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FREEDOM IN PAULINE PERSPECTIVE.¹

A BRIEF EXEGETICAL SURVEY

OF GALATIANS 5, 1.6²

In this brief presentation I would like to make an attempt to outline the frames of Christian freedom in the sense the apostle Paul might have meant it in his *Epistle to the Galatians* (Gal 5,1.6). On the one hand – so writes Paul – freedom should be originated from the redeeming action of Christ: ‘It is for freedom that Christ has set us free’ (Gal 5, 1). The reason why Christians can be called free is to be found in Jesus Christ through the experience of his eternal liberating power. Christian freedom is not determined by one’s socio-political status with its temporary boundaries and prospects of liberty and freedom. In this sense, Christian freedom

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² This present short study is based upon material found on the internet and in other English language sources and put together accordingly. There might appear word-by-word quotations built into the whole material throughout, which are not specially marked, but they reflect to the topic and at the same time mirror the very own ideas of their interpreter, too. One source of the impressions given had been William Baird’s excellent study on Galatians in Harper’s Bible Commentary pp. 1209-1210. The related elements in the NIV Study Bible (Zondervan, 1985) had proven to be of great help, too. Since this material at hand had been a live presentation at the time, special references to the word-by-word quotations and citations won’t appear in the case of any of the above named sources, either. They are again rather interwoven into the text making it whole and keeping it alive the way it’d been meant to be originally: a vivid and dynamic lecture. I do hope this can be forgiven and won’t raise any kind of questions and concerns of authenticity.

is by far a matter of theology, or more closely a matter of Christology, and as such it is totally independent from our will, our personal or communal power. In this relation the status of Christ is the status of the redeemer who, through his service on the cross has fulfilled the liberating will of God. Our status, however, is that of a slave who has to be freed, who has to be redeemed. This is why Paul writes: 'It is for freedom that Christ has set us free' (Gal 5, 1). In accordance with God's action for our redemption in Christ, we are not designated to be slaves again, as if before Christ we had been slaves to sin and after Christ we also remained slaves, if not of sin, then of someone or something else. Not at all! On the contrary, our redemption from sin has made it possible for us to take a different yoke upon us. Not that of slavery, but that of freedom. 'Come to me', says Jesus, 'and take my yoke upon you and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light' (Mt 11,28–30). In *Galatians* Paul uses the word 'yoke' as it was often used by his contemporaries, to refer to the yoke of the law. We can see from his statement in Gal 5, 3 that the crushing weight of this yoke is the obligation to obey the whole law. A similar use of yoke can be seen in Peter's speech at the Jerusalem council, as reported in Acts 15, 10: 'Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear?' The yoke of the law is a yoke of slavery, because it places us under the burden of commandments we cannot keep and under curses that we deserve for our disobedience. But God sent his Son to lift this heavy yoke from our shoulders and to take it upon himself: 'he was born under law' (Gal 4, 4) and kept all its demands for us; 'he died under the curse of the law for us' (Gal 3, 13). Since he has set us free from this yoke of slavery, we must not take it on ourselves again. In contrast to the yoke of slavery under the law, he calls us to come to him and take up his yoke on ourselves. As quoted before, this yoke of his is easy and his burden is light (Mt 11, 30).

'Stand firm, then' (Gal 5, 1); so Paul summons the Galatians. The indicative – 'Christ has set us free' – is immediately followed by an imperative. As usual in Paul's teaching, after a theological statement there comes the ethical, the practical challenge. What we must do (the imperative) is always based upon what God has already done (the indicative). Putting it another way, what God has done gives us the opportunity and the power to do what we must do. So on the other hand it is not surprising that in Paul's confession – closely following Gal 5, 1 in Gal 5, 6 – faith and love are mentioned in which this special, i.e. theologically based freedom is vitally incorporated: 'The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself

through love' (Gal 5, 6). Out of these two parts Christian freedom can be framed: freedom by Christ through his love towards us and freedom in Christ through our love towards our neighbours. It stands out clearly that according to Paul, theory and practice go closely hand in hand. By Him theology – or Christology – is not a matter of misty human fantasy, but it is a matter of sheer everyday reality. The Greek word which we read here in our text, and which in the quoted English version is translated by the verb 'to express', originally means 'to be active', 'to work actively' or 'to be filled with energy'. A boat floating on the water, let loose from the riverbank or from the lakeshore with her ropes untied, is not really free in herself. To the contrary, after having gotten rid of her bounds, she is free rather to use her power and ability to move according to her appropriate function. This is exactly how and why Christ has set us free: We are not merely free *from* something, but much rather we are free *to* something, we have the liberty to do something. God's liberating action in Christ has made us free to react. We are now free to live with our freedom. One of the secrets or mysteries of the Cross is the everyday reality of its liberating power. We are not obliged to stick to the law anymore, but we are free to keep it voluntarily. We are free to fulfill God's will, not through the submission of a slave, but as free men, in thanksgiving. We do not love and adore God in order that He might have mercy on us sometime in the future, but we love Him and give thanks to Him because He has already had mercy on us in Jesus Christ. Although this took place sometime in the past, it has a value that exists and is effective even today. We do not obey God's will in order that He would call us His children, but because He has already accepted and welcomed us as such in Jesus Christ. Our life and deeds are not being judged anymore by the measures of the law, but by the love and grace of our heavenly Father. On this basis it is no longer an unbearable burden to serve others in our family, in our church or in our society, but it can be done naturally and with a quiet conscience, being aware of our status as God's free and beloved children. So can Jesus' call in Mt 5, 41 be understood and accomplished: 'If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles'. The one mile: this is compulsory service. The other, the extra mile: this is voluntary service, in addition to the service that we are obliged and expected to accomplish. If you go one mile, you are still a slave. You have to obey, no matter whether you like it or not. If, however, you voluntarily go an extra mile, you take then a free man's action – you have prevailed either over the obligation itself or over those who've been forcing you to do it. You are free not only to do what is generally expected, but to do what is a lot more than that. You are free to overcome your limits, you are free to make sacrifices. It is not simply playing a word game

with the prepositions when we elucidate the significance of Jesus' liberating us *from* the law – *to* the law.

Freedom, incorporated in love by the affective action of the Holy Spirit – this is how summarizes Paul the good news about the possibility of a new life given by God, in other words the secret of Christian life. Only in this freedom can we have any chance against the mighty power of sin. Law, order, rigor, discipline – these are the instruments of false teachers to control and master the extension of sin even among God's people. The false teachers seem to forget though that the above mentioned – either external or internal – 'virtues' do not bring any change into our originally sinful, 'bodily' nature. On the contrary, they just add fuel to the fire. It is true that our human prospect to abide and sustain life cannot be imagined and realized without the help of laws, regulations and obligations. Nevertheless, God's idea in creating humankind must have been vastly different: 'He wants his law to be put in our minds and he wants it to be written on our hearts' (Jer 31, 33). The law of God should become effective in one's life not from the outside but from the inside: freely, instinctively, naturally and spontaneously, without any boundaries. If this is realized in one's life, one will not only live corresponding to the requirements of the law, but will gladly and voluntarily perform what essentially cannot be prescribed by any law: 'to serve one another humbly in love' (Gal 5, 13). In order to strengthen his readers' resolve to defend their freedom in Christ (Gal 5, 1) and resist the false teachers' efforts to put them under the yoke of slavery to the law, Paul sets forth some strikingly negative consequences of submitting to the yoke of slavery in Gal 5, 2–4. Then in contrast to this negative picture, he sets out a positive description of maintaining one's freedom in Christ in Gal 5, 5–6. His words chime with those of Jesus: 'If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8, 36). We may give thanks to God for our freedom to be able to live our lives as his children and for the honour to be his partners in creation here on earth.

Literature

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