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GLOBAL GOSPEL PROJECT

The Bonds of Freedom

There is paradox in the Christian understanding of what it means to be free.

Roger Olson / posted October 5, 2012



The Bonds of Freedom

No single word resonates with Americans and millions of others quite like *freedom*. A television commercial announces that buying a certain automobile or flying with a certain airline will make you "free." People celebrate their country's independence with songs of "freedom" on their lips and ringing in their ears. Politicians, businesspeople, advertisers, salesmen, military leaders and recruiters—all know how to use "freedom" to attract

attention and draw interest. Few words are so common while carrying so much weight.

The word is also found throughout Scripture and Christian tradition. Everyone raised in Sunday school knows "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32) and "[i]t is for freedom that Christ has set us free" (Gal. 5:1). Freedom is not just an American or humanitarian theme; it's also a gospel theme.

Unfortunately, two very different ideas of freedom get confused in many people's minds. The biblical idea of freedom is different from, but easily confused with, the cultural value of the same name. And neither one is the same as "free will." It can be confusing to the average Christian who wants to know what "real freedom" is. Is it having choices? Is it lack of coercion and constraint? Is it being able to do whatever you want? In what sense does Christ set us free, and how is that different from what Madison Avenue and Hollywood promise?

At the very heart of the Christian gospel is the strange truth that *real freedom* is found only in giving up everything secular culture touts as freedom. The gospel, it turns out, requires a distinction between the enjoyment of true freedom and the mere possession of "free will." Not that free will or independence

from tyranny is a bad thing; they're just not true freedom. True freedom, the gospel tells us, is trusting obedience, the obedience of faith. That's not exactly the image one finds portrayed in popular culture.

A Kind of Bondage

When I was a kid, I heard many sermon illustrations. My dad was a pastor, and he overflowed with them—in the pulpit and at home! So did the evangelists and missionaries who crowded our kitchen and sanctuary. A memorable one was the homey but pithily expressed truth about freedom—"gospel freedom." A train is free only so long as it stays on its tracks; a train that jumps the tracks is "free" of the rails but no longer free in the most important sense of the word. It's a freed wreck that can't go anywhere. "Free," but no longer *truly free*.

The great church father Augustine taught that true freedom is not choice or lack of constraint, but being what you are meant to be. Humans were created in the image of God. True freedom, then, is not found in moving away from that image but only in living it out. The closer we conform to the true image of God, Jesus Christ, the freer we become. The farther we drift from it, the more our freedom shrinks.

From a Christian perspective, then, freedom—paradoxically—is a kind of bondage. Martin Luther expressed this truth better than anyone since the apostle Paul. In his 1520 treatise *On Christian Liberty* (also known as *On the Freedom of a Christian*), the Reformer put it in a nutshell: "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone."

In other words, according to Luther, because of what Christ has done *for* her and because of her faith in Christ, the Christian is absolutely free from the bondage of the law. She doesn't *have to do* anything. On the other hand, out of gratitude for what Christ has done *for* her and *in* her, the Christian is bound in servitude to God and other people. She *gets to* serve them freely and joyfully. A person who doesn't "get" the "get to" part simply doesn't know the joy of salvation. That's what Luther meant.

Jumping from the 16th to the 20th century, and from a magisterial Reformer to a radical Anabaptist theologian, John Howard Yoder wrote in *The Politics of Jesus* about "revolutionary subordination." True freedom is found *not* in insisting on one's own rights, but in freely giving them up by being a servant to Jesus Christ first and the people of God second.

Freedom through Obedience

All that's pretty hard for 21st-century Westerners—heirs of the Enlightenment, brainwashed by modernity's extreme emphasis on individualism and liberty—to swallow. We are bombarded from childhood with the message that freedom means self-assertion, insisting on your rights, throwing off constraints, and creating yourself. The highest virtue in contemporary society is "Be true to yourself." In old-school lingo, "Don't fence me in!"

No truth is more pervasive in Scripture and Christian tradition than this one—that real freedom is found in obedience and servanthood. And yet no truth is more incongruent with modern culture. Here we stand before a stark either-or: the gospel message of true freedom versus the culture's ideal of self-creation, autonomy, and living "my way."

The contrast between the gospel truth of real freedom and its satanic substitute begins to unfold in the Genesis story of humanity's origins and fall. According to Genesis 2, God gave the first humans freedom: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Gen. 2:16-17, RSV). Conditioned as we are by modernity and its obsession with autonomy, our first reaction is: "How is *that* freedom?" To us, freedom with limitations is not freedom at all.

We know, however, how grasping for that sort of freedom turned out for Adam and Eve, and indeed for the whole human race. It's a story of shame, hiding, alienation, enmity, toil, and death—in short, the absolute antithesis of freedom. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton parodied humanity's Promethean rage against limitations when he had Lucifer declare, "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven!" The question presses in upon us: When were Adam and Eve most free? In the Garden of Eden, when they could eat of all the trees except one? Or after they lost paradise, and were "free" to roam around and eat whatever they wanted?

The implication of the Genesis story is unavoidable: True freedom is found only in obedience to God and the fellowship that comes with it. Loss of true freedom comes with self-assertion, the idolatrous desire to rule my own square inch of hell rather than enjoy the blessings of God's favor.

The entire biblical narrative can be read this way—as a "theo-drama" of freedom and its loss through the desire and attempt to enjoy unfettered autonomy. Take, for instance, Israel's frequent rebellions and loss of divine protection; or David's rediscovery of joy in obedience to God's law; or the prophets' clarion calls to Israel and Judah to keep God's law, and the people's subsequent loss of freedom from insisting on having their own way.

Nowhere does this counterintuitive theme become clearer than in the New Testament. Jesus said to his disciples: "[T]hose who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25, NRSV). Again, to his disciples: "[W]hoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-27, NIV). True, the apostle Paul spoke often and warmly of our liberty, in Christ, from the law as an external constraint or compulsion. Trusting in Christ is, according to him, the only basis for our right relationship with God. On the other hand, throughout his epistles he counsels giving up rights and freedoms for the sake of spreading the gospel and protecting others' consciences (Rom. 14 and 1 Cor. 8). Paul found real freedom in giving up his rights: "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them" (1 Cor. 9:19, NRSV).

This gospel theme of true freedom through obedience and servanthood is so pervasive in the Bible that it cannot be missed. And yet, because of our culture's overriding emphasis on autonomy, we miss it all the time.

The Question of 'Free Will'

So what kind of obedience brings real freedom? First, and again contrary to popular opinion, it's not imposed obedience. It's not about obeying God's will because we fear the consequences of disobedience. Gospel obedience is always voluntary. The moment obedience to Christ becomes drudgery or a reluctant, cringing conformity, it is no longer gospel obedience. Only when obedience is joyful, when it stems from gratitude, does it result in true freedom, in the freedom of being who and what we are meant to be. The freedom, in other words, of a train heading along the right track.

Second, obedience that brings real freedom is motivated by self-sacrificial love. Yoder prophetically describes this sort of servanthood as "revolutionary subordination," in which every believer seeks the good of others with no hint of asserting one's own rights. In a community where everyone lives that way out of gratitude to Jesus Christ, empowered by his Spirit, true freedom abounds.

How does all this relate to the concept of *free will*? Does "freedom" mean nothing more than "free will"?

Obviously not. If, by "freedom," we mean *gospel freedom*—as in servanthood, becoming and being what God intends us to be, obedience to Christ and growing into his image—then it's clear we're talking about something deeper than mere possession of "free will."

This is something about which Arminians (believers in free will as the power of contrary choice) and Calvinists (believers in bondage of the will and God's absolute, all-determining sovereignty) can agree. As an Arminian, I have often been accused by fellow Christians of holding a shallow view of freedom. Not true. Even evangelical Arminians, "Arminians of the heart" (as opposed to "Arminians of the head"), believe *true freedom* transcends *free will*. Free will is simply a God-given capacity for choosing the true freedom offered by God's grace, or else rejecting it through our own self-centered obstinacy.

Not all Christians believe in free will. Luther certainly didn't! But that's not the point here. My point is simply that whether or not one believes in free will, *true freedom is something else*. It doesn't contradict free will; it transcends it.

All Christians agree that true freedom, the freedom of obedience to Christ and conformity to his image, is a gift of God's grace that we will fully enjoy only in our heavenly glorification. That is the point of Paul's confession in Romans 7—here on earth, we struggle in a war between the "flesh" (fallen nature) and the Spirit, God's gracious gift of dwelling within us. In the meantime, as we await our full glorification, we grow in freedom only by exchanging an attitude of grudging submission to the law for a new heart that delights in obeying Christ. By God's grace, and with the aid of his Spirit, we can realize

ever increasing freedom from sin and death. But freedom in its fullness comes only after our resurrection.

Theologians call the gradual process of experiencing true freedom before death "sanctification." We debate about how intense and whole that freedom can be before our resurrection. But we agree that *real freedom* is an unfolding gift that, by degrees, we *receive*.

Paul says in Philippians 2:12-13, "[W]ork out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (NRSV). Salvation, in other words, is both *gift* and *task*. Paul's "for" indicates that the gift surrounds and underlies the task. But our "work" of obedience and servanthood is truly ours; we are called, by an exercise of free will, to embrace it. We don't sit back and wait for it to "just happen."

Sufficient Grace

On the other hand, whenever we experience that greater freedom of real obedience, being conformed to the character of Christ and true servanthood, we acknowledge that it is all due to God's work in us. That is the "paradox of grace and free will."

Another homey analogy might help make the point.

Every summer, I struggle to water the numerous bushes and flowers that thirstily surround our house in the dry heat of central Texas. I turn on the outdoor faucet with the hose attached and the spray nozzle on its end. Then I drag the 100-foot hose way out to the far corner of the yard, point the spray nozzle at a bush, and press the trigger. Usually, nothing comes out. So, I trudge back around the house to the faucet to see if it's really turned on. It usually is. Why, then, is no water spraying?

Experience has told me that somewhere along the length of that garden hose there's a kink. I may have to hunt for it. When I find it and finally straighten it (or them) out, the water that was there all along can finally quench the thirst of the bush.

God's grace for our freedom is always there—completely—from the moment of conversion. There is no lack of grace or need for grace boosters. But there can be grace blockers—wrong attitudes and habits, hidden resentments and selfish motives. My "job," as it were, is to find them—with the Spirit's help, of course—and work them out through a process of repentance and submission. Free will is a necessary precondition in that process, but not the end result. The process leads not to absolute autonomy, but rather, in increasing measure, to freedom from bondage to sin and death. I'm already free from the law and from condemnation; freedom to become what God designed me to be is God's work and mine together. His work surrounds and enables mine. He gets all the glory. But unlike conversion, it's a process.

The gospel is unconditional good news. Not *having to* do something, or obey someone, is always bad news. No, the gospel is indeed about *getting to*, which is always good news. It's the good news about what I *get to have* as I joyfully let God, through the Spirit, do his work in me: the certainty of victory over sin and death. Only when we embrace *that* victory—and renounce all claims to rule our pathetic private kingdoms—will we truly be set free.

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