

# The Nature of Christian Freedom

BY PHILIP D. KENNESON

In our “freedom”-saturated culture, we rarely consider that what Scripture and tradition mean by “freedom” may be seriously at odds with many assumptions that underwrite everyday American usage and practice. Three fine books offer insight into critical issues regarding the nature of Christian freedom.

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Only someone who has been locked away in a closet for a very long time could be unaware of how utterly pervasive the language and imagery of “freedom” is in American culture. Every day we hear politicians of all stripes proclaiming freedom’s praises and rallying citizens to its defense. Each night we are inundated with television commercials for SUVs with names like “Liberty” and “Escape” that peddle images of vehicles conquering remote and exotic landscapes while seemingly limitless vistas provide the backdrop. And at least several times a year we are urged to stand up and be proud of our national heritage, singing boldly that at least we know we are free.

But are we *really* as free as we think we are and pride ourselves to be? Answering that question would, of course, require us to do something we are rarely asked to do: inquire into the very *nature* of this freedom we so incessantly extol. Such an inquiry is particularly important for Christians living in this “freedom”-saturated culture, since what Scripture and the Christian tradition mean by “freedom” may be seriously at odds with many of the assumptions that underwrite everyday American usage and practice. Fortunately, these three fine collections of essays, while exploring many other important matters, offer us a wealth of insight into a number of critical issues regarding the nature of Christian freedom.

## THE CRISIS OF FREEDOM

One excellent starting point for sorting through the range of issues around our contemporary notions of freedom and the tensions and contradictions between those notions and the nature of human freedom as revealed in Scripture and tradition is the fine set of essays by Richard Bauckham, *God and the Crisis of Freedom: Biblical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002, 224 pp., \$29.95). Penning his introduction to these eight essays only weeks after the attacks of September 11, 2001, British New Testament scholar and theologian Bauckham wastes no time in articulating the urgent need for a careful examination of our concept of freedom. He insists that the term in our context is “fraught with ideology,” clearly functions with “mythic power,” and is exalted “as the one thing that must at all costs be achieved and defended” (pp. 1, 2). Yet despite the central role that the language of freedom plays in the rhetoric of daily life, its meaning has become dangerously unstable, not least because it has become untethered from other traditionally important goods of human life (such as justice, community, authority, and God) and now stands largely alone as the only unquestioned good remaining. As a result, the crisis of modernity is a crisis of freedom, and the most pressing question is whether any freedom worth having is ultimately sustainable apart from these other goods, including God—the ground of all good and of all freedom.

To address this crisis Bauckham takes up a number of salient subjects. He begins by tracing the trajectory of the notion of freedom and liberation across the pages of Scripture. He underscores that the liberation of the children of Israel from Egypt involved not simply freedom *from* their oppressors but freedom *for* the service of the living God. The New Testament extends and deepens this insight by insisting that real freedom also includes “liberation from enslavement to self-interest and freedom to give oneself for others” (p. 24).

In the essays that follow, Bauckham carefully explores many of the tensions which the notion and practice of freedom elicit in contemporary Western societies. For example, he examines the tension between individual liberty and the common good within the libertarian tradition, as well as the tension between freedom and coercion in the socialist tradition. He also fruitfully critiques the tendency within modernity to view freedom in largely Promethean terms, as the unrestrained capacity to engage in self-creation. This denial of limits and human creatureliness effectively displaces God as creator and subsequently underwrites the modern notion that the world is no longer to be understood as setting limits to human freedom, but is simply “the material with which human beings can construct their freely chosen future” (p. 33). According to Bauckham, this myth of unrestricted freedom decidedly informs both the misleading rhetoric of “freedom of opportunity” and the trivializing practice of “consumer choice.”

Bauckham is at his best when he is either drawing illuminating distinctions or unmasking the many false oppositions that underwrite our modern

love affair with freedom and our uncritical suspicion of all those forces we presume stand against it. For example, he explains how God's freedom is different from human freedom, and therefore why obedience to God is different from obedience to human authority. Likewise, he delineates the important difference between exalting freedom of choice for its own sake and honoring freedom because it allows the space to choose the good. In

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essay after essay, Bauckham carefully and convincingly shows why freedom rightly understood is not opposed to all limits or constraints; why freedom requires (rather than is opposed to) relations of dependence and belonging; and why authority is not to be equated with authoritarianism, obedience with coercion, tradition with oppression, and the biblical notion of dominion with domination. In so doing,

Bauckham reveals why the contemporary celebration of unbridled freedom leads, ironically, to one of the most insidious forms of human bondage.

### **FREEDOM WITHIN LIMITS**

A number of tensions pertaining to human freedom are generated from within the Christian faith itself. One of these tensions involves the relationship between grace and freedom, and thinking through this tension is the focus of the first third of Gilbert Meilaender's fine collection of essays, *The Freedom of a Christian: Grace, Vocation, and the Meaning of Our Humanity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006, 192 pp., \$23.00). As a Lutheran theologian and ethicist, Meilaender wryly names his volume after Luther's famous treatise on freedom while rightly acknowledging that the theological issues addressed in his own volume are not peculiarly Lutheran, but inherent to any thoughtful Christian theology. For example, stated simply, the tension between grace and freedom is this: "If the gospel announces that sinners are pardoned and that God is pleased with them, what more could possibly need doing? Why should we talk about these pardoned believers needing to learn to follow Christ, obey the command of God, or to grow in grace and virtue?" (p. 10). In the three essays of Part One, "Freedom for the Obedience of Faith," Meilaender skillfully and pastorally explores these issues by showing how the gift of grace as pardon is linked with the gift of grace as power for transformative obedience, and how as such, grace does not in any way cancel out human freedom but empowers us to obey in ways we could not apart from

the Spirit's grace. In ways that echo Bauckham's work, Meilaender helps us see why God's grace, rather than undermining freedom, makes possible a kind and degree of freedom that expands and enriches our humanity.

In the three essays of Part Two, "Freedom for God's Call," Meilaender again explores the tension between freedom and obedience, though here with reference to the notion of vocation. In cultures like ours that equate authenticity and genuine personhood with autonomy and self-determination, how may a person obey their calling without sacrificing their very freedom for self-determination and thus their genuine humanity and personhood? Meilaender offers considerable wisdom here, reminding us first of all that if God ultimately knows us better than we do ourselves, then God's call invites us to greater authenticity not less. In addition, Meilaender pushes an important Christological point: "The story of Jesus' own obedience makes clear that what looks like an annihilation of the self may, in fact, be its enlargement" (pp. 108-109).

In the final section of his collection, "Freedom for Embodied Humanity," Meilaender works out some of the possible implications of these reconfigured assumptions about human freedom, particularly as they pertain to issues surrounding biotechnology. As he does in nearly all of his essays, Meilaender explores these issues by deftly combining well-chosen examples from Western literature with clear, cogent theological reflection. He reminds us, for example, that we must learn, like Homer's Achilles, that to be human is to live and love within limits, and that "the temptation to be more than human may leave us less than human" (p. 127). Embracing these limits means that we are free to choose certain kinds of lives and certain kinds of deaths; free *not* to do certain things—even seemingly good things—if doing them ultimately diminishes our humanity; and therefore free to resist the notion that human beings have god-like responsibilities for eradicating all human suffering, as if "suffering has no point other than to be overcome by human will and technical mastery—that compassion means not a readiness to suffer with others but a determination always to oppose suffering as an affront to our humanity" (p. 164).

## THE GIFT OF FREEDOM

Although all three collections emphasize that human freedom is first and foremost a gift of God rather than a right or presupposition of human existence, this theme of giftedness is most profoundly worked out in the learned, demanding, and yet deeply rewarding essays compiled in Reinhard Hütter's, *Bound to be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004, 324 pp., \$28.00). Here in twelve essays Hütter explores the deep connections between Church, freedom, and truthful speech, notions which, far from being at odds with each other as we normally suppose, mutually interpenetrate each other. Because no brief summary can possibly do justice to

Hütter's carefully crafted and closely argued essays, I will highlight only a few insights he offers that enrich our understanding of human freedom.

In Part One, "Free to Be Church," Hütter argues convincingly that the Church is only free to be what it has been called to be—the eschatological gathering of the people of God who bear embodied witness of God's salvific economy—if it is bound to a particular set of normative doctrines and practices through which the Holy Spirit transformatively works. Though Hütter

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is well aware of the modern aversion to anything "binding," especially "dogma," he wisely sees that the alternative is to make everything a matter of personal choice, which leads not to greater freedom, but to what he calls a "Babylonian exile into privacy" (p. 41) and the inevitable reduction of the Church to simply another private and irrelevant religious association.

As Hütter insists repeatedly, but particularly in Part

Two, "Free to Live with God," all of this matters because "genuine freedom denotes the truthful enactment of created existence" (p. 113), which is nothing less than participation in the divine life, as well as in the divine mission of service to our neighbor. Furthermore, this freedom has a particular shape, a form found in God's commandments, preeminently shown in the first commandment, which teaches us that we are creatures. Thus, rather than the law and commandments being opposed to freedom, rightly understood, they are in fact the very form of freedom that liberates us to desire our ultimate good.

Finally in Part Three, "Free to Speak Ecumenically," Hütter offers three relatively brief examples of concrete reflections on church documents in which he seeks to speak truthfully and ecumenically in service of the gospel and the unity of the Church. If the "very core of any positive freedom...is the truth" (p. 177), as Hütter suggests, then the unity of the Church and the practice of truth-telling cannot be set in opposition as they so often are. These truth-telling essays echo and build upon Hütter's point made earlier in the volume where he displays beautifully the interrelationship between the practice of hospitality and truth-telling by bringing into conversation C. S. Lewis's *Great Divorce* and Luke's story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

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**LIBERATING FREEDOM FROM ITS MODERN CAPTIVITY**

Taken together, these three collections offer us a powerful account of the nature of genuine human freedom. At a minimum, they rightly underscore how desperately we as Christians need to recover a robust and theologically-informed notion of positive freedom (freedom *for*) to counter-balance the atomizing and alienating effects of living in a society that conjures “freedom” almost exclusively as negative freedom (freedom *from*). Indeed, in a society where negative freedom stands as the only common value, and where we are urged to employ that freedom primarily to cut ourselves off from God, from one another, and from meaningful and responsible interaction with the rest of the created order, Christian theology – “because it is free to talk about more than freedom” (Meilaender, p. 11) – may have something vitally important to say and embody before a world bent on defacing, if not erasing, its own humanity.

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