

Crossing Workplace Slavery with Freedom in Christ

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The summer before I experienced the course "Crossings from Galatians: Jesus Means Freedom," I took a course called "Group Processes in Organizations." There to my surprise I learned that I, a high school librarian with a staff of two besides myself, was a manager. Further, I learned I was a transformational sort of manager in a basically transactional sort of organization. So I came to the slavery and freedom of Galatians steeped in discoveries and insights from the earlier class. It was very easy to see the slavery of the law within the transactional management style; the two quotes at the

beginning of this paper I have heard used at work more than once. The second example is my experience. I was well aware of the slavery to the law of the group inherent in the transformational style when I wrote this paper, but recently it has been made more vivid as I work with a planning committee for whom the transformational style is law.

It takes hindsight for me to realize that the freedom of the Spirit of Christ is at work in our office. Again, the paper's second to the last example is my own experience during the earlier class. Reflecting now, I realize that a recent office crisis was not dealt with transactionally or transformationally, but with the loving concern God's children have for each other in Christ.

SLAVERY AND FREEDOM IN THE PYRAMID OF POWER“Well, that's why they pay us the big bucks, to make the hard decisions.” “We're not expected to win popularity contests you know.” The cliches from the other division supervisors followed him into the elevator. The rumors had been right. The company continued to feel the effects of the recession, and drastic cuts were needed in its expenditures to pull it out of the red by the end of the year. Each division was required to cut its expenditures by the same percentage, and it was his task to decide where those cuts would come in his division. He wanted to protest that the work his people did was essential to the long term survival of the company, and these cuts could cripple the company's competitive edge for years to come.

But surrounded by his fellow supervisors and before his superiors who had determined this action he remained silent. Almost all the others could make similar claims, after all. Having reached his position on the corporate ladder, he thought it unwise to risk its loss by antagonizing those who

could keep him there or help him climb further. The current crisis would not last forever and he must protect his position. Still, he had hoped that this position would give him the power to further the welfare of everyone under him. Instead, many people under him would soon be without jobs, and which ones was his decision. Right now he wasn't feeling very powerful at all. Rather, he felt like a puppet whose superiors held all the strings, a tool of the powers above him just as those below him were seen as his tools. He felt a slave to the system.

Hot tears welled in my eyes as I walked away from that senseless interview. I needed answers and, trustingly, I expected to have them at last. Instead, I had received rebuke and insult. I had become a librarian less than a year before when my predecessor resigned under the pressures of the upcoming move to new quarters and what she described as lack of support from the administration. Students and teachers depended on the availability of the materials our library housed. It had been an awkward and frustrating year trying to operate in the cramped temporary quarters, and the staff was determined to move to the new facility with as little disruption to service as possible. But to do so I needed to know when the move would take place and what assistance would be available and for how long. Repeated requests to my principal were answered with I-don't-knows. The central administration staff were not giving him any information. This, rumor said, was not unusual, for the principal was not too popular with the higher powers. Teachers claimed he had taken their part too often.

In frustration the principal sent me to talk to the administrator who oversaw all the new building projects. This gentleman informed me that since he was only weeks away from his retirement and a replacement had not been named, I should

make an appointment with the assistant superintendent to find my answers. I did. I had gone to the interview feeling that at last I would be talking to someone who knew what was happening and when and how. At last here I could find the information I needed to plan our move. Instead, the man scolded me for bringing my questions to him and said the principal should supply that information. He went on to imply that the principal's lack of the needed information reflected his basic incompetence.

I left the interview with my questions still unanswered, feeling like a pawn in someone's cruel game and angry at myself for letting myself be so used. Fuming, I reviewed what I had learned. I had learned that my principal needed support. I had learned never to vary from chain of command. I had learned never to trust anyone in central administration. The traditional management style in this country is the transactional style. Its basis is legalistic. Its language, "if you do this, then I will do that" employs the same terms as legal contracts. The manager has agreed to be responsible for the accomplishment of some task involving the combined efforts of others for completion. For the transactional manager, this implies controlling the actions of others in order to reach the desired end. It is in this need to control that the enslavement within the system can most easily be seen. It is generally much easier to control things than to control people.

Therefore, the temptation to think of people in terms of things or categories rather than as individuals may become a convenience for the transactional manager. This is by no means a conscious decision on the part of the manager, but a trait of human nature and of the management system that can be enhanced under pressures of deadlines and distractions until it becomes habit. For example, it is easy to ignore a

valid protest when it comes from a chronic complainer, and a good idea can be overlooked because it came from “just a janitor” or “just a clerk.”

The focus on the work itself leads the manager to ignore the needs and concerns of the people who must accomplish it. So those people become objects rather than persons. Meanwhile, the manager herself becomes a slave to the task. She cannot think of others as tools for the task without suffering the same fate herself. Rather than an individual she becomes the manager for whatever is at hand and the title becomes her identity. This is how she is seen by her superiors and how she comes to see herself. If she retires or loses her position, she finds herself bereft of any identity, at a loss to know who or what is left without the work.

A further temptation is to rely solely on the power of authority to one's control. The manager was put in charge so things will be done the manager's way, and anyone who disagrees can find work elsewhere. Likewise, the transactional manager must honor directives and decisions handed down from her superiors whether or not she is in full agreement. So to retain or advance her position she must bow to the same power of authority she invokes, trapped within the system.

The transactional manager risks confinement in the world of self. Attitudes and habits exercised at least eight hours every working day on the job become ingrained and carry into life outside work. If people at work exist as tools for a task, people outside work can be seen in a similar light. They are identified by the task they perform rather than as a person performing a task, such as mailman, taxi driver, or checker. Even in social relationships people can be viewed in light of being either assets or detriments to the manager's

social position or network of work related contacts. Both social and work-related associations are viewed by the standard of what benefit they can hold for the manager. The legal obligation to perform the task subtly shifts to the sacred duty to perform "my holy task, do my job" above all else so that I am seen as more than worthy of all consequent rewards. The work becomes an object of worship around which the manager's life revolves and "my ability to do that work well" becomes a justification for existence. "Without me that place would fall apart" becomes the manager's creed. There is no room for other gods in this little universe, even a real one. All others, be they family, friends, fellow employees, or even the employer, exist only to serve the dual god of work-self and its entrapping law that work comes first.

Even the law of work is too demanding to be met by its worshiper, and the god of work-self cannot stand against its own standards. Deadlines are missed, important memos are mislaid, meetings must be rescheduled, and items are forgotten. The manager cannot perform even the basic duties perfectly and therefore, truly is not entitled to the contractual rewards. Beyond that are the other direct commands of a very real and jealous God, the first of which is violated by the mere existence of the work-self god. The manager by placing work-self first has divorced herself to a twin god that leads only to destruction. The real and just God tolerates no such objects of worship and seals the divorce by pronouncing the manager cursed. [As St. Paul understands that term in Galatians, that means] standing in the wrong place in relation to God and destined to stay so forever.

There is no way the little god of work-self can overcome the curse of the real God. It takes a real God to cancel such a curse, a real God who knows what it means to be in the right

place with God, to be blessed. The real God knows the right relationship is not seen in one of servant or slave to master, or employee to employer, but in that of child to parent. Only the real God can rescue the manager from her curse and at the same time show what it is to be a child of God. This He did when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, placed Himself under the law and took its curse on Himself and suffered the total alienation from God that is the rightful place of the manager, and all managers and all who are managed, and all created life that had been cursed by sin. Jesus canceled the curse by His death and triumphant resurrection and restoration to the blessed, right relationship with the Father. No longer under the law in any sense, He is free to show what it is to be an heir in God's kingdom.

Having taken our place, Jesus makes that same freedom available to all who trust Him to supply it, even the manager. As an heir led by the Spirit of Christ, the manager is free of enslavement to work and self, free to put the real God first in all things and free to see others as fellow heirs in God's kingdom. It is in her relationship to God that the manager finds reason for existence and the purpose for actions. The work becomes opportunity to express that relationship. Others are no longer tools to be used, but fellow redeemed to be encouraged, loved, and brought to understand the freedom that is theirs also through faith in Jesus. People become individuals performing their own tasks: Walt, the mailman; Henry, the taxi driver; Shelly, the checker. They are important to the manager because they are important to God, important enough to die for.

The transformation management style encourages all members of a group to work together for a common goal. Since the manager has been transformed from slave to law to heir of God, she

also is free to choose a management style appropriate to her God-centered existence. The transformational style may be useful with the knowledge that she is not bound by it. But she is free also to use a transformational style even in the midst of an organization where the transactional form is expected. She is free to accept advice from Mike, the janitor, or Debbie, the clerk, and even to seek it and give them credit for it. She is free to listen to Claude, the complainer, or not to listen, as the Spirit of Christ leads her. She is free to acknowledge the needs and concerns of others. She no longer needs to control people. She is free to move beyond even the transformational style where the welfare of the group or organization is given priority to consider the welfare of individuals within the group. She is free to assign her task high priority or to acknowledge the task of another as of greater importance. The basis of her task is no longer merely the legal agreement; the basis is found now in her freedom to be God's child in the given time and place in which she finds herself. Her language has become that of freedom, "because God has redeemed me, therefore I can..."

The move was a disaster. All of the alternative plans composed by the library staff were swept away with orders to move within two days just before the start of school with the "help" of college students hired for summer work on the last days of their jobs. The task of settling into the new quarters, which should have taken less than a week, took over two months.

Some years and two superintendents later, I again sat in the office of a central office administrator. To fulfill an assignment I was to interview an administrator (not my immediate superior) about group processes and leadership. Following the instructor's advice, I interviewed the superintendent. He was a bit late and apologized. We sat at a

conference table in his office, not with a massive desk between us. He listened to my questions attentively and answered candidly, giving examples from his experience. He spoke of the strategic planning committees composed of individuals from the community, as well as parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and students working together to determine direction for the district. Decisions made by those committees would be honored even if he disagreed with them. He noted that he will listen carefully to what another has to say even if the other obviously dislikes him, because what is said can have value.

He extended the time of the interview slightly until I had exhausted my questions, and then added a bit of district background that became essential to my paper. This time as I walked away from the administration building, I felt encouraged for the future of the district. A transformational leader was at work transforming a formerly transactional organization.

There is still a long way to go in reconciling old factions and breaking the bonds of old habits, but there is hope that these things can be done because the superintendent is not only a transformational leader but a man who has been transformed from slave to heir by Christ.

As the elevator rose, he clutched the proposal more firmly. It was a risk. He could lose his position. He had decided not to make the decisions on what and who must be eliminated without input from those affected. He had told his managers what reductions were required and instructed them to find ways to cut expenditures with minimum reduction in production for the division. Further, he had insisted that they involve as many of the workers as time allowed to help in making the determinations. Meanwhile, he had followed his own

instructions talking to those who knew the requirements best, being open and honest about what he needed. Now the results were in his hand. He had discovered ways to cut costs he never would have considered on his own. It was not the conventional way of doing things in the company, but in Christ he found the freedom to be unconventional. In what he believed was a Spirit-led decision, management in his division had agreed to a temporary cut in pay, himself included.

Now it remained to be seen if the proposal could be accepted. The door opened at the top floor.

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