> Wm. Blackstone, 1 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Introduction, §2 (1765).

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy Bentham, *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, published under the Superintendence of his Executor, John Bowring (Edinburgh: William Tait, 1838-1843), Vol. 1.

belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Dt. 29:29). Furthermore,

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their measuring line goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (Ps. 19:1-4, 7a).

### **What The Creation Reveals**

I suspect some of you may be skeptical of the nature and extent of this knowledge which the scriptures claim everyone has. So, let’s briefly review what may be learned merely from observing the creation into which we have all been placed.

**First**, the creation speaks of the existence and attributes of God, the Creator. The end result of which is, every individual is without excuse before God.

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19-20).

**Second**, the creation speaks not only of scientific or physical laws, but also of the laws of human behavior.

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. (Ps. 19:7-9).

**Third**, these laws include the prohibition of all forms of idolatry.

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Rom. 1:21-23).

**Fourth**, bloodshed (murder) defiles and pollutes the land.

You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. (Num. 35:33).

**Fifth**, all forms of sexual immorality are contrary to nature and prohibited.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator .... For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. (Rom. 1:24-27).

**Sixth**, all people are aware of behaviors which are generally evil, and that everyone who does evil things deserves to die.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Rom. 1:28-32).

**Seventh**, God has made it plain to all nations on earth that He will judge all wicked people.

"The Lord will roar from on high, and from his holy habitation utter his voice; he will roar mightily against his fold, and shout, like those who tread grapes, against all the inhabitants of the earth. The clamor will resound to the ends of the earth, for the Lord has an indictment against the nations; he is entering into judgment with all flesh, and the wicked he will put to the sword, declares the Lord." (Jer. 25:30-31).

This is just the really obvious stuff. There is, in fact, much more that can be learned from observing the creation, if you put some effort into it. Things like the *law of the land*, the *law of inheritance*, the *laws of authority*, the knowledge written in the stars, and others. But even a child can figure out the seven laws of nature listed above. Why do I say this? Because everyone has a head start, if you will - a certain knowledge of God's laws of right and wrong placed inside us from the moment of our birth. We call this the *conscience*.

## THE LAW OF CONSCIENCE

### What Is The Conscience?

What is the connection between conscience and the law of nature? Philosophers and legal writers have argued over what the conscience is, and how it is to be ruled.

Whereof one doctor saith, that conscience is the law of our understanding. Another, that conscience is an habit of the mind discerning between good and evil. Another, that



conscience is the judgment of reason judging on the particular acts of man.<sup>3</sup>

Conscience is properly no more than reason itself, considered as instructed in regard to the rule we ought to follow, or to the law of nature; and judging of the morality of our own actions, and of the obligations we are under in this respect, by comparing them to this rule.<sup>4</sup>

Frankly, I don't know why commentators have had such a difficult time defining the conscience, because the scripture plainly tells us what it is.

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom. 2:14-16).

Thus, the human conscience consists of *the laws of God written on our hearts*. Since people are a part of God's creation, He has seen fit to write the knowledge of His creation law on the heart (*i.e.*, the innermost part of the thoughts) of every person. This is one more way in which people are made in the image of God. Thus, there is a sense in which some (but not all) of God's law of right and wrong behavior is *a priori*. This innate knowledge is the *conscience*.

Though Rom. 2:14-16 refers only to Gentiles (or, non-Jews), it must be equally true of all people, because all people are equally God's creation. There is no time when God would have written His law on the hearts of the Gentiles without doing so for everyone.

So the first function of the conscience is to instruct each individual about what behaviors are right and wrong in the sight of God, irrespective of the extent to which any person has actually observed the external creation (that is, external to one's self). Even if it were possible that a person could know absolutely nothing about the physical universe apart from their own thoughts, they would still carry within them a limited knowledge of right and wrong.

Thus, the human conscience is itself a part of the natural creation. People are created by God, the universe was created by God, and He is the author of both. It is no surprise, then, that the conscience (in its nascent form) and the creation should fully agree with each other.

For this reason, some people conceive of the conscience as *the voice of God speaking to us*. I don't mean an audible voice here - but when we encounter various situations, feelings or thoughts of right or wrong (or guilt) will rise up within our minds, *because God put them there*. For this reason - because God is the author of the conscience - *the conscience is sacred*. It is to be listened to and

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher St. Germain, *The Doctor and Student* (1518), DIALOGUE 1, Ch 15.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, *The Principles of Natural and Politic Law* (1748), Bk 1, Pt 2, Ch 9.

respected, not ignored or suppressed. The conscience is also - because it reflects the image of God in every person - something that we must respect in others as fellow human beings who also carry God's image in them.

The second function of the conscience is to guide how we perceive the created universe around us, and to use that information to strengthen and confirm our knowledge of right and wrong *consistent with the laws of nature*. This is commonly referred to as the application or exercise of *reason*, to discover what may be known of God and His laws. Except, of course, our reason is corrupt and far from perfect as a result of the fall of mankind.

Yet undoubtedly the revealed law [of the scriptures] is of infinitely more authenticity than that moral system, which is framed by ethical writers, and denominated the natural law. Because one is the law of nature, expressly declared so to be by God himself; the other is only what, by the assistance of human reason [and the conscience], we imagine to be that law. If we could be as certain of the latter as we are of the former, both would have an equal authority; but, till then, they can never be put in any competition together.<sup>5</sup>

The conscience is the God-given mechanism to help us *submit our individual will to the law of God written on our hearts*. The conscience, in its native condition, is sufficient for us to be able to "read" nature. And though our reason will always be imperfect and corrupted, each person has the *ability* to come to a knowledge of at least *some* truth of God. How much truth we come to know, depends on how hard we look and inquire into matters, how much we respect and pay attention to our conscience, and whether our conscience has been hardened due to continual neglect.

The third function of the conscience is to be the primary mechanism of self-restraint. Conscience is the sole and exclusive means of *internal* self-restraint. All other means of restraint are *external*. This is why, when we talk about self-government, we have to include a consideration of the conscience. Self-government is self-restraint, and self-restraint originates in the conscience. Without a conscience, self-government simply would not be possible.

The opposite of conscience is that rule which says, "*Do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.*" In other words, when the individual will submits to no other voice than itself (*i.e.*, a lack of self-restraint). This rule indeed, besides having a historical connection to Satanism (via Alistair Crowley), is the very spirit of the Antichrist, who the scripture calls the *man of lawlessness*, and the *son of destruction*. (2 Th. 2:3). The Antichrist is the supreme example of a person who is a law unto himself, and refuses to submit to the law of God.

For we should be grossly mistaken, if, under a notion that conscience is the immediate rule of our actions, we were to believe, that every man may lawfully do whatever he imagines the law commands or permits.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Wm. Blackstone, 1 *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Introduction, §2 (1765).

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Burlamaqui, *The Principles of Natural Law*, ch. 9 (1748).

### **Responsibility For The Conscience**

So then, God gives each person a conscience, which contains only a part (not the entirety) of God's laws, and every person also has a corrupted reasoning ability with which to discern the laws of God from the creation. Clearly, we are all at a significant disadvantage in knowing God's thoughts after Him. But that does not mean we are completely unable to perceive God's laws, nor does it excuse us. What should we then do?

At this point, some of you may want to jump immediately to, "without faith it is impossible to please God." (Heb. 11:6). However, I ask that you avoid this temptation. We are here not inquiring as to how one *pleases* God, or the manner of obtaining forgiveness. We are rather asking how we may train up our senses to better discern the laws of God for the purpose of *obedience*. True, having faith can assist in this process, but it is not *necessary* for obedience. Also, if you want to argue that every person with faith is a better judge of right and wrong than the faithless, save your breath. If only that were so.

The more sure path to consistent obedience is marked by self-reflection and practice. The scriptural admonition is pretty clear: train up your conscience in the way it should go. If you aren't actively making the effort, it won't happen automatically. (And sadly, many believers - perhaps most - never make the effort.) The danger, of course, is that unless we take care to seek the things of God, our conscience may actually become damaged (or hardened) over time.

The discriminating power of conscience may be injured by neglecting to reflect upon the moral character of our actions, both before and after we have performed them. ... If we yield to the impulses of passion, and turn a deaf ear to the monitions of conscience, the dividing line between right and wrong seems gradually to become obliterated. We pass from the confines of the one into those of the other, with less and less sensation, and at last neglect the distinction altogether.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, we can each train our own conscience to be better at discerning good from evil, through self-reflection and practice.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that *by testing you may discern what is the will of God*, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2, emphasis added).

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their *powers of discernment trained by constant practice* to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:14, emphasis added).

To the wicked and the intentionally faithless, a conscience is the ultimate inconvenient truth. It checks us in our actions, shames us when we do wrong, and floods us with guilt and remorse when

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<sup>7</sup> Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Moral Science*, ch. 2, §4 (1856 ed.).

we hurt others. If you are hell bent in doing wrong, or denying God, the last thing you want is a conscience that is *more* attuned to God's laws. Rather, you want it to be *less* attuned, so you numb your conscience, and eventually over much time and with great effort, try to deaden it completely.

If that is your goal, it is certainly achievable. But beware: the God of nature and all of creation won't take it lightly. The LORD knows exactly what to do with such people:

Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones, whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord. But these, like *irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed*, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction, suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. ... For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. (2 Pet. 2:10-13, 17, emphasis added).

And so each of us needs to understand, as part of our own self-government, that we will all give an account for the condition of our conscience in the final judgment, and whether we have heeded it or not. No one else is responsible for your conscience, nor are you responsible for anyone else's.

But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (Rom. 2:5).

I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. (Rev. 2:23).

It has been truly said, that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." Likewise, eternal vigilance is the price of a clear conscience. There will never be a point in your life when you can just forget about your conscience. Neither will there be a time when you have trained your conscience enough, and need not train it any more. The only time you can stop being vigilant is when you are dead.

### **The Liberty of Conscience**

Now let's take these basic principles or laws of conscience to their logical conclusion. **First**, because the conscience is sacred (God-given), it is *inviolable*. Which is to say, since the conscience represents the voice of God within us, to go against that voice of God (*i.e.*, to violate one's own conscience) is a sin. If the conscience is a knowledge of God's laws, then to violate conscience is to violate God's laws. A violation of God's laws is the very definition of *sin* (*i.e.*, a moral wrong).

Therefore, *there is never a right way to violate your conscience*. Violating your conscience is always wrong. There are no exceptions.

**Second**, we have already seen how God knows our innermost thoughts, and will hold us accountable for them in the final judgment. This is a fairly common theme in scripture. For example, "no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must

give account.” (Heb 4:12-13).

What we must also acknowledge is that this jurisdiction or authority is *exclusive* to God. Men are neither authorized, nor capable, of knowing or judging the thoughts of any other person. “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him?” (1 Cor. 2:11).

Since God has exclusive jurisdiction over the heart and mind, the conscience is not subject to the jurisdiction of men, which is to say *the conscience is free*. This is what is meant by the *liberty of conscience*. And this freedom is absolute. It is absolute in the sense that our conscience is nobody’s business but our own. Period. We don’t owe any man a duty to think a certain way, we are not accountable to any man for the way we think, and no man is actually capable of knowing what we think in any event.

**Third**, the liberty of conscience is an inalienable right. It is inalienable because the conscience is God-given, and also because *a duty towards God is a right towards men*. This view of the liberty of conscience is supported both by scripture and by its acceptance as a chief tenet of religious freedom in America. The link between liberty of conscience and religious liberty is no accident. Since the conscience pertains to our manner of thinking, it is inextricably linked with freedom of the mind - the basis of religious freedom.

Whereas, Almighty God hath created the mind free; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishment, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion, who, being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Jefferson makes the argument that not even God, who is all-knowing and all-powerful, ever forces anyone to change his or her mind contrary to their conscience - so how can mere men ever pretend to do so? Certainly, God can read our thoughts and will judge our consciences in the final judgment, yet *He never forces anyone to think a certain way*. The individual conscience is inviolable, and the freedom of conscience is absolute. James Madison wholeheartedly agreed.

The religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable; because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds, cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also; because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom* (1779). Adopted by the General Assembly of Virginia on January 16, 1786, now part of Code of Virginia, §57-1.

<sup>9</sup> James Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785)

We should not be surprised, therefore, that scripture speaks of the liberty of conscience in a similar manner, affirming both the sanctity of the conscience and its inherent liberty.

Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ... ***For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?*** If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? (1 Cor. 10:25-27, 29b-30, emphasis added).

This ***law of the conscience***, then, rests on these fundamental principles:

1. The conscience consists of the laws of God written on our hearts (or the voice of God speaking to our minds).
2. Each person is responsible for his own conscience (no one else for you, and you for no one else).
3. The conscience is sacred and inviolable (for anyone to violate their conscience is sin).
4. Everyone's conscience is absolutely free as a God-given right.
5. Following one's conscience is the primary means of exercising self-government.

## **GUILT-TRIPPING THE CONSCIENCE**

With this foundation now laid concerning the nature and freedom of the conscience, I want to examine some difficult scriptures. I refer mainly to Romans 14, but I also include 1 Cor. 10:24 & 28, as well as 1 Cor. 8:4-13, which speak to similar concerns. Unfortunately, these are often interpreted in a way which severely undercuts the rights of conscience and self-government.

It is one thing to say the conscience is free from external coercion, part of God's reserved jurisdiction over the heart and mind, and not any part of the power of civil government. It is quite another thing to say, as many would have us believe, that as part of our religious duty to God and love for our neighbor *we ought to give up* the sole, exclusive and absolute right of conscience for the benefit of others. However, this is a gross misinterpretation of the scriptures.

### **The Law of Conscience Confirmed**

Remember, it is *God* who set up the law of conscience, made the conscience sacred, inviolable and free. Plus, it is He who made the conscience free from any outside constraint. So as a starting principle, God will never countermand His own laws, or undermine the liberty which He has given us. If I am correct in describing the law of conscience, then *a violation of the conscience is never justified*. God never expects us to violate His laws (or His voice) as a means of fulfilling His will.

A common saying accepted by believers since the early 1600's is this: "In essentials, unity; In non-essentials, liberty; In all things, charity." I suggest the purpose of Romans 14 is to instruct us how

to relate to each other regarding non-essential matters. The bottom line of Romans 14 may be fairly summarized as supporting *liberty*, but there are some bumps in this textual road, and it requires careful analysis.

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. 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. (Rom. 14:1-4).

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. ... Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ... So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. (Rom. 14:5, 10, 12).

The chapter opens with a discussion of two behaviors we may characterize as *non-essential*, namely, whether to eat meat, or to observe special days. Apart from the laws of ancient Israel (which neither Gentiles nor the Church are required to observe), whether to eat certain foods or observe special days are *non-essentials* as far as the laws of nature and nature's God are concerned. For the most part, they are matters about which God has neither required nor prohibited specific conduct, and people are free to do as they please in the course of their own self-government.

[There are two possible exceptions. The first being the prohibition of eating or drinking blood (Gen. 9:4), which I assume is not really at issue here. The second is the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3), which even though it is a universal principle for all people, its observation is left to individual discretion under *lonang*. There are no other dietary restrictions or special days that either Gentiles or the Church are commanded to observe - the observance of the Lord's Day being a *custom*, not a *command*.]

In other words, these are matters of individual *discretion*, and ***where there is discretion we have liberty***. This is the clear assumption of the text as a starting point. It is twice confirmed later on in the chapter (in vv. 14 & 20) that these are matters in which nothing is unclean, therefore any decision regarding them can be honoring to God. We are also repeatedly told (vv. 4, 10 & 13) that regardless of our own decisions about such matters, we are not to judge others in the decisions they make about the same things. Thus, the context of Rom. 14 must be limited to matters which are indifferent (or morally neutral).

Given this backdrop, how are we to then govern ourselves? The rule of conduct (v. 5) is that "each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." This rule is implicit in vv. 12 and 22 as well: we will each give an account to God for our convictions. Thus, in areas of *liberty* (*i.e.*, non-essentials), the rule is one of personal *conscience*. As long as each person follows his own conscience, our conduct will bring honor to God (v. 6). Rom. 14:22 says, "Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves," which is essentially a rule of conscience.

The text thus far is a straight up admonition to biblical individual self-government: 1) each person is governed by their own conscience; 2) no one should think less of another's decision to act in a different manner than he has chosen (*i.e.*, no one should judge another's conscience); and 3) this is honorable in the sight of God. So far so good. Now for the wrinkle.

### **Stumbling Blocks Notwithstanding**

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. (Rom. 14:13-16).

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Rom. 14:20-23).

With verse 13 the concept of a stumbling block is introduced. We must take care not to force an interpretation which puts anyone in the position of violating either their own conscience, or the conscience of another. If the conscience is truly sacred, then the last thing God would ever call anyone to do is to violate anyone's conscience, including their own. Further, we must interpret the second half of the chapter to be consistent with the first half, for God is not the author of confusion.

**First**, it helps to know what a *stumbling block* is. It is not, as many suggest, merely a personal offense. The text, in fact, never uses the word *offense*, so there is no need to assume that's what it means. If we take our cue from similar usages in scripture, the meaning of a stumbling block is linked to the *stone of stumbling* (Rom. 9:33; 1 Pet. 2:8), which is a crisis of faith, not a personal offense. In other words, a stumbling block is something that causes another to lose faith, or doubt their faith, or deter them from having faith.

**Second**, I think the stumbling block situation is a very limited case, a type of exception to the general rule of *do whatever you think is best* when it comes to indifferent things. It is limited to cases involving another believer (*i.e.*, a *brother*), and the context suggests it is also limited to cases where you already know that your actions will provoke a crisis of faith in someone else. How often do cases like that come up, really?

What distinguishes the strong person from the weak person is *knowledge*. This is clearly seen from v. 14: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone *who thinks it unclean*." In other words, eating meat or observing days (or whatever), is



indifferent under God's laws. The weak person, however, *does not know this*, and their conscience - which is not yet mature or fully trained up to recognize when things are truly indifferent - tells them something is wrong, even though it really isn't.

While it is the job of the Church (broadly speaking) to educate believers about the true nature of things, when you and someone else have a difference of opinion in the course of daily life, it is not usually an optimal educational opportunity. They don't want to be lectured to, and you shouldn't try to shove anything down their throat (as it were), so often you simply have to acknowledge your differences and show mutual respect (*i.e.*, don't pass judgment). And that works both ways.

Yet, when you know the subject of your disagreement is in reality an indifferent thing, it will not violate *your* conscience to voluntarily restrain your liberty, or momentarily waive your right to do as you please, because it frankly doesn't matter (morally) how you do something which is morally neutral. And so long as you do not bend the other person to your will, they do not violate *their* conscience either. Everyone's conscience is preserved, and this is what honors God.

No, it doesn't mean you always have to defer to others as to indifferent things. God gave you liberty, and you are entitled to use it. Christ did not set us free, only to be enslaved by the preferences of others. As I said, the stumbling block scenario is very limited - it is the exception, not the rule.

Even when this exception applies, deferring to another person's preference must be completely *voluntary* (*i.e.*, there can be no moral duty to defer) and is subject only to personal discretion. For one thing, no one can ever be under a moral duty to do something which is morally neutral. For another, there is no *ought* in discretion, and no *duty* in being voluntary.

Strictly speaking, while we are *called* to love, there is no *duty* to love, and the manner in which we discharge our duty to God (and by which we love our neighbor) is entirely discretionary. It can neither be coerced, nor can it be guilt-tripped (*i.e.*, manipulated). Therefore, no one has the right to demand others to defer to their own preference. Being *weak* in the sense used in Rom. 14 (being a person who lacks knowledge) vests no rights in the weak person. Ignorance is not power over others. If someone you know really objects to you (or anyone) having a "pagan Christmas tree" in your home, just don't invite them over to see yours.

So the next time you are in a restaurant, your menu choices are not going to be dictated by what other people think you should eat, or what they choose to eat themselves. The way you celebrate holidays (or not) doesn't depend on what your neighbors or fellow churchgoers decide to do. The rule remains the same, that in areas of liberty (*i.e.*, non-essentials), we are guided by personal conscience.

In any event - and this is the bottom line for me - God never puts us in a situation where He expects us to violate our conscience, either for the sake of obeying Him, or for the sake of loving our neighbor. The conscience is inviolable.

## **SELF-GOVERNMENT DENIED**

So far, I have shown that *God has fitted every person for self-government*, since we are all made in the image of God and are morally responsible beings. In addition, *God has plainly told every person what He expects of us* via the laws of nature revealed in creation and the laws of God written on our hearts (*i.e.*, the conscience). The conscience has absolute liberty before God, and nothing concerning stumbling blocks limits that freedom.

**Therefore**, every person is not only *capable* of self-government, but also has the *inalienable right* to exercise self-government as to all matters which are consistent with the laws of nature and nature's God.

Unfortunately, according to many of our governmental, religious, educational and business leaders, that is a very big problem. It's one they intend to solve by stamping out self-government. In fact, their solution is already well under way. And your church is probably one of the worst offenders.

### **The War Against Self-Government**

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.  
(Jdg 21:25).

I look at this verse, the last verse in the book of Judges, and I see that when God led the people of Israel out of Egypt around 1450 BC, He gave them a very minimal system of civil government. There was no legislature, and the Judge exercised a very limited executive authority (mainly as commander-in-chief of the army). So when we get to the end of Judges (about 400 years later), the people are exercising self-government. And I see this as a good thing, because *that is exactly the system of government God gave Israel and intended for them to function under*.

But that's not how most people read Jdg. 21:25. In fact, there is a nearly universal sentiment that this verse is an indictment against the Jewish people. Most people read it as saying Israel had fallen into anarchy, although the text never says that. It is simply *inferred* by people who are predisposed to look down on self-government as inferior and lacking. You think I'm being harsh?

Ask yourself a question - what, exactly, do people think is the remedy for this supposed anarchy? Does every nation need to be led by one or more strong men (*i.e.*, a king, or a dictator), men who are fatally flawed, inherently sinful and corrupt in their reasoning, in order to be better governed? In other words, the remedy is to abandon a decentralized system of self-rule (essentially, a democracy), and replace it with a strong centralized government as a way to reduce corruption and abuse. *Oh, sure, that makes sense*.

Yet, that is the operating paradigm in society today. Just consider how many thousands of rules are imposed on people everyday - I couldn't possibly list them all. Civil government regulates your travel (it didn't used to) and your health care (it didn't used to do that, either), requires you to buy auto insurance (God forbid you should neglect to do that), and tells you what you can or cannot eat,

smoke and drink. Civil government even tells you what clothes to wear in government buildings (such as a courtroom). But tell me this: If the courts really belong to the people and not to the judges, then why must the people dress to please the judges?

Businesses are told who they cannot avoid hiring, what questions they can't ask when interviewing, what things they cannot make their employees do, and what they cannot use as a reason for terminating someone. Employee hours, wages, vacations, benefits, pensions, tax withholding, and workplace environment are all highly regulated. Lord knows what peril the world would be in if we let business owners (those greedy wretches) make these decisions themselves! What's that - you say you are a business owner? See, right there? - *you're the problem.*

Families are told how to discipline children (or not), how, where, when and by whom kids are to be educated, what foods they can or cannot send their children to school with, what level of care and type of living conditions they must have in order to adopt a child, and in some countries how many children they can have. Dare we allow families to decide these things for themselves? My word, people might start locking kids in closets or basements in squalid conditions. But of course, they are already doing that, even with heavy regulation.

There is nothing so scary in our modern world than a man who knows his conscience, is assured of his liberty, and is persuaded to exercise his own self-government. Just think about all of the multi-faceted rules we have in life about things which are - according to the laws of nature and nature's God - either completely indifferent, or which God has squarely placed in the hands of individuals to do as they see fit according to their own conscience.

Sure, I know that many of these things are addressed in scripture as moral admonitions, such as to dress modestly, avoid intoxication, treat laborers fairly, love your children, remember the Lord's death till He comes, respect authority, not to give in to prejudice, etc. But none of these things come with specific standards of what is modest, fair, loving, respectful, etc. Nor are any of these things delegated to civil government (or to the Church) to enforce.

Which means that under lonang, individual self-government before God prevails in such matters, and people have liberty to do as they please directed only by their consciences. But God forbid we should let people actually govern themselves in this manner. We simply cannot trust that people will govern themselves appropriately, so we make up endless rules that supersede individual judgment and impose, if not uniformity, then at least conformity with artificial standards.

Yes, there's a war going on, all right. It's a war to remove you from governing yourself as much as possible. And the war is almost completely lost already.

### **Some Laws Cannot Be Enforced**

Does lonang actually provide - anywhere - that civil government, the Church, the family, or in fact anyone has the legal right to prevent people from harming themselves? Seriously. Does it? Where does it say that, or from where can you logically extrapolate that legal rule? I have never seen such

a rule, and don't know anywhere it can be implied or derived consistent with scripture. In fact, I argue, such a rule flies in the face of, and directly contradicts, God's expectation of individual self-government.

The two questions we must always ask when we wish to remedy a wrong are: 1) whether the thing is actually wrong according to *lonang*; and 2) whether anyone has authority under *lonang* to do something about it. As a general rule, everybody wants to answer the first question, and ignore the second. However, the second question is the most important one to God.

I refer to the example of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), where it was not enough for any potential avenger of Abel to know that Cain wrongfully killed his brother. It was every bit as important to God whether anyone had been authorized to punish murder (because at that point in time, no one had). In reality, the authority question was *more* important than the murder question, because God promised to avenge Cain *sevenfold*, not merely eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth, if anyone acted without authority. (Gen. 4:15).

Well, God hasn't changed. He still cares deeply about who is, and who is not, authorized to enforce His laws. And the reality is that God has not authorized men to punish every kind of evil or wrongful conduct. Some things (some evil behaviors) God has reserved for Himself to deal with. Things like hate, lust and coveting - to which we can add drunkenness, modesty, foul language, wardrobe choices, and many others.

Many laws of God have never been enforceable by men. Here's some random examples - and these aren't indifferent matters, these are morally charged behaviors. From the Old Testament, consider the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment (coveting) and the law of tithing. Coveting you can probably guess - due to its nature as an attitude, thought or intention of the heart - is beyond human authority to enforce. But tithing required an overt act, according to a fixed schedule with designated places of compliance. Tithing was not merely a suggested guideline for the ancient Jews, it was a legal requirement. Would it surprise you to know there was no provision in the divine law to enforce it?

From the New Testament, consider communion (the Lord's Supper) and baptism. Again, plenty of injunctions and admonitions to do these, but not a single enforcement mechanism. Further, there are no time, place and manner restrictions (where these can be done, how they are to be done, by whom they can or must be done, etc.). All these decisions are left to personal discretion. Whose personal discretion? *Yours*.

Oh, so you're in one of those few Protestant churches that lets parents participate in such things. Big whoop! Does your pastor tell you that you are fully capable of performing sacraments *by yourself in your own home*? I thought not. Where does the scripture give clergy the exclusive authority to perform sacraments? I'll tell you exactly where - *nowhere*. But if you dare to think that clergy involvement is not required, most churchgoers will view you as downright un-Christian.

And even though fornicators are worthy of hellfire (Rev. 21:8), there is no provision anywhere in the laws of nature and nature's God for men to enforce the law of fornication, or to punish offenders.

Adultery, incest, lewdness, bestiality and homosexuality - yes. But fornication - no. Weird, huh? Which means that *the liberty of self-government is not limited merely to things which are morally indifferent*, but also includes behaviors which are morally charged, but which God has reserved for Himself to enforce, not having given any men the authority to enforce them. *We need to pay attention to God's enforcement limitations.*

Let's agree, or assume *arguendo*, that fornication is immoral *per se*, that it is currently a plague in our nation, and it defiles the land for everyone. It's bad, it's wrong, and nothing good whatsoever comes from it. Yet, if God has not delegated any enforcement authority to men, then to exercise it is also bad, wrong, and nothing good whatsoever will come from it. God knows the *defilement of the land* (which leads to economic woes and eventually dispossession from the land) *is the remedy*. There is, in fact, an enforcement mechanism in place. If you don't like the enforcement mechanism God has put into place, *don't complain to me* - take it up with the Almighty.

You have heard it said (well, I heard it said when I was younger), *you can't legislate morality*. You don't hear this much anymore, because people have forgotten that neither men nor government can punish all wrongs. Some things - indeed, a very great number of things - are merely moral offenses, not legal offenses. Only God can enforce His merely moral laws. *Men must let people be immoral*. No, it's not a right to be immoral. It's a restraint on enforcement authority.

Are you catching the irony here? The best self-government is that which is self-restrained. The best civil government is that which is self-restrained (*i.e.*, does not try to do too much). So why are people always pushing for civil government to do more, as a way to combat a lack of self-restraint? Don't they see it will have the opposite effect? *Apparently not.*

Slowly, but surely, over my lifetime society has been piling up the rules, mostly in a vain attempt to regulate things God left for people to decide for themselves. God lets people make wrong decisions. He lets people fail. He lets people suffer for the choices they have made. *Who are we to think we can do better than God*, and keep people from behaving poorly?

The job of society is to *punish crimes*, that is, only those wrongs which constitute crimes according to lonang. I know this is a hard thing for many people to accept. Many wrongs are not crimes, and society, especially civil government, can do nothing about merely moral wrongs. *And that's the way God designed things.*

I remind you of two basic biblical facts. First, God made men and gave us everything we needed to survive and thrive, based solely on the institutions of the individual and the family under self-rule. No civil governments existed until approximately 2,000 years after creation. Yes, civil government was instituted by God after Noah's flood in order to impose an additional restraint on evil. However, just because nations and civil governments eventually came on the scene, it did not put an end to self-government.

Second, when God formed the nation of Israel and called them out as a separate people, He gave them no king but Himself. When Israel begged for a king (it was never God's idea), it was almost

3,000 years from creation (around 1000 BC). So, even after the creation of the nations at Babel, and after the world had kings for several centuries, God still intended for His people to be ruled primarily by individual self-government.

So when we come to the matter of the biblical role of civil government, it is very specifically limited to wielding the sword to carry out wrath on a limited class of wrongdoers (Rom. 13:4). Nowhere do the scriptures commend civil government either to: 1) punish evil thoughts; or 2) punish merely moral wrongs which are not also crimes as God defined them. Nor did God ever give civil rulers the power to (re)define crimes as merely any behavior which those in power want to deter. The chief evil of civil government is not that it does too little, but that it seeks to do *too much*.

### *God's Courts vs. Man's Courts*

I remind you of the distinction between God's court and man's courts. Look carefully at Mat. 5:21-37, where Jesus gives a number of examples of the distinction between the courts of God and the courts of men. Watch closely, as He compares murder with hate or anger, adultery with lust, divorce with moral adultery, and a legal oath with common swearing. He makes a moral equivalence between these things (hate is as bad as murder to God, lust is as bad as adultery to God, etc.), but *He never says men may on that basis enforce or punish anger, lust, or common swearing*, etc. No, those things are reserved for God's judgment alone.

And no, an improper divorce does not automatically make either the husband or the wife guilty of *legal or criminal adultery*. (Mat. 19:9). Criminal adultery requires a married person to commit a sexual act with someone other than a spouse. And a divorced person by definition is not a married person. Don't give me this, *well, he or she is still married in God's eyes* crap! God may see it as a moral offense, but *He does not thereby rewrite or supersede the civil laws regulating marriage*. Nor does God hold the spouses for all eternity to an obligation which they have disavowed. (1 Cor. 7:15).

You can probably guess what I think of *ecclesiastical annulments* - a spurious and damnable heresy if I ever heard one. God didn't give the Church the authority to enforce His moral laws any more than civil government, nor did He vest the Church with authority to rewrite or supersede the civil laws or civil acts of men. Sure, the Church can preach and teach God's moral laws, but *cannot enforce them*. Nor does the Church have any special authority to administer them (especially in the case of an ecclesiastical annulment, whereby a church purports to separate what God has joined together - see, Mat. 19:6).

As far as I can tell, the Church has no role in marriage (if you can find one in scripture, I'd like to see it). When the scripture says, *what therefore God has joined together*, it does not mean *what therefore the Church has joined together*. When God joins people, it is the individuals acting of their own accord before God. It isn't some ceremony (or a *sacrament*) that people other than the husband and wife perform. When a priest or pastor performs a marriage and says, *by the authority vested in me*, I challenge anyone to show by scripture that such an authorization ever took place.

The *people* (in their individual capacities) decide if and when they are married. The law of Moses made it clear that even if divorce was morally wrong, it was nonetheless legally permitted. (Mat. 19:8). And Jesus said He did not come to abolish or change those laws. (Mat. 5:17-19). So when I compare the courts of men with the courts of God, I do *not* count ecclesiastical courts as among the courts of God. Ecclesiastical courts are courts of men as much as any court of civil government. It's just one more example of men trying to do what God has reserved to Himself alone.

The civil government has only a very limited role (essentially, of keeping a record of marriages for inheritance, paternity and related issues). I would argue, under *lonang* both marriage and divorce are determined by the individuals involved (*i.e.*, the spouses). So yes, I believe in the sanctity of common law marriage, because that, too, is an aspect of self-government. It used to be the common law of America. Shame on those states which have abolished it. And shame on those churches which think they have a hand in the matter.

Conventional wisdom assumes that people are basically good, yet they are fundamentally incapable of governing themselves. Whereas the biblical assumption is that people are inherently flawed and sinful, yet nonetheless capable of self-government. Society has everything backwards - *as usual*.

### **Every Plant Yielding Seed**

And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." And God said, "Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. (Gen. 1:28-30).

Let's talk very frankly about an uncomfortable subject, namely, *substance abuse*. You know what I mean - alcoholic beverages, tobacco use, marijuana, opioids, and the like. But I don't want to talk about how bad they are, or how dangerous. Let's cut to the chase - admitting *arguendo* that such substances are dangerous and bad when abused, I want to focus on one and only one issue: *Who has the authority to do anything about substance abuse?* (Remember the two questions we need to ask? 1 - is it wrong? 2 - who can do anything about it?)

These substances all have at least three things in common: 1) they all have the effect of numbing the senses, acting as sedatives, or inducing a "high" sensation; 2) they are all highly regulated by both federal and state laws in the U.S.; and 3) each is directly derived from, or is part of, a seed yielding plant. And *the last of these is the most important, insofar as enforcement authority is concerned*.

Tobacco is a seed-bearing plant, and marijuana is a seed bearing plant. Wine is made from grapes, beer is made from barley, and whiskey is made from various grains - all of which are seed bearing plants. The opium poppy, the source of various narcotics including morphine, heroin, codeine,

oxycodone and many other derivatives, is a seed-bearing plant.

Now, it is a *fact* - not my opinion, not a myth, not an allegory, not a speculation, not a mere hypothesis - that God gave mankind complete and unrestricted dominion over the seed bearing plants. This dominion is not limited to using seed bearing plants for food (although, obviously, both alcoholic beverages and marijuana are in fact consumed as food).

The point being, dominion over the plants of the earth is not limited to food and beverage purposes. People have an unrestricted dominion to use plants for construction, for gardens, for the care and feeding of animals, and 10,000 other uses. So it frankly doesn't matter whether tobacco or poppies or marijuana are food or not. *We have dominion over them.* And this dominion, being given to us by God, is *an inalienable right and authority* (no civil government that ever has existed or ever will can lawfully deprive anyone of God's delegation of authority).

A second *fact* - not my opinion, etc. - is that when God granted dominion authority to mankind, it was given to us in our private capacities (*i.e.*, as individuals and members of families). Which is to say, no civil government then existed at the time of God's grant, nor did God thereafter submit this private dominion to the jurisdiction of civil rulers. Civil government has no original, inherent or superior right to supervise, superintend, regulate, license, tax or otherwise police the private dominion of individuals over the plants of the earth (whether they are food or not). *Period.*

To put it as bluntly as I can, civil government (according to the laws of nature and nature's God) has *no legitimate jurisdiction* over the private dominion of people with respect to plants. And I mean this as expansively as I possible can. Civil government has no rightful authority to tell me what plants I can or cannot grow, possess, use, or sell to others. By which I mean *all* plants, whether agricultural, horticultural or any other plants whatsoever, for any purpose whatsoever.

### *The Usual Objections*

Let's examine the various objections to my line of reasoning - both legal and moral. First up: because of the Fall of mankind (Gen. 3), we lost our dominion over the earth and all of the plants. There is, of course, absolutely no scripture anywhere in the Bible which says that. Can it be fairly implied? No (and I've written on this exact point extensively elsewhere), man's dominion did not get handed over to Satan, nor was it *lost*. Satan's dominion, while overlapping geographically, is entirely different (powers and principalities, etc.).

Remember, the dominion granted in Gen. 1:28 is a package deal - along with subduing the earth, mankind has dominion over the fish, birds, animals, and to be fruitful and multiply (*i.e.*, to have children). Do people still have dominion over animals? Yes - livestock, pets, you name it. Same with birds (think chicken) and fish (seafood). No change in dominion there. Do people still have the authority to bear children? *Duh.* Mankind's dominion is still in full force and effect.

Did Satan ever have the right to bear children? No. Was Satan ever given dominion over plants, animals, fish and birds? No. Did mankind forfeit (or lose) its dominion as a result of the Fall? No.



If that was the case, then why did God repeat the command to be fruitful and multiply after the flood? (Gen. 9:1). And note what else God said after the flood - "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every [animal, bird, creeping thing and fish]. *Into your hand they are delivered.* Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you." (Gen. 9:2-3a). Sure sounds like **dominion** to me.

Second up: doesn't civil government have the right to punish wrongdoers (it does not "bear the sword in vain" - Rom. 13:4). Yes - but that power is limited to matters which God has declared to be wrong. If your argument to me is that civil government is a *servant of God* to punish people for exercising a God-given authority, then my answer to you is that *a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.* (Mat. 12:25-26). God never gave authority over the same things to separate segments of society, so they could fight each other for control. Plus, God is not the author of confusion. (1 Cor. 14:33). What God gave the private sector, He did not "re-give" to civil government.

Let's move on to the moral objections. First up: inebriation, drunkenness, and getting high are all specifically prohibited by scripture, are morally wrong, may cause a person to be excluded from heaven, and are otherwise just *bad*. Let me concede all of the above - because none of that matters as to the authority question. Don't get me wrong - substances can genuinely be abused, many uses are both incredibly foolish and dangerous, and substance addictions are harmful.

However, we are not here discussing the *wisdom* of substance abuse. We are here considering who has *authority before God* to do what. And just because people do harmful, foolish and stupid stuff of their own volition does not thereby deprive them of the authority to do so. We've been over this already. God lets people fail, and fail miserably. God even lets people (gasp!) *go to Hell*. God never stops people from being foolish or self-destructive. Who are we, as a society, to think we can do what even God does not?

Next up: but if we don't stop people from substance abuse, they will become a burden to society and will end up costing everyone a lot of time, effort and money. Really? Do you hear yourself talking? *God never once said* that society in general, or civil government in particular, should take care of people who are (take your choice) harmful to themselves, vulnerable, disadvantaged, marginalized, going through rough times, homeless, etc.

Sure, the Bible in several places admonishes or encourages us to care for the poor and to show charity towards others. But *never once* does the scripture anywhere indicate that love, charity, or caring for the poor is either a legal duty or a governmental responsibility. The Golden Rule (Mat. 7:12), and other similar scriptures, are never directed to civil rulers or to civil governments. The admonition to *love your neighbor as yourself* is not a rule of public policy or state action. Such scriptures are directed solely to people in their *individual or private capacities*.

That our elected representatives have chosen to make such things a public responsibility does *not* mean God ever intended for us to be put in that situation. We are in a situation of our own making, directly because we have outright decided to ignore God's limitations on the proper functions of civil government. The obligation of modern society to provide a personal safety net is not one God

has imposed. Therefore, don't expect me to recognize or approve it.

If letting people suffer for their own life choices puts modern society between a rock and a hard place, rest assured the object lesson here is to eliminate the improper functions of the public sector, not to double down and provide an ever expanding social safety net. If self-government is good enough for God, it is good enough for society. And if our society won't govern itself according to *lonang*, then God has a remedy for that, too. Namely, let the government fail, and then start over. Isn't that harsh? Yes. But how else will people learn?

So no, I am not advocating for marijuana *use*. Yes, I am advocating for marijuana *legalization*. But only because that's what God's laws require. If you can show me God's laws require something else, then (and only then) I'll change my mind. What anyone *thinks is best* is irrelevant to God. That settles the matter for me.

I am also, on the same principles, advocating for freedom from all federal land use regulations, the majority portion of state and local land use (*i.e.*, zoning) restrictions, the taxation of mere production, use and transportation of alcoholic beverages, the federal excise tax and regulation of guns, etc. I specifically and vociferously reject the holding of *Wickard v. Filburn*, 317 U.S. 111 (1942). No really - you should go look that one up. It's absolutely shocking how much (and for how long) the federal government has waged war against individual self-government, and what ridiculous lengths they were (and are) prepared to go, to stamp it out for the good of society.

What it all boils down to is this: are you willing to make man's society in God's image, or will you tenaciously cling to making society in man's image of God?

### **SELF-GOVERNMENT PERVERTED**

The denial of rightful self-government is not the only way things have gone off track. Increasingly, people are making choices about matters which God never intended to allow for, and instead of curtailing this wantonness, society only encourages it more and more.

Since *lonang* and the conscience are equally authored by God, they must agree with each other, thus, *your conscience can never truly urge you to violate God's laws*. Such urges come from the sin nature, not the conscience. In addition, *you can never truly have a right* (much less an inalienable right) *to violate God's laws*, because God will never contradict Himself by authorizing a violation of His own commands. Besides, man's laws are inferior and subject to God's laws, so no one can look to man's laws to provide a justification for disobeying God's laws.

So, neither conscience, nor the will of God, nor the laws of men, can be claimed as a basis for doing those things which God has not authorized. ***Therefore***, no one has the right (in the name of self-government) to do things which God has not authorized, or which He has forbidden. Such things originate only with our natural corruption, and are worthy of death.

Remember, *the essence of self-government is self-restraint*, that is, the conformity of both conduct

and conscience to the laws of God, or Ionang. When all restraint is cast off, and the laws of God are ignored, the result is not better self-government, but a lack of it. And ironically, what is meant to bring increased liberty only brings about more bondage.

### **The Exaltation of Personal Choice**

Fifty years ago, most people had a pretty good idea of what *deviance* and *perversity* meant. If you called someone a *deviant* or a *pervert*, it was understood to comprehend a range of sexual behaviors including pedophilia, homosexuality, incest, oral sex, sodomy, cross-dressing, and like offenses. Bestiality, of course, would have been considered perverse, if anyone had thought about it 50 years ago (no one did). Same for sex change operations, except for the most part they weren't yet feasible.

Nowadays, you almost never hear anyone use the words *deviance* and *perversity* any more. That's because today the only wrongful sex is nonconsensual, or deemed to be so because of the involvement of minor children. What God or nature *prohibits* is no longer the issue. For that matter, few people today use the term *moral turpitude* (or know what it means), even though not too long ago it was widely understood to include all forms of perversity plus many lesser offenses, such as thievery, cheating, dishonesty and similar behaviors. It used to be that you couldn't serve in the military or become a lawyer if you were guilty of moral turpitude. *Imagine that.*

If you look up *deviance* and *perversity* in a modern dictionary, chances are pretty high you will see both definitions tied to *socially accepted norms*. If you try to pin down what norms are acceptable and how they got that way, eventually you will find there are no truly fixed (unchanging, eternal) norms, but only shifting standards society decides to impose from time to time. Which ultimately means all norms are temporary, relative, and if not completely arbitrary, then at least entirely subjective. *A different strokes for different folks* kind of thing.

Not totally forgotten, but mostly ignored or denied, is the reality that God hasn't changed His mind about any of these things since creation. No mere passing fad or fancy, God's laws are fixed, uniform and universal (applying to all times, persons and places). God's standards of conduct and laws of behavior never change once implemented. And most of the things we are talking about here can be traced back to the creation, by that reason being made a part of the laws of nature.

It's amazing how many moral deviations can be traced to a fundamental disregard of the fact God created mankind as male and female, and gave them the authority to be fruitful and multiply as a heterosexual couple functioning within marriage as a family unit. The entire LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, and asexual) agenda of sexual orientation is one giant rejection of male and female sexuality *for each other only*. The same is true for gender identity and gender fluidity, which disregard biology (God's creation) as the definition of gender, and substitute subjective feelings (man's invention) in its place.

Same-sex marriage and its equally depraved cousins, namely *civil unions* and *domestic partnerships*, are a bald-faced effort to redefine marriage and family away from God's design for marriage as a union of one man and one woman. Polygamy (whether one man with multiple wives, or one woman

with multiple husbands) used to be universally scorned. Now, there are reality TV shows about *sister wives* and other freakish nonsense in the polygamist universe, which only serve to promote social acceptance and legalization of the practice.

If the law of nature were to serve as our example, then the only people legally competent to birth or adopt children would be heterosexual married couples. Permitting an unmarried woman (in the biblical sense) to become impregnated by artificial insemination is an outright rejection of the law of nature. Same thing for surrogacy, which is simply an unlawful delegation of child-bearing to someone who is not part of the marital union. I make a similar argument regarding the adoption of children by same-sex couples or single persons. Such people have no natural capacity to reproduce (*i.e.*, as a same-sex couple or as a single person) - adoption standards should be tied to the same test.

Let's get real. God has not authorized people - as mere individuals - to do any of these things. There is no right of conscience, and no law of God, which justifies LGBTQIA lifestyles, subjective gender identification, same-sex marriages, polygamy, etc. There simply isn't. So the fact that man's laws are slowly but inevitably moving towards legitimizing all of these things is not progress. What it is, is *rebellion*. One giant lack of restraint. A huge failure to conform to the laws of God.

And let's not forget about abortion. Abortion is, among other things, the unnatural termination of a pregnancy and a life that God has given. In God's grant of authority to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 1:28; 9:1), there is no express or implied grant to terminate a pregnancy. Nor is there, in the Dominion Mandate, any grant of dominion authority over people, *including one's own person*. Neither a male nor a female have dominion over their own body, to treat it as property (like an animal) or to dispose of the fruit of the womb like a piece of meat.

In fact, if you want to get to the nasty truth of the matter, a married woman has no direct authority over her reproductive functions anyway. "For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does." (1 Cor. 7:4). If you don't like it, don't complain to me. And an unmarried woman has no reproductive authority to begin with.

As discussed above, a woman acting on her own initiative or authority, as the possessor of her body, has no right to bear children all by herself. No woman is capable of reproducing *all by herself*. Therefore, it is beyond absurd to permit her to decide whether to keep her baby or not as a matter of individual choice. Abortion is not a matter between a woman and her doctor - it isn't even a matter between a husband and wife - because first someone would have to show that anyone, at anytime, has the God-given authority to terminate a pregnancy. And no one can show that.

So no, none of these things are aspects of lawful self-government. What they are, is a concerted attempt to throw off the laws of God. But God isn't worried. In fact, He's having a good laugh about it, because He will have the last word, a word of judgment.

Why do the nations rage? and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits

in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. (Ps. 2:1-4).

The irony is that all of these behaviors are undertaken for the purpose of breaking free from God's laws (in other words, to bring liberty), but they only lead to bondage.

These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved. For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved. (2 Pet. 2:17-19).

When it comes to true liberty, God has something else in mind.

### **The Nature of True Liberty**

I have a simple formula for describing and defining justice and liberty—

Law ≡ The will of God for all people  
Justice ≡ To carry out the will of God  
Liberty ≡ Freedom to do the will of God

God's law then (not man's law, obviously) is simply the will of God for all people. We're not talking about any commands or orders given to particular people (such as, "go here and do that"). Nor are we here interested in the laws of ancient Israel, except to the extent they indicate or confirm a general rule extrapolated from creation. What I'm after, and what the laws of nature and nature's God are all about, are those universal principles of law laid down by God for all people, places and times.

Justice in the modern world is merely whatever result is spit out by the system for the administration of justice. In other words, as long as you and your legal claims have been processed by the right people according to the rules of the system, the results are irrelevant. Not so with God. His idea of justice is inextricably linked to His will for all people. Any result which complies with His will (*i.e.*, God's laws) is just, no matter what anyone thinks about it. Any result which contradicts His laws is unjust, no matter what anyone thinks about it. Fairness is irrelevant.

Liberty is the freedom to obey and carry out God's will. So liberty involves the freedom to do justice (God's will for all people), but it also allows people the freedom to carry out God's specific will (such as, "go here and do that"). Especially with respect to those matters springing from the freedom of the mind (education, religion, love, charity, speech, etc.), liberty is the freedom to fulfill our duties to God according to the law of conscience.

But I don't want you to think - I absolutely *never* want you to think - that liberty under God's law is limited to matters linked to the freedom of the mind. Liberty and conscience are also directly involved in the matter of fulfilling the Dominion Mandate (*i.e.*, deciding how best to use one's

resources, subdue the earth, raise a family, and exercise stewardship of all material things). This is the aspect of liberty most under appreciated (or permitted) in society today.

True liberty, then, is both *empowered* and *constrained* by God's will. It is empowered by the individual conscience directing each person in how to fulfill his duties to God, the ultimate source of which is the laws of God written on the heart. It is constrained by the will of God in that no one has the freedom to violate the laws of God, which are the greater part of God's will. True liberty is the goal of righteous self-government (the freedom to fulfill the laws of God according to the dictates of conscience).

True liberty is contradistinguished from mere *license*, which is just another name for unbridled lawlessness. License is the manifestation of a lack of self-restraint. It is the opposite of conscience, of God's laws, and self-government. License is the *failure* to govern one's self, to bring one's conduct under the rule of law, and to fulfill one's personal responsibility to the Creator. License is an attempt to cast off the laws of God, to declare oneself free and independent from the Creator, and to impose one's own will as the only true law.

License is not the sort of self-government which God has fitted us for. The whole premise of self-government is for us to be responsible and accountable to God by conforming our conduct and conscience to His laws. By rightly governing ourselves, we avoid the need for others (even wrongly, or misguidedly) to try to intervene and force us to comply with those rules of behavior which govern us. In other words, the better we govern ourselves, the better we are able to hold back governmental excesses.

## CONCLUSION

God, the creation and people - we all form a *closed system*. There is no escaping this system, or getting around or outside it. It does no good to object to the way the system has been established, to bemoan any perceived injustices arising from the nature of the system, or to rally support from others for the overthrow of the system. "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." (Ps. 24:1). It's all His, friends. You can shake your fist at it if you want, but you protest in vain. Nothing will change merely because you want it to. And try as you might, you cannot overthrow God.

So the main question concerning self-government is this: Are you willing to accept the system God has put in place for our government and work within it the best you can, or will you revolt and waste your life fighting something you can never win?

Which brings us - inevitably, I suppose - to the realization that all self-government is really about is the *willingness* to observe, respect and follow God's laws. God isn't going to force anyone to follow His laws. Of course, the failure to do so will incur an eternity of punishment. But if that's what you truly want, God is perfectly content to go along with it. He respects both your ability to govern yourself and your personal responsibility for behavioral decisions, more than you do yourself, most likely. Just FYI.

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