

# Theology of Freedom, Part 3

Colleagues,

Recapping: The starting point for Christian freedom is freedom with God: no more bondage, neither rebellion, nor servility nor despair in the God connection. God-connected in a brand new way—in freedom. What is that? Like being “born anew” in last Sunday’s Gospel (John 3). Freedom with God is not separation and “now out on my own.” That’s what the prodigal son thought. He was wrong. That was rebellion. Nor is it the dutiful grudging service of the elder brother. That was servility, maybe even despair. Freedom with God is still being bonded with God, but the bonding is not bondage. Call it faith, a Christ-connected bonding with God that opens all the doors.

Freedom’s endpoint is “cosmic” freedom, the freedom signalled to us in the few glimpses we have in the Gospels of the Easter Jesus—with all the nemeses, even space/time confinements, left behind. In this vision of freedom Paul (Rom. 8) links Christians to the rest of creation and doxologizes: “Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” God’s kids with God’s cosmos—all the doors open. Bonded, but not bondage. Like parents and children, St. Paul reminds us, not like masters and slaves.

In the third and final section of W.Elert’s chapter on freedom, he seeks to show what such freedom looks like when it shows up within the parameters of the old creation. [For Elert’s full text check this url: <<https://crossings.org/thursday/Thur1217.htm>>] That is not so easy to do, since Christian freedom too participates in the “already, but not yet” of the new creation flowing from Christ’s Easter victory. It too is “sub cruce tecta,” hidden under the

crosses Christians bear, yet genuinely present and operative under what may look like the opposite. Elert sketches it under the rubrics of “believed” freedom and “lived” freedom—“geglaubte Freiheit—gelebte Freiheit.”

Believed freedom arises from trusting Christ’s promise, his very words “If the Son of God make you free, you are free all the way.” But that only works when you trust it. Trusting bonds you to the freedom. Non-trusters remain in bondage. And when you do believe it, trust it, you get the chutzpah to live it, to act as though it really is true for you.

One NT example of such believed and then lived freedom is Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi in Acts 16. Their feet are in stocks in the innermost cell, and what are they doing? Praying and singing hymns, and the prisoners are listening to them—at midnight! What could be more bizarre? But this is just the overture to this freedom tale. Now comes an earthquake that crumbles the prison walls and loosens the chains of the prisoners. Awakened by the temblor, the jailer sees his life ruined and draws his sword to end it all. Paul stops him with a shout. Relative calm returns. They stay up the rest of the night talking about the Easter Lord. The jailer and his entourage “rejoice” to get bonded to this same Lord. When daylight arrives flunkies from city hall come hat in hand: “Oops, our mistake. Please leave quietly so no one notices.” Paul gets his dander up: “No way, the top brass put us here. They’ll have to come and eat crow, or we won’t go!” Talk about chutzpah!

Who is free and who isn’t among the actors in that bizarre drama? Though in innermost solitary confinement Paul and Silas, bonded to Christ, are in bondage to no one. Everybody else in the drama is—to real chains, to career ruin, to public image pressure. Except for the jailer, whose job it is to put folks in bondage. Though he starts out un-free, he (with his household)

moves into Christ-bonded freedom. He's no longer in bondage to anyone. It's a wild story of believed freedom that leads to lived freedom—in real time, in the face of real bondage.

This believed and lived freedom is at the center of Luther's classic treatise on Christian Freedom with its opening paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Believed freedom grounds the first statement. And from that grounding comes the lived freedom to be a "little Christ" to everybody, as Luther says later in the treatise, not inhibited, not in bondage to anything of my own agenda or someone else's hegemony to restrain me from such serving in freedom. In short, from giving away my life.

In Elert's words:

*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 case-by-case fashion wherever it confronts chains to be broken or opposition to be overcome—be it a challenge to faith, a temptation, the weakness of the flesh, or opposition arising from considerations to "be reasonable," or that coming from political power. Here is where freedom demonstrates its alluring, incendiary, unpredictable power.*

As the antithesis to believed and lived freedom, Elert describes people who think they "own" freedom. My hunch is (he was writing this in 1949) that he's alluding to the American program in post-WWII Germany to "re-educate" Germans into the American understanding of freedom. He says: "By contrast, those who act as though they own freedom are satisfied 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 all the answers is freedom with no future." Believed freedom is always held in an open hand. You can't be bonded with your fist closed. Thinking that you own freedom, that you "have" it, is closing the fist. It's losing freedom because it sacrifices bonding. It's the slide back into slavery. No bonding = bondage.

That American predilection may not have been all that obvious to many in 1949. But it is obvious to many in 2005—even if these many are not within the USA. We are lecturing the world about freedom, since we "possess" it and others as yet do not. That was the entire inaugural speech last month. And in doing so, Elert reminds us, we torment others. We are satisfied that "at home" there is no serious freedom agenda; we ARE the land of the free. So there is nothing to be "believed." Our calling is to teach it to others. But is genuine freedom ever "taught"? Did we Americans "learn" freedom? The freedom we enjoy is a "received" freedom, a gift. Believed freedom is received freedom, not self-achieved freedom. Our own un-free chutzpah about the freedom we propound was documented in the president's inaugural speech, his "Ode to freedom American style." At root it is a freedom bonded to no one, surely not to other nations. If they won't agree with us, we'll go it alone. We're big shots, we can take care of ourselves and take care of the agendas we know that others should join us in pursuing, even if they refuse to do so.

Mixed in here is the notion that freedom is a commodity—something you can transfer, therefore even exportable. Not so. Freedom is no more a commodity than married fidelity is. Both are relational realities. Their locus is in human hearts. You cannot package and sell them—or even give them—to someone else. And those who think they can, because they already own freedom, are already sliding into bondage.

Alleged freedom with no need of bonding to other people(s) is finally not bonded to God either, despite the "in God we trust" on the US dollar bill. If not "bonded to God in freedom," then there is only one other option: bondage. Even while shouting about our freedom. Other voices from other nations see our bondage—to our own national ego, to our own consumption of umpteen times our fair share of the creations' resources, our own militarism which while wreaking havoc on others will someday—perhaps just fiscally—turn and rend us too. And, linking all that together, bondage to blindness. Physician, heal thyself, others cry out to us. But we're so busy healing the world, sorting out the splinters in the eyes of others, that the log in our own eye we never see. In Iraq we are getting our come-uppance. And we don't know what — what all — the consequences will be. First reports of the self-destructing of our returning soldiers are dreadful.

Humans were created for bonding. That may well be a (or even the) fundamental element of our being created in the "image of God." Not only is it "not good that the human should be alone," it may well be impossible to be human at all "alone." Surely that applies to human communities as well. Nations that are "loners" are nations on their way to being un-human. With that we are back to the theology of empire. Empires are by definition "loner" nations who colonize others nations under their alleged "reign of peace." But none of the colonized peoples ever experience that to be true. Colonization is not bonding, it is bondage. And the divine irony is that in putting others into bondage, individuals and nations do the same to themselves.

The freedom to be a bonded-to-no-one empire is bondage. It's the very sort of bondage Luther explicates in his Bondage of the Will opus maximus. Freedom of will is to be free to do what you ought, but no human possess that freedom, he said. Does any nation? Unlikely. It is the axiom—at least no wadays—that

nations act in their own self-interest. No one seems to challenge the rightfulness of that axiom. But why should that not be challenged? If self-interest is the stuff of sin in individual humans (*incurvatus in se et seipsum*), does it escape that divine verdict when practiced on a national scale?

If self-interest in individual humans is the generative motor that leads to their eventual self-destruction, why would it be any different in a national community of such humans? So it would really be in one's self-interest NOT to be self-interested, for that would mitigate the drift towards self-destruction. The history of empires is the history of mega-nations on the way to self-destruction. On what grounds might an empire that hypes freedom, but un-bonded freedom (and thus bondage) be an exception to that axiom? Especially if it is a divine axiom: the nations strut their stuff, but the Lord holds them in derision.

Sometimes it makes me wonder about the American Civil War. What made the UNION such a godly goal that four years of fraternal suicide was called for to preserve it? The USA is content (mostly) with a neighbor nation to the north and one to the southwest. So why could it not also have had a neighbor nation to the southeast? Lincoln's unabashed acknowledgement of the need for national repentance during that war—could that not have signalled his own admission that “preserving the union” just might have been a false god?

There is little evidence of our nation's awareness of any need for repentance today. Even President Bush's charm campaign this week to re-achieve “bondedness” with Europe bears no patent signals of repentance. At best it's: “Let bygones be bygones, let's start afresh. We really are united.” Maybe even a bit of the passive voice, but with no sense of responsibility. “Mistakes were made,” yet that is a far cry from repentance. And

the words are from Jesus: Except you repent, you perish.

Suppose our born-again President had some of Paul & Silas's chutzpah to enact believed freedom in the midst of the maxi-chaos confronting us and much of which we've generated as the world's only empire left. He, and we the nation who elected him, would have the chutzpah for the following:

1. To repent publicly before the world—at least for a few of the crassest items of our national megalomania. [See Lincoln, the first ever republican president, for cues on repentance for war.]
2. To say Iraq was not only a mistake, but (following Luther) that preemptive war is murder. We are sinners for doing it.
3. So we are stopping right now. All our forces are being withdrawn. We are the losers in this war as we were in Vietnam.
4. The 80 billion asked for to continue the war—plus another couple of 80s—will be turned over to the European Union (or perhaps better, some Arab nations coalition) to see what can be done in post-America Iraq—with no American participation other than funding the reparations—or whatever the EU/Arab coalition invites us to do. 80 billion dollars repeated twice is \$1000 for every man, woman, child in Iraq.
5. We need no guarantees of anything.
6. And the US president will make a personal visit to Pyongyang to work with President Kim on detente with N. Korea. For every a-bomb they may have and now demolish, we will demolish 1000 of our own. Ditto for Teheran.
7. And US tanks will lumber out of Iraq across Jordan to take positions on the Palestinian side of the wall of bondage that Israel is erecting to strangle Palestinians. And at a not-too-distant announced date they will lumber forward

and demolish the wall—just as the Berlin wall was razed.

Of course, it's crazy. Incredibly risky, insanely dangerous. Of course. More knowledgeable folks could come up with a better list. But remember, "more reasonable" is NOT one of the rubrics for "lived" Christian freedom. But you get the point. Believed freedom is always a dare. But the dare is not that it will be successful. Instead it is a dare to believe that the One who puts received freedom into our hands will not close his fist when we turn believed freedom into lived freedom.

Believed freedom possesses liberating power only when it confronts situations of bondage. 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 into places where it is "not yet." It moves spasmodically—here a spurt, there a spurt—Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Vaclev Havel, M.L.King, Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa—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. What happened in the jail at Philippi is the paradigm—even if it never shows up on CNN.

A side item: As more and more Africans are calling Jesus Lord, freedom is on the increase there in the very face of the evidence to the contrary that the media put before us. And conversely, as God's Platzregen moves patently from the northern hemisphere to the southern one, freedom shrivels in "the West" even as less-than-Christian gospels flourish. Christian freedom always arises precisely in those places where it encounters



opposition, in the face of the attempt by enemy powers 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. Only believers have a clue about believed freedom—and even they are sometimes unsure if they are seeing it or not.

One more paragraph from Elert: “The appearance of freedom mystifies the normal thinking of outsiders, how in fact it tears apart the seams of normal events in the world. 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.”

Karl Barth—who was often on the other side of the fence in debates with Elert—made only one visit to the USA in his lifetime. Some of us teaching at Valparaiso University in those days made the pilgrimage to the U. of Chicago to hear “Karl the Great.” In one of his lectures he got “preachy,” and chided us for the fact that with all the hoopla about freedom, American theology never developed a “theology of freedom.” Even after 50 years that is still largely the case in “mainline” theology. But really that is no surprise. “Those who act as though they own freedom are satisfied and do not know what to do with it.” So don’t expect it from them.

But liberation theology did come. And where did it come from?

From the folks who were un-free in the favillas of Latin America and in the racial and gender ghettos of the USA. Once more, no surprise. Christian freedom, “lived” freedom, occurs only where un-freedom rules. Once more Elert: “Those who carry this freedom in their hearts [that’s “believed freedom”] know that all ropes of bondage can be torn to shreds. With knowing smiles they see the rust on all chains of oppression. Aware that all revolutions inevitably run out of steam, they can detect the self-serving substratum in every political program.”

Is our American revolution any exception? Is American freedom shredding, rusting? Only believed freedom is rust-proof. Owned freedom, commodity freedom, freedom with no bonding, is not. It will not save the world, least of all with guns. It will not save the USA either. Believed-freedom folks see that. The log is out of their eye. That’s no achievement on their part. “Liberation from logs” is another part of Jesus’ gift-package. They act it out in the Philippi prison paradigm. In doing so they may well stay up all night talking about Jesus to folks in bondage. When it clicks, the newly-liberated folks join them in singing hymns.

Peace & joy!

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