

the Freedom of a Christian

Appendix 4: Synopsis of *The Freedom of a Christian*

According to Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian* “contains a summary of the whole Christian life” (*Freedom*, 9). Its main point is that only faith can make us free in such a way that we can give ourselves in loving and joyful service to our neighbors, whoever they may be, without seeking anything in return other than to praise God.

Luther opens his treatise by explaining that faith is not something people can learn from books. He also warns his readers that faith cannot be acquired through practice or rehearsal, like a skill or a virtue. Instead, he thought that “faith is learned through tribulations” (*Freedom*, 34). That is so because faith is trust in God’s faithfulness and goodness. We get a “taste of faith” when we endure tribulations, suffering and spiritual trials, because only then must we rely not on our own strength and resources but on God alone. To experience faith is to experience the freedom of a Christian.

Luther liked to use opposites held in tension (paradoxes). To describe the experience of the freedom of a Christian, he proposes the following paradox:

The Christian [person] is a completely free lord of all, subject to none.

The Christian [person] is a completely dutiful servant of all, subject to all (*Freedom*, 10).

How can a person feel absolutely free, having all things bound to serve them, while at the same time feeling like “completely dutiful servants of all, subject to all”? The answer is love! “Love’ by its very nature is dutiful and serves the one who is loved” (*Freedom*, 10). The model is Jesus Christ, who – even though he was absolutely free and Lord of all because he was the Son of God – became a servant of all, even giving up his life for all (Philippians 2:5-8) because of love. That tension between being freed by faith and being moved by love to use that freedom to serve the well-being of our neighbors, whoever they may be, is beautifully summarized in the treatise with the following words:

[Christians] do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. Through faith they are caught up beyond themselves into God; likewise through love they fall down beneath themselves into the neighbor – remaining nevertheless always in God and God’s love (*Freedom*, 32).

Another paradox is necessary to explain that experience of freedom and servitude in the life of faith:

Every human being consists of two natures: a spiritual and a bodily one. According to the spiritual nature, which people label the soul, the human being is called a spiritual, inner, and new creature. According to the bodily nature, which people label the flesh, a human being is called the fleshly, outer, and old creature (*Freedom*, 11).

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Those two natures should not be confused with subordinate parts of the human being; each term refers to the entire person but from a different perspective. In fact, before using that image, Luther warned his readers that he had chosen “a rather distant and unsophisticated starting point” (*Freedom*, 11). He uses the dual nature of human beings to explain why a person can become good and righteous never through external rituals and works but only by faith. Appealing to common sense, he asks, “How could poor health or captivity or hunger or thirst or any other external misfortune harm the soul, when even the godliest, purest, and freest consciences are afflicted with such things?” (*Freedom*, 11). Likewise, he continues, “It does not help the soul if the body wears the sacred robes set apart for priests or enters sacred places or performs sacred duties or prays, fasts, abstains from certain foods, or does absolutely any work connected with the body” (*Freedom*, 11).

The word of God has the power to touch human beings deep in their interior, spiritual nature. Therefore, “One thing and one thing alone is necessary for the Christian life, righteousness, and freedom, and that is the most holy word of God, the Gospel of Christ” (*Freedom*, 11). Through the word the Holy Spirit reaches deep within us and liberates us from the things that enslave us. “Thus, to preach Christ means to feed, justify, free, and save the soul – provided a person believes the preaching” (*Freedom*, 12). Faith is the human spirit daring to believe the promises of the gospel and, by believing, being “caught up beyond themselves into God” (*Freedom*, 32). Everything depends on the promises of the gospel and the faith that trusts them. But learning to trust in the promises of the gospel is not straightforward. We must take a closer look at the word of God in order to understand how God works the miracle of faith in the human soul.

The word of God consists of commands and promises (law and gospel). A common misunderstanding is that, even though the commands reveal to us what is good and teach us God’s will, “what is taught is not thereby done” (*Freedom*, 14). The human predicament is not that we don’t know what we should do but that we don’t do it. That is what the commands (the law) reveal to us. When we take the divine commands seriously, we are forced to despair of ourselves “and to seek help elsewhere from someone else” (*Freedom*, 14). Only when people learn to despair of themselves are they ready to receive the word of the gospel that promises complete forgiveness and reconciliation with God for the sake of Christ. The promise is that Christ has fulfilled on our behalf everything that the law requires for our salvation.

For what is impossible for you to fulfill using all the works of the law, which though great in number are useless, you will fulfill easily and quickly through faith. Because God the father has made all things depend on faith, whoever has faith has everything and whoever lacks faith has nothing (*Freedom*, 14).

Faith, therefore, is not about uncritical adherence to dogma or ritual. Faith is the union of the soul with the one who has given himself up in sacrificial love. This union transforms the soul and “makes it holy, true, peaceful, and free, filled with every blessing and truly made a child of God” (*Freedom*, 15).

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Luther speaks of three powers of faith. The first, as stated above, is that faith allows a believer to be “swallowed up by [the promises of God], so that it not only shares in them but also is saturated and intoxicated by their every power. ... [T]his ingestion by the word ... communicate[s] to the soul all things that belong to the word” (*Freedom*, 14-15). This is similar to the effect of fire on iron: “Just as heated iron glows like fire because of its union with fire, so it is clear that a Christian needs faith for everything and will have no need of works to be justified” (*Freedom*, 15).

The second power of faith is that “it honors the one in whom it trusts with the most reverent and highest regard possible for this reason: Faith holds the one in whom it trusts to be truthful and deserving” (*Freedom*, 15).

The third power of faith is that it unites the believer with Christ. To describe the results of that “happy exchange,” Luther uses the medieval image of a wedding between a poor peasant woman of ill repute with a wealthy nobleman of flawless reputation.

The third incomparable benefit of faith is this: that it unites the soul with Christ, like a bride with a bridegroom. By this “mystery” (as Paul teaches), Christ and the soul are made one flesh. For if they are one flesh and if a true marriage – indeed by far the most perfect marriage of all – is culminated between them (since human marriages are but weak shadows of this one), then it follows that they come to hold all things, good and bad, in common. Accordingly, the faithful soul can both assume as its own whatever Christ has and glory in it, and whatever is the soul’s Christ claims for himself as his own (Freedom, 16).

The result is that “the faithful soul, through the wedding ring of its faith in Christ her bridegroom, is free from all sins, secure against death, protected from hell, and given the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of her bridegroom, Christ” (*Freedom*, 17).

From such union the believer also receives from Christ the responsibility and privileges of royalty (“kingship”) and of the priesthood. Royalty does not imply secular authority: “This does not establish that Christians possess and exercise some sort of secular power over everything – ecclesiastical leaders far and wide are possessed by such madness” (*Freedom*, 19). Rather, it refers to our knowledge that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Therefore, the believer is absolutely free and lord of all things, because, by the power of faith, all things serve the believer spiritually in the end, even pain, suffering, evil and death: “This is nothing other than ‘power made perfect in weakness’ so that ‘in all things’ ... I may gain salvation. In this way, the cross and death are forced to serve me and to work together for salvation” (*Freedom*, 19). And to be a priest by virtue of our union with Christ simply means to be “worthy to appear before God, to pray for others, and to teach one another the things that are of God” (*Freedom*, 20).

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All those things take place in the interior, spiritual nature of the believer, and only partially and imperfectly until the fulfillment of all things on the day of the resurrection in eternity. For “as long as we live in the flesh, we are only beginning and advancing toward what will be perfected in the future life” (*Freedom*, 22). Until then we continue to live in the body as it is now, with its limitations, needs and desires, and in relationship with others. Therefore, we must discipline the body, as athletes do, for it to serve a higher end than its own desires. In that sense, good works, rituals, fasts and the like can be helpful but not if they are done to earn God’s favor.

Good works are not good or bad in themselves. Luther explains, “It is necessary that first the very character of a person be good or evil before doing any good or evil work” (*Freedom*, 24). He recalls Jesus’ saying, “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit” (*Freedom*, 24). Good works flow naturally from the heart of the person who has been liberated and transformed by faith. Their good works are like the works Adam and Eve performed in the garden. They did them joyfully without expecting anything in return; they did them not because they needed them but because the garden did.

Christians must do good works because their neighbors need them. This is a point that Luther makes forcefully and repeatedly:

For a human being does not live in this mortal body solely for himself or herself and work only on it but lives together with all other human beings on earth. Indeed, more to the point, each person lives only for others and not for himself or herself. The purpose of putting the body in subjection is so that it can serve others more genuinely and more freely (Freedom, 27).

Furthermore, he insists:

It is also Christian to care for the body. At times when the body is healthy and fit, we can work and save money and thereby can protect and support those who are in need. In this way, the stronger members may serve the weaker and we may be sons [and daughters] of God: one person caring and working for another, “bearing one another’s burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ.” Look here! This is truly the Christian life; here truly “faith is effective through love.” That is, with joy and love [faith] reveals itself in work of freest servitude, as one person, abundantly filled with the completeness and richness of his or her own faith, serves another freely and willingly (Freedom, 27-28).

In conclusion, the Christian is made free by faith, but true faith always bears fruits of genuine love. Through faith the believer is conformed to Christ and embodies Christ’s love for the neighbor and all of God’s creation. “Therefore,” writes Luther, “I will give myself as a kind of Christ to my neighbor, just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see will be necessary, advantageous, and salutary for my neighbor, because through faith I am overflowing with all good things in Christ” (*Freedom*, 29).