



Christian Reflection
A Series in Faith and Ethics

Christian Reflection
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Study Guides for Freedom

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to help us go beyond popular notions of political and moral freedom to explore the rich idea of freedom for loving God, people, and the created order. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

Freedom and Belonging 2

Freedom is so potent a word today that it can be dangerous. Indeed, some ways of understanding and practicing freedom make it destructive of community. How can resources in Scripture and Christian tradition help us construct a positive relationship between freedom and belonging?

Paul's Assessment of Freedom 4

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.

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We should be critical of the modern idolatry of autonomy even as we continue to be skeptical about unchecked authority. But if freedom as detachment does not produce real freedom and if authority as coercion only feeds resentment, what alternative vision can the Church offer?

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As freedom becomes the single ambition that possesses Hazel Motes – the protagonist in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* – freedom's competing definitions dramatically play out through plot twists and turns. "Freedom cannot be conceived simply," O'Connor notes. "It is a mystery and one which a novel...can only be asked to deepen."

The Baptist Contribution to Liberty 10

Any contemporary view of religious freedom that isolates and internalizes faith is contrary to the freedom envisioned by the early Baptists who called for religious liberty. They aimed to create a distinct people whose lives were disciplined by and bound to God and one another.



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Focus Article:

📖 Freedom and Belonging
(*Freedom*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Article:

📖 The Nature of Christian
Freedom
(*Freedom*, pp. 82-87)

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Freedom and Belonging

Freedom is such a potent, even a magic, word today that it can be dangerous. Indeed, some ways of understanding and practicing freedom make it destructive of community.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Exodus 3:7-10

Responsive Reading (based on 1 Peter 2:9-10, 16)

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people,

in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; **once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy.**

As servants of God, live as free people.

May we not use our freedom as a pretext for evil.

Reflection

"The Hebrews are freed from slavery to the Pharaoh so that they might find their true freedom in service to Yahweh as a holy people, a nation where everyone gets to be a priest," observes Will Willimon. Scripture teaches that like them, we are called to be "servants of God" in a "royal priesthood" to serve one another and the creation. Yet the divine commission includes a stern warning: "do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil" (1 Peter 2:16b). This apostolic council, Richard Bauckham notes, may be difficult for us to understand and obey in the contemporary context of "hyper-individualism and decline of social obligation."

To praise those aspects of freedom that remind us of our dignity, Bauckham writes: "The notion of human rights – though it is probably not a matter of self-evident universal values as the Enlightenment believed – has proved very useful legally and internationally." But he warns that freedom is susceptible to the following interpretations and uses that undermine community:

- ▶ *Freedom from all limits* displays "a Promethean tendency...to suppose that all given limits can be transcended and abolished." We think that the more freedom we have to determine our lives the better. When we see other people and society as limits to overcome, we think: "my freedom really would be increased if I denied other people their freedom, overruled their freedom, and subjected them to my will." We reduce obligations to others to "an entirely negative form: do what you like so long as you do not harm anyone else."
- ▶ *Freedom as maximal independence* seems like an innate capacity, not something received from and enhanced by others. We become "unwilling to make long-term commitments or to stick with relationships or situations that are not going well." We prefer to keep our options open, to be free to move on.
- ▶ *Freedom as consumer choice* values merely "having the choice, not making the right choice, not choosing well or rightly," he says. This attitude "can be a means of commercial manipulation



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cloaking itself in the illusion of freedom. But probably the worst manifestation of a consumer culture occurs when the model of consumer choice is applied to things other than those we purchase, such as choosing our moral values.”

- ▶ *Freedom as domination* occurs when we value freedoms that are possible only because others are denied freedoms. Since it “can cloak oppression and justify selfishness,” every appeal to freedom “deserves a lot more critical attention than our society usually affords it.”

Bauckham finds in Scripture and Christian tradition two themes to construct a positive relationship between freedom and belonging. First, freedom is a finite good that we receive as a gift, ultimately from God, “but also in the concrete circumstances of life it is given by social structures and traditions and by other people.” We should live in grateful interdependence with others and within the limits determined by God’s creation. Second, freedom is relational – it is freedom *for* serving the common good. True freedom is possible, he concludes, only when people can “transcend their supposedly autonomous, self-sufficient, wholly self-determining selves, and find their true selves in relation to God – the truly determinative reality that graciously gives to us selves that subsist in freedom and relationships.”

Study Questions

1. How do significant features of society today – pluralism, hyper-individualism, consumerism, and decline of social obligation – reshape how we understand and practice freedom?
2. Discuss differences between freedom from and freedom for.
3. How does Richard Bauckham use themes from Scripture and Christian tradition to construct a positive relationship between individual freedom and belonging to one another?
4. Philip Kenneson writes, “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.” Do you agree? If so, how should we be careful today when we use the language of freedom?

Departing Hymn: “Go Down, Moses” (vv. 1, 4, and 9)

When Israel was in Egypt’s land,
(Let my people go!)
oppressed so hard they could not stand.
(Let my people go!)
*Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land,
tell old Pharaoh: Let my people go.*

The Lord told Moses what to do,
(Let my people go!)
to lead the Hebrew children through.
(Let my people go!) *Refrain.*

Lord, help us all from bondage flee,
(Let my people go!)
and let us all in Christ be free.
(Let my people go!) *Refrain.*

African American Spiritual
Tune: GO DOWN, MOSES



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Focus Article:

📖 Paul's Assessment of Christian Freedom
(*Freedom*, pp. 19-27)

Suggested Article:

📖 Freedom
(*Freedom*, pp. 74-77)

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Paul's Assessment of Christian Freedom

In an awkward but memorable phrase, the Apostle 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.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Galatians 5:1, 13-15

Reflection

Though we immediately resonate with Paul's reminder to the Galatian Christians that they "were called to freedom" (5:13a), it is easy for us to misunderstand the Christian liberty that he commends to them. Today many people often think of freedom "as the maximum ability to choose whatever life I want to live with a minimum of external attachments," Will Willimon observes. "A person who is externally determined, who lacks freedom of choice, who has succumbed to any limitations upon self-expression is hardly a person." But can this self-determining individualism be what the Apostle had in mind for the Galatians?

Bruce Longenecker explores Paul's gospel of freedom, especially in his letters to Christians in Galatia, Rome, and Corinth. Returning each time to Galatians 5:13, Longenecker uncovers three levels of meaning in the Apostle's teaching.

▶ *Freedom from moral libertinism.* Paul was urging the gentile Christians in Galatia to resist "enslavement" to certain applications of the Torah—like the rules for food or requirement of circumcision that had caused a rift in Antioch (Galatians 3). By their faithful obedience to Christ, they were already heirs of Abraham (3:15-18), like children of the "free woman" Sarah instead of the "slave woman" Hagar (4:21-31).

Paul's teaching on freedom was misinterpreted. Christians in Corinth concluded "I have the right to do anything" (1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23). Some believers in Rome slandered Paul by claiming he taught "Let us do evil that good may result" (Romans 3:8; cf. 6:1, 15); these ethical libertines presumed on God's grace toward sinners—"We can do anything we want, because God will forgive us." Paul says about people who misrepresent the gospel this way: "Their condemnation is deserved!" (Romans 3:8). Notice how Paul includes his response in Galatians 5:13, where he warns "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence."

▶ *Freedom from self-interest.* Paul puts this condemnation of libertinism into cosmic context in Romans. Adam's act of sin opened the door for suprahuman powers of Sin (Romans 3:9) and Death (5:12-21) to wreak havoc in God's good creation. These powers hijacked the God-given law to serve their purposes (7:7-25; cf. 8:2). Though we were "slaves of sin" (6:20), through baptism we are "freed from sin" (6:7, 18, 20, 22). This does not mean we are free to commit sins; rather we are to be "slaves of righteousness" (6:18; cf. 6:20, 22). "Although Christians do not observe the law,



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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," Longenecker writes. Sin can externalize and twist God's law into temptations to "all kinds of covetousness" (Romans 7:8), but the Spirit inspires patterns of love that (inadvertently) fulfill the law. Notice how Paul includes this idea in Galatians 5:13, saying "through love become slaves to one another." In sinful coveting the Galatians might "bite and devour one another" (5:15); the gospel frees them for self-giving.

- ▶ *Enslavement to one another.* Paul's image of our becoming "slaves" is startling, but essential. It corrects the moral chaos that Paul encountered in Corinth. "Over and over, [the Corinthian Christians] interpreted their freedom in Christ along individualistic lines, without regard to the health of the Christian community," Longenecker notes. They employed spiritual gifts for personal advantage (1 Corinthians 13) and ate meat from pagan rituals without regard for how this practice influenced other believers (1 Corinthians 8:1-13).

Yet after the Corinthians allowed God to align their practices with the gospel, Paul praises their transformation into self-sacrificing Christlikeness through the Spirit of freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Likewise, he commends this renovation of the heart to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (2:20). As they are crucified with Christ, they become the means for the self-giving Christ to live through them, serving others.

Paul's strange claim that "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free" is clarified by this relationship between salvation and ethics. "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," Longenecker concludes. "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."

Study Questions

1. Consider how the God-given law could be misused to enslave someone. How could a person follow the law's letter and still be bound by Sin and Death?
2. How did moral libertines in the churches in Corinth and Rome misunderstand Paul's teaching? Is their mistake still a danger in congregations today?
3. How does Paul's oft-used description of the Church as "the body of Christ" (Romans 7:4 and 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30) illuminate his view that Christian freedom is not individualistically configured?
4. Discuss Will Willimon's remark: "At the heart of the Christian life is a holy paradox: the more securely we are tethered to Christ, the more obedient we are to his way rather than the world's ways, the more free we become. Or as Jesus put it, 'If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.'"

Departing Hymn: "A Hymn for Freedom"



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Focus Article:

📖 Authority, Autonomy, and the Freedom to Love
(*Freedom*, pp. 28-35)

Suggested Article:

📖 A Picture of Freedom
(*Freedom*, pp. 78-81)

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Authority and the Freedom to Love

We should be critical of the modern idolatry of autonomy even as we continue to be skeptical about unchecked authority. But if freedom as detachment does not produce real freedom and if authority as coercion only feeds resentment, what alternative vision can the Church offer?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: John 8:31-38

Meditation†

Freedom is not absolute self-sufficiency.... First of all, our choices must really be free – that is to say they must perfect us in our own being. They must perfect us in our relation to other free beings. We must make the choices that enable us to fulfill the deepest capacities of our real selves. From this flows the second difficulty: we too easily assume that we *are* our real selves, and that our choices are really the ones we want to make when, in fact, our acts of free choice are...largely dictated by psychological compulsions, flowing from our inordinate ideas of our own importance. Our choices are too often dictated by our false selves.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

Reflection

No wonder we are suspicious of authority at every level – in cities, congregations, families, and friendships. The modern picture of life together, as basically a contest of competing wills, throws freedom and authority into a moral standoff. Freedom appears dangerous because “we know that our fallen selves are always tempted to act out of self-interest, to sacrifice others for our desires, to justify the pursuit of selfish ends in the name of choice,” Scott Bader-Saye notes, but authority looks even worse! We suspect obedience would be foolish because authority is just “a cover for self-interested abuse of power” by those who wield it. Thus, we tend to vibrate: wary of authority, we embrace socially destructive forms of freedom; but the distaste of anarchy throws us right back into the grip of abusive leaders.

The root problem is “we have detached both authority and obedience from a common source and goal,” he writes. “Having given up on the belief in a public and reasonable truth about the world, we are left with only competing desires and opinions. Lacking the ability to persuade (because we lack a common vision) we turn instead to manipulation, ‘spin,’ and intimidation.”

Bader-Saye helps us “reframe authority and obedience as a shared pursuit of goodness and truth that issues in a perfect freedom and fulfills the self in the service of God.”

- ▶ *True freedom is the capacity to become who we are created to be, not an arbitrary license to choose.* Autonomy (or self-rule) can quickly devolve into “captivity to desires that fail to be directed to any good outside of themselves.” Bader-Saye observes that when Jesus tells his disciples they will be free (John 8:31b-32), “freedom is not the starting point, the place of pure neutrality from which we make choices. Rather, freedom is the end point, an achieve-



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ment of the soul; it is the result of formation in the word and practices of discipleship.”

- ▶ *True authority is power to persuade, not coerce.* God’s authority is not ‘freedom’ to make arbitrary commands, but freedom to be true to God’s self. Bader-Saye says “arbitrary power is a mark of the demonic not the divine.” Human authority should be “power that is transparent to God and thus dispossessed of purely private interests. Humans are never simply and properly rulers over one another except insofar as we mediate God’s rule to one another (Romans 13:1).”
- ▶ *True obedience is participation in a common mind, a common love.* If Christ is the head (Ephesians 4:25, 5:23; Colossians 1:18), our leadership should be “drawn into his wisdom, to participate in the logos, the very mind and reality of God that became incarnate in Jesus.... Faithful authority, then, will always require persuasion – giving reasons and exchanging arguments.” Since the members of Christ’s body, the Church, have many gifts, “Each person in the community bears an authority in relation to their area of giftedness. Each one, then, becomes at different times both leader and follower.”

This view does not “focus authority on moving the will rather than persuading the mind,...reduce authority to management,... [or mistake] choice for a good in itself,” Bader-Saye notes. “It counters all of these with a vision of true freedom as the *telos* of discipleship, the capacity to do the good and thus, beyond authority and obedience, to become friends of God.”

Study Questions

1. Why do we tend to think personal freedom and obedience to authority are in conflict, and may be incompatible?
2. What role should reason play in our obedience to human authority? Consider why Bader-Saye thinks employing reason is consistent with obedience to God. Do you agree?
3. Consider what it means for a congregation and its leaders to share “the mind of Christ”? Do you think this model of authority and obedience is transferable to leadership in friendships, families, organizations, and cities?
4. Identify common themes in the hymn “Make Me a Captive, Lord” and the quote from Thomas Merton. How are these grounded in Jesus’ promise of freedom in John 8:31b-32?

Departing Hymn: “Make Me a Captive, Lord” (vv. 1a and 2)

Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free;
force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.

My heart is weak and poor until it master find;
it has no spring of action sure, it varies with the wind.

It cannot freely move till you have forged its chain;
enslave it with your matchless love, and deathless it shall reign.

George Matheson (1842-1906), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. MICHAEL or TRENTHAM

† Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (Gethsemani, KY: The Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1955), 24-25.



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Focus Article:

- 📖 Deepening the Mystery of Freedom
(*Freedom*, pp. 64-73)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 Under Assault
(*Freedom*, pp. 44-47)

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Deepening the Mystery of Freedom

As freedom becomes the single ambition that possesses Hazel Motes – the protagonist in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* – freedom’s competing definitions dramatically play out through plot twists and turns. “Freedom cannot be conceived simply,” O’Connor observes. “It is a mystery and one which a novel...can only be asked to deepen.”

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

Meditation†

All of us are made according to the image of God. But only those who through great love have enslaved their own freedom to God are in his likeness. When we no longer belong to ourselves, then we are similar to him who has reconciled us to himself through love.

Diadochus of Photikē (5th Century)

Reflection

In her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964) deepens the mystery of freedom by contrasting two views of it through the extreme life of Hazel Motes: a popular modern view of freedom as personal autonomy and a Christian view that accepts our limitations as creatures made in God’s image, living in a world that is divinely ordered.

Since O’Connor believes every free act is significant for leading us either toward or away from our true end, she does not neutrally depict the differences between these views or seek some compromise between them. Rather, she shows that the modern freedom of autonomy is imprisoning because it is based on the illusion that we can control our lives. O’Connor depicts how accepting Christ’s gift of freedom (along with our creaturely limitations) enables us to become our true selves, the people God made us to be. Her protagonist Hazel Motes eventually comes to understand this positive conception of freedom through the back door, by his failure to achieve the impossible autonomous freedom he so desperately seeks.

Hazel’s striving for autonomy degenerates as he grows older:

- ▶ *As a child* Hazel believes his family’s teaching that Jesus shed his blood for our sins, but he does not willingly accept this gift of salvation. Instead, he does everything he can to avoid it. By carefully controlling his desires and managing his experiences, Hazel tries to live a perfect life that limits how much he is indebted to Christ’s saving work on the cross and reduces his need for anything external to his own capacities.
- ▶ *As an adolescent* Hazel’s longing for autonomy undergoes a radical transition when he is drafted into the army and new friends give him very different ideas about God and humanity. No longer must he futilely strive against his family’s Christian perspective; instead he embraces a view of reality that is compatible with his desire for freedom as autonomy. Hazel becomes a nihilist: he believes there is no God and devil to choose between (since



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nothing is valuable at all) and he has no immortal soul (because it is only a burden, making him indebted to God for its perfection).

- ▶ *As an adult* Hazel moves to the big city and preaches his newfound nihilism – starting what he calls the Church Without Christ. However, he discovers “The Church Without Christ don’t have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new Jesus...one that’s all man, without blood to waste.” His belief in nothing becomes focused on what human beings can do for themselves – apart from any prescribed goal or *telos*.

Hazel Motes does not gain the autonomous freedom he longs for, and cannot escape his attraction to the Christian view of reality taught to him as a child. His thinking is haunted by Christ, even when he proclaims, “Nothing matters but that Jesus don’t exist.” Ironically, Hazel’s proclamation implies that Jesus Christ’s existence is what matters most, if anything matters at all.

For modern readers who think belief in Christ is no great matter, “Hazel’s integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind,” O’Connor notes in her introduction to the novel. “For the author Hazel’s integrity lies in his not being able to.”

Study Questions

1. Contrast the two views of freedom that Flannery O’Connor explores in *Wise Blood*. What is most valuable on each view?
2. Review the extreme nihilistic ideas that Hazel Motes preaches in the Church Without Christ. How do they parody some popular ideas of freedom in American culture?
3. With the meditation of Diadochus of Photikē as your guide, reflect on 2 Corinthians 3:17-18. How does this apostolic teaching relate to O’Connor’s vision of Christian freedom that freely embraces creaturely limitation?
4. How does Martin Schongauer depict the spiritual freedom of St. Anthony the Great of Egypt (c. 251-356) in the etching *Saint Anthony Abbot Tempted by Demons*? Contrast the saint’s freedom to the autonomy that Hazel Motes seeks.

Departing Hymn: “Make Me a Captive, Lord” (vv. 1a and 4)

Make me a captive, Lord, and then I shall be free;
force me to render up my sword, and I shall conqueror be.
My will is not my own till you have made it yours;
if it would reach a monarch’s throne, it must its crown abjure.

It only stands unbent amid the clashing strife,
when on your bosom it has leant, and found in you its life.

George Matheson (1842-1906), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. MICHAEL or TRENTHAM

† Diadochus of Photikē, *Discourses on Judgment and Spiritual Discernment*, chapter 4, in Cliff Ermatinger, trans., *Following the Footsteps of the Invisible: The Complete Works of Diadochus of Photikē* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).



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Focus Article:

- 📖 The Baptist Contribution to Liberty
(*Freedom*, pp. 36-43)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 The Field of Experience and Sensation
(*Freedom*, pp. 48-52)
- 📖 The Field of Experience and Sensation
(*Freedom*, pp. 88-93)

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The Baptist Contribution to Liberty

Any contemporary view of religious freedom that isolates and internalizes faith is contrary to the freedom envisioned by the early Baptists who called for religious liberty. They aimed to create a distinct people whose lives were disciplined by and bound to God and one another.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 12:1-19

Reflection

Peter's miraculous liberation from prison has long served as an emblem of religious liberty. The believers in Jerusalem had singled out King Herod and Pontius Pilate as political leaders who conspired against Jesus (Acts 4:27); now the King was laying "violent hands upon some who belonged to the church" (Acts 12:1). After ordering that James, the brother of John, be "killed with the sword," Herod imprisoned Peter for preaching the gospel about Christ. Raphael's wonderful fresco *The Liberation of St. Peter* (1513) – shown on the cover of *Freedom* – interprets Peter's miraculous release as a sign that God will continue to protect the Church from rapacious political leaders of the artist's day.

In the seventeenth century, near the beginning of the modern political era, English Baptists played a significant role in seeking religious liberty for all people. Though we admire their courage, we often misunderstand their reasoning and goal, Jason Whitt observes. "Contemporary accounts of religious freedom that isolate the individual from all sources of authority save for personal reason betray a deep influence from Enlightenment thought rather than Baptist origins," he writes. And such views – which suggest we are "isolated individuals whose faith is solely interiorized and who have no true connection with fellow believers other than our voluntary and changeable associations with them" – are far from what the early Baptists intended.

Whitt highlights key differences between the early English Baptist and contemporary views of religious freedom.

- ▶ *The early English Baptist appeals for religious liberty* were radical for restricting the state's power to civil matters. They said the state had no authority to compel religious belief, because this would "usurp not the rights of the autonomous human individual, but the sovereignty of God," Whitt writes. Baptists had three concerns. Appealing to the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), they said since God withheld judgment on disbelief until "the end of the age" (13:40), the authorities should do likewise. When a state excludes unbelievers from public life – or worse, tortures or kills them – it abridges God's freedom to redeem resistant souls even up to the "harvest time" (13:30). Baptists also argued that the state compelling religious practice caused unbelievers to commit grave sins of hypocrisy. And they gave a very practical reason: enforcing religious practice will cause unbelievers to avoid coming to the country, and thereby limit the opportunities for faithful evangelistic witness to them.

Baptists sought "freedom for God's activity of calling all



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people to salvation such that persons move from the world into the Church—the society in which Christ’s authority is recognized as ultimate,” Whitt concludes. Correlated with this is true human freedom—not each person being autonomous (literally, a “law to one’s self”), but permitted to join “a disciplining body that forms in its members those practices of living that...are consistent with the kingdom ethic.”

- ▶ *A very different view of religious freedom is common today.* It begins with the idea that “liberty belongs to the individual’s will, which is free only when it is not bound by any constraints greater than itself. Its sole authority is that individual’s unaided reason, which Enlightenment thinkers assume is innate (i.e., it exists prior to any social conventions, traditions, or religious beliefs), universal (i.e., the same in all human beings), and neutral (i.e., not unduly influenced by or in the service of any moral perspective).” One may have any religious belief one chooses, but it should play no role in public debate. John Locke famously writes in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), “the Care of Souls is not committed to the Civil Magistrates...” —a view early Baptists would readily accept—but he continues “...any more than to other Men.” Thus, caring for souls is not the business of the state, but neither is it the concern of anyone else, including the Church! Such “radical individualizing of the Christian faith was foreign to the earliest Baptists who understood the Church as a disciplined and disciplining community,” Whitt writes.

The modern approach to religious freedom stands opposed to the witness of Scripture and Christian tradition that it is God who chooses us, not we who choose God. And it distorts the body of Christ. “When freedom is confused with the unhindered play of our desires, Christian faith is reduced to an unmediated one-on-one relationship between God and the individual believer. The Church becomes secondary,” Whitt concludes. Since “each individual is autonomous, living a faith disconnected from anyone else or any authority other than one’s own reason, the ecclesial communion is not essential to anyone’s salvation.”

Study Questions

1. How were the early English Baptist appeals for religious liberty more concerned with protecting God’s sovereignty (and opportunities for God’s people to cooperate in God’s purposes) than with advancing individuals’ rights and freedoms?
2. What are the essential differences between the early Baptist and the contemporary views of religious liberty? On each view, what do we need to be free *from*? To be free *for*?
3. Contrast the role of the Church, the gathered community of the body of Christ, in the early Baptist and the contemporary views of religious liberty.
4. According to Heidi Hornik, how does Raphael’s fresco *Liberation of St. Peter* develop a typology of divine liberation from tyranny? How was it interpreted in the fifteenth century? What can we learn from it today?

Departing Hymn: “A Hymn for Freedom”

Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

Freedom and Belonging

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To recognize the positive contribution of the language of freedom in the modern world.
2. To examine some ways of understanding and practicing freedom today that can undermine community.
3. To sketch a positive relationship between individual freedom and community by drawing upon themes in Scripture and the Christian tradition.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Freedom (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Go Down, Moses” locate the familiar tune GO DOWN, MOSES in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Comment

To illustrate how modern thinkers aspire to absolute freedom, Richard Bauckham quotes this famous and remarkable passage in which philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) imagines God speaking to Adam:

The nature of other creatures, which has been determined, is confined within the bounds prescribed by us. You, who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will.... We have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that, more freely and more honourably the moulder and maker of yourself, you may fashion yourself in whatever form you shall prefer....

Pico summarizes the “sublime generosity of God” to human beings through Adam in this way: “To him it was granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills.”

Bauckham observes that “What Pico has really done in this passage, following the tendency of the Italian Renaissance to treat humanity as a god, is transfer to human beings a theological understanding of God as the absolutely self-determining reality” (*Freedom*, p. 13). As this idea of freedom from all limits becomes the ultimate value in our hyper-individualist society, Bauckham worries that it will be a barrier to belonging and eventually destructive of freedom itself.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for the gift of freedom in your community that is rooted in dependence on God and in relationship with one another and creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Exodus 3:7-10 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Reflection

In this opening study Richard Bauckham distinguishes some ways of understanding and practicing freedom today, and shows how several of them—freedom from limits, freedom (independence) from other people, and freedom as unlimited consumer choice—are destructive of community. This allows him to highlight two distinctive themes of a Christian theory of freedom—namely, freedom has limits and freedom is relational. The next three study guides articulate the Christian view in more detail by outlining its relationship to Christ's saving actions ("Paul's Assessment of Christian Freedom"), proper authority and obedience ("Authority and the Freedom to Love"), and discipline in the Church ("The Baptist Contribution to Liberty").

Study Questions

1. Richard Bauckham suggests that hyper-individualism and the decline of social obligation have led many people to believe that freedom and community (or the human need to be independent and the human need to belong) are incompatible. The problem does not arise from the core idea that all human beings have dignity and human rights, but from two other interpretations of freedom in the modern era—that we can and should have no limits in determining our own lives and we should be independent of others.

Consumerism plays an important role by urging us to see everything (not just consumer products, but relationships, commitments, and moral values) as things that we can and should select. Pluralism tempts us to see freedom of choice as the only value that people share, and reduce morality to the lowest-common-denominator of not harming one another.

Bauckham notes these distortions of freedom are also encouraged by social circumstances such as increased mobility, the need to travel for education and work, and so on.

2. The contemporary ideas of freedom Bauckham critiques emphasize freedom *from* something—other people, tradition, institutions, limited consumer options, and so on—that are barriers to our self-determination. He writes, "The contemporary concept of freedom is deficient in having no real idea of what freedom is for. When freedom is the only value, it becomes no more than having the choice to do whatever one chooses, which in itself is entirely without value. What I choose to do with my freedom could be wholly destructive to myself as well as to others. For freedom to be worth anything we have to have notions about what it is good to choose. Once we see this truth, the tension with community disappears. Freedom is for the common good."
3. Bauckham emphasizes two themes from Scripture and Christian tradition. The first theme is that freedom is *finite* in several ways: we are given freedom as a gift by God and by other human beings; and our freedom is meant to be exercised in dependence upon God and interdependence with other human beings and the wider creation. He writes, "In a well-functioning community we are not restrictions on each other's freedom, but enable each other's freedom. Freedom is not a zero-sum game, so that the more freedom I have the less you have. The more freedom we give each other the more we all have."

The second theme is that freedom is *relational* in the sense that it is freedom *for* something, or in relation to something. The object of freedom is the realization of our true selves that God intended, our creaturely participation in the unfolding story of God's kingdom. This makes it clear how freedom supports the common good and enables community.

4. Philip Kenneson's point can be illustrated with the contrasts that Bauckham draws between various forms of freedom *from* and his constructive Christian account of what freedom is *for*. Kenneson notes other contrasts in his review essay.

"Rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) should be a pattern of life for all Christians. If we fail to emphasize the gospel call to freedom, we will be delinquent; but if we are not careful in stating it, we will be widely misunderstood. Encourage members to identify some ways in which church members and others misrepresent Christian freedom. Some of these will be addressed in the next study guides.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Paul's Assessment of Christian Freedom

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Galatians 5:1, 13-15	Romans 7:1-6 and 12:1-8
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Distinguish Paul's view of Christian freedom from moral libertinism and self-interest	Explore the meaning of being "slaves to one another" within the body of Christ
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 2	Questions 3 and 4
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To articulate the gospel of Christian freedom expressed in the Apostle Paul's letters.
2. To distinguish Christian freedom from hyper-individualism and moral libertinism.
3. To consider what it means to "become slaves to one another" in the Church.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Freedom (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

The Apostle Paul jars us in Galatians 5:13. After reminding the Galatian Christians that they are "called to be free," he tells them to "enslave themselves" to each other in humble and practical acts of love. The seven times that Paul has mentioned slavery previous to this verse, it describes a condition the Galatians have been freed from and should not return to.

Commenting on this passage, Carolyn Osiek observes, "Paul understands freedom not as the opportunity to pursue one's own interests but to be even more at the service of others. That this is costly service can be seen in the fact that in this charter of Christian freedom he also refers frequently to the cross.... Paul may be doing something quite radical here: he is holding up traditionally feminine values as ideals for everyone, male and female.... Women too need to appropriate these values, but they need also to balance this ideal carefully against their legitimate psychological needs. Bearing the cross in freedom does not mean enduring abuse and victimhood, but living genuinely for others out of one's own inner freedom by claiming the inheritance of the 'sons of God.'" (Carolyn Osiek, "Galatians" in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded edition [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998], 427)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for guidance in interpreting the gospel of Christian freedom in the Apostle Paul's letters.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Galatians 5:1, 13-15 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study continues to articulate the Christian view of freedom by outlining its relationship to Christ's saving actions. Bruce Longenecker helpfully keeps the focus on Galatians 5:13, but he outlines the Apostle Paul's teachings on freedom elsewhere in Galatians and in the letters to the Roman and the Corinthian congregations. If you would like to extend the discussion of these passages to two sessions, you might divide the material this

way. In one session, consider what Christians are freed *from*—the “enslaving” relationships to the God-given law and the cosmic powers of Sin and Death—by the saving actions of God in Jesus Christ. In the second session, discuss how Christians are freed *for* becoming slaves to one another. You can integrate some of Will Willimon’s insights into each of these sessions.

Study Questions

1. Paul does not say we should ignore God’s law. Rather than “overthrow the law” (Romans 3:31), Paul wants to “uphold” it. He says “the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin” (7:14). That is, in this world that is infected and damaged by the cosmic powers of Sin and Death, we are constantly tempted to misuse every good thing (even the law). Earlier in Romans, Paul complains that Gentiles boast about gaining wisdom and virtue on their own (or their community’s) effort: they fail “to honor [the Creator] as God or give thanks to him.... Claiming to be wise, they became fools” (1:21-22). Similarly, it is possible for a Jewish person to “boast” in being given the law by God (even though one does not obey it, except in an external way of being circumcised) (2:17-23).

Bruce Longenecker notes how church reformers used Paul’s insight to counter a similar twisting of the good practice of repentance: “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 [through ‘indulgences’].”

2. Longenecker uses “libertinism” to describe Christians who believed they were free from all moral restraints. Some even claimed that they should continue to sin in order that God would have opportunities to display grace in forgiving them (Romans 3:8 and 6:1, 15). They misunderstood their freedom from certain applications of the law—food restrictions and circumcision—to mean they could (or should) do whatever they want.

Encourage members to think about how Christians today expect God to grant what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace”—forgiveness for their sins with no expectation of spiritual and moral reformation. Do the patterns of sin differ according to the person’s generation, or gender, or background? To what extent is such libertinism based on wanting to be like and, thus, accepted by others in the wider culture?

3. As members of the *body* of Christ, we have some role (large or small) to play in enhancing the community. A concrete example is Paul’s instruction regarding the eating of meat used in a sacrifice to a pagan god. Longenecker says: “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).”

As members of the body of *Christ*, our patterns of thinking, perceiving, caring, and acting are being changed to be more like Christ (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). “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.”

4. In John 8:36 Jesus says that he frees his disciples—those who “continue in my word” (John 8:31)—from slavery to sin. This means, Will Willimon writes, that true freedom is not something we possess, but is “a gift of God; it is grace that only God can give. There is no freedom to be who God means us to be, no freedom from sin and from the alluring servitudes of this world except in servitude to Christ” (*Freedom*, p. 77). He compares Christ’s disciples to the Hebrews who were freed from slavery in Egypt: in both cases God frees them from enslavement to other powers so that they can find true freedom in service to one another.

Why is this “a holy *paradox*”? We value freedom *from*, and rarely do we consider what freedom is *for*. (When we think of it at all, we tend to think we have been freed *for* doing anything we want.) Encourage members to relate this paradox to the Apostle Paul’s teaching: “through love become slaves to one another” (Galatians 5:13). Paul suggests that Christian freedom is *for* a relationship of mutual, loving service that is unimpeded by all forms of covetousness—e.g., lust for power, fear of dependence, desire for superiority.

Departing Hymn

“A Hymn for Freedom” is on pp. 53-54 of *Freedom*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Authority and the Freedom to Love

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider why modern people tend to think personal freedom and obedience to authority are in conflict and may be incompatible.
2. To articulate a Christian vision of true freedom, authority, and obedience.
3. To reflect on the nature of proper human authority in congregations, and to apply this model to friendships, families, institutions, and governments.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Freedom (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Make Me a Captive, Lord” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. MICHAEL or TRENTHAM in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

Our modern distrust of authority traces to our dislike for dependence. Matt Cook recalls how his thinking was challenged by Sister Jean Stewart, a nurse who cares for people who live in the cardboard shanties at the edge of Johannesburg, South Africa. She introduced Matt to one of her patients. “In her late twenties, she had three children. After her husband cheated on her with a prostitute, he had come home and transmitted to her the AIDS virus. She was at the point of death when Jean gave her the powerful new class of drugs that can turn HIV into a chronic disease rather than a death sentence.

“‘I have so much to be thankful for,’ the woman told us. ‘God is so good to me!’

“After we walked away, Jean could tell that I was somewhere between intrigued and puzzled. ‘That woman is happy,’ said Jean ‘because she has learned that no matter what else is taken from her, she can always depend on God.’ Jean kept going...right on to my toes! With a gentle smile she said, ‘in my experience the problem with wealthy people is that sometimes we have so much, we don’t even realize that we’re always trying to do things all by ourselves.’

“Is that what freedom looks like: in-dependence?” Cook wondered. “Is freedom the state we arrive at when we can live our lives without having to depend on anyone or anything else? Or is it something else?” (*Freedom*, pp. 78-79)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to draw members into a common mind and love that can recognize and depend on faithful human authority.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read John 8:31-38 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

According to many modern notions of freedom that emphasize autonomy and independence from others, personal freedom is in serious tension (if not incompatible) with obedience to authority. Scott Bader-Saye identifies the key problem as the modern assumption that people share no “common source or goal”; consequently, social relationships cannot be grounded in reason, but they quickly devolve into struggles for power. The alternative he offers is a rich theology of freedom, authority, and obedience that rehabilitates the role of reason (when it has been redirected in faithfulness to God toward a shared pursuit of goodness and truth).

Study Questions

1. We may remember times when our freedom was unjustly abridged by an arbitrary and unchecked authority figure, and times when we resisted wise authority by our unruly free choices. But why do we go beyond this evidence and believe freedom and authority are inevitably in conflict? “The standoff between authority and autonomy arises because modernity teaches us to imagine a world fundamentally shaped by competing wills,” Scott Bader-Saye writes. “In such a world *authority* is simply one will subjecting another, while *autonomy* is simply one will left to its own devices. Having given up on the belief in a public and reasonable truth about the world, we are left with only competing desires and opinions.”
2. When an authority gives an instruction or command, we might ask if obeying is reasonable in some way: the instruction or command (now that we think about it) makes sense; it may not make sense, but we have good reason to trust this authority knows better than we do; our role is such that we owe it to the authority to obey; or, it is a situation in which someone must choose how a group will proceed, and we know this figure is authorized to make the choice. That is, something about the command, the authority figure, our relationship to the authority figure, or the situation makes obeying reasonable. Bader-Saye agrees with Anglican theologian Richard Hooker (1554-1600) that we would be acting “like beasts,” neither knowing nor caring about where we are being led, if we were to obey when it is totally unreasonable (“against or above Reason”). “His point was not that human rationality should stand above the Word of God, but that God’s Word, being true to God’s nature, would be consistent with the deep logic of creation—the same logic, or *logos*, embodied in Christ.”

Some members might object that human thinking is so broken by the Fall or distorted by culture, that we cannot trust our damaged reason to know when obedience is reasonable. The next question explores how God’s grace intervenes to reconstruct damaged reason.

3. When a congregation is graced by God to share “the mind of Christ,” Bader-Saye notes, it has “a common mind ordered to self-giving, kenotic love. Faithful authority, then, will always require persuasion—giving reasons and exchanging arguments. To test human authority by reason is to confess that human authority is justified by its transparency to God’s rule and so must be shown to be consistent with the logic of divine love.” Because individual members of the congregation have different gifts, leaders will share decision making and gather insights “through the authority that is transparent to the mind of Christ—that gives reasons and calls forth reasoning from the entire community.”

Encourage members to discuss how this model is transferable to leadership in friendships, families, organizations, and cities. For instance, in families there may be very unequal knowledge, in cities there must be authorized quick decision making, and so on.

4. Thomas Merton emphasizes that true freedom requires that our choices not be arbitrary, but rather be based in what is true and good—health in ourselves and wholeness in our relationships with others. When compulsions and disordered loves distort our thinking, we are not healthy, but are ruled by our “false selves.” The hymn brings out this theme: we may think we are strong conquerors when we do whatever we want, but we are acting out of a “weak” and feckless heart. Christ’s promises freedom in John 8:31b-32 to those who follow him, who obey his instructions and receive his grace to reorder their thoughts and desires.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

Deepening the Mystery of Freedom

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To contrast two views of freedom explored by Flannery O'Connor in her novel *Wise Blood*—freedom as autonomy from external limitations, and freedom as a welcome embrace of God's gift and creaturely limitations.
2. To consider the cultural critique suggested by the nihilistic sermons of her protagonist, Hazel Motes, in his Church Without Christ.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Freedom (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Make Me a Captive, Lord" locate one of the familiar tunes ST. MICHAEL or TRENTHAM in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Reading from the Novel

Flannery O'Connor recounts one of Hazel Motes' memorable nihilistic sermons:

"The next night, Haze parked the Essex in front of the Odeon Theater and climbed up on it and began to preach. 'Let me tell you what I and this church stand for!' He called from the nose of the car.... 'I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is there's no truth,' he called. 'No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place.'

"'Nothing outside you can give you any place,' he said. 'You needn't to look at the sky because it's not going to open up and show no place behind it.... You can't go neither forwards nor backwards into you daddy's time nor your children's if you have them. In yourself right now is all the place you've got. If there was any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and your body and where in your time and body can they be?'

"'Where in your time and your body has Jesus redeemed you?' he cried. 'Show me where because I don't see the place. If there was a place where Jesus had redeemed you that would be the place for you to be, but which of you can find it?..'

"'Who is that that says it's your conscience?' he cried, looking around.... 'Your conscience is a trick,' he said, 'it don't exist though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it's no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you.'" (Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007], 165-166)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for grace to embrace the limitations inherent for humans beings made in God's image and to grow in his likeness.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This discussion focuses on the depiction of Christian freedom in Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, largely and inversely through the spiritual degeneration of her protagonist Hazel Motes. A grotesque and often hilarious figure, Motes is a modern everyman who seeks personal autonomy without any limitations, including the love and saving action of Jesus Christ. "I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else," O'Connor once wrote in a letter, "and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction to the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times." *Wise Blood* centers on this tension—the concurrent desires to embrace God and to reject God's existence, and the free will that we are given to choose between them.

Study Questions

1. Hazel Motes hilariously seeks freedom as personal autonomy. According to this popular modern idea, freedom is opposed to any external limitation or standard; the free person values independence, self-reliance, and self-invention.
On the Christian view, by contrast, freedom is the positive ability to grow more fully into God's likeness. The free person embraces the limitations inherent in the human condition and seeks to conform to the standards of God's nature over the desires of her personal will. She values the gift of God's grace that allows humans to grow more fully into God's likeness.
These two understandings of freedom are at work in the fictional world of Hazel Motes, but they are also at work in our own. Encourage members to discuss examples of these opposed ideas of freedom in our culture and in their personal experience.
2. Though Hazel Motes is an extreme fictional character, many of his preachments—e.g., that there is only personal truth and thus no absolute truth; that all one needs is a good car—are apparent throughout our consumerist society. Ask members to come up with their own examples. A careful analysis of the sermon excerpt above should produce a fruitful discussion of how his views parody some common assumptions in modern culture.
3. The meditation and the scripture reading express the deep mystery of an active freedom to grow, through God's grace, into likeness to God. Freedom is not negative (i.e., an absence of constraint and influence), but positive (i.e., growth into the structure of limitation which is our identity as human beings made in God's image). In this sense, freedom is not something others can take away from us. We are made in God's image and are free to fill out this natural capacity by growing in likeness to God through participation in our own sanctification, regardless of any external constraint, exploitation, or mistreatment.
Encourage members to discuss what it means to grow in likeness to God. Diadochus of Photikē identifies self-giving love that reconciles our enemies as a mark of likeness to God.
4. Martin Schongauer's *St. Anthony Tempted by Demons* depicts the saint's face as calm even while he is being attacked by terrifying demons. St. Anthony knows what Hazel Motes learns in *Wise Blood*: true freedom is not something that can be hijacked, wrecked, or stolen like a car. Trials of violence and evil cannot take this freedom away from those who embrace it as Christ did on the cross. "Like Anthony, we are not immune to life's temptations," Heidi Hornik and Bob Kruschwitz write. "They are opportunities for faithful obedience and resistance to evil. Through our struggle against them we participate in God's gift of spiritual freedom." By contrast to St. Anthony, Hazel Motes is a driven person who knows he is losing the war against his inner demons of vainglory, anger, and lust, but especially pride.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

The Baptist Contribution to Liberty

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the English Baptist appeals for religious liberty in the seventeenth century.
2. To contrast the early English Baptist view of religious liberty with contemporary accounts of religious freedom.
3. To consider the implications of each view of religious freedom for the privatization of faith and the role of the Church as the gathered body of Christ.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Freedom (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

Seventeenth-century Baptists called for religious liberty in order to carve out 'space' for their life together in Christian communities, uncontrolled by the modern nation state. Jason Whitt explains, "They aimed to create a distinct people whose lives were disciplined by and bound to God and one another."

Is it still important for us to appreciate and embrace this Baptist vision today? Scott Moore reminds us that powerful governments – even those committed to liberal democracy – can easily dominate the life of intermediate institutions.

In the modern world it is often assumed that what is most important about politics can be reduced to statecraft. But *politics* refers to so much more than statecraft.... Politics is about how we order our lives together in the *polis*, whether that is a city, a community, or even a family. It is about how we live together, how we recognize and preserve that which is most important, how we cultivate friendships and educate our children, how we learn to think and talk about what kind of life is really the good life.

(*The Limits of Liberal Democracy: Politics and Religion at the End of Modernity*, p. 15; quoted in *Freedom*, p. 92)

To understand the seventeenth-century Baptist contribution to liberty, we must explore the nature of their communities and their vision of a good life.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for wisdom to properly value and promote religious liberty in all countries.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 12:1-19 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This discussion focuses on how we should understand and appropriate the seventeenth-century English Baptist appeals for religious liberty. It is more than a history lesson however, for the early Baptist view of liberty raises

important questions about the role of religion in public life today and about the role of the Church as a gathered and disciplined community where we are bound to one another in Christ. Encourage members not only to contrast the early Baptist perspective with the view of religious freedom that predominates today, but also to explore which one is more faithful to Scripture and Christian tradition.

Study Questions

1. Jason Whitt highlights three early Baptist appeals for religious liberty: using state power to punish unbelief and to enforce religious practice will short-circuit God's plan to graciously wait for unbelievers' response, cause unbelievers to commit the grave sin of hypocrisy, and discourage unbelievers from joining the society where they might be evangelized. These appeals emphasize God's freedom to save unbelievers without interference from the modern state that would use religious participation for its own purposes.
2. The seventeenth-century English Baptists valued freedom *from* enforced conformity to the national church (for the reasons stated above). They valued freedom *for* "God's activity of calling all people to salvation such that persons move from the world into the Church—the society in which Christ's authority is recognized as ultimate," Whitt writes. They believed "freedom is first God's nature, and only derivatively are humans free as God calls them from bondage to sin that is characteristic of the world, and into God's own freedom that characterizes the Church...a disciplining body that forms in its members those practices of living that do not inhibit this freedom, but are consistent with the kingdom ethic."

The contemporary view of religious liberty sees it as a property of an individual's will. It values freedom *from* any external constraint on religious belief or practice—including the instruction of the Church, other Christians, and tradition. It values freedom *for* following one's own reason and participating (or not) in a congregation as a voluntary association that is like any other group of people who share common interests or cooperate for good works.

3. The contemporary view of religious liberty suggests the Church is a voluntary society one might (or might not) join, because salvation is "an unmediated one-on-one relationship between God and the individual believer." Whitt quotes Curtis Freeman's description: "The individual offers faith and in return God provides salvation. In the economy of this individualistic scheme, salvation is severed from membership in the church, since believers enjoy private fellowship with Christ and must subsequently enter into voluntary fellowship with the church. Christians that choose not to unite with fellow believers may be in violation of the admonition not to neglect meeting together, but their relationship to Christ remains unaffected by their isolation from the church."

The early Baptists viewed the Church as an alternative polity, or community, to the ways of the "world." Within the Church, members grow to freedom as their consciences accept Christ's authority mediated to them through Scripture and church discipline. Early Baptists "called on the king not to preserve individual rights, but to recognize God's sovereignty to call all people to faith. Importantly, they aimed at creating a distinct community, a people whose very lives were disciplined by their participation together in the faith, bound to God and one another. They never sought to uncouple people from one another, as if an individual's faith could exist apart from life in community with other believers."

4. Raphael depicts three critical scenes from the biblical story—the swarm of soldiers guarding the prison door, the sleeping Peter being awakened by the angel, and the freed Peter walking with the angel past the sleeping soldiers—to emphasize that the Apostle's freedom is a gift from God. To make the artwork simultaneously a celebration of a victory for the Church over an invading French army in 1512, Raphael employs contemporary architectural details in the prison and uses the pope's visage to represent Peter's features. Encourage members to think of places in the world today where the Church suffers persecution under tyrants, or has been co-opted by the society for its purposes. How does God act to bring liberty?

Departing Hymn

"A Hymn for Freedom" is on pp. 53-54 of *Freedom*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.