

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

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**Evangelical
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Editorial

However the coming generations may judge Karl Barth, it is unquestionable that one of his greatest contributions to Christian theology was his rediscovery of a basic, biblical concept of God—that he is ‘wholly other’. But an over-emphasis on God’s holiness led to a preoccupation with human sinfulness which in turn led to the abandonment of the world, as in the Hindu renunciation. Francis Schaeffer biting remarks that in our enthusiasm to maintain God’s holiness and human depravity, some evangelical theologies have reduced man to zero. On the other hand, an overemphasis on man as the image of God leads either to *vedantic ahambrahmasmi*, ‘I am God’, or to secular utopias. Those Christians who sympathize with the former approach understand church as being ‘*out of*’ this world, while those who emphasize the latter understand it as ‘*belonging*’ to the world. One great weakness of both the positions is that evil and its growth, such as in violence and wars, cannot be adequately explained.

The cross of Jesus Christ is the connecting link between God’s holiness and his love. In the Bible, God is holy love. The cross is where justice and mercy meet. Incarnation essentially involves suffering. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s insight that only participants can be prophets is fully biblical.

Liberation theology is a challenge not only to our generation but to all generations, for it raises the question not of right or wrong theology, but the very basic question of what theology is. As our generation attempts to respond to the whole challenge of liberation theology, I am convinced that the above three basics must always be kept intact: the holiness of God, God’s image in man and incarnation as suffering. In several ways these elements come through in the articles in this issue. We invite you to respond. Your responses will be published.

In this issue a variety of forms are used—articles, sermon, Bible study, interview, lecture, multilogue, but there is a unifying theme of liberation theology. The coming annual meeting of the Theological Commission in Singapore in June–July 1986 can be, if discerning and obedient to the Spirit of God, a breakthrough in evangelical thinking and action. May God help us all in both.

Sunand Sumithra p. 104

Bible Study (for small groups) Christ Has Made Us Free: Characteristics and Limitations of Christian Freedom

Michael Green

*Reprinted from Freedom Tear Fund Bible Study Booklet No. 4 with
permission*

Jesus came to 'set the captives free' ([Luke 4:18](#)). What is this going to mean in practice? What difference is your response to Jesus going to make to the way in which you exercise responsible choices?

I can't tell you. You see, you are committed to a person, not to a set of rules. The world is full of systems which insistently call for your obedience. But for you there is one Master only, Jesus Christ. And his way was often unusual, uncomfortable, and at variance with the accepted norms of the pious. When he was confronted by a woman caught in the act of adultery, he did not say, 'The rule book says she should be stoned. Let's get on with it'. He looked at her accusers, so smug in their self-satisfaction, and said, '*Let the man who never sinned among you be the first to throw a stone.*' He began with the woman, not the hard-and-fast rule. He wanted to help her, reclaim her. Notice, he wasn't being permissive about what she had done. What was the object of the old law? Why, to stop adultery. What was the object of Jesus's approach? It was identical. But he achieved it, not by slating her, but by accepting her just as she was, and then giving her a clean start, '*Neither do I condemn you*' and a new direction, '*Go and sin no more*' ([John 8:7, 11](#)). I'll bet she didn't. In-so-far as I follow Jesus, then, I shall not automatically be a hanger, a flogger, an anti-divorce, anti-abortion man without further reflection. No, I shall try to act with Christ's freedom in the different choices that beset me, asking him to use me as his agent in bringing sacrificial love into each situation.

Can we find any guide-lines in the New Testament for our use of freedom, even if there is a shortage of narrow rules? Yes, indeed. Here are a few questions we could usefully check ourselves by, to make sure our Christian freedom does not turn into licence.

PERSONAL

On the personal level to start with, *will it make for growth?* God's plan **P. 105** for me is to be so freed from self-centredness that I grow up into the fullness of humanity as Christ knew it ([Ephesians 4:13](#)). That and nothing less is the purpose of God's rescue operation. As a responsible Christian I am not going to allow my freedom to imperil my development as a friend and servant of my Lord. It will not do for those who were 'fornicators, idolaters, homosexuals, thieves, swindlers and slanderers' simply to cry, 'I am free to do anything.' That invites Paul's response, '*Yes, but not everything is for my good. No doubt I am free to do anything, but I for one will not let anything make free with me*' ([1 Corinthians 6:12](#)). He proceeded to apply that, by way of example, to food, drink and sex. Notice that there was no 'Index of Prohibited Things'. Just the invitation, as Christ's free man, to see where the cap fits and put it on. '*Am I not a free man?*' asks Paul at the outset of one chapter. By the end of it, however, he is saying, '*I am like a boxer who does not beat the air; I bruise my own body and make it know its master*' ([1 Corinthians 9:1, 26f.](#)).

There has been a tendency among Christians with a strong sense of the world, the flesh and the devil, to restrict 'worldliness' to a very narrow area of life—smoking, drinking, reading-matter, films and so on. Far more serious, I suggest, is the danger to our growth as persons which comes from assuming it is *our right* to get married, have a car, a washing machine, good holidays, pleasant working conditions and an ever-increasing salary, without the least pang of conscience about the Third World. This sort of selfishness is more corroding than 'X' Certificate films. '*You, my friends, have been called to freedom. But do not allow your freedom to be an occasion for the self to have its way. Rather, be servants to one another in love*' ([Galatians 5:13](#)).

SOCIAL

On the social level, we might well ask, will it show love? There is a discussion in the Epistle to the Romans which we could easily dismiss as irrelevant. It is all about whether you should be a vegetarian or not if you are a Christian, in view of the fact that most of the meat in the ancient world had been offered to some idol or other. The note of freedom is clearly sounded by Paul. *'I am perfectly sure, on the authority of the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing really wrong with eating meat which has been offered to idols.'* But at once comes the note of loving responsibility to others: *'But if your brother is bothered by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you go ahead and eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died.... After all, the important thing for us as Christians is not what we eat or drink, P. 106 but stirring up goodness and peace and joy from the Holy Spirit. If you let Christ be Lord in these affairs, God will be glad: and so will others, In this way aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up....'* He concludes the discussion thus: *'Let's please the other fellow, not ourselves, and do what is for his good and thus build him up in the Lord. Christ did not please himself'* ([Romans 14:14-15:3](#)). If we applied that attitude to our relationships with others, the church would be a lot freer, a lot less criticizing, and a great deal more effective in creating unity and harmony in society. Why not ask the Lord to show you how you can be a channel for his love and integration among the people with whom you live and work?

This love will lead you to want to share with others the good news you rejoice in. Here again, there is no compulsion about it, no set way of doing it, but, as Paul put it, *'I am a free man and own no master; but I have made myself every man's servant' in order to win them. 'To the Jews I behaved as a Jew in order to win the Jews. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I was not outside the law in God's sight, being under law to Christ) in order to win those outside the law.... I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some'* ([1 Corinthians 9:12-22](#)). No doubt there were plenty of people who said "Tut-tut, when they saw Paul behaving as a Pharisee one day in a crowd of Jews he was trying to evangelize, and associating with Gentile street people the next day as he put the good news in terms that would make sense to them. But that is how he used his Christian freedom in loving service to the community in which he worked. In all this flexibility, 'I am not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' ([1 Corinthians 10:33](#); [11:1](#)).

POLITICAL

On the political level, the question is, perhaps, how can I use my freedom to promote order and justice? And that is a question it is very hard to answer. The Bible makes it plain that in general Christians should *'obey the government, for God is the one who has put it there. There is no government anywhere that God has not placed in power. So those who refuse to obey the laws of the land are refusing to obey God'* ([Romans 13:1ff.](#)). That was not written under a just democracy, but under Nero's Rome! Even a bad government is better than anarchy. God wants his creatures to live in harmony with the order (*cosmos* in Greek) which he brought into the cosmos.

But God is the author of justice, as well as of order. So what should p. 107 Christians do when the existing régime is utterly corrupt? Well, that situation had actually arisen in the times when the New Testament was written. The book of Revelation is addressed to just such a situation. It advocates passive resistance, not violent revolution ([Revelation 13](#)), for, as Jesus had said, 'the man who takes the sword will perish by the sword' ([Matthew 25:52](#))—and that leads not to greater freedom but to less! Jesus, ironically

crucified as a Zealot revolutionary, disappointed many of his followers because he refused to allow the nationalist cause against Rome or the ideological cause for the kingdom of God to tempt him to take up arms. Force is not exorcized by force. Those who follow Jesus know that violence has its teeth drawn not by retaliation but by patient, innocent suffering. That is the conviction that stimulates a man like Bishop Helder Camara in Brazil. Dedicated to the cause of non-violence, he is none the less a passionate advocate of the underprivileged and poverty-stricken in Brazil, that land of shattering inequalities. But nevertheless he does say, 'I respect and shall always respect those who, after thinking about it, have chosen or will choose violence.'

That is what Camilo Torres did, the revolutionary priest in Colombia. There the conditions of the poor were so oppressive that he saw no alternative to engaging in active and violent attempts to overthrow the régime. He believed that in this way he was in fact fulfilling the Christian law of love to one's neighbour. His aim was peaceful revolution; 'Revolution *can* be peaceful if the minority does not resist it with violence.' But if armed force proves the only way to get revolution, it must, he felt, be accepted, for 'the Revolution is the way to get a government which will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach the ignorant, and make possible a true love for our neighbours. This is why the Revolution is not only permitted but is obligatory for all Christians who see in it the most effective way of making possible a greater love for all men.'

Such was Camilo Torres' considered use of his Christian freedom. We may feel that he was wrong to countenance violence even as a last resort. And in his case violence showed its self-destructive nature, for he was shot in action by government forces on 15 February 1966. But at all events he represents a Christian revolutionary who certainly did not use his freedom as a cloak either for aimless anarchy or for pietistic acceptance of the *status quo*, but sought conscientiously to promote both order and justice in his country.

We too may make mistakes. There is no one blueprint for political action in a world as complex as ours. But we too are called to seek both order and justice without subordinating one to the other. p. 108

SPIRITUAL

On the spiritual level, we shall ask ourselves, how can I please Christ? What would he want me to do? How would he act in such circumstances? *'Whatever you do or say, do everything as the representative of the Lord Jesus'* ([Colossians 3:17](#)) is Paul's crowning advice to the Christians at Colossae.

It is interesting to see how Paul handled the enthusiasts for freedom at Corinth. They had a wonderful vitality and joyful sense of liberation which is sadly lacking these days in many church circles. They believed they had already entered on their reign with Christ. They had already tasted the powers of the age to come. They were free men and could do what they liked. 'All things are lawful for me,' was their cry. 'All things are ours.'

'Yes, indeed,' is the substance of Paul's reply. *'All things are indeed yours. But you are Christ's'* ([1 Corinthians 3:21-23](#); cf. [6:12](#)). You are called to exercise your Christian freedom under his control. All truly Christian freedom is marked with the cross of Jesus, the one who showed himself most free as he went to the cross for others. That is why Paul determined to know no other message among these enthusiastic Corinthians, except Christ crucified. He and he alone was the model for Christian freedom. Free as he was, Paul knew he was under the law of personal accountability to Christ.

So, then, we should value these guide-lines which the New Testament gives us to our use of freedom. Jesus spells freedom. *'For freedom Christ has set us free. Let us therefore refuse to be tied up in the chains of slavery again'* ([Galatians 5:1](#)).

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Galatians 4:1-10

One: Christ has set us free from immaturity and slavery and given us 'rights'—what are those rights? vs. [5-7](#). cf. [John 8:31-32](#) and [34-46](#).

Two: In what ways can we deliberately place ourselves back in 'slavery'? vs. [8-10](#).

Galatians 5:1 and 13-16

Three: Once again the world's view of freedom is turned upside down—we are freed from sins that enslave us in order to create a positive life in a self-disciplined way.

What has Christ set us free to do? vs. [16](#), [22-23](#). cf. [1 Cor. 10:24](#) and [Romans 6:22](#). p. 109

Four: The way of the cross leads to freedom (v.[24](#))—the crucifixion of sinful nature leads to new life.

Look individually at the fruit of the spirit and consider v.[26](#)—which illustrates attitudes that are a hindrance to a free life—compare the two (the fruit and the attitudes that hinder its development).

1 Corinthians 10:23-33 and 1 Corinthians 8:9-13

Five: Look at the above verses and discuss where to draw the line in relation to freedom. Think of situations where you might deliberately limit your freedom for the sake of others.

Six: Truth is an important ingredient in the battle for freedom. The devil is portrayed in the Bible as the 'deceiver' or 'liar', Jesus in [John 8](#) says, 'If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' and in the same conversation says of those who hold to his teaching that 'the truth will set you free'.

(a) In the struggle for freedom the Christian role is to combat lies and dishonesty—false ideas and fantasy. Discuss this and think of examples of where the 'world' is selling a lie that we must combat, i.e. over the value of an individual—where his work—or lack of it—may make him appear worthless. Or, where contemporary views of mankind see him as simply another species of animal. A discussion of racism and sexism could be relevant in this context.

(b) Consider the 'fantasy' worlds that are encouraged by media and advertising such as the unreality of sexual dreams—and discuss how truth can set people free from these fantasies.

Seven: (a) Look again at Michael Green's comments in Section 3 on non-violence and justice. Can the example of Camilo Torres square with the way of the servant? Had he overstepped the limit of Christian freedom when he took the path of violence?

(b) Are there ways in which our own society is being unjust either here or in its attitude to those in the third world? If, so how should we deal with it? Exercising our freedom and showing a concern for order and justice?

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