

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

48 What Is the Christian View of Freedom?

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, 27; 10:4-31:

America's bicentennial celebration is now a thing of the past. With it came a rethinking of our origins and a reflection upon those principles which are said to have made this nation great. On the occasion of this year's celebration of Independence Day, a fitting thought has to do with the source of those principles. From whence did most of the streams of thought originate which shaped the grand American experiment in liberty? What individual might we best point to as the virtual founder of America? Just what is this thing called freedom and how is it to be understood from a Biblical perspective? In our study this morning we will make some general observations, cite the important areas of clash or difference between the view of a secular culture concerning freedom, and conclude by seeking to understand the negative and positive aspects of Christian freedom.

I. WE WILL BEGIN BY PLACING ALL REALITY ON THREE LEVELS:

In simple wording there are spiritual realities which are either Divine or Satanic, and there are the realities of physical properties. Satanic reality is virtually ignored by the masses of people and physical reality is thought to be the most vital aspect for successful living. The real fact of the matter according to Christian teaching is that Divine reality is what constitutes true success, Satanic reality is not an alternative, and physical reality is irrelevant in terms of the great issues of life. Man has always had the potential for apprehending Divine reality, man has always been harassed by Satanic reality, and in our time man has become hyper conscious about material reality.

The reason for moving along these lines is to distinguish between political freedom and Christian liberty. Somehow we have the idea that these are synonymous and that political freedom comes from Biblical roots and is the result of a Christian culture. This is sometimes referred to as the American "WASP" mythology, the influence which has come from white Anglo Saxon Protestantism. We have tended to assume that democracy and Christianity are the same in meaning. They are not and differences in Christian liberty and political freedom are many. Here we note each is rooted in a different reality.

Political freedom rests on the fundamental assumption that man can govern himself individually and collectively. Political freedom springs from a rationalistic humanism rooted in Greek thought which saw man primarily as a political animal. This thinking was injected into Western thought during the age of enlightenment. Christian liberty is based upon the assumption, the Biblical assumption, that man cannot govern himself; he will be individually a slave of God or a bondservant of Satan.

II. THE FAITH OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS WAS A COMBINATION OF BELIEFS:

It is commonly believed and often stated that the American republic was founded upon the principles of Christianity. On the other hand there are those who reject this reasoning because in their opinion the historic data is not sufficient to support such a conclusion. The fact is that the early fathers were heirs of a double tradition. Individually they embraced the influences of Puritanism or of Enlightenment Rationalism, of orthodoxy or deism. It is well to have some understanding of these beliefs in attempting to equate political freedom with the Biblical view of Christian liberty.

Deism flourished in 17th and 18th century England. Its advocates were not atheists. They believed in a creator God who in turn gave control of the universe over to secondary law. Deism was an application of rationalism and humanism to the Christian faith. Man's reason was to sit in judgment on all truth. Deism did not accept Biblical revelation as final, or the special divinity of Christ and held strongly to the perfectibility of man. It looked for the inevitability of progress in this world because truth is self evident to reasonable men. (**The Reasonableness Of Christianity**, John Locke, 1695). It was Locke's **Two Essays on Government** which figured importantly in the shifting of colonial politics from revelation to reason. Some feel that if you were to choose one word which characterized the religious faith of the founding fathers themselves, it would be the word "deism." Leading deists were Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Ethan Allen, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams.

The other major tradition in the faith of the Founding Fathers was Puritanism. Puritan theology was that of John Calvin, the leader of Geneva's sixteenth century reformation. It focused on the sovereignty of God, the authority of Scripture, the depravity of man and the mercy of God expressed most fully in Christ. A further aspect of Puritanism was the congregational form of government which probably

strengthened the average American's desire for a voice in political government. Puritans were also believers in Christian conversion which was to them a matter of inward experience. Puritanism can be traced back to the 1620s and 1630s with the Pilgrims of the Massachusetts Bay colony which became a model of hard working, successful, and God fearing people in the seventeenth century. Although very much in the minority, evangelical orthodox leaders were important to the Constitutional generation. Samuel Adams of Massachusetts, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Patrick Henry of Virginia were staunch evangelical believers. John Witherspoon, who became the first president of Princeton, was a strong voice in Revolutionary America. These four and a few others represented a strict orthodox faith. Jonathan Edwards, (1703-58) also figured importantly, in bringing the orthodox faith into contact with the Age of Reason without sacrificing either. (Great Awakening - 1730-40)

It is interesting to note the importance John Calvin is given to the founding of our country by leading scholars. The German historian, Von Ranke, is considered to be one of the most profound scholars of modern times. He writes, "John Calvin was the virtual founder of America." The French historian, Taine, writes concerning Calvinists, "These men are the true heroes of England. They founded England, in spite of the corruption of the Stuarts...they founded Scotland; they founded the United States." The American historian, Bancroft, calls John Calvin "the father of America and he who will not honor the memory and respect the influence of Calvin, knows but little of the origin of American liberty."

Motley, the Dutch historian, writing in the **United Netherlands**, Volume 3, said, "The Calvinists founded the Commonwealths of England, of Holland and America." The French scholar and historian, D'Augibne, has written, "Calvin was the founder of the greatest of republics. The Pilgrims who left their country in the reign of James I and landing on the barren soil of New England, founded populous and mighty colonies, were his sons, his direct and legitimate sons; and that American nation which we have seen growing so rapidly boasts as its father the humble Reformer on the shore of Lake Leman." The importance of Calvin's influence is thus noted by historians of all lands. Two or three centuries ago not only Presbyterians were Calvinists, but all Anglicans, Episcopalians, Congregationalists and Baptists. So were also the Reformed of Holland, Germany, Switzerland, the Puritans of England, and the Huguenots of France. All of the pilgrims who came over on the Mayflower were Calvinists. Lorraine Boettner writes, "John Endicott, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony; John

Winthrop, the second governor; Thomas Hooker, the founder of Connecticut; John Davenport, the founder of the New Haven Colony; and Roger Williams, the founder of the Rhode Island Colony, were all Calvinists.” Four areas of American life are said to have been greatly influenced by Calvin; religion, political foundations, economic thought, and concepts of education. Deism sacrificed the theological teachings of historic Christianity in terms of belief in Christ as God, but those men who were deists recognized that morality is closely tied to religion as it is to politics. Hence, there was a general commitment to Biblical values. The Founding Father's generation was “Christian” in the sense that a Puritan conviction was present, though not predominant.

III. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS NOT FREEDOM FROM THE LAW OF GOD:

The secular world view concerning freedom equals independence and sovereignty, it is the thought that man can govern himself. Christian liberty, on the other hand, is harmony with the will of God, it is alignment with reality and calls for total dependence. Independence leads to idolatry, fornication, tempting Christ, murmuring and destruction. (I Corinthians 10:3-11)

The Scripture does say that we are no longer under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:14) What we have to understand here is what part of the law it is which no longer binds us. Grace does not cancel the law entirely for it is the law which expresses the unchangeable nature of God. In Romans 7:12 we read that the law is holy and good, and In Matthew 5:17 we read that Christ is to fulfill the law. These Scriptures make it plain that the law is still in effect. Actually, believers are no longer under the ceremonial law of the Old Testament. The nature of that law was temporary. (Hebrews 10:1) This is also taught in Hebrews 9:9-12, and in Hebrews 8:13. **Secondly**, Christians are no longer under the curse of the law or the condemnation of the law. (Romans 7:10; 8:1) The law is forever crying, “Curse you and die.” Christ has done that for us and we no longer are under the indictment. **Lastly**, we are rid of the law's compulsion. It is no longer an outward and foreign motif. It is a law written in the heart which we seek to fulfill willingly. Hebrews 8:10 reads, *“For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after these days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their minds, and write them in their hearts.”*

IV. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY IS NOT FREEDOM FROM OUTSIDE OBLIGATIONS:

Secular political freedom offers choices which are infinite and varied in terms of caring for man socially. The Christian aim is to edify and save the other man. (I Corinthians 9:19-22) The New Testament use of the word "*ought*" makes it clear that many external responsibilities are placed upon believers. For example, Christians ought to obey God. (Acts 5:29) They ought to pray. (Luke 18:1) They ought to support the weak. (Acts 20:35) Christians ought to forgive. (II-Corinthians 2:7) We ought to teach. (Hebrews 5:12) We ought to say "Lord willing." (James.4:17) See also I Timothy 4:12-13; I Corinthians 10:23-32 and Romans 14:13-22. We are not free from responsibility to others. There are also many commands which apply to the Christian. We are commanded not to be slothful in business (Romans 12:11). We are commanded to give to the poor (Romans 12:13). We are commanded to be subject to the higher powers (Romans 13:1). We are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Hebrews 10:25). These are but a few. It is evident that Christian liberty involves certain obligations. The choices are not unlimited.

V. CHRISTIAN FREEDOM IS NOT BEING ABLE TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT IN ONE'S OWN EYES:

Political freedom is a chimera, a creature of the imagination. It cannot maintain itself within history. Collectively, governments of this world tend to be evil taskmasters, the belief is that man can govern himself. The Bible frankly assumes that man cannot govern himself individually or collectively. Christian liberty is not license to do what you want to do, it is the ability to do what you ought to do. It is not freedom from external control. We are to be subject to civil authority (Romans 13:1). We are to be subject to those who are over us in the Lord. (I Thessalonians 5:12) We are to submit ourselves to one another. (Ephesians 5:21) Paul refers to himself many times as the prisoner of the Lord. (Ephesians 4:1) He did not consider his freedom in Christ to be absolute freedom. Rather, he sets forth the paradox that in slavery to Christ he is free from the power of sin (Romans 6:14-22) and free to submit himself to Christ and to others. It is important as Christians that we realize our place in the plan of God. We are to submit ourselves to the authority of Christ and to the authority He has vested within society and within the church. A train is only free as long as it remains on the track. A fish is only free as long as it remains in the water. Christians are only free as they are willing to abide in the place wherein God has called them. This is freedom to become in Christ all that God wants us to become.

Ephesians 4:13 instructs, *"Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."* Thus we are free to become the person we were born to be as opposed to doing anything we may want to do.

VI. CHRISTIAN LIBERTY HAS AS ITS AIM THE GLORY OF GOD:

The secular aim in political freedom is to secure happiness for the greatest number of people. The Christian view or aim is to glorify God. (I Corinthians 10:31-33) Christian freedom is the freedom to act according to a new nature God has placed within us. It is the freedom to perform our responsibilities joyfully as unto the Lord. Impelled by love rather than legalism, and by the Holy Spirit we are urged to *"do all in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."* *"And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men."* (Colossians 3:17, 23) Surely, one of the great concepts to which the Bible speaks is that of freedom. The Bible clearly proclaims our freedom in Christ. True freedom is harmony with the will of God.

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,
July 2, 1978