



Our Freedom in Christ

Michael Parsons, Lecturer in Ethics at London Bible College, considers some aspects of Christian freedom.

It should be recognised at the outset of this short study that 'freedom' in the thought of the New Testament conjures up several ideas: socio-economic and political liberation as well as that of personal, spiritual freedom. It is with the last of these that we want to deal, without in the least minimizing the other two.

Whilst the idea of freedom in the spiritual dimension of the word has been said to be almost marginal in the rest of the New Testament it becomes a dominant theme in the letters of the apostle Paul. He is clearly the chief expositor of the concept which is to intrinsically associated with the new relationship we enjoy with Christ and which assumes a radical change in us.

Many of us will be aware of the areas from which believers are freed. They are often listed as five: they include the fact that we are liberated from sin (that is, from its power in our living, from the guilt that inherently attaches to it and from the consequences which follow from it in the exercise of God's justice), from the law (in the sense of its condemnation of those who fail to live up to its demands and from the insupportable burden of attempting to keep it in its entirety), from the 'old self', from spiritual powers and from death as the judgement and salary for lawlessness. These are generally agreed - some scholars add more. Calvin, for example, interestingly adds that Christians are freed from 'things indifferent'.¹

However, we need to realize the importance of seeing this negative aspect, as vital as it is, as merely one side of the New Testament picture of freedom for the true believer. The negative side of 'freedom' is almost invariably balanced by its positive counterpart: that is, the believer is liberated *from* certain things *to* others. We need to be reminded of this.

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This is seen clearly, for example, in the letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, both of which seem to deal with the subject at length. In this context we find Romans 1-8 particularly helpful. For instance, in Romans 5:1-2 Paul indicates that having been freed *from* condemnation (1:18-4:25; 5:16, etc.) the believer is freed *to* peace and access by

faith into God's grace (5:21; 6:14). This, he declares is life and righteousness (5:18-19). It is interesting to notice here that in Romans 'life' becomes, at times, synonymous with 'freedom'; 'death' with (adverse) slavery (Rom.7:7f.; cf.8:2,6, etc.), that is, slavery to sin and to death. So important, then, is the concept of freedom to the apostle that he envisages 'life' beginning again when a person becomes a Christian: he is a new creation.

The two passages within this epistle which need closer scrutiny are chapters 6 and 8. In chapter six, for instance, the question arises, 'Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?' (6:1) and, linking the idea to that of union with Christ, Paul answers, 'Do not offer the parts of your body to sin . . . but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness' (6:13). These two chapters, then, are crucial to our understanding of the subject. What do we learn from them?

First, the apostle points out those things from which the believer is liberated. 'We died to sin' (6:2) is a radical way of stating that for a Christian continuing to live in sin is not permissible; more than that, it is simply not possible. Paul speaks of a specific, definitive act in the believer's experience when, at conversion, he renounced his past sinful life, he separated from it and became dead to it. By the grace of God the believer is delivered from the power of sin in his life. This idea is further elaborated. For example, in verse six he declares that the 'body of sin' has been rendered powerless with the result that we are no longer slaves to sin. We are not conditioned and controlled by sin as the ruling principle of our lives - we are 'free from the law of sin and death.'

It is this point that Paul wishes to emphasize when he reintroduces the concept of slavery more explicitly as if to underline the matter. The believer has been freed from slavery to sin (6:16f). How was that former slavery shown? The unbeliever actually offers himself to 'impurity and to ever increasing wickedness' (6:19) - words which, in the original, focus on a disregard for the law of God and the dictates of the conscience. In 8:5 Paul seems to define this - 'it is to live 'according to the sinful nature.' Murray helpfully comments: it 'is to have the things of the flesh as absorbing objects of thought, interest, affection and purpose.' This includes 'not simply the activities of reason but also those of feeling and will, patterned after and controlled by the flesh.'² This is a life under God's hostility and condemnation, an existence which would inevitably lead to death. From these things the believer, by God's infinite mercy, is free.

Secondly, Paul asserts the positive aspect of freedom. Our freedom is summed up in the idea of living a new life (6:4), it is living with Christ (v8). This idea is put into stark contrast

throughout these chapters. As much as the life of the unbeliever is influenced by his sinful nature; so the Christian's existence is controlled by the Holy Spirit. Chapter 8 makes this abundantly clear. It is the Spirit of God who now directs our life as Christians. I put this positively. We are apt to qualify the statement to read 'It is the Spirit of God who now should (or ought to) direct our lives.' This is not what the apostle is saying; he is altogether more adamant: 'You however are not controlled by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you' (8:9). To be as confident as that, from the pulpit for example, may well first demand a thorough examination and appraisal of our own lives in the light of the Lord's holiness and just demands. In chapter 6 Paul describes the Spirit-controlled life as one of obedience to righteousness. The benefits reaped by such a life are holiness, peace, a knowledge that the Father is pleased and, finally, eternal life - the gift of God.

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Thirdly, we should notice from whence this freedom comes. The apostle emphasizes again and again that liberation from sin and death, and the positive life and peace associated inevitably with this, proceeds from the grace of God through Christ. Three things may be observed briefly here. (a) Freedom comes from union with Jesus Christ (6:3). Paul has already outlined the believer's incorporation into Christ as a representative figure (5:12-21): Christ has initiated a new humanity and established a new solidarity in which the believer now exists. The believer is united both historically and in individual experience in Christ's death. Participation in Christ's death involves also participation in his resurrection: in other words, through his resurrection power we are able to lead a qualitatively new life. (b) Freedom also proceeds from the fact that the union with Christ established at his death continues in the life and present reality of the believer. He is 'in Christ' (8:1-2) and in him there is no condemnation at all. The 'in Christ' formula in Paul's correspondence is, of course, a very difficult one to pin down to a precise meaning. However, it is enough to note here that it is absolutely necessary for a Christian to be 'in Christ'; it is part of the definition of his condition, if you like; it is synonymous with being a new creation (2 Cor.5:17)). The phrase denotes, at the very least, a belonging to Christ and, actually, goes much further in establishing an identification between the believer and Christ as we have seen already. There is, then, a very real solidarity between Christ and his people. As Christ defeated sin and death, so Christians are freed from sin and death and all the consequences that accrued from them. (c) Freedom originates from the indwelling of the Spirit in the believer (8:9,11,13) - freedom, that is, is a distinct part of what it means to be a child of God (see v15f.).

Fourthly, freedom carries with it both obligation and responsibility. Believers liberated by grace are to count themselves dead to sin and alive to God (6:11). The Christian is to live a life free from the dominion of sin but under the dominion of the Lord. Despite the claims that sin appears to make, the believer is to remember that his old master has no authority to command him, no rights and no power over him. 'Therefore, do not allow sin to reign. Do not place yourself at the disposal of sin's desires.' More positively, the believer is to present himself (paristemi 'to

offer', could be used in a military sense) wholly to the sovereign God. In the eighth chapter the apostle speaks of the obligation to be led by the Spirit and to put to death the misdeeds of the body by the Spirit's aid. This is an obligation, and experience, common to all God's children; it is to be something continuous, affecting all the activities throughout every day of their lives.³

As we read the letter to the Galatians we see again the same elements in the apostle's thinking. The situation in Galatia made it imperative that Paul should spell out exactly what he meant by 'freedom' and to put that within an outline of the relationship which exists between freedom and consequent obligation. Against those who would enslave the churches to Judaistic notions of the law, Paul asserts his firm conviction about Christian liberty.

Galatians 5:1 is, in fact, an epitome of the contention of the whole letter: 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.' John Calvin comments: 'Almost the entire argument of the letter to the Galatians hinges upon this point.'⁴ In examining this, briefly, we need to take the following points into consideration:

a. Paul now places the idea of 'freedom' at the beginning of what is basically the ethical and hortatory section. This has a double effect. First, it brings the concept of freedom more firmly into the centre of his argument and, secondly, makes the implications of the first four chapters explicit. Paul has, previously, been arguing for Christian liberty which he brought to the forefront in 2:4f.. It seems as though the 'false brothers' had come to discover what attitude the Gentile Christians were adopting towards the law, and also to bring them under that law - to make them 'slaves'.⁵ By the phrase 'the freedom we have in Christ Jesus' the apostle affirms that this is inherent to the gospel he preached and, therefore, that slavery to anything other than to God is contrary to the good news he brought to them initially (see Gal.1:8,9). He later explains something of this in the allegory of Hagar and Sarah contained in chapter 4, with its conclusion: 'Therefore brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.' The first verse of the fifth chapter, then, forms the climax of his polemic.

b. The tremendous news for believers is that it is the will of Christ that we should remain in our freedom: for this he died. Guthrie, commenting on the apparent repetition (freedom/free) remarks that Paul 'means to stress the incongruity of any other result.'⁶ To think otherwise is foolishness, of which the apostle accuses them earlier in the epistle (3:1-5).

c. The verb (*stekete*) 'stand firm', being in the present active imperative as it is here, indicates that the apostle is appealing for a resolute perseverance in safeguarding freedom. Our task, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, is to preserve the freedom we already have by continual and habitual action - resting, also, in the Spirit's work in us and for us.

d. Although Paul mentioned freedom from 'the present evil age' (1:4) and, by implication, from human effort (3:1-3), I think Ridderbos is correct in outlining the following areas as the basic, specific intentions at this point: first, freedom from servitude to the law (3:13, 22-25; 4:1-2, 21-31); secondly, from the curse of the law (3:13, 24), and, thirdly, from spiritual impotency from which the law cannot rescue man.⁷

e. When we surveyed the content of Romans 6 and 8 we noticed that Paul saw freedom connected very closely to the work of both Christ and his Spirit. The same is the case as we look at Galatians 5.

It is made clear at the outset that it is Christ who has made the believer free. If the Galatians succumb to slavery Christ will be of no value to them at all (v2), they will be alienated from him, they will have fallen away from grace (v4).

On the other hand, it is the emphasis on the work of the Spirit which the apostle brings to the forefront in this chapter. In doing this he stresses two things: first, that freedom is an integral part of sonship. Earlier, of course, he explained that Christians are sons of God (3:26f.) and as such we have the Spirit (4:6). It is because we have been made sons through faith in Christ Jesus that God sent his Spirit to indwell us. Paul adds significantly, 'So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.'

The second stress here is on the inevitable, subsequent tension that exists between life in the Spirit and life in sinful nature. This is summed up in v16-18. The incompatible contrast drawn here is illustrated further in v19-26 in the incomplete list of the acts of the sinful nature and the summary of the fruit of the Spirit. It is of interest here that Paul uses the phrase 'live by the Spirit' in both an indicative way (v16) and an imperative way (v25). That is, he seems to command them to live by the Spirit in the former verse, but to assume that they do in the latter. The whole point here is that Paul is reminding them that they do live by the Spirit: something which they seem to have forgotten (cf. 3:3; 4:6). His exhortation to 'live by the Spirit' is a timely reminder of their true reality, their freedom in Christ; that the Spirit is the author of their new creation and new life. The apostle, then, is actually exhorting them to do what they have been doing: he urges them to keep on walking in the Spirit. To put it another way: if the Spirit creates a new lifestyle then it must be evidenced in the spiritual believer.

f. Very importantly, Paul warns that freedom is not licence (5:13). He exhorts the Galatians to use their freedom but not to 'indulge the sinful nature' thereby. There is, as we have previously noted, a responsibility and an obligation that goes hand-in-hand with biblical freedom. There is, he insists, a real danger of abusing freedom: the possibility that having grasped hold of something of the negative aspect of freedom (that is, freedom *from*) the believer could continue without any regard to the positive idea of freedom *to* righteousness. Paul works out the admonitions and principles of chapter 5, briefly, in the exhortations of 5:26-6; 10.

From these verses we gain the impression that freedom under the control of the Spirit is a responsible serving of others; it is at the least the opposite to having an envious and provocative spirit together with a proud disposition.

The apostle asks for friendliness, gentleness and real sympathy, deriving from a modesty, which is the necessary outworking of fellowship in Christ. Believers are to help and support each other through oppressive difficulties. The whole is fundamentally summed up in the words of the eighth verse: action within our Christian freedom is a sowing to please the Spirit of God.

g. Galatians 6:15 ('what counts is a new creation') seems, for me, to sum up what Paul has been saying. The new creation by the power of the Spirit is foundational to Christian freedom; freedom is part of being a new creation. To be a new creation in Christ is to be in an existence opposed to the old creation signified as 'flesh' (sarx), and to be in contrast with the world in which, for example, circumcision and uncircumcision were functional (see Gal.6:15, cf.5:2f.; 5:19). The new creation signifies that believers are different from what they were and implies that they should manifest it by radically changed conduct. This is

so on the basis of Paul's ethical presupposition: what Christians ought to do depends on what they are in Christ.

In a recent book, C. K. Barrett draws the following conclusion: 'there is no conflict but rather an indissoluble union between the theology of freedom and the ethics of obligation. Nor is there any question of a compromise between the two in which each is watered down so as to accommodate the other. Freedom is real freedom, and any attempt to restrict it must be firmly refuted. But obligation is real obligation too, and there must be no attempt to evade it.'⁸

Perhaps, in drawing to a close we need to make more evident one or two of the implications which readily come from this subject.

a. The subject of Christian freedom forces us to recognise the fact that unbelievers are locked in an essential slavery and that all the modern sophistications, the technological and educational opportunities and advances of this age and generation do not alter this basic truth. The men and women to whom we preach and witness are slaves of sin and death. Twentieth century man needs the redemptive work of Christ applied by the Spirit. This must affect our speaking. We speak as those who offer pardon, freedom and new life in the name of the Lord.

b. We see also that the truth of Christian freedom is very important not only to our indicative state; that is, what we already are in Christ, but also to our living before him now. The believer is a new creation, he has freedom in the Lord. The question, simply put, is: does my life demonstrate an enjoyment of the present freedom in which I live? Too often believers live in bondage, in fear and in guilt. This should not be so! Is our preaching geared to produce mature Christians who are growing in an understanding and an exercise of their freedom in Christ?

Notes

1. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 1, Westminster Press, 1977, p. 838.
2. J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol.1, Eerdmans 1977, p. 185.
3. See B. B. Warfield's very helpful sermon, 'The Leading of the Spirit', in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, p. 543-559, ed. S. C. Craig, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968.
4. Calvin, *op.cit.*, p. 835.
5. See H. N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, MMS, 1976, p. 82-85, for a succinct, but reasonably thorough explanation.
6. D. Guthrie, *Galatians*, MMS, 1976, p. 127.
7. H. N. Ridderbos, *op.cit.*, p. 186.
8. C. K. Barrett, *Freedom and Obligation*, SPCK, 1985, p. 70.

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