

THE CALL TO FREEDOM

Problem Texts (12)

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This is Prof. Bruce's final regular article for us after a run of unbroken contributions to The Witness and HARVESTER going back to 1971. On behalf of readers worldwide, we would like to thank him for his help and wish him God's richest blessing for the future.

'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal. 5:1).

Evangelical legalism?

How is that a problem text? Its meaning is perfectly plain, is it not? Yes, one would think so, and yet many Christians find it a problem text in the sense that they have difficulty in embracing it as their principle of life. I recently read a reference to 'evangelical legalism'—a contradiction in terms, if ever there was one, and yet I think most of us know what it means; we have met it too often. And now, in a list of new and forthcoming books I see one entitled *Jesus and the Threat of Freedom*. I do not know what its contents are, but I have no difficulty in understanding the title. There are some people who perceive Jesus' offer of freedom as a threat. Many a believer would prefer to be 'a creature that moves in predestinate grooves' rather than enjoy 'the liberty of the glory of the children of God' (*Rom. 8:21*).

There are those who are afraid to exercise liberty themselves; they would much rather be told what to do. And there are those who are scared at the idea of other Christians, especially younger ones, rejoicing in true gospel liberty. So, where we have some who are anxious to restrict the liberty of others, and others who prefer to be directed, we have an infallible recipe for authoritarianism or dictatorship—something totally inconsistent with life in the Spirit, since 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom' (*2 Cor. 3:17*). Believers are, in Anthony Norris Groves's great phrase, 'the Lord's freeborn children in the way of holiness'. They have come of age in Christ; God gives them the freedom

proper to his sons and daughters, and teaches them by the Spirit to use that freedom responsibly.

Liberty, not licence

But, it is asked, are there to be no limits to freedom? Yes, there are two, and both are laid down together in another verse in this same chapter of Galatians. 'You were called to freedom, brethren', says Paul: 'only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh' (*Gal. 5:13*). There we have one limit: freedom must not degenerate into licence. (In some languages 'liberty' and 'licence' are synonyms, but not in English.) In his defence of liberty, Paul had to wage a constant war on two fronts, saying to one group, 'Liberty, not legalism', and to another, 'Liberty, not licence'. We are not left in doubt about the meaning of 'an opportunity for the flesh': the 'works of the flesh' are catalogued in *verses 19-21*, and Christian liberty must not be pleaded as an excuse for indulging in any of them.

A good example of what is meant is provided by one tendency in the Corinthian church. When one member of that church shocked the permissive paganism of Corinth by cohabiting with his father's wife, that was bad enough; even worse was the attitude of some other members of the church who regarded this relationship with admiration as rather a fine assertion of Christian liberty: 'you are arrogant!' said Paul in remonstrance (*1 Cor. 5:2*). But they may have thought that Paul was slow in drawing the logical conclusions of his own teaching about liberty, not realizing (as they should have done) that such behaviour involved them in a new form of bondage.

The limitation of Christian charity

'Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh', said Paul, 'but through love be servants of one another' (*Gal. 5:13*). Here is the other limitation that is placed on Christian liberty—Christian love or charity. How this limitation could work in practice is seen in Paul's own example. Paul was the most emancipated of believers: 'I am free from all', he

said, but added in the same breath, 'I have made myself a servant to all' (*1 Cor. 9:19*). He would voluntarily restrict his liberty in any direction in order to help others: for instance, if his example would tempt an immature fellow-Christian to violate his conscience and thus be led into sin, he would readily forgo his right to act in that particular way. The same principle governed his conduct among Jews and Gentiles; why else did he expose himself to danger by going into the temple with the four men who had undertaken a Nazarite vow? I once met an Egyptian Christian in Luxor during the month of Ramadan; he mentioned in passing that, although he was under no religious obligation to do so, he observed the fast as a gesture of courtesy to his Muslim neighbours. The truly emancipated Christian is not in bondage to his emancipation: he is free to eat or to abstain, to observe the special occasion or not to observe it, as may be best in the circumstances. Paul makes it clear that in all such matters he exercised his freedom by promoting the interests of the gospel and not by pleasing himself. But the whole virtue of limiting one's freedom for the sake of Christian charity lies in its voluntariness: it is not an area in which one can dictate to another.

The need for vigilance

In the spiritual life as on the political plane, the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. 'You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men' (*1 Cor. 7:23*). The securing of our liberty was costly, but it can be very easily lost. In personal life or in church life, the first sign of encroachment on spiritual liberty must be guarded against. Rules and regulations cannot coexist peacefully with 'our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus' (*Gal. 2:4*). As I have said before in these pages, where there are conflicting practical interpretations of a New Testament text, the interpretation which promotes the cause of freedom is most likely to be the right one.

Martin Luther introduced his treatise *On Christian Liberty* with two propositions: 'A Christian is a most

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.' Subject to none, in respect of Christian liberty; subject to all, in respect of Christian charity. 'Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.'