

Autonomy

When I was 15, I couldn't wait for my 16th birthday to come. You know why: so I could drive a car. And when I got my DL it was exhilarating, because at last I had independence. I didn't have to depend on my parents to take me wherever, if they were in agreement with what I wanted to do. And when I bought my own car, I no longer had to live according to their schedules and wishes. All my life, I have prized independence. Retirement is especially sweet because independence is fuller than ever. In America we're blessed with civil freedoms, but linked to freedom and equally important, though we rarely think of it, is independence.

Exercising independence, Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, etc, were able to compose exquisitely beautiful music, yet they were not totally free. They were limited to certain fixed musical notes and to laws of harmony. None of us are totally free and independent. We're restricted by traditions and customs, by conscience, and by societal laws and natural laws. Joni, restricted to a wheelchair, is not independent like I am. People in prison are not independent like I am. Neither are the people who live in North Korea, nor women in Muslim countries, nor those who pass miserable lives in abject poverty. Autonomy is ours only to a limited degree. God has made it that way. We have sufficient free will to choose to live to His glory – or not. We have to abide by the moral laws He has revealed to us – or answer to Him. We have to acknowledge His existence in all that we do because ... well, because He's Creator and the Sovereign Ruler of His creation, and His holiness and justice demand our submission. We don't have absolute autonomy. Even God Himself doesn't have absolute autonomy, for He can do only that which is according to His holy will. (The Muslim god, Allah, is absolutely autonomous, which therefore means that he's also arbitrary or capricious.)

Those who think abortion should be free and unrestricted reject God's rule; they demand a degree of autonomy that's not theirs to have. Same for homosexuals. Those who espouse Marxism, or Buddhism, or the Hindu religion, likewise seize upon a fantasy: that they have the autonomy to believe whatever they please about spiritual matters. Thinking that they have independence from God is a delusion.

Autonomy is what the Serpent put on offer in the Garden (Genesis 3:5, "You will be as God"). And that independence from God is exactly what most people since then prize most of all: "I decide for myself everything, I decide what is right or wrong, what I'll believe, and what I want to do in life and how I'll do it. Nobody rules me, not even any God." What's especially tragic in this, besides the massive number of people who'll face God's wrath because of their rebelliousness, is the notion of autonomy that prevails today in the Church.

In reality, of course, there's no such thing as autonomy. The Serpent lied. As an immature teen, I was thrilled with what I thought was independence, but it was imaginary. I was dependent on my parents for . . . hey, I don't have to tell you, it's a very long list. None of us are independent. We're all dependent on others in countless ways. We need farmers to grow our food, we need others to get fresh, clean water into our homes, to supply the fuel we need to warm us in the winter and to cook, and to make our cars and homes and refrigerators and clothes and . . . this too is a very long list. And we're likewise totally dependent on God for fresh air to breathe, for the rain that grows our food, for peace, even for our next breath and heartbeat. Independence is illusory. Nevertheless, we crave it, we suppose we have it. Is this fantasy dangerous? Yes. It steals from us all gratitude for those on whom we're dependent. It also indulges dehumanizing pride. It blocks us from the creaturely humility that makes us human. But if we're a Christian, there's something worse. It's this that we need to think about today.

It's impossible to spend time in the New Testament and not realize that believers in Christ are not free to live as they please, as their inherent spirit of independence would like. Rather, Christians are under obligation to live according to the Law of Christ (Gal 6:2 and 1 Cor 9:21), which is everything commanded and taught in the New Testament. Yet most American Christians suppose that having placed faith in Christ, there's a spot in heaven waiting for them and that's all there is to Christianity – except of course for church attendance, and even that may be desultory. Independence is intrinsic to our sin nature. It sits at the core of our natural being, controlling our thinking, our affections, and especially our will. We love ... No, we *crave* autonomy. We lust for it, we live for it. Whether expressed by unbelievers or by Christians, this spirit of autonomy is rebellion against God. If it doesn't well up within us spontaneously because of our sin nature, we quickly and efficiently get it from the world we inhabit.

Repeatedly (six times!), in Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, Christ says, "I know your deeds..." *Deeds?* What deeds? The phrase implies that we are to be doing something that Christ values, and not doing something else, anything else. The

phrase means we're under obligation to be doing something for Christ according to His will, something that has been revealed in His Word (for otherwise we can't be held accountable). "I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds" (2:23). Christ is observing us, each one of us, and keeping track of whether we're fulfilling the responsibilities of salvation. A day of reckoning is implicit.

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10). "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:13). "[Christ] has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Rev 1:6).

Let's reflect on these 3 verses. First, let's observe that believers have a purpose here on earth. We are created in Christ *to do good works*. We're not here to enjoy life as our unbelieving neighbors are doing. Unlike the lives of unbelievers, our lives are purposeful. We're here to serve God.

Second, notice that the "good works" ("deeds" in Revelation) are God-ordained. The good works are what God wants done. He has revealed what they are in His Word. The indwelling Spirit may reveal more specifically what God wants us to do, provided that we're yielded to the Spirit and haven't quenched the Spirit. The "deeds" are not what we think we should be doing, nor are they just anything that seems like it's the right thing to do. That's why we need to be in the Word all the time, internalizing it, so that we know God's will. If we don't know His will, it's for sure the "deeds" Christ is looking for won't be there.

For just one example, we know that it's God's will that we pray for others. After all, that's Christ's high priestly work in heaven now, and we're in Christ. Therefore, we are priests too (the above verse says so). So we should be doing what priests are supposed to do. That's praying or interceding with God for each other and mediating God's blessings to each other. Priests make it possible for people to enter into God's presence, so that means sharing the Gospel with others in the hope they also will believe. Gospel outreach thus is a priestly work. Encouraging and serving one another also are priestly duties. When we do our work as priests, we are serving Christ in the temple He's building (Eph 2:19ff).

Third, we are unique persons. We're "created in Christ Jesus." So although we dwell in the same body, we're no longer the same person we were prior to being born again. We have a new life, the life of Christ imparted to us by the Spirit. Paul refers to this in various ways in his writings. For example in Ephesians 4 he says we're a "new man." We're to be transformed (Rom 12:2) into the likeness of Christ. We're to "put on Christ," by living out the Word of God and by allowing the Holy Spirit to control us. We *can't* live as our unbelieving neighbors do. For sure, we still have a sin nature, it's intrinsic to this life. But we don't have to allow it to control us. The Spirit of God indwells to enable us to overcome the sin nature. But it doesn't happen automatically; we must continually, consciously work at it. And we will, if to seek to glorify and exalt our Savior is our obsession.

But probably someone will disagree, saying something like, "The Gospel gives us liberty, real freedom. The Bible says that. Don't push legalism onto us!" Really? Here's what Paul actually wrote, "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace...You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love" (Gal 5:4,13). So, what we're free from is obedience to the Mosaic Law in order to be saved. (This is Paul's argument in 2 Cor 3:17.) But Christians are NOT free from God's holy rule. We're not free from the requirement of sanctification. We're not free from the obligation of servant-hood or priestly service. We're not free from the responsibility of Christ-likeness. Whoever supposes we have full freedom in Christ should reflect on 1 Peter 2:16. Beware the will to be autonomous that resides within all of us!

All the above is to argue that the lust to be autonomous is an especially ugly aspect of the sin nature. Unbelievers can't do otherwise. But Christians, citizens of the Kingdom, must be submitted to the rule of Christ the King. They *cannot* be autonomous. Yet, sadly, tragically, they are. Most unbelievers in America have never encountered a Christian who's expressing the life of Christ. In this vast panorama called America, there are lots of black holes. These are our evangelical churches. No light escapes them. How are unbelievers ever to know that they can have a glorious and eternally blessed relationship with the living Creator God if we believers refuse to submit to God's holy and good rule?

In love Christ has provided us, His followers, with all that we need to overcome sin and vain, selfish and worldly pursuits. He has gifted us with the Spirit of God to empower us and to enlighten us. And He's given us His Word, all that we need to know, by which to live out His life. We only have the short time of this life to show God how much we love Him. Let's commit afresh to seeking to make each day – each moment – count for Christ.