

FREEDOM AND SLAVERY IN PAULINE USAGE

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TO ATTEMPT to evaluate the attitudes towards freedom and slavery evinced by St Paul in his letters is to be confronted with a set of special problems. One quickly gains an impression of the presence of paradox in much of what the apostle to the greek-speaking peoples has written on this theme, which our minds instinctively associate with the Greeks. A little reflection, however, upon the significance of certain paradoxical elements, discloses the vast distance which separates the present-day problematic with respect to these issues and the viewpoint towards them adopted by St Paul. And it may well appear a conundrum to our present-day mentality that this great apostle, despite his intense awareness that his apostolate was directed by his Lord's command to the greek-speaking world,¹ should never have exploited the values inherent in those types of liberty so highly prized in the ambient hellenic culture in which he preached the gospel. And this, notwithstanding his acknowledged indebtedness to the Greeks.²

Some problems arising from pauline usage

Is it of any consequence that, while the Paul of Acts is represented by Luke as setting a premium on his claim to be 'a citizen of no mean city',³ on his status as a roman citizen,⁴ on his incontrovertible right of appeal to the imperial tribunals of Rome,⁵ the 'historical Paul' of the letters displays no such interest or pretensions? To be sure, he jealously guards 'the freedom we possess in Christ Jesus',⁶ as may be grasped from his lively retort to his antagonists, the corinthian enthusiasts. Picking up their slogan, 'Everything is possible for me', he warns them severely against the dangers inherent in the subtle enslavement to which they have exposed themselves.⁷ In his refutation of the errors he perceives in the attitudes of these opponents, Paul can cry, 'Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?'⁸ On the

¹ Rom 15, 15-16.

² Rom 1, 14.

³ Acts 21, 30.

⁴ Acts 16, 37.

⁵ Acts 25, 11.

⁶ Gal 2, 4.

⁷ 1 Cor 6, 12b.

⁸ 1 Cor 9, 1.

other hand, he will insist with the Galatians that as one commissioned to proclaim the unique 'gospel of Christ', he can rightly regard himself only as 'slave of Christ'.⁹ This self-imposed sobriquet is clearly regarded by Paul as a title of honour, although it is almost certainly not based upon the paradigm 'slave of God', an honorific designation bestowed on the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, later adopted by certain post-pauline writers.¹⁰ Yet for all that, when one recalls the intimacy of Paul's intensely personal attachment to the risen Jesus,¹¹ it seems paradoxical that he should have had recourse to the slave-master antithesis to express such a deeply loving relationship.¹² The johannine use of the term 'beloved' to mark the progress in the disciples' adherence to Jesus appears to be preferable.¹³

In this connection, a curious bias for 'servant' instead of 'slave' in the tradition of the great english bibles should be remarked upon. From Wycliffe and Tyndale, through the great classic by King James's men or the Douay-Rheims version, down to the present day, translators with very few exceptions have manifested an evident distaste for 'slave' and 'slavery'. Cruden could discover but a single instance each in Old and New Testament of 'slave', when he produced his celebrated *Concordance*. While the Revised Standard Version has striven to redress the balance, it has not succeeded in eliminating the prejudice for 'servant' instead of the more correct 'slave'. And the New English Bible, like the Knox version before it, has returned an overwhelming majority vote for 'servant'.

One unfortunate consequence of this conspiracy to suppress mention of slaves and slavery on the part of the makers of our english versions was noted by the distinguished hellenist and translator, the late Dr Edgar J. Goodspeed. 'Their fastidiousness has led readers of the King James, for example, far astray; modern political scientists have gained from it the impression that Paul says nothing at all about slaves and slavery, and cared nothing about them'.¹⁴

Paul and 'The Four Freedoms'

Has Paul anything to say relevant to the 'four freedoms' – of religion, of thought/speech, from fear, from want – which constitute the theme of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted

⁹ Gal 1, 7. 10.

¹⁰ Isai 46, 27; Ezek 34, 23; Tit 1, 1; 1 Pet 2, 16; Apoc 1, 1.

¹¹ Gal 2, 20.

¹² Phil 1, 1; Rom 1, 1; Col 1, 7.

¹³ Jn 15, 15.

¹⁴ Goodspeed, Edgar J.: *Problems of New Testament Translation* (Chicago, 1945), p 139.

by the United Nations in 1948? The very posing of such a question may disclose the difference which separates the attitude of twentieth-century man from the pauline views on slavery and freedom. Paul does speak of 'freedom from fear', but in a religious and christian context. 'We have not received a spirit of slavery (leading us back) again into fear'.¹⁵ The antithesis of such a fear-inducing spirit, be it noted, is 'the spirit of adoptive sonship'. In one instance, at least, Paul did campaign for 'freedom from want' in the interests of the Jerusalem poor. He appeals to the Corinthians to contribute to his relief fund.¹⁶ As for himself, he tells the Philippians, 'I have learned the secret, in any and all conditions, of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of going without. I can do anything through him who gives me the power'.¹⁷

It is instructive to recall that in regard to 'freedom of speech', that much vaunted civic and political ideal of the Greeks (*parrhesia*), Paul gives the term a new and christian content. It comes to signify for him his apostolic freedom in the preaching of the gospel.¹⁸

Was 'freedom of religion' a concern of Paul? Something of this human right may be thought to lie behind the contention in Galatians, since these former pagan Celts were subjected to moral pressure by Paul's judaizing adversaries. Yet it would be difficult to imagine that the deep anger Paul displays throughout this letter could be assuaged by the suggestion that these young christians be given the option of practising circumcision or other jewish observances, if they so desired. 'Now that you know God, or rather, have become known by God, how can you return to these impotent and bankrupt elements, and desire to become their slaves all over again?'¹⁹

If these examples serve to awaken us to the realization that 'freedom' in the pauline letters is always given a derived meaning, and that the term habitually exhibits a christian sense, the same may be said in only a slightly less degree, as K. H. Rengstorf notes, of 'slavery'. 'It is only with some reservation that one can speak of a secular usage of the word-group in the NT. In most cases, if one excludes the passages in which it occurs in religious connections, it is used improperly, that is, in figures of speech and comparisons, especially in Jesus's parables'.²⁰

In the present study we propose to inquire firstly into the meaning

¹⁵ Rom 8, 15.

¹⁶ 2 Cor 8, 14.

¹⁷ Phil 4, 12ff.

¹⁸ 1 Thess 2, 2; 2 Cor 3, 12; 7, 4.

¹⁹ Gal 4, 9; 5, 7ff.

²⁰ Art 'Doulos, etc', in G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol II, p 270.

of freedom in St Paul, observing the semantic development undergone by this characteristically greek notion under the impact on the apostle of Jesus's teaching as well as that of his own apostolic experience. In the second place, we shall investigate Paul's use of the terminology related to the institution of slavery, his attitude towards that institution, and the (to us strange) suitability in his eyes of 'slave' as a vehicle of expression for relationships which he regards as of paramount importance in his exposition of the christian faith.

Paul's divergence from pagan greek usage

To avoid misunderstanding the reality which St Paul denotes by the term freedom in his letters, it is of great importance to appreciate from the outset that the ideals of freedom set forth by the greek-speaking peoples at various stages of their history have left little if any trace upon pauline thought. In the theologically significant statements Paul makes concerning freedom, he employs the word in a quite new and christian sense. Before considering the reasons for the profound differences which separate the pauline from the hellenic view of freedom, it may be helpful to recall that in his allusions to the distinctions between the slave and the freeman obtaining in contemporary hellenistic society, Paul asserts unequivocally that this antithesis, from the christian viewpoint, has become meaningless. Slave, no less than freeman, has been 'baptized by one Spirit into one body',²¹ with the result that 'there is no . . . slave and freeman . . . since all of you are one Man in Christ Jesus'.²² In the context, for 'the new man, who is being continually remade anew with a view to perfect knowledge after the image of his Creator' – the totally unprecedented reality produced by baptism – there is no . . . slave, freeman: Christ is everything and in us all'.²³

Why was it that Paul discarded the traditional greek notions of freedom as inadequate for expressing the effects of Christ's redemptive work? A satisfactory answer to this question is the more imperative at the present day simply because our western civilization, which rightly sets such store by liberty and democracy, considers these a precious heritage bequeathed by ancient Greece to our modern world. An uncritical assessment of the various realities that lay behind the words for freedom in the cultural and political

²¹ 1 Cor 12, 13.

²² Gal 3, 26.

²³ Col 3, 10-11; cf Eph 6, 8.

life of Greece can only create a dangerous confusion in the mind of today's christian between those realities and the christian liberty of which Paul speaks.

In the golden age of the democratic greek city-state it was actually the universal acceptance of slavery as a political, social, economic institution that enabled the citizen to define his own status as a freeman. The greek thought of his freedom in terms of certain civic and legal rights as a member of the commonwealth. To be autonomous before the law was to be master of oneself, of one's own mobility, emancipated from the constraints of tyranny whether foreign or domestic. This view obtained still in the hellenistic society in which Paul found himself as a missionary of the gospel, although by this time the slave had acquired considerable, if limited, rights at law. In first-century Greece the slave could own property, possess money (some were extremely wealthy), live apart from the master, seek employment elsewhere than in the master's household (some rose to positions of eminence in city-government). Yet, for all the riches the slave might amass, for all the political and even social influence he might wield, the slave remained basically at the disposal of the master; and his status in turn exercised, if only by contrast, a determining influence upon the greek political concept of liberty. Recognition of this state of affairs should alert us to the necessity of contrasting such freedom with that which Paul proposed as part of the gospel message.

In addition to this political sense of the word freedom – its original connotation among the Greeks – there came into usage in the hellenistic era a radically different philosophical understanding of the term. It will be remembered that the hellenistic age had witnessed the decline in the greek city-states of the traditional political democracy, a fringe benefit of the conquests of Alexander the Great. This new and radical conception of personal liberty, largely the creation of the cynic-stoic philosophers, proclaimed self-knowledge as the key to the mystery of man's existence in the cosmos. True freedom was now deemed to be achieved by the recognition of what cannot, as well as what can, fall under a man's control.

Accordingly, the successful leading of a truly human life came to be regarded as contingent on man's capacity to liberate the self from those passions to which the self was inevitably subjected from outside in the cosmos. Freedom has in fact become identified with impassibility. The slings and arrows that beset man's existence in this world cannot touch the totally free man, because by his own

efforts he has put himself beyond their reach.

This characteristically stoic idea of liberty will be found to have made even less impression on Paul's thought than the classical political concept created by the democratic greeks of an earlier age. And this for the very good reason that it was diametrically opposed to the evangelical paradox, already set forth in the teaching of Jesus himself.

Paul and the teaching of Jesus

On the testimony of our evangelists, Jesus had taught that 'if a man desires to come after me, he must say No to himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever desires to save his life will destroy it, while whoever will destroy his life for my sake and the gospel will save it'.²⁴ The bankruptcy of the stoic search for the true self cannot be more pellucidly asserted. As Heinrich Schlier has noted, on the view of the gospel, 'self-preservation by retreat into inwardness is merely a way of losing one's real self'.²⁵

That Paul had thoroughly assimilated this paradoxical teaching of Jesus and allowed it to determine his own conception of christian freedom is evident from his testimony regarding his personal conduct in the course of his apostolate. In his polemic against the aberrations of the emancipated enthusiasts in the corinthian community, Paul leaves his readers in no doubt as to his high esteem of the freedom in Christ he possesses. Yet he resorts to paradox to clarify his view of it.

I am free and acknowledge no master. Yet I have made myself a slave to all men, in order that I may win more and more . . . In a word, I have become everything in turn to men of every kind, to use every possible means to save some of them. Everything I do, I do for the sake of the gospel, to make it a part of myself.²⁶

Paul once more exhibits his awareness of Jesus's teaching about the delusion of the quest for the self, when he attempts to free his 'bewitched Galatians' from their fascination with the false gospel of the judaizing missionaries.²⁷ 'Christ has set us free for freedom'.²⁸ He gravely warns his converts that their intended submission to

²⁴ Mk 8, 34-35; cf Jn 12, 24.

²⁵ Art 'Eleutheros, etc', in G. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol II, p 496.

²⁶ 1 Cor 9, 19-23.

²⁷ Gal 3, 1; 4, 24-31.

²⁸ Gal 5, 1.

circumcision, for the illusory conviction that it was necessary for salvation, is tantamount to a denial of the orthodox faith in the efficacy of Christ's saving death. 'For us, it is upon the work of the Spirit through faith that we base our hope . . . What counts is faith that is operative through love'.²⁹ This text mentions the three vital elements in Paul's conception of christian freedom: the holy Spirit, faith, and love. We shall return presently to the role of the Spirit as chief artificer of liberty in Christ. For the moment it is enough to recall the lapidary statement with which Paul concludes his celebrated contrast between what he dubbed the 'old covenant' and the 'new covenant', when writing to the Corinthians: 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'.³⁰

When in Galatians Paul returns to the theme of freedom after a brief digression, he observes: 'As for you, brothers, your vocation was a call to freedom. Only do not make your freedom a base of operations for the natural self. No! through love become slaves to one another'.³¹ Here we meet again the same paradox characteristic of Jesus's gospel, but now transposed in terms of slavery and freedom. To this Paul immediately adds another element, also dominant in Jesus's teaching: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'.³² And Paul continues by pointing to the Spirit as agent of this new 'freedom-slavery'. 'Now if you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to law'.³³ On this view, to live under the guidance of the Spirit is to achieve that 'freedom for which Christ has set us free'. He gives a more positive description of this christian liberty a few lines further on, when he enumerates what he terms 'the fruits of the Spirit'.³⁴ Nothing, it will be noted, could be further removed from the cynic-stoic notion of freedom as flight into inwardness than this pauline sketch of 'our freedom that we hold in Christ Jesus',³⁵ based as it is upon the categorical denial of 'the natural self' and the transcending of it by the aid of the Spirit.

In his letter to the roman community, Paul makes it clear that this christian freedom has its source in the saving death and resurrection of Christ. It must be admitted that, with his sensitivity for the values of Old Testament typology, Paul apparently found it more congenial to describe that event in terms of Israel's exodus from Egypt: her 'redemption'.³⁶ To this exodus-vocabulary also belongs

²⁹ Gal 5, 4ff.

³² Gal 5, 14.

³⁵ Gal. 2, 4.

³⁰ 2 Cor 3, 17.

³³ Gal 5, 16-18.

³⁶ 1 Cor 1, 30; Rom 3, 24; Col 1, 14; Eph 1, 7. 14; 4, 30.

³¹ Gal 5, 13.

³⁴ Gal 5, 22ff.

'acquisition';³⁷ probably also 'ransom';³⁸ possibly, too, 'buy for a price'.³⁹

And yet, because, in his apostolate, Paul was chiefly engaged with greek-speaking peoples, for whom the notion of liberty, in both the political and philosophical sense, continued to exercise a certain fascination, he was obliged to evolve a christian conception of freedom, if only to correct certain misapprehensions of it among his converts. Yet it is probably significant that Paul employs the terminology of freedom to any notable degree in only three of his letters. In First Corinthians he is chiefly concerned to correct those gross exaggerations in the area of liberty which an excessive religious enthusiasm had bred in some christians. In Galatians, he is refuting his judaizing antagonists who were succeeding in inducing these former pagans to restrict, if not abandon completely, their freedom in Christ, by accepting 'another gospel'.⁴⁰ Finally, when he writes to the roman Church to present his apostolic credentials in view of his projected visit, Paul – after a protracted period of controversy – serenely exposes his understanding of the gospel, at whose centre stands 'Jesus our Lord, who was handed over for our sins and raised for our justification'.⁴¹ It is in Romans, then, that we may expect to discover the definitive pauline view of christian freedom, which is basically liberation from the mosaic law. It is of paramount importance, however, to realize that in Paul's eyes the law has become a symbol of 'the present shape of this world which is passing off the stage'.⁴² Its passing, 'when the fulness of time was come', signifies for him the coming of age of the human race, its liberation from the thrall of those 'guardians and trustees' that had conspired to reduce man's status as 'heir' of God to the level of a slave.⁴³ Thus for Paul, freedom from the law of Moses comes to mean liberation from sin and death, from the self and the flight towards inwardness, and ultimately freedom from all régime of law.

Freedom from the Mosaic Law

Two statements summarize, in almost epigrammatic style, Paul's attitude towards the christian's liberation from the law of Moses. The first occurs in Galatians:

³⁷ 1 Thess 5, 9; 2 Thess 2, 14; Eph 1, 14.

³⁸ Gal 3, 13; 4, 5.

⁴¹ Rom 4, 24-25.

³⁹ 1 Cor 6, 20; 7, 23.

⁴² 1 Cor 7, 31b.

⁴⁰ Gal 1, 6.

⁴³ Gal 4, 1-2.

Through the law I died to the law, in order that I might live for God; that is to say, I was crucified together with Christ. It is no longer I that live: Christ lives in me. With regard to my present bodily existence, I live my life by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and handed himself over for my sake.⁴⁴

Here Paul thinks of the christian baptismal experience; and once again we meet the paradox of the gospel. The beginning of christian life is of necessity marked by ritual dying.⁴⁵ Since Paul knows Christ died 'accursed' by the law, that can only mean that the curse of the law died with him.⁴⁶ In Romans, Paul states this truth more positively. 'As a consequence, my brothers, you also have been put to death to the law through the body of Christ, so that you belong to another, to him who was raised from death that we might produce a rich harvest for God'.⁴⁷ The death of which Paul speaks is the same mentioned in Gal 2, 20: the christian's death to the self.

What difference does this emancipation from the mosaic law make in the present existence of christians? A second statement by Paul, which sums up the development of his thought in chapters 5-7 of Romans, provides the most comprehensive answer to this question. 'Therefore, in the present dispensation, there exists no condemnation for those in union with Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed me from the law of Sin and of Death'.⁴⁸ Paul however cannot but discern the terrible anomaly that throughout the history of Israel had marred the intended beneficent effects of that law upon the human predicament. It had in truth turned out to be a 'ministry of condemnation', 'a dispensation of death'.⁴⁹ Introduced into the world of man, already marred by sin and doomed to death (that is, the definitive separation from the God of the living) as the result of Adam's transgression of the divine command, the mosaic law was added for the sake of transgressions to the divine economy of the promise made to Abraham.⁵⁰ In this sorry situation the law inevitably became 'the dynamic of Sin', and it possessed no power to bring man life.⁵¹ As J. A. Fitzmyer notes,⁵² Paul 'makes a daring addition' in citing Ps 143,2: '*by the observance of the law* no human being can become upright in God's eyes'.⁵³ And Paul remarks further that all the law could do was bring man

⁴⁴ Gal 2, 19-20.⁴⁵ Rom 6, 3.⁴⁶ Gal 3, 13.⁴⁷ Rom 7, 4.⁴⁸ Rom 8, 1-2.⁴⁹ 2 Cor 3, 7. 9; cf Rom 7, 10. 13.⁵⁰ Rom 5, 12-15; Gal 3, 19.⁵¹ 1 Cor 15, 56.⁵² 'Saint Paul and the Law', in *The Jurist*, 27 (1967), p 24.⁵³ Rom 3, 20.

'a real knowledge of sin'. It simply unmasked the heinousness of sin as 'transgression': that is, conscious rebellion against God.

The real reason for this sad plight was, of course, that man is 'a creature (or tool) of the flesh'.⁵⁴ The pauline adjective 'carnal' denotes man as subjugated by a principle binding his entire outlook, his very self, to a purely material existence. Such for Paul is the human dilemma, apart from Christ's saving act; and its inevitable result is slavery. 'Creature of the flesh that I am, I have been auctioned off on the block (as a slave) by Sin'.⁵⁵

In the paragraph following this dramatic portrayal of the helpless, hopeless condition of 'carnal' man, Paul might almost be describing that flight into inwardness advocated by the cynic-stoic philosopher as the road to true freedom. He exposes its futility, and the awful disillusionment to which it leads.

I do not understand what I do. I do not do what I want to do: I do what I hate! And when I do what I do not want to do, I simply acknowledge the law to be right. Actually, it is not I that do these things, but sin which has taken possession of me . . .

To be sure, I am delighted with the law of God in my inmost self. Still, I find another 'law' in my bodily members that fights against the 'law' my reason approves, and it holds me prisoner under the 'law' of sin that is in my members.⁵⁶

The flight into inwardness has turned out to be a *pis-aller*: 'Hence, so far as the self in me is concerned, while I am a slave by my reason to the law of God, yet as a creature of the flesh I am slave to the 'law' of 'sin'.⁵⁷ The power to overcome the impasse comes solely from Christ's redemptive death and resurrection, which in consequence has played the dominant role in determining the character of christian freedom: 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed me from the law of Sin and of Death'.⁵⁸

Throughout chapters 5-7, Paul presented the main events of sacred history as a drama, in which a series of 'personalities' acted out their roles on the stage of life. Adam, the father of the human race, had introduced the first actor, Sin, who in turn led on his crony, Death. But with the entry of a new character, Law, Sin was transformed into conscious rebelliousness against the divine commands.⁵⁹ Yet the nefarious influence of this unholy alliance on man's entire history was more than nullified by 'the graciousness of God

⁵⁴ Rom 7, 14.

⁵⁷ Rom 7, 25b.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Rom 8, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Rom 7, 15-25a.

⁵⁹ Rom 5, 12, 14, 22.

and the gift by graciousness of the one man, Jesus Christ'.⁶⁰ Paul views baptism as the seal of justifying faith, just as 'the symbol of circumcision' accepted by Abraham was 'the seal of his justifying faith';⁶¹ and baptism is the God-given means effecting the liberation of the believer.⁶² Yet, it is to be noted, Paul can find no more apt expression for this new-found freedom than to say that the christian 'has become enslaved to God',⁶³ for such freedom can never be construed as autonomy vis-a-vis God. This new enslavement is totally different however from the old slavery to the law, which had never been anything more than a norm of conduct, exterior to man. 'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus'⁶⁴ is a dynamic and liberating principle of action that frees the christian radically from all regime of law. To be sure, Paul is not so ingenuous as to ignore the need for regulations within the christian community. He is indeed quite capable of 'laying down the law' in uninhibited fashion.⁶⁵ Yet the fact that he realizes the need to recommend his injunctions by giving reasons for them,⁶⁶ discloses his sensitivity to the secondary role which all law must occupy in christianity.⁶⁷ On his view, law can rightly exist in the Church only if it be somehow a symbol of the unique commandment of love.⁶⁸

Thus far, our presentation of Paul's conception of christian freedom has been mostly negative, as emancipation from the law, from sin and death, from the self and the flight into inwardness. Paul has however described this reality in more positive fashion, and to this description we must now turn.

The glorious freedom of the children of God

A scrutiny of the eighth chapter of Romans, Paul's definitive conception of christian life in this world, will reveal a disarmingly simple view of what it means for the christian to be free. Freedom is found and preserved in its vitality only through openness to the leading of the holy Spirit – such openness being, of course, itself a gracious gift from God.⁶⁹ Unfreedom is the inevitable result of man's subjection of himself to the earth-bound concerns of 'the flesh', from which only the Spirit, gift of the risen Christ, can liberate him.⁷⁰ It is man's existence under the dynamic direction of the holy Spirit which Paul will presently designate as 'the glorious freedom of the children of

⁶⁰ Rom 5, 15, 21.

⁶³ Rom 6, 22.

⁶⁶ 1 Cor 11, 2-16.

⁶⁹ Rom 5, 5.

⁶¹ Rom 4, 11.

⁶⁴ Rom 8, 2.

⁶⁷ Gal 5, 14.

⁷⁰ Rom 8, 5-6.

⁶² Cf Rom 6, 18, 22, 20.

⁶⁵ 1 Cor 14, 37.

⁶⁸ Rom 12, 8-10; Gal 6, 1-2.

God'.⁷¹ To express the full significance of christian freedom, Paul employs, by way of analogy, a term from hellenistic legal vocabulary: adoptive sonship.⁷²

The Spirit, by his very presence in the christian heart,⁷³ thus provides the dynamic element in the exercise of christian freedom. He unlocks for the christian the mystery of his own true identity as a man liberated from the law, from sin and death, awakening him to a new self-consciousness in relation to God as adoptive son. It is this transforming presence of the Spirit (which at the beginning of this chapter Paul called 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus') that 'has freed me from the law of Sin and of Death'.⁷⁴ For Paul it is crucial that the christian grasp the very real difference that exists between subjection to the mosaic law and being 'under the law of Christ'.⁷⁵ The latter is not to be considered as the adoption of a higher religious ideal or a more exacting code of morality, since the gospel does not proclaim new external norms for conduct. It announces a 'new creation',⁷⁶ the gift by the Spirit of an unprecedented dynamic power of action. This is why Paul can only describe the gospel adequately by calling it 'God's dynamic power (leading) to salvation'.⁷⁷ With such a radical view of christian freedom, it is not surprising that Paul could find no help from the notions of liberty cherished by the Greeks, either their political or their philosophical constructs, in expressing what freedom in Christ means.

'Slavery' in pauline usage

Paul employs the vocabulary connected with slavery much more frequently than that related to freedom (a ratio of almost two to one). Moreover, the proportion between the occurrences of these terms in a derived (religious) sense and in the literal, secular sense is appreciably higher than the corresponding proportion for the words denoting freedom. This would appear to indicate that Paul found 'slavery' and its cognates more apt for the expression of certain christian values than the terminology connoting freedom.

That Paul was acquainted not only with a good number of slaves who had become christians, but also with the situation of slaves in hellenistic society as well as with roman and greek law governing

⁷¹ Rom 8, 21.

⁷⁴ Rom 8, 1-2.

⁷⁷ Rom 1, 16.

⁷² Rom 8, 14-16.

⁷⁵ 1 Cor 9, 21.

⁷³ Rom 8, 9-11.

⁷⁶ Gal 6, 15; 2 Cor 5, 17.

their status, is fairly well substantiated from his letters. At Corinth he had baptized 'the household of Stephanus' as well as Crispus and 'his household', and such 'households' would include slaves in addition to the family;⁷⁸ Erastus, 'the city-treasurer' at Corinth is judged, from his office, to have been a slave; and there was Onesimus, Philemon's slave.⁷⁹ Paul is aware of the legal distinction between 'freedman' (*apeleutheros*) and freeman (*eleutheros*).⁸⁰ He knows that in roman law the father's rights over his son who was a minor were the same as those over the slaves in his household.⁸¹ He appears to know of the contemporary practice by which men sold themselves into slavery to escape debts, or to seek security, or even to better their social status by later becoming freedmen: 'Do not become the slaves of men'.⁸² From his admonitions to slaves to purify their motives in serving their masters, it is not unlikely that Paul was well aware that the slave's hopes for manumission were chiefly based upon his diligence and usefulness. Thus Paul warns the christian slave against the mere 'outward show of service, to curry favour with men'.⁸³ He seems familiar also with the fact that slaves commonly might expect to inherit from their masters 'as a reward of service'.⁸⁴

One celebrated *crux interpretum* deserves attention, since, when correctly understood, it discloses something of Paul's attitude to slavery. In this passage Paul insists upon the supreme value, for a successful living of the christian life, of an acute and constant awareness of God's initiative in bestowing this vocation and of Christ's graciousness in sharing with the christian those gifts that guarantee continuing perseverance. He inculcates this truth by asserting the irrelevance of the jew's religious status vis-a-vis the uncircumcised pagan convert, and that of the freeman's civic or social status compared with that of the slave.

In any event, each one must live his life because of what the Lord has shared with him . . . Each man must persevere in this (christian) vocation to which he has been called. Were you called as a slave? Do not let that worry you! But if indeed you can become a freedman, by all means live your (christian) life (in that condition). For the slave who is given the christian vocation is a freedman of the Lord: equally, the freeman who is given this vocation is a slave of Christ. You have been bought at a price: do not become slaves of men.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ 1 Cor 1, 16; 1, 14; Acts 18, 8.

⁸⁰ 1 Cor 7, 22.

⁸¹ Gal 4, 1.

⁸³ Col 3, 22.

⁸⁴ Col 3, 24.

⁷⁹ Rom 16, 23; Phm 16.

⁸² 1 Cor 7, 23.

⁸⁵ 1 Cor 7, 17-24.

The frequent mistranslation, in verse 21, of Paul's elliptical advice to the slave whose master has decided to free him is the result of ignorance of the contemporary practice of manumission in Greece. The slave had no choice (having no legal rights) of remaining a slave or accepting freedom: all depended upon the master's decision. Hence Paul has been wrongly accused of trying to persuade the slave to remain in bondage. In fact, Paul implicitly favours the status of freedman. He is however more concerned that such a one should make use of his newfound freedom to become a better christian.

Paul and the hellenistic institution of slavery

If we are to evaluate correctly Paul's usage of the terms slave and slavery in a derived christian sense, certain misapprehensions about the institution of slavery in the hellenistic society he knew must be clarified. Perhaps the most serious error is the common confusion of slavery in the ancient world with the type familiar to us from the nineteenth century. In contrast with its more modern forms, the hellenistic institution offered the slave real hope of obtaining his freedom, after a limited time of service, by its in-built system of manumission. Moreover, it should be remembered that by Paul's day the vast majority of slaves had been born in slavery, not enslaved by war or piracy. And since the slave was a valuable asset to his master, it was in the master's interest to treat him well, to promote his education as his talents might suggest, to hold out to him the prospect of his eventual liberation. There is documentary evidence to show that slaves were not exploited to the same degree as free workmen; and they enjoyed far greater security. In greek law the distinction between slave and freedman tended towards the vanishing point – in part, because of the lengthy, sometimes onerous conditions of the indenturing of the freedman to his former master. In pagan religious confraternities slaves were frequently admitted to the same status as members who were free. To recognize all this, however, is not to claim that slavery was not an evil. Yet it does assist us to understand why the institution was accepted as part of the social, economic fabric of first-century hellenistic society.

Moreover, it goes a long way to explaining why in the ancient world there was no protest voiced against slavery as an institution. By Paul's time the great slave revolts had ceased for over a century. Even these rebellions were not thought of by the insurgent slaves as a blow struck against slavery as such. In the writings by slaves or

former slaves that have survived there is no denunciation of slavery.

Paul certainly did not denounce slavery as an institution. In that, he was a man of his time. There are certain indications, however, that he did not approve of it. He did not despise the slave as such, nor exclude him from christian fellowship when called to the faith. He appears not to have approved of the practice of selling oneself into slavery; and he cannot be accused (through a misinterpretation of 1 Cor 7, 21) of trying to persuade slaves to remain voluntarily in slavery.

'Slave' and 'slavery': the christian sense

As has been noted already, Paul claims the title 'slave of Christ Jesus', which he shares with Timothy. He seems to consider the designation especially appropriate for describing his role as a preacher of 'the gospel of Christ', his chief function as an apostle.⁸⁶ And he describes Timothy's assistance in the same manner.⁸⁷ Here the point of comparison is the conception of the slave as wholly at the disposition of another. For Paul the gospel *is* Christ: to preach the gospel is to make Christ present. Paul's gospel also asserts his relationship to the churches he founded by means of the same figure. 'We do not proclaim ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord – and ourselves as your slaves on account of Jesus'.⁸⁸

Paul speaks much less frequently of the christian's relation to God than of his more immediate union with Christ.⁸⁹ He does however think of conversion to the gospel (especially on the part of the pagan) as 'a turning to God from idols to become a slave to God'.⁹⁰ His more characteristic view of christian life is 'being a slave to the Lord' as 'the household slave of another'; this essential orientation of the christian 'to another' is the effect of Jesus's death and resurrection.⁹¹ He has 'become a slave to the Lord Christ', which for Paul means abdication of self-interest.⁹² In consequence, christians must 'become slaves to one another through love'.⁹³ This imperative must not, however, be considered as another external norm, replacing the outmoded demands of the mosaic law. It is the vital aspect of that divine love which the christian has been given, the dynamic presence of the Spirit: 'so that we have become slaves to a newness

⁸⁶ Rom 1, 1; Phil 1, 1; Gal 1, 7; 1 Cor 1, 17; Gal 1, 10b.

⁸⁷ Phil 2, 22; see Col 1, 7; 4, 7.

⁸⁹ Gal 2, 19–20.

⁹¹ Rom 12, 11; 14, 4; 14, 7–9.

⁸⁸ 2 Cor 4, 5; see 1 Cor 9, 19.

⁹⁰ 1 Thess 1, 9; Rom 6, 22.

⁹² Col 3, 24.

⁹³ Gal 5, 13.

of spirit, and not to an outmoded letter'.⁹⁴

This preference on Paul's part for the term slavery to describe the character of christian existence cannot fail to strike our modern mentality as strange, even perhaps bizarre. We find more congenial his application of 'slavery' to unredeemed existence under sin;⁹⁵ and it may come as a surprise to discover that Paul employs 'slavery' in its pejorative sense – for us its chief connotation – in but two paragraphs in his letters. It is a reminder, once again, of the paradoxical element that runs throughout the pauline usage of 'slavery', no less than that of 'freedom'.

⁹⁴ Rom 5, 5; 7, 6.

⁹⁵ Rom 6, 17. 19. 20; Gal 4, 3. 8. 9. 25.