

Freedom in Christ

Ken Camplin

Jesus and the apostles taught that believers in the gospel have freedom from the bondage of sin and of the Law of Moses, but the right exercise of that freedom brought problems and challenges for first-century believers that still affect us today.

ONE OF THE MOST important themes in the New Testament is that of freedom in Christ. Sometimes the theme is dominant, and at other places it may be recognised as an underlying thread. In order that we appreciate its significance, this subject will be considered against the background of slavery, generally considered to be the very opposite of liberty. Throughout Old Testament times, and on into the Christian era, bondage and slavery were common experiences in the ancient world, and sadly the practice still persists in some places even today.

This theme of liberty in Christ is considered in Paul's letters to believers in the early ecclesias, in the context of the mission of the Lord Jesus Christ to fulfil the Law and set free from its bondage those who accept his teachings and love him. The Law revealed to Moses in effect put sin on a pedestal, for no man could keep it; mankind was in bondage to sin. This article will also consider the distinction between life under the Law and life in Christ, with particular reference to the contrast between rules and principles.

Hostility to believers

The members of the early church included both Jews and pagan Gentiles who had been converted through the preaching of the gospel. There were Jews who accepted gospel truth without reservations, and worked alongside Gentile believers. However, some of the Jewish converts argued that, because Jesus Christ was the *Jewish* Messiah, a Gentile must embrace Judaism before he could become a Christian. These 'Jewish Christians' were determined to maintain their traditional teachings and practices, including circumcision. There were others who, deliberately and deceptively, had infiltrated the fellowship of believers, and insisted that Gentile believers should submit to 'full-blooded' Judaism. To add to the difficulties of genuine believers striving to maintain the Truth, there were Jews outside the ecclesias,

especially Pharisees, who were completely hostile, and who constantly persecuted the disciples (Gal. 2:1-5; Phil. 3:1-3; Col. 2:8-23).

The Jerusalem Council, whose proceedings are recorded in Acts 15, was called to consider the position of Gentile believers in the early church. At this meeting there was a vigorous exchange of views between the apostles, who had witnessed the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on Gentile believers, and a group of converts from the Pharisees. The outcome was a most tremendous and significant achievement, for it was decided that Gentiles who turned to Christ should not be required to keep the Mosaic Law, but should be instructed to "abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality" (v. 29).^{*} This statement was agreed in order not to offend Jewish Christians over particularly sensitive issues. *It was not done with the intention of preserving a residue of the Mosaic Law.* Do we fully appreciate the significance of the Jerusalem Council's momentous decision, which demonstrated so forcibly the principle of freedom in Christ? Later Paul wrote that believers "are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14).

Problems in Galatia and Colosse

However, even after the Jerusalem Council, Judaizers insisted on conformity to the minutiae of the Law and their man-made traditions. This included the strict observance of food regulations and of the ceremonials and rituals associated with feast days and festivals. In his Letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul argued that acceptance of the true gospel was based on faith and grace, not according to the keeping of the Law, that is, not according to works. The prophet Habakkuk had declared that "the just shall live by his faith", and Abraham was accepted by God because of his faith (Hab. 2:4; Gal. 3:5-9). Keeping the Law meant that the Judaizers would continue to be slaves, but acceptance of the Spirit of Christ accounted them 'free men', enabled to show appreciation of their deliverance by doing good works to all men. As has been said, "The Christian is at one and the same time the freest of all men and the servant of all men" (attributed to Martin Luther).

^{*} Quotations from the NKJV unless stated otherwise.

The kinds of problems that faced the Apostle Paul and his fellow-workers are illustrated in the letter to Colosse, where there was also concern about false teachings and practices. It would seem from the complimentary remarks about Epaphras' role in establishing the ecclesia at Colosse that Gentile converts had not been circumcised, but there was disquiet that such a 'perversion' could occur. The apostle is concerned to emphasise the supremacy and pre-eminence of the Lord Jesus Christ in God's plan of salvation. This means that the one who believes and accepts the saving grace of Christ is not bound by the regulations of the Law of Moses, nor by the accumulation of man-made rules and ordinances that over the centuries were added to the Law. The believer is freed from the need to work for his salvation, and "he is bound neither by Jewish ceremonialism, nor by pagan superstitions and taboos".¹

Outward observances

The second chapter of Colossians contains references to the influence of teachers of philosophy and to persons who were involved with astrology. There were also those who worshipped angels and claimed guidance from visions. Some attached great importance to the observance of new moons and sabbaths, and to rules such as, "Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle" (v. 21). Overall it looks as if both the Judaist and pagan philosophies were materialistic and earthbound in their traditions and way of life. The apostle demonstrates that the gospel presents a death, a life, and a hope. The disciple dies to the way of the flesh, accepts with joy life in Christ now, and hopes for the Lord's return and the gift of immortality.

Gentile believers may not have been freed from the bondage of striving to keep the Law, but they have been delivered from the worship of false gods, and from the futility of a life without meaning and purpose, which is also a life of slavery—to sin. The writer of Ecclesiastes observed life from a natural humanistic perspective and penned these words: "I thought in my heart, Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good. But that also proved to be meaningless . . . I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives . . . I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure" (2:1,3,10, NIV).

In this context consider the following words: "Life today is seen in terms of the pursuit of

happiness or satisfaction. It is assumed that everyone has a right to be happy. In living we aim constantly at satisfying the various natural desires that we all have and all should be able to fulfil".² This philosophy leads only to reinforce the bondage of sin and death, from which there is no escape, apart from an acceptance of the way of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. The believer rejoices that under grace his life has meaning, a purpose, and is satisfying.

Captives set free

How does this deliverance come about? During his ministry the Lord Jesus declared that he had come to fulfil the Law. He fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that he was born to set captives free (Lk. 4:17,18). In one particular sense the captives are those who are in bondage to sin and death. Jesus makes the appeal, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt. 11:28-30). This was another way of signifying the liberty to be experienced by those who become his disciples in truth. The appeal was made against the background of the experiences that ordinary people endured, who were loaded with the burden of keeping the minutiae of the Law and the traditions of the Jewish élite. The term "yoke" was used to imply that these traditions involved an intolerable and oppressive way of life for the Jews.

The Lord spoke often of the relationship between himself and those who would be his disciples. True followers must accept the different parts of his teachings as they progressively become aware of these doctrines. Jesus said to those Jews who believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are my disciples indeed [If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples, NIV]. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free . . . if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (Jno. 8:31,32,36). His word was truth, and he declared that he was "the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6). In his exposition of this Gospel, Brother John Carter draws particular attention to the futility of the Jews' belief that natural descent from Abraham "gave . . . title to

1. *IVF Dictionary* on "Liberty".

2. C. H. Whitely, *The Permissive Morality*.

the everlasting features of the covenant [made to Abraham]. These features were necessarily bound up with the removal of sin", and that could only be accomplished through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.³

The new man

To the Jew, truth is an integral part of Yahweh's character and includes motive and action as well as knowledge. Hearing and accepting the teachings of Jesus are not an intellectual exercise; rather it is essentially moral and spiritual. The Apostle Paul follows this line of thinking in the Letter to the Ephesians: "But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard him and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (4:20-24).

God sets us free by making us His own slaves, as the Apostle Paul declares:

"And having been set free from sin . . . present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness . . . and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life" (Rom. 6:18-22);

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage . . . For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:1,13).

Paul's Letter to Philemon provides a wonderful account of the deliverance of Onesimus, Philemon's slave, from the bondage of slavery, to being a 'free man' in Christ.

In his book *Legalism Versus Faith*, Brother David Levin presents a useful overview of the distinction between life under the Law and life in Christ: "A slave to the law has a belief system which says, 'I must follow certain rules and rituals to please God and earn salvation. If I do the right things God owes me eternal life.' This . . . is self-centered, and relegates God to a secondary role in the process of salvation. Conversely, a servant of Christ has the belief system which says, 'Christ has freed me from law, sin, and death. Therefore I acknowledge this great gift by voluntarily enslaving myself to his work'.⁴

The exercise of freedom

We are unchained from self-centredness and have been crucified with Christ, who lives in us by faith. God calls us to be His sons and daughters, and adoption brings liberation (Gal. 2:20; 4:1-7). What are the practical effects of this deliverance? Life under the Lord Jesus Christ is free; we are open to accept his teachings or reject them. As disciples we are committed to a person, to the Lord Jesus Christ, not to a set of rules and regulations that are hard and fast, obligatory and binding, as Jews under the Law were beholden to. This experience of freedom is like being released from prison. The anonymous prison uniform is replaced by new clothes. The identification bracelet is removed, the nameless inmate now has a name and is recognised as a person. He is no longer subject to the institution's rules and regulations, and is now only responsible to the one who sponsored his release.

What are the implications of this freedom? Surely it means that the one who is free should not seek to impose a yoke or burden upon others by striving to regiment them into a rigid conformity of beliefs and practices. First principles and guidelines are essential, but should be mutually agreed. There is a temptation to use the Law in an *à la carte* kind of way, that is, to pick and choose what appeals to us. For example, some may adopt the rules relating to tithing or fasting, but at the same time do not observe those that forbid the wearing of garments woven from mixed textiles, or eating pork. It is important to establish good habits and rules for our own behaviour, and we may choose to be guided by certain aspects of the Law. However, these should not be imposed on others without their consent. The pattern of our discipleship ought to be one of kindly persuasion, cooperation, agreement and, where necessary and appropriate, an acceptance of differences.

We have been "called to liberty", but with this freedom and privilege comes responsibility. This freedom must not be abused by allowing our natural impulses free reign, or by causing distress to our brothers and sisters. In regard to the problem of eating food that had been offered to idols the apostle counselled:

"Everything is permissible for me'—but not everything is beneficial" (1 Cor. 6:12, NIV);
"Be careful . . . that the exercise of your

3. *The Gospel of John*, p. 109.

4. p. 139.

freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (8:9, NIV);

"As one who is in the Lord Jesus I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself . . . If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died" (Rom. 14:14,15, NIV).

The Apostle Peter penned these words: "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the king" (1 Pet. 2:16,17, NIV). Even though we are free, we are accountable to the one who has granted us liberty.

Principles and guidelines

The basis of life in Christ is the observance of the two great commandments: "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind', and 'your neighbor as yourself'" (Lk. 10:27). The life of the Christian operates according to principles, and is not based on rigid rules and regulations. Principles may be thought of as guidelines relating to beliefs, values and practices, and are open to interpretation. For example, in Ecclesiastes 3:1 we are informed that there is "a time for everything" (NIV). This principle is capable of interpretation depending on the particular context or situation. Nevertheless, someone may say that when Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:28, "Let him who stole steal no longer", he was reiterating a precise rule. But this statement is also capable of interpretation, for it could include 'stealing time' when one is late for worship, or 'stealing a person's reputation' by spreading an unfounded insinuation or smear.

We accept the principle, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40), but this guideline is used and interpreted in a variety of ways in ecclesial life. Baptism and the Breaking of Bread are vital to our lives in Christ. There are significant variations across the worldwide Brotherhood in the structure and arrangements for these two fundamental rites. And yet, for the most part, we are satisfied that these different

patterns and orders of service do not contravene the essential principles involved in our fellowship. The variations are usually accepted as reputable and orderly.

Another example is when a considerable number of UK ecclesias adopt the same public address title on a particular Sunday. On some occasions over two hundred addresses with the same first principle title are given on the same day. It is highly unlikely that any two are anything like identical, yet over two hundred brethren are trusted to present sound doctrine. The same may be said with regard to the worldwide presentation of seminars. In these activities we are celebrating the freedom we enjoy in Christ. The acceptance and operation of Scriptural guidelines and principles in our fellowship in Christ are based on trust. The Lord has committed the good news of life in Christ to our trust. In turn we have to trust one another.

Conclusion

Believers rejoice that they have been delivered from this present evil world and are free to chose to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and enjoy a life that is meaningful and satisfying. We must recognise the important distinction between life under the Law and the true pattern of life in Christ. There is a vital difference between behaviour dictated by rigid rules and regulations, and the disciples' pattern of life that is guided by principles. The Apostle Paul argued that acceptance of the true gospel was based on grace and faith, and not according to the keeping of the Law.

We have been delivered from the worship of false gods, and from the futility of a life without meaning and purpose that is a life of slavery to sin. In His great love God has set us free by making us His own slaves. In turn we love Him and the Lord Jesus Christ; and our good works, which we are free to choose to do, are an expression of gratitude. We have been "called to liberty", but with this freedom and privilege comes responsibility. The acceptance and operation of Scriptural guidelines and principles in our fellowship and liberty in Christ are based on trust. Together let us value and protect this freedom in a responsible manner.

"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage . . . For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another" (Gal. 5:1,13).