

Freedom

From the Epistle: Galatians iv. 21 ff.
The Book of Common Prayer, p. 130-131

21 Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? 22 For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. 23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. 24 Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. 25 For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. 26 But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. 27 For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. 28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. 29 But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. 30 Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.

Using today's Epistle, I want to discuss the topic of "freedom", a term very dear to American hearts, but also one of great import to Christians, for different reasons, as we shall see.

But first it's important to examine the text, even if briefly, because on the surface it may appear quite confusing. The great Apostle is using well known Old Testament passages to illustrate a point of great significance to his Galatian readers. He notes that *Abraham* had two sons by two different wives (see Gen. chapters 16-17, & 21). *Ishmael, born after the flesh*, represents for Paul the Old Covenant of the Law, which God gave to Israel on *mount Sinai in Arabia*. *Agar* ("or "Hagar") was a *bondwoman* who bore *Ishmael* to *Abraham* at the insistence of *Sarah*, his wife, who was childless. Paul would have us infer that there was no faith involved in the story of *Ishmael's* birth and life, just as observance of the Law required no faith, but mere rote obedience. Later in Genesis, in response to a promise made directly by God to *Abraham*, *Sarah, a freewoman*, bears him *Isaac*. St. Paul further compares the two women to "two Jerusalems": *the Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children* to God's Law, and the *Jerusalem which is above [and] free, which is the mother of us all*. The residents of this second Jerusalem are *the children of promise*, living by faith in Jesus Christ, and freed from the bondage of Law-observance. Presently, those in bondage persecute those who have been gloriously freed, as *Ishmael "persecuted" Isaac*, and the Jewish unbelievers of the New Testament persecuted Paul and the Church. But in the end those who refuse the way of faith will be *cast out*, while those who were *desolate*, having to wait for the fulfillment of their faith, will some day *rejoice, break forth, and cry*, having *many more children* than those who had triumphed over them before. It is a rich but complicated analogy, indeed!

Christian freedom is a very precious concept, which is why St. Paul labored so hard to make sure his hearers understood it. Already, not long after their conversion to Christ, the Gala-

tian Christians were reverting to legalistic bondage, much to Paul's dismay. Earlier in this letter he had penned these words:

1: 6 I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: 7 Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. 9 As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

Lest we tend to look askance at these Galatians, we should remind ourselves that lapsing into legalism is a very real and ever-present temptation for believers, and this is the kernel of what I wish to discuss today. It can be extremely subtle, and influence us in a myriad of ways. It might be far easier to detect if it were something as obvious as mixing Christianity and Judaism, which was the Galatian error, one which is indeed still found among some quasi-Christian cult-like groups today. But in what commoner forms does it raise its head among us now?

It arises from imperious leaders in the church who want to keep and maintain control: "It's my way, or the highway!", as the saying goes. It becomes even more lethal when the implication is made that if you fail to please and accept such a leader on his or her terms, you'll be failing to please and accept God. The more power such leaders accrue to themselves, the more firmly entrenched they become between the believer and his own, personal relationship with God. This is not in any way, shape, or form, the nature of true biblical leadership, to which we are rightfully commanded by Scripture to offer due reverence and acknowledgement, because in doing so, we offer reverence to the God who has appointed them. No, this is *bondage*, which allows unauthorized persons in the church to rob Christians of the joy of their freedom in Christ. We must be constantly on the look out against them. And just as tyrants move in on nations which have lost their spirit, so weak churches themselves invite this sort of unfortunate destiny.

Furthermore, we fall prey to legalism by a host of expectations laid upon us by the Christian community itself. America has always looked up to its icons and stars. And in the believing world it's no different. Our own frustration with our failures on any number of fronts tend to send us running for the experts, the ones always ready to write books for "dummies":

"Look, if you really want to live out this Christian life in victory, then just keep coming to my seminars, reading my books, buying my CD's, and receiving my daily e-mail devotions. Don't pay attention any more to that convicting voice of conscience. It's probably the devil, anyway."

So we are held sway by our apparent inability to just get it right. We see the Bible as a towering, unmanageable list of do's and don'ts, and failing to live up to them, we seek for someone, anyone, who can provide the shortcut to success. And since American Christendom often rejects the idea that the Church and its offices have any authority to interpret Scripture, we turn instead to the ever present smorgasbord of opinion, rarely tested by the standards of the famous "Vincen-tian Canon", which is: "take the greatest care to hold that within the Church which has been be-

lieved everywhere, always, and by all”. We seek a quick fix, and end up concluding at the end that no one seems to know what they’re talking about. As in the case of domineering leadership, someone or something once again inserts itself directly between us and Scripture, and the ministry of God’s Spirit in applying it, and we remain bound.

The sort of freedom that St. Paul is longing to see his spiritual children experience—and this includes us, their descendants, as it were, within the Church—is a place of extraordinary maturity, and independence. It is light years away from the misuse of “liberty” which has become the excuse for a whole gamut of behavior among us that would never have been sanctioned by those who worked to procure and preserve it. Later in this letter he warns the Galatians: *For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another (5:13)*. It is a freedom that obligates us to break away from arbitrary dependence upon others, a rejection of the welfare mentality that infects our entire culture, whatever our social standing, where we expect everything to be handed to us as an entitlement, including things spiritual. It is a freedom that drives us from our hiding places of insecurity and fearfulness to a face to face, individual encounter with God, without others present to intervene, interpret, or tailor-make that meeting for us.

We should ask ourselves whether we are ready for such a calling. We say we desire it, but when the reality of what’s involved begins to become clear, we back off, often without realizing it. A people truly set free in the biblical sense have been released not to play golf, nor to name their own hours, nor to make themselves an object of envy. They have been liberated to be placed under the most binding yoke of all: to love. Their numbers are very few, and their obligations are extraordinary. As they look around themselves, they will realize perhaps even with a shudder of dismay that very few others have had the courage to allow Christ to strike off their bonds, usher them into the open air, and send them forth on such an exalted mission.

No, in reality, we love our chains too much. Even though we say we hate them, they at least in their miserable heaviness provide us with a sense of security that would be absent should we have to stand without them, in faith. If this is true, it is a very sad indictment of us, indeed.

What can we say? “Lord, set us free. We confess that we know very little of what that word means. Like children, we run from responsibility and maturity. We are afraid You will ask us to do things we don’t want to do, and are very ashamed to admit it.”

But that’s what faith is all about, isn’t it?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.