

# Christian Freedom: The Struggle to Remain Free

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## Introduction

The apostle Paul began his letter to the Ephesians with a long sentence of praise for the blessings of God: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ..." How blessed we are as God's chosen believers. Nine times in the apostle's sentence he connects all these blessings with Christ, using either "in Christ" or "in him." Later in the letter Paul reminds us that we have these blessings "by grace" "through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works." We memorized that passage in confirmation instruction class, and we ask our confirmands today to memorize it. We share these blessings and rejoice in them all as surely as first-century Christians did. As those who treasure grace, we are here today to discuss Christian freedom. As I approached the topic, I felt overwhelmed. My assignment directed me to discuss current issues facing the church and our synod today. But that apparent narrowing of the topic didn't bring any relief. I did not want to create a catalog of issues that would result in a list of recipes for our Christian life. Such a list could end up fettering Christians and not be an expression of Christian freedom at all. As I read and thought about the topic, I concluded that the greatest threat to our Christian freedom was close at hand -- within each of us, our sinful flesh. This paper is an exploration of that threat.

## The Human Context of Christian Freedom

Because of Christ, we have freedom. Believers are free from sin, death, and hell. As believers we are also free from the regulations of the Old Testament ceremonial law. The new freedom we have in Christ extends even to the moral law. I am free from the coercion of the law and free from all the consequences of disobedience to the precepts of the law. I am, as Luther put it, "perfectly free lord of all, subject to none" (LW 31:344). Christian freedom is not some theory postulated by a theologian, behavioral scientist, or politician. I am free because God says so. I am a child of God and stand in "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21). The prison that confined me and all people stands open because of the work of Jesus. He has declared me and all the world righteous and free of all that would or could enslave me. I am a child of the Reformation. I am justified *sola gratia, sola fide*. I base my confidence on this truth because God says so, *sola Scriptura*. My freedom, like the freedom of every believer, is based entirely on Christ, *solus Christus*. Our freedom is perfect.

Because of its source our Christian liberty is a perfect thing: it covers every phase of our previous enslavement, it is an accomplished fact, is subject to no qualification or condition, is secure and inviolable, and brings the Christian into complete harmony with everything that God has called good and into active opposition to all that He has branded evil. (Reim, "Our Christian Liberty," p. 152).

My Christian freedom is simply the practical application of justification by faith in Christ. God has declared me free and righteous. I am no longer condemned. God is for me. (Romans 8:1) I am his child free to live, breathe, think, act, and speak as his child. Yet something within me tells me that this is not perfectly so. "It can't be," the voice within challenges. "If you are so free, then why do you feel so much like a captive? Why do you continue to struggle to do the right thing? Why do you anguish so over your failures? Perfect? No, you are not perfectly free. You are trapped and enslaved by sin. And you know that you will die. You are afraid of

death. How can you be free from death?" My interior dialogue is not unique. The words may vary from Christian to Christian, but each Christian engages in such a struggle -- free but still bound by sin.

So has our prison really been opened? Are we really free? God says so, and it is so. Yet we know this voice within is too true. We are free children of God by faith in Christ. Yet we know another reality: we are also slaves of sin. *Simul justus et peccator*. Because of Christ, every Christian is a "perfectly free lord of all." The Holy Spirit has created faith, a new power within the Christian, that not only receives the gift of God's gracious declaration but also desires to do all that God desires. Christians are transformed within so that they desire only what God desires. "Those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires" (Romans 8:5). But, as long as Christians live in the temporal world, this powerful faith shares its house with its arch enemy. Faith resides in constant opposition to the old sinful nature. We are as familiar with the struggle within as the apostle Paul: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do .... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it ...For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members" (Romans 7:15-23).

When we wish to discuss Christian freedom in the contemporary world, we must recognize that our new self lives in conflict with the old self. Christians are "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). They are free from the law because they are righteous in Christ. "We know that law is not made for the righteous..." (1 Timothy 1:9). (The NT text has δικαίῳ here, that is "for the righteous", a quality no human has except as a gift of God's declaration of justification in Christ. Paul used a word for "good", καλός, in verse 8 but abandoned that word in verse 9.) If we are to discuss the dimensions of Christian freedom in the contemporary world, not only must we keep in mind the struggle within each believer, but we must also remember the source of that freedom -- Christ. All of the blessings of God come to us by faith in Christ. We are connected to Christ and therefore have all these blessings. The New Testament uses the phrase ἐν Χριστῷ over 85 times to remind us that all we have as believers comes in connection with Christ. Outside of that connection we have nothing. That includes our Christian freedom, "the freedom we have in Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ Galatians 2:4).

This has implications for our lives as Christians. We are connected with God through faith in Christ. We believe by the power of the Holy Spirit through the gospel (Romans 10). The conversion of the sinner can be described as a turning away from slavery to sin to freedom in Christ. Faith receives all the blessings of God and turns away from sin -- not only the sins of omission and commission but also the power of the sinful nature -- to Christ, his forgiveness, his care, and perfect righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Such a connection with God comes through the means of grace. It is maintained by the gospel in Word and sacrament. We believe it when God promises to work through the gospel. We have no promise that he will work to nurture and sustain faith in any other way. The critical task for every Christian -- after conversion -- is to apply himself or herself to the gospel. The gospel has created faith, or the new self within, and it provides the strength necessary for the struggle with the old sinful nature. Christian life is a daily turning away from the sinful flesh with its array of vices and pleasures and turning toward Christ with all his eternal blessings -- a daily repentance. It is a turning away from slavery to Christ and freedom. This is what both Luther and Paul have told us. When Luther posed the question about the meaning of baptism for our daily lives, he wrote, "It means that our Old Adam with his evil deeds and desires should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and die, and that day by day a new man should arise, as from the dead, to live in the presence of God in righteousness and purity now and forever. Where is this written? St. Paul says in Romans, chapter 6, 'We were buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life'" (Luther's Small Catechism). Luther opened the Reformation with these words: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Matthew 4:17] he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance" (Ninety-Five Theses, LW 31:25). He explained,

I shall prove the thesis for the sake of those who are uninformed, first from the Greek word *metanoete* itself, which means “repent” and could be translated more exactly by the Latin *transmentamini*, which means “assume another mind and feeling, recover ones’ senses, make a transition from one state of mind to another, have a change of spirit”; so that those who hitherto have been aware of earthly matters may now know the spiritual, as the Apostle says in Romans 12:[2], “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” By this recovery of one’s senses it happens that the sinner has a change of heart and hates his sin (LW 31:83,84).

Christians are freed by Christ, but Christians also struggle against the sinful nature that would drag them back to their slavery and bondage. The tension remains for each Christian day after day: The Galatians had allowed themselves to be drawn back to slavery and Paul guided them back to their freedom in Christ. Because Christians are at one and the same time saints and sinners -- free in Christ and slaves and prisoners -- Christian freedom does not operate without the struggle between the new self and the old flesh. Repentance, daily turning away from sin toward Christ in faith, frees the Christian from the sins that cling to him or her because of the sinful flesh and renews and strengthens the new man or new self to exercise freedom in Christ. Christians are caught in this struggle as long as they live. The gospel frees each Christian from the power of sin and the consequences of sin so that the Christian can live as lord of all. Daily, however, the Christian must subdue the sinful self in order to allow the new creation to emerge and live. Only the gospel gives this power. “To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching” (LW 31:346).

In other words, we cannot talk of Christian freedom without talking about the gospel, which is the power of God that sets us free and empowers us to do those things that are clearly God’s will. The gospel restores the image of God in the sinner. Christians so freed by Christ and the gospel desire to conform their will and actions to the will of God. They apply their hearts to the gospel so that they can renew their freedom, and they listen to the Scriptures that are God’s clear revelation of his holy will. A free Christian listens to what God says and conforms to that will. In the contemporary world as well as the world of the prophets and apostles believers cannot imagine a freedom apart from the will of God and divorced from the revealed will of God in the Scriptures. Nor can they imagine a freedom without Christ and without the gospel. Not only do the Scriptures announce the will of God, they also proclaim the gospel -- the one and only source of true freedom. No freedom exists except in connection with Christ and the gospel.

Of course, every Christian confronts situations and circumstances that cause him to choose between two or more alternatives that are neither commanded nor forbidden by the revealed will of God. We have traditionally placed Christian freedom in the crosshairs of that perspective. Yet a Christian can rarely exercise freedom without the tug of the sinful self struggling to spoil it. A few examples will clarify the struggle. A free and generous gift for the spread of the gospel becomes a reason to take pride in the accomplishment. A gesture of kindness goes unnoticed only to generate resentment that no one recognized it or even said thanks. A preacher delivers a wonderful sermon of consolation and looks for recognition and appreciation at the end of the service. A teacher helps a child learn the truth of the gospel but harbors bitterness over criticism by the parents. A parent sacrifices to spend time with the children only to grouse about the sacrifice. A spouse gives unselfishly but wonders what’s in it for her. A congregational member attends church and finds comfort in the gospel but complains about the preacher, the lighting, the organist, or the hymns.

Our situation is never easy because of other factors as well. We live in a world that caters to the sinful nature. We listen to advertisements that beckon us to want more and more stuff. We are told to seize what we want and do what we want to do. Sometimes we never imagine that we have been subtly taken captive by our own greed, lust for power, desire to control others, and pride. The sinful nature that resides within each of us is powerful, persistent, and perverse. We have a difficult fight to keep the sinful self under control so that we can live as free Christians to the glory of our Savior. We drown it by contrition and repentance, but as Luther so aptly reminded us the sinful self can swim. It desires to draw us back into captivity to sin. The sinful self is always struggling to turn the gospel to its own advantage. It always wants to exchange Christ for its own efforts and thinking.

So we struggle. As believers in this battle between the old self and the new creature, we need both the law and the gospel. Our sinful natures need the thunder of the law. We must be driven to despair of all that flows from our sinful human nature. Paul has cataloged what flows from the sinful nature: “The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21). Jesus warned us too, “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:19). In the exercise of Christian freedom, where God has neither commanded or forbidden, we can make any decision we believe will foster the gospel. If malice, rage, factions, or envy were absent at every gathering of Christians, praise God for the power of the gospel. But only a little thought will reveal the necessity of the law to crush the sinful nature. Yet even when we apply the law, the sinful nature is so intractable that it will love to become a Pharisee and talk about how bad the others were. Because the sinful nature is so perverse, the law must exercise its power even among Christians, since we still retain the old sinful nature. “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming .... But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices” (Colossians 3:5,6,8,9).

No wonder Paul exclaimed, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). As believers, we know the truth that sets us free. Christ has set us free from such slavery. Paul went on to write, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (v. 25). We live free from the threats of the law, forgiven, loved by God, and eager to live for him. As surely as the law must crush the sinful nature, even more must the gospel soothe, comfort, empower, and encourage the new self. So Paul went on to remind believers: “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation -- but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God (Romans 8:9-14). As believers, our attitudes and actions are colored by the Spirit working through the gospel. As Paul cataloged the fruits of the sinful nature, he also cataloged the fruits of the new self, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other” (Galatians 5:22-26).

The church is a collection of people who have been addicted to sin. The addiction paradigm, I think, is helpful. We are recovering addicts never more than a step from relapsing into our addiction to sin. We stay free children of God by virtue of the power of the gospel. We gather together to hear the message of God’s great faithful love. As we use the gospel in Word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit fills us with power: “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” (Philippians 2:13). The Old Testament asserts the same principal: “Lord, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.” (Isaiah 26:12). By comparison our powers have done nothing: “We were with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world” (Isaiah 26:18). While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. We are freed from our addiction. We are no longer dead in our sins. We are no longer enemies of God. The grace of God in Christ has changed all that.

Why am I spending time on these issues in a paper on Christian freedom? The answer is in the natural human addiction to sin. Our Christian freedom is constantly at risk because our sinful natures are so powerful, persistent, and perverse. We always stand at risk of being drawn back into the slavery from which Christ has released us by his suffering and death. Sin continues to appear plausible and pleasant to the sinful nature. If

disobedience appeared attractive to perfect Eve and then to perfect Adam, we are at a distinct disadvantage because of our sinful nature. We are surrounded by ideas that would take us captive again. Satan and the world are willing allies of our sinful nature, and together their goal is to turn us back into our prison.

Our world is different from the world of Paul and Luther. Threats to our Christian freedom, however, are not new. They simply have taken on new textures and new hues. As I view the circumstances in which we live, I see many threats. The list that follows is not exhaustive, and the reader might find much more to add. But I hope the list will generate thought, vigilance, and discussion so that we might retain the freedom we have in Christ.

### **1. The sinful flesh would rather remain in prison than believe in Christ and be free.**

The Lord Jesus did tell us that the truth would make us free, and it certainly does. He also told us in clear and unmistakable language that we are to share the message with others. Believers are his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1: 8). But the natural human mind cannot grasp this spiritual freedom. “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (Isaiah 64:4; 1 Corinthians 2:9). Because no human can accept the things that come from the Spirit and because the blessings of Christian freedom are just so much foolishness to sinful human beings, we should not be surprised that many reject God’s gracious gift. Even when the gospel is presented in eloquent and vivid terms, some will reject it.

Consider the ministries of Isaiah and Jeremiah. No one expressed the vicarious atonement more clearly than Isaiah, but Isaiah described those on whom the judgment would come as those who would say to God’s prophets, “Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!” (Isaiah 30:10,11). Jeremiah’s ministry would be measured as a failure by some standards. King Jehoiakim heard the prophecy of Jeremiah and then cut up the scroll of his prophecy and burned it to keep warm (Jeremiah 36). Christ’s witnesses, whether they are pastors, teachers, or lay people, know more than one sad tale of rejection. As believers we cannot understand such rejection and opposition. We treasure Christ more than life on earth and all its blessings. Why would anyone reject what we treasure so? We beat ourselves up because we know our own failings. We reason that if we could only say the right words, it would have been different. We may take the blame for such rejection because of our manner or style, but the gospel will be rejected and opposed by some no matter how it is delivered. The old sinful flesh prefers bondage to the kind of freedom Christ has secured. Our world has produced its share of unbelief. Mahatma Gandhi understood the gospel but rejected it. He attended a conference in South Africa and concluded:

This convention was an assemblage of devout Christians. I was delighted at their faith. I met the Rev. Murray. I saw that many were praying for me. I liked some of their hymns. They were sweet.

The convention lasted for three days. I could understand and appreciate the devoutness of those who attended it. But I saw no reason for changing my belief -- my religion. It was impossible for me to believe that I could go to heaven or attain salvation only by becoming a Christian. When I frankly said so to some of the good Christian friends, they were shocked. But there was no help for it. My difficulties lay deeper. It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate Son of God, and that only he who believed in him would have everlasting life. If God could have sons, all of us were His sons. If Jesus was like God, or God himself, then all men were like God and could be God Himself. My reason was not ready to believe literally that Jesus by his death and by his blood redeemed the sins of the world. Metaphorically, there might be some truth to it (Quoted in *Christianity Today*, “Gandhi and Christianity” (April 8, 1983), p. 16 and *Concordia Journal* (July 2001), pp. 194-195).

I quote from one more who has rejected Christ and his blessings -- Bertrand Russell -- because of his assault on the gospel. He does not just reject Christ, but uses the concept of freedom in an entirely contemporary way so that he makes rejection plausible. Like this one, all invitations back to the slavery of sin appear plausible -- even laudable -- to the sinful nature.

We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world -- its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men. When you hear people in church debasing themselves and saying that they are miserable sinners, and all the rest of it, it seems contemptible and not worthy of self-respecting human beings. We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face. We ought to make the best we can of the world, and if it is not so good as we wish, after all it will still be better than what these others have made of it in all these ages. A good world needs knowledge, kindness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men. It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence. It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time toward a past that is dead, which we trust will be far surpassed by the future that our intelligence can create. (*Why I Am Not a Christian*, p. 23).

One might object to the inclusion of these quotations in a discussion of Christian freedom. But I find more here than just a rejection of the gospel and freedom from sin, death, and hell. I think you will agree that there is something particularly contemporary about these quotations, especially Russell's. Some of the other threats to our Christian freedom are imbedded in his comments. While his particular philosophy has gone out of vogue for most, one can still hear the siren of modern thought.

## **2. The sinful human mind hardens the ceiling of sin's prison when it rejects the revelation of God.**

Questions about authority and truth are different today than they were for Luther. He defended his thought on the basis of a Scripture that was universally accepted in the Christian world. At the same time, however, he rejected the authority of the Roman Church. All authority for Luther flowed from the text of the Scripture. In the dedicatory letter of *The Freedom of a Christian*, he announced to Pope Leo, "I acknowledge no fixed rules for the interpretation of the Word of God, since the Word of God, which teaches freedom in all other matters, must not be bound [II Tim. 2:9]" (LW 31:341). Luther believed that God revealed the truth through the inspired text of the Scriptures. We subscribe to the same principle. The Bible is the authority for all questions among us. Yet the world today has shifted away from that principle. Some have additional scriptures like the Mormons or the Christian Scientists. Others abandon the Scriptures all together and consider the sacred texts as Russell did, nothing more than "words uttered long ago by ignorant men." The pronouncements of Jesus Seminar scholars assume that only a limited portion of the gospels is historically accurate. Everything else, they claim, is human wishful thinking and exaggeration. Theories of Foucault and Derrida deconstruct not only secular texts but also the texts of the Bible. Truth for post-modern society does not exist in any absolute sense. It is eclectic, personal, and experiential. Today people conclude, "My truth is good for me, but it may not be true for you." A commitment to God's Word and his revelation has been replaced by self-determined principles based on experience, emotion, experimentation, and the material world.

Even God's truth among Christians suffers. Christians look for churches that agree with their opinions instead of looking for churches that teach the absolutes of the Bible. Some belong to churches but do not believe everything the church teaches. They pick and choose which doctrines to believe and discard those that are difficult to believe. This phenomenon is not isolated to laypeople. Even respected clergymen abandon the Bible when they cannot accept its teaching. One could draw an illustration from the Reformation. Zwingli could not

accept the clear word of God on the Sacrament. It offended his reason. Calvin articulated the same thinking and institutionalized it. At Marburg, Luther stood on the words of Scripture even if he could not understand. “Hoc est corpus meum,” he wrote on the table and exclaimed that all the arguments of Zwingli had not changed those words. The resistance to some doctrines of the Bible has not disappeared from our world. Recently I listened to a series of tapes featuring such evangelical leaders as Pinnock, Godfrey, Strimple, Horton, and Rice. In the discussion Clark Pinnock stated that he could not believe that a loving God could condemn all the world to eternal torment. For him, such a god was barbaric, and yet at the same time he maintained that he wanted to remain faithful to the Bible. Sadly, at least in this case, one scholar and thinker, like so many others, determined who and what God should do and be.

In whatever form rejection of the Word of God comes, it hardens the ceiling of the prison in which we are bound by nature. It preempts God from correcting human thought. It arrogantly asserts more knowledge than God has revealed. It confines truth to human imagination and intelligence and then enslaves thought and knowledge. Because of the sinful nature, human thought cannot break out of its affection and devotion to its own imagination. It fails to understand that the mind of man can not imagine what God has in store for those who love him. Failure to listen to God, who is omniscient, prevents God from breaking through human limitations. The ceiling of human thought is not as boundless as the stars. It is a prisoner to the limitations of human thought and to the weakness of sin within the human heart.

We are not immune to the enticement of such arrogance. The sinful nature within each of us longs to be able to tell God what he means to say. It looks for opportunities to say that God really doesn't know. It balks when confronted with sin, grace, election, the role of man and woman, hell, fellowship, the antichrist, and the final judgment. Our Christian freedom comes from God above and comes to us by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the promises of the Word. The Lord still says, “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (Isaiah 66:2). Christian freedom means listening to God as he has revealed himself in the Scriptures. Whenever we stand in judgment of God's revelation, we step away from freedom into bondage to our sinful natures.

### **3. Freedom has been secularized and may become a substitute for Christian freedom.**

Luther and the reformers lived within the Holy Roman Empire. They knew princes, the emperor, the royal court, and government through the filter of empire. About two hundred years later, the world had changed. The American and French revolutions ushered in political freedom and elections. The constitution promises us “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” A century later, part of the agenda for the American Civil War was freedom from slavery for southern black men and women. In more recent history, the civil rights movement has taken on the rhetoric of freedom, and within the church a liberation theology has grown up that has the removal of social and political oppression as its agenda.

We live in a democratic world and know elections, chads, representatives, congress, and parliament. We view government and life in general through the filter of our freedoms. Men and women from the Revolutionary War to Desert Storm have given their lives to resist oppression. I am grateful for their sacrifices because the world I know arose thanks to their efforts. I treasure my political and social freedoms and like most Americans I resist discrimination, prejudice, and oppression. But these freedoms are not Christian freedom. Christian freedom comes through Christ and is a spiritual freedom. Although discussing other things, Luther reminds us: “It is evident that no external thing has any influence in producing Christian righteousness or freedom or in producing unrighteousness or servitude. . . None of these things touch either the freedom or the servitude of the soul” (LW 31:344; 345).

If we accept the secular emphasis on freedom as a substitute for Christian freedom, we are still in bondage. The sinful flesh does not wish to see spiritually. It cannot. The blessings of political and social freedom are enormous for all of us. Because they are blessings that I can perceive and understand without the Holy Spirit, the sinful flesh deems them to be the highest goal and treasure. My new self created by the gospel perceives them as blessings of God but knows a greater freedom in Christ. Liberation theology and what we call

the social gospel may succeed in gaining freedom from oppression, poverty, and prejudice. Yet even as it does, it will leave its adherents still in bondage to sin, death, and hell. Of course, this does not mean that as a Christian I think oppression, poverty, and prejudice are unimportant and unworthy of my attention. But it does mean that I may live in a world completely free of all these ills and still remain a slave to sin, death, and hell. Only Christ provides such freedom.

#### **4. A god in general cannot provide freedom.**

If freedom has been secularized, God has been revised. Concepts of God circulate in our everyday world that are different from the God of the Bible. Masons and Shriners pray to a god above who is the Great Architect or the Grand Potentate but eliminate Christ. Scouts may allow individual leaders to Christianize their organization on the local level, but God remains a god in general who rewards moral and patriotic behavior. In order to appeal to a broad market, Oprah Winfrey talks about God or “whoever your higher power is.” Feminism has asked us to think carefully about the gender of God. In our pluralistic society God becomes a supreme being of great power, vague love, and benign tolerance for all. Hindus, Moslems, Jews, and Christians have specific ideas about God, but they have all been blended into a god in general. The distinctive Christian concept of God who came to earth in the fullness of time to redeem the world has been dispatched to the trash bin reserved for all disruptive and divisive ideas. It is as if someone had gone through our public documents and erased the concept of Christ and the vicarious atonement.

Some, of course, reject the idea of God altogether. Bertrand Russell would find no value in the concept of a supreme being no matter what he or she did. Friedrich Schiller viewed God as a creation of man’s mind: “Man paints himself in the gods?” (as quoted in Jungel, p. 68). More are religious. After all, we learn from Scripture, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God’” (Psalm 53:1). Yet the religion of so many is like the religion of the Athenians in Paul’s day. They have all kinds of gods but the one God who can free them from the bondage of sin and death remains unknown. Christ disappears from their vocabulary and thought except as a word to express surprise or frustration. Christ disappears in another more subtle way too. The purpose for Christ’s coming changes from a rescue mission for sinners to something else. Christ becomes a great teacher, a martyr, or an example. The message becomes a gospel of endurance and ultimate personal triumph through suffering. Such a thought appeals to the sinful flesh. It suggests that we must follow our dream even when no one else shares it or when others work in opposition to it.

Many have bleached the blood of Christ shed for sinners from their minds. A loving, gentle, tolerant figure has taken the place of a Savior whose head is full of blood and wounds. Such a Christ does not free us from sin or death, and his love for us is not “while we were still sinners [he] died for us” (Romans 5:8) but rather something like “behold, the gentle friend of all.” When these theologies allow the Savior to suffer and die, they proclaim, “Behold such great injustice inflicted upon this innocent man.” For so many living among these concepts, the best one can do is forget about what will happen after we die. One strand of contemporary thought suggests that we can worry about that tomorrow. Another says that we can simply ignore the punishment of God. After all, so they say, no one has seen such punishment and God wouldn’t do such a barbaric thing. A third approach is to keep so busy with activities that no one has time to contemplate the end of life and the eternity beyond. So sinners remain in bondage, busy with the affairs of the day and unconcerned with the truth of Christ.

Are we influenced by this temptation? How often haven’t our conversations about God been vague and even Christless. Our people say that they believe in God and are saved. On one hand that is true, but I sense that sometimes people say that rather than confess that Christ has died for them and removed their sins. The sinful flesh would like to say, “I believe in God.” Certainly, Moslems, Hindus, and Jehovah’s Witnesses can say that and we do not offend them with such a bland confession. But the sinful flesh resists absolutely and categorically, “I believe in Jesus Christ.” Such a confession, when spoken by a sincere Christian, implies an understanding of sin, forgiveness, and grace. When the flesh cannot prevent such a confession, it will attempt to



turn it into a glib comment, color it with decision theology, or choose another strategy that will empty it of the gospel. Our old sinful flesh resists Christ and prefers the comfort of a god in general.

### **5. We remain in bondage if Christ shares responsibility for our liberation with any human effort.**

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). The letter to the Galatians has long been considered essential to understanding the grace of God in Christ. We are freed not by observing any laws or regulations but solely by faith in the work of Christ, the Redeemer. In Luther’s confrontation with the Roman Catholic Church, the issue was clearly articulated. The Lutheran Confessions give ample evidence of what we believe on the basis of God’s word. Paul gave expression to it in Romans: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” (Romans 3:28). As orthodox confessional Lutherans, by faith we still cling to Christ and Christ alone and the freedom he has won for us. We have contributed nothing and do not boast of our effort (Ephesians 3:8,9).

Yet the old sinful nature desires to retain some credit. Before the Reformation, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* gave expression to much Catholic thought, even if it did tweak the papacy in the process. Roman Catholic teaching at the time of the Reformation opposed justification by grace through faith and at the Council of Trent anathematized it. Roman Catholics viewed grace as a power infused into the sinner. For them grace was an undeserved start from Christ toward a Christian life and eventual entrance into heaven. Christians could advance upward to use Dante’s picture-toward greater and greater bliss. Priests doled out forgiveness when certain deeds were performed. Purgatory also provided an opportunity to suffer and move upward. But no freedom exists in this scenario. The sinner is held captive by the church and his or her ability to do as commanded. We have commonly used the term work righteousness to describe this concept. We work to achieve righteousness. It is nothing more than a carrot on a stick for members of the church. Sometimes the carrot may be ineffective, so priests can use the lash of law and punishment to sting the faithful and motivate performance. Christ is still called the Savior and Redeemer, but once the sinner receives grace, Christ becomes an enabler for sinners to advance to full approval from God. Justification is a process carried out by the sinner, not a declaration of innocence from God on the basis of Christ’s work.

The recent accord signed by Roman Catholics and some Lutherans has not changed the essential beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. Catholics still believe in work righteousness and justification as a process. The issuance of indulgences shortly after the signing should be a clear signal that the more things seem to change, the more they stay the same. Forgiveness is still doled out by priests for money paid to perform masses and for other services rendered by faithful Catholics. Religion remains a quid pro quo arrangement. In Roman Catholic thought, Christ has had to move over to make room for Pelagius even if Pelagius has become only semi-Pelagian. Sadly, the reality is more serious. Christ has been superseded by the efforts of humans. We are not set free from sin, death, and hell, but we gain freedom by our “Christian” morality.

Perhaps Roman Catholics have difficulty with the concept of justification by grace because they are worried about the absolute collapse of morality. If we are free in Christ of all punishment, they might ask: “Why should anyone do anything? Won’t people simply live immoral lives believing they have been absolutely forgiven?” We will address this in more detail a little later. For now we should note the influence of the old sinful self. Our sinful nature knows reward and punishment and understands *quid pro quo* religion quite well. This is nothing but the *opinio legis*. As a matter of fact, the sinful nature is enslaved to those principles. In such slavery, the sinful nature is given to moralizing and legislating pious and upright behavior. The religion of reward and punishment reduces Christians to rats in a maze of some kind of spiritual trial. Those who hold to the *opinio legis* do not understand grace, faith, and Christ. Because they do not understand God’s grace in Christ, they have no concept of Christian freedom. They cannot understand that believers are free of sin, death and hell; believers in Christ are changed and desire what God desires. Because human thought is so influenced by the sinful flesh, it reasons that behavior is only motivated by compulsion or reward. Paul’s warning is appropriate here: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which

depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8). Roman Catholics are not the only ones who have found a friend in Pelagius. A recent issue of *Pro Ecclesia*, which identifies itself as “A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology” carried an article on John Wesley. The author provided a definition of Wesley’s concept of justification as remission of sins that are past by quoting Wesley’s definition of justification as “the remission of sins that are past. . . all his past sins, in thought, word, and deed are covered.” Dorman goes on to suggest “Here Wesley is distinguishing between justification (forgiveness of the *guilt* of past sins) and sanctification (deliverance from the *power* of present sins)” (p. 276). The distinction between past sins and present sins and between guilt and power places Wesley closer to Roman Catholic teachings of infused grace and justification as a process than Luther and Paul. Even though Wesley traces his conversion experience back to Luther’s commentary on Romans, his “methods” for Christian living do not escape the prison of the sinful nature and its *quid pro quo* religion. Wesley emphasized the assurance of salvation based on the virtues of the Christian that flow out of his or her new birth. The Christian must do something to gain deliverance from the power of present sins. Wesley is not Catholic, but his distinction limits the work of Christ and requires human effort. Here is Wesley again:

Least of all does justification imply, that God. . . esteems us better than we really are, or believes us righteous when we are unrighteous. Surely no. The judgment of the all-wise God is always according to truth. Neither can it ever consist with His unerring wisdom, to think that I am innocent, to judge that I am righteous or holy because another is so. He can no more, in this matter, confound me with Christ, than with David or Abraham (*The Works of John Wesley*, Vol. 1 p. 188 as quoted by Ted Dorman, p. 276).

Another approach that fails to escape the prison of reward and punishment is that of the holiness and Pentecostal groups. While not every group will articulate their doctrines exactly the same way, these quotations may prove helpful. Interestingly, they come from a little book entitled *How to Find Freedom from the Power of Sin*.

God’s provision for constant victory is complete, but of course victory is dependent on our yieldedness and faith. . . As we said before, after the experience of supernatural regeneration, it would be normal and natural for a Christian to grow constantly if it were not for “that thing” which retards growth. Therefore, besides forgiveness, one must be cleansed from all sin. One’s own-way-ness, spoken of by Isaiah, must be crucified (Hegre, p. 17).

Yet if the will is not yielded, it is impossible for Him to make this human clay “meet for the Master’s use.” Once the will is yielded, then He is able to remove hidden stones of secret sin and through batting and kneading, get human clay to the right consistency. If there is nothing to hinder, He can make us exactly what He wants us to be (p. 25).

But if God merely forgave the sins and left the sinner with a sinful heart and a sinful nature, it would be like covering him with pure white snow. That is not God’s complete way of dealing with the sin problem. The prophet makes this plain in his words, “though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” The thought there is not merely of imputed righteousness but of imparted righteousness, the making of every strand of our fallen, polluted, depraved nature pure and white as the white wool of the oriental mountain sheep -- a wonderful and blessed *possibility* of grace! [Emphasis mine.] We must guard against the idea that God will conceal sin with a robe of righteousness. No! No! Nakedness is clothed, but not sin. Sin is taken away, and the righteousness of Christ is imparted to those who know the *recovery power* [Emphasis mine] of the blood and the cross of Jesus Christ” (35).

The terms may be different, but Christ starts us on our Christian road toward heaven. Then it’s up to us to achieve full recovery. The Pentecostal experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a part of that

“supernatural regeneration.” That adds a dimension to the prison of sin we have not noted before. Such an emphasis makes us prisoners again in another way. We are not only prisoners to the reward and punishment principle so attractive to the sinful self, but we are also prisoners to the emotional power of our spirit. If we don’t feel it, we must not be free even of our sins, using Hegre’s definition, and it makes it impossible to be free from the sinful nature, again using his definition.

Even contemporary evangelicalism does not escape Pelagius. R. C. Sproul observes:

Modern evangelicalism almost uniformly and universally teaches that in order for a person to be born again, he must first exercise faith. You have to choose to be born again. Isn’t that what you hear? In a George Barna poll, more than seventy percent of ‘professing evangelical Christians’ in America expressed the belief that man is basically good. And more than eighty percent articulated the view that God helps those who help themselves. These positions -- or let me say it negatively -- neither of these positions is semi-Pelagian. They’re both Pelagian (p. 27).

So the sinner must do something. He or she must contribute. Evangelicals, and contemporary Catholics too, would subscribe to the position that Christ provided forgiveness. But there’s a part of both systems that is very attractive to the sinful nature. In different ways the sinful nature can claim some credit and earn something from God. Billy Graham would say that God does 99 percent but we must still add the one percent, the coming to Jesus. Charles Finney, an icon in some Protestant circles, would also disagree with Luther and Scripture on justification. He believed that we don’t need the imputation of the righteousness of Christ because we have the capacity in and of ourselves to become righteous. One evangelical who abandoned American evangelicalism for Lutheranism confessed the danger of evangelicalism in making us slaves again to our own sinful nature. He suggested evangelicals, after their conversion decision, are more interested in books like *How to Live the Spirit Filled Life* and *My Utmost for His Highest* than Christ’s forgiveness for sinners. After the gospel converts the sinner, evangelicals do not hear much of the gospel. Instead they hear happy homilies on Christian behavior that amount to little more than moralizing.

At least one perception of evangelicalism places it in the sphere of natural religion -- *quid pro quo*, do this and receive blessings from God. *The Simpsons* introduced us to a cartoon family with an evangelical neighbor, Ned Flanders.

Religion and morality inform nearly every aspect of Flanders’ life, from the doorbell that alternates chimes of “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” and “Bringing in the Sheaves,” to his air horn that blares the “Hallelujah” chorus at football games. Together with his family, he prays at meals and before bed. He attends his church three times a week and tithes, contributing to seven other congregations *just to be on the safe side* [Emphasis mine]. (Pinsky p. 44).

One might certainly ask whether Ned Flanders and his family are accurate portrayals of evangelical Christianity. But one might also ask if Ned has escaped the bondage to sin and the *opinio legis*. Have other evangelicals? What happens when the emphasis on Christian living leaves little or no room for Christ and justification by faith? What happens when it overshadows it? I recently received a letter from a believer in South Dakota who was troubled by a book entitled *A Woman of Joy* by Dee Brestin. She writes: “While she speaks of the substitutionary work of Christ, she seems to lack the understanding of what this really is. She says, ‘Live deeply in Christ. Then we’ll be ready for Him when He appears...’ She does not seem to understand that through Christ’s work we are always ready. What a frightening thing to be always wondering if you are living deeply enough or praying enough or whatever the case may be. On page 37, she asks, ‘As you look over the first two chapters of 1 John, what kind of behavior is necessary in order for you to be unashamed when Jesus comes back?’ ! ! ! The exclamation points are mine.” To my mind this sincere Christian has it right. Bondage to human effort appeals so much to the human heart that it perverts the gospel into a religion of works.

Perhaps the inclusion of Ned Flanders is a bit of a stretch, and I do not wish to paint Methodists, Pentecostals, or evangelicals with the brush of Roman Catholicism. What I am asserting is that whenever we do not give Christ center stage, we run the risk of losing the freedom we have. We are free not by human effort, thought, or intention. We are free by Christ alone. Faith receives this unsurpassed blessing and we leap from the prison of our own sinful flesh ready to learn God's will and do it. When anyone allows room for the sinful flesh, we are drawn back into bondage. I included the comments of the woman from South Dakota so that we would all understand two things. First, enticements into the bondage of sin persist all around us, yes, even around Lutherans. Second, these temptations are subtle and dangerous.

## **6. The law must crush the sinful self and drive it to despair.**

Christ has released us from sin, death, and hell, and sin no longer has power over us. Yet as long as we live in this world, our sinful self will attempt to drag us back into slavery and seek its own way rather than God's. By the power of the gospel, we can so fear and love God that we serve him willingly and freely. This side of eternity, we are saints -- righteous and holy in the eyes of God because God has justified us on the basis of Christ -- and sinners -- unrighteous and perverse enemies of God. We struggle daily with sin, the world around us, and the power of Satan. A necessary part of that struggle is the announcement of God's law in its fierce attack on sin. In so far as each of us still has a sinful nature, we need to hear that we are corrupt humans deserving God's eternal punishment as a just reward for our sins. The sinful nature that still resides within us is a powerful, persistent, resourceful, and perverse adversary that would rob us of our freedom in Christ. It must be crushed daily so that daily we can turn away from its influence and live as God directs. We survive outside the prison and beyond the chains of bondage by daily contrition and repentance. The law is a vital part of that daily struggle with sin. This was true for Paul; it was true for Luther; it is true for all of us. Time has not diminished our need for the law. Cultural changes have not reformed the sinful self. Whether we read by the flame of an oil lamp or an electric bulb, we are sinners by nature who need the threat of the law to battle the old self.

When the law ceases to penetrate the human heart, we miss an important ally in our struggle against sin. Without the law, we may have an inflated view of human moral power. We can excuse our slight faults as nothing but dirty smudges on an otherwise clean bright surface. We can underestimate the depth of our sinfulness, and when that happens, we undervalue the greatness of Christ's work. We may conclude that sin is overlooked and excused by God. Without the law we can view God as a tolerant old man suffering from a case of Alzheimer's. Another danger awaits those who fail to see the depth of human sin. Sinners may become nothing more than Pharisees comparing their behavior with others and concluding that they are not as bad as everyone else. Without the law, we give opportunity to the sinful nature to prompt us to believe that we're really not so bad and God should notice our good qualities. But we need to be reminded that even our righteous acts are nothing but filthy rags -- dirty, bloody, disgusting, menstrual rags deserving to be cast out (Isaiah 64:6). The Law helps us smell the stench of our own foul sins. Yet no one likes to hear the law, and we sometimes feel more comfortable without it. The sinful self hopes to escape the consequences of sin by ignoring sin. Like all good addicts, the sinful self is in a state of denial where he desperately wants to remain addicted to sin.

The sinful self will do all it can to remain in denial. It will interpret the law as a list of suggestions. But the law does not crush the sinful nature when it is proclaimed as a list of suggestions for living. In our world today, the Ten Commandments become a moral guide. They condemn murder, infidelity, disobedience, false witness, and theft among other things. We build prisons to keep the rest of us safe from those kinds of criminals. But Jesus penetrated the purpose of the law in his Sermon on the Mount when he included hatred and lust as sins against God's law. He wanted to rouse us from our sleepy denial. The law is for all sinners. We may not build prisons for those who lust or speak angry words, but they are also sins deserving God's wrath. The law must be proclaimed to crush and convict the sinful nature in every human, including the sinful nature still clinging to the Christian. When we reduce the Bible to a how-to book of Christian life and behavior, we turn

back to our bondage to the sinful flesh and to the *opinio legis*. But when we crush the sinful nature with the law, we are ready for the wonderful news of the gospel.

### **7. The gospel frees us.**

As surely as the sinful nature within needs to hear the law, just as surely the new self needs to hear the gospel. Luther commented: “One thing, and only one things, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ. . .To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching” (LW 31:345, 346). Human works are not enough to draw the approval of a holy God. Even the good deeds of a faithful Christian do not merit his approval. We need Christ not just for release from the consequences of our past sins, but we need him for his perfect obedience for our daily failures and miscues. Repentance is contrition over sin and faith in the promises of God in Christ. It is not a onetime event but an ongoing attitude.

Freedom does not depend on our doing but on Christ’s completed work. Our salvation is not about anything we do, think, or say; it is all about the grace of God in Christ. We turn from ourselves and the sin within and turn toward Christ in faith. Luther comments again: “Though you were nothing but good works from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head, you would still not be righteous or worship God or fulfill the First Commandment, since God cannot be worshiped unless you ascribe to him the glory of truthfulness and all goodness which is due him. This cannot be done by works but only by the faith of the heart. . .Therefore it is a blind and dangerous doctrine which teaches that the commandments must be fulfilled by works” (LW 31:353). The gospel creates faith, nourishes faith, and empowers faith. The works which flow from such an empowered faith do not justify any more than works of civic righteousness do. They are an offering of sweet savor to the Lord of grace. Only faith makes us free and only faith in Jesus justifies.

### **8. The sinful self desires to call attention to itself; the new self desires to glorify Christ.**

The sinful nature is persistent and perverse. When Christians overcome it once, the victory is not permanent. The sinful nature keeps coming, persists in proclaiming plausible lies, and relentlessly seeks to draw us back into its bondage. If we have successfully overcome on one front, our sinful self will reappear somewhere else. The tactics of the sinful nature are so perverse that it will even allow us to accept the gospel and then turn the gospel into a law in order to return us to our prison. Our sinful nature always wants to turn our attention away from Christ back in upon ourselves. When the gospel is turned into a law, we no longer have gospel. Walther’s lectures provide an important discussion of the proper distinction between law and gospel that should be read often. When we confuse law and gospel, we are drawn back into the prison of sin and the principle of work righteousness. At times, we don’t understand our own perversion and therefore get swept along, even in spite of our good intentions. J. Westendorf identified two ways in which law and gospel are currently confused by some preachers. The first he calls “Law-to-Law.”

In the “Law-to-Law” the line of thought goes something like this. The preacher begins by condemning me for my poor showing in sanctification ...The problem is that from there he goes directly to the third use of the law and invites me to start doing a better job for Jesus’ sake. No matter what the preacher’s good intentions might be, this Law-to-Law approach leaves me looking at myself and implies I should start doing better (for Jesus’ sake, of course).

He continues,

The second abuse, that of Gospel beating, begins in a similar way to Law-to-Law. The preacher again condemns the unsatisfactory way that I live my life for Christ. But then he tries to get me to remedy the situation by saying that Christ deserves better. He tells me all the great things that

Christ has done for me. He says that not one sin remains because the Savior's blood has washed them all away. He assures me that God's anger has been satisfied. He reminds me that Christ has showered his love upon me in so many ways and in such great amounts. . . This is all wonderful Gospel news. The only problem is that he is telling me this, not primarily to assure of God's forgiveness in Christ, but to shame me into doing better for Christ (p. 2).

As confessional Lutherans we subscribe to the idea that justification by faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. We want to emphasize justification above all else because it is pure gospel. Sometimes, however, the old self ushers justification to a back seat in the church. The old self wants to hear laws and rules about Christian living. Such an emphasis may even be disguised as a desire to be more practical and less theoretical or it may be suggested that we must have more emotion or heart-felt sincerity in our worship and have less dead academic platitudes. I recently saw a bumper sticker that captures the thought, "My Karma Ran Over My Dogma." A generation ago the battle cry was "Deeds not creeds." Note how persistent and perverse the sinful nature is. The "Deeds not creeds" idea is returning in a slightly different way. "Give us practical rules and precepts for Christian living, not dry doctrine." Solomon was right. There is nothing new under the sun.

Don't misunderstand here. I'm not suggesting that our seminary abandon practical theology and concentrate only on systematic theology nor am I suggesting that preachers should not preach sermons on Christian life and sanctification. But in the church whenever justification takes a backseat so that sanctification can occupy center stage, don't we assume a similar emphasis to that which proponents of the social gospel took in the past century? Justification must always occupy center stage because justification is Christ, faith, and freedom. It is pure gospel that nourishes faith and helps the new self beat down the old self. Nothing can be more practical than that. If we make sanctification the antithesis of justification so that we prefer sanctification, practical precepts, and Christian living we turn attention away from Christ to ourselves. Our emphasis on sanctification at the expense of justification makes us more concerned with what we do -- even as Christians -- than what Christ did. For example, "What would Jesus do?" directs our focus on human action. We need to start first with "What did Jesus do?" Then I can exercise my Christian freedom and think how I might do as Jesus might have done. And in Christian freedom I can employ WWJD properly, but whenever the Bible becomes a recipe book for Christian behavior and fails to be the announcement of Christ's work, we have set up a new Biblical set of laws and step toward bondage. Justification cannot be in the back row of the church while sanctification is ushered up front. Without justification there is no sanctification. The concepts are not opposed to each other; there is no antithesis but a symbiosis. We must be careful not to cater to the sinful flesh and make ourselves the sun around which the universe revolves. Christ is the center.

Isn't justification practical? Yes it is. The term *justification* may be too much of an abstraction for our modern Christians, but the concept is life and freedom. As teachers in the church, we must present it as clearly and eloquently as we can. We owe it to our fellow believers to make justification concrete and memorable not abstract and difficult. The new self will rejoice in its proclamation because it gives spiritual life, nourishes that life in the midst of all the assaults of the sinful flesh, the world and Satan, preserves the believer for eternity, and motivates the believer to act as a child of God, free from the bondage of sin. That thought is expressed in the Foreword of *Justification and Rome*: "The doctrine of justification gives us practical knowledge... nothing can be more practical than the knowledge of God's love, which provides for a savior who washes away sins and opens Heaven. Thus the study of justification is the most practical of all studies, for in no other article of the Christian teaching is God's love more clearly revealed than in this central article of the faith" (p. 11).

Lutherans understand justification. It has been said that Lutherans have been guilty of slighting sanctification to emphasize justification. As Lutherans we fear work righteousness perhaps more than spiritual inactivity. Both appeal to the sinful nature. The cure for both is the law and gospel. We might suggest that the Reformed fear license and therefore are more concerned with sanctification while Lutherans fear work righteousness and are more concerned with justification and freedom. August Pieper offers this solution:

Accordingly, the cure for our lack of works does not consist in this, that we become more legalistic in our Christianity and adopt something of the Reformed spirit, but in this, that we in a genuinely Lutheran spirit, apply the law in its sharpness as a mirror to our lazy flesh, that we allow ourselves to be judged and condemned by it, that we become alarmed at our lack of energy because of which we neglect God's kingdom and poor souls, and that we flee again to grace and from its fullness and fervor, which surpasses all human thought, acquire for ourselves new, free, spiritual willpower ("The Difference between the Reformed and the Lutheran Interpretation of the So-Called Third Use of the Law", p. 110n)

Sanctification grows from daily contrition and repentance. The law and the gospel work together within us because we are saints and sinners at the same time.

This spiritual operation of law and gospel whereby we first despair because of our sins and then cling to Christ is unpleasant to the sinful nature. The law beats up the sinful nature and leaves it bloody and weak. For us as Christians, law and gospel are necessary to crush our sinful flesh and strengthen the new self, but the sinful flesh doesn't like it one bit. The sinful self will suggest that it can be moral, "Christian," upright, and righteous without the painful interplay of law and gospel. In one way to avoid the pain, the sinful flesh will substitute sociology and psychology for Christ. If we wish to improve interpersonal relationships, overcome rage and anger, improve our families, be better women or men, become better listeners, and more considerate human beings, we are invited to discover the right principles and then put them into practice. According to this line of thought, you don't need Christ to improve relationships, overcome faults, or improve any part of your life. In marriage counseling or family therapy the sinful flesh notes that even non-Christians can improve. Seminars for improving your life pop up like mushrooms after a rain. They never seem to be lacking for attendees. Some might suggest that they are nothing more than babblefests which promote self-absorption, but all that is what the old sinful flesh craves. Again, don't misunderstand. We have much to learn from psychology and sociology as well as other disciplines, and seminars often provide valuable and needed help. But education does not make us free nor does it reform the sinful nature. Psychology and sociology have as little to do with helping the new self as the study of mathematics. The old self would rather use these temporary solutions because the strategy avoids the daily renewal only the law and gospel can accomplish, and because these solutions enthrone human effort.

### **9. Using Christian freedom as a license to sin is always a return to the bondage of sin.**

By nature we are "dead in [our] transgressions and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). We were not able to make any movement toward God, not even a decision to believe. Our spiritual death meant that we could not move toward God. Our natural condition means that absolutely nothing good and God pleasing lived inside us. We were unable to love God and able only to sin. We were enemies of God and hostile to his will, resisting it at every occasion. Before the flood, God observed man's bondage, "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Genesis 6:5). The law does not help. It cannot compel any sinful creature to love God. Instead, it only makes matters worse by making sin and its consequences plain. The best that natural humans can muster is a civic righteousness that allows them to live together side by side in relative calm, but even that sometimes requires the stiff application of the penalties of law.

Christians have been renewed by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. They are no longer bound only to sin and doomed to hell. They are freed from the bondage of sin so that they can love God. The new self is diametrically different from the old self. The new self loves God and desires to serve him. The old self opposed God and desired to serve only its own will and pleasure. The new self listens to God. The old self stops his ears, unwilling to listen to any voice but his own and those who agree with him. The new self is righteous and holy, cleansed by the blood of Jesus and destined for heaven. The old self is unrighteous and filled with evil -- anger,

rage, malice, lust, slander, filthy language, and lies. The new self is freed from all these sins and desires to be kind, humble, gentle, patient, compassionate, and loving.

How can a Christian be free to sink back into slavery to sin? If anyone suggests that Christian freedom opens the door for license to sin, he does not understand Christian freedom. License to sin is not license at all; it is bondage -- a bondage with which we were born and from which Christ has set us free. Christ has set us free from our old sinful selves that are able only to sin. Because of Christ we are also able not to sin -- a new power we did not have before our connection with Christ by faith. Positively, we are able to fear, love, and trust in God and follow his will. Even if we struggle to do those things, Christ has freed us from the bondage of our wills so that we can serve him.

License is another excuse for the sinful flesh to return to its prison. There the sinful nature can boast of its freedom and independence from God and all his rules. It can throw off all restraint and indulge in immorality of the most perverse kind. But that's the way all of us were by nature: corrupt, enemies of God, and interested only in our own way and our own pleasures. Using Christian freedom as an excuse for evil reveals at best a faulty understanding of both freedom and sin. Peter warns us: "Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God." (1 Peter 2:16). Jude is even more pointed: "For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord" (Jude 4).

## **10. The exercise of Christian freedom implies change.**

The book of Acts provides an interesting practical casebook for Christian freedom. By the power of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, the early church exploded from its cocoon of Old Testament regulations and Old Testament patterns. Even before Pentecost, the remaining eleven apostles, who had been appointed by Jesus himself, determined to choose a replacement for Judas. As these first Christians considered the situation, they decided to choose a replacement by lot, depending on the Lord to guide their selection. Perhaps the background for such a choice was the experience these Jewish Christians had from the synagogue, where a leader was chosen by the others and the elders exercised discipline. Whatever served as their pattern, it was a bold step by redeemed children of God. They consulted the Scriptures for direction, and their decision was based on the prophecies in the book of Psalms concerning Judas and his replacement.

This first action signaled that a new and distinctly different religion had emerged from Old Testament Judaism. After Pentecost, so many converts joined the church in Jerusalem that additional bold steps had to be taken. The work stretched the Twelve to their limit. Among the believers quarrels developed over the distribution of food. Then the Twelve proposed a new category of public servants. From my perspective, the choice of the seven exhibits a profound exercise of Christian freedom. I think it is profound especially when viewed through the eyes of all the Old Testament regulations and patterns these Christians knew from their lives as faithful Jews. But they concluded that, tradition and training aside, new conditions required new approaches. Of course, Christian freedom was not limited to the Jerusalem Christians. In Antioch, where Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, Barnabas, and Saul conducted their ministries, the Lord himself provided a special revelation and a new direction. The congregation did what had not been done before. Barnabas and Saul, as the Lord directed, were sent out on what we call their first missionary tour. The patterns for the new faith had been changed. Christian freedom emboldened them to evolve solutions and to follow the Lord's direction. Consider Paul's strategies and practices as further illustrations of Christian freedom, perhaps especially the issue of circumcision. One might also cite the Philippian congregation's decision to send Epaphroditus to take care of Paul's needs.

We might spend some time reviewing how new forms and patterns evolved over the centuries. As Christians faced new challenges, they did new things. Church councils, presidents, liturgical practices, gowns for clergy, architectural diversity, democratic process, Robert's Rules of Order, and constitutions all represent changes Christians elected to make as they faced new challenges in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. One



might think that all such changes were good, but Christians also chose a priesthood, monasteries, the Roman curia, the adoration of Mary, the withholding of the cup from the laity, the crusades, the inquisition, revival meetings, ecumenical emphasis on union at the expense of truth, and television evangelism, among other things. One could argue that these are not properly within the realm of Christian freedom, but we view this list from the perspective of history and associate them with their negative outcomes. Sincere arguments, at least in some cases, were made for these developments. And believers chose to do these things. When we place Christian freedom in the context of this last list of choices, I hope it will be apparent why Christians must exercise their freedom carefully. The old sinful self has not abandoned the field to the free exercise of the new self. Power, self-glory, greed, ego, a vision of the future church that differs from the vision of the Lord of the Church, compromise born of well-intentioned desire to reach more people and do more for Christ, even a desire to lead and be seen as a leader have all played their roles in the changes we have inherited as the visible church today.

The best formula for the future suggests Christians faced with choices crush the sinful self with the law and empower the new self with the gospel. We live in a world that worships the god of progress and his consort, the goddess of the new and improved. They make powerful allies with the sinful flesh within each of us. Our early political forefathers suggested that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. Our Christian freedom remains much more precious and requires daily attention. By daily contrition and repentance the new man will arise to make decisions that will remain faithful to Jesus and extend the proclamation of the gospel to the world. Christ has made us free to choose what will best serve his rule in the hearts of believers and gather new souls under his gracious rule of love. We will change. Old patterns need to be changed, but not at the expense of the means of grace, the only tool God has promised for effective work in the human heart. As we make the changes, we do well to purge from our thoughts, words, and actions whatever springs from the old self-pride, desire for acclaim and recognition, lack of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, ego, and unfaithfulness to the Lord of the Church. Then we can apply our energy to love, unity, humility, and the spread of the gospel.

Change. The idea places us between the familiar and the innovation. If a Christian lived isolated from other Christians, freedom would not be a difficult problem. But Christians do not live isolated from each other. They are gathered together into the church of Christ that pops up in local visible congregations here and there throughout the world. These congregations are not isolated from each other either, especially in our contemporary world of telecommunications and travel. So change places Christians not only between the familiar and the innovation but also often among fellow Christians with different opinions. “Why do we have to change?” one side asks. The other replies, “Why not change?” A third group listens to the arguments of both sides, unsure of what to do. Change from within the visible church includes wrestling with such things as the perception of the status quo, authority, democratic process, trust, turf protection, and leadership style. Change places Christians then also between the two principles of Luther: the Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none, and the Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

Negotiation in such a sea requires patience, persistence, communication, prayer, and, above all, love. In addition, a Christian must be careful that innovation and change do not open the door for the erosion of the gospel. The reason for change is not necessarily numerical growth, a new church building, a new liturgy with different instruments, use of a different translation of Scripture, a better school, or a more efficient organization. As important as these goals may be, they all are subordinate to another goal. We are Christ’s witnesses here on earth and our primary goal is to share the gospel. Christians build a church or school, alter their organization, or develop new forms for worship so that they can do a better job of sharing Christ in nurture and outreach. The changes Christians implement are only the means to that end. As contemporary Christians we face cultural diversity, changing racial demographics, static or dwindling memberships, post-modern relativism, and an eclectic approach to spiritual values. Christian freedom means that we change to present the gospel more effectively. For us, it should be clear that we cannot change the gospel, since that is God’s means to touch the hearts of sinners and convert them. Without the gospel we lose the tool to build the church. Without the gospel we only build an organization. Let me offer an illustration. In 1955 Robert Schuller was assigned to Orange County California to establish a new church. He began by renting the Orange Country Drive-In Theater for Sunday mornings and went door-to-door inviting people to come to his church and asking them what type of

church they wanted. He discovered that they wanted “light, beauty, tranquillity, beautiful music, friendly people, programs that suited their needs, sermons that weren’t boring -- better yet, sermons that weren’t even sermons. They wanted a place where they could feel comfortable” (from Robert Schuller: *The Inside Story*, p. 21 as quoted on <http://www.isuesetc.org/resource/archives/gudel2.html>). The result of Dr. Schuller’s research was the gospel of possibility thinking. He began to proclaim self-esteem and self-love. He has ceased being a disciple of Jesus proclaiming the gospel of sin, grace, forgiveness, and life and become a disciple of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. But the Crystal Cathedral has attracted more “converts” than most of us will see in a lifetime of gospel ministry. The success of Dr. Schuller has been replicated in other parts of our country and around the world. What do we do when we see such apparent success? One might suggest that we can do what Dr. Schuller and others in Church Growth have done and yet make it Lutheran and orthodox. I offer the following observation as a caution. It comes from “The Report of the Church Growth Study Committee” of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod:

Some emphases of the Church Growth Movement have highlighted the importance of mission work and a desire for healthy growth. There is certainly nothing wrong with common sense suggestions that might make a church more accessible and relational -- the need for visibility, adequate parking space and facilities, ways of making a congregation more welcoming to new members, and the like. Such ideas are helpful. The problems with the Church Growth Movement have to do with the assumption that God’s Word is not sufficient, that it needs to be supplemented with “contemporary social and behavioral sciences.” In practice, this means changing the church -- its worship, its self-understanding, and its confession -- so that it conforms to contemporary American culture. Marketing techniques turn sinners in need of salvation into consumers. The church adapts its practices to attract consumers and seeks thereby to grow in numbers. Institutes and mega-church workshops and church-growth materials are potential sources of introducing alien doctrines into the life and mission of the Synod. Tragically, the Gospel itself is sometimes compromised, redefined, or treated as secondary.

The goal of many Church Growth proponents, to win souls for Christ through the gospel, is a worthy one. Ironically, many of the Church Growth techniques work instead to undermine the Gospel. Church Growth principles have roots in American revivalism, which suggests that people have within them the free will to “make a decision for Jesus.” This implies that gaining new Christians is a human work -- a matter of rhetorical and emotional manipulation, applying the correct techniques, and following the right principles -- rather than the work of God. Typically Church Growth techniques minimize the Means of Grace, which are God’s way of conveying the salvation of Christ, and instead confuse Law and Gospel, mingle the Two Kingdoms, and promote a theology of glory over the theology of the cross. Such things, however sincerely done, undermine the very Gospel they are intended to proclaim (“Report of the Church Growth Study Committee” LCMS website)

We face a different world than Christians faced only a few years ago and certainly a different world than faced by the apostle Paul and first-century Christians. But those early Christians were faced with cultural diversity, a hostile anti-Christian society, their own mostly Jewish ethnicity, and religious apathy. They adapted in order to share the gospel. Christ has freed us so that we can make similar adjustments. Our task remains the same: make disciples of all nations. God has given us the tool to do that, his gospel. If we lose that, we cease to be his witnesses. As we read secular sources, and even some Christianized sources, about change, we should remember that at best they are Reformed and do not understand the importance of the means of grace. What I have read might be characterized as institutional health guides that operate without the gospel. Many of the practices and remedies are adapted from psychological behaviorism or business models that sometimes come from self-appointed authorities. Many of them can trace their origin to the principles of Walter Deming, a business leader who transformed Japanese industry after the Second World War. We should read these things

because we can learn from them, but we must not adopt any of them at the expense of the gospel. We can't do things the way they were done before. We need to put the gospel into play in new and positive ways.

### **11. Distortion of adiaphora returns us to bondage.**

The church has often been pictured as a ship at sea. The sea is sometimes turbulent and the wind, sometimes fierce. I've placed the church in the midst of a sea filled with large rocks. The task is to guide her through those dangers. But we are not at the helm. The Lord Jesus stands at the helm and guides his church. Nothing can destroy her, but we are crew members employed by the Captain to do his bidding. Navigating the rocky course involves avoiding the rock of inactivity while at the same time steering from the whirlpool of wholesale change. It means finding a middle course between being lord of all and servant of all. Two additional opposites have traditionally found their way into the discussion of Christian freedom -- license and legalism.

On the ship of his church, the Lord has left many things to us. He has neither commanded us to do some things nor forbidden us to do others. We are free to choose those adiaphora. Christians desire to conform their wills to the will of God. Therefore they adopt God's revealed Word as their standard. What happens when Christians choose to add to God's standard? It's possible for Christians supplement what God revealed not only about beliefs and doctrines but also about Christian life and behavior. But when we add traditions, opinions, and practices and equate them with Scripture, we bring ourselves into bondage. We become the arbiter of right and wrong, truth and falsehood, what we believe and what we choose not to believe. When we make adiaphora what is not adiaphora, we refasten the chains of our bondage to sin.

A certain humility must accompany our Christian freedom. We are humans. So as humans we cannot perceive future events with any certainty. At times we even have difficulty perceiving the present, and more often than not we color the past with rosy hues of memory. In all humility we stand as limited creatures redeemed by the blood of Jesus -- not only limited in our perception but also limited in our ability to do anything important. As Christians we are still addicted to sin, even though Christ has won our release from its power. As long as we live here on this earth, we still feel the influence of the sinful self. In all humility we must realize that our decisions may be influenced by the power of that sinful self as it manifests itself in pride, malice, ego, and self-interest. So we need to repent, turn away from the sin within and turn toward Christ and the power his forgiveness provides. As we do that, our decisions will serve the Captain of the church.

It is a difficult task to crush the sinful flesh and strengthen the new self. The sinful flesh resists such effort and is perverse enough to distort our efforts. The sinful flesh may allow us to take the shortcut of legalism. We want rules, policies, standards, and operating procedures. Of course we need them, but we can make rules where God allows us freedom. We can make the practices we have developed, even for our own journey to eternity, the rules by which others must conduct their journey. How perverse the sinful flesh is! It loves to judge others by the standard of itself. What one Christian decides to do in Christian freedom and works in his or her situation becomes what everyone else should do and must do if they are to be considered Christian and faithful. We would like to make our opinion binding on others, adopting the kind of attitude that "It's my way or the highway." Wherever we make a law where Christ has left us free, we return to the prison of self and sin.

If we say that legalism is a shortcut, we might imply that legalism is an acceptable path to Christian behavior. But no. Legalism distorts Christian behavior and abandons the gospel. Legalism operates with demands, threats, and condemnation -- all tools of the law -- and it is external and mechanical. The gospel operates with Christ, forgiveness, life, and salvation; it is spiritual power and internal. Legalism dethrones the gospel and Christ while elevating the behavior of the individual. Christian freedom does the opposite: Legalism thwarts and obstructs the operation of the gospel. In other words, legalism feeds the sinful self what it craves, attention and self-importance. Since it is difficult to find little sound bites or quotes from J.P. Koehler, I would direct the reader to turn to his essay on legalism and suggest reading or rereading it (cf. "Legalism Among Us," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. 2, pp. 229-282).

## 12. Christian freedom requires daily repentance and the renewal of Christian love.

Christ has made us free. We are lords of all, subject to none. That's pretty heady stuff. Because the sinful flesh clings to us, we can easily become arrogant, boastful, proud, and aggressively insensitive. By daily contrition and repentance, we crush those sins and invigorate the new man to live before God as truly free. We are also servants of all, and such a position can only be maintained by the application of Christian love. Through the gospel in Word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit provides the spiritual strength we need to love. The apostle Paul twice (Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 13) encouraged believers to live together in love. In both instances, his directive comes in the context of Christians living and working together. Today, as we live and work with other Christians, we have no less a need for such love. Failure to love each other has always created problems within the church and draws us back to the prison cell of our bondage to the sinful self. I offer these observations for your consideration:

*We fail to love when the majority exercises tyranny over others.*

In a democratic assembly, one might ask how can the majority exhibit any tyranny. Christians gather together and agree to abide by the vote of the majority. Where God's Word has not determined a matter, that is, in matters of adiaphora, the democratic process is accomplishing the work of the church in proper decency and order. But if one thinks carefully about the principle, we may find the occasion for abuse and the opportunity for love to make a quick exit. Don't we say, "The majority rules." What happens when a group of Christians seeks to gain power over the minority and "ram some measure down their throats"? Does such an attitude exhibit Christian love? Are these Christians servants of all, or have they banded together to exercise power over others? Power politics in the house of God empties Christian freedom and Christian love of their meanings. We may be aware of more than one example from congregational life. A faction in a congregation stacks a congregational meeting to defeat or pass a measure without any concern for what their brothers in Christ think. After a contentious vote, victors gloat and do all they can to punish those in the minority. Ill will and discord dominate as factions grow and polarize. The apostle Paul included "dissensions, factions and envy" (Galatians 5:20,21) in his lists of acts of the sinful nature. Christian freedom requires repentance in order to crush the sinful self and allow the new self to arise and reign in love.

But in a democratic assembly, value, authority, and power are not dispensed in equal measure to each person. Interestingly, the majority may be a strong minority who have learned to get their way by making matters difficult for everyone who opposes them. This kind of majority may even be only one very powerful individual, perhaps even the pastor. The others are afraid to offer opposition and do not voice any concern or opinion different from this powerful group or individual. The minority has become dominant and the operating majority. Such domination, in my humble opinion, stifles Christian freedom and fails to exhibit love and sensitivity to others. I can imagine a time when a Christian leader must "pull rank" to prevent doctrinal deterioration or to frustrate some foolish or dangerous proposal that will harm the proclamation of the gospel. But I think such circumstances are rare and, in my judgment again, should be limited to those issues that fall outside the realm of adiaphora.

*We fail to love when the minority rebels in matters of adiaphora.*

But sin does not only reside in the hearts of the majority. Sin lurks in the hearts of the minority too. Both the majority and the minority of a Christian congregation share the same work. At times two or more forces will collide over issues of adiaphora. One side emerges as victor and another as the vanquished. Perhaps the picture of warfare implied by these words is a bit of an exaggeration, but I know of cases where they are not exaggerations at all. Consider for a moment this situation. In Christian love, the Christians have all had an opportunity to voice their opinions, state their fears, and seek support for their position. All have agreed to be "ruled" by a majority. The vote is taken, but the losing group does not work together with those of the majority.

Some withhold offerings. Others nurse grudges. Still others work deceitfully against leaders, including the called servants, to frustrate the implementation of the majority vote and the gospel ministry among them. Another group leaves the congregation with bitterness and anger.

How is this an exercise of Christian love? What happens to Christian freedom in such a situation? Those in the minority who harbor resentment, anger, bitterness, jealousy, and deceit have become slaves of sin. Their Christian activity will be frustrated by the degree to which they hold on to these attitudes. Repentance frees Christians as such sins are reflected clearly by the mirror of God's law and the believer turns away from them to forgiveness in Christ. Then the new self can seek to work toward peace the inner personal peace of forgiveness in Christ and the outward peace and harmony with their brothers and sisters in the faith. Overcoming the sinful flesh and strengthening the new self will then help such saints of God become involved in the work the Lord has placed before the congregation. For many these sins cannot be overcome simply or all at once. It often requires daily repentance and a difficult struggle.

*We fail to love when we remain silent concerning the truth.*

The majority does not decide the truth of God. Popular opinion does not determine morality. Yet in the visible church, the majority can set a course that drifts away from the truth and can pass resolutions that are at variance with the revealed will of God. Examples include the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry, the inclusion of practicing homosexuals, or the proclamation of doctrinal unity where there is none. In such situations, human organizations can claim to act in Christian freedom when they do what is contrary to the will of God. But that is a contradiction. Christian freedom means that the believer is free from the domination of sin and all that is hostile to God. Taking a course of action that is clearly at variance with God's will returns the soul back to the slavery of sin and makes it hostile to God, the very thing from which Christ has released Christians.

In these circumstances the Christian may find himself or herself in the minority. To remain silent when the truth of God's Word is at stake is sin and enslaves. Sadly it is a symptom of too little love for Christ, his truth, and those Christ has redeemed. All too often Christians choose to remain silent in order to avoid difficult confrontations. They hope for peace. Others feel helpless to change decisions they believe to be morally and doctrinally wrong. For various reasons they turn away from what happens in the larger visible church organization and simply tend to their own affairs, frustrated to do anything about the drift from God's truth and hoping the problem doesn't get any worse.

While on earth most Christians belong to visible organizations, but their allegiance to these visible organizations is voluntary, even if strengthened by emotional, personal, familial, or financial ties. All Christians have a greater allegiance and love for Christ, who has redeemed them. Their first priority is to serve Christ, and when a visible church organization charts a course contrary to the Savior's word, the first step is to oppose what is contrary to Christ, even if the Christian finds himself in the minority. Silence in this case is not golden. Silence in matters of God's truth is neither freedom nor love. Concern for the souls of others leads a Christian to voice concern and to issue warnings. When the truth is at stake, Christians should not remain silent but persist in admonition. More than a few New Testament passages (for example, Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians; Romans 16:17,18; 2 Thessalonians 3:14,15) and the practice of the Old Testament prophets encourage Christians to persist in calling brothers and sisters back to the truth. Unfortunately, there may come a time when it is clear that the visible organization of Christians is unwilling to return to the truth. At such times, Christians are to withdraw and remain free in Christ rather than remain entangled in such visible organizations and put their freedom in peril.

*We fail to love when rhetoric replaces respect for our fellow believers.*

Plato defined *rhetoric* as the "art of influencing the soul through words" (cf. *Phaedrus*). Over the centuries the connotation associated with the term *rhetoric* has changed from positive to negative. At one point

rhetoric was a positive skill used to arrive at the truth. Today we view rhetoric as a way of hiding the truth in order to use words to manipulate. We most often think of rhetoric in this negative sense as a kind of drug delivered through words to convince. In this sense, Satan used rhetoric to convince Eve that she was missing something by refusing to eat the forbidden fruit. His words challenged the truth and substituted only half-truths and lies. Satan enslaved Eve by convincing her to abandon the freedom God had provided and embrace disobedience and death. Of course, he never said it that way.

In Christian freedom and love, how shall we use words? Our task is to make the gospel clear in spoken and written communication. The gospel is God's communication of his love to sinners. To the gospel, God attaches the power of his Holy Spirit and through the gospel awakens faith in the hearts of sinners enslaved by sin. Through the same gospel he keeps sinners in Christ. God's rhetoric is completely positive. God's rhetoric is not only the gospel but also the law, and the power of the law crushes and drives the sinner to despair. That too is positive so that the sinner might despair of all that is human and find the only answer in the gospel. The rhetorical interplay of law and gospel is God's art of creating faith in the soul and freeing the soul from the bondage of sin, death, and hell.

Christians live in a world that teaches different lessons about the use of words. Feminism uses equality as a rhetorical principle. Politicians use the rhetoric of promise for a better life. The world around us pumps the rhetoric of sexual pleasure into our brains from every media outlet. We listen regularly to a rhetoric more akin to Satan's than God's. The lie is painted as plausible. Alcohol and sex are positive pleasures. Words like progress, equality, freedom, toleration, and diversity all can be used to label what is none of these things but the opposite. Pleasure appears always good, and rules always become constraints that need to be broken. If rules are kept, they are obeyed only by the narrow-minded, intolerant, bigoted, or stupid. It is not difficult to illustrate that some words are loaded with connotations intended to convince and manipulate. Consider the manipulative impact of these words: "Storm the walls of conformity with the innovations of today armed with new methods to solve old problems."

Christians faced with deciding a matter of adiaphora may resort to such a use of rhetoric. They may label those who think differently as parochial, obstructionist, or failing to see the whole picture; they may employ arguments that depend on personal attacks. Sometimes Christians do use words that show no love or respect for those who hold opposing views. Instead, they consider themselves superior to others. They often bash their brothers and sisters in faith without remorse, and the bashing only begets more bashing. Christian love takes a backseat and when it does, Christian freedom is not far behind also looking for a seat in the back. Believers are lords of all and, at the same time, servants of all. Humility, love, and concern for others mark the Christian life. We return to these values as we crush the sinful flesh with its arrogance, prejudice, and insensitivity and, by the power of the gospel, love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

*We love when we recognize each other as lords of all.*

Some time ago I read a little treatise of Luther entitled "That A Christian Assembly Or Congregation Has The Right And Power To Judge All Teaching And To Call, Appoint, And Dismiss Teachers, Established And Proven By Scripture." I still remember two lessons I learned from that little treatise. The first is the way Luther asserted the priesthood of all believers. He wrote: "For no one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest. . . These fellows are the Christians, Christ's brethren, who with him are consecrated priests as Peter says too, I Peter 2 [:9] 'You are a royal priesthood so that you may declare the virtue of him who called you into his marvelous light'." When a Christian is "in a place where there are no Christians... it is his duty to preach and to teach the gospel to erring or non-Christians because of the duty of brotherly love even though no man calls him to do so." The Christian does not "wait until he is given a command or letter from a prince or bishop." But Luther went on to explain how things would be different if this solitary Christian were gathered together with other Christians, "Second, if he is at a place where there are Christians who have the same power and right as he, he should not draw attention to himself.

Instead, he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place of and by the command of others” (LW 39:309-10).

I remembered these points as I prepared for this essay on Christian freedom. It seems to me that the first point of Luther is a practical application of his first point, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.” Christians, as priests before God, are free to do God’s will in their daily lives. All Christians are equal. One is not more equal than another. Yet as equal lords and priests, we gather together to do the Lord’s work. In that context, Luther also wrote, “A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” When equal lords assemble, this principle applies. One Christian does not draw attention to himself or consider himself greater than the others, but waits until called. Consider the attitude of humility and love that such a practice implies. This applies, it seems to me, not only to the issue of public ministry, the context of Luther’s comment, but it applied in every joint activity of Christians. Paul suggested the same thing: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others .... Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe” (Philippians 2:3,4,14,15).

It may be difficult for us to view the assembly of believers as all equals before God. Groups of Christians like to think they are superior and know more than others. Such groups may even gather together to devise ways to manipulate their fellow believers. Repentance drowns the sinful self with its thoughts of superiority and power so that a new self can arise filled with a humble love, eager to serve. In addition, we have a tendency to stratify the church into pastors, teachers, and laypeople. But laypeople are priests and kings no less than pastors and teachers; only laypeople have called their public servants to proclaim God’s truth in their place. Called servants could benefit from a dose of humility that considers their brothers and sisters as equals and another dose of love that seeks to be “the dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” In that repentance we step away from captivity to arrogance and power toward the freedom of serving God and our fellow Christians. When all Christians listen to each other with respect and treat each other with honesty, dignity, honor, and courtesy, we can exercise our Christian freedom, decide even contentious issues, and live together to the glory of God and the proclamation of his wonderful gospel.

We should not confuse this universal priesthood of all believers with the public ministry. Every Christian is a servant, but not every Christian is a public servant with a call to minister on behalf of others. If we define the word minister as “servant”, then every Christian is a minister and proclaims the gospel in the course of his or her daily life. But if we define minister as “called public servant of the gospel”, however the congregation has defined that service, then everyone is not a minister. Pastors, teachers, staff ministers, deaconesses, or whatever other office believers in Christ may require serve the believers who have called them and continue to share the gospel with all who need it outside the fellowship of believers too.

We should also realize that while every Christian is an equal royal priest before God, the Lord himself has granted different gifts to each of his saints. That is true of lay members as well as called servants. Christians are as different as snowflakes, and yet as members of Christ’s body, they all have a place and a function in the church. Sometimes Christians envy those to whom the Lord has granted greater gifts and to whom their fellow believers have entrusted greater or different ways of service. Repentance will move Christians away from jealousy, presumption, and discontent toward willing service wherever and however the Lord of the church has seen fit to use them. By the power of the gospel, they will learn to bloom where they are planted and not desire the ministry or circumstances of another.

*We love when we serve our brothers and sisters in Christ.*

Christian freedom cannot be practiced properly without Christian love for others. As believers drawn together in Christ’s church, we are living stones that influence other living stones. Paul describes the church as the body of Christ. Can you imagine one part of the body doing something that would not affect the entire body? Christians do not have the freedom to do whatever they want whenever they choose without influencing

others. This becomes more critical when the Internet, the telephone, and travel make it so easy to share information. Christians move from one place to another and associate with different groups of Christians in different congregations. Whatever action Christians take must take their brothers and sisters into consideration. Pastors think about how to serve not only the members of their own congregations but also consult with their brothers about issues that may affect neighboring congregations. Such consultation should not paralyze us to inaction but demonstrate a love for the spiritual welfare of others. We listen to each other. We learn from each other. We act in ways that demonstrate that we love one another.

The church is community. It is fellowship with other saints who treasure the gospel. God has gathered us together to support one another and to help one another on our journey to glory. The road is hard and difficult for many. All of us face the daily struggle with our sinful natures. By daily contrition and repentance, we drown that sinful nature so that a new person can come forth that is characterized by the fruits of the Spirit. We serve our fellow sojourners when we do whatever benefits their journey to glory. Here we have the cross; there the glory. Here we nurture, comfort, encourage, admonish, worship, and proclaim the gospel together for each other and for the world. The goal of all we do is to help each other enter glory where we will sing sweet psalms of eternal joy as God wipes the tears from our eyes.

### **A Final Word**

Perhaps as you have patiently listened to this presentation, you may have wondered if we were ever going to get at some of the practical issues Christians face in the exercise of their freedom. I received a letter from a woman who wanted us to discuss the freedoms and responsibilities Christians have in their choice of dress. On one level, I feel that I may have failed to meet her expectations and yours too. Certainly what we wear, what we eat and drink, what music we listen to, what kinds of forms we use in worship, church polity, along with thousands of other issues raise questions for us to think about and those same issues trouble many sincere Christians. But on another level I felt that it was more important to examine threats to the exercise of Christian freedom that flow from within our own sinful natures. I felt that was even more practical because we all struggle with the sinful flesh each day. And each day that sinful flesh wants to drag us back into slavery. It wants to become lord in my heart and drive out the Lord of life. If we expose the issue of dress to the principles I have tried to articulate, I hope you can see at least the reason for my choice. A Christian in freedom can wear whatever he or she desires. After all we are free lords of all. But the old sinful flesh of the Christian has many different motives for choosing clothing. Perhaps the sinful flesh wants to be provocative and sexy so it can tease the sexual interest of others. The sinful self easily parrots advertising's claim that sex is fun and its better to be sexy than left out. Perhaps the sinful self wants to impress others with expensive clothes. Perhaps the sinful flesh wants to assert independence from parental control or conformity with a particular group. Such attitudes flow from the sinful flesh and are not age specific. They may take on different tints for different ages, but the sinful self is active in all of us even in such matters. As believers we must recognize all that flows from our sinful self and turn to Christ for forgiveness. Christ has made us free, so that we can think of what our clothing will say about the Lord who has redeemed us. None of us could think that way on our own, that is, by nature, but the gospel has awakened in us an entirely different set of concerns. Will our clothing lead others away from the one thing needful? Will it place us in a compromising situation where we might sin and lose our Savior? How can what we wear serve our brothers and sisters in Christ? How will it show love -- true love, not selfish gratification or vanity? So in the exercise of Christian freedom, each Christian repents of all that comes from his or her sinful flesh and struggles to do what the new self wants, and the new self wants what Jesus wants -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). Finally it doesn't matter what the issue is. We are recovering addicts of sin. We are never more than a step from returning to the prison of our addiction and bondage to the sinful nature. We must look unflinchingly in the mirror of the law and discover where the sinful self has arisen to influence our decisions. Then we turn away from those vices and attitudes. We repent. We turn to Christ and forgiveness and find the strength to renew our faith and exhibit the fruits of the Spirit. The church today faces a grave danger in that it may fail to preach law and gospel. As



they make decisions, believers today, in our synod and in other church bodies, face the temptation to exchange the only power for Christian life for public relations glitz and marketing rhetoric. We listen with interest and fascination at concepts such as a new paradigm; contextualization; spirituality; self-esteem; liberation, feminism, and openness theologies; church growth; and cultural sensitivity. We can learn much from all of them, but we might also be drawn away from proclamation of law and gospel because we are so wrapped up with this passing parade. Clark Pinnock said it this way:

The real danger to traditional theology comes from its own temptation to accommodate to modern culture and lose the distinctiveness that gives it character and is the source of its transforming power (p. 3).

I don't think Dr. Pinnock would mean exactly what I mean. Even though he is a Protestant evangelical, he does not understand the importance of the means of grace as God's tool to touch sinful human hearts nor does he grasp the depth of sin in the human heart. But at least all of us here can understand what some of our choices can do.

Let me rephrase the principle in two ways. First, if our Christianity becomes a matter of behavior, no matter how well-intentioned, does the Christian message lose its distinctive character in a pluralistic society? All other religious traditions focus on altruistic human behavior for the good of humanity. If the Christian message becomes centered on the activity of its adherents, does it not cater to the sinful self and focus on the individual rather than Christ? Might it then lose those things that depend upon Christ: forgiveness, eternal life, resurrection from the dead? We might ask if the proclamation of justification in such an environment becomes secondary and even irrelevant. Second, we are tempted to be agreeable at all costs. The service mentality of the world today places customer satisfaction as one of the highest goals. If we provide people of this world with what they want, we will end up giving them neither the law nor the gospel they need. Both law and gospel are repugnant to natural human beings, and the sinful self continues to resist them both even after the Holy Spirit has created faith. Yet law and gospel are the tools God has given to us to build his church. We must proclaim that transforming power as effectively, eloquently, and forcefully as we can, even if all the world refuses to listen.

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