



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

📖 Freedom
(*Freedom*, pp. 74-77)

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

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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"

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.