

Liberty

“I am in debt both to Greeks and barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish” (Romans 1:14-15). And, “. . . the continuing debt to love one another” (Romans 13:8).

“Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel . . . I make myself a slave to everyone” (1 Corinthians 9:16b, 19b).

“You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God” (1 Corinthians 6:20).

“They [false teachers] promise freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity – for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Peter 2:19).

Our nation is in the throes of a crisis, but it’s been missed by nearly everyone. It’s a massive deception. Massive! Yet no one sees it. It’s invisible. And the tragic part of it is, the deceit I refer to has infected the Church. The crisis is all about “liberty,” a putative liberty. We very much need to discuss this.

Paul had a strong and deep sense of responsibility. Because of what Christ had done for him, Paul knew that he had a compelling obligation to share the Gospel with others. For Paul it was so strong he referred to himself as “in debt” or as “a slave.” Paul went further and said that we’re to imitate him, and that for a good reason: God expects everyone of us, believers, followers of Christ, to likewise understand the responsibilities we’ve been given and to fulfill them. If we’re a believer in Christ, we have God-given responsibilities. And we’re all “in debt” to carry them out. We are servants of God. We are not free to pursue our own interests and desires.

Almost five centuries ago, Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza gave the Western world anti-monarchialism, pantheism, and Bible criticism. His big idea, though, was that humans are to be free from the restraints of religion and kingship. During the subsequent centuries those who built upon Spinoza’s ideas gave us the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, Darwinism and, thru Hegel, Marxism. And thru John Locke, American constitutionalism. But the big idea in all this is the same: we’re free! We don’t want, need or, in reality, have to be chained and repressed by forces that come to us by tradition, economics, religion, law, or by any other means. We’re meant to enjoy the liberty to live as we please. Evolution and billions of years especially enhanced this big idea by removing from us the awareness of the existence of a Creator God. The American experiment in (what we now call) democracy has infected all of us with the notion of total individual freedom, guaranteed to us by our Constitutional form of government. This is not hyperbole! The modern American psyche is one that exults in freedom – freedom from any and all restraints except those necessary to subsist and to avoid harm to others. We are free to pursue our own interests and desires.

Consider what liberals currently advance: total and absolute sexual freedom (non-marital sex, homosexuality, etc); freedom from the restraints of constitutional government and the rule of law (“democracy”); freedom from the repressive doctrines and beliefs of Christianity; freedom from traditions such as marriage and family; freedom from pregnancy and motherhood (abortion); freedom from the oppressiveness of seeking profits (capitalism and the greed it fosters); freedom from having to learn anything; freedom from the need to be kind and respectful to others; freedom from truth (transgender); freedom even from reality (a metaverse); and freedom from being competitive, wanting to succeed, indeed, from striving for excellence or even a desire to achieve. Freedom, in other words, from responsibility! The great goal is to be free from responsibilities: no expectations, no standards, no demands, nothing but total freedom.

The “social justice” that liberals promote is really the liberation of society from all the oppressive restraints of a previous, unenlightened, superstitious, ignorant, tradition-bound era. Religion *especially* has to go, because it’s by (and for) an ignorant, superstitious pre-modern people. In their mind, Christianity has such a crushingly repressive influence it needs to be abolished, and those who promote it deserve to be punished for seeking to enslave people in ignorance and with lies. The “goal of history” (which they help along) is that all society be liberated, by whatever means necessary.

Not all Americans are liberals, of course. Many are “conservatives.” Although secularist, they are tradition-bound. Family, marriage, achievement in life, education, lawfulness, and freedom of expression are some of their chief values. They have no interest in the liberal agenda or perhaps only in certain items on it. They love liberty too, for sure, although with a more developed sense of responsibility. Liberals hope that these people will soon come around to becoming liberal too, especially after some “inducements” (pressures) are introduced. Liberals have power; conservatives don’t.

The liberty in view above is ultimately liberty from having to obey God. It's defiance of His authority over us. It's rebellion against His sovereign rule, against the standards by which He's commanded we're to live. It's narcissism and its hubris. Interestingly, no one asks, Who has the authority to grant all this liberty? Someone somewhere with the appropriate authority has to give freedom from bondage [to whatever]. Evolution or naturalism is not a personal entity so that cannot give liberty. Who then? Answer: Nobody. Because there really is no liberty, it's all a ruse. An absolutely *massive* deception. It's making ourselves into little gods capable of living according to our own wisdom, exactly what Satan put on offer in the Garden in Genesis 3. The reality is, everyone referred to above pursuing "freedom," viz, almost all of America, is in bondage to sin, to clever Satanic deception, and therefore to judgment. Or, based on Paul's argument in Romans 1, the putative liberty IS the judgment.

My great concern in the above is the following. The craving for liberty, the inordinately high value Americans place on liberty, and the self-indulgent life-style that it incites, has corrupted the Church. Political freedom is partly in view. I sense that the patriotism in the evangelical churches is driven mostly by the concern that our freedom to be Christians is slowly being eroded if not assaulted. The very serious danger in this is the consequence that necessarily results, idolatry. We are Americans having a Christian religion, rather than followers of Christ dwelling in America. More concerning is the notion that we can live as we please without reference to Scripture or to God's standards, values and priorities.

The most *essential* demand that God makes in Scripture is obedience to Him. As Creator and Ruler, He has the authority to command obedience. There are of course other reasons to obey God, such as to honor Him, to love Him and to fear Him. But at its core, "belief" is not belief without obedience! What does "believe" mean? It means trusting obedience! To NOT obey means we don't really trust God's will, His Word, or His wisdom. In other words, we don't trust God. Our ideal of liberty means freedom from having to obey God. It means freedom from having to live according to His Word, His values and His will. Freedom even from having to *know* His will. We suppose that if we profess Christ we are assured of being in heaven one day, so nothing else matters. So we're free to live as we please. Can it be more compelling than to put it like this: To not obey God is to defy Him. On such a person, may God have mercy.

But someone will argue, "Scripture does say in several places that we're 'free.' So what's wrong with exercising the freedom that the Bible says we have in Christ?" OK. Let's discuss that. We don't take a phrase of Scripture and make it mean what we want it to mean. We understand Scripture in its historical and literary contexts. So when Paul writes, "**It is for freedom that Christ has set us free**" (Galatians 5:1), he's arguing that the Galatians (and we readers) are free from the *stoichea* of the Mosaic Law. That's the issue the Judaizers had created that triggered the Letter to the Galatians. *Stoichea* are rites, ceremonies, special days and practices and traditions that are typically part of religious observance. From such, Paul says, we're free. So Gentile believers don't have to be circumcised to follow the Jewish Messiah. They don't have to observe the Sabbath. Or to eat kosher. From such we're free. But we're NOT free from living righteously according to God's standard of righteousness. We're not free to ignore Christ's teachings and commands, such as to love our brothers. Look what Paul writes just a bit further on: "**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**" (Galatians 5:13). We're not free to live as we please. Peter, by the way, says the same thing: "**. . . live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God**" (1 Peter 2:16). To serve God is to obey His will as it's revealed in His Word.

What about, "**Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom**" (2 Corinthians 3:17)? Again, let's understand why Paul wrote this. In this passage, Paul is contrasting the New Covenant with the Old because certain opponents at Corinth were challenging his ministry. The New is superior, Paul is arguing, because with belief in the Jewish Messiah the Spirit of Christ comes into the believer's life. That results in freedom. From what? From the penalty of not fulfilling the Mosaic Law! We've been redeemed from the penalty of that Law. So we're free in the Spirit to glorify the Lord and to be transformed into His likeness. Similarly, Jesus' statement, "**the truth will set you free . . . if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed**" (John 8:32,36), refers to being set free from bondage to sin and to Satan in order to honor, please and glorify the Father. In that chapter, the Pharisees were the ones *not* free because they were living according to their desires and those of the devil.

Dear reader: Be very careful. The "liberty" on offer today is a sham. The temptation is to make ourselves little gods, able to know how to live according to our own lights, wiser than God. That's worse even than idolatry. But we are not free from the responsibilities that God has given us. No one is, *especially* those of us who are following Christ. We have heightened responsibilities to obey, to serve, and to be holy. As though we're His slave, let's fulfill the responsibilities in Scripture to the glory of the One who, in supreme love, redeemed us to be His own.