

The “Freedom” Struggle: Another Tussle with St. Paul

Co-Missioners,

According to Lutheran church calendars, today is the Festival of Mary, Mother of our Lord. Are any Lutheran congregations disturbing their usual Thursday habits with a high liturgy in the Virgin’s honor? If so, the few who gather will hear a familiar passage from Galatians 4, appointed as the second reading for the day. [It bears browsing right now](#) as a preface to the item we’re passing on for you to chew on this week. It’s sermon by Steve Albertin on Galatians 5. Here he wrestles with the perennial challenge of how to entice people into taking God’s gift through Mary, our Savior Christ, as seriously as God would have Him taken.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

“FREE FOR ALL”

A Sermon on [Galatians 5:1,13-25](#)

by the Rev. Dr. Steven E. Albertin



On July 4, 1776 our founding fathers declared their independence and freedom from the tyranny of mother England and King George. But this new birth of freedom needed to be protected. It needed to be given structure and form. To do that our founding fathers wrote the Constitution adopted in 1787. The Constitution created the laws that were intended to preserve the new freedom won by our country. Without such laws, our freedoms would quickly disappear in a maze of chaos and confusion. Society would disintegrate into one big FREE FOR ALL!

St. Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, says just the opposite! Paul says that for Christians freedom is very different. True freedom means freedom FROM the law. The law is the yoke of slavery. The law is the enemy of true freedom. Trying to preserve freedom with laws destroys the freedom Christ has given.

Paul was writing to a Christian congregation where many felt that this freedom needed the protection of rules and regulations. These well-meaning Christians, many of whom were Jews, felt that all those Gentiles who were becoming Christians

needed to follow some of the rules of Jewish ritual law like circumcision. This Christian freedom needed to have some form and structure. Otherwise, it will be just one big FREE FOR ALL!

The Galatians probably said something like this to Paul: "Yes, it is great that Jesus has died and set us free, BUT that is not enough! We need to show how serious we are about following him. You know, something like 'Yes...BUT!' Yes, Christ died for sins BUT that is not enough. Something more is needed. Christ PLUS something else. Christ PLUS circumcision."

Does this sound familiar? How many times have we not heard the same thing? "Yes, Jesus saves, BUT to really be saved, we need something more. Jesus PLUS...a sincere faith, a deep commitment, our fervent prayers, our regular tithes, our consistent church attendance, etc. Freedom is dangerous. It is an invitation to a **FREE FOR ALL.**

Paul will not listen to such talk. The Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, must always be free of such additions. The Galatians were dead wrong by demanding that Gentile converts also "had" to be circumcised in order to be REAL Christians. In Christ, we are free FROM the law. Trying to put someone back under some law again destroys the Gospel. Then it is no longer the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel is very different. The Gospel declares that Jesus Christ is the friend of sinners and law-breakers. The Gospel announces that Jesus became one of us. He who committed no sin nevertheless took upon himself our sin, became a sinner and carried it all the way to the cross. There Jesus suffered the consequence that every sinner must suffer: death. There God's own Son suffered the consequences of the Law "for us." When he was raised from the dead, it was clear. God's last word to this sinful and broken world is not the law but grace and mercy. We

are free from the accusations and threats of the Law. Jesus is the “end” of the Law.

What is The Gospel? It is good news because it tells the story of Jesus in such a way that unconditional value is offered to those who hear it. The Gospel is completely different from the Law. Where the Law speaks with conditions, with “if...then...” the Gospel speaks unconditionally. Instead of “if...then...” the Gospel declares “**because...therefore...**”. **Because** Jesus died for you, **therefore** your sins are forgiven, **therefore** you have new life, **therefore** you are the apple of God’s eye.” This is the language of grace and gift. The Law says, “You **gotta** do this.” The Gospel announces, “God has done this...**for you.**” There are no rewards earned nor penalties handed out. There are only gifts offered and love received.

When someone asks you, “What do you HAVE to do to be saved,” you answer, “NOTHING! Because Jesus has saved me.” What do you GET to do? “I GET to believe that Jesus has loved me, forgiven me and set me free from the demands of the law.”

Jesus love is...**FREE...FOR ALL!**”



When this good news is believed, life changes. The believer produces “the fruit of the Spirit.”

You all know about fruit. Perhaps you have a fruit tree in your yard. You do not have to teach a tree to bear fruit. You do not have to lecture it, instruct it, threaten it or bribe it, to produce fruit. A healthy tree simply produces fruit. It can do no other. So also is it for the fruit of the Spirit! Such fruits happen in the lives of those who believe. They are not “**gotta’s**” but “**get-to’s**.”

It is like the couple who wins millions in the lottery. They do not bury their lottery ticket. They GET to cash it in. They plan on how they are going to put it to use. It is a GET to. It is like buying Johnny that new bike. You expect him to take it out and ride it. You do not expect Johnny to let it sit in the garage gathering dust. Johnny is so thrilled with his new gift that riding that bike will be no burden, no obligation or “have to,” but a privilege, an honor, a “**GET to**”– freedom!

However, such freedom never comes easily. It is always under attack, from our sinful nature that is always worried about itself, from a world that shouts there is no free lunch, and from the Evil One who insists that such freedom is an illusion. The Evil One whispers, "You have gotta do something to prove yourself to God." Our own perverse logic reasons, "If this is FREE FOR ALL, then I can just go off and do anything I want!" But in the midst of such a FREE FOR ALL, the world begins to fall apart.

A pastor once asked a member of his congregation, "How's your relationship with God?" The member responded, "There's not much to tell. I like sinning. God likes forgiving. We get along just fine."

This reminds me of some lines from W. H. Auden's poem, *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. In the poem, when King Herod hears from the wise men the news of the Savior's birth and the free grace and forgiveness Jesus brings, he cynically complains, "Then every crook will argue: 'I like committing crimes. God likes forgiving them. Really the world is admirably arranged.'"

See, if God's love is FREE FOR ALL, then every sinner can keep on doing whatever he or she wants! Then we really do have a world mired in a FREE FOR ALL!

That is exactly what the enemies of Paul's law-free Gospel feared: such freedom is permission for sinners just to keep on being sinners. Christianity is nothing more than a good deal. Cheap grace! Therefore, we gotta clampdown. More things to do. Make it cost something!

However, Paul insists that they have it all wrong! If there is anything that the Gospel of freedom means, it means that it is no longer business as usual. The Gospel of freedom calls for change. When the Gospel is believed, the Spirit of God is alive

in the hearts of believers. Life changes. A struggle begins. A conflict ensues. Contrary to those who would want us to believe that the Christian life is constantly happy and ever blissful, Paul describes a struggle that never ends until that day we breathe our last. That struggle is between the old sinful nature, what Paul calls here "the desires of the flesh," and the new person, the saint, empowered by God's Spirit. Daily our old nature, what Paul calls the "flesh," gets to die. Daily the Gospel sets us free from our slavery to sin, death and the law.

However, we always want to go running back to the security of the Law. I remember a fellow I had in one of my new member classes many years ago in another congregation. In the final class, the participants got to ask any question that was still on their mind. I thought this fellow had paid attention, but he asked, "Pastor, could you tell me this congregation's policy on membership? How many times a year do I *HAVE TO* attend church in order to remain a member in good standing?" It was sad. All that time spent helping him to hear the Gospel and trust its freedom, yet he still wanted to run back to the Law. He still believed that it was all about what I *HAVE TO* do.

The struggle never ends. Yet it is a glorious struggle! Because God never gives up! Because Jesus keeps reminding us that he has not come to create a *FREE FOR ALL*. He has come to give us something that is *FREE...FOR ALL*: his amazing love and mercy. That changes everything.

We are now free not to remain the same old selfish jerks. Now we are free to be different. Instead of always worrying about ourselves, we can be *FREE...FOR ALL* the people in this world who need our love and care.

Martin Luther put it well in his famous 1520 essay "The Freedom of a Christian." **"Christian is a perfectly free lord of all,**

subject to no one. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.”

We are free not to turn this world into a FREE FOR ALL, but filled with Christ’s spirit that truly is FREE FOR ALL, we can be FREE FOR ALL caring for our neighbor, always looking for ways to make a difference and set people free with the only freedom that matters.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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