



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

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

Suggested Article:

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

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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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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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.