



NEW LIFE

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"For the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1:9)

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My dear readers,

Christian Freedom

By John Calvin, Institute of the Christian Religion 3.19.1-13

Part 1 of 2

1. Need for a Right Understanding of the Christian Doctrine of Freedom

We must now discuss Christian freedom. He who proposes to summarize gospel teaching ought by no means to omit an explanation of this topic. For it is a thing of prime necessity, and apart from a knowledge of it consciences dare undertake almost nothing without doubting; they hesitate and recoil from many things; they constantly waver and are afraid. But freedom is especially an appendage of justification and is of no little avail in understanding its power. Indeed, those who seriously fear God will enjoy the incomparable benefit of this doctrine, one that impious and Lucianic men humorously satirize with their witticisms. For in the spiritual drunkenness that has laid hold upon them every sort of impudence is lawful. Accordingly, here is the right place to introduce this topic. It was profitable to put off a fuller discussion of it to this place, although we have lightly touched upon it several times before.

For, as soon as Christian freedom is mentioned, either passions boil or wild tumults rise unless these wanton spirits are opposed in time, who otherwise most wickedly corrupt the best things. Some, on the pretext of this freedom, shake off all obedience toward God and break out into unbridled license. Others disdain it, thinking that it takes away all moderation, order, and choice of things. What should we do here, hedged about with such perplexities? Shall we say goodbye to Christian freedom, thus cutting off occasion for such dangers? But, as we have said, unless this freedom be comprehended, neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known. Rather, we must take care that so necessary a part of doctrine be not suppressed, yet at the same time that those absurd objections which are wont to arise be met.

2. Freedom from the Law

Christian freedom, in my opinion, consists of three parts.

The *first*: that the consciences of believers, in seeking assurance of their justification before God, should rise above and advance beyond the law, forgetting all law righteousness. For since, as we have elsewhere shown, the law leaves no one righteous, either it excludes us from all hope of justification or we ought to be freed from it, and in such a way, indeed, that no account is taken of works. For he who thinks that in order to obtain righteousness he ought to bring some trifles of works is incapable of determining their measure and limit but makes himself debtor to the whole law. Removing, then, mention of law, and laying aside all consideration of works, we should, when justification is being discussed, embrace God's mercy alone, turn our attention from ourselves, and look only to Christ. For there the question is not how we may become righteous but how, being unrighteous and unworthy, we may be reckoned righteous. If consciences wish to attain any certainty in this matter, they ought to give no place to the law.

Nor can any man rightly infer from this that the law is superfluous for believers, since it does not stop teaching and exhorting and urging them to good, even though before God's judgment seat it has no place in their consciences. For, inasmuch as these two things are very different, we must rightly and

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conscientiously distinguish them. The whole life of Christians ought to be a sort of practice of godliness, for we have been called to sanctification [1 Thes 4:7; cf. Eph 1:4; 1 Thes 4:3]. Here it is the function of the law, by warning men of their duty, to arouse them to a zeal for holiness and innocence. But where consciences are worried how to render God favourable, what they will reply, and with what assurance they will stand should they be called to his judgment, there we are not to reckon what the law requires, but Christ alone, who surpasses all perfection of the law, must be set forth as righteousness.

3. The Argument of Galatians

Almost the entire argument of the letter to the Galatians hinges upon this point. For those who teach that Paul in this contends for freedom of ceremonies alone are absurd interpreters, as can be proved from the passages adduced in the argument. Such passages are these: That Christ "became a curse for us" to "redeem us from the curse of the law" [Gal 3:13]. Likewise: "Stand fast in the freedom wherewith Christ has set you free, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. Now I, Paul, say... that if you receive circumcision, Christ will become of no advantage to you... And every man who receives circumcision is a debtor to the whole law. For any of you who are justified by the law, Christ has become of no advantage; you have fallen away from grace" [Gal 5:1-4]. These passages surely contain something loftier than freedom of ceremonies! Of course I admit that Paul is there discussing ceremonies, for his quarrel is with false apostles who were trying to reintroduce into the Christian church the old shadows of the law that had been abolished by Christ's coming. But for the discussion of this question, the higher topics upon which the whole controversy rested had to be considered. First, because the clarity of the gospel was obscured by those Jewish shadows, Paul showed that we have in Christ a perfect disclosure of all those things which were foreshadowed in the Mosaic ceremonies. Further, because those impostors imbued the common people with the very wicked notion that this obedience obviously availed to deserve God's grace, Paul here strongly insists that believers should not suppose they can obtain righteousness before God by any works of the law, still less by those paltry rudiments! And at the same time he teaches that through the cross of Christ they are free from the condemnation of the law, which otherwise hangs over all men [Gal 4:5], so that they may rest with full assurance in Christ alone. This topic properly pertains to our argument. Finally, he claims for the consciences of believers their freedom, that they may not be obligated in things unnecessary.

4. Freedom from the Constraint of the Law Establishes the True Obedience of Believers

The second part, dependent upon the first, is that consciences observe the law, not as if constrained by the necessity of the law, but that freed from the law's yoke they willingly obey God's will. For since they dwell in perpetual dread so long as they remain under the sway of the law, they will never be disposed with eager readiness to obey God unless they have already been given this sort of freedom. By an example we shall more briefly and clearly arrive at the meaning of this. The precept of the law is that "we love our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength" [Deut 6:5]. To bring this about, our soul must first be emptied of all other feeling and thought, our heart cleansed of all desires, and our powers gathered and concentrated upon this one point. They who have progressed farther than all others on the Lord's way are yet far distant from that goal. For even though they love God deeply and with sincere affection of heart, they have a great part of their heart and soul still occupied with fleshly desires, by which they are drawn back and prevented from hastening forward to God. Indeed, they struggle with much effort, but the flesh partly weakens their powers, partly draws them to itself. What are they to do here, while they feel that there is nothing they are less able to do than to fulfil the law? They will, they aspire, they try, but they do nothing with the required perfection. If they look upon the law, whatever work they attempt or intend they see to be accursed. And there is no reason for any man to deceive himself by concluding that his work is not entirely evil because it is imperfect, and that God nonetheless finds acceptable what is good in it. For unless its rigor be mitigated, the law in requiring perfect love condemns all imperfection. Let him therefore ponder his own work, which he wished to be adjudged in part good, and by that very act he will find it, just because it is imperfect, to be a transgression of the law.

5. Freedom from Constraint Makes us Capable of Joyous Obedience

See how all our works are under the curse of the law if they are measured by the standard of the law! But how, then, would unhappy souls gird themselves eagerly for a work for which they might expect to receive only a curse? But if, freed from this severe requirement of the law, or rather from the entire rigor of the law, they hear themselves called with fatherly gentleness by God, they will cheerfully and with great eagerness answer, and follow His leading. To sum up: Those bound by the yoke of the law are like servants assigned certain tasks for each day by their masters. These servants think they have accomplished nothing, and dare not appear before their masters unless they have fulfilled the exact measure of their tasks. But sons, who are more generously and candidly treated by their fathers, do not hesitate to offer them incomplete

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and half-done and even defective works, trusting that their obedience and readiness of mind will be accepted by their fathers, even though they have not quite achieved what their fathers intended. Such children ought we to be, firmly trusting that our services will be approved by our most merciful Father, however small, rude, and imperfect these may be. Thus also he assures us through the prophet: "I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him" [Mal 3:17]. The word "spare" is clearly here used in the sense of "to be indulgent or compassionately to overlook faults," while also mention is made of "service." And we need this assurance in no slight degree, for without it we attempt everything in vain. For God considers that he is revered by no work of ours unless we truly do it in reverence toward him. But how can this be done amidst all this dread, where one doubts whether God is offended or honoured by our works?

6. Emancipated by Grace, Believers Need not Fear the Remnants of Sin

And this is the reason why the author of the Letter to the Hebrews refers to faith all the good works of which we read as being done among the holy fathers, and judges them by faith alone [Heb 11:2 ff.; 11:17; etc.]. In the letter to the Romans, there is a famous passage on this freedom, wherein Paul reasons that sin ought not to rule us [Rom 6:12 and 6:14, conflated], for we are not under the law but under grace [Rom 6:14]. For he had exhorted believers not to let "sin reign in" their "mortal bodies" [Rom 6:12], nor to "yield" their "members to sin as weapons of iniquity," but to "give" themselves "to God as those who have come to life from the dead, and" their "members to God as weapons of righteousness" [Rom 6:13]. On the other hand, they might object that they still bore with them their flesh, full of lusts, and that sin dwelt in them. Paul adds this consolation, in freedom from the law. It is as if he said: "Even though they do not yet clearly feel that sin has been destroyed or that righteousness dwells in them, there is still no reason to be afraid and cast down in mind as if God were continually offended by the remnants of sin, seeing that they have been emancipated from the law by grace, so that their works are not to be measured according to its rules. Let those who infer that we ought to sin because we are not under the law understand that this freedom has nothing to do with them. For its purpose is to encourage us to good."

7. Freedom in "Things Indifferent"

The *third* part of Christian freedom lies in this: regarding outward things that are of themselves "indifferent," we are not bound before God by any religious obligation preventing us from sometimes using them and other times not using them, indifferently. And the knowledge of this freedom is very necessary for us, for if it is lacking, our consciences will have no repose and there will be no end to superstitions.

Today we seem to many to be unreasonable because we stir up discussion over the unrestricted eating of meat, use of holidays and of vestments, and such things, which seem to them vain frivolities.

But these matters are more important than is commonly believed. For when consciences once ensnare themselves, they enter a long and inextricable maze, not easy to get out of. If a man begins to doubt whether he may use linen for sheets, shirts, handkerchiefs, and napkins, he will afterward be uncertain also about hemp; finally, doubt will even arise over tow. For he will turn over in his mind whether he can sup without napkins, or go without a handkerchief. If any man should consider daintier food unlawful, in the end he will not be at peace before God, when he eats either black bread or common victuals, while it occurs to him that he could sustain his body on even coarser foods. If he boggles at sweet wine, he will not with clear conscience drink even flat wine, and finally he will not dare touch water if sweeter and cleaner than other water. To sum up, he will come to the point of considering it wrong to step upon a straw across his path, as the saying goes.

Here begins a weighty controversy, for what is in debate is whether God, whose will ought to precede all our plans and actions, wishes us to use these things or those. As a consequence, some, in despair, are of necessity cast into a pit of confusion; others, despising God and abandoning fear of him, must make their own way in destruction, where they have none ready-made. For all those entangled in such doubts, wherever they turn, see offense of conscience everywhere present.

Adapted from Pilgrim Covenant Church, Singapore

(Part 2 of 2 to be continued next week...)

WELCOME TO NEW LIFE B-P CHURCH LONDON

CHURCH THEME: WALK IN THE NEWNESS OF LIFE (Romans 6:4)

Our worship services begin promptly at 11.00 am and 4.00 pm.

Please stay back for Bible Study and fellowship lunch after the morning worship and for tea after the evening service. Do invite your friends to come to Church.