



# the Freedom of a Christian

## A Note on Freedom

*We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone (ELW, 95).<sup>4</sup>*

At the heart of *The Freedom of a Christian* and of the gospel itself is the idea that Christ has the power to set us free. But how can we accept the gift of freedom if we don't even know that we are captive? And how can we recognize our captivity if we misunderstand what freedom is really about? We live in an era when freedom is lifted up as a flag for many causes but seems to be poorly understood. In a time of pandemic, freedom has been embraced by those resisting local governments' restrictions on public gatherings or free movement. Many seem to view freedom as the ability to do whatever they want without any restrictions or accountability. That is a tragic misunderstanding. It leads to deeper captivity, not to greater freedom, and that is definitely not what the freedom of a Christian is about.

The freedom of the Christian is liberation from forces that distort our basic humanity. It is freedom from inner and outer compulsions that make us act in ways that harm others, hurt ourselves and damage the rest of God's beautiful creation. It is freedom to love ourselves and our neighbors as God loves us. It is freedom to dedicate ourselves to the well-being of our neighbors, whoever they may be, and to the flourishing of creation. It is freedom to challenge and transform any system that robs people of their daily bread and their dignity. And it is the power to participate in God's great work of bringing about healing and wholeness to creation.

Sin is the name Christians have given to those forces keeping us captive and denying us the free and wholesome lives God wants for us. There is not just one way to experience the forces of sin in our lives. Different people experience the chains of sin in different ways:

**SHAME.** One of the most common experiences of captivity to sin comes in the form of immoral cravings. They are like waves that crash against our souls until our defenses are overwhelmed by them and we give in, even against our will. Like the apostle Paul, we find ourselves crying, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."<sup>5</sup> These cravings can take many forms, including greed, lust, envy, hatred and self-deprecation.<sup>6</sup> The tragedy of shame is that it makes us forget how precious we are to God and to our loved ones.

**GUILT.** Another common way we experience our captivity to sin is through our guilt over bad decisions, reprehensible behaviors or habits, and negative actions. But there is also another form of guilt – the guilt of privilege. How hard it is to recognize and accept the ways we benefit from the misery and exploitation of others. My cheap produce comes at the expense of many farmers losing their farms. The prosperity of my nation came from slaves, indentured servants and Native Peoples who were displaced from their ancestral lands and forced to work for the enrichment of others. I may have worked very hard to earn what I have, but

# the Freedom of a Christian

my skin color, my sexual orientation, my gender, my ethnicity, my citizenship status, my (dis)ability status and many other factors may also have played a part in where I am now. There is a collective and intergenerational dimension to sin. The biblical authors knew that very well.<sup>7</sup>

**OPPRESSION.** Tragically, sin does not hurt only those responsible for the sin. The innocent often have to bear the consequences of our sin. Similarly, we can be harmed by the sins of others, including sins from previous generations. Social institutions and practices bear the marks of that sin and can often perpetuate injustices and the oppression of certain groups. Think, for example, of slavery; lynching;<sup>8</sup> Jim Crow laws (past and present); mass incarceration<sup>9</sup> of Black and Brown people;<sup>10</sup> violent removal of Indigenous people from their original lands;<sup>11</sup> massacres and genocides; gender-based violence; abuse and discrimination against women, girls and sexual minorities;<sup>12</sup> and pollution of the environment<sup>13</sup> resulting in the extinction of species and ecosystems and threatening the well-being of communities. The freedom of a Christian is not just freedom for the sinner but also liberation for the oppressed.

**FRAGILITY.** Death and broken health can be experienced as serious threats to our sense of freedom and well-being. They should not be understood as punishments for sin, though some Christians interpret them this way.<sup>14</sup> Death and sickness are just natural parts of our finitude. Only God is immortal. As creatures vulnerable to sickness and death, we are naturally finite and mortal. Where sin comes in is in our incredulity. Sin is not trusting Christ's promise that, despite our finitude and mortality, we are of infinite worth to God and that the Holy Spirit promises us resurrection and eternal life, which involves the healing and final fulfillment of our being in eternity. The freedom that Christ offers us does not remove those things; it gives us the courage to live fully and joyfully despite them.

**SELF-DEPRECATORY FEELINGS AND THOUGHTS.** We know we sin in treating other human beings poorly and robbing them of their dignity. But we often forget that this also applies to ourselves. If the most important commandment is to love God and others as we love ourselves, then loving ourselves is a presupposition of all the commandments. We all owe a debt of gratitude to Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista theologians for uncovering that dimension of sin. We sin when we fail to value ourselves as God values us. In fact, the freedom of a Christian comes from knowing ourselves as passionately loved, completely accepted and fully forgiven by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

## One last word

May this study guide serve you as a resource to better understand Luther's *The Freedom of a Christian*. And may your study of that text bring you joy and a deeper clarity of what it means to be free in Christ, free to love and serve.