

# TRUE FREEDOM

## A scriptural meditation

By THOMAS DEIDUN

**F**OR THE pagan world, to be free is to be independent. Judaism and Christianity teach that true freedom is total *dependence* on a Creator who graciously bestows on man a share in his own dominion. We find this idea already in the Old Testament, even if the actual terminology of freedom is not yet used to express it. To be made in the image and likeness of God means, on the one hand, to depend on him entirely and, on the other, to participate in his lordship over creation (cf Gen 1,26ff; Ps 8). By refusing to depend on his Creator, man deprives himself of the freedom for which he is created (cf Gen 3,17ff; Rom 1,21ff).

The history of salvation is the process of man's being restored to a liberating dependence on God. Israel's deliverance from Egypt consists not simply in her being rescued from the 'house of slavery' but also, and much more, in her accepting Yahweh's sovereignty at Sinai. The Exodus is release *for service* (cf Exod 9,1). To describe this 'change of masters' Judaism used the language of liberation: Israel passed from the 'yoke of iron' to the 'yoke of the Torah', from servitude to freedom. Man is truly free when he allows himself to be ruled by God.

The course of Israel's history had shown that this great act of liberation awaited consummation in the future. In the 'days of the Messiah' God would again intervene to render Israel's freedom complete and definitive. This would mean political emancipation and the in-gathering of the scattered sons of Israel. But it would mean also (indeed, it presupposed) purification from sin and a renewed obedience: 'Your iniquity will be expiated, congregation of Sion: you will be liberated by the Messiah and the high priest Elijah; never again will the Lord send you into exile'.<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, the instrument of this final liberation would be Israel's observance of the Law. The promise of the New Covenant (Jer 31,31ff), as Judaism understood it, was the promise of renewed fidelity. God himself would inculcate the Law ('I will write it upon their hearts') to secure that practical recognition of his sovereignty ('they shall all know me') which brings true freedom.

*The 'change of masters' in Paul*

St Paul shares this basic idea of freedom, as is especially clear from Romans 6,16ff:

Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and having been set free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness. . . . When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. . . . But now . . . you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God. . . .

But this passage also shows that the decisive factor in Paul's understanding of freedom is uniquely christian. The basis of the freedom he proclaims is his faith in the crucified and risen Christ as the one in whom God had already re-established his rule over creation, and hence as the one in whom it was now already possible for all men to 'live to God' in life-giving, liberating obedience:

For we know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6,9ff).

*Christ the liberated one*

Christians are already free because through faith and baptism they share in the eschatological freedom of the risen Christ. It is because *he* is supremely free that we too, by submitting to him, obtain freedom. The author of the Fourth Gospel seems to be alluding to this in the language of symbol when he describes the 'linen cloths lying there' in the empty tomb (Jn 20,5f), which recall, by contrast, the bandages which *bound* the hands and feet of Lazarus. As the one who through his resurrection is now eternally free, Jesus can give the command, 'Unbind him and let him go!' (Jn 11,44; cf 8,32.36).

Paul never describes the risen Christ as the liberated one. But that he thought of him as such is abundantly clear from the parallelism expressed in Romans 6,9ff between Christ's experience and our liberation which is based on it. If we are called to share in the 'glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom 8,21), it is because we are destined to be assimilated to the risen Christ as the liberated one

and the prototype of our liberation. For he is the 'first-born among many brethren' (Rom 8,29).

*The new creation*

It has been said that in his understanding of salvation Paul begins with the solution (Christ) and then discovers the problem (man's plight). Though this does not say everything, it does help to explain the depth of Paul's insight into man's need of liberation and his altogether novel view of what liberation involved. It was his encounter with the crucified and risen Christ as *God's* answer to man's plight which enabled him to see that all men, Jew and Gentile alike, were inescapably subject to the power of sin, and simply incapable of an obedience that could restore them to freedom; that their liberation required not just a renewed fidelity but a *new creation*, such as no human endeavour, however well-intentioned, could ever effect; and that not even the mosaic law, however efficaciously inculcated (even by God himself!) was of any avail for man's liberation, but only the miracle of grace which moulds man anew in obedience to God and sets him free from *himself*.

Such an act of grace, which Paul believed to be already manifest and operative in the Christ-event, reveals that all other means of liberation — including the mosaic law — are illusory and irrelevant: '... if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come!' (2 Cor 5,17). 'For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' (Gal 6,15). Not the Law of Moses, but only the risen Christ, is capable of creating Easter in the heart of sinful man (cf Gal 3,21b; 1 Cor 15,45b).

*The bondage of existence without Christ (Rom 7-8)*

To go deeper into what, in Paul's view, is involved in the Christian's liberation, we turn to chapters 7 and 8 of Romans. This letter contains what is arguably the last and certainly the most carefully meditated exposition of Paul's teaching (it has been described as his 'theological confession' and 'last will and testament'), and chapter 8 is a climactic proclamation of his gospel in terms of liberation from the bondage of unredeemed existence, portrayed (as is most commonly acknowledged) in the previous chapter.<sup>2</sup> Here we have the most balanced synthesis of Paul's message of christian liberty, in the light of which his other statements on the subject can be viewed in true perspective.

We must first of all specify what Paul here considers the Christian to have been liberated *from*. Many interpreters (one suspects, with Galatians not very far from their thoughts) have little hesitation in answering, 'from the mosaic law', which is sometimes understood to stand for everything which modern liberal thought finds repugnant and destructive. Indeed, some see in the expression 'the law of sin and death' (8,2) a designation of the mosaic law. But this expression is almost certainly intended to refer to the 'law of sin' which, in the image used in 7,23, is not the mosaic law but the power of sin existing 'in my members' — that is, sin itself 'dwelling' in man and dominating his personality (cf 7,17.20).

In fact, the mosaic law as such (as an external legal régime) fades into the background in the description of man's bondage in 7,14-25. Here Paul is no longer concerned with the Jew as such, but with adamitic man; and if the mosaic law remains in the background, it does so only as a concrete historical example of God's holy demand as it impinges on the conscience of fallen man, Gentile and Jew alike (cf 7,22f).

Certainly, the impact of this demand, which in 7,7-13 is said to have 'given sin its opportunity' (by provoking rebellion), plays no small part in man's continuing plight as portrayed in 7,14-25. For it requires obedience without conferring the power to obey, making liberation desirable but not attainable. But the real enemy is not this demand (which Paul calls 'holy, just and good'), but the power of sin. It is from this power that Paul will declare the Christian free (8,2), not from the mosaic law seen as the epitome of all that we moderns regard as 'illiberal'. In fact, in his proclamation of freedom (8,2) Paul does not even mention the Law; only in the following verse does he return to it, with a passing reference to its ineffectiveness.<sup>3</sup>

### *The bondage of self*

The freedom Paul celebrates (in 8,2) is freedom from the compulsion of sin. But we get a more comprehensive view of man's helplessness without Christ when we see that the basic reason why the Law (as God's mere demand) is incapable of setting man free is to be sought not in the Law itself but, as Paul puts it, in the 'flesh' (8,3). Paul begins his description of man's bondage by speaking of the 'flesh' (7,14), and he speaks of it again when he sums up that description in 8,5-8. It is because unredeemed man is 'immersed in flesh' (*sarkinos*) that he is held in bondage to sin (7,14), for the

instinct of the 'flesh' is 'hostility towards God'; it 'does not submit to God's demand, nor has it the power to do so'; 'those who are in the flesh are powerless to please God' (8,7f). Man's liberation from the power of sin, then, also entails a release from the impotence of the 'flesh'.

We must here recall that in Paul's usage the 'flesh' has several connotations, and that even the one intended here is far wider than most English translations suggest. It designates that dimension of man's existence which leaves him open to sin — not only to 'carnal' sin (which for Paul was characteristic of the Gentiles), but also to the sin of pride, whereby man 'boasts of' (relies on) his own resources, giving himself the credit which belongs to God alone (in Paul's eyes, the typical sin of the pious Jew). In either case, the 'flesh' is the seat of man's radical egoism, which impels him to make self the criterion of his existence.

Because man is curved in upon himself in this fashion, God's mere demand can never set him free: it can only drive him deeper into himself. But now, Paul jubilantly declares in Romans 8,3, what God's mere demand could never do, *God himself* has done through the cross of Christ and (though Paul does not feel the need to repeat it here) through the Spirit imparted by the risen Christ. As Paul had put it in 5,5, 'the love of God — the power of God's own loving — has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us'.

The purpose of God's deed in Christ, as Paul explains in 8,4, was 'that the Law's demand (God's eternal claim on man's obedience and love) might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit'. Paul does not say '*by* us' but '*in* us': the power of the life-giving Spirit ('the law of the Spirit of life', 8,2) *creates* in us a new obedience, shattering the bondage of sin and releasing us from the futility of the 'flesh'.

### *The New Covenant*

Some interpreters have observed, surely with good reason, that Romans 8,2ff celebrate the fulfilment of the promise of the New Covenant as we have it in the pages of Jeremiah (31,31ff) and Ezekiel (36,24ff).<sup>4</sup> God fulfils this promise not simply by inculcating the mosaic law, as Judaism had hoped, but by implanting his will in the core of man's personality. When Paul speaks of the '*phronēma* of the Spirit' in 8,6, he means that the mind and will of the Spirit (cf 8,27) have now become the Christian's own. 'The Spirit founds a

new will, whose origin is not within man but within the salvation-deed of God — a will that has definite direction, free from the 'flesh' and in battle against it, guided by the demand of God'.<sup>5</sup> This is the marvel of the New Covenant and the basis of christian freedom.

All this is magnificently expressed in Galatians 2,20: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me'. When Christ becomes the well-spring of a new personality, energizing all our activity at its very source, we are free from everything that is not God, including ourselves, and, with Christ, we 'live to God' (cf Rom 6,10; Gal 3,19).

#### *An asceticism of docility to the Spirit*

Obviously God cannot create in us a new obedience without requiring us to make it our own. The gift of freedom entails a demand. Paul's assertion of freedom in Romans 8,1-11, therefore, forms the basis of an exhortation to obedience: 'So then, brethren, we are under obligation . . .' (8,12). Freedom commits us to a life-long mortification of self: we must 'put to death the deeds of the body' (8,13b). The purpose of this self-denial is not that we may *achieve* freedom, but that we may give full scope to the freedom we already possess. This is why Paul stresses that the self-denial must take place in the power of the Spirit (8,13b), for it consists in allowing ourselves to be 'led by the Spirit' (cf 8,14). Christian freedom implies an asceticism of 'passive' surrender to the Spirit of Christ, who leads us, as sons, into communion of life with the Father:

Ah yes, the God of consolation and peace gently draws to himself those who surrender to him — and certainly he does so without delay and in the most perfect manner when resistance on our part has ceased completely, when we are truly passive, truly dead to ourselves. . . . It is a fact that when, for the love of Christ, a man ceases to think with his own mind, Christ thinks in him; and when a man ceases to act with his own strength, Christ acts in him.<sup>6</sup>

Christian freedom means total assimilation to the one who, because he *emptied* himself, was highly exalted (Phil 2,6-11).

#### *To be free is to love*

If freedom is surrender to the Spirit of Christ, this means that it must be, and can only be, exercised in selfless love. The Spirit sets man free by fulfilling in his heart the 'Law's demand' (Rom 8,4);

but the Law's demand is fulfilled in christian love (cf 13,8ff). The love Paul means is the love of one another and of all men, which is God's own love 'poured out in our hearts'. Love *alone* does not seek itself (cf 1 Cor 13,5). It frees us for commitment to others: 'Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another' (Gal 5,13).<sup>7</sup>

*The Church: dwelling-place of freedom*

The Christian is not freed in isolation. There is no such thing as a solitary freedom, as there is no such thing as a solitary love. The Church, as the community in which the liberating power of Jesus's death and resurrection is at work in its members' mutual self-giving, is the *dwelling-place* of true freedom.<sup>8</sup> Through their love for one another and for all men, the Church's members are being brought to a condition of permanent consecration to God (cf 1 Thess 3,12f), which is perfect freedom. The Church becomes more free not to the extent that it is conformed to a human ideal of freedom, but to the extent that each of its members, whatever his role in the community, denies himself and opens his heart to the almighty power of inconspicuous, daily service. Karl Barth's observation that 'the freedom of the Christian is the freedom to play his part in the upbuilding of the community'<sup>9</sup> does not reveal its full wealth of meaning except in the light of Paul's teaching that only unassuming love builds up the community (cf 1 Cor 8,1). Freedom is for the increase of such love in the Church. Without it, *everything* else is pointless (cf 1 Cor 13,1-3).<sup>10</sup>

*The freedom that transcends the world's agenda*

From what has been said it is clear that christian freedom is not the culmination of a natural process of human growth, but God's gift of grace, hence altogether new and surprising. Certainly, christian freedom has its repercussions on all levels of human experience. But it cannot be reduced to, nor adequately expressed in, the categories which belong to that experience. Freedom, for Paul, is a soteriological category. It is never to be identified with any of the values (however noble) deriving from politics, psychology or sociology. True freedom is not 'man's noblest creation', and no more than the cross itself can it be regarded as the high-point of a process of 'humanization' (not, that is, without a profound acknowledgment of the wisdom of God's foolishness, to which, however, human wisdom has never been particularly amenable). Christian freedom *transcends* all the forms of freedom to which the world

aspires, and all the forms of bondage which the world abhors (cf 1 Cor 7,22). Precisely for that reason is it *true* freedom.<sup>11</sup>

### *Freedom in the world*

This does not mean that the Christian is unconcerned with the horrendous reality of political and social injustice and other forms of oppression which deprive people of their human dignity and freedom. The Spirit of Christ does not free man from being human, and 'nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo' in the Christian's heart.<sup>12</sup> The Christian is *obliged* to combat injustice, and hence to promote human freedom. But that does not mean that true freedom does not altogether transcend all social and political objectives, or that the christian message of liberation can be reduced to a 'liberation theology' understood in social or political terms. When all 'human rights' have been vindicated, the world still has to be saved.

### *Liberation and liberalization*

Something similar must be said about the present-day quest for greater liberty and flexibility in the Church. When it is inspired by a love for truth and a desire to increase mutual esteem, this quest is surely laudable. The Church needs constantly to renew its attitudes and practices at every level, if it is to demonstrate the great reverence it has for each individual. In some areas of Church life this will involve no small measure of liberalization. We must do what we can to promote it. At the same time, we must not give the impression (by sheer quantity of talk on the subject) that liberalization is the centre of the gospel. Liberation in Paul's sense is not synonymous with liberalization in ours, even if circumstances are readily conceivable in which the two are related. The 'unsearchable riches of Christ' are not exhausted in a programme of ecclesiastical reform.

### *Eloquent omissions in Romans 7*

It is significant that in the classic description of man's enslavement in Romans 7 (intended as a foil to the solemn assertion of christian freedom in the following chapter) no mention is made of the factors which in modern debate are commonly assumed to be among the essential constituents of the bondage from which man (and the Church) has to be freed. There is no hint of legalism or external structures, and nothing about tradition or authority inhibiting the spontaneity of the free spirit, restricting individual



responsibility or discouraging pluralism in thought and practice. It cannot be that Paul has no interest in such matters, since on at least some of them he elsewhere expresses some strongly felt convictions. But here, at the climax of his 'theological confession', he is content to speak of the bondage of *indwelling sin* and man's radical incapacity to yield to God's holy demand. As we noted earlier, we look in vain in Romans 7-8 for some basis for the equation 'christian freedom = freedom from the mosaic law (= everything that the good liberal deplores)'.

### *Freedom in Galatians*

It is true that in Galatians Paul defines christian freedom as freedom from the mosaic law (5,1: 'yoke of servitude'). It is also true that he sees the mosaic law here as a senseless régime of ritual legalism (4,10; 5,3). But Galatians is a polemical document, written to combat an extremely peculiar situation. One cannot hope to find there the sort of balanced synthesis that one finds in a letter like Romans, where Paul is at liberty to call his own tunes and expound his essential theological concerns. It is obvious that to communities which are in critical danger of addiction to ritual observance (cf Gal 4,10) Paul is going to present Christianity precisely as a liberation from all that sort of thing. But this does not mean that he is here expounding his essential understanding of christian freedom. A pastor who knows that members of his community are in danger of addiction to gambling may well present the christian message in a form which he considers relevant to the situation; but that will not necessarily go to the heart of his understanding of the christian message!

But even apart from this, Paul's basic objection to the mosaic law even in Galatians is not that it stands for legalism but that it purports to be a *way of salvation* replacing or supplementing the Gospel. That is why it is inimical to the 'truth of the Gospel' (Gal 2,5.14). It encloses man in himself, instead of opening him to the Spirit. The Christian has broken with it, as he has broken with everything which is not instinct with the Spirit (cf Gal 5,2-6; Rom 7,1-6). In this sense, it is one of the constituents of the bondage from which the Christian is now free.<sup>13</sup>

### *Was Paul a liberal?*

No doubt Paul would subscribe unreservedly to many of the points of view propounded by present-day liberal Christians. He

would reject legalism and authoritarianism as passionately as any modern. At the same time, some of his positions seem outrageously illiberal (e.g. no pastor nowadays would get away with a statement like 1 Cor 11,16!). His thought is complex and paradoxical. It is all too easy to read into it our own concerns and problems. Perhaps the most we can say is that Paul appears to have been sufficiently liberal to reject any kind of uncritical conformism, whether of the conservative or liberal kind.

It has not been the purpose of this article to align Paul with one tendency or another, but only to suggest that the concerns of modern debate do not necessarily go to the heart of his message of christian liberty, and may even prevent us from doing so. This does not mean that he would not have shared at least some of these concerns. Nor is his message of liberty unrelated to them. On the contrary, it affords a criterion which every discussion of liberty must ultimately be subject, and which Paul consistently applied in 1 Corinthians and elsewhere: that no liberty is an end in itself except the liberty to love.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Targum on Lamentations, 4,22.

<sup>2</sup> A minority protestant opinion still holds that ch 7 describes the situation of the Christian. This is extremely unlikely: cf 7,14: 'sold under sin'.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller exegetical discussion, see Deidun, T. J.: *New Covenant Morality in Paul (Analecta Biblica 89)*, pp 194-203.

<sup>4</sup> Cf especially Lyonnet, S.: 'St Paul: Liberty and Law' in *The Bridge* IV (1962), pp 229-51.

<sup>5</sup> Bultmann, R.: *Theology of the New Testament*, I, p 336.

<sup>6</sup> Rosmini, A.: *Epistolario completo*, II, p 321.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Bornkamm, G.: *Das Ende des Gesetzes*, pp 133-38.

<sup>8</sup> Küng, H.: *The Church and Freedom*, pp 9-18.

<sup>9</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, III, ii, pp 305f.

<sup>10</sup> 'Ubi ergo charitas est, quid est quod possit deesse? Ubi autem non est, quid est quod possit prodesse?' (St Augustine).

<sup>11</sup> Cf Schlier, H. in *Geist und Leben* 43 (1970), p 432.

<sup>12</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf Deidun, T. J.: *op. cit.*, pp 251-58.