



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

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

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2011 The Center for Christian Ethics

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



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2011 The Center for Christian Ethics

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

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.