

# Elert on Freedom

Colleagues,

Within hours of this posting Marie and I, d.v., will be on our way to the Holy Land to celebrate Christmas in “the city of David called Bethlehem.” We’re in a group of 27 folks, many of them friends or relatives—some from the USA, some from Germany. Our hosts in the Holy Land will be Palestinian Lutherans—yes, they’re there! It’s touristy, sure, but also with some elements of pilgrimage and study in the mix. Crossings Internet manager, Robin Morgan, is part of the group, so there’s no one taking care of the ThTh store till we get back on Jan. 4.

Elert’s 1953 essay, sent out two days ago as [ThTh 29](#) brought some interesting and interested response. So I’ll offer some more of the same to cover the upcoming 3 Thursdays—Dec. 17, 24, 31. It’s my translation of Elert’s chapter on freedom which nicely has 3 parts for 3 Thursdays. It’s from DAS CHRISTLICHE ETHOS, his theological ethics published in 1949. A version of this translation appeared some years ago in LUTHERAN FORUM. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

## Section #36: Freedom

### 1. Just what is Christian Freedom?

The distinctive quality of a Christian’s “new life” is that it unfolds under the mercy of God. Since mercy and law are mutually

exclusive, when God justifies us by mercy, life under the law comes to an end. Thus the Christian's new ethos [=the new quality, the new value, of our life by virtue of what God's mercy says about us] can be nothing less than a life of freedom. But what is freedom?

The popular 18th century Wandsbeker Bote answered that question this way: "Those who are free are not those who can do whatever they want. Rather those are free who can want to do what they ought to do." Here we see freedom portrayed in the manner of classic German philosophical idealism, and idealism's debt to Luther is undeniably evident. For this is the concept of freedom that Luther advocated in his debate with Erasmus on the freedom of human will. Luther's point, however, was to show that no human being possesses it.

If freedom were viewed in that way—to be able to do what we ought to do—we could conclude that our transformation from being an "old" creature to being a "new" one was an act of liberation whereby new creatures gained possession of the freedom tragically absent in their old existence. To be able to do what you ought to do would amount to the sort of freedom needed to fulfill the law. Were that the case, then the difference between the new and the old person would amount to this: the new one can do what the old one cannot do, but what both ought to do, namely, fulfill God's law. And in this way the law would finally get its due.

Yet if that were the case, then Kant [the father of philosophical idealism] and Luther, despite their divergent perspectives on human nature [discussed earlier in this book], would in the end wind up at the same place. The only difference would be that Luther (and not just he, but St. Paul and finally all Christians as well) takes a frightfully roundabout way—through Christ, faith, repentance, through a complicated

collection of concepts and real (or just imagined) processes—to get to the same goal of freedom that for the rational moral agent in Kant’s thought was no problem at all. Kant saw freedom as self-evident; it is not the goal, but the natural starting-point, for everything ethical: “Since you ought to do what is right, it follows that you are able [=free] to do so.”

“People are free,” said Friedrich Schiller, “even if they were born in chains.” A human being is free, and does not need first to be set free. The truth of this cannot be proved, but we all experience it when we take an “ought” that someone imposes on us and turn it into an “I will” of our own. Thereby we want to do what we ought to do. Is there anything that could thwart such freedom?

Kant himself does acknowledge some opposition to such freedom arising from what he calls “radical evil,” and so he also requires a kind of “rebirth.” Yet this occurs via “self-improvement,” even though it does take considerable effort. In any case, if the new creation of a Christian had no other purpose than to put such freedom into service for God’s law, then idealism’s path toward that goal is much more direct, and clearly preferable, to the one proposed by Paul and Luther.

Nevertheless, as close as these two paths seem to come to each other, there are two different concepts of freedom involved. These differences in freedom arise from different meanings ascribed to the law. The unconditionally valid law of reason stands in contrast to the unconditionally valid law of God. Here is the significant distinction: the law of reason is perceived to be a mandate addressed to our will, while the the law of God is seen as a divine verdict that condemns us.

Under the law of reason, the quality of our personal ethos depends on whether or not we decide to fulfill it. God’s law, by

contrast, gives us no choice, but rather discloses what our ethical quality already is, namely, our inevitable opposition to God, and thereby it exposes our guilt. Our un-freedom here is that we are already under a guilty verdict from God, and therefore we are not free.

If God, when changing us from old to new creatures, sets us free, that too can happen only by virtue of another divine verdict. Seen from this vantage point, such a transaction is indeed an act of justification, wherein God acquits us of our guilt, making right what was wrong, and therefore changing our un-freedom into freedom.

Christian freedom is freedom from guilt by virtue of God's verdict. That is the concept of freedom in the Epistle to the Galatians, and it has nothing at all to do with idealism's freedom. Human ethos under the law is always life under a curse (Gal. 3:10,13), since the mark of guilt remains upon it. It therefore amounts to a life of slavery (5:1). The freedom brought about by Christ, which we receive when we believe him, is our redemption from this slavery (3:13 and 4:5). We are free people, not because we can now do what we could not do before, namely, fulfill the law, but because we no longer even exist for the law (2:19). It is not that we are free for the law as Kant maintains, but we are free from the law as Paul proclaims.

---

## **2. The dimensions of Christian Freedom.**

Christian freedom is free access to God, access that was previously blocked off for us. From God's side the blockade consisted of the law's threats, God's own wrath, yes, all the structures of law that order our lives; from our side it was our sin, unfaith, and fear (Romans 5:2; 8:13; Ephesians 2:18). Christian freedom arises where Kant's rationally moral person

least expects it: in our relationship with God. When we now face God, we are free, since the divine judge has acquitted us. This acquittal alters the value of everything that we are, just as the law always puts the value judgment, "sinner," on our entire self. Consequently everything done by an acquitted sinner is an act of a free person. But then the question arises: how can we live day by day in the freedom given to us in this divine verdict?

If freedom means being free from the law, then it also means living apart from the law. Is that then a lawless life? The term "lawless" would mislead us, since in common parlance it carries the same meaning as the New Testament term *anomia*, that is, living in opposition to the law. A life without law, however, is not necessarily a life in opposition to the law. We need think only of Paul's words that "Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires" (Rom. 2:14).

Instinctively, when we hear of living without the law, we think we are staring into the abyss of libertinism. Paul, too, sees this abyss, but its danger in no way compels him to retract any part of his doctrine of freedom. Freedom is itself a dangerous commodity. Why? Because our total acquittal includes our flesh, because "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit," and because our experience as new creatures is that the battle with the old self never ends. Flesh needs to be subdued, to be put to death. The old self needs the threats of the law of retribution.

However, the new self, which is destined to overcome the old, is precisely the free person who no longer needs the law, whose newness, in fact, depends on how completely the law is kept at a distance. You do not banish the spectre of libertinism by subjecting the new self again to the law's dominion. Instead, the real antidote for libertinism is to be led "by the Spirit." "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal.

5:13-18; Rom. 7:1-17).

Here we find the lines converging from the various paths we followed to comprehend the new creation earlier in this book. Like all of God's creating, the new creation is ex nihilo (from nothing). Yet this refers not merely to the one distinct moment when it began. A necessary part of its newness is that it must continue distancing itself from the old existence under the law. Our experience of the newness in our day-to-day living comes as the Holy Spirit's power continues to renew us. That power is God's personal presence with us. God's Spirit, not God's law, is the new active subject at the center of our new lives.

It is inconceivable that the Spirit of God as the formative agent for our new life could be subject to any law. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). Even the restoration of the image of God within us does not take place according to some divine command, but rather in conformity with the image of Christ. That image is the "Christ in us," not a new lawgiver, but the personified measure of all things, as he was for his first disciples.

All of these paths lead finally into that free space where no law could restrict, threaten, or even set limits. This is the freedom of God's new creatures, and all the paths flowing into that freedom originate in God.

It would seem at first glance, at least according to the apostolic witness, that the word freedom can mean a host of different things. God's verdict of acquittal frees us from guilt and thus also from the accusing power of the law. According to Paul, the law therefore no longer has any claim upon us, and thus Christian freedom amounts to freedom from the law's jurisdiction.

Because the law constituted a whole way of life for the people

of the Israelite theocracy, including circumcision and cultic regulations, one can say that the early church graphically demonstrated a second meaning of the word freedom when it annulled these regulations, even though that entailed coping with internal opposition (Gal. 2:3, 11ff.; 5:1ff.; Acts 15). Paul, of course, held that it was not external annulment that counted, but internal freedom. It was such freedom that enabled him, in consideration of others, even to continue his own external practice of the old regulations in some cases (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor. 9:20).

There is still another freedom that follows when guilt is absolved. To be guilty means to be a sinner. Consequently, living without guilt means not being a sinner. Here our earlier question, how life under grace can be lived practically in day-to-day existence, takes on greater intensity. For living according to God's own verdict now has to mean living as a non-sinner. Our lived freedom from sin must correspond to our believed freedom from guilt. This is no mere utopia, as we can see when we remember that life under grace is lived by faith. [More needs to be said about this below.] Our point at present is only to show that Christian freedom also entails freedom from the dominion of sin (John 8:34ff.; Rom. 6:11ff.).

So we have the freedom of faith, freedom of the Spirit, freedom from guilt, freedom from the law's jurisdiction, freedom from cultic regulations, freedom from sin and its dominion – a multiplicity of freedoms, it seems. But that list is not yet complete. There is one more freedom which makes the apostle Paul groan as he thinks about it. It is not yet present, but its very approach almost transports him into ecstasy. It is not yet here, for the children of God, along with the rest of creation, are still subject to decay, bound by suffering, lying in earthly chains, since they too must suffer travail along with the entire creation.

But this freedom will come and redeem those who wait for it, once more, in linkage with all creatures. Such freedom will bestow upon them all doxa (=glory), the genuine glow of the freedom of the children of God. It will be not only a spiritual, but also a bodily, event since physical substance is our common denominator with all other creatures (Rom. 8:18ff.). It will be total freedom, anthropological as well as cosmic, not a private affair just for the children of God, but an event arising from the collapse of the entire cosmos with all its "rulers and authorities and powers" (1 Cor. 15:24), every one of which has oppressed, coerced, and dominated the powerless. This collapse of the cosmos is not the ultimate natural catastrophe. It is instead the conclusion of Christ's battle with his adversaries, the cosmic powers that rule in darkness along with all the other forces of the cosmos, "whatever their names may be" (Eph. 1:21; 6:12; Col. 2:15).

It might appear that in this last paragraph we have gotten rather far away from the simple, transparent beginnings of our new ethos, namely, our encounter with Christ, the friend of sinners, and our master-disciple relationship with him. Nevertheless, such a cosmic expansion of expectations for freedom not only corresponds to the apocalyptic vision of the Son of Man himself as portrayed in the synoptic gospels (Mark 13; Matt. 24). It also turns our attention back once more to the full picture of the earthly Christ, who is the starting point for the entire apostolic witness. For us he is grace and truth in person by his befriending sinners and pardoning them. And his forgiveness is curiously and yet inseparably linked to his helping people in physical need (Matt. 9:2ff.).

When John the Baptist asks for his credentials, Jesus reminds him that not only is the good news being preached to the poor, but also that all sorts of illnesses are being healed and even the dead are raised (Luke 7:22). Whoever comes to him with a

burden goes away unburdened (Matt. 11:28). Grace for him is not merely forgiveness. When he encounters pain, tears, hunger, anxiety, perplexity, or misery, he "is moved with compassion." He bears their grief and carries their sorrows. Even the pain of animals he links to human suffering (Luke 13:15; 14:5). Consequently, when he dies the whole creation mourns (Matt. 27:51; Luke 22:45). His resurrection breaches the massive cosmic wall that encircles us, thereby opening our view into a freedom where all cosmic requirements and limits are gone.

There is thus a straight line from the friend of sinners to the one who sets the whole creation free, the triumphant Christ of Col. 2:15. This is the way his first witnesses saw, believed and proclaimed him: the one who opposed not only sin, but also the princes of this world; the one who cleansed them not only from guilt, but also from leprosy; the one whom even the Roman empire, through the mouth of Pontius Pilate (John 19:1f.), had to acknowledge as king; the one who abolished death (2 Tim. 1:10); the one who "led captivity captive" (Eph. 4:8); a priest not according to legal requirements but by the power of an indestructible life (Heb. 7:16); the bright morning star (Rev. 22:16); the one who "called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9); the one who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18); the one who holds the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:18); the one whose kingdom will have no end, as the ancient church confesses in the Nicene Creed.

This is the Son of God who, when "he makes you free, you are free indeed" (John 8:36), and it is from him that the children of God await their total freedom, righteousness, sanctification, imperishability and immortality (1 Cor. 15:53; Eph. 6:24). All of these are freedoms from something: from guilt, from blemish, from decay, from death. They add up to be the total negation of all negations, the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom.

8:27). We cannot yet envision the whole picture, because “it does not yet appear what we shall be” (1 John 3:2).

---

### **3. The Hidden Power of “Believed” Freedom in World History**

The total freedom of the children of God carries the label: “It does not yet appear.” The same is true of the new image of the human, formed from the pattern of the divine original, Christ. Both this freedom and the new human image are “not yet.” They are facets of the new creation, which is itself still hidden for the time being. For that reason the apostles can talk about the new creation, and freedom too, using verbs in both the present and future tenses. That corresponds to the already/not yet character of “believed freedom” and “lived freedom.”

In keeping with God’s verdict that sets us free, “believed freedom” is a present tense reality – complete and incapable of further expansion, for when God’s word of acquittal sets us free, we are 100% free. As “lived freedom,” on the other hand, it proceeds in piecemeal fashion wherever it confronts chains to be broken or opposition to be overcome—be it a challenge to faith, temptation, the weakness of the flesh, opposition arising from considerations to “be reasonable,” or that coming from political power. Here is where freedom demonstrates its alluring, incendiary, unpredictable power.

By contrast those who act as though they own freedom are lethargic and do not know what to do with it. They then seek to lecture others all about freedom and wind up tormenting those who are not yet free. We encounter such freedom know-it-alls in the realm of politics. Freedom that claims to have it all wrapped up is freedom with no future.

Believed freedom possesses liberating power only when it confronts situations of bondage. If it were not for the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul himself would come off as a know-it-all lecturing us about freedom. In this seventh chapter he shows that he really is the apostle of freedom, for here he supplies the evidence that he too knows what bondage is.

For this reason the freedom of the children of God is genuine power, not despite the "not yet" element, but precisely because of it. Its power presses forward spasmodically—here a spurt, there a spurt—as temporal world history unfolds. Freedom is on the increase in the world. Admittedly that is a statement of faith. It cannot be proved statistically simply because of freedom's hidden character. But where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And where Christ is preached, the Spirit of the Lord is promised. Consequently we cannot doubt that, as Christian proclamation presses forward into new areas of the world, freedom too is on the increase.

The philosopher Hegel indeed thought he could give historical documentation for such growth of freedom. He noted that among the peoples of the ancient Orient, only one person was free [namely, the emperor]; in ancient Greece many were already free; and among the Christian nations, especially those who welcomed the Reformation, the development went so far that all people were free. That was not a bad observation on Hegel's part. And we cannot simply dismiss it out of hand. For it is a fact that the notions about freedom of the human spirit, promoted by philosophical idealism, did arise on Christian soil. The political and social freedoms related to this freedom do indeed have some pragmatic linkage with the freedom for which Christ has set us free. We might even see an inverse corroboration of Hegel's claim in the fact that since his time a de-Christianizing of those very nations has set in, paralleled by freedom's falling curve in these same places.

Yet the Lord of lords did not make it as easy as this scheme might suggest for the opposition, the powers of the cosmos, to achieve their ends. Were Hegel's view to be taken as an index, these powers could conclude that merely by suppressing the Christians they could eliminate freedom. But that would be a tactical blunder. For Christian freedom always arises, as we have said, precisely in those places where it encounters opposition, in this case in the face of the powers' attempt to suppress it. How freedom will react in any given instance remains for the outsider a complete enigma. Since it remains intrinsically hidden, one can expect to see it come on stage clad in the most unlikely costumes.

When the flagellants, for example, in P. J. Jakobsen's novel, *Pestilence in Bergamo*, come on the scene they look as pitifully retarded and handicapped as can be imagined. And yet we catch signals of their tremendous inner freedom. They are indifferent to self-inflicted whiplashes, to the jeers of the onlookers, and to the danger of infection from the plague—the last item doubtless the most incredible for modern readers. Whether or not this really is the freedom of the children of God, we cannot tell, for the whole story is only fiction. Yet the author has given us a vivid example of how the appearance of freedom mystifies the normal thinking of the outsiders, how in fact it tears apart the seams of normal events in the world. The devil knows that, too. We can never be sure just from the visible evidence whether such freedom is usurped, demonic freedom or the freedom of the children of God.

Certain in any case is Paul's general principle that no one knows a person's thought except the spirit within that person (1 Cor. 2:11). That applies to Christians as well, in a particularly uncanny way. The freedom within Christians does not make them autonomous, as though they lived from their own resources. If that were the case, then the rulers of this world,

with the help of a little psychoanalysis, could track it down and control it.

When analyzed under the rubrics of the law-structured world this freedom appears to lack real substance. It is, however, God's personal presence in new human creatures. It defies any earthly attempt to get a handle on it. For this reason Christian freedom is subversive and disruptive of world history. It injects uncertainty into all the schemes of politicians and social reformers, for it reckons with the eventual collapse of the entire cosmos. In fact, as the first fruits of total freedom, it is already secretly at work dismantling the entire network of the law-structured world we live in.

Those who carry this freedom in their hearts know that all ropes of bondage can be torn to shreds. They smile as they notice the rust on all chains of oppression. Knowing that all revolutions inevitably run out of steam, they can detect the self-serving substratum in all political programs.

Translated by Edward H. Schroeder  
November 1991  
St. Louis, Missouri