

Theology of Freedom, Part 2

Colleagues,

ThTh #346, posted three weeks ago, examined the “theology of freedom” in President Bush’s 2005 inaugural address. At the end of that posting came this: “For a look at the Gospel’s radically different freedom GO to an early ThTh posting, now archived on the website <www.crossings.org>. Click on Dec. 18, 1998. I hope to work from that essay for next week’s posting.” But other topics intervened for two weeks. So now finally back to freedom.

And I’ll begin with something I found in Mark Mattes’s book, the subject of last week’s ThTh posting.

“The church today is trying to do so many tasks because it has forgotten the task for which it exists: delivering the good news. The gospel is a word that frees. In this regard, the gospel is not ‘whatever’ frees but is tied to a specific liberator, Jesus Christ, and offers a specific liberation – from sin, death, wrath, and the devil. It allows us to be restored to creation, to be the caretakers of God’s beautiful garden, and to treasure and savor the delights of this garden as well.

“What then is freedom? In the gospel, we are free FROM the wrath of God as it is exhibited in its various manifestations, including our indifference to holy things, our seeking to control our destinies, and the pervasive meaninglessness that has been widespread for the last hundred years and more, to which God has given us up. We are free FOR sheer enjoyment of God, the world, and our very lives, which, as created, are intertwined with others. Acknowledging God to be God allows us to be free from “ambitio divinitatis” [the yen to be God ourselves], allows us to accept our humanity, including those aspects of ourselves that apart from God’s affirmation of us in

our entirety we would find unacceptable.

“In such trust that God is for us, and from the assurance of God’s present commitment to us, the future is promised as a space for the flourishing of life, not only personally but also socially and cosmically. In God’s provision, there will be enough for us. We need not be driven by the anxiety that results in greed. Furthermore, the past is not something from which we must flee in shame or guilt, but instead can become an integral part of our histories and identities. We are free from the compulsion of establishing our own worth and security, because these are in the hands of a trustworthy God.

“As free, we can be free for others—genuinely open to their needs and concerns as well as the needs of the earth. Independent of secular mythologies that legitimate human autonomy, we can see that the freedom of the gospel permits a new outlook on the social realm as an arena for securing human dignity, freedom of conscience, and the right to education, important democratic ideals, expressions of God’s providential grace in history. Luther’s rediscovery of the gospel helped permit an acknowledgment of these ideals.” (p.184)

So far Mark Mattes. I probably should stop right now, let that stand as the great statement it is, and simply sign off for this week. But Mark’s words press so many buttons. One button links to the item on the Crossings website mentioned in the opening paragraph above. That was the text of the chapter on freedom in Werner Elert’s Ethics book. Mattes is in the same ballpark.

Elert’s chapter has three parts: 1. Just what is Christian freedom (and what is it not)? 2. What all (yes “all!”) is included in Christian freedom? 3. Christian freedom is “believed” freedom. How does that work in world history?

1. Elert’s answer to “Just what is Christian freedom?” begins

with a classic German quotation: “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.” The first clause—to do whatever you want—is de facto libertinism, not freedom, even though it’s the implicit notion of freedom widespread in the world, and especially in America these days. It’s “to be your own boss,” to do things “my way,” for “after all, it’s a free country!” It’s the freedom of being a “free agent.” But that means an agent of no second party (as the term agent once meant), but a person working just for myself. Such a “free” agent is Luther’s definition for the “unfree” sinner: “incurvatus in se et seipsum” – turned into oneself and one’s own agendas. Free agents are not confined to the sports world. Isn’t that the very notion of freedom in America’s national self-perception these days? We operate as a “free agent” in today’s world—“incurvatus in se et seipsum.” The second clause “Rather those are free who can WANT to do what they OUGHT to do” has roots that go back to Luther. Says Elert: “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.”

Let’s take a closer look at the Luther and Erasmus debate.

The two classic texts for the theology of freedom in the Lutheran tradition carry two seemingly contradictory titles. One is “Bondage of the Will” [De Servo Arbitrio, in Latin. “Arbitrium” in Latin is not literally “will.” The first word for “will” is “voluntas.” “Arbitrium” is human ability for choosing, deciding. So Luther’s title is better rendered: “Concerning Enslaved Decision-making”]. The other one is titled: “Christian Freedom.” So what is it—slavery or freedom? Answer: Yes. Both texts come from

Luther's hand. He thought the first one was one of the few things he did that might still be worth reading after he died.

In "Bondage of the Will" (1525) Luther is going to the mat with the superstar of his day, Erasmus, who had just published an essay on the freedom of human decision-making. Humans have to have free choice, free will, argued Erasmus (and the Western world after him), or else they are automata with someone else pulling the strings. And if that were so, if outside forces determined everything they did, they could not be held accountable for their decisions and actions. Moral life disappears if we do not freely choose to do what we do indeed do. We humans thus decide for or against what we "should" choose. And we are free to go either way. We are free to follow that "ought," even when we don't. We could have done so. For such freedom is there.

Not so, said Luther, "chopping logic" [his phrase] with Erasmus from the Scriptures. No such freedom is available to the post-Paradise human race. Sinners are stuck being sinners, and God still holds us accountable for being just that. All the choices of sinners are sinner choices. Their choosing is infected by the incurvature virus—always bending everything I do back into my self and my agendas. Even the decisions of real do-gooders, i.e., the Pharisees in the NT Gospels, still register on the "incurvatus" test. Do-gooders desire feedback, get brownie points, for their good deeds. For all their good stuff, said Jesus, Pharisees too do not "go down to their house justified."

But that's not fair! And God is obligated to be eminently fair. So said Erasmus. So has our Western civilization following in his train. [Bob Bertram often said: Luther

won the theological debate with Erasmus, but Erasmus won the hearts and minds of the Western world, much of Western theology included. There just “has to be” free will.]

So human choosing must be free, or God is unfair. But suppose Luther’s reading of the scriptures is right. Human choice is enslaved to incurvature, AND God still holds us accountable. Even if that is perfectly clear to us, is “unfair!” a wise response? “Careful,” Luther cautions, “It is dicey business for a cracked pot to call the potter unfair. He could just drop the hammer to settle the argument.”

There is another way to cope with the dilemma. St. Paul, one of Luther’s sources, “justifies” God in the very midst of this dilemma thus: “God has imprisoned all in disobedience [damned if you do, damned if you don’t] so that he may be merciful to all” (Rom. 11:32). It’s not: “How can a just God get away with this?” but “How does God in mercy get us out of this mess?” No surprise, the answer is Christic.

Because the answer is Christic, Christian freedom arises where worldlings least expect it: in a sinner’s relationship with God. That’s MM’s first answer above. Back again to Elert’s text. In Luther’s debate with Erasmus there were “two different concepts of freedom involved. These differences in freedom arise from different meanings ascribed to the law. For Erasmus God’s law is perceived to be a mandate addressed to our will. For Luther the law of God is seen as a divine verdict that condemns us. ... Our un-freedom here is that we are already under a guilty verdict from God, and therefore we are not free.” Our unfreedom is a God-problem. In Christ God offers sinners an opposite verdict: Guilty-sinner, yes,

but now forgiven-sinner-free from guilt. Free with reference to God? Sounds too dangerous. Even so, "If the Son makes you free, you are free all the way!"

Christians are free people, says Elert, "not because they can now do what they could not do before, namely, fulfill the law, but because they no longer even exist for the law (Gal. 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. Fundamental is: Free from the law because of free access to God. Christian freedom is free access to God, access that was previously blocked off for us. 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. 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? Instinctively, when we hear of living without the law, we think we are staring into the abyss of libertinism—doing whatever you want, instead of wanting to do what you ought to do. 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.

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). 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.

It would seem, according to the apostolic witness, that the freedom of God's new creatures can mean a host of different things: 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. The creation's own liberation—and with it the space-time liberation of human creatures as well.

We see snippets of this—in a glass dimly—in the post-Easter Jesus of the Gospels. He appears and reappears totally free from any space-time limits. "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." Elert calls it "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)."

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).

Enough for this week. To be continued, d.v., hopefully concluded, next time. Freedom, Part 3, will attempt to link this Christic cosmic freedom to the freedom in the inaugural address. They both are talking about "worldly" freedom, but seems to me they are worlds apart. If you want a preview, check Elert's third section in his Freedom chapter on the Crossings website: The Hidden Power of "Believed" Freedom in World History. I intend to start there.

Peace & Joy!
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