

6-1-1969

Gospel Freedom

Robert H. Smith

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Robert H. (1969) "Gospel Freedom," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 40, Article 33.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol40/iss1/33>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Gospel Freedom

ROBERT H. SMITH

TWO KINDS OF FREEDOM

The Western world has understood freedom in two basic ways. For one school of thought freedom is the right and the power to do what one wishes. A man is not free if he is behind bars or in a captive nation or lying crippled in a hospital—no matter what his state of mind. Persons or powers beyond his control dispose his life and dictate orders to him, and to say that he is free is to play fast and loose with the language.

According to this definition external restraints really deprive a man of freedom. If I must do another's bidding, if I lack the power to walk when I wish to walk, if I am hungry or unemployed when I want to eat or work, then to that extent I am not free but a slave. A message of liberation is realistic and true only if it can remove the manifold tyrannies which actually and externally oppress and bind men.

A second equally ancient and authoritative school of thought identifies freedom as a quality of life independent of external circumstances. Not doing what one *pleases* (Rousseau, Locke, Hume, Hobbes, Bentham) but doing what one *ought* is freedom (Plato, Epictetus, Spinoza, Hegel). Freedom is not an adjunct of pleasure or desire but of duty or obedience. Swerve from your duty and you become a slave.

It is easy to imagine why Christian

Robert H. Smith is assistant professor of New Testament exegesis at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

thinkers throughout the history of the church have aligned themselves almost exclusively with the latter of the two freedoms, defining the liberty of the children of God as inner harmony with God by which one rises above the ebb and flow of external circumstances.

Many of the first Christians were literally slaves and prisoners. Until the fourth century and the accession of Constantine, Christians existed as a suspect minority in a hostile state. Nevertheless they knew the death and resurrection of Jesus as the great act of liberation. They counted themselves free in Christ, celebrated their freedom, prayed for its consummation, and developed insights into the nature of God's gift in Jesus Christ that have nourished the church ever since.

The gospel has ever been a message of comfort and consolation to the weak and the poor, the exploited and the oppressed, the prisoner and the slave. Through the web of inscrutable circumstance and contrary fate there shines a great light from the crib and cross and empty tomb. And in that light men know that God is their God, and in that confidence they have found peace and meaning. Let the politicians and the rich run and enjoy this world. There is yet another realm, another space, another dimension, and it is available equally to all. Indeed it has long been thought that the dispossessed may have a special aptitude for discovering it by the very fact that they are locked out of the kingdoms of this world. The Christian

tradition exhibits both a suspicion of worldly place and power and at times a near romantic exaltation of poverty.

A further indication that gospel freedom has long been interpreted as inner peace is the fact that in our time Christianity is popularly defined as a religion. The equation is taken for granted. And religion is commonly understood as having to do with the soul rather than the body, and with heaven and God rather than with the earth and man. There is much that is valid and right in that picture of religion and the view of freedom based on it. But it involves very grave dangers. Before we rehearse the pitfalls and suggest an alternative, we turn to the past, inquiring how these widely accepted identifications arose in the first place.

FREEDOM IN HISTORY

On the soil of classical Greece the two historically dominant views of freedom emerged. While the city-state was intact and viable, freedom was very simply the political privilege of the citizen as distinguished from the slave. The citizen has the right and responsibility of self-determination and free speech. His speech and his freedom were to express and nurture the freedom of the citizen and of the city, so there was consequently no opposition or contrast between the citizen's freedom and the right ordering or law of the community, nor were inner freedom and political freedom opposed in any way.

The system of the city-state was crushed by the empire builders, and the old order with its sense of community dissolved under Alexander and his successors of East and West, who built anew on a far grander scale than any seen before. The individual

citizen suddenly counted for less and lacked the power to dispose his affairs or affect in the slightest the policies of the gigantic entity of which he was so minute a member.

Stoicism pondered the place of man in such a large and indifferent universe. It directed men to the microcosm within and taught that truly human freedom consists in harmony with the rational principle at work within the outwardly hostile and irrational universe. Freedom consists then in liberation from one's passions and anxieties by which one is bound to the cosmos rather than to its underlying law or spirit. As in Buddhism so in Stoicism desiring and acting in the world serve only to bring a person into conflict and grief. Disciplined withdrawal is the royal road to freedom—withdrawal from striving and scheming, spending and getting, from caring about the world of things and from hoping for factual improvement of one's lot (or of the neighbor's outward condition) in the world.

The slave Epictetus and the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, so different in external circumstances, both alike sought freedom in the interior spaces where man by the exercise of his reason comes into contact with the changeless and abiding spirit of God. Unlike and unequal outwardly, they were yet one in the inner realm to which both withdrew.

By New Testament times the two basic conceptions of man's freedom had assumed new political and mystical forms. Both have their counterparts in our modern world, and both are still invested with all the authority of the divine, even though the mystical form alone is ordinarily called "religious" today.

On the one hand emperor worship had become plausible in the West—the rulers of the East had long received divine honors—through the achievements of Caesar Augustus. He had brought to the world the Roman peace. The cessation of warfare on land and piracy on sea, the extension of Roman roads and Roman law meant that a harmonious and quiet space had been carved out of the infinity of the universe where a man could live his life in relative security. Men could write, paint, or carve. They could think and build, trade and travel. They could sow and reap, have children and see children's children. And in those activities they could find meaning in life and be laid peaceably to rest at the end of life.

At the very same time, however, lush Oriental vision and intuition in the form of mystery religions threatened to displace or at least dilute the Roman love of reason and order. The mystery religions offered a more popular and less demanding avenue of contact with God than Stoicism and other traditional philosophies. By participating in the cult—eating its meal or seeing its drama—the person became initiated into the true (inner as opposed to surface) shape of reality and was freed from the delusion that physical, political, or economic life mattered very much at all. The cults guaranteed freedom not here and now—what was that worth anyhow?—but hereafter and beyond in a spiritual world.

It is safe to say that through much of its life the church has tended to side with the Stoics and the mystics in defining Christian freedom as an inner condition beyond the reach of external circumstance. Furthermore, the Western church has

aligned itself with the rationalism and heroic asceticism of the Stoa against the emotional abandon or spontaneity of the mystery religions, which have had their Christianized descendants, however, in the sects. But church and sect have ordinarily agreed that Christian freedom has to do primarily with the inner life of soul or mind or spirit.

That is by no means to say that Christians were indifferent to the world. For more than a thousand years after Constantine, Christianity exerted influence in every sector of life or was at least able to do so and expected to do so. The line between state and church was a permeable membrane with fluids passing in both directions. Religion in its piety, liturgy, and theology was interested in announcing and promoting the freedom of detachment from this world. But religious celebrations and rites were public affairs involving whole communities and not the private rituals of individuals, families, or tiny minorities only.

Separation of religion from culture began in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Theology no longer ruled as queen of the sciences, but the manifold departments of life and learning declared their independence and demanded autonomy. A crisis was reached following the Thirty Years' War. After the Peace of Westphalia (1648) sane men everywhere wanted to prevent a recurrence of religiously inspired violence between states. The answer was the secularization of the state, the removal of the influence of religion. Religion was pushed farther and farther out of public life into the private and interior sectors.

FREEDOM NOW

Today the church is achieving increasing awareness that we should not and must not any longer acquiesce in the simplistic definition of Christianity as a religion of inwardness only or of Christian freedom as spiritual or psychic only. The church is reacting against the isolation of Christian faith from the full range of man's life. Various circumstances have contributed to the awakening.

For one thing, modern psychology and psychiatry have brought unexpected light, healing, and freedom to the souls of men. Skeptics and unbelievers say that the successes demonstrate that religion is no longer necessary for the health of the soul or spirit and that mankind has come of age. Thoughtful Christians, while they thank God for the blessings channeled through every therapist and healer, have begun to see that the church or many in the church were too glibly identifying gospel freedom with the kind of inner peace that psychiatry can also contribute. They have been compelled to reassess the scope of the redemption in Christ.

Equating religion with inwardness and the liberty of the gospel with freedom of mind or soul has been under attack from another direction also. Those to whom the message of inner freedom has been announced have not always shown gratitude. Especially in recent times they have begun to suspect that the freedom God offers His beloved children is a larger and brighter, a more earthy and solid quality than they were being told, and that the message of inner freedom is not good news but a hoax specifically designed to keep them in their (bad and unfree) place.

Indeed it must be confessed that neither

the church nor the world ever wanted for unscrupulous men whose selfishness early discovered that the gospel of inner freedom might satisfy the neighbor and keep him from asking for a share of this world's (and this church's) goods. If men were satisfied with peace of soul, why share with them either bread or political power?

Black Americans have lately been heard to protest that "The Star-Spangled Banner" is right in a perverse sort of way: The United States really is "the land of the free" (the whites) and "the home of the brave" (the blacks). The blacks and the poor have served notice that they will not long tolerate the gap between those who enjoy only inner freedom and those who have external freedom as well. Why should they be brave and patient when man's power over external circumstances is so demonstrably great?

The impressive results of psychiatry, the demands of the oppressed, and man's expanding knowledge and competence are shaking the church out of its satisfied slumbering and making it rethink the meaning of gospel freedom. The church is beginning to realize that it had been lulled into gradual acceptance of an intolerable narrowing of the scope of redemption and the arena of freedom. Biblical and historic Christian teaching on the height and length and breadth of freedom is being recovered.

The fault was never in the Bible nor in the writings of the early Christians. The church of recent centuries has simply had difficulty translating the biblical and early Christian insights and appropriating all their richness and potential in changed situations. Especially since the Renaissance and Enlightenment large segments of the

church had been too shy and retiring and had permitted the gospel to be constricted dangerously, as if it applied only to ethereal realms within or beyond.

FREEDOM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The ancient unholy trinity of "the devil, the world, and our flesh" captures something of the awful breadth of evil's working in creation. It is not less but more than merely personal, inner, and individual. Jesus certainly knew that men stubbornly defend their old selves, and in the strongest language He called men to repent before time ran out on them. His harshness toward the cunning unrepentant is sobering.

But He knew also that men are not only perpetrators of evil and centers of responsibility (and irresponsibility), but they are also victims of evil forces beyond their ken and control. His remark to His disciples concerning the man born blind is a classic case in point (John 9:3). Furthermore, He rescued the imperiled from drowning, raised the dead, fed the hungry, cleansed the leper, healed the lame and the deaf, and He cast demons out of the possessed. Throughout His ministry Jesus attacked and defeated the powers both within and without which enslave men and keep them from the glorious liberty of the sons of God.

Yet some read the gospels as if Jesus' miracles were not there—or as if they were merely myths or parables of Jesus' intentions to give inner harmony with God. Such a procedure assumes that God is not concerned for men's bodies, for their societies and communities, or for the life of His whole creation. Furthermore, the interpretation ignores the statements of

Jesus regarding the coming kingdom of God with the consequent dethroning of Satan and all demons from the individual and corporate lives of men.

Paul drew cosmic conclusions regarding Jesus' life and death and resurrection. The redemption worked by God in Christ is as broad as God's creative work, embracing body as well as soul, individual persons and corporate entities, together with all things visible and invisible. Liberation in Christ encompasses even the whole inanimate world. As Christ is the agent through whom God created, so He is also the one through whom God has redeemed the world.

One of the ways Paul indicates the size of God's liberating deed in Christ is to say that in Jesus God has defeated the "principalities and powers." These are Paul's names for the coalition of forces outside the heart or will of people by which people are enslaved and their lives twisted, tortured, and perverted. These ancient designations indicate perennially present powers of destruction. Paul proclaimed what we moderns need to learn. "Liberal" and "conservative" argue whether the forces binding people and spoiling the world are inside individual hearts or outside the environment. Paul declares that evil is not either individual and personal or external and corporate. It is both. And by saying that God has in Jesus both conquered sin and dethroned the principalities, he is declaring the astounding sweep of our deliverance. What God has done in Christ is nothing less than "reconciled to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross." (Col. 1:20)

THE GLORIOUS GOAL

The liberation effected by God in Jesus Christ extends to and through three circles: the individual person (body and soul), the society, the entire creation.

The freedom offered and promised in the gospel is so great that it far exceeds the two common definitions of freedom not only individually but in combination. It is more than the sum of the inner freedom of harmony with God plus the external freedom of circumstances. It is greater than living without anxiety together with being able to roam and act without hindrance or interference of foreign or hostile barriers.

The freedom of the gospel is circle within circle, sphere within sphere, wheels within wheels spinning and expanding outward to the farthest reaches of His world gathering up in His fatherly embrace all souls, all bodies, all persons and communities, all plants and animals, all stars and galaxies, all systems and worlds. (1 Cor. 15:28)

The gospel proclaims nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth where men will be externally and internally free—not merely to think and act in any way they choose but free in such a way that they will choose to think in accord with God's good pleasure and be free to carry out their God-pleasing decisions. There will be no gap between their will and God's will, nor between their world and God's intention. God will be all to everyone.

It is important to know how large is the goal God has for His world. Only so can men be delivered from partiality and lopsidedness, and only so can the church

speaking prophetically and critically of partial freedoms and work positively and effectively for the enlargement of freedom. Albert Einstein's famed remark has been frequently repeated and deserves to be pondered carefully by the church as it assesses its mission in the world: "We live in an age of perfect means and confused ends." In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our God has enacted the end in the midst of history, and He calls His people joyously to display right now the full dimensions of that final liberation. He sends the church to make a spectacle of itself in the world, or rather to make a spectacle of the gospel, to declare His glory, the vast reaches of His love and redemption. Now in the midst of a world of manifold tyrannies He calls us to display how great is the freedom He offers to individuals and communities and the whole material world. In the name of Jesus, crucified and resurrected, the church ministers to individuals, creates new community, and even cares for the earth. When the church is faithful to the church's Lord, it denounces personal sin, and it also attacks social ills and injustices, because some people are chained by their own stubborn selfishness, and others are imprisoned or destroyed by the impersonal working of a political or economic or racial system, and many people are enslaved to both. And the earth is littered, despoiled, and abused by a bound, unfree humanity.

Where the gospel is proclaimed, where God's glory is displayed, where redemption is celebrated and offered, individuals and social systems and the good earth itself taste the freedom for which God intends His children and His world.

CHRISTIAN LIBERTY TODAY

Will the gospel ever suffer a layoff and be theologically unemployed and unemployable? There is no danger so far. Man has not come of age in the sense of maturing and growing up whole. He still grows up split or bent or small. Twentieth-century man still suffers all the schizophrenia of the Stone Age animists or the Bronze Age polytheists, worshiping at many altars, dividing his allegiance and dividing his very self and his world. Nothing is more alive in the world today than split and rift, brokenness and out-of-jointedness. Tribalism and totemism, nationalism and racism, class consciousness and a thousand snobberies—these all bear witness to man's limitations, his tunnel vision, his inability and unwillingness to think big and broadly, his undernourished and perverted sense of community, his sin and enslavement.

The enmities and the false fellowships bear witness to man's egotism, to the heart turned and curved in upon itself. All are circles of narrowness rippling out from the self at dead center. If "I" cannot quite deceive myself into thinking that "I" am the center of all the universe and the one for whom all things exist, if such is named pretentious and counted as horrible, then I am taught by countless voices from earliest childhood that nothing is more natural, more right, than to assume that "I multiplied by all those most like me" constitute the center of the world. That is, my class or my family or my tribe or my nation or my race or even my church is the hub of all things.

The continuing need is for a power to blast men out of their narrowness and get them committed to a universal, all-inclusive

community. Man must be taught to speak and act and take his stand not on the basis of blood, soil, flag, class, color, or idea but on the basis of God's deed in Christ. Jesus Christ is the one and only name under heaven given among men by which men can be saved. The answer to the rifts and divisions, the polytheism and schizophrenia is the proclamation that God is one (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:6), that He has cast out the false gods, exorcised the divisive demons, and granted peace or wholeness in the one Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 1:10)

Narrowness is the problem, and freedom from narrowness and freedom for community is the answer. It is not an easily curable narrowness, but doggedly stubborn, because it is based on the drive to secure one's existence, to preserve one's very self.

The gospel of Jesus Christ liberates men from that narrowness and for one another because it deals with that persistent and deep-rooted drive for self-preservation. It quite frankly calls men to die to self, to turn their backs on all the old securities and props that offer partial fulfillments and partial meanings, and to find new life with God and with one another through Christ.

"Die to self"—how that good phrase has been perverted by every crafty dictator seeking to subordinate individual persons to his own design! "Be free"—how that set of vocables has been rendered suspect in the contemporary cult of uninhibited self-expression and used to frustrate political and educational communities! Christianity calls men to die to self in order to come alive—not for the dictator but for God and in order to be free as God's sons in Christ.

Confronted by God's offer of freedom in Jesus, man literally mortifies himself—sorrows and repents for his partiality and narrowness, accepts his guilt and condemns himself as culpable, thereby rejecting and killing what he has been and what he has done. Man can find the power so to deny himself and to contradict his innate drive to preserve himself only in Jesus Christ, who is Himself in His death and resurrection the promise of life and freedom beyond the death of repentance. The man of freedom will arise from the ashes of the slave. Life is given anew on the far side of Baptism and repentance, and it is a life in harmony with God, the Creator of our life. To be in harmony with our Creator is to be in harmony with the principle of our own being. Therefore to have Him as Lord is to live not under a tyrant but in harmony with the one who raises our life to its own essential truth and its own intended freedom.

Thus not to belong to oneself (1 Cor. 6:19; 9:19; 1 Peter 2:16) and to belong to Him (Rom. 6:18,22; Gal. 5:1,13) is to be free—free from the partialities and enmities of improper self-love, free for God. But, once again, gospel freedom is not only inner freedom or individual

freedom. It means being free for the neighbor, free even for the stranger and the enemy (Matt. 5:38-48), free and able to cross boundaries in love, the freedom of being able to be constrained and drawn by the love of Christ. (2 Cor. 5:14-15)

Those who know God as Father in Jesus Christ are members of one new body, a new and liberated community, the church, the people of God, wherein the old and selfish priorities give way to the Spirit of the living God. No longer do the members of that body and the instruments of that Spirit bow to strange altars. They have been freed from the old drive to preserve their lives and liberated from the principalities and powers, the elements of the world, the angelic beings; that is, they have become God's children, free from the twofold tyranny of personal evil and institutionalized evil, liberated from the inner and from the environmental forces that previously conditioned, shaped, and even determined life from womb to tomb. (Eph. 6:12)

The myriad boundaries between individuals and between communities are for crossing—not in raids on the territory, persons, and goods of others but with extended hand and the kiss of peace.