

Christian Liberty: How Free Am I?

REFORMED theology was born in the shadow of Roman Catholic legalism, and for this reason Christian liberty has always been an important facet. This emphasis is rooted in the fact that the New Testament sees salvation in Christ as liberation from sin and corruption, and the Christian life as one of liberty—Christ has freed us for freedom (Jn 8:32,36; Gal 5:1). Christ's liberating action is not primarily a matter of sociopolitical or economic improvement, as is sometimes suggested today, but relates mainly to three specific points.

First, as Christians we have been set free from the Mosaic Law as a system of salvation. Being justified by faith in Christ, we are no longer condemned by God's law, but graciously acquitted on the basis of Jesus' merit (Ro 3:19; 6:14-15; Gal 3:23-25). This means that our standing with God (the "peace" and "access" of Ro 5:1-2) rests wholly on the fact that we have been accepted by and adopted in Christ. It does not, nor ever will, depend on what we do, nor will it ever be imperiled by what we fail to do. As long as we are in this world we live not by being perfect, but by being forgiven.

All natural religion, then, is negated, for the instinct of fallen humanity, as expressed in every form of religion that the world has ever devised, is to suppose that one gains and maintains a right relationship with ultimate reality (whether conceived as a personal God or in other terms) by disciplines of legal observance, proper ritual and asceticism. The world's faiths prescribe these disciplines as a means of establishing one's own righteousness—and Paul observed unbelieving Jews engaged in these very practices (Ro 10:3). Paul's experience had taught him the hopelessness of this enterprise. No human performance is ever good enough, for there are always wrong desires in the heart, coupled with a lack of right ones, regardless of how correct one's outward motions may be (Ro 7:7-11; cf. Php 3:6)—and it is at the heart that God looks first.

When we seek righteousness before God through keeping the law, the law arouses, exposes and condemns the sin that permeates our moral makeup, making us aware of the depth of our guilt (Ro 3:19; 1Co 15:56; Gal 3:10). So the futility of treating the law as a covenant of works, and of seeking righteousness by it, becomes plain (Gal 3:10-12;

4:21-31), as does the misery of not knowing what else to do. This is the bondage to the law from which Christ sets us free.

Second, as Christians we have been set free from sin's dominion (Jn 8:34-36; Ro 6:14-23). We have been supernaturally regenerated and made alive to God through union with Christ in his death and risen life (Ro 6:3-11), and this means that our deepest desire now is to serve God by practicing righteousness (Ro 6:18,22). Sin's domination involved not only constant acts of disobedience, but also a constant lack of zeal for law keeping that sometimes deteriorated into positive resentment and hatred toward the law. Now, however, being transformed in our hearts, motivated by gratitude for acceptance through free grace, and energized by the Holy Spirit, we "serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Ro 7:6). This means that our attempts at obedience are now joyful and integrated in a way that was never true before. Sin rules them no longer. In this respect, too, we have been liberated from bondage.

Third, as Christians we have been set free from the superstition that treats matter and physical pleasure as intrinsically evil. Against this idea, Paul insisted that we are free to enjoy as God's good gifts all created things and the pleasures that they yield (1Ti 4:1-5), provided only that we do not transgress the moral law in our enjoyments nor hinder our own spiritual well-being or that of others (1Co 6:12-13; 8:7-13). The Reformers renewed this emphasis against various forms of medieval legalism.

Fourth, as Christians we are free from the regulations that others add to the teaching of Scripture in the matters of faith and worship. To submit our consciences to such human additions to Scripture—or, worse, to submit by blind obedience to such requirements—is to violate the liberty of conscience that God grants (cf. *WCF* 20).

Fifth, as Christians we have been set free from self-righteousness in which we compare our behavior with that of others and judge ours to be a lot better in God's sight.

Sixth, as believers we have been set free from the urge to arrange the many laws in order of importance. To do so we have to introduce more laws—laws to tell us which laws are most important. Hence, by the end of the Old Testament period there were 613 different rules or

laws in addition to explanations about them.

Nevertheless, there are still ways in which believers have not yet been completely freed by God. For one thing, although we are free from the dominion and condemnation of sin, we are not free from its presence and influence. As long as we are in this life, we are continually subjected to temptation (1Ti 6:9), drawn in by the lure of the sin that continues to indwell us and surround us (Ro 7:14-25; Gal 5:17) and plagued by demonic forces (1Co 7:5; 1Ti 4:1; Rev 16:14). Our individual freedom from sin's presence awaits our release from our mortal bodies, and our complete freedom from the presence of sin in creation awaits Jesus' return and the restoration of all things in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 21:1-5).

Nor are we free to exercise our liberty in harmful ways. For example, as Paul made clear in his discussion of questionable matters such as eating food sacrificed to idols (Ro 14; 1Co 8), believers have an obligation not to exercise their freedoms in ways that may cause other believers to fall into sin. Further, God has not freed us from obedience to the law. Although such obedience cannot merit our salvation, nor can our breaking of the law condemn us, the law is still our moral guide. Jesus himself affirmed the law's abiding validity in the life of every believer (Mt 5:17-19), and Paul went so far as to refer to it as "the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

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