

# Our Commitment to Christian Liberty

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One purpose of Christ's earthly ministry, he tells us himself, was to "proclaim *freedom* for the prisoners and...the oppressed" (Luke 4:18 cf. Isa 61:1). He came announcing truth that would *set free* all who would "hold to his teaching" (John 8:31–32). As such, Jesus came to this earth with an express commitment to the freedom of his people. This theme of freedom is picked up in the epistles as well, most notably in the Pauline corpus. It is clearly an important topic. But the topic is also elusive one because of the diversity of the NT liberty motif. The prophetic context of Luke 4 suggests that freedom from political oppression and captivity is in view. Elsewhere we read of freedom from slavery, illness, fear, and death. We read too of freedom from ourselves, that is, freedom from what we once were in Adam and from the power of indwelling sin. Then there is freedom from law, which adds a whole set of new complexities: Are we free from the guilt/curse of law? From obedience as a means of salvation? From the *Mosaic* Law as a way of life? From manmade rules? From all rules as projections of a "law principle"? The options are almost endless. We should be committed to freedom, but what is it exactly?

In a recent essay, Larry Hurtado suggests that the answers offered above are misdirected. What unites them is that they all emphasize freedom *from* something, and this, he submits, is the wrong emphasis. Instead, "'Freedom' in the NT is notable in emphasizing freedom *for* a certain direction in life, rather than simply freedom *from* circumstances or other people." Specifically, Hurtado opines that "the NT emphasis is that believers are set free and enabled to engage others in *agapē*."<sup>1</sup> Of course, freedom *for* some goal often involves freedom from the forces that keep one *from* that goal, so these ideas can never be divorced entirely. But I would like to echo Hurtado in suggesting in this presentation that ***Christian freedom has as its primary emphasis not emancipation from restraint, but empowerment to successfully serve God and the Church.*** In demonstration of this thesis, we will examine the sundry uses of NT freedom and conclude with some practical implications for those with a holistic and biblically informed commitment to this biblical ideal.

## Freedom as a Broad Theological Concept

It may seem odd to begin a study of *Christian* freedom with an anthropological discussion of *human* freedom, but this foundational concept offers some key preliminary parameters to our study. In ordination councils it is not uncommon to hear the question, "Are people truly free agents?" or "Does man have a free will?" These are trick questions, of course, because they may be answered disparately according to at least two basic definitions of freedom:<sup>2</sup>

- If by freedom is meant a kind of **absolute sovereignty** that renders a person free from the onus of any authority or will greater than his own, then humans do not have freedom. God alone is free in this sense.

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<sup>1</sup>L. W. Hurtado, "Freed by Love and for Love: Freedom in the New Testament," pre-publication version of an essay prepared as a contribution to the international research project on "Concepts of Freedom in the Biblical Traditions and Contemporary Contexts," convened by Michael Welker (University of Heidelberg), 2009. Available at <http://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/2662>, accessed 13 March 2013.

<sup>2</sup>We might add to these the hypothetical idea of **contra-causal freedom**, by which a person chooses contrary to his nature, but such freedom does not exist except in theory. It is therefore irrelevant to our discussion.

- If by freedom is meant the **natural capacity** of a person to choose according to dominant principles/affections, then humans enjoy true freedom. Depravity and the finiteness of the human condition adversely affect the human will, but the willing itself is unrestricted.<sup>3</sup>

Related to Christian liberty, it is important to recognize that this fundamental state of affairs is unaltered by the miracle of regeneration.

- The regenerate are no more self-sovereign than their unregenerate counterparts because **believers are still not God**. Even though a believer is a new creation and imbued with the indwelling Spirit, he still has quantitative and qualitative deficiencies in the realms of knowledge, wisdom, and appropriation of the divine decree. It would be both logically impossible and ethically irresponsible for God to grant absolute sovereignty to his creatures.
- The basic idea of man's power of choice has not been changed by regeneration either—he still chooses freely according to his dominant principles/affections. He does have a new set of chaste principles/affections that compete with the “flesh” to inform his will, of course, so *something* has changed. But his capacity of choice is unaltered and his newfound moral rectitude has not completely eliminated sin: in short, **believers are still not good**—at least not *perfectly* good. Unless one embraces the elusive Wesleyan category of “perfect love” or the Keswick state of “fullness of the Spirit,” we are forced to concede that every believer lives with the persistent experience of a conflict between two laws at war within himself (so Rom 7:14–25). The believer is *no longer totally depraved*, but he is *not yet perfect*. This state of affairs is of critical importance to our study of what Christian liberty should look like. When it comes to questions of sanctification, many systems assume an either/or situation: either one is totally depraved and totally untrustworthy (and thus in need of a comprehensive authority structure) or by virtue of the indwelling Spirit is totally perfect and trustworthy (and thus in need of no additional authority structure at all). The truth lies between these poles. Regeneration and Spirit-indwelling have enabled believers to please God, but even believers cannot yet be trusted with a liberty that completely removes all restraint. This is why believers are reminded perpetually in the Scriptures to submit not only to direct biblical authority, but also to human authorities such as parents, pastors, governors, and “one another” in the context of local churches.

To summarize this introductory foray toward a more complete understanding of Christian liberty, we make an opening negative observation that Christian liberty is to be confused neither with (1) self-sovereignty nor with (2) the total removal of authority structures (whether of the biblical and human variety). Both options are theologically inconceivable. Positively, this opening discussion also identifies for us of the primary force that inhibits freedom to good, viz., the corrupt nature brought upon us through original sin.

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<sup>3</sup>Note here that I follow a view of the human will and *imago dei* made popular by Jonathan Edwards and reflected with succinct simplicity in John Murray, “Man in the Image of God,” in the *Collected Writings of John Murray*, (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:34–46. For these the image consists of capacities (among them the capacity to reason, speak, worship, and most importantly for our discussion the capacity to choose). The capacity for choice was not lost at the Fall, but every chaste affection or inclination that informs the act of choosing was lost. As such, mankind remains *truly free* to choose according to his dominant affections/principles, and yet can be regarded as *enslaved* by those affections/principles (e.g., Rom 6:6ff; 7:6; Gal 4:8–9; Titus 3:3; 2 Pet 2:19; etc.).

### Freedom in Intertestamental Jewish Context

Turning now to the historical use of the *freedom* motif, we turn our attention again to the first NT usage of the term in Luke 4:18. The promise of freedom (ἄφεσις) both for prisoners and for the oppressed appears in this context together with similar promises of relief for the poor and recovery of sight for the blind. Despite hesitation among many commentaries to stress the literal, physical nature of these promises, the context suggests little else—and for the premillennialist, this should not be alarming. Jesus had just received his Messianic anointing and was unveiling his comprehensive offer of the exact kingdom predicted to Israel in the OT, complete with comprehensive relief in the physical, sociological, political, and really all spheres of life. It was *this* kingdom and *these* freedoms that constituted the irrepressible hope of the Jewish people.

Desire for national freedom was a uniqueness of the Jewish people during the intertestamental period. In a world almost entirely resigned to the onus of foreign oppression (first Greek, then Roman), the Jews agitated time and again for freedom. Some suppose that the Jewish interest in freedom derived from the Cynic quest for individual sovereignty: a freedom that manifested in ἀὐταρκεία or “self-rule” in every area of life, but chiefly in the areas of speech and morality.<sup>4</sup> The Cynics, so named because their “natural” ethic permitted a lifestyle as shameless as that lived by dogs (κύων), despised social convention and vilified all who sought to “manipulate or direct one’s way of life.”<sup>5</sup> This idea of freedom, however, is foreign to intertestamental Judaism and offers no precedent for *Christian* liberty. Instead, freedom in the first-century Jewish context was a corporate freedom to live not *autocratically* but *theocratically*, and specifically to worship under the “sole rule of God.”<sup>6</sup> Its background lies not so much in Greek philosophy as in the historical precedent forged during the Egyptian and Babylonian captivities of the Jewish people. In both historical instances the longing of the Jewish people, as repeatedly expressed in the OT Scriptures, was not so much for autonomy in general, but for the specific freedom of unrestricted worship of Yahweh in the very places and using the very forms that God had prescribed (e.g., Exod 4:23; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3; Ps 137; Isa 27:13; Dan 1:8–14; 6:6–28; etc.). This was the capital freedom, and so long as they had this, they regarded themselves as the slaves of none (so, e.g., John 8:31–36). Messiah came to Israel, then, offering absolute religious liberty, defined simply as the removal of every possible hindrance (whether spiritual, physical, economic, political, or hindrances of conscience) to full faith-participation of every member of the elect community in every duty prescribed by God.

Now it is surely a fact that not all of these freedoms were realized at the first advent of Christ, and that the bulk of the NT emphasis on freedom shifts to the removal of other sorts of hindrances to the believer’s spiritual service of worship; nonetheless a single unifying principle connects all of these various freedoms together: they all reflect a broader enablement of God’s people to worship God and serve the elect community without restriction.

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<sup>4</sup>See, e.g., Lincoln E. Galloway, *Freedom in the Gospel: Paul’s Exemplum in 1 Cor 9 in Conversation with the Discourses of Epictetus and Philo* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004); a condensation of this work can be found in *ibid.*, “Preaching Freedom to the Corinthians,” *Homiletic* 29 (Summer 2004): 15–23.

<sup>5</sup>Hurtado, “Freedom in the New Testament,” 5.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Hengel, *The Zealots: Investigating the Jewish Freedom Movement in the period from Herod I Until 70 A.D.*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T. Clark, 1976), 90–110.

## Freedom as Legal Standing

Although the NT regularly mentions socio-political slavery (the physical ownership/exploitation of persons and people groups) together with the obverse of freedom, the abolitionist finds no support at all for his cause in the whole New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor 7:20–24). And that is because one’s socio-economic legal status as a slave or a freedman only minimally affected the first-century believer’s ability to love and serve God in the context of the local church: an impoverished slave can be a full participant in the church (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; and Col 3:11), and in some sense even enjoyed certain advantages in God’s taxonomy. But there is another sort of legal bondage that is an obstacle to loving/serving God and one other, viz., the legal liability to punishment or guilt incurred via original sin and exacerbated further by instantiations of sin. Below we will discover that Paul’s greater concern in discussions of Christian liberty is practical in nature (i.e., it is the *ongoing experience of depravity* and not the *remembrance of old guilt* that tends to cripple the progress of sanctification); still, the legal cannot be neglected. There exists a legal prerequisite (justification) to the practical pursuit of holiness that is necessary for any practical pursuit of holiness to be truly good. Freedom from culpability makes practical holiness a joyful and free endeavor rather than an onerous one.

It is interesting that the term translated as *freedom* in Luke 4:18 (ἄφεσις) has as its primary lexical niche the idea of legal acquittal—a nuance highlighted in the universal English translation of ἄφεσις as *forgiveness* or *remission* in every other NT incidence of the term (Matt 26:28; Mark 1:4; 3:29; Luke 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Eph 1:7; Col 1:14; Heb 9:22; 10:18). This discovery gives reason to believe that while Christ’s offer of freedom to Israel included an offer of liberation from socio-political enslavement, it also held out something more: release from the onus of original guilt that that has been compounded by the Law.

Another common word group that helps to define biblical freedom, the λύτρον word group, also carries a legal nuance on at least one clear occasion: through *redemption* the believer has been liberated from the guilt that once stood as an insuperable obstacle to worship (see esp. Heb 9:12). The English terms *redeemed* and *redemption* might be as accurately rendered *free* and *freedom*, respectively. This word group is often overlooked in discussions of Christian liberty, but draws attention to an important aspect of the believer’s freedom. By our release from sin’s guilt we have been judicially placed into the body of Christ where we may freely worship God and serve others (2 Cor 12:13): the church is the primary locus for our pursuit of practical freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Paul’s favorite word group in discussions of freedom, the ἐλεύθερος word group, can also command a legal nuance, but only in contexts of secular/socio-political contexts (1 Cor 7:21; 12:13; Gal 3:28; 4:22–23; and Col 3:11). There is no clear use of the word group that speaks to the “freedom” in the sense of justification. Instead, Paul uses the ἐλεύθερος word group to reference experimental or practical freedom. It is to this topic that we now turn.

## Freedom as Experimental Empowerment

By saying that the most common usage of the ἐλεύθερος word group refers to *experimental* freedom in Paul’s writings, I mean that Paul sees freedom (or as I have defined it in this essay, *empowerment for Christian worship and service*) not primarily in legal release from sin’s guilt,

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<sup>7</sup>We will return to this word group below, though, because on two other instances, the term is clearly used in an experimental sense: the believer is freed from *lawlessness* (Titus 2:14) and an *empty way of life* (1 Pet 1:18).

but in the death to sin's tyranny experienced in the initial sanctification of all true believers.<sup>8</sup> While there surely is profit in meditating on Christ's death on the cross, the Gospel, and the grace of imputation, and while we are surely encouraged by remembering what Christ did **for** us, this is not the source of energy for Christian sanctification. Energy for sanctification instead comes from the assimilation of resurrection truth and the grace of impartation (the new nature), viz., what Christ has done **in** us and **to** us. The following is a brief defense of this sub-thesis followed by an analysis of its implications for the meaning of freedom from law.

### Freedom from Total Inability

At salvation, Christ grants to the believer two major benefits (sometimes called by the Reformers the *duplex beneficium* or “double benefit” of union with Christ): (1) an imputation/declaration of righteousness and (2) an impartation/creation of new life. The latter concept can be divided into two aspects, which are concurrent: the old man dies and the new man springs to life (Rom 6:1–23; 2 Cor 5:14–21; Eph 4:17–32; Col 2:13–3:17; 1 Pet 1:3–11; 1 John 3:2–10). It is the first aspect especially (the death of the old man) that supplies the fodder for the dominant freedom idea in the Pauline corpus.

The largest cluster of Pauline usage of ἐλεύθερος and its cognates occurs in Romans 6–8, Paul's longest and most formal treatise on the doctrine of sanctification. The first instance of the term does not occur until 6:18, but Paul's discussion of freedom extends all the way back to the beginning of the chapter. Having completed his Romans 4–5 discussion of the declarative benefits of redemption (justification), Paul segues to a new topic in 6:1 by raising a question that his readers might have been thinking: In view of the incredible glory Christ receives in justification, “shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” Note Paul's subtle suggestion that an exclusive fixation on justification, rather than encouraging holiness, may actually discourage holiness. Paul responds with a sharp negative and offers warrant for his answer with an appeal not to justification, but to the second great benefit of salvation: “*We died to sin,*” he says, and on the basis of *this* truth, “how can we live in sin any longer?” (v. 2). Gratitude for Christ's death **for** us might encourage godliness,<sup>9</sup> but by dying **with him** and receiving **in him** new life we are enabled and empowered to “live a new life” (v. 4).

Having introduced the theme of dying/living, Paul then spends the next chapter explaining these concepts. The “old man” (i.e., that totally depraved slave to sin in Adam) has died and a new man has replaced him, ending the believer's obligation to sin and making possible the systematic extirpation of the whole body of sin (v. 6). Though the word *freedom* is not used here, the concept is plain—we are no longer paralyzed by sin's crippling slavery (v. 6) and mastery (v. 9, 14) that we call *total inability*. Sin's tyranny has been broken, and we are capable of living godly lives. The fact of this new condition, then, leads logically (οὐν) to a series of logical imperatives:

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<sup>8</sup>The idea of practical freedom is broader, of course, than just freedom from the sin's power. We also find terms for freedom used in Scripture to denote the experience of freedom from illness (Luke 13:12), from fear (**Rom 13:3**; **Heb 2:15**), from incarceration (John 19:10; Acts 24:23; 26:32), from specific political/legal stipulations (**Matt 17:26**; **Rom 7:3**), from religious authority structures (**1 Cor 9:1, 19**), and from death (Acts 2:24). These all are examples of experimental freedom in some sense. But the two dominant NT emphases under consideration are freedom from *human inability* and from the *tyranny of the law*.

<sup>9</sup>As L. S. Chafer argues, justification is the “strongest possible incentive to holy living that human heart can know” (*Salvation: God's Marvelous Work of Grace* [New York: C. C. Cook, 1917], 71).

- “Count yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (v. 11).
- “Do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies so that you obey its evil desires” (v. 12).
- Do not use your body for sinful purposes but instead use it for righteous ones (v. 13).<sup>10</sup>

It is in verses 16–23, however, that a full-orbed discussion of freedom (including three uses of the word ἐλεύθερος) appears. Of particular interest is verse 20, where Paul comes closest to giving us a definition of freedom. As part of his contrast of the old and new states, he describes the unregenerate state as being “free from the *control* of righteousness.” This suggests, then, that freedom from sin is likewise freedom from sin’s totalitarian *control*, *obligation*, and *tyranny*. This freedom, which I join John Murray in calling “definitive sanctification,”<sup>11</sup> is the capital freedom that that Christians enjoy.

### Freedom from the Tyranny of the Law

The concept of Christian liberty takes on new complexity, however, when we notice that the Scripture writers treat synonymously the idea of freedom from *law* with freedom from *sin*:

- Paul starts this practice in Romans 6:14 where he effectively equates being “dead to sin” with being “not under law.” He then continues in 7:4, 6 to equate “death to sin” with being “made to die to the law” and being “released from the law” (Rom 7:4, 6), citing several Mosaic specifics. In Romans 8:2, finally, he conflates the two metaphors as “the law of sin and death.”
- In the book of Galatians Paul magnifies this idea further. The Mosaic Law, we find, was a temporary custodian until Christ came (Gal 3:24–25), and those under its power were “trapped” and in need of “freedom” (4:4–5 NLT—the Greek term here is ἀγοράζω). Paul insists, using language highly reminiscent of Romans 6, that the believer has “died to the law” and has been “crucified with Christ” (2:19–20), so that the “I” that once was (the old man in Adam) no longer exists, having been replaced by a new “I” (the new man in Christ), who lives to God. It is this experience that gives Paul the ground to argue that the Christian Gospel does not “promote sin” (2:17), even though it offers *freedom* from the Law (note that the term ἐλεύθερος is used in 2:4; 5:1) with all of its moral stipulations.
- In Colossians 2–3, Paul again intertwines death to sin and the extermination of the old man (2:20; 3:1–4) with freedom from the Law and all of its stipulations—circumcision, special days, “touching,” “tasting,” and in fact all its rules (2:16–17, 20–21).

The interconnection of freedom from sin (which is cast in Scripture as an eminently experimental concept) and freedom from law (which is, *prima facie*, a legal/judicial idea) has produced a number of competing theories about sanctification. It is here that the whole question of Christian liberty is ultimately decided. Note the following options:

- (1) Some, especially in the holiness/Keswick community, suggest that the arrival of grace has completely transformed Christian sanctification. “Striving” to keep laws of every sort

<sup>10</sup>See chart appended to this presentation for a further elaboration of this point in four representative texts.

<sup>11</sup>John Murray, “Definitive Sanctification,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 2.1 (April 1967): 5–21. This article has since been divided into two distinct essays, “Definitive Sanctification” (cited above) and “Agency in Definitive Sanctification,” both in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:277–84 and 2:285–93, respectively.

(but especially the Mosaic Law) is the enemy of sanctification. Instead, the believer must “reckon” on a new “position,” realizing that Christ has already done everything necessary not only for justification but also for sanctification. Sanctification is reduced to a forensic event (reckoning or presenting oneself to God as a “channel” for Christ to live out the Christian life by proxy on the believer’s behalf). By “letting go and letting God” the totally consecrated/surrendered/yielded/filled believer need no longer worry about rules: Christ does all my living for me by proxy. **This is the essence of true freedom in this model: I am free from all obligation to obey rules.**<sup>12</sup>

The tension with this view is that NT sanctification is overwhelmingly cast in terms of *discipline*, *austerity*, and *obedience to God’s law* (in addition to the texts in the appendix, see Rom 8:13; 1 Cor 6:18; 9:27; 2 Cor 7:1; Phil 2:12–13; 3:13–14; 1 Thess 4:3; 2 Tim 2:22; Titus 2:12; 1 John 3:3; etc.). We also observe that the Bible frequently equates freedom with a new kind of service/slavery (Rom 6:18, 22; 1 Cor 9:19; Gal 5:13) and with adherence to a new law (1 Cor 7:19; 9:21; Gal 6:2; Jas 1:25; 2:12)—an easier, lighter, and less burdensome law (a la Matt 11:29–30; 1 John 5:3), but a law nonetheless. Also, and importantly, the Scriptures warn us against spurious kinds of “freedom” that are really expressions of “lawlessness” (ἀνομία—Rom 6:19), fleshly indulgence (Gal 5:13), and “cover-ups for evil” (2 Pet 2:19).

- (2) In the Reformed community, a similar idea exists, but with a few differences. In some segments of Reformed life, a sharp hermeneutical bifurcation is made in the whole Bible between *law* and *gospel*. The imperatives of Scripture are collectively “law”; Christian indicatives are “gospel.” Specific to our discussion, Christ’s successful completion of the demands of law to free from the terrible guilt of law is *gospel*. While law may continue to direct unbelievers to Christ and offer behavioral guidelines for believers, believers are free from the sanctions connected with his inability to keep the law. In this model **the essence of freedom is not the removal of total inability, but the realization that Christ has fulfilled the law, stripping the law of all the awfulness associated with it. Freedom takes the form of sneering in the face of law because my inability to keep the law, while ongoing and persistent, has been rendered irrelevant.** When I am frustrated by my own sinfulness, my response should be to “preach the Gospel to myself,” reminding myself of what he has done for me *extra nos*.<sup>13</sup>

This second view demands a more surgical treatment than the previous. And that is because in the realm of guilt and justification, it is most emphatically correct—if I begin to think that my post-conversion sin has broken my faith-union with Christ and my righteous standing before God, then the remedy *is* to “preach Christ to myself” and remind myself that Christ’s death *for me* (*extra nos*) has perfectly and permanently fit me

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<sup>12</sup>Most adherents to Keswick theology (and its theological cousins, the Victorious Life Movement and Chaferianism) have tended to live better than they taught. But some come very close to denying the need for any visible progress in obedience (e.g., Zane Hodges and Chuck Swindoll). Historical precedents include Luther’s nemesis, John Agricola, and also Robert Sandeman, whose deficiencies were exposed by Andrew Fuller.

<sup>13</sup>For a representative of this model see Tullian Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011). For a very perceptive analysis of this model see Jesse Martin’s three-part critique at <http://thecripplegate.com/what-is-the-lawgospel-distinction/>, <http://thecripplegate.com/3-reasons-the-lawgospel-distinction-is-unlawful/>, and <http://thecripplegate.com/is-jesus-plus-nothing-a-formula-for-sanctification/>.

for heaven. However, if I have lost communion with God by engaging in post-conversion sins, it is not enough to remind myself what Christ has done for me (*extra nos*); instead, Paul indicates that I should internalize what Christ has done *in me* (*intra nos*): he has taken away my bondage to corruption, giving me the freedom to, with all diligence, wage war with sin and to cultivate Christian virtues (see esp. the appendix to this paper).

- (3) Others in the Reformed community address the apparent conflict between the believer's simultaneous *freedom from* law and *continuing obligation to* law by dividing the Mosaic Law into parts: (1) Some distinguish between specific *kinds* of laws, of which some persist, and others have ceased. The most common expression of this scheme is the partition of the Law into civil, ceremonial and moral divisions. Others (2) suggest that the Law be distinguished according to *usage*, normally the civil use (the first use of the Law), the pedagogical use (the second use of the Law), and the normative use (the third use of the Law). **The essence of freedom here is freedom from futile, time/culture bound, or excessively oppressive aspects of the Law.**

This model successfully explains how law can be simultaneously abolished and in force. It cannot successfully answer texts which assert that the whole Law without division has been abolished (Jas 2:10; Gal 5:3); nor can it explain the variety of specific laws that have been abolished (e.g., Paul's ambivalence toward the Sabbath, which is classified as "moral" in almost every Reformed scheme). It also has difficulty explaining the connection between the Law of Moses with the problem of human depravity (see above).

- (4) A superior explanation, which has for decades been championed by Doug Moo,<sup>14</sup> views the Mosaic Law as the embodiment, the primary instrument, and the "power" of Old Covenant (1 Cor 15:56). This Law, together with the covenant that it represented, brought enormous angst to those it governed because it supplied "no help in conquering evil desire" (Col 2:23; cf. also Rom 8:3; Gal 3:21). It's not that the Mosaic Law was bad (Rom 7:12, 16; 1 Tim 1:8), but it represented a covenant the terms of which could be kept only in the hypothetical realm (Lev 18:5). By completing the requirements of the Law, Christ abolished it. This does *not* mean that he made a blanket suspension of all rules so that Christians are "Gospel antinomians" answerable only to private, non-propositional guidance of the Spirit (so esp. 1 Cor 7:19 and 9:21); instead, **he destroyed the onus of the whole Mosaic system, complete with all the guilt, frustration, power, and sanctions by which it crushed all who were "under" it (esp. Rom 10:4; also Rom 7:6; 2 Cor 3:12–17; Eph 2:14–15; Col 2:14). This is the essence of freedom from law in this final model**, and it seems to explain best the full range of biblical data.

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<sup>14</sup>See esp. Moo's "The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988): 203–18. Moo offers several prequels to this essay as early as 1983, and others afterward, but this is probably the one that cemented his view on the evangelical map. Other key contributions that more-or-less take Moo's view are Stephen J. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) and Thomas R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993). For a fine summary assessment of views see William W. Combs, "Paul, the Law, and Dispensationalism: An Introduction," essay presented at the Mid-America Conference on Preaching (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Seminary, 18 October 2012), available at <http://dbts.edu/pdf/macp/2012/Combs,%20Paul%20the%20Law%20and%20Dispensationalism.pdf>.

## Freedom as a Way of Life

We come now (and finally) to the question that dominates most discussions of Christian liberty: What are the implications of Christian liberty on how I live within the Christian community? If freedom in Scripture has primarily to do with empowerment for worship/service by eliminating (1) total inability and (2) Mosaism, what does commitment to Christian freedom look like?

Negatively...

- Christian freedom does not mean I can do anything at all. We have shown this to be theologically impossible and exegetically unsustainable: rules and laws remain an integral and everyday part of civil structure and Christian sanctification.
- Christian freedom does not mean that there are no extrabiblical authority structures that can tell me what I can and cannot do. Scripture tells the believer that “living as free men” occurs in the context of “submitting to every authority instituted among men” (1 Pet 2:13, 16). Scripture tells children to “obey parents” (Eph 6:1) and church members to “obey [pastors] who have the rule over them” (Heb 13:17), etc. And in a stunning concession to the authority of the hypocritical religious teachers of his day, Jesus even told his disciples to “obey *them* and do everything *they* tell you” (Matt 23:2).
- Christian freedom does not mean no one can ever manufacture rules in areas where the Scriptures are silent (what I call a “normative” application of the liberty texts). When the Scriptures speak of “things indifferent” (διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν) in Rom 14:1, it speaks to (1) *Mosaic stipulations that* (2) “no longer matter” and that (3) *God has clearly countermanded*—eating meat, observing days, circumcision, etc. (Rom 14:2ff; cf. 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 2:4ff; 5:1ff; 6:15; Col 2:16ff). There is no exegetical warrant for expanding this definition—and certainly not to defend bikinis, R-rated movies, grinding, drinking hard liquor, and rap music. The practice of expanding the διακρίσεις διαλογισμῶν to include everything on which Scripture is silent quite simply has no warrant.<sup>15</sup>
- Christian freedom does not mean, either, that I can flout the liberties that have accrued to the believer in the wake of the Law’s dissolution. Over and over again the NT writers warn against any assertion of liberty that undermines the gospel (1 Cor 9:19–23; 10:27–33), causes weak believers to stumble (Rom 14:13, 15, 20–21; 1 Cor 8:7–13), creates disharmony or inhibits Christian development (Rom 14:19; 1 Cor 10:23), or functions as a cover-up for evil (1 Pet 2:16).

Positively...

- The most basic application of Christian freedom is that I can now do things that were prohibited under the Mosaic Law but which cannot be reasonably demonstrated to be part of the eternal law of God or the law of Christ. I have been freed from the power of sin and its primary instrument, the Law, to live under a new and more gracious rule that, unlike Law, offers great practical “help in conquering evil desire” (Col 2:23).
- It is also biblically demonstrable that a “regulative” expansion of the freedom texts is also commended in Scripture. What I mean by this is that other *divinely sanctioned* activities, totally detached from Mosaism, can also be legitimate areas of freedom (esp. 1 Cor 8:7–

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<sup>15</sup>For a further elaboration of this idea see my article, “Weakness or Wisdom? Fundamentalists and Romans 14:1–15:13,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (2007): 29–49.

13; but also poss. 11:3–15).

- There is another key application of Christian freedom, however, that has been almost totally lost in our current evangelical scene. If, as I have argued, the primary idea of “freedom” in Paul is liberation from total depravity such that I am *empowered to worship and serve a new master, Jesus Christ, and to serve and edify the new community, the Church*, then the most visible application of Christian freedom (or to use the words of the title of this presentation, the primary manifestation of commitment to Christian freedom) should be my persistent use of the power now resident within me to do, with all diligence and discipline, everything that God requires, and most especially to promote the interests of the *Gospel* and the *Church* (note again the appendix).

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing has been a faithful attempt to survey the whole New Testament teaching on Christian liberty in an attempt to discover what a full-orbed commitment to liberty should look like in the Christian church. It has discovered very little of the popular ideas of liberty as (1) a bulwark against Pharisaism or (2) a kind of juvenile Christian “Bill of Rights.” While I concede that approximations of Pharisaism have plagued and continue to plague the Christian church, I deny for lack of evidence that the NT theme of Christian liberty offers any substantial answer to this problem.

Instead, Christian liberty has everything to do with the removal of the guilt, frustration, power, obligation, and sanctions of the Mosaic Law as an instrument of the Old Covenant and as the representative power of the law of sin and death. Freedom means that the believer has been loosed from the crushing power of total depravity, and had been effectively empowered by Christ’s work *intra nos* to love and serve God and the Christian community. This is what I understand the Scriptures to mean by “Christian freedom,” and we do well to be committed to it.

**APPENDIX 1: THE INDICATIVE & IMPERATIVE OF FREEDOM  
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

<b>Passage</b>	<b>The Indicative Dynamic of Freedom</b>		<b>The Causal Hinge</b>	<b>The Imperative Expression of Freedom</b>
	<b>Positive Statement: Regeneration</b>	<b>Negative Statement: Definitive Sanctification</b>		
<b>Romans 6:1–14</b>	All of us ... have been baptized into Christ Jesus. [We were raised] to walk in newness of life.	We died to sin. Our old self was crucified.	οὐν	Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life. Offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.
<b>Ephesians 4:22–32</b>	You [have been] renewed in the spirit of your mind; [You] put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.	You laid aside the old self.	διό	Put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry. Do not give the devil a foothold. Steal no longer, but work... Do not let unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful... Do not grieve the Holy Spirit Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, with every form of malice. Be kind & compassionate to one another, forgiving each other.
<b>Colossians 3:5–17</b>	[You] have put on the new self.	“You laid aside the old self with its evil practices.”	οὐν	Put to death, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires & greed, which is idolatry. Rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie. Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience. Bear with each other and forgive all grievances you have against one another. Put on love.
<b>2 Peter 1:3–7</b>	[You] may become partakers of the divine nature ...	“... having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust”	αὐτὸ τοῦτο	Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; to goodness, knowledge; to knowledge, self-control; to self-control, perseverance; to perseverance, godliness; to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.