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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

‘THE DISCIPLINE OF FREEDOM’: A RESPONSE

By Paul L. Watson

In reading this article and thinking especially about its two central theses, I found myself relating what was said to the biblical account of the Fall. That account, which is traditionally limited to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden in Genesis 3, may be better understood as including all the stories in Genesis 3-11.¹ In other words, the Fall was not so much a plunge from a cliff as it was an avalanche rushing down a slope, from the garden of Eden to the plain of Shinar. It was in the Fall that those two elements of freedom emphasized in the article--freedom-through-limitation and freedom-in-community--were lost by the human race.

The precise nature of Adam and Eve’s sin (Genesis 3) has been the subject of much debate. That sin has sometimes been connected with human sexuality; but Adam and Eve’s awareness of their nakedness was the result of their sin, not its cause. More often this original sin is defined as human pride which rejects the instruction of God in favor of the desires of the self. This is certainly closer to the truth than the former interpretation. But even here more needs to be said.

“Human freedom is thus freedom through limitation.” This last sentence of the first major section of the article goes right to the heart of the matter. Surely it was their

unwillingness to accept creaturehood, with all the limitations that creaturehood implies, that led Eve and Adam to sin. The serpent's offer was that of an alternative to creaturely limitations: "you will not die . . . you will be like God." The serpent was offering infinity in the place of finitude, transcendence over all human boundaries. In a word, the serpent was holding out what appeared to be freedom. But when this "freedom" was seized by Adam and Eve it turned out to be not freedom but bondage. Specifically, in Eve's case, it was bondage to husbandly rule and labor pains. For Adam it was bondage to a hostile environment from which he would have to wrest a living. Thus the real freedom they had in the garden, even with the restriction concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was abandoned in their pursuit of limitless freedom of which humans may dream but which, as humans, we shall never attain.

In Genesis 4, the avalanche picked up momentum when Cain killed Abel. Here again Cain feels his freedom infringed upon, in that the Lord's lack of "regard" for his offering implies certain limits upon what, when, where, or how Cain may make an offering to the Deity. For Cain, the standard of acceptable sacrifice was his own to set freely--"le loi, c'est moi." The Lord thought otherwise and overruled Cain's decision. The difference between Genesis 4 and Genesis 3 is that now Cain vents upon innocent Abel the frustration and anger he feels when he reaches his own limits. One might speculate upon how much evil is inflicted today on fellow human beings by those of us who cannot accept our own limits when we bump up against them, whether these limits be ones of physical beauty, financial resources, social skills, or whatever.

Humanity “progresses” to the third level of the Fall in the story of Noah: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). How aptly this verse illustrates the statement in the article that “Without love, without recognition and respect for the other, freedom is but an illusion of our neurotic self-preoccupation.” “Self-preoccupation” is precisely what we find in Genesis 6. Everyone is now “doing his own thing,” and “thinking his own thing,” as well. Limits which were recognized by Adam, Eve, and Cain (even if they went on to violate those limits) are now no longer considered. Nor is there any community in which “The necessary conditions of human freedom . . . must be sought.” There is instead only limitless individualism, the results of which are so disastrous that the Lord is sorry for ever having made human beings in the first place.

Rock bottom is not reached, however, until we arrive on the plain of Shinar in Genesis 11. Here humanity is struggling to establish a community and therein to secure freedom. We might expect such an enterprise to have received divine approval until we realize that this community defines “freedom” as the absence of both divine control and social responsibility. It turns out to be a project that is exclusivistic (“Come, let us build ourselves a city”), excessive (“and a tower with its top in the heavens”), self-centered (“and let us make a name for ourselves”), and motivated by fear (“lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth”). Thus we have at the tower of Babel a group of individuals, but hardly the human community envisioned in the article as the social matrix

in which personal freedom may be found. As the story ends humanity is as un-free as it can be: out of touch with God, and therefore out of touch with what it means to be a creature; and out of touch with one another as well. It is in this situation that the human race finds itself when God's call to freedom goes out to Abram in Genesis 12.

Footnote

- ¹ For a fuller explication of this interpretation, see Gerhard von Rad, Genesis (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 148-150.

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