

weaker consciences. The Apostle Paul repeatedly warns against using one's Christian liberty in an offensive manner. For example: "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block for the weak" (1 Cor. 8:9). Paul is setting forth the principle that although we have freedom in our consciences to do or not do certain things, there are times when we must lay down our freedom voluntarily.

So, those who are rich should not display riches in a way that is offensive to the poor. Those who enjoy alcohol in moderation ought not use it in settings that are likely to cause others to sin.

What Paul is teaching here is that though your freedom with regard to things indifferent is important, it is not as important as the cause of the gospel and the peace of the church. Our individual freedoms must submit to the cause of the Gospel. This was Paul's practice (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1). He says, "I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Cor. 10:33b). In this, he says, follow my example "as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1)

So how did Christ model Christian freedom? Christ never did anything that endangered the spread of the gospel. He who had freedom from every man-made opinion regularly laid his freedom aside so that his message would not be tarnished.

But he did more than that. He freed us from bondage and slavery to sin. He has made us free to freely serve him. Christ has paid for the freedom of his children with his own blood. He has delivered us from Hell and from the fear of Hell. He has cleansed our consciences. Let us use that freedom to serve him as sons for the sake of his honor and glory.

<sup>1</sup> Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 25.

<sup>ii</sup> Lindberg, 58

<sup>iv</sup> Lindberg, 63

<sup>v</sup> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), Book 3, Chapter 19.

<sup>vi</sup> Robin A. Leaver, *Luther on Justification* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975), 11.

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# PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic Christianity  
February 2010 | Volume 1, Number 8

## Christian Freedom

### Liberation from legalism and laziness

*"Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty by which Christ has made us free."* Galatians 5:1



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Imagine that you are no longer in twenty-first century America. Imagine that you have been transported across the Atlantic to Europe and across time to the Middle Ages. The age which you are imagining has rightly been called an age of crisis; a time in which "the awareness of crises...encompassed all social classes, and pervaded [much] of Western Europe."<sup>i</sup>

Much could be said about the crisis of physical living conditions but, in fact, one of the weightiest burdens was a crisis of *conscience and spiritual security*. The Christian soul in the Middle Ages was assaulted by spiritual doubt and the fear of hell. In answer to this problem, Church leaders famously urged Christians to "do what lies within you" (*facere quod in se est*). But, this supposed remedy of works was itself poison to their consciences. People began to rightly ask, "How do I know if I have done my best? How do I know if I've tried hard enough to appease God, that my troubled conscience might be relieved?"

This was a question that plagued Martin Luther before his conversion. He was constantly barraged by doubt. In the Wittenberg parish churchyard where Luther lived, there was a sandstone relief depicting Christ sitting on a rainbow with a sword in his mouth. This image of Christ in his judgment so terrified Luther that he refused to look at it as he passed by.<sup>ii</sup> The thought that there was a holy God who would judge sin sent shivers of terror down Luther's spine because he was trusting in his works, which he realized were stained with sin. This is how Luther described his paralyzing fear: "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an *extremely disturbed conscience*. I could not believe that He was appeased by my satisfaction..."

Luther asked, “How do I know when I’ve tried hard enough?” The answer he and others received was, “Try harder!”

One church historian described this theology, which suspended people between hope and fear, as “a sort of spiritual carrot-and-stick incentive system.”<sup>iv</sup> Sadly, all their work got them no closer to their goal.

Many people today don’t have to imagine this scenario; it is a daily reality. As much as the Medievals, we need to receive the total freedom found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin highlights three core parts of the doctrine of Christian liberty. Each part answers the question, “What are believers freed from and what are they freed unto?”

### **Believers Are Freed from the Law**

In the book of Galatians, Paul speaks of justification in terms of freedom. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free...” (Gal. 5:1; NIV). We are freed from the burden of a yoke of slavery. “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). What is this yoke? The yoke is the weight of trying to be justified by the works of the law.

Paul says that if anyone looks to the law in even a single area for the purpose of being justified, then he is a slave to the whole law (Gal. 5:2-4). We all admit that it is impossible for us to obey the whole law.

The beauty of justification is that Christ *did* obey the whole law and we can receive that perfect obedience by faith in him.

Most of us, at times, have trembling consciences. Could God possibly ever be pleased with me as sinful as I am? Remember, this is the question that Luther asked. But, Luther found rest for his conscience through understanding Christ’s free gift of grace. In his own words: “At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to...Paul’s words, namely, ‘He who *through faith is righteous* shall live’ (Rom. 1:17). Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered

Paradise itself through open gates.”<sup>vi</sup> By meditating on the righteous work of Christ his “extremely disturbed conscience” was put to rest.

In times of distress, believers must *use* the doctrine of Christian liberty. Reflect on and trust in Christ’s finished righteousness. The answer to Heidelberg Catechism’s Question 60 is worth meditating on:

“Even though my conscience accuses me of having grievously sinned against all God’s commandments and of never having kept any of them, and even though I am still inclined toward all evil, nevertheless, without my deserving it at all, out of sheer grace, God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me.”

Those who have true faith in Christ, weak though it may be, can say with trembling boldness: “God is pleased with me!” Who can imagine a greater thought? Is God pleased with my sins? No! But God does not view the Christian in his sins but, rather, in Christ’s holiness.

Does justification mean that the law no longer has a bearing on the Christian’s life? Not at all.

### **Believers Are Freed to Obey the Law**

Ironically, the Scriptures teach that those who are under a compulsory obedience to the law can never actually obey it. If, in your mind, you are slavishly bound to keep the law, then you are not actually keeping it.

Calvin cites Deuteronomy 6:5 to illustrate this point: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus himself says that this is the first and greatest commandment. And yet those who are under the yoke of the law for justification cannot obey it because it is based on love.

Think again of those poor souls whom I described earlier who lived under the bondage of the law imposed by the

Medieval Church. Their works were largely done for the purpose of escaping hell, not out of love for God or regard for his glory! Notice the paradox here. Those who are made slaves to the law cannot obey it. They labor to obey God’s law but his law is to *love* him and to *love* their neighbor.

Thankfully, the Scriptures teach that those united to Christ by faith are not slaves but sons. It is the master’s children, not his slaves, that truly serve him. Children (sometimes) happily and lovingly serve their parents, even though their work is less than perfect. They know that their imperfect work will be received by their parents with a smile and an embrace.

So it is with our relationship to our Father in Heaven. God promises that he will receive our service as sons because of our relation to Christ. “I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.” (Malachi 3:17). Christians are freed by Christ to do good works freely and joyfully. You cannot serve happily, joyfully, and truly, if you suspect that your flawed works will be rejected. Christians have no such fear.

This does not mean, however, that believers have the liberty to sin. Christian liberty, says Calvin, is “perversely interpreted by those who use it as a cloak for their lusts...and to abuse the good gifts of God.” This is Paul’s inspired teaching in Galatians 5:13. “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.”

You see the corrupt reasoning of the flesh: “If I’m free in Christ, then I’m free to live however I want.” But, Paul says, “The freedom that you have in Christ is not meant to indulge the sinful nature.” We are to kill our flesh, not give it freedom to sin. “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality,

impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these the wrath of God is coming” (Col. 3:5,6). Those who use the cloak of Christian freedom to sin are, in fact, still enslaved to sin and are thus still under the condemnation of the law.

### **Believers Are Freed from Opinions of Men**

That is to say, believers are free with regard to those things that are neither commanded nor forbidden by the Scriptures. They are morally neutral and can either be done or avoided without moral consequence. Examples of things that the Bible considers morally indifferent include circumcision, the eating of certain meats, the moderate use of wine, celibacy or the observance of certain Christian feast days.

This principle is taken from such Scriptures as Romans 14:14. Here Paul says, “I am fully convinced that nothing is unclean in itself.” He elaborates on this thought in 1 Timothy 4:4, “For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”

What does this look like practically? In other words, how can we use our freedom regarding things that are truly indifferent?

*Recognize Personal Freedom*  
Those in Christ may, with a clear conscience *enjoy* the

God-given privilege of using earthly goods, for example, wealth, alcohol, certain forms of entertainment and recreation. Those who disapprove *on personal grounds* may not condemn. Sadly, men tend to make laws of these things, further binding the consciences of others.

### *Don’t Abuse Your Freedom*

On the other hand, these freedoms must not be enjoyed *in such a way* that they become a stumbling block for those with

***The beauty of justification is that Christ did obey the whole law and we can receive that perfect obedience by faith in him.***