

Paul's Assessment of Christian Freedom

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In an awkward but memorable phrase, Paul declares: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." The story of Jesus Christ, as it comes to life in his followers, is a story of freedom, to be sure, but a freedom constrained by the Cross and deeply at odds with individualistic notions of liberty.

The Apostle Paul assures the Galatian Christians, "You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free" (Galatians 5:13a, TNIV).¹ These words were written in the middle of the first century, but they resonate strongly with fundamental sentiments of many Western societies, with their mixture of individualistic and democratic liberty. It has often been the case, however, that Christians have unwittingly extracted Paul's emphasis on Christian freedom from its larger discursive and theological context. As a consequence, Christian ethical convictions that seem to be based on solid Pauline grounding have at times run against the grain of Paul's ethical theologizing.

As we seek to delineate the complexity of Paul's discourse on Christian freedom, we will return to Galatians 5:13 as a theme verse on three occasions. In each case we will be able to add yet another level of meaning to Paul's understanding of the gospel of freedom.

FREE FROM MORAL LIBERTINISM

Freedom is an important motif in several of Paul's extant letters. This is true especially of his letters to Christians in Galatia and Rome. In his allegory of Abrahamic offspring in Galatians 4, for instance, Paul likens Christians to offspring of the "free woman" (Sarah) instead of the "slave woman" (Hagar), concluding the allegory with the claim, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (5:1, TNIV). The sentence might look somewhat awkward, verging

on tautology or redundancy. But Paul has constructed it in this way for a particular purpose, as we will see toward the end of this essay.

For now it is enough to note that Paul uses the notion of freedom as a kind of short-hand for the conviction that gentile Christians need not “enslave” themselves to observing the Torah. When some proposed to the Galatians that gentile Christians should be circumcised, Paul understood this to be a

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way of undermining “the freedom we have in Christ Jesus” and a way of “mak[ing] us slaves” (Galatians 2:4, TNIV). So too, Paul’s claim that “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” is followed by the exhortation to “stand firm” against those who inspire gentile Christians to be circumcised, lest the Galatians “be burdened... by a yoke of slavery” (5:1). For Paul, then, Christian “freedom” could be used as a shorthand slogan for

“salvation has nothing to do with observing the stipulations of the Torah.”

In this daring and dramatic conviction lie many of the rich resources that came to prominence in the Reformation period, when Paul’s theology was rightly used to counter the deficient view that salvation could be manipulated by people’s actions, not least through penitential purchasing of the “rights” to salvation through “indulgences” sold (in essence) by the pre-Reformation church. Quite appropriately, the reformers applied Paul’s gospel of “salvation by grace through faith” to their own day, standing firm against those who demanded that Christians should (for all intents and purposes) purchase their salvation, being burdened by a yoke of slavery placed upon them by the leadership of the pre-Reformation church.

So it is that Paul’s gospel of “freedom” is embedded with rich and important theological resources that have contributed to vital changes in the history of Christianity – in relation both to Galatian Christians and to Christians of the Reformation period.

But it is also important to note that Paul’s discourse of freedom is extremely vulnerable to misinterpretation. This became all too clear to Paul himself when dealing with Christians in Corinth. Some of them began to imagine that, if Christians are not required to observe the Torah, it follows that they really have no ethical constraints upon their behavior. Based on Paul’s gospel of “freedom,” they came to the view that “I have the right to do anything.”

Paul reiterates this view of theirs on two occasions in 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23, where he makes it clear that Christian freedom requires careful handling, lest it should result in a kind of ethical servitude. This will be developed below; for now it is enough to note that this Corinthian view of “having the right to do anything” may have plagued Paul’s ministry beyond the confines of his relationship with the Corinthians. Writing to the Christians in Rome, Paul articulates this Corinthian slogan more pointedly, and in a fashion suggesting that others were suspicious that his gospel of freedom was ethically deficient. So, he writes: “Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say – ‘Let us do evil that good may result?’” (Romans 3:8, TNIV). On two occasions in Romans 6 Paul rearticulates the same view: “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” and “Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” (6:1, 15, TNIV).

Evidently Paul had gained a reputation for promoting what might be called an ethical “libertinism,” in which one could live without any kind of moral restraint, and all to the glory of God. After all, if grace is freely given “apart from law” (Romans 3:21), then perhaps those who have faith in Jesus can live in any fashion they choose, without worrying about being condemned as sinners. This might even be thought to enhance God’s reputation as a gracious God who does not hold sin against those who have put their faith in Jesus. Paul says about people who misunderstand his gospel in this way that “their condemnation is just” (Romans 3:8, TNIV).

Returning to the theme verse of Galatians 5:13, we can now recognize how Paul builds his case there. Whereas the first sentence of the verse calls Christians to “be free,” in the second sentence Paul gives this critical stipulation: “But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” The translation “sinful nature” is the TNIV’s interpretation of the word “flesh,” by which Paul usually means something like “the human reinforced proclivity towards sinful living.” Here we get a glimpse of what Paul does more fully in his letters to qualify what Christian freedom involves, putting a fence around how it should and should not be understood.

FREE FROM SELF-INTERESTEDNESS

Accounting fully for Paul’s theology of “freedom from” requires an examination of the middle chapters of Romans. We have already noted instances when Paul articulates the view that others have attributed to him – that is, it might actually be a good thing for Christians to be free to commit sins, since that would only enhance divine grace (Romans 6:1, 15). On each occasion, Paul immediately rejects this view with a most vociferous ejection, “that must not be the case!” This stance might seem obvious, but for Paul it was more than just a matter of ethical common sense. It involved cognizance of an apocalyptic scenario that the Romans were in danger of losing sight of (like many Christians after them). That apocalyptic scenario

needs to be clearly in mind when considering Paul's emphasis on freedom, as outlined in the following paragraphs.

Front and center in this regard stand the "powers" that give shape to human existence. In Romans 5:12-21, Paul outlines two separate spheres of influence in which different "cosmic powers" are operative. Highlighting Paul's notion of sin makes the point well. Paul did not simply imagine Adam's act of sin to be the first in a never-ending line of sins replicated by his offspring; instead, and much more dramatically, Adam's sin provided the occasion for suprahuman powers to gain a devastating foothold within God's good creation. Paul introduced one of these powers already in Romans 3:9, the power of Sin, and in Romans 5:12-21 he associates that power with another, the power of Death. At times in Romans 5:12-21 Paul seems to have human sinfulness and human death in view, while at others he seems to have the cosmic powers in view – not least when speaking of them as "reigning" or being the overlords of the sphere of influence in which sin and death are human inevitabilities (5:14, 17, 21). In Paul's view, the cosmic dimension and the personal dimension are intertwined parts of the same fundamental problem. The death and resurrection of Jesus introduces a situation of "freedom" not only in relation to the human inevitabilities of sin and death but also in relation to the cosmic powers of Sin and Death.

In Romans 6, Paul spells out the mechanisms whereby this "freedom from the suprahuman powers" is brought about. Central to his thinking is baptism. Christians have been baptized into Christ Jesus and have been united with him in death, and in this way, the power of Sin is hoodwinked, since it gets no inevitable traction in the lives of Jesus-followers. Death is the key here. When people die, the power of Sin no longer has a foothold in their lives; since Jesus-followers have died with Christ, the power of Sin has thereby been duped. But these "died with Christ" people are not trophies for the power of Death. Instead, they have come alive in a new "sphere of lordship," a sphere in which their lives are instruments of God's grace and righteousness.

For Paul, the power of Sin is no longer the controlling overlord of those who follow Jesus, and those who follow Jesus are no longer "slaves" to the power of Sin. So he writes: "do not let [the power of] Sin reign [or be the lord] in your mortal bodies...for [the power of] Sin shall no longer be your master [or overlord]" (6:12, 14, TNIV). Having been "slaves to sin" (6:20), Christians are now "set free from the power of Sin" (6:7, 18, 20, 22).

This does not mean, of course, that they are therefore free to commit sins. Paul recognizes that it is still possible for Christians to "offer" their bodies to the power of Sin, allowing that suprahuman power to influence their lives. But he sees this as a perversion of Christian freedom. Christians are, instead, exhorted to offer themselves to the power of God.

Paul's conviction of "freedom from the Torah" plays a part within this larger context of Paul's "apocalyptic" thought about the suprahuman powers

that oppress God's world. In Romans 7:1-6, Paul observes that dead persons (like those who have died with Christ) are not bound to laws that bind others, and he draws from this the view that there is no salvific necessity to observing the Mosaic law. In fact, Romans 7:7-25 outlines how the power of Sin hijacks the God-given law so that the law itself serves the purposes of Sin. That allows Paul to designate the Mosaic law as "the law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2, TNIV), perhaps connoting the Mosaic law engulfed within the program of the powers of Sin and Death. It is this law in its inadvertent association with powers of Sin and Death that Paul says Christians have been "set free" from.

There is nothing "Corinthian" about Paul's position, however. Having been set free in one sense, Christians have become "enslaved" in another sense, becoming "slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:18; cf. 6:20, 22 TNIV). And this notion of Christian enslavement introduces the second dimension of what it is that Christians have been freed from. What the power of Sin induced in the person who speaks in Romans 7 is covetousness. Whereas the law commands "You shall not covet," the power of Sin seized "the opportunity afforded by the commandment" and "produced in me every kind of coveting" (Romans 7:7-8, TNIV). If we can uncover what "every kind of coveting" looks like to Paul, we can unmask what it is that the power of Sin promotes within enslaved humanity.

To discover what "every kind of coveting" looks like for Paul, we only need to expose its opposite within Paul's thinking. Later in Romans Paul encourages Christians to be

debtors to each other in love, adding "for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law" and noting that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:8, 10, TNIV). This resonates with what Paul said earlier in Romans 8:4, when speaking of the "righteous requirement of the law" having been "fulfilled in us" by means of the Spirit. Although Christians do not observe the law, there is a sense in which the law

itself is fulfilled in Christians through the Spirit, who brings alive loving patterns of life within Jesus' followers. For the one who is "sold as a slave to the power of Sin" (Romans 7:14), the law inevitably becomes associated with the powers of Sin and Death (Romans 8:2). Conversely, for the one who is "enslaved to righteousness" (Romans 6:18), the law finds its true fulfillment, not by doing its commandments but by living through the

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Spirit, who inspires patterns of love, whereby the law is (inadvertently) fulfilled. It is in this matrix that we find the converse of “every kind of coveting.”

We are now in a position to return to our theme verse for a second time. Whereas the first sentence of Galatians 5:13 calls Christians to “be free,” and whereas the second sentence warns against allowing freedom to promote sinfulness, the same verse concludes with the exhortation to “serve one

another humbly in love.”

Freedom, for Paul, is freedom to serve, through love. And once again, Paul immediately brings the Torah into this matrix of thought, giving an assurance similar to that of Romans 13:8-10: “For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:14, TNIV).

Paul says more about what love looks like throughout Galatians, but note here how he contrasts it with what

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might be thought of as a relational amplification of the phrase “every kind of coveting” in Romans 7:8: “If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other” (Galatians 5:15, TNIV). If we unwrapped what this impetus of biting and devouring looks like throughout Galatians, we would find it to be little more than self-interestedness, a self-interestedness that results only in chaotic relationships (i.e., “you will be destroyed by each other”). In essence, and in the arena of practical ethics, Paul’s gospel of freedom translates into the moral character of self-giving, in contrast to the character of self-interestedness. For Paul, then, the bottom line is that the gospel frees Christians from the chaos that results from enslavement to self-interestedness.

ENSLAVED TO ONE ANOTHER

Moral chaos is precisely what Paul found among some of the practices of Corinthian Christians. Over and over, they interpreted their freedom in Christ along individualistic lines, without regard to the health of the Christian community. The issue of spiritual gifts is a case in point, especially for those Corinthian Christians who exhibited the gift of tongues. Finding the Spirit to have gifted them with notable spiritual powers, those whose gift was tongues found that their gift could so easily be used to enhance their own status within the community, promoting them over against others whose gifts were of a different kind. Despite their impressive spiritual speech, such people are (says

Paul) merely like “a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1, TNIV). In contrast to this, Paul imagines the Christian community to be a well-oiled machine, in which all the parts work together in perfect coordination. This is what Paul presents in his analogy of the Christian community as “the body of Christ,” with each part of the community playing its part (whether large or small) to enhance the community.

The fact that, for Paul, Christian freedom is not individualistically configured is evident elsewhere in 1 Corinthians, not least in relation to the eating of meat that may previously have been used in a sacrifice on an altar to a pagan god. In that context, while Paul affirms the liberty of Christians to eat freely, he spends more time and effort crafting out what freedom looks like when it is wielded responsibly within Christian community. Properly understood, Christian liberty is constrained by Christian conscientiousness toward others (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8:1-13).

When the Corinthians align themselves with Paul's gospel, he finds them to be his letter of commendation—“a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Corinthians 3:3). Paul uses the Greek word for “Spirit” seven times within 2 Corinthians 3, and concludes the chapter with an emphasis on the transformation of Jesus-followers through the Spirit of freedom:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:17-18

What is this “same image” that the Spirit of freedom transpires “from one degree of glory to another” within Christians? It is likely that the image is Christological in its content and outline. That is to say, Christians are being transformed into the “image” of Jesus, so that they, as if reflecting Jesus among each other, are progressively reflecting his own way of life within their communities.

What, then, is this “way of life” that Jesus embodied? For Paul, the characteristic that most defines Jesus' own “way of life” is the way of self-giving. This motif is in virtually every one of Paul's letters, not least in the “kenotic hymn” of Philippians 2:6-11, with its emphasis on Jesus having “emptied himself” and “humbled himself” (2:7-8). To track the motif throughout the Pauline letters would be an exercise in itself, and falls beyond the scope of this essay. But it lies at the heart of Paul's gospel of freedom, with cruciformity (a cross-shaped life of self-giving) lashing Paul's soteriological and ethical discourse together in an inseparable union.

This union of salvation and ethics is likely to explain the otherwise intolerable claim (as noted above) that “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). The phrase “Christ has set us free” pertains to the salvation of Jesus’ followers, while “for freedom” pertains to the ethical lifestyle of Jesus’ followers. In essence, Christians have been set free from the enslavement of chaos-inducing self-interestedness in order to allow the self-giving Christ to become incarnate within their own self-giving way of life.

Running along similar lines are Paul’s notable claims in Galatians 2:20, a passage that has been called the “touchstone that every proposition in theology, every course of action prescribed in ethics, every Christian institution must be brought.”²

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God [or better, perhaps: I live by the faithfulness of the Son of God], who loved me and gave himself for me.

Galatians 2:20 (TNIV)

Having been crucified with Christ, Christians become the means for the self-giving Christ to live through them.

The same theme emerges elsewhere, such as Galatians 4:19, where Paul incorporates the imagery of childbirth: “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed *in you*” (italics added, TNIV). The formation of Christ in the Galatians is rooted in their having been baptized “into Christ” and having been “clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Paul imagines that the lives of the Christians are so altered as to suggest that Christ himself has been “draped” around them, as if they themselves were “performing” the self-giving Christ.

All this transpires from Christian participation in the story of Jesus Christ, as his story comes to life within his followers. It is a story of freedom, to be sure, but a freedom constrained by its Christological basis and its corporate and relational contours.

It is also a freedom that is eschatologically “apocalyptic” in its configuration, with the self-giving one having come “to rescue us from [the bondage of] the present evil age” (Galatians 1:4, TNIV) as his loving self-giving becomes embodied within his followers. The freedom that God empowers “in Christ” through the Spirit involves the shattering of the cosmically-ingrained power (bifurcated in terms of “Sin and Death”)—a power that embeds itself within the insatiable drive of self-interestedness, destroying healthy human relationality in the process and leaving moral chaos in its wake. God, in Christ and through the Spirit, is smashing all permutations of the suprahuman force that animates human self-interestedness and fosters moral chaos. In this way Jesus’ followers are being restored to “right relationship” with him and, as a consequence, with all other components

of God's creation. Enslavement to cosmic forces of moral chaos has been undermined in the process, resulting in the freedom that equates to enslavement to others in the love that the Spirit inspires within those who are enslaved to God.

We return one final time to the verse that began this essay, Galatians 5:13. Noting that Christians were "called to be free," Paul exhorts the Galatian Christians not simply to "serve one another humbly in love" (as in most translations); instead, the verb Paul uses is "enslave" (*douleuô*)—literally, they should "enslave themselves" to each other in humble, enacted, practical love. Paul was no doubt aware of how jarring this exhortation must sound within its immediate context. In the seven instances when Paul employs the notion of slavery prior to this verse in Galatians, that notion functions to depict the condition from which Christians have been freed and to which they should not return (4:3, 7-9, 24-25, and 5:1). As one whose gospel advocated "freedom" from non-essentials (i.e., law observance) and from the cosmic power that translates into chaotic self-interestedness, Paul's choice of verb in the phrase "enslave yourselves to one another humbly in love" was no doubt as intentional as it was ironic.

NOTES

¹ Scripture passages marked TNIV are from the *Holy Bible, Today's New International Version* ® TNIV ® Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica, www.biblica.com. All rights reserved worldwide.

² C. K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation: A Study of the Epistle to the Galatians* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985), 88. In some presentations of the text, the phrase "I have been crucified with Christ" is the final phrase of Galatians 2:19.



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