

An Examination of Martin Luther's "Freedom of the Christian"

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Luther's key text for his treatise "The Freedom of a Christian" is 1 Corinthians 9:19, "For, while being free from all, I have enslaved myself to all, in order that I will win many." In this passage, Paul is writing about reaching as many as possible with the gospel. He is obligated to Jew and Gentile—and at the same time he takes his commands from God, and not from men. In Christ, he is free from the control and dictates of men, yet he is not free from serving men—he is a slave for them as far as the gospel goes.

As will be shown, Luther departs from Paul's meaning, as he asserts from this passage that Paul is teaching he is free from commands and laws and being born of the Spirit he now becomes a willing servant of all men, not because of commands, but because of Spirit-led desire. First Luther discusses the nature of man. "Man has a two-fold nature, a spiritual and a bodily one"(596). Luther argues that freedom has to do with the "inner man" and not with externals. "The righteousness and the freedom of the soul" has nothing to do with "any work that can be done by the body and in the body"(597). He goes on to say that the inner man, the soul, has need of only one thing. "One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ.."(597). This understanding reflects a dualistic anthropology.

Luther then goes on to describe the one Word of God that is needed. "The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God"(598). Again he writes, "as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not of any works; for if it could be justified by anything else, it would not need the Word, and consequently it would not need faith"(598). Commenting in Romans 10, he writes, "Rom. 10[:10] says, 'For man believes with his heart and so is justified,' and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inner man cannot be justified, freed, or saved by any outer work or action at all, and these works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inner man"(599). So for Luther the saving, soul-filling Word that addresses the inner man, has nothing to do with "any work that can be done by the body and in the body." The Word of God for Luther is the message of faith alone. This is the logical outworking of Luther's dualistic view of man.

Luther then anticipates the question of how it can be that "faith alone justifies." He answers by explaining that the "entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises" (600). Commandments teach us what is good, but "do not give us the power to do it." Commandments teach us that we are sinners (600). "Here the second part of Scripture comes to our aid, namely, the promises of God which declare the glory of God, saying, 'If you wish to fulfill the law and not covet, as the law demands, come, believe in Christ in whom grace,

righteousness, peace, liberty, and all things are promised you. If you believe, you shall have all things”(600-601). For Luther, we are granted what is promised by God, by faith alone. “God our Father has made all things depend on faith so that whoever has faith will have everything”(601). “Since these promises of God are holy, true, righteous, free, and peaceful words, full of goodness, the soul clings to them with a firm faith.” We are to be as Luther puts it, “saturated and intoxicated by them.” Through faith alone “the soul is justified by the Word of God, sanctified, made true, peaceful, and free, filled with every spiritual blessing and truly made a child of God”(601). This is Luther’s point regarding the “freedom” that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 9:19. “This is that Christian liberty, our faith, which does not induce us to live in idleness or wickedness but makes the law and works unnecessary for any man’s righteousness and salvation”(601-602). The freedom of the Christian, for Luther, is freedom from law and commandments. We are free from commandments, because “the promises of God give what the commandments of God demand.” The commands demand righteousness, God promises righteousness by faith alone.

He then divides faith into two distinct powers. The “first power of faith” is the freeing us from commands and gives us to the promises of God apart from our works. The second half of his treatise is given to showing how faith makes us glad servants of all men. This is what Luther calls the “second power of faith.” First Luther argues that faith is our righteousness before God. “When, however, God sees that we consider him truthful and by the faith of our heart pay him the great honor which is due him, he does us the great honor of considering us truthful and righteous for the sake of our faith”(603). It is in speaking about the need for good works that Luther speaks once more of the distinction between the “inner man” and the “outer man” or the body. “As I have said, a man is abundantly and sufficiently justified by faith inwardly, in his spirit, and so has all he needs...yet, he remains in this mortal life on earth. In this life he must control his own body and have dealings with men. Here the works begin; here a man cannot enjoy leisure”(610). Luther describes our endeavoring for good works as bringing the outer man of the flesh in conformity to the righteous inner man of faith (Ibid). The inner life is faith, the outer man consists in what is visible and is of works. For Luther this is the conflict within a man, between his inner self and his flesh. “The inner man, who by faith is created in the image of God, is both joyful and happy because of Christ in whom so many benefits are conferred upon him...behold, he meets a contrary will of his own flesh which strives to serve the world and seeks its own advantage. This the spirit of faith cannot tolerate, but with joyful zeal it attempts to put the body under control and hold it in check”(611).

This inner-outer distinction for Luther is crucial. He goes on: “We must, however, realize that these works reduce the body to subjection and purify it of its evil lusts, and our whole purpose is to be directed only toward the driving out of lusts. Since by faith the soul is cleansed and made to love God, it desires all things, and especially its own body, shall be purified so that all things may join with it in loving and praising God”(611). Luther is careful to explain that the soul is justified already by faith, and the body remains to be purified by works. “Nevertheless the works themselves do not justify him before God, but he does the works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God and considers nothing except the approval of God, whom he would most scrupulously obey in all things”(611). The motivation for good works for Luther is not nor

can be for justification, that is already done by faith, rather it is “without thought of gain,”(611) “considering nothing except the need of a neighbor”(617) and “considers nothing except the approval of God”(611), “without hope of reward”(617) “and takes no account of gratitude or ingratitude, of praise or blame, of gain or loss”(619).

A Christian is now free to do works, not out of servile fear, since “a Christian has no need of any work or law in order to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely”(613). Luther again on the freedom of a Christian, ““Although I am an unworthy and condemned man, my God has given me in Christ all the riches of righteousness and salvation without any merit on my part, out of pure, free mercy, so that from now on I need nothing except faith which believes that this is true. Why should I not therefore freely, joyfully, with all my heart, and with an eager will do all these things which I know are pleasing and acceptable to such a Father who has overwhelmed me with his inestimable riches?”(619). For Luther this is how faith is full of good works. For the believer who has confidence that he has all he needs already, the motivation for good works comes out of overflowing appreciation for the grace and mercy of God. This is Christian freedom. “If works are sought after as a means to righteousness, are burdened with this perverse Leviathan, and are done under the false impression that through them one is justified, they are made necessary and freedom and faith are destroyed; and this addition to them makes them no longer good but truly damnable works”(615). The good works do not effect the believers standing before God, in fact, he cannot believe that they do. “But very great care must always be exercised so that no man in a false confidence imagines that by such works he will be justified or acquire merit or be saved; for this is the work of faith alone”(621-622). As Luther has said, works done for justification are “damnable works.”

In conclusion, Luther’s view is dependent upon a strict dualism. The inner man embraces the promises by faith alone. This happens completely and in an instant. The outer man, that is workings of the physical body are addressed by the commands of God. These two realities, according to Luther are quite diverse. The inner man stands holy before God, free from sin by faith, while the outer man stands as a sinner, loaded down with sins. This condition is possible because of Luther’s dualistic view. Slowly and progressively the man who has faith brings his outer man under obedience to the commands of God. But his doing of this has no bearing on his standing before God, the inner man has all he needs by faith. Luther’s “second power of faith” has to do with a person’s obedience to commands out of gratitude for what he has by faith. This is crucial for Luther. For Luther, to obey for justification is to render a person obedient “out of servile fear.” This we are free from. We now obey out of a glad appreciation for what we already possess in full. This is how faith relates to obedience. What becomes clear, is how much Luther’s dualistic view of man informs his understanding of the Scriptures. What now must be explored, is how far Luther’s dualism has carried him from the apostle Paul’s own views.

The best place to begin is with Luther’s key text from the apostle Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9:19, Paul asserts that “though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” From this Luther represents Paul to mean by being free from all men, he is free from commandments, even the commands of God. First, this cannot be Paul’s meaning because only a few sentences later in verse 21 he states that “I am not free from

God's law but am under Christ's law." The law that he is free from is the law of Moses, but this does not mean he is free from the law of Christ. Clearly, what Paul meant was that he was free from the dictates of men, but not from the commands of God. This was Paul's teaching, and also reflects his life. According to Luther, when a person becomes a Christian, they become one by faith alone, and the inner man must remain persuaded that he has all he needs by that faith. Everything done after receiving Christ by faith is done out of a glad appreciation of that fact. Commands are not done out of necessity and "servile fear," but freely, from a glad and appreciative heart. However, this was not how the apostle Paul understood his apostleship. When Jesus Christ revealed himself to Saul on the Damascus road (later to be named Paul) he told him, "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told *what you must do*." The Greek word for must is *dei* and is translated "it is necessary." Paul had to go into Damascus, because it was there he would receive further instruction about what he *must do*. The Lord then commissioned Ananias to be his mouthpiece. He told Ananias. "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he *must suffer [dei]* for my name"(vv.15,16). Paul *must suffer* because he *must be* God's messenger to the nations. Paul would suffer indeed. In the midst of his ministry and after many beatings and rejections, the Lord "stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you *must [dei]* also testify about in Rome"(Acts 23:11).

Paul's own understanding of his apostleship is reflected in the reality of what he was told he had to do by Christ Himself. The way Paul refers to his commission in many places reflects the reality that he was a man under necessity. "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by *the command* of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope"(1 Timothy 1:1). "[A]nd at his appointed season he brought his word to light through the preaching entrusted to me *by the command* of God our Savior"(Titus 1:3). Luther understands Paul to be a man who is free from the commands of God, and serves them in preaching the gospel out gratitude for what God has done for him. There is no question that Paul was a grateful man, but it cannot be concluded that Paul served men out of glad appreciation and *not* from necessity.

As we have seen, Luther also taught that obedience is given freely, that is understood to mean, apart from any expectation of reward or benefits received, but only out of gratitude for what has been received by faith alone. This does not reflect the apostle's understanding. In 1 Corinthians 9:22,23, Paul described what motivated him to serve men in preaching the gospel. He was motivated for two reasons. First, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." The first reason he serves men is to save *them*. The second reason is the he himself may share in the blessings that the gospel promises. What are the blessings that the gospel promises? Is it not salvation from sin and the wrath of God? Is it not the promise of life? Paul did what he did because lives depended upon him doing what he was commanded to do, the lives of other men and his life as well. Paul was not free in the sense that Luther understands freedom. He was not free from the command of his Lord to preach to the nations. It was something he had to do. This is why Paul would say, "Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"(1 Cor. 9:16). Paul employs a

“woe oracle” which was employed by the prophets to reflect the judgment of God upon the disobedient. Jesus used the woe oracle when referring to the Pharisees in Matthew 23. Paul uses it in reference to himself. This is also why Paul speaks of his apostleship as being “according to the promise of life” in 2 Timothy 1:1. “Paul, an apostle of Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus.” This is not to say that Paul’s service was not a glad or appreciative service to His Lord. Surely it was. But it is to say that Luther sets up a false dichotomy by teaching that either a person does what he has to from “servile fear,” *or* a person does what he wants to do freely out of gratitude. Luther falls into a logical fallacy of the excluded middle. Rather, the biblical reality is that the apostle Paul gladly did what he had to do *in order to share in the blessings of the gospel*. Paul’s freedom was not of the type Luther taught. He was free from the dictates of men. He was not free from the dictates of God.

Lastly, it is evident that Luther’s interpretation of biblical texts is hampered by a philosophical dualism. Luther divides man into two distinct parts, the inner man and the outer man. It is true that Paul can speak of an inner and outer man—but once again, Paul meant something very different than Luther by speaking in this way. Luther’s dualism serves to divide men into two distinct parts that have an ability to relate to God in two distinct ways, almost as two people in one. For Luther a man may be righteous and holy before God in his soul, and sinful and rebellious toward God with his body. A man may be pleasing to God in his heart by faith and abhorrent to God in his body by disobedience. Not only is this theoretically possible for Luther, but it is, in reality and in various degrees, true of all men. This goes far beyond anything Paul ever taught. Paul never divided men in this way. When Paul wrote of man’s inner and outer condition he was speaking of whole men. We read of this in Romans 2:28,29,

If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision are a law breaker. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is his circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from man, but from God.

In this passage Paul does not divide a man into two parts the way Luther does. Paul divides whole men into two types, one type who disobeys God and others who obey. In this passage the ones who are *inwardly* circumcised by the Spirit are those who obey God’s commands. The spiritual man keeps the requirements of God. The issue here for Paul is a false confidence in circumcision while living in sin. Luther’s dualism cannot be sustained by an appeal to Romans 7. Whoever a person believes Paul is referring to in Romans 7, Paul’s description does not give credence to Luther’s body/soul dualism. Paul writes of a man who is divided *internally*, the sinful nature warring against the desire for God’s ways. In 2 Corinthians 4:16ff. Paul refers to the inner and outer man, the man of spirit and body. But there it is the body that is suffering because of faithfulness to God. Man is not divided in allegiance as Luther conceives, rather the body bears the marks of a man’s spiritual allegiance. Paul’s point is that, despite appearances to the contrary, the man who suffers and is being broken down physically *for his faith* is being prepared for great glory in the age to come. This glory will encompass the whole man, just as the present

suffering encompasses the whole man. Once again, Paul was not controlled by Luther's philosophical dualism. But Luther has read Paul under the philosophical - not biblical- view of a divided man.

For all of Luther's protest against philosophical reasoning distorting the Word of God, it is clear that he himself failed to exegete Scripture on its own terms and by its own assumptions. Unbiblical dualism has been a long-time opponent of the biblical world-view. Clearly, Luther's assumptions have caused him to mis-represent the apostle Paul at important points having to do with obedience to commands and faith in God. For Paul, faith and obedience did not reside in separate compartments of man. Paul never conceived of the possibility of a saving faith existing within a man enslaved to sin, or an obedient man of unbelief. Paul understood that what he did as an apostle he had to do as an expression of his faith in his Lord. Paul knew he had to go Rome by the command of his Lord and Savior (Acts 23:11). He would go by faith in the promise of life (2 Timothy 1:1). And because Paul obeyed the command of his Lord by faith in the life promised to him, he could say with great confidence, while in Rome, at the end of his life, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." Paul includes us in this pursuit of life. God's Word of promise is for us as well.

"Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."

- Revelation 2:10