

CHRISTIAN BASICS

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Study Eleven

CALLED FREEDOM

FREEDOM, THE GREAT LONGING OF ALL

We belong to a race that knows instinctively that it is born to be free. If for a time, certain freedoms are denied to a group of people, it can be anticipated that they will eventually rise up in protest if not in power, to demand the freedoms denied to them. However, while man seeks to procure this freedom for himself, he does it at the expense of the freedom of others, or by withdrawal from the life he is meant to share with others.

Into this situation comes the exclamation of Paul to Christians: '—you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.' (Gal. 5:13) So in the gospel, men may find true freedom, not only as a definition or a prescription, but in power and in fact. And in finding this freedom, they will be able to offer it to others. NB This call secures the result.

LIBERTY ARISING FROM THE NATURE OF GOD

God himself is free. That is, he is not under the restraint of any other being or of any circumstance (Dan. 4:34f.; Eph. 1:11). Therefore, when he redeemed Israel it was because he wanted to (Deut. 7:6–8). When he promised to restore them he said he would love them freely (Hosea 14:4). The church has been justified freely by God's grace (Rom. 3:24; 5:15f.) and will ultimately drink of the water of life without payment. (Rev. 21:6; 22:17). That his blessings are gifts indicates that he gives them freely and not because he is prevailed upon with payment.

It is not surprising therefore that God required that the tent of meeting in the wilderness be made solely from free will gifts from the people (Exod. 36:3). The building of the temple, and later, the re-establishing of its worship were similarly executed freely (II Chron. 6:7; Ezra 7:13–16). The law provided not only for obligatory sacrifices but free will offerings (Lev. 22; II Chron. 29:31; cf. Ps. 119:108), for the setting free of slaves in the seventh and fiftieth years (Lev. 25:10; cf. Isa. 58:6; Jer. 34). When this was done, the slave was to be liberally supplied so as to be able to re-establish himself in his freedom, and this was not to seem hard to the slave's master (Deut. 15:12–18).

Freedom cannot be narrowly defined either theologically or pragmatically as though it were simply the absence of certain restraints. Freedom in God is the free expression of his Godhead, and freedom in man is the free expression of his true humanity. What God does, he does freely, and reflecting that redeemed man finds living water springing up within him to eternal life (John 4:14). Having received freely, he gives freely (Matt. 10:8; II Corin. 11:7). Liberation springs from and leads to liberality and so generosity is commended and urged as an expression of true manhood. (Prov. 11:25; Isa. 32:8; II Corin. 8:2; 9:13)

MAN'S SLAVERY AND ENSLAVING OF OTHERS

The Jews did not appreciate being told they were in bondage (John 8:33). They mistook their ancestry and proud spirit for freedom. But this was only an illusive feeling of freedom, as was the so called freedom of the libertine (II Peter 2:19).

In fact, the Jews needed to understand that they were slaves of sin, and of Satan (John 8:34, 44) and like David, recognise that their guilt had dried up the springs of true human life (Ps. 51:10–12). It is clear, both in Scripture and experience, that sinful man feels unwanted by God. He is a child of wrath, and always in fear of death (Eph. 2:3, 12f.; Heb. 2:15). These leave him no option but to yield to impurity (Rom. 1:24; 6:19), to be taken captive by Satan to do his will and to be ensnared by a whole world system under his control, which conjure up illusions of freedom, so as to be kept from seeing the truth (Col. 1:13).

So the sinner is ensnared by his sin and enmeshed in its deceit. But in longing for freedom, he creates false freedoms of his own which invariably lead to bondage, not only for himself, but for others. In the pursuit of what he sees as his own rights, he cannot treat others with the liberality which is native to God and to true humanity, and in place of the open access to life intended for human beings, there is alienation.

LIBERTY PORTRAYED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The redemption of Israel and exodus from the land of Egypt was the beginning of their nationhood and a fact to be celebrated throughout their history. Moses had brought God's word to Pharaoh: 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness' (Exod. 5:1). The fact that God brought them 'out of the house of bondage' is frequently referred to thereafter and always with a view to reinforcing the purpose God had in mind in releasing them (Exod. 13:3; 20:2; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 8:14; 13:5; Josh. 24:17; Judg. 6:8). Being free, they would be able to celebrate the feast of Passover, keep the law, oppose idolatry, and occupy the land of promise.

This further reveals the nature of Christian freedom: it is a freedom from all powers and obstructions preventing obedience to God. It is belonging directly to God, with no intermediary masters. Any understanding of freedom that does not include this purpose of service and belonging, will falter and lead to alternative forms of bondage. It should be readily appreciated that the one who threw back the gates that imprisoned us holds the keys to all of life (So Psalm 116:16).

LIBERTY PROVIDED BY THE SON AND THE SPIRIT

Before Jesus was born, Zechariah prophetically blessed God for visiting his people, fulfilling the promises to the nation's fathers, 'to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life' (Luke 1:68–75). When Jesus began his ministry, he showed that he fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy: 'He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives—to set at liberty those who are oppressed—' (Isa. 61:1–3; Luke 4:16–21).

He authenticated or rather illustrated his claim to be man's liberator, by healings and exorcisms, by forgiving people their sins and revealing the truth to them (Matt. 11:29; Mark 2:1–12; 3:27; Luke 7:18–23; 10:18; 13:16; John 12:31f.). He could not have demonstrated his own freedom more clearly than when he said, '—I lay down my life for the sheep, that I may take it again. —I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father' (John 10:17f.). Being himself free to do all the will of the Father, even in the presence of man's last and greatest foe, he is eligible to release those who are in captivity. 'If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36).

The freedom of the Son is now expressed in his being Lord. Being at the right hand of God, he has poured out the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:33) and in his name, the lame are healed (Acts 3:15f.). He has been raised up to turn everyone from their wickedness (Acts 3:26). Peter's sermon to Cornelius likewise associates Christ's Lordship with his power to liberate (Acts 10:34–43, see also 13:30–39), particularly, from sin.

The Spirit takes the things of Christ and shows them to us (John 16:14). In that sense, Christ is the Spirit (in the same sense that the Father and Son are one) and where that Spirit of Christ is, there is liberty (II Corin. 3:16–18). So it is by walking in the Spirit that one enjoys the liberty Christ came to bring (Rom. 8:2–8).

FREED FROM SIN

In Rom. 6:7, Paul says: 'For he who has died is freed (justified) from sin.' He is talking about the person who by faith, and in union with Christ, understands that he died when Christ died for sinners. The word 'freed' should actually be translated 'justified'. If a person has paid the penalty for their crime they are free of that crime, or justified in regard to it. Paul's point in this context is that believers are so united with Christ and what happened to him, that what happened to Christ, happened to them.

The death of Christ can never be simplified into one simple explanation, but we must understand that when Christ bore all the sin of man, its whole entail was taken up by him. All of its shame and corruption was borne. All of the accusation of Satan was hurled at him. The offended law of God applied all its condemnation and curse to him and the wrath of God fell on him. At the resurrection, Jesus was shown to have triumphed over all of that, and in him, all who believe have triumphed over all of that. Satan and his whole kingdom have been defeated at their central stronghold and those who believe walk through territory he cannot occupy (Col. 1:13). Christ, as head of a new humanity, lives to God, and all who are in him are alive to God. (Rom. 6:10).

If freedom consists in belonging to God with no intermediary masters then the cross and the resurrection are the great liberating actions for all mankind.

FREED FROM THE LAW

The great difficulty with man is that he knows he is meant to be free; he knows that to be free he cannot be under obligation to anyone; to be free of obligation to others, he must be right and sufficient in everything he does, having no need of forgiveness or dependence on others. Therefore, he must 'justify' himself in order to feel free.

The law became therefore a means of attainment rather than a guide to life, and those who sought justification in this manner were reduced to greater and greater futility and small-mindedness. Paul shows, on the other hand, that those who are justified are freed from the law, that is, from using it as a means of attainment (Gal. 4:21ff.; 5:1; Rom. 7:6). With that, they are also released from bondage to Jewish ceremony (Gal. 4:8–11) or any merely human tradition (Col. 2:8–23), which otherwise in their eagerness to be justified and free they might succumb to.

The condemnation of the law or of those who would use the law to condemn others is rendered null and void (Rom. 8:31–39; I Tim. 1:3–11).

FREED TO FULFIL THE LAW

Jesus showed that the law was to be fulfilled by love (Luke 10:25–28 also 13:8–10), so it is clear that it could only be fulfilled by persons who are freed to love. Such a love is the result of discovering the freely flowing love of God. (I John 4:17–19).

True freedom never tends to lawlessness but to serving one another in love (Gal. 5:13–15; 6:2; I John 5:3), and to bearing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–24). Prior to justification, Paul reasons, the sinner had no obligation to righteousness. He committed sins and received their due reward. But when the believer is set free of sin, through his whole-hearted obedience to the teaching of the gospel, he is a slave of God (Rom. 6:18–23).

It is law in this sense that James has in mind when he says: 'He who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being . . . a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing.' (James 1:22–25). Alternatively, the person who chooses who he will love or the parts of the law he will keep will be judged under that law of liberty (James 2:8–12). Such a person would be judged not simply for failing to freely keep the law, but for neglecting the means of grace whereby it could be freely fulfilled. It is never indicated that the fulfilling of the law by a Christian is complete (for example I John 2:1–2), but in as much as it is free, it is accepted, and is part of the 'righteous deeds of the saints' with which the Church is adorned for her marriage to Christ (Rev. 19:8; 14:13).

In another sense, only those who fulfil the law can be free, because they alone fulfil the role in life for which they were intended. All others must find it hard to 'kick against the goads' (Acts 26:14). The psalmist knew that a human being could only be free while operating according to the laws governing human beings (Ps. 119:45). The love that fulfils the law does not fear, and never fails (etc.; I John 4:18; I Corin. 13:7).

CHALLENGE TO FREEDOM

If it is only by freedom that the law can be fulfilled and God be glorified, it is naturally a central point for Satan's attack. Hence, Paul must write to the Corinthians: 'You bear it if a man makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face (II Corin. 11:20); and to the Galatians: 'how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more?' (Gal. 4:9; also 2:4); and to the Colossians: 'If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belong to the world? Why do you submit to regulations?' (Col. 2:20). Jesus warned his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, only to find them legalistically applying his comment to their failure to bring bread (Mark 8:14–21).

If we have seen that we are free of the need to justify ourselves,—by being justified forever by Christ, we must 'stand fast' in that liberty (Gal. 5:1). Through Christ we have died to the law as a means of justification (Rom. 7:3–6; Gal. 2:16–21).

Liberty is challenged in another way by those who would use liberty as a pretext for doing as they wish (I Peter 2:16; II Peter 2:19). Clearly this is not the purpose of liberation and is actually no liberty at all. In fact, those who are set free, may, and can, endure greater restrictions than those in bondage to sin or law-works, as we must now see.

ANCILLARY NATURE OF SOCIAL FREEDOMS

To suggest that social freedoms subserve true freedom may draw hostility from some quarters. To be quite honest, when we are the ones whose rights are infringed by others, we may all feel some hostility. But it must be true that a person can be truly free regardless of the actions of others or the promises of Scripture have not yet taken significant effect. Many forms of social imprisonment have persisted in all ages.

However Paul told slaves not to be perturbed about their status; they were in fact, the Lord's free-men (I Corin. 7:17–24). Men have the same Master whether slaves or free-men (Ephesians 6:8f.); social freedom is not a primary issue (Col. 3:11; Gal. 3:28). One can well imagine the social disaster if all slaves immediately fought for social equality on becoming Christians, not to speak of the disrepute and misunderstanding that would accrue to the gospel. For the present, it was necessary that nothing be done about slavery as such, in order that a greater freedom may be offered to all men.

In a similar way, Peter told his readers to submit to 'every human institution' (I Peter 2:13–17). With all of their imperfections, injustices, and poor-handling, these human institutions are the means whereby societies hang together, and it is in these contexts that the gospel must be commended. Jesus showed his willingness to submit in this way (Matt. 17:24–27), as did Paul (Acts 16:3). The Jerusalem council saw that Gentile converts would create havoc in a society well tuned to Jewish practices, if they started eating strangled meat etc. (Acts 15:19–21). In fact any communication between persons must follow certain patterns previously understood by both parties. Self expression cannot follow any form it pleases because the aim of expression should normally be communication (I Corin. 14:4f.. A communicator is

limited to cultural expressions that express what is intended. The gospel has not freed man from all context, but rather given him a context, which embraces things as they are, and in which he is freed to take a responsible part.

In various ways then, Christians are called to voluntarily limit their freedoms where it is clear that this will benefit others (Rom. 14–15; I Corin. 8–10). Paul said he ‘would endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ’ (I Corin. 9:12, 1 Thess. 2:5–9), even if this involved suffering (Col. 4:3).

However, if true freedom is being enjoyed and practised by Christians, inevitably, this freedom will be worked out in relationship with others. The Hebrew slave-owner, himself released from slavery in Egypt, had the responsibility of freeing his slave at the appropriate time (Deut. 15:12–15). Israel’s duty was to ‘take away from the midst of you the yoke, the pointing of the finger’ and to ‘satisfy the desire of the afflicted’ (Isa. 58:9f.). The duty of the Messiah was to ‘proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound’ (Isa. 61:1–3), which Jesus fulfilled by setting people free from demons and sicknesses, as well as their sins.

Therefore Christian freedom is demonstrated by the full life that it desires for, and where it has the ability, grants to others. For this purpose, Jesus ascended to heaven, taking captivity captive, and he gave gifts to men, that by the exercise of those spiritual gifts they should free others (Eph. 4:4–16).

Individuals may be able to rightfully secure better conditions for themselves (I Corin. 7:21), and the extents to which such persons go will have to be weighed up in each case. But they should consider the rights of all and not just themselves. They should also bear in mind the secondary nature of any social freedoms they may gain. By getting out of the pan, they may be in the fire. Jesus said those who took the sword would perish by the sword (Matt. 26:52). And in the end, no one out of Christ, slave or free, will be able to avoid the captivity of God’s judgements (Rev. 6:15; 13:16; 19:18).

Some then may see that insisting on certain social freedoms will ultimately be best for all. The certainty of this will depend on how much it arises from an inner spring of freedom, as against a compulsive assertiveness that is a replacement for true freedom.

However, biblically, the weight of responsibility lies not with the oppressed but with the oppressor, and the spate of ‘freedom fighters’ present in so many places today is a reflection on the extent to which the free are avoiding their role.

FREEDOM OF SONS

Christian freedom is described as the liberty of sons as distinct from the servitude of slaves. Jesus called his apostles friends rather than servants, because, he said, servants do not know what their master is doing. Believers are not kept in the dark about what the Father is doing, but have the liberty which knowledge brings (John 15:15).

They also have the liberty of certain acceptance in the love of the Father, not only in this life, but in that which is to come (Rom. 8:12–17). Therefore, their freedom is not primitive but mature (Gal. 4:1–7). This dignity which grace has awarded to

believers defuses all struggles for equality that so readily pose as desires for freedom. (The human quest for equality moves imperceptibly over to striving for superiority, from which stance one can then 'supervise' the quality!)

THE COMING FREEDOM

Humanity of itself, is limited in its vision because it can only conceive what may be achieved in a lifetime or a series of lifetimes if their work is great enough to be carried on by others. It is also circumscribed by what may be achieved in a world as we know it now. But all creation waits with eager longing for the revelation of the sons of God (Rom. 8:21), when believers will be changed to be like Christ (I John 3:1–2), and all creation will be set free from its bondage to decay. This is the eternal life, or life of the ages, into which Christians have been born. Their expectation includes the promise that 'They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Isa. 11:9).

This all encompassing expectation of freedom, arising, as it does, from love, means that the children of God are not locked into the pessimism of their day or trapped by the panic of false messiahs. (cf., P.T. Forsyth in 'The Church and the Sacraments' p 21: 'If we think of the world, let us think chiefly of the world as the arena of an eternal Redemption, and not of a professional success, or of a social revolution'). They know there is only one freedom—bought on a cross, conveyed by the Spirit, demonstrated by all who know it, but awaiting the time when that freedom, and no other, is pre-eminent. The Son is the one who is free, because he always does the will of his Father. And whoever he sets free has the freedom which is true and in which he will reign with Christ in the ages yet to come.