

Freedom in Christ alone

Judges 6:1-10, Romans 6:15-23, John 8:31-41.

The desire to be free is an intensely human desire. We see it expressed in many different ways, in many different situations, in many different times and periods in history. The desire for freedom has been portrayed graphically on our TV screens on many occasions in the last few years. The collapse of the Soviet empire, the demolition of the Berlin Wall, the civil wars, the revolutions, the mass public demonstrations, and the first free post-war elections in many European countries, have all given ample witness to the human desire to be free. We have seen similar demonstrations and campaigns for freedom in South Africa, in South Korea, in Burma, in East Timor, and many other places.

We also have seen many public demonstrations, campaigns, and debates concerning freedom in New Zealand. Now, for the first time in many years, we are told, we have a truly free society, in which government intervention in people's lives is significantly reduced, controls on the economy are removed, bureaucratic and legislative hindrances are gone, and we now have the freedom to get on with our lives in whatever way we desire. We now have the freedom we all desire. Or do we? What kind of freedom is it that we have had bestowed upon us by the government? Is that true freedom? Is the society we now have the society that we really want?

Many people would cry no, this is not what we want. We do not have freedom; we are not free to work for a realistic wage, because the freedoms given to employers to determine wages and conditions are not balanced by the freedom of employees to negotiate a fairer deal. Freedom unilaterally imposed by one party on the other means that a new form of bondage results. We are not free to seek medical attention when we need it, if we cannot afford medical insurance for private treatment that public hospitals cannot provide. We cannot afford decent housing, adequate food, proper clothing, sufficient fuel for heating, adequate education, because the economy has been "set free" in such a way that only those with a reasonably large and secure income can truly benefit from it.

What sort of freedom is it that has been bestowed on us by the government? It is not true freedom, for the Scriptures tell us that if we have been set free, we will be genuinely free, totally free, universally and uniformly free. The freedom that we have,

the social and economic freedoms brought about by various governments, are not true freedoms at all, because the freedom of the economy has been brought about at the expense of the health, the welfare, the nutrition, the housing of those who are on low fixed incomes. The changes we have seen have brought liberation to some, but greater bondage to many more people.

Why is this? The reason is simple: we have sought freedom from a source from which freedom cannot be obtained. Freedom cannot be granted by those who are themselves not truly free. Freedom cannot be granted by those who wish to ensure that freedoms are controlled, or limited, or privileged only to a sector of society and not the whole. Freedom given by those who are themselves enslaved is a false freedom, an imitation freedom, a deceptive freedom that is not truly freedom at all. All they can grant to others is what they have chosen for themselves, and if that freedom is not genuine, full and open freedom, then all that happens is that more of society is enslaved by the deception that has taken hold of those who grant such freedom to others. We do not find freedom in political change, nor in the economic ideologies of the left, or the right, or from any other point on the spectrum. We do not find freedom in overthrow of moral standards, or abdication of responsibility either for ourselves or for others.

Our cultural, political and social tradition considers freedom to be the absence of controls or restrictions that would hinder us in doing whatever it is that we wish to do. The cry of the French Revolution was “No God, No Master.” The ideology that lay behind that revolution has spread to almost every part of the modern world, and has become so entrenched in our way of thinking that we do not even blink when it comes into view. That ideology can be found ingrained in our political thought, our economic activities, our educational systems, our social interactions, our media and even, some would say especially, our religion! That ideology is: “accept no law except that which you impose upon yourself.” Put in more blunt terms, it boils down to a simple slogan of rebellion: “nobody else is ever going to tell me what to do!” I am sure we have all met with such an attitude on many occasions. And that is the essence of the problem we have with regard to freedom: the freedom we seek is not the freedom which God offers to us, but the chance to get away with doing whatever it is we want to do, and with nobody ever saying to us, “No.”

When we consider what the Scripture teaches us with regard to the human condition, we see that the root problem which faces us on every side is rebellion against God.

This rebellion in which all human beings take part began with the sin of Adam and Eve in rejecting the law laid down for them by God, choosing instead to follow their own desires, their own ambitions. They made the choice not to accept God's law for their lives, but instead to establish for themselves their own law. In other words, they wanted to decide for themselves what they could and could not do. They wanted to make up their own rules to govern their behaviour. They would determine for themselves what was right and what was wrong. As a result they were deceived; they came under the power of their own delusions. The essence of the human condition which has plagued us ever since remains the same: we choose our own standards of right and wrong. We decide what we may and may not do. Because we are in rebellion against God, the only basis on which we can establish those standards of right and wrong are our own views on the subject. Thus the standards we establish have no deeper foundation than our own desires and opinions, and cannot avoid being totally and completely arbitrary. That is, we cannot give any good, enduring reason why we should behave in one way or another. We have deceived ourselves into believing that we always know best; that we know the difference between right and wrong.

One of the crises we face today is an ethical crisis, in which we are no longer able to make any meaningful, widely acknowledged and generally practiced rules for ethical conduct, rules that can win acceptance from society as a whole. We see this in medical research, where a whole variety of different experimental or clinical procedures which many people find repugnant, have arguments offered in their defence that boil down basically to the fact that if such and such a procedure is possible, then there is no reason not to do it. Thus ethical decision-making is abandoned for a purely technological argument concerning what is feasible. This is the crisis we face, because there is no basis on which anyone can challenge such an approach, as long as we maintain the legitimacy of the ideology that underlies it: "accept no law save that which you impose on yourself." Why would anyone voluntarily restrict their practice of a medical technique which they have invented if they have no ethical basis for not carrying it out? The arbitrary nature of this situation is a source of considerable danger to society as a whole, as we can see from the arguments for euthanasia, clinician-assisted suicide, animal organ transplants, assisted fertility, and abortion, to name but a few of the hotly debated issues of the day.

Can we as Christians challenge this state of affairs? Certainly we claim to have a wider standard for right living, a deeper grounding for our lives, than our own

arbitrary opinions, our own convictions or opinions as to what is right or wrong. We believe that God has given us his revelation in Scripture, and in Christ, which point us in the way in which we should live. There is no other basis on which we can find freedom, either as individuals or as a society, because this is the only true basis for our lives. God called us into being, and calls us to respond to him in faith and obedience. Until we do indeed acknowledge him as our only rightful sovereign Lord, who alone is the true law-giver and master over us all, we will never find true freedom. We will always be in bondage to a lie, a deceit, a delusion of our own making, for to deny that God is indeed our sovereign Lord, the only rightful master to whom we are subject in everything, is the original, the foundational, the all-pervasive lie and delusion that holds us completely in bondage.

Earlier we read in the book of Judges of the oppression the Israelites were under. They did evil in the sight of the Lord, and as a result the Lord allowed them to come under bondage to the Midianites. The Israelites had to take to the hills, to hide in the caves and rocky places, seeking protection there from the ravaging hordes of invaders who destroyed and stole their crops, their herds, their livelihoods. The Israelites were impoverished, so impoverished, in fact, that they cried out to the Lord for help. What a predicament they had got themselves into: the people of God **forced** to cry out to God, to ask him to deliver them from their enemies. They were no longer God's faithful people, following his ways and obeying his laws. They had gone after false gods, the gods of those who were now destroying them. As a result of their prayers, God sent an angel to appoint Gideon as a judge to deliver them from their oppressors. But had they not committed idolatry in the first place, they would not have been brought to such a pass that they were obliged to cry out to the Lord. Where then were the gods of the Amorites they had chosen to worship instead? Where then was the answer to prayer from these idols? In times of great desperation, even those who have rebelled against God and rejected his laws realise that God alone can help them. But what an admission to have to make: that your preferred gods, the ones you **want** to worship, are impotent to aid you. What then is the point of being free to choose to worship whomever you like? What freedom is there in following after other gods if they are powerless to come to your aid, who can do nothing to save you? The freedom you have in such a situation is no freedom at all, but enslavement to a false god.

Will we, like the Israelites of old, continue to do evil in the eyes of the Lord? Will we ever cry out for deliverance from oppression, if that means that we must turn again to

the Lord in repentance and faith? Or will we prefer rather to struggle on alone in our impoverished and oppressed condition, rather than admit to God that we have gone astray and departed from his righteous and just laws for our lives? God has set us free in Christ: but will we rather make our own rules for our religion, worshipping as we desire, believing what we choose to believe, and ignoring or repudiating the rest? Will we continue to pick and choose as we like from the commandments of God, arbitrarily selecting those we like, and equally arbitrarily rejecting what we don't like? That is, selecting the commandments that would put a stop to other people's actions that we disapprove of, while allowing our own preferred sins to go unchecked? That is the problem of arbitrary religion: somehow, our own sins go unpunished, while those of others are harshly dealt with. We must be prepared to admit that we are all sinners; every one of us has gone our own way, making up our own rules as we go along. None of us is exempt from the power and slavery of sin, because we all share that heritage of Adam: the attitude that nobody else, not even God, is going to tell me what I can and can't do.

In Romans we read of the results of this attitude: those who sin against God are not free, but are instead slaves to sin. Those who choose to rebel against the living Lord fall into the power of false gods, deceitful gods, lying gods, which cannot deliver on their promises, a fact that does not prevent promises being made. You could in fact define a false god as one that is unable to make good its promises. We see ample evidence in our society today that people are willingly following false gods: for the promises that are made, that a more "free market" approach, more loosening of the economy, more flexible exchange rates, more this, more that, no matter what the promise, the end result held out to us is the same: we shall all be saved. The freedom which we seek cannot be found in the places in which we seek it. Our economic structure, the complex of monetary transactions and negotiations we have established for ourselves, cannot provide true freedom, for it is not a self-existing thing but a humanly-shaped and governed system. It does not have the power to do any more than we allow it to do. The promises that are made are promises based on what we expect or anticipate or desperately hope we will be able to accomplish through manipulation of the economy in a particular way. The economy by itself can do nothing for us.

To seek full and complete freedom for society as a result of the changes we make in the economy is deception and delusion: not all of society is governed by economic considerations, not every part of our lives is economic in character, not everything has

a monetary value; not everyone is directly engaged in economic activity. What freedom can there be then for those things, those aspects of our lives that are outside the purview of the economy? To all intents and purposes, they don't exist, because they cannot be taken into consideration. This is one of the most damaging aspects of our idolatry: whole sections of life, whole sectors of society, are written out of existence, or at least, out of all consideration. Thus to seek freedom from the effects of sin in the very things that we have established as a result of our sin is absurd. To rebel against God, and to treat one of our own humanly-shaped systems in society as a substitute for God which will save us, set us free, and bring us all to prosperity, is the height of folly. This is what Paul means when he says that we are slaves to the one we obey: either God, or mammon, or some other such thing. To have to follow the dictates of economic considerations, to blindly follow where "market forces" lead, is to head into darkness and destruction.

What is true freedom? What can we offer to a society that has lost its way, seeking to establish its own standards of right and wrong, seeking freedom for all, but because of its arbitrary basis, founded no deeper than our own frail and seriously flawed opinions, able only to offer ideologies that inevitably favour some and disadvantage others. True freedom can be found only in bondage to Christ, because it is only in bondage to Christ that we are freed from the destructive, the arbitrary, the deceitful power of sin. Paul says that in Christ we have been set free from the power of sin. We have been given freedom and life, because instead we have become slaves to righteousness. The former things we did lead only to death, but now the things that we do lead instead to life, because they are grounded in faith in God, directed by his law, empowered by his Spirit. New life comes from being set free in Christ from the power of sin, from the deception and delusion of idolatry, from the snares of evil. We need no longer be subject to the power of the economy, but subject instead to God. To live as though our economic life is the source of direction, of meaning, of fulfillment for us all, is to live in slavery to the vagaries of multiple, complex monetary transactions. The results will be arbitrary, unpredictable, disempowering. For the paradoxical thing is, that if we seek to find freedom through controlling the economy to produce the results we require, we find instead that the economy controls us. We only think we are in charge: instead, we become subject to that which we are seeking to subject to ourselves. In other words, whatever you obey, you become slaves to that thing. If we obey the dictates of the market economy, then we become the slaves of a market

economy. A slave has no control, no influence, no power over its master: as Paul says, a slave has instead surrendered all control to the one he obeys.

But we have been set free in Christ. What does that mean then for us today? It means, in part at least, that we no longer need obey the dictates of an economic system, a political ideology, a social philosophy, that does not bring freedom to all, let alone freedom to some - all are enslaved, not just those at the bottom of the socio-economic heap. To be set free in Christ is to become slaves to Christ, to obey him as sole master, supreme commander, sovereign Lord, the only rightful and just king over all of humankind. Then we can see as we should see. Then we will recognise that the systems of this world cannot bring deliverance or freedom. We will see through the lies, the delusions, the deceptions that have been foisted upon us. To see as Christ sees, is to be set free from seeing things as the world would have us to see. The first step in being liberated from a false god is to be able to see through its deceitfulness. Unless we are able to recognise it as a fraud, we will always be in bondage to it. But Christ puts all things in true perspective; he sheds light into our darkness, and makes visible that which is concealed. Thus in Christ we see aright, directed by the Scriptures, to understand the world as we ought. Thus we are enabled to live in accordance with the just and righteous laws of God, which alone bring freedom to us, because they alone are true laws which lead us into obedience to God. Thus being set free in Christ is to be liberated from the power of sin; it is to turn aside from the path of rebellion instituted by Adam and Eve and willingly followed by all their descendants. It is to acknowledge that we do indeed have a master; that we do indeed belong to another; that we do indeed have to give account of our actions to the Just Judge and receive either vindication or punishment; that we do indeed have to obey the commands which another has given us. We cannot make our own laws; we cannot decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong; we cannot worship as and whom we choose; we cannot do just as we please in life, for we were created to worship and serve the only true God, and if we will not, then we will surely face his judgement.

Christ told the Jews that it is possible to know the truth only by following his teaching. Today we are not even sure that there is such a thing as truth. We are told that something may be true for you, but it isn't true for me, therefore I can safely ignore it. One person's truth is another person's private opinion; it has nothing to do with anyone else; we all have our own truth, after all. Thus the breakdown of society continues, and the desperation of the search for a common basis for society becomes

even more earnest. What do we all hold in common, that can serve as the basis on which we can all live together in peace and harmony? How can we even find such a thing, if there is no possible way of knowing what the truth is? After all, what may be true for you is not true for me, and even worse, there is absolutely no way we can possibly arbitrate or come to agreement on the subject. That, after all, would imply that there is some standard of truth, some law, some external control, by which we can know what is true, and conversely, what is false. But because we are so committed to the idea that everybody has access to their own private truth that is meaningful for them, then any such external control is by definition disallowed. Thus we fragment as a society ever further, and there is no way out of the impasse.

Unless of course, we are prepared to admit that we do not decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong, what is true “for you” and what is true “for me.” Unless we turn back from this path, unless we are prepared to accept that Another has made the laws for us to follow, then we are doomed. We cannot find our own solution, for any solution we decide upon is purely arbitrary, purely expedient, purely temporary, because it is baseless, groundless, vacuous and empty. This is the situation in which a powerful ideology can emerge, promising to solve our problems, to fix up the mess, to put everything right, to clear up the confusion. This is the context which throws up a dictator, a strong-man, a powerful individual, who if only given the means, can put things right, by force if need be, by force because that is the only way it can be done. That dictator need not be one person; it can be a power clique, a faction, a group with the will to take control, with an ideology to guide them relentlessly forward in the pursuit of their goal. That is the danger we may face if we continue on the road we are currently following.

Is there then a solution? Yes, because we can be free from arbitrary choice. We can be free from blindness and delusion, we can be given the eyes to see and the ears to hear; but will we like what it is that we hear? Will we acknowledge that which we see? The light that God shines on our path, the voice that calls us to faith and repentance, the law that God has given, can alone bring us true freedom. Until we turn in repentance to God, seeking his forgiveness, accepting his way of salvation through faith in Christ, acknowledging that his grace alone is the power that can rescue us, then we will not find true freedom. We will continue to be enslaved by sin, enslaved by our own sin, enslaved as a result of the sins of others, enslaved by the sin of an entire society that has given itself heart and mind to bondage to a false and deceptive ideology. For only

in Christ can we be made free from the power of sin, our own and others', and from the false ideologies that rule this world. Only in Christ can we find the way to bring deliverance to our society, a society that is in bondage because of sin, a society that can find freedom only in rejecting its own arbitrary rules, acknowledging the righteousness of God and his laws, and willingly submitting to them in every respect so that He alone determines for us which way we should go. Then we will be truly free, free in Christ, both as individuals and as a society. May God grant us the grace to find this freedom. Amen.