

P.S.

Free range or fresh farm?

A FEW MONTHS AGO I attended a Bible school in the UK held at an agricultural college in Shropshire. One of the more exotic aspects of the week was a Wednesday afternoon jaunt in a tractor and trailer around the farm-cum-campus. (Lest uninitiated readers should get the wrong impression of UK Bible schools, it ought perhaps to be pointed out that lots of Bible study also took place during the course of the week!)

Our trailer, crammed full of inquisitive adults and children with craning necks, passed by the hen house, if house is the right word. It was more like a hen factory. I forget the exact figures, but in a fairly narrow building of only a hundred metres in length there were something like seven or eight thousand hens, each laying on average one egg per day.

The detail of the lifestyle of these so-called 'fresh farm' chickens was one of those things that you didn't want to know, on the one hand, and yet somehow couldn't resist querying. It was a good illustration of the principle that what you don't know doesn't hurt you; some vowed they would never eat eggs again!

We then drove into a huge field in which their better-off relatives, the free-range hens, were to be found. In the middle of the field was the hen house, tiny in comparison with the enormosity of the field, but the hens were not confined to the house; they were free to roam anywhere they wanted within the confines of the field.

The fascinating thing was this: despite the vast expanse those hens had in which to explore and exercise themselves (as stipulated, apparently, by EU guidelines), they spent virtually all their time huddled together in or by the hen house, in a space almost as cramped as that shared by their 'fresh farm' counterparts. As the lecturer from the college explained, there were always in every batch one or two maverick hens who would go off to investigate the far corners of their territory, but the vast majority wanted nothing more out of life than to be huddled together in the same cramped space.

You can probably tell where this is going. It is a lesson about freedom. Freedom at a certain level is in principle a good thing; everyone would admit it. It is better, generally speaking, to be a free man than a slave. It is 'better', in some sense, as far as

the hens are concerned, for them to be free and to have all that space to run around in than to be cooped up in some conveyor-belt existence. And yet most of the hens weren't remotely interested in taking advantage of the full extent of that freedom. Theoretically it was a good idea and a nice principle, but in practice it profited the free-range hens relatively little. I dare say they had a better life than the 'fresh farm' ones (the eggs do taste better, after all!), but they certainly didn't take advantage of and fully experience the freedom that was available to them. They only benefited from a small proportion of their potential liberty.

Now we are not hens, of course, but people. Yet our new lives in Christ are lives which are characterised by freedom, though we are paradoxically servants of God. The bondage of sin and death has been broken for us through the work of Christ. We have come to know the Truth which can make us free. Ours is not the conveyor-belt life of the broad way. Nor are we ring-fenced by the same death-bound and meaningless activities as our fellows who do not know God.

But do we really use and do we fully experience the freedom that is ours in Christ? It would be a pity to have the full freedom of the field to explore, and yet to spend our days cooped up gobbling the same diet in the same cramped quarters as everybody else—living, in other words, as if Christ had made little difference to us.

It is not a trivial point. The pressures of life and the mundane activities that must be accomplished in life do crowd in upon us, and we can end up feeling as haggard and as spiritually empty as everybody else. Yet this should not be. We must take the time to lift our heads and allow ourselves to feel the difference; to understand deeply and to derive benefit, for instance, from what it means for there to be no condemnation in Christ.

Ours is the freedom to think bigger thoughts and to pursue higher goals than the merely mundane. Christ has redeemed us, and we must learn to know the difference between what it feels like to live a life of freedom and what it is like to live a life of bondage. We must learn to live expansively, and with full spiritual appreciation, within that glorious liberty into which we have been set free.

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