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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
FREEDOM AT CORINTH: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PAUL THE APOSTLE AND LUCIAN, A CORINTHIAN CHRISTIAN Allan McNicol and James Thompson	5
THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM Michael R. Weed	19
“THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM”: A RESPONSE Paul L. Watson	28
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY: THE ESSENCE OF A SERMON Tony Ash	32
BOOK REVIEW: <u>Paul’s Ethic of Freedom</u> by Peter Richardson Don Crittenden	39
CONTRIBUTORS	44

FOREWORD

Since the dawn of history, the human odyssey has in large part been a quest for freedom. In this respect the present age is no different. With varying degrees of success, we continue to explore diverse models of freedom -- political, psychological, religious, and economic.

In the first century the Christian message encountered and joined issue with alternative views of freedom. It is equally important that Christians today join in the ongoing conversation regarding the nature and significance of human freedom.

These essays, originally presented in a seminar conducted with the Administrative Board of the Institute for Christian Studies, are here made available to a wider audience as an expression of the Institute's commitment to the task of encouraging reflection on the implications of Christian faith for life.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the faculty of the Institute for their patience and cooperation in this task. Special recognition and thanks are also due to Mrs. Frances Horn, Institute Secretary, and Ms. Kathryn Pinkerton for their valuable aid in preparing the manuscript for printing.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY: THE ESSENCE OF A SERMON

By Tony Ash

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal. 5:1)

Thomas Carlyle said:

Great meanwhile is the moment, when tidings of Freedom reach us; when the long-enthralled soul, from amid its chains and squalid stagnancy, arises, were it still only in blindness and bewilderment, and swears by Him that made it, that it will be free! Free? Understand that well, it is the deep commandment, dimmer or clearer, of our whole being, to be free. Freedom is the one purport, wisely aimed at, or unwisely, of all man's struggles, toilings and sufferings, on this Earth.

These are stirring words, vibrating in harmony with so much that matters in our world. To be free wars are fought. Those who seek racial equality join in the chorus "Oh freedom," and thrill to the words of Martin Luther King Jr., when he said "Free at last, free at last ...". The world earth is divided into the free world and that part presumably not free. Three decades ago and more four famous paintings by Norman Rockwell fired American patriotism by depicting the four freedoms. In more common terms, each day's life is a series of smaller struggles to get free. Free of a traffic jam, of a problem, of constricting clothes, of crying children, of the pressure of things that must be done, of housework, of

debt, of mental strain--and so on.

We face more terrible prisons as well. Thus we long to be free from purposelessness, from fear, from guilt, from loneliness, from despair, from worry, from besetting faults. If only the chains could be struck off, and we could soar away, unfettered!

We are talking about being free. In recent years the urge for liberation has focused on freedom from the constraint of authority. One result of this has been the philosophy of freedom which advocates doing whatever one wants--unfettered by authoritative constraints. Thomas Merton, in his spiritual autobiography, The Seven Storey Mountain, writes in detail of the time in his late teens and early twenties when he adopted this point of view. He celebrated his liberation from inhibiting powers through several years of sensual excess, until eventually his life was turned in other directions. He came to realize how empty such a procedure was. His story was reminiscent of the time in my own youth, when, with a best friend, the decision was made that we would be totally uninhibited. We would do just what we wanted, when we wanted, with absolute disregard for what anyone thought. The experiment got us nowhere, except that reflection on our resolution revealed it was impossible to accomplish. Yet the desire to have this kind of freedom was akin to that which many people adopt as a life philosophy.

Our age wants to be free. Free to grab all the gusto we can get, since we only go around once. Free to grab for the "brass ring"--as a lady seeking a new (and illicit) love once said to me. It is the promise of freedom offered by the "winning through intimidation" and "looking out for #1" point of view. A recent analysis of the 1970's said it could

probably be best characterized as the “me” decade. This evaluation doesn’t seem wrong. One can think of numerous illustrations of simple selfishness disguised as freedom.

In a television program produced by the Paulists, titled “When, Jenny, When?” a high school counselor speaks to Jenny, a student, about her sexual promiscuity. Jenny, who had been used more than once by boys in the school she attended, defended her behavior by saying, “it feels good.” Note the implication--Jenny thought that she was free to do whatever she wanted if it felt good. The counselor replied, “It also feels good to jump from a ten story building. It’s a great thrill to fall through the air . . . But you’ve got to hit bottom eventually.” This sobering thought gives us the opportunity to turn a corner in this sermon.

There are, indeed, many things a person is free to do. They may be sensual things, or greedy ones, or grasping ones, or selfish ones, or inconsiderate ones. But every such choice involves a consequence. One must “hit ground.” Note the following choices. We can eat as much as we can afford and want, but we must be prepared for the consequence of obesity. We can smoke if we wish, but the danger of lung cancer is terribly real. We can drink as much as we wish, but run the risk of becoming alcoholic. We can drive as fast and as recklessly as we want, but there are the law and the hospital room, not to mention the mortuary. We can cheat or lie, but the price in reputation must be paid. We can spend more than we make by the foolish use of credit, but debts eventually come due, and if they are not paid bankruptcy and/or poverty may result.

Here is the point. These so-called freedoms often end by producing a new bondage. One is convinced he has emerged from his cell, only to find he is really in another cell,

more difficult to escape than the first. Certainly it is not difficult to set aside liking for alcohol learned from youth, but it is exceedingly difficult to go on the wagon once alcoholism has occurred. Thus a misuse of freedom produces a greater slavery. Quite simply, the wrong use of freedom can bring about the loss of freedom. The acquisition of those things that fulfill lesser desires can make it impossible to acquire the satisfaction of greater desires. If the use of freedom leads to the loss of freedom, is there any real freedom at all? In a sense there is not. We are bound to be slaves, and cannot escape it, no matter how we try. But can we use our freedom in a way that will make us free indeed, while yet in bondage? Is there a form of bondage or limitation which is freedom?

If there is a way to find this genuine freedom, it certainly does not come by assuming we must answer to no higher authority than to the self. That was Eve's mistake. She was told she could become like God, knowing good and evil, overcoming all limitations, if she would eat the forbidden fruit. The temptation was most inviting. "You can rule your own life--be its absolute sovereign." Alas, the promise from the serpent was a lie. The result of Eve's eating was the terrible bondage of sin and death which we now experience, and which lies behind all human problems.

Consider these reasons why self cannot be the ultimate court of appeal for its use of freedom. The self does not know the nature of absolute freedom. No one has ever achieved this vision. The human mind, limited by its nature, and corrupted by sin, cannot know what lies beyond its powers. Even if, by some miracle, one could have this vision, his will could not will the perfect accomplishing of it. And even if, by a further miracle, one could will it

perfectly, it is doubtful if that will could be perfectly carried out.

Man is unable to be the ultimate authority because he is subject to another limitation. He may be free to transact business a certain way, or to behave a certain way in his home life, but he is not free to escape death. No matter how flamboyant his use of freedom, death comes stealthily onward. Death's mouth is open, and one day its jaws will snap shut. Man is free to spend money to preserve a youthful appearance, or to treat his physical maladies in the best ways. But die he must. Here is the great and inevitable bondage.

We did not create ourselves, nor are we completely free to mold our own destinies. Fate, divine intervention, the plans and designs of others--whatever descriptive expressions we use--all impose on us in such a way that only a limited number of things are possible. Some of freedom's desires are impossible of fulfillment. (Only one woman can marry a particular man; we cannot all be millionaires; what is good for labor may not be good for management.) Therefore freedom based in the self can never be absolute freedom. It always leaves us enslaved, because our options are always limited.

We asked earlier if there is a form of bondage which is genuine freedom. The Christian answer is a definite yes. Our bondage should be to the only one who deserves to be our master--to God himself. There we find that God is love, and that every aspect of that slavery is designed to set us free. Only by completely losing ourselves in him can we be completely free. By accepting this one constraint, we are released from all others that are of any significance. Since God is the perfect Giver, then his child will be the great receiver. God's gifts are freedom, in its various modes.

Thus the center of the self must lie outside the self. God has made us. Only he truly sustains us. When life is centered in God, we notice how we are genuinely free. We are free from loneliness, because we know he will never forsake us, and because we are in the midst of his loving people. Whatever good we miss in the absence of another person is found in perfection in the presence of God himself.

We are free from guilt, because he has forgiven, and will forgive. The guilt we ought to have is purged by his blood, and false guilt is driven away by a recognition of his love and acceptance.

We are free from anxiety, because he assures us he knows and cares for our needs. "Seek first God's kingdom, and all these things will be added . . ." All life is in God's hands. There is no more secure place for it.

We are free from meaninglessness. We know who made us, and why. We know where we are going. We know the ultimate purpose of history and the place of our lives within it. We have a reason to exist--for the glory of God in service to others.

We are free from a sense of worthlessness when we realize that he loves us more than any other has or can, and even more than we will ever be able to understand.

We are free from despair, since we know that, ultimately, his people will win through and share in the final victory assured by Christ's resurrection.

We are free from sin and are no longer held accountable for our misdeeds. We are given strength to become what he wants us to be.

We are free from death. We will still suffer physical death, but our view of it is

transformed, for we know that we are not going to suffer the real death--separation from God.

Here it is in a few words. If we strive to be free from God, we find we are really in bondage of the most horrible sort. But if we willingly become his slaves, then we are truly free.

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