

Christian Liberty

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The topic for this year's convention essay was, I am sure, very likely chosen to serve as a part of our Synod's expression of gratitude to God for the birth of the church's greatest Reformer half a millennium ago. Through Martin Luther the Lord of the Church showered a host of blessings on his people. Not the least of these blessings is found in the theological literature produced by this great man of God. From the pen of the most famous professor of an obscure medieval German university have come theological classics that continue to be read and appreciated by Lutheran and non-Lutheran Christians even in our advanced and sophisticated twentieth century.

To one of these classics and its message for a modern church we shall direct our attention at this convention. After the publication of the *Ninety-Five Theses* had made Luther's name a household word from one end of Europe to the other, from Bohemia to England, and from Sweden to Italy, the Wittenberg professor came under great pressure to recant his views and to submit to the authority of the pope. This pressure became even greater after the 1519 debate in Leipzig, where Eck pressured Luther into expressing openly the view that popes and councils had erred. Then in 1520 it became clear that the Roman curia had decided that Luther would have to be excommunicated. It is virtually impossible for us to imagine the tremendous pressure that was being brought to bear on the Reformer in an age when words like Canossa and Constance, bans and interdicts, made both kings and theologians tremble. Even the threat of a bull of excommunication was usually enough to bring a rebel against papal authority to his knees in humble submission to the holy father in Rome. At that stage of the game the only real alternative to such a recantation was burning at the stake.

There is no doubt that in 1520 Luther was in imminent danger of being burned as a heretic. His friends knew this and were concerned for his safety. Two of those friends, John Staupitz and Wenceslaus Link, both of whom were his monastic superiors, tried to persuade him to write a conciliatory letter to Pope Leo X as an effort to stave off disaster.

Luther wrote the letter. In it he expressed his willingness to do almost anything that was asked of him to put an end to the turmoil and controversy that had broken out. And yet the letter shows how completely Luther had been liberated from the bondage into which the antichristian papacy had brought the medieval church. Two things, he said, he could not and would not do. He wrote, "Let no person imagine that I will recant" (*LW* 31, 341). In those words we hear the voice of a man who had truly been freed from the fear of death. When he wrote those words, he must have known what the consequence of such a resolve would very likely be. He knew and was not likely to forget what had happened to John Hus at Constance just about a hundred years before his time. John Eck had indirectly reminded him of that at the Leipzig debate a year earlier by accusing him of the Bohemian heresy.

The second thing that Luther said he could not and would not do shows how completely he had been delivered from the tyranny of human authority. Reminding Leo that he was a mere man and not a demigod, he wrote, "I acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God, since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all matters, must not be bound." By "fixed rules" Luther meant the rules that had been laid down by the Roman church. Just a few months before he wrote to Leo he had addressed an *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* in which he had spoken of three walls that the Roman church had built around itself to make reform impossible. The second of those three walls was the claim that the pope possessed the sole authority to interpret the Scriptures (*LW* 44, 133-136). Luther knew that as long as that wall stood no one in the Roman church could be free in the sense in which Jesus had promised freedom to those who continued in his word. In his letter to the nobility he had called for the demolition of that wall but in the letter to

Leo Luther demonstrated that he himself was no longer a prisoner behind this wall of papal arrogance. He was free to follow wherever the word of God led him, and that is the true freedom of the Christian at its very heart and center.

When writing a letter of the kind that the lowly Augustinian monk from Wittenberg was writing to the pope it was a common custom to send a devotional tract of some kind as an accompaniment to the letter. Luther followed that custom and sent Leo one of the most famous works to come from his pen, “*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*” (*The Freedom of the Christian, or, Christian Liberty*).

Luther clearly knew exactly what he was doing when he chose to write a devotional tract on that particular subject and to dedicate it to the pope. In his dedicatory letter he reminded Leo that the pope at Rome, according to his own confession, was a *servus servorum*.. a “servant of servants.” In line with that papal title, he gave the pope this advice, “Be not deceived by those who pretend that you are lord of the world, allow no one to be considered a Christian unless he accepts your authority, and prate that you have power over heaven, hell, and purgatory” (*LW 31, 341f*).

The pretense of the pope in calling himself a “servant of servants” while at the same time claiming to be the lord of the whole earth as the vicar of Christ was a caricature and a denial of the true freedom of the Christian. It was undoubtedly those two claims of the pope that led Luther in this treatise to speak of the Christian as a free lord and a dutiful servant. Over against the pope’s claim that he was lord of the world, as well as heaven, hell, and purgatory. Luther set forth the proposition that every Christian, man, woman, or child, is a “perfectly free lord, subject to no one.” In contrast to the false humility with which the pope called himself the “servant of servants,” Luther proclaimed that every Christian is also “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” To these two propositions we will address ourselves at this convention, whose theme is, “IN HIS WORD - MADE FREE.”

I. The Christian, a Perfectly Free Lord, Subject to None.

A. The Source of Christian Liberty: The Gospel

Our theme at this convention reminds us that true freedom, truly Christian liberty, is rooted and anchored in the Word of God. We are made free by that Word. Luther had learned that truth in a spiritual struggle that stretched over many years. The freedom with which he addressed Pope Leo had not come easily to him. He had sought relief from the awful burden of his conscience and from the overpowering sense of God’s wrath by devoting himself to prayer and fasting and all the countless other works that the monastic rules recommended as sure ways to win the favor of God. None of these could do for Luther what the Roman Church promised they would do. They only brought him into deeper bondage.

In reluctant obedience to one of those monastic rules he went to the University of Wittenberg to lecture on the Bible. At that time the Bible was for Luther little more than another book of rules that spelled out for the church what a man needed to do to free himself from his burden of sin and guilt. But in Luther’s experience we find another illustration of the truth of the word in which God says, “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me” (Isa 65:1). Luther was looking for a God whom he could satisfy with his godliness. He found a God who justifies the ungodly, freely, by grace, without any merit on our part.

This God he found when he discovered the gospel in the Scriptures. He was speaking out of his own experience when he wrote to Leo,

The soul can do without anything except the Word of God and ... where the word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the word of God it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy liberty, wisdom, power grace, glory, and of every incalculable blessing. (*LW 31, 345*)

It was that discovery that prompted him a few years later to teach the church to sing:

Dear Christians, one and all, rejoice
 With exultation springing,
 And, with united heart and voice
 And holy rapture singing,
 proclaim the wonders God hath done,
 How His right arm the victory won;
 Right dearly it hath cost Him. (TLH 387, 1)

And the joy which he expressed in that hymn was all the greater because he knew from his own personal experience what the bondage was from which Christ had set him free. He was describing something that had been a dreadful reality for him when he wrote,

Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay,
 Death brooded darkly o'er me,
 Sin was my torment night and day,
 In sin my mother bore me;
 Yea, deep and deeper still I fell,
 Life had become a living hell,
 So firmly sin possessed me. (Ibid., 2)

If we are to have an adequate, even if still incomplete, conception of what Christian liberty is, this is the place where we also must start, "fast bound in Satan's chains." Only then will we understand why Luther says that the word brings liberty.

When Luther speaks of the word of God as the source of Christian freedom, as well as of all other spiritual blessings, he was speaking of the gospel. His words in that connection have often been quoted by gospel reductionists, who have sought to use Luther to justify their rejection or denial of one or another part of the Holy Scriptures. The translation of the words in question that we have in the American edition easily lend themselves to such abuse. This translation reads, "You may ask, 'What then is the Word of God, and how shall it be used since there are so many words of God?' I answer, '...The Word is the gospel of God concerning his son'" (LW 31, 346). Luther, however, had written, not "What is the Word of God?" but "What is this Word?" (*quod est verbum hoc?*). His own German translation of this question sets forth even more clearly what he wanted to say. There he wrote, "*Fragistu aber, 'wilch ist denn das Wort, das solch grosse gnad gibt, Und wie soll ichs gebrauchen?'*" (But if you ask, "Which is that Word which gives such great grace, and how shall I use it?"). That is the question which Luther answers with the words, "It is the gospel." (WA 7e 22. 51).

When Luther put this question and answered it in that way, he demonstrated that he had come to understand the great difference between the law and the gospel. He had tried to find freedom in the observance of the law only to discover that the law "gendereth to bondage," as St. Paul says (Gal 4:24). The gospel, and only the gospel, was the liberating word through which God sets the human soul free from all slavery. Jesus had told his disciples and he still tells us, "If you hold to my teaching, if you continue in my word, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31, 32). What the word of Jesus is which sets us free is made clear already in the introduction to John's Gospel, where that apostle had written, "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17).

The church in this last quarter of the twentieth century still speaks of freedom and liberty. "Liberation theology" has become a watchword of our time. But in reality great segments of the modern church know even less of true freedom, even less of Christian liberty, than did the church of the Middle Ages. At least the church in those days, corrupt and deformed as it was, still took sin seriously; it still believed in the infinity of divine

justice; it still knew that there is a heaven and a hell; it was still conscious of the awful anger of a just and holy God; it was still convinced that death is the wages of sin. Because of that there was still hope that it could learn to appreciate what Christian liberty really is.

Modern churchmen often seem to have lost this understanding of the reality and the seriousness of sin. It has been said that the central question for a modern theologian can not be the question with which Luther tormented his soul, namely, "How shall I ever find a gracious God?" The important question that we must answer today is rather, "Is there a God?" Does God really exist? If he does, he must be good. And if he is good, he cannot be angry forever with anything or anyone that he has made. So we can stop worrying about his wrath and about eternal damnation in hell and get on with the church's real work, the work of setting men free, free from illness, free from poverty, free from oppression, either the oppression of capitalism or the oppression of communism, free from the threat of nuclear destruction, free from social insecurity, free from all the other evils that keep our world from being a garden of Eden, the kind of paradise that scientific research can build for the human race, a millennialistic kingdom in which science will create the only heaven that men will ever know.

These liberation theologians are not as modern as they believe themselves to be. And perhaps we only encourage them in their error by our habit of calling them modern. Luther tells the story of a peasant who heard his pastor preach on the glories of eternal life in heaven and whose response to that sermon was, "What do we care about heaven? What we need is flour" (*LW* 13, 125). And long before Luther's time the Savior proclaimed the wrong-headedness of those men whose greatest concerns were "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Wherewith shall we be clothed?"

But while the modern church has a concept of liberation that differs radically from the definition of freedom that characterized what might have been called "mainstream Christianity" in the fifteenth century, yet the method by which men seek freedom today is basically the same as that employed in the Middle Ages. It is the method of the law and of works. Freedom, in the world view of medieval and modern heretics is earned as a reward for human effort, whether it is freedom from the eternal dangers that frightened the medieval heart, and that ought to, but often do not frighten the hearts of man today, or freedom from the social and economic and political bogeymen that strike fear into the hearts of modern men.

"Do something," said the devil to Eve, "if you want to be free from the ignorance in which a jealous God wants to keep you by forbidding you to eat from a tree whose fruit can make you wise." "Do something," said the medieval theologian, "if you want to be free from the dominion and the consequences of sin." "Take a vow of celibacy, if you want to be free from the evils of sex and a vow of poverty to set yourself free from the love of money which is the root of all evil."

And the modern theologian still operates with the same principle. "Do something," he says, or she says, "if you want to be free from male domination." "Do something, if you want to be free to sit at any lunch counter or in the front of the bus." "Do something if you want to be free from pollution and the threat of nuclear war."

Or, if you can't do something yourself, pass another law that will force others to do something. Pass a law to make the rich set the poor free from poverty with their tax dollars. Pass a law that will free men from the effects of pollution. Pass a law that will get rid of the threat of nuclear war. Such thinking is not confined to what we call liberal church bodies. Much of what passes as conservative Christendom is afflicted with the same disease. Pass a law to force public school teachers to present creationism as a viable option setting us free from evolutionistic dogma. Pass a law to free the unborn from the dangers posed by doctors who butcher unborn babies in the womb. Pass a law to force school boards and the courts to make prayer a free exercise in the public schools.

But laws never set men free. They only increase bondage. The more laws we pass the less free we are. For men who live in the bondage of sin this is true even of God's law. "The law works wrath," says the apostle Paul (Ro 4:15). The same apostle tells us that the law causes sin to increase (Ro 5:20), that it bears children born to be slaves (Ga 4:24). At the council of Jerusalem St. Peter spoke of the ceremonial law laid on God's people as a yoke that neither they nor their fathers were able to bear (Ac 15:10).

Law serves a useful purpose both in the state and in the church. In the state it protects the poor from the rich and the weak from the strong. It preserves outward decency in the world sometimes, —if there are enough policemen to enforce it. But a law that sets a homosexual free from discrimination and helps to make his homosexuality acceptable as a life style only tends to fasten the chains of his bondage more firmly. The law of the state never brings freedom.

In the church the law of God also serves a good purpose, but it, too, never sets men free. Rather it reveals the awful bondage in which they are held. If the law is preached the way God wants it to be preached it will make men aware of the horrible slavery in which they were born, a slavery from which they can never set themselves free by doing something. As Luther said, “The commandments show us what we ought to do but does not give us the power to do it” (*LW* 31, 348).

But the gospel can accomplish what the law can never do. Luther says. “One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy word of God, the gospel of Christ” (op. cit. 345). The activist church of the twentieth century needs to recover this understanding, for only then will the church understand what her real mission in the world, is. We sometimes hear even otherwise orthodox churchmen say that there is no point in preaching the gospel to people whose stomachs are empty. But if we know what the gospel does and can do for men we will also know that the gospel is given especially for the poor, the blind, the naked and the hungry. It can set them free in the midst of poverty, persecution and hunger.

B. The Nature of Christian Liberty: Freedom from the Consequences of sin

All these ills disasters and sufferings from which men would like to be free are the result of sin and they are only warnings and foreshadowings of the eternal sorrow and suffering that will come to men after death. Man has some knowledge of this “dread of something after death” from the stirrings of his own conscience. Thus, consciously or subconsciously, all men by nature are “through fear of death...all their life-time subject to bondage” (Heb 2:15), and because of that, conscience “makes cowards of us all.”

On the surface the world in which we live often seems to have come to terms with death. The evolutionistic world-view that informs almost the totality of modern thought processes has managed to turn death into the natural tool by which nature improves itself. E. A. Hooton of Harvard, an ardent evolutionist, recognized this effect of evolutionistic philosophy. He wrote in his book *Apes, Men, and Morons*,

I have, however, been inclined to think that, on the whole, the dissemination of evolutionary teaching among the lower grades of human intelligence—in short, to the public at large—may be inexpedient. An inept presentation of evolution to persons of limited mentality is likely to destroy their religious beliefs and fears and to free them from inhibitions which make them socially tolerable.

There is no doubt that evolutionistic thinking naturally gravitates toward atheism. A textbook on the history of philosophy says that Charles Darwin “began as an atheist but was led more and more to the rejection of the traditional conception of a creative and providential God.” Atheism promises men freedom from the fear of death and for a time may even deliver on that promise. The British atheist Julian Huxley spoke of the “enormous” “relief which comes from rejecting the idea of God.”

But there are those who recognize that one does not solve the problem by viewing dead men as nothing more than fertilizer for fuller and fitter forms of life. Edna St. Vincent Millay felt the folly of such a faith when she said of her dead friends, “They are gone. They have gone to feed the roses. / ... But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.” The thought of her own death left her with even less approval and resignation. She admitted her fear in the despairing words,

Withstanding Death

Till Life be gone,
I shall treasure by breath,
I shall linger on.

I shall bolt my door
With a bolt and a cable;
I shall block my door
With a bureau and a table;

With all my might
My door shall be barred.
I shall put up a fight,
I shall take it hard.

With his hand on my mouth
He shall drag me forth,
Shrieking to the south
And clutching at the north.

We often hear it said that sooner or later such thoughts will come to the most hardened atheist. Whether this is true or not is unimportant. What is important for us as messengers of the Gospel whether as pastors, teachers, or laymen, is that the kind of freedom from the fear of death which is rooted in evolutionary atheism is in reality bondage to diabolic ignorance. The devil is delighted to see men forget the horror and the terror that death ought to inspire in the sinful and unbelieving human heart.

True Christianity never minimizes that horror by portraying death as something less than it is, namely, the wages of sin and the clearest demonstration of God's wrath. The courage that Martin Luther displayed before the prospect of burning at the stake was not based on a failure to understand the true nature of death. In the records of his after dinner conversations he is reported to have said one day,

I am not pleased with examples which show how men die gladly. But I am pleased with those who tremble and quake and grow pale before death and yet suffer it. Great saints do not die gladly. Fear is natural because death is a punishment. Therefore it is sad. (WA, TR, 1, 177)

Whether men know it or not, whether they feel it or not, whether they admit it or not, it is still true that through fear of death they are "all their life time subject to bondage."

From that bondage the gospel sets us free. By assuring us of the heavenly Father's grace and love, by proclaiming to us the full, free, constant forgiveness of all our sins for the sake of the merits of Christ our Savior it helps us conquer the fear of death and hell that still makes itself felt from time to time even in the heart of many a believing child of God. By the Redeemer's atoning sacrifice we have been delivered from the eternal punishment our iniquities have merited. Through that deliverance we are set free also from the terrifying consciousness of God's righteous wrath. That does not mean that the fear of God's wrath is once and for all eliminated from the heart of the Christian. Rather it is overcome by faith. The Lutheran confessions speak of the childlike fear of a Christian as fear, *Erschrecken* (being scared), *pavor*, which is relieved by faith, whereas the slavish fear of the unbeliever is described in exactly the same terms except in the case of the unbeliever there is no faith to console and comfort the frightened heart (Apol. X11, 38, *Trig.* 261).

In reality the Savior has set us free from the fear of death by freeing us from death itself. St. Paul tells us, "Christ has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Ti 1:10). The Lord Jesus himself said that he had come into the world that men "might have life and that they might have it

more abundantly” (Jn 10:10), that they might have life in the fullest sense of that term. Life at its fullest might be described as communion and fellowship with God, who himself is Life and the source of all life. Life is the enjoyment of God’s blessings—spiritual life, the enjoyment of his spiritual blessings; physical life, the enjoyment of his physical blessings; eternal life, the enjoyment of the blessings of body and soul which he will shower on us in eternity.

That life, that kind of life, began on the day of our conversion, on the day we heard the voice of the Son of God and through that hearing came to the faith by which we were justified (Jn 5:25; Ro 10:17; 1:17), by which we made our own the forgiveness proclaimed to all men in the gospel. And this life which began at conversion never comes to an end unless a man once more becomes unconverted. Jesus promised, “He that liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (Jn 11:26). John, who heard Jesus speak those words on the way to the grave of Lazarus, must surely have remembered them when many years later on the island of Patmos he saw the souls of beheaded martyrs living and reigning with Christ (Rev 10:4-6). The Roman government that had sentenced those confessing Christians to die seemed to have conquered and there were very likely many believers who were tempted to wonder whether the gates of hell were not prevailing against the church. But John consoled a mourning church by reminding it that those beheaded believers were not really dead. Their bodies were perhaps lying on the sand of the arena in apparent total defeat, but their souls were even then living and reigning with Christ. To be assured of that by the unfailing promises of God is to know what Christian freedom is. The first time I taught Dogmatics at the seminary on the basis of Prof. John Meyer’s notes I was somewhat surprised to find that he dealt with the subject of Christian liberty as part of the discussion concerning the atoning work that Christ performed in the exercise of his priestly office. But only a few moments of meditation should suffice to bring us to the realization of how fitting the discussion of Christian liberty is at just that place.

For when men are free from the fear of death, free from the fear of God’s wrath, they are really free from every other fear, at least in the sense that such fears need no longer dominate and rule their lives. Many years ago an old pastor in our fellowship was told after an exploratory operation that he had six weeks to live. A close friend of his, a young pastor, asked him three weeks later what it felt like to hear such a sentence of death pronounced. The aged man looked at his young friend and said,

You will never know until it happens to you. I always thought I was not afraid to die. But when the doctor said, “You have six weeks to live,” I was afraid. I was so frightened I could no longer laugh. I could not even smile. I tried to make it look like I was smiling by turning up the corners of my mouth because I did not want anyone to know how frightened I was. But now I can laugh again.

And with those words he leaned back in his rocking chair and laughed as though he did not have a care in the world. To the question, “What made the difference?” he replied,

When I came home from the hospital I sat in this chair and all I could think of was “six weeks to live.” You know that’s only forty-two days, only a little more than a month. For three days I sat here trying to comfort myself by reciting all the Bible passages and hymn stanzas I know, but I did not finish any of them. They all ended with “six weeks to live.” But on the third day I happened to think of John 10:27 and 28, where the Savior says, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me; and I give unto them eternal life.” That was the first passage I finished and I said to myself, “If the Savior says, ‘I give unto them eternal life,’ why am I thinking about “six weeks to live?” And since then everything has been fine.

What more can this world do to such a man, who has come to that firm assurance of eternal life with Christ in the glories of heaven? He has discovered the basis and the essence of Christian liberty.

C. The Mature of Christian Liberty: Freedom from the Dominion of Sin.

But there is still more to Christian liberty than this. The freedom of the Christian is also freedom from the dominion of sin, or perhaps we would do well to say freedom from the dominion of Sin, with a capital S. Even the world knows a little about freedom from the dominion of this or that special sin. A member of Alcoholics Anonymous who through professed reliance on some vague Power greater than his own has gained dominance over his desire to drink seems to have been freed from the dominion of his desire to drink. He seems to have been freed from the dominion of his thirst for liquor. But many times the demon of drunkenness has been cast out only to be replaced by seven demons more wicked, not the least of which is often the demon of self-righteousness who has been able to persuade him that his drunkenness was not a sin for which he needs the cleansing blood of Christ.

A man of strong character can often by the exercise of sheer will power, win dominion over some special weaknesses to which he may be inclined. The Lutheran confessions very correctly ascribe to natural man a free will in external matters. A man can rule over the coarse outburst of sin by the exercise of his reason and by the natural power of his will. Even the natural promptings of his conscience may be sufficient to deter him from falling into the clutches of a besetting sin.

But the freedom of a Christian from the dominion of sin has far deeper roots than this. The motivations that move unconverted men to a moral life can never be anything less than totally sinful. The apostle Paul made that abundantly clear when he wrote to the Romans, “The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God” (Ro 8:7,8). The NIV translation, “The sinful mind is hostile to God”, has obscured some of the finer points of what Paul tells us in this passage. To say that a sinful mind is hostile to God is almost a redundancy. It expresses a truth few Christians would dispute. The “carnal mind”, or “the mind of the flesh” is more than a sinful mind. It is an *innately* sinful mind. It is the sinful attitude with which man is born because he is “flesh born of flesh” (Jn 3:6).

The natural attitude of man toward God, the attitude with which he was born, is hatred against God. This is a statement that most unbelievers and even many Christians would be inclined to dispute. It expresses one of the truths revealed by the Spirit that unconverted men can only regard as foolishness. When an unbeliever with evident sincerity professes to love God we can be sure that the God whom he loves is not the God of whom Paul is speaking here. He is not the God who revealed himself to Moses at Mt. Sinai—the God who indeed forgives all sin but who will also not allow one sin to go unpunished. That is why Luther says that the natural knowledge of God always leads to idolatry. Because the human conscience can never be at peace with a God who punishes every sin, men invent either a God who punishes only gross offenses against his law, or a “good” God, who will never send anyone into eternal punishment. Such a God, however, has no objective existence outside of the imagination of men.

This hatred of the human heart against the true God is usually hidden. By and large, its reality and existence is a matter of faith. Finally, we can only believe and not see that this is by nature the condition of every man’s heart. But very often this hatred manifests itself in words, not only in the words of professed unbelievers, such as Thomas Jefferson, who said that a God who damns men in hell is a monster and not a God, but also in the words of men who claim to be Christians. A churchman of the past century wrote that such a God is the kind of God in whom we could not believe if we would, and should not if we could. A well-known Methodist bishop of a generation ago called the God who sent fiery serpents to punish Israel a “dirty bully.” In such terms men reveal their hatred of the God who has revealed himself in the Holy Scriptures.

Because natural, unconverted men can not love God, they “are not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Ro 8:7f). The very first requirement of God’s law is that men should love the Lord with all their hearts and with all their souls, and with all their minds. But it is just this love for the true God that cannot exist in an unconverted heart. The Lutheran confessions point to this humanly incurable malady of the natural human heart when they list “the inability to love God” as one of the basic ingredients of original sin. And without love

for the true God all the “glittering vices” of the heathen, as Luther called them, are worthless in the sight of God. It is this fact that demonstrates how completely they live in the bondage of sin, so that they serve sin in all that they do. “Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing: (1 Co 13:3). Because of that those who “are in the flesh”, those who are unconverted, because they cannot love God, also “cannot please God” (Ro 8:8). This is the real dominion of Sin from which we can never set ourselves free.

Only man who through the enlightenment of the Holy Ghost come to believe in the vicarious satisfaction made in the obedient life and innocent death of the son of Gods, only men who are no longer “natural” but “spiritual” (1 Co 2:14f), only such men can love the God who punishes every sin, because they know that God has punished all their sins in Christ. And only such men can keep the law in the way in which God wants it kept. Just as the “inability to love God lies at the very root and center of man’s bondage to sin, so the ability to love God is one of the most important factors in true Christian liberty. Such love for God is an inseparable concomitant of true Christian faith. For that reason Paul can describe it as a faith that expresses itself through love (Gal 5:6). Freedom from the dominion of sin is the ability to sing, with understanding and sincerity,

Thee will I love, my Life, my Savior,
Who art my best and truest Friend;
Thee will I love and praise forever,
For never shall Thy kindness end;
Thee will I love with all my heart,
Thou my Redeemer art. (TLH, 399, 2)

D. The Nature of Christian Liberty: Freedom from the Law.

It seems to be a strange paradox to say that when a man through faith acquires the ability to love God and with that the ability to keep the law he at the same time is freed from the law itself. St. Paul described that aspect of Christian liberty when he wrote to the Romans:

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature (Gr. the flesh), the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the spirit, [Gr: newness of spirit], and not in the old way of the written code [Gr: oldness of letter) (Ro 7:4-6).

When Paul says that we now should serve in “newness of spirit” and not in “oldness of letter”, he is referring to the Christians’ freedom from the dominion of sin. “Oldness of letter” describes the outward obedience that an unconverted person renders to the law. As we have seen, such outward obedience is possible for natural man. Heathen can be, and often are, models of virtue. But because they cannot love God their obedience is valueless in the sight of God who looks at the heart while men look at the outward appearance (1 Sa 16:7). The phrase “newness of spirit” describes the service that a child of God renders. His obedience is a spiritual obedience, an inward obedience that comes from a new and right spirit which the Holy Ghost has created in his heart, an obedience that flows from a heart that has acquired the ability to love the true God.

When a man is through faith and love liberated from the dominion of sin he is also freed from the dominion of the law. This newfound freedom has a number of facets. We will say nothing at this point about our freedom from the curse of the law or from the requirements of the Old Testament ceremonial law. The first of those we have already described as freedom from the consequences of sin and the second we will consider when we speak of our freedom in matters of adiaphora.

An essential part of a Christian's freedom from the law is his release from what our confessions call the *opinio legis*. They use that term to describe the natural religion of all men. All religions developed by men, from the ethical monotheism of the Jews to the superstitious animism of some of the hill tribes of India, have one thing in common. They all teach salvation by works. All men by nature believe that they must do something to make themselves acceptable to God. The Christian, however, believes that he is saved by grace alone, that salvation is a free gift bestowed without effort on his part. Through his vicarious obedience Christ has done everything that the law of God requires. He has for us obeyed all the commandments of God. He has suffered the full penalty that justice demands. There is nothing left that we are required to do.

Thus Christ sets us free from all obligations to the law. As Paul says, we have died to the law through the body of Christ. His hands have done what was required of ours. His lips have spoken what we should have said. His ears have heard the pleas for help to which we should have listened. His heart has loved the Lord with the love that we owed to him. His mind has maintained the purity and truth that God demanded from ours. His blood has paid the penalty we deserved. So, as we said, there is nothing left that we are required to do. We have died to the law through the body of Christ. In his treatise on Christian liberty Luther said it this way, "If he (i.e. the Christian) has no need of works, he has no need of the law; and if he has no need of the law, he is free from the law." (*LW* 31, 349). And long before Luther, the apostle Paul said it too when he wrote to Timothy, "The law is not made for a righteous man."

This is the rest from labor that the Old Testament Sabbath prefigured. The law, which stood over us like a demanding taskmaster, no longer can require one single work from us as a condition of salvation. The yoke that neither we nor our fathers were able to bear has been lifted from our necks. We can sit back and enjoy a lifelong vacation from all the orders the law keeps handing down. This is what the Savior promised when he said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

E. The Nature of Christian Liberty: Christian Liberty is not License

Yet Christian liberty is not license. When we describe Christian liberty or salvation by grace alone in such terms as these, those whose only guide is sinful reason will invariably object and say that such doctrines will lead men to believe that they can do anything they please and live according to their heart's desire. And their words are far closer to the truth than either they or we sometimes imagine. The Christian, insofar as he is truly Christian, is free indeed to do what he pleases. The Christian, insofar as he is truly Christian, can really sing and mean it,

I leave all things to God's direction,
 He loveth me in weal and woe;
 His will is good, true his affection,
 With tender love His heart doth glow
 My Fortress and my Rock is He:
 What pleaseth God, that pleaseth me. (TLH, 529, 1)

Deeply conscious of his own inborn depravity that still clings to him, he will say,

The will of God shall be my pleasure
 While here on earth is mine abode;
 My will is wrong beyond all measure,
 It doth not will what pleaseth God.
 The Christian's motto e'er must be:
 What pleaseth God, that pleaseth me. (ibid., 3)

To a man who says that and means it with all his heart it is perfectly safe to say, “Go, and live as you please.” Such a man will never forget the admonition of the apostle Peter, “Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God” (1 Pe 2:16).

Another oft-repeated objection to this concept of Christian liberty as freedom from the law and its demands is this: “If men do not need to do any good works to get to heaven, then there is no reason why they should do good works.” Such an argument, however, only betrays the speaker’s own bondage to the law and his slavery to the *opinio legis*. Is it really true that if we teach men that it is not necessary for them to do good works to get to heaven then they will stop doing good works? It is not necessary for us to eat to get to heaven. In fact, if we do not eat we will perhaps get to heaven a lot faster. Do we stop eating on that account? And just as men have reasons for eating which have nothing to do with getting to heaven, so a Christian has reasons for doing good works that have nothing to do with earning salvation.

As long as a man does his good works because he believes that he must do them to escape the punishment of hell and to gain the bliss of heaven, so long he is acting under the compulsion of the law and as such he does not enjoy the freedom of the Christian. It is simply not true that when the compulsion of the law is removed it is replaced by license to sin. It actually under all normal circumstances results in more diligence in the performance of good works, just as many a man works harder on his vacation when he is doing what pleases him than when he is busy on a job he hates. We will have more to say about this when we speak of how the Christian’s freedom makes him a servant.

F. The Christian as a Free Lord over All, Subject to None.

But before we speak of the Christian as a servant, we will turn our attention to Luther’s proposition that “A Christian is a perfectly free *lord* of all, subject to none” (LW 31, 344). In his discussion of this proposition Luther lays particular stress on the royal priesthood of the believers.

The Bible says that we are kings and conquerors. St. Peter in addressing the Christians in northern and eastern Asia minor spoke to them of a fiery trial which was to try them and reminded them that it is often the lot of believing children of God to experience severe trials in a world in which they are aliens and pilgrims. But at the same time he assured them, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Pe 2:9). The Apostle John delivered a similar message to the persecuted Christians of the seven churches of western Asia Minor. His Revelation is filled with dire predictions of catastrophes and calamities, of wars and famines, pestilence and persecutions; it depicts powerful and terrifying enemies who assault the church; but it begins with the assurance that the Savior has loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood and has made us “kings and priests” (1:6 AV), and before it ends it shows us the souls of the beheaded believers living and reigning with Christ for a thousand years (Rev 20:4). It gives us the promise that after their bodies are resurrected “they will reign for ever and ever” (Rev 22:5). Those prosecuted martyrs of the first century of the New Testament Church did not look like conquering kings but God’s Word does not lie, and in faith those believing children of God could say with the apostle Paul, “In all these things—in tribulation and distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril or sword—we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Ro 8:37).

We also do not look like kings. “What we will be has not yet been made known” (1 Jn 3:2) and the creation is still waiting on tiptoe “for the sons of God to be revealed” (Ro 8:19). But even though our kingly character is not manifest, yet in reality a believing child of God can know that we are in a better position than the wealthiest and mightiest monarch on earth. For, as Luther reminds us in his treatise, we have God’s own promise that “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Ro 8:28). If we had all the money in the world in our personal bank account, we would not have the assurance that it could benefit us at all tomorrow. If we could have access to the best medical care, we would have no guarantee that it could keep us alive for even one day. If we were in a position of authority that would make it possible for us to give commands to underlings by the thousands we could have no assurance that they would not rebel tomorrow, because we live in a sinful world where no man can be trusted absolutely. The best of friends can become unfaithful and surest investments

turn sour. But if the faithful God, who cannot lie, the almighty God, who has done whatsoever he has pleased, the gracious God, who loved us enough to give his own Son to die for us, if that God has given us the promise that all things will work together for our good, we must know that all things in the universe must serve us and our welfare. By faith we hold an exalted position where no evil can harm us and where no plague can come nigh our dwellings. It was that faith that enabled Paul Gerhardt to sing in the midst of tears and sorrows,

I will sing my Maker's praises
 And in Him Most joyful be,
 For in all things I see traces
 Of His tender love to me.
 Nothing also than love could move Him
 With such sweet and tender care
 Evermore to raise and bear
 All who try to serve and love Him.
 All things else have but their day,
 God's great love abides for aye. (TLH, 25, 1)

When Adam and Eve were created the Lord God gave them dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. All creatures served man willingly and freely. When through the fall into sin that dominion was lost, God promised to send a savior to restore man to the position his Creator intended him to have in the world. In the eighth psalm David saw this dominion restored in Christ, and through Christ also in us. In the new heaven and the new earth it will again be as it was in the beginning and there we shall reign openly as kings with Christ forever and ever.

By faith that full dominion belongs to us even now. In his treatise on Christian liberty Luther reminds us also of the words of Paul to the Corinthians, words which are true of all Christians: "All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's" (1 Co 3:21-23). This is the divinely issued and duly recorded title deed that makes us the richest people in the world, lords indeed over all things.

Not only are we lords and kings, but Christ has also made us priests unto God and his Father. The priests played a major role in the Levitical worship practices ordained by God in Old Testament times. In that system of worship and sacrifice only the priests were allowed to offer sacrifice and to bring intercessions to God in the temple. In view of the importance of the priests in the ceremonial law it is indeed remarkable that in the whole New Testament there is not one passage in which the pastors or elders of the Christian Church are called priests. That honored name is in the New Testament the title of every believing child of God. Luther writes, "As priests we are worthy to appear before God to pray for others and to teach one another divine things." The medieval church was bound in the fetters of sacerdotalism and it was generally agreed that without the mediation of the priest no salvation was possible. Under God we owe it to Luther that we feel free to approach the throne of grace without intermediaries. For a free Christian who knows that he is one of God's priests, the intercession of saints is superfluous.

For Luther this was another foundation stone of Christian liberty. He complains that great mischief has been done in the church by the practice of giving the name "priest" to those who hold official positions in the church. Instead of being a ministry of service the churchly priesthood had developed in his day "into so great a display of power and so terrible a tyranny that no heathen empire or other earthly power can be compared with it" (*LW* 31, 356). The result has been, he says, "an unbearable bondage of human works and laws" (*ibid*).

What freedom from that bondage meant to a man who had grown up in priest-ridden culture we can hardly picture for ourselves today. We live in an age which has in large measure cast off all moral and theological restraints, an age, which, if it believes in the existence of God at all, no longer sees him as the righteous judge and a consuming fire. Such an age can never appreciate what it means to be free to approach a

holy God to pray for others. Unless we appreciate the truth expressed by the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, “Our God is a consuming fire,” we shall never know what a privilege it is to be a “royal priest,” to be free from all human authority both in the state and in the church, to take to heart the admonition of St. Paul, “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (1 Co 7:23).

II. The Christian as a Servant of All, Subject to All

If Luther had stopped at that point those who charge Luther with inciting the rebellion of the peasants would have some basis for their accusation. What Peter said of the epistles of Paul is true also of some of the writings of Martin Luther. There are in them “some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest...unto their own destruction” (2 Pe 3:16).

The greatest of all champions of Christian liberty, the Apostle Paul, warned against abuse of this doctrine. In his letter to the Romans he asked, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace?” and he answered, “By no means!” (Ro 6:15). In his most eloquent defense of the freedom of the Christian, his epistle to Galatia, he called upon the Christians there to “stand fast...in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free” (5:1 AV) but he also admonished them, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge your sinful nature; rather serve one another in love” (Gal 5:13).

Luther does not quote that passage in his treatise on Christian liberty, but it could have served as the text for the second half of that work, in which he expands on the proposition that the Christian who is a free Lord of all and subject to no one is at the same time a “*perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all*” (LW 31, 344). Like the Apostle Paul, from whom he had learned this, Luther knew that when a man is set free from the slavery of sin he becomes a servant of righteousness (Ro 6:18). And having become a servant of righteousness the converted sinner also becomes a servant of God and of all his fellowmen. Christian liberty, says Luther, “does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness” (LW 31, 349). To this side of Christian liberty we shall turn our attention tomorrow.

A. The inability not to Love God.

The service that a Christian renders to God and to his neighbor is a direct consequence of what happened to him when he was set free from the consequences and the dominion of sin, when he was liberated from the law and from the fear of death. His slavery to sin consisted at its very heart and center in his inability to love God. As we have seen, when a person learns by faith to see the holy and just God as the God who forgives all sins for the sake of Christ, he acquires through that faith also the ability to love the God who punishes sin. We can say even more than this. It does not only become possible for such a converted person to love the Lord. It becomes impossible for him or her not to love God. It is impossible to see ourselves as sinners deserving eternal damnation in hell and then to come to the conviction that the suffering and dying Christ has procured full and free forgiveness for us by taking our guilt upon himself and by giving his own righteousness to us as a free gift of his love, it is impossible to come to that conviction without coming to love him who gave himself into death that we might have everlasting life. It is impossible to confess honestly that Jesus Christ has redeemed me, not with gold and silver but with his holy precious blood and innocent suffering and, death without realizing that this was done I might be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness. Somewhere Luther says that you need not tell a Christian that he should love the Lord just as you need not tell a pear tree to bear pears.

The Apostle Peter did not have to ask the Christians who had “been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood” (1 Pe 1:2) whether they loved the Lord. He took it for granted that this was so, and he told them, “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Pe 1:8). “To know him is to love him” is more applicable to our Savior than to anyone else. It is true that often we may see in our hearts less of that love

and joy than we would expect to find there, but the very fact that we desire to love him more and that we are troubled by the weakness of our love for him is evidence of the tremendous change that has taken place since we were only flesh born of flesh, with a carnal mind that is enmity against God.

Loving God is to desire communion and fellowship with him, wanting to be his people, wanting him to be our God, our Lord, our Savior and Redeemer. If we love him and desire such communion with him we will want to do those things which please him and to avoid whatever stands in the way of or threatens our fellowship with him.

This is what Jeremiah was talking about when God through him promised to write his law in our hearts. Jeremiah wrote,

“This is the covenant I will make with the house of
Israel after that time,” declares the Lord.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord
“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

When we speak of God’s law written in man’s heart we are so often accustomed to limiting our discussion to the knowledge of right and wrong that was implanted in man at the time of creation. But when God wrote his law on the heart of Adam and Eve this included much more than just a knowledge of right and wrong. They were created righteous and holy. Their minds not only knew the will of God, but they loved what God loved. Their wills were perfectly attuned to the will of God. They wanted what God wanted.

Through his word and by his Holy Spirit God recreates that same spirit in us when he brings us to faith. That does not happen all at once, but as we live under that Word, the preaching of both his law and his gospel becomes the means by which he motivates and directs us, teaching us why and how we are to serve him. By his Gospel he sanctifies our thoughts so that more and more we think his thoughts; he sanctifies our hearts so that more and more we love what he loves and hate what he hates; he sanctifies our wills so that more and more we want what he wants and abhors what he abhors. In that way he puts his law in our minds and writes it on our hearts.

Charles Kingsley once wrote that there are two kinds of freedom, the freedom to do what we will and the freedom to do what we ought. In my younger years in the ministry I used to quote those words when I preached about Christian liberty. I thought in those days that Kingsley had a profound understanding of this aspect of a Christian’s freedom. It was the freedom to do not what you wanted to do but what you ought to do. But in reality, so long as we make a sharp distinction between what we ought to do and what we want to do we have not yet understood the true nature of the full freedom of a Christian. On this particular level we will never attain to full and complete liberty until what we want to do and what we ought to do become one and the same thing. Once that happens all feelings of compulsion and restraint will disappear and we will really do God’s will with a free and willing spirit. Augustine must have had something like this in mind when he wrote his famous words, “*Da quod iubes, et iube quod vis* (Give what you command and then command whatever you want).” The psalmist expressed the same thought when he wrote, “I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart”, or as the NIV translates the same words, “I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free” (Ps 119:32). It is important for us to remember that this new attitude is founded on the

fact that God promises to forgive our wickedness and to remember our sins no more, or in more dogmatic terms that this sanctification finds its root and basis in justification.

B. The Struggle with the Flesh

That stage of Christian liberty, when we will be totally free from all restraints, we will never reach until this corruptible body puts on incorruption and this mortal puts on immortality.

In this life and in this world we will never be completely free from that fleshly attitude which infects us all. Luther once compared the world to a hospital in which all the inhabitants, both the believers and the unbelievers, are sick. But the Christians, he says, are the ones who are on the road to recovery.

In the sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans the Apostle Paul describes the freedom of the Christian from the dominion of sin as it ought to be. When we have through baptism died to sin with Christ, our life ought to be as free from the influence of sin as the life of Jesus was when he was raised in the glory of his Father. Not only ought this to be so, it really is the case so far as our new man is concerned. As St. John says, "Whosoever is born of God...cannot sin" (1 Jn 3:9). But in chapter seven of Romans the apostle Paul describes the sanctified life of the Christian as it really is. He pictures that life as a constant struggle in which we do not do what we want and so often do what we do not want. Thus the freedom to do what we want and the freedom to do what we ought still have not become completely one in us.

But because we really do want to walk the way of God's commands, because his will, at least so far as our new man is concerned, has become our will, and because we know that it does not please God if we follow the dictates of our sinful flesh, the Christian's life will often be a painful struggle with his Old Adam, and he will sense little of that freedom which he knows he has by faith. Thus Luther says that the Christian is "compelled" to do many good works by his need to keep the old man under control. Yet in doing those good works he is not motivated by the old *opinio legis*. He does not do his good works in order to earn salvation. He does them rather just because he wants his life to be pleasing to God. He does good works and serves God not to become a good and righteous man. He does good works because by faith he has become a good and righteous man. Even the struggle with sin, which often causes him to cry out with St. Paul, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Ro 7:24) is a part of the liberty with which Christ has made him free from the law. His new man carries on that struggle not because he feels compelled by the threats and promises of the law but because he loves the Lord and wants to be the kind of person that he knows God wants him to be. He needs the threats and promises of the law only to help him keep his old man in subjection. The Formula of Concord has related the freedom of the Christian to his struggle against sin in a clear and simple way:

Since believers are not completely renewed in this world, but the old Adam clings to them even to the grave, there also remains in them the struggle between the spirit and the flesh. Therefore they delight in God's Law according to the inner man, but the law in their members struggles against the law in their mind; hence they are never without the Law, and nevertheless are not under, but in the Law, and live and walk in the Law of the Lord, and yet do nothing from constraint of the Law. (FC VI, 18)

C. The Christian as servant to His Neighbor

The love for God which is engendered in the heart of the Christian when by faith he comes to know the forgiveness of sins and begins to live in that forgiveness will also create in his heart a love and concern for the neighbor. The believer's freedom from the constraint of the law will not make him indifferent to his neighbor's needs. He knows that it is God's will that he should love his neighbor as he loves himself. And because the law of God is written on his mind and heart, because he wants what God wants, he will also want to love and serve his neighbor. Because he no longer needs to do any good work to save himself, since all that has been provided

for by what Christ did for him, therefore he is now free to serve his neighbor's need. Luther says that because a Christian has all he needs in Christ,

he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor. (*LW* 31, 365)

Those who do good to their neighbors because they hope thereby to become righteous and to earn salvation for themselves are in those efforts in reality not serving their neighbor but themselves. And they are certainly also not serving God. In fact, by their self-righteousness they trample the righteousness of Christ underfoot. By their efforts to gain salvation by works they insult the Savior's grace. Only when a man is justified by grace through faith is he free to serve his neighbor in the way God wants the neighbor to be served, namely, out of love and not for reward. When we develop that Christian attitude we will learn how it is possible to be kind to the unthankful and the evil, just as God lets his sun shine on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

As a Christian grows in his freedom from the law he will more and more learn to follow the example of Christ who came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for all, even for those who scourged and crucified him. Knowing that through his suffering and death Christ redeemed all men the Christian will learn to look at men of all races and stations in life as men and women and boys and girls who have been bought with the precious blood of Christ. If Christ so loved them, we surely cannot be indifferent to them. In that realization the Christian will also recognize that his greatest privilege is to share with his neighbor the good news of salvation which Christ has commanded us to bring to all people. We will not view the work of reaching out to all the world with the gospel as an unwelcome obligation or as a burden that we would rather not carry. It is part of our Christian liberty that we do also this with a joyful and willing spirit. Having found release from the fear of death and hell for our own hearts we will want all men to share that same inexpressible joy. Thus our faith in Christ will move us to serve our neighbor in love especially with the gospel.

That does not mean that we will ignore his physical and temporal needs. Evangelical Christians in our time are often accused of ignoring the social and economic ills of the world. Because of the presence of the selfish old Adam in our hearts we may often need to be admonished not to forget the bodily needs of the neighbor. But we ought also never make the mistake of confusing the enforced charity of the welfare state with the love that moves a child of God to reach out with a helping hand to those who can really benefit by the aid we extend out of love for Christ. Whatever our political views may be, whether we favor or oppose the modern trends toward socialism, we must all recognize that government in a sinful world can only operate on the basis of law and as such it never fosters Christian liberty which finds its roots only in the gospel.

D. Christian Liberty and Adiaphora

That does not mean that a Christian because he is a free Lord and subject to none will renounce his allegiance to the government. But as a free Christian he will obey the laws of the land "not only for wrath but also for conscience' sake" (Ro 13:5), not only because we fear the punishment (only our old Adam needs that motivation) but especially because we know that we have a God who wants us to obey the human authorities he has established to maintain order in a sinful world. Jesus himself gave us an example of what our attitude ought to be when he sent Peter to pay the temple tax after telling him that they were in reality under no real obligation to pay it, because they were sons of the king (Mt 17:26).

The Christian, who is free from the law of God in the sense that he is no longer under any obligation to keep it in order to win God's favor and who keeps the law not because he has to but because he wants to, is certainly also free from every human ordinance. In Luther's day it was especially the church that destroyed the concept of Christian liberty not only by setting up all sorts of rules and regulations for men to keep but especially by promising that through the observance of those rites and ceremonies men would acquire merit in

the sight of God. There were those among the reformers who thought that Christian liberty would be established if all such rites and ceremonies could be done away with. In fact, some of them believed that Christian liberty demanded that all human authorities both in the state and in the church should be deposed. They declared fasting and the observance of holy days and the use of images in the church to be sin. They taught that on one could observe these ceremonies without damage to his soul. They had no better understanding of Christian liberty than those who insisted that it was a sin not to fast or to observe the religious ceremonies instituted by the church.

Over against such views Luther held that Christian liberty consisted neither in the use or non-use of such rites and ceremonies. Rather everything hinged on how and for what purpose those regulations were observed or omitted. At times Christian love for the neighbor and one's own need requires that the ceremonies be followed. At other times the same concern for the neighbor will lead us to omit the observance.

St. Paul gives us a powerful example of this aspect of Christian liberty in the varying advice that he gave to the Romans and the Galatians in regard to the ceremonial law. He knew that a part of New Testament liberty was freedom from the requirements of the Levitical law. All the ceremonial requirements of the Levitical worship system had lost their reason for existence when the Savior came to do what those regulations had prefigured.

Therefore, when the Judaizers came to Galatia to demand that the feast days and the Sabbaths be observed and circumcision be practiced as part of man's justification before God, Paul declared that any observance of the ceremonies was an insult to Christ. He insisted that under those circumstances circumcision and ceremonies were an indication that the gospel had been preached in vain in their midst. In and through the Lord Jesus they were free from all such requirements and Paul admonished them to stand fast in the liberty with which Christ had made them free.

But in Rome, where Judaizing tendencies evidently had not made their influence felt, Paul treated the ceremonies in an entirely different way. Unlike the Galatians, the Romans had not had the benefit of full apostolic instruction. There were still weak Christians among them who were not quite delivered from centuries of ceremonial custom and who still felt qualms of conscience when it came to eating pork and omitting the Sabbath observance. And when Paul wrote to them he urged each man to act freely in accord with his own conscience, but always with due regard to the neighbor's welfare, with the strong not despising the weak because their progress in understanding their liberty was slow and the weak not judging the strong because they did not live according to the Mosaic law. Christian liberty for them did not consist in freedom to do or not do certain things, but rather in doing all things to the glory of God and for the welfare of the Christian brother.

In our time, too, we sometimes speak of Christian liberty as consisting of the use or non-use of things or the observance or non-observance of certain practices. We leave the impression at times that Christian liberty is the freedom to drink a glass of beer or to smoke a cigarette whenever we want to and that anyone who suggests that it might be wise and proper at times to dispense with beer and tobacco is seeking to destroy our Christian liberty. In certain circumstances the drinking of a glass of beer may well be an exercise of Christian liberty and in other circumstances not drinking a glass of beer may be just as much an exercise of that same freedom. One thing can be said for certain, namely, the person who can't quit drinking or smoking any time he wants to has lost his Christian liberty. He has come under the domination of something over which he, as a free lord of all ought to rule. St. Paul set before us the ideal toward which we ought to strive when he wrote, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any" (1 Co 6:12).

What God has forbidden or commanded, of course, can never be a matter of indifference to a child of God. For us who love the word there is always motivation enough in the knowledge that he who redeemed us with his blood and has freely bestowed righteousness and life and salvation on us wants us to do this and not to do that.

But when it comes to the use of those things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden, the things the church has always called *adiaphora*, our Christian freedom is again the freedom to do what we please, only always with the provision that we are people who meant it when we sang, "What pleaseth God, that

pleaseth me.” It will surely never please a Christian, *qua* Christian, to do what he wants to do if by doing so he brings harm in any way to his neighbor for whom Christ died. For that reason Luther deals with the use of adiaphora when he speaks of the Christian as a dutiful servant to all, subject to all.

We have already noted that the greatest service that we can render to our neighbor is to share the gospel with him. A corollary to that truth is that we will do all that we can to protect him from anything and everything that obscures that gospel. In the interest of the gospel the Apostle Paul circumcised Timothy before he took him on as an assistant for his second missionary journey. To the Jews he was ready to become as a Jew. In the same interest of the same gospel he refused to circumcise Titus when the Judaizers in Jerusalem insisted that circumcision was necessary for justification before God. And when the Roman theologians of Luther’s day insisted that the observance of certain ceremonies helped to justify men in God’s sight, Luther wrote, “in the presence of such men it is good to eat meat, break the fasts, and for the sake of the liberty of faith do other things which they regard as the greatest of sins” (*LW* 31, 373).

The freedom of the Christian, therefore, also in the area of adiaphora, has its roots in the gospel. It is never just the freedom to do or not to do something. It always consists in doing what we do to the glory of God and the welfare of our neighbor. The first is liberty. The second is Christian liberty.

Whenever the observance of religious ceremonies or the abstention from the proper use of any creature of God is made a prerequisite for justification or a necessary part of Christian living men are once more brought into the bondage of the law from which they were delivered when they were justified by grace through faith. Under those circumstances we must resist every effort on the part of others to force their views on us. To act in any other way would be to help men rob God of the glory that belongs to him.

But there are other times when the Christian in the interest of his neighbor’s welfare will give up the use of his freedom in order that he might thereby serve his neighbor. Christ was under no obligation to humble himself even to the death of the cross. Yet for us and for our salvation he gave up the use of his glorious majesty so that we might have a share in his glory with him in heaven. St. Paul tells us that the same attitude ought to inhabit our hearts (Php 2:5).

This is especially true when our use of adiaphora will cause offense to our fellow-Christians. I do not know whether it is here again necessary for us to be reminded that to offend another man in the biblical sense does not mean to do something that he does not like. The word has often been watered down to mean little more than that. To offend someone, in scriptural terms, means to do something that leads him into sin. God’s Word makes it very clear that a man sins not only when he violates a direct command of God but also if he sins against the convictions of his own heart and the warnings of his conscience. Paul teaches that when he says that “if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean” (Ro 14:14). If our example prompts him to do what his conscience warns him against doing we will by our action lead him to endanger his own souls’ salvation. In such circumstances we will gladly give up the use of our freedom.

But giving up the use of our freedom is not a surrendering of our liberty, any more than Christ’s non-use of his divine attributes deprived him of those attributes. Rather it is the use of our freedom to do what pleases the Lord. Paul says, “if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again” (1 Co 8:13). In that way the use of our Christian liberty makes us the brother’s servant.

And, if we love our fellow-Christians, yes, if we love our fellowmen, we will try to avoid offending them even in the popular sense of that term, if that can be done without acting contrary to the will of God. As members of a confessional church we will often be in situations in which we must in loyalty to the word do and say what is not likely to meet with favor. But we ought to strive to do that in a way that does not ignore the debt of love that we owe to every man. It is well for us always to remember that the foolishness of the gospel is not the same thing as the foolishness of the local ladies aid. St. Paul’s ideal of being “all things to all men” is one that we ought constantly keep before us. If we do that we will never ask, “Why must we always be the ones who give up the use of our freedom?” We know why. We do it to serve the neighbor.

All this has special application to us also as members of the Wisconsin Synod and as members of Wisconsin Synod congregations. Someone from the outside looking in may sometimes get the impression that

when we in the Wisconsin Synod talk about Christian liberty we so often have in mind little more than our freedom to drink a glass of beer whenever we feel like it, or perhaps even our freedom to participate or not to participate in a Synodically sponsored program such as “Reaching out.” Some may even have the opinion that we equate Christian liberty with “rugged individualism.” When I became a member of the WELS just twenty years ago, that was one of the phrases that often made me cringe. I know that the men who used those words often meant something good and right and Christian by that phrase. But it also seemed to me at times to denote an attitude of unconcern about the neighbor’s opinions, and to demonstrate a stubborn desire to go one’s own way rather than walking in harmony with brothers whose opinions have as good a chance of being right as our own. I may think that it is foolish to spend time and effort and money in producing a new hymnal and I have a right to try to persuade my brother to agree with me. But if we remember that Luther very correctly says that a Christian is a dutiful servant of all and subject to all, we will recognize that if the majority of our brothers have come to the conviction that such a hymnal will serve the best interests of the church we will walk with them as members of the same church whose very name “Synod” ought to remind us to walk together in love, and by that love to serve one another” (Gal 5:13).

These principles have application also to the “Reaching Out” program in which our Synod is now engaged. We may not be enthusiastic about the method that has been chosen to carry on what we all recognize as the Lord’s work. We may be able to point out dangers of abuse inherent in the method or even cite examples of such abuse. But unless we can point to a clear word of God that is being violated, we have here another good opportunity to demonstrate the spirit of loving service that we owe to our neighbor as “dutiful servants to all.” Even our Wisconsin synod principles of church fellowship, which I hope are dear to all of us, can be abused by legalistic application, and some of us can point to such abuse, but that does not mean that we will attack or despise those principles, which are commanded by God. If even divine commands can be abused by legalistic practices, surely we will not reject the decisions of brethren only because of the danger of abuse.

If each of us will learn that a part of our Christian freedom is the ability to give ourselves to our neighbor in a spirit of Christian service we will have gone a long way toward making our Synod and our congregations the kind of churches they ought to be. Such loving service does not destroy or even limit our Christian freedom. Rather it makes it even more glorious and actually demonstrates our high position as freed lords over all things. “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:26-28). May God plant that spirit deep in the hearts of all of us, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.