

Freedom and Responsibility

ARTHUR K. LOOMIS

MORE than four hundred years ago in the year 1520 two men of great mental stature came into sharp conflict. One was the son of peasant parents; the other, the son of Lorenzo de' Medici, called the Magnificent. One was Martin Luther, a member of the Augustinian friars; the other, pope Leo X, not religious but exact in religious observance.

In June 1520 a bull of condemnation requiring Luther to retract his errors within sixty days on pain of excommunication was issued. On December 10, 1520, Luther publicly burned the bull of condemnation. In the meantime, he addressed "An Open Letter to the Pope" in which he declared that he had not attacked the Pope in his own person at any time. In fact, he said, "I have called you a Daniel in Babylon, and I have zealously defended your innocence against Sylvester, your defamer."

But the tone of his letter to the Pope was hardly conciliatory. He continued, "True I have vigorously attacked the See in Rome, and what is known as the Roman court; and you yourself, like everyone else on earth, must admit that it is more wicked than Sodom, Gomorrah, or Babylon ever was. The Roman church, which in past ages was the holiest of all, has now become a den of murderers beyond all other dens of murderers, a thieves' castle beyond all other thieves' castles, the head and empire of every sin, as well as of death and damnation. Mean-

while, Holy Father Leo, you seem like a sheep amongst the wolves." Finally, he concluded his letter as follows: "I now come, Holy Father Leo, and fling myself at your feet. But it is useless to demand that I should recant my teaching. Moreover, I can not bear with rubrics and regulations as to how I should explain the Scripture; because the word of God, which teaches full freedom, should not and must not be fettered. If these two points are granted, any other conditions that can be imposed upon me I shall welcome and most willingly observe." And then he said, "Finally, lest I come before Your Holiness empty-handed, I am sending herewith a little book which I have dedicated to you. Going by the number of pages, it is but a pamphlet, but to grasp its meaning is to comprehend the whole sum of the Christian life. I am a poor man, having nothing else with which I can pay my respects. Herewith I commend myself to Your Holiness."

The little book which Luther sent to the Pope had in the meantime been published in Germany in the German language. It was entitled, "The Freedom of a Christian." It is my purpose to quote extensively from this source since it deals most effectively with the subject of freedom and responsibility. I shall take the liberty of using **The New English Bible** as the text for any quotations from the New Testament used by Luther in writing his treatise.

Parenthetically it is interesting to note that **The New English Bible—New Testament** is the consummation of thirteen years of devoted scholarship of a panel of outstanding Biblical literary scholars from various British universities. Among the massive literary products of Luther's tireless energy is his own single-handed translation of the entire New Testament into German. This work was

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completed in the incredibly short time of ten weeks.

And now I shall attempt to summarize the discussion by Luther of "The Freedom of a Christian," using Bertram Lee Woolf's translation. "In order that we may have a true and proper understanding of what it is to be a Christian, or what is the freedom which Christ has won for us and given to us, and of which St. Paul often writes, I propose to begin with two propositions.

"A Christian is free and independent in every respect, a bondservant to none.

"A Christian is a dutiful servant in every respect, owing a duty to everyone.

"These two axioms are clearly found in I Corinthians 9:19, where St. Paul says: 'I am a free man and own no master; but I have made myself every man's servant, to win over as many as possible.' Again in Romans 13:8, 'Leave no claim outstanding against you, except that of mutual love. He who loves his neighbor has satisfied every claim of the law.' In the same way also in regard to Christ, in Galatians 4:3-5, 'And so it was with us. During our minority we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe, but when the term was completed, God sent his own son, born of a woman, born under the law, to purchase freedom for the subjects of the law, in order that we might attain the status of sons.'" Luther continues, "the only means whether in heaven or on earth, whereby the soul can live and be religious, free and Christian, is the holy gospel, the word of God, preached by Christ. He himself says in John 11:25-26, 'I am the resurrection and I am life. If a man has faith in me, even though he die he shall come to life; and no one who is alive and has faith shall ever die.'

"You will fulfill all commands, and be free from all things, as St. Paul says in Romans 1:16-17, 'For I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is the saving power of God for everyone who has faith because here is revealed God's way of righting wrong, a way that starts from faith and ends in faith; as Scripture

says, 'he shall gain life who is justified through faith.'" And in Romans 10:4, 'For Christ ends the law and brings righteousness for everyone who has faith.'

"I have summed everything up in faith alone, so that whoever has faith shall have all, and be saved; without faith, no one shall have anything. Thus we see that a Christian has sufficient in his faith and he is assuredly free. That is Christian freedom, gained by faith alone. From this fact we can understand what was said above: 'A Christian man is a dutiful menial, a bondservant to everyone,' which is as much as to say: 'In as far as he is free, he requires to do nothing. In as far as he is a servant, he must do everything.'

"But now we would speak of other actions, those which he does in relation to other men. For a man does not live alone in his own body, but among other men, in the world. He should have no other thought than of what is needful to others. That would mean living a true Christian life; and that is the way in which faith proceeds to work with joy and love, as St. Paul teaches the Galatians. Also, in Philippians 2:1-8, he teaches them further and says: 'If then our common life in Christ yields anything to stir the heart, any loving consolation, and sharing of the spirit, any warmth of affection or compassion, fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike, with the same love for one another, the same turn of mind, and a common care for unity. Rivalry and personal vanity should have no place among you, but you should humbly reckon others better than yourselves. You must look to each other's interest and not merely to your own.'

"In addition, St. Paul cites the example of Christ and says: 'Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus. For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave. Bearing the human

likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death—death on a cross.’

“It follows that, like Christ his head, a Christian must let himself be completely and sufficiently content with his faith. . . . Yes, that is the true spiritual and Christian freedom. It liberates our hearts from all sins, laws, and commandments. It exceeds all other freedom as much as heaven the earth. God grant that we rightly understand and retain this freedom.”

But the letter to the Pope and the book that Luther sent with it were found unsatisfactory. As James MacKinnon, professor of ecclesiastical history in Edinburgh University, says in his article on Luther in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (vol. 14 (1958 ed.) p. 494c): “In January 1521, the Pope, in consequence of Luther’s refusal to retract and submit to the authority of the Church, launched a Bull of Excommunication against him, and called on the Emperor Charles V to execute it forthwith.” Instead of complying, the emperor summoned Luther to appear for examination before the diet under the imperial safe conduct. On April 16, 1521, Luther entered Worms, and late in the afternoon of April 18, having failed to satisfy the official interrogator, he gave a definite answer to the question whether he would retract his errors or not in the fateful words which made the breach between Rome and Luther complete and irretrievable. Luther’s answer is an example of free and responsible action. He said, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of scripture or by an evident reason—for I confide neither in the Pope nor in a council alone, since it is certain that they have often erred and contradicted themselves—I am held fast by the Scriptures adduced by me, and my conscience is taken captive by God’s word, and I neither can nor will revoke anything, seeing that is is not safe or right to act against conscience. God help me. Amen.”

Nothing that has happened recently seems of greater significance, in my

opinion, than appeal by 227 Catholic bishops on November 20, 1960 for “A fresh evocation of the principle and practice of personal responsibility (which) can revivify our society and help to stem the seemingly inexorable march toward the automation of human beings and the steady loss of that freedom which is man’s distinctive attribute.”

It is interesting to note that the scriptural basis for the statement issued by the Catholic bishops is very similar to the quotations used by Luther in his book on “The Freedom of a Christian.” They cite Galatians 5:13-14 where St. Paul says, “You, my friends, were called to be free men; only do not turn your freedom into licence for your lower nature, but be servants to one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The bishops also emphasize, “That the freedom innate in man, as well as the social nature he enjoys, demands as a correlative the fullest personal responsibility.” For scriptural backing they cite Romans 14:12, “So, you see, each of us will have to answer for himself.”

The bishops pose the question, “What is personal responsibility in the context of man’s relation to the world?” They answer, “It requires the free and deliberate acceptance of one’s obligations in the position he occupies—in the family, in the church, in the corporation, in the labor union, in the community, in the nation, in the family of nations. It demands the rule of conscience, not self-satisfaction.”

The opening paragraph of the appeal by the Catholic bishops is worth quoting in full: “The history and achievements of America stand as a monument to the personal responsibility of free men. Our institutions and our industry, the fruit of the American sense of responsibility, have in the past inspired, guided and helped many other nations of the world. If our future is to be worthy of our past, if the fruit of America’s promise is not to wither before it has reached full matur-

ity, our present preeminent need is to reaffirm the sense of individual obligation, to place clearly before ourselves the foundation on which personal responsibility rests, to determine the causes of its decay and to seek the means by which it can be revived."

Another example of recently aroused concern for freedom and responsibility comes from Japan. The new course in morals now being used in the public schools sets up the objectives of the teaching as follows:

"Try to have a pride as a man; to think, decide and act for yourself and accept the responsibility for what you have thought, decided and practised. . . . Man has a weak and frail aspect likely to follow social practices blindly. But at the same time, man is also given the power to think for himself, make decisions, and behave independently. Try to control your impulses, think calmly, practise what you believe is right, and accept with pride the responsibility for the result.

"Try to respect everybody's personality, and endeavor to promote the development of your own personality and that of others. Personality is derived from the consciousness that man is free and equal per se. . . . The fundamental human right in a democratic society also depends on this spirit of respect for the dignity and personality of every individual person.

"Try to admit frankly your own errors and not to be discouraged by your failures. . . . We often make excuses or shift the responsibility on to another. . . . Study the cases which have brought you failure, and make each failure a lesson to prevent another in the future."

Now we may take a look at ourselves. In the United States of America we have tended more and more to rely on the many organizations for our standards of behavior. This abdication of our proper individual responsibility has brought us to a serious situation in which we as parents look to the church and the school to carry the full responsibility for

developing character in our children. The unfortunate result is often apparent to us too late to remedy it. The classical scientific study of character education was made forty years ago by Dr. Mark A. May of Yale University. He was supplied with adequate funds for his study, which extended over several years, and which was reported in a series of volumes. The unequivocal conclusion was that the home is far and away the most influential agency in character education. This is unfortunately true as much when the home fails to do its job as when it measures up to its responsibility. This conclusion is not as hopeless as it seems. The strategic approach to finding a solution for the problems of character education lies through providing assistance to the family through adult education for parents. Both the church and the school are more and more aware of the vital need for such programs.

The Parent Education Project of the University of Chicago is an example of careful planning and experimental tryout of materials and methods of presentation. A progress report issued in 1958 describes the work done in the first five years of the study. All the materials will be completed and eventually published. Dr. Ethel Kavin, the Director of the Project, states that the purpose of the project is to help parents bring up children who will become mature, responsible citizens, able to function in and maintain a free, democratic society. The materials which have been developed are designed for use as a mass medium of education, utilizing study-discussion group methods, with considerable responsibility placed upon volunteer leadership and upon all members of the group.

This project is based on the assumption that most parents want to be wise and good parents, but that for the most part they have had little or no opportunity to secure the education that would help them to understand children or themselves as parents.

In the home children ordinarily want

to make their own decisions at an early age. The conflicts that frequently result between children or between child and parent give priceless opportunities, when used wisely, to develop healthy non-conformity while learning to respect the rights of others.

Within the same family children are likely to vary considerably in (a) their rates of growing into free, responsible behavior; (b) their desire to have more and more freedom; and (c) their willingness to accept responsibility for the freedom they have. It may be noted that the development of freedom and responsibility rests more in the hands of each growing individual than on the shoulders of the parents. Consequently, children should be given opportunities to learn freedom and responsibility by practice under sympathetic guidance rather than

by relying on precepts, which frequently degenerate into an unending series of don'ts with only an occasional do. Parents must expect and accept imperfections and variability while children are learning. They must always keep in mind that too much freedom and responsibility too soon can do serious harm to children.

In conclusion, it is most encouraging to note that there is a new and widespread awareness of the importance of non-conformity and the extreme dangers of the pressures demanding conformity. Professor J. Glenn Gray of Colorado College has said in his recent book, **The Warriors**, subtitled **Reflections on Men in Battle**, "Freedom and responsibility we speak of easily, nearly always without recognition of the iron courage required to make them effective in our lives."

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