

# CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

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## Introduction

We often hear the words liberty or freedom, and when we do, many thoughts and feelings are conjured up as the topic of freedom and the fight for freedom surround us. As human beings we long to be free and this can be seen in the many facets of freedom, whether it be religious, political, racial, sexual or even financial freedom. Patrick Henry sums up this desire in his speech made to the Virginia Convention in 1775 by saying, *“Give me liberty or give me death!”* Or as the framers of the Declaration of Independence in the United States held these *“truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”* There have been many battles fought and won, but also many lives slain in the name of freedom. I was reminded of the famous line in the classic movie Braveheart, where the Scotsman William Wallace is rallying the troops, trying to convince them to fight the English. This is his rally cry,

*“Aye, fight and you may die. Run, and you’ll live...at least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willn’ to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance, just one chance, to come back here and tell your enemies that they may take our lives, but they will never take...OUR FREEDOM!”*

Or the inspirational, but necessary call to end racism etched in our minds by Martin Luther

King Jr.’s speech, “I have a dream”, given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963:

*“...and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’”*

Or we can think about our modern day tyranny of terrorism and the enslavement it brings. We watch, as many parts of the world are in bondage by this ruthless propensity to control, dominate and others. The topic of freedom, as you can see, is of enormous proportions.

## Nature & Quality of Christian Freedom

Of all the freedoms we can talk about, that people have fought for, lived out, and experienced, there is one kind of freedom that is superior to all other freedoms – the freedom all true Christians have in Christ. The kind of freedom we will be exploring this morning *“...is a spiritual and heavenly freedom...a freedom purchased by Christ, revealed in the Gospel, and conveyed to the saints of God as the great dowry of Christ to His Church and Spouse.”*

This freedom all of us possess here this morning because of the grace of God poured out upon us through faith in Christ.

As we begin exploring this freedom, let me mention a few of its general qualities. First

of all, this is freedom is a real freedom.<sup>ii</sup> It is not something that works only in theory or is something that is imaginary. It brings real freedom to our conscience and to our living. Secondly, this freedom is also universal. It frees us from all the spiritual bondage we were in prior to Christ invading our lives. *“We were, then, in bondage to Satan, to sin, to the law, to wrath, to death, to hell. By this privilege we are freed from all.”*<sup>iii</sup> Everything Christ came to free us from is ours to enjoy. We may not experience and enjoy the full measure of our freedom in this life, but we will in the life to come. The “already, but not yet” can apply to Christian freedom. Thirdly, this freedom is constant. We can never go back to the state of bondage once Christ has set us free. It is a perpetual freedom. There is no expiry date. It is always there because of what Christ did for us on the cross. We are to enjoy and live in this freedom everyday we are alive.

The application of this freedom has caused much controversy throughout the history of the church. And this controversy is still alive and well since the rise of *“The Young, Restless and Reformed.”*<sup>iv</sup> John MacArthur criticizes this segment of the Reformed community and their use of their Christian freedom by saying, *“If everything you know about Christian living comes from blogs and websites in the young-and restless district of the Reformed community, you might have the impression that beer is the principle symbol of Christian liberty.”*<sup>v</sup> I must admit in the young,

restless and reformed part of the Christian world there are abuses of Christian freedom. The sad result is that there is much confusion and misunderstanding over what activities and lifestyle choices are permitted and what are not. There can be much spiritual danger in the wrong use of Christian freedom. Even Darren Patrick, who helped pioneer “Theology at the Bottleworks” recognized the reality of spiritual danger. In his book on church planting he wrote, *“As I coach and mentor church planters and pastors, I am shocked at the number of them who are either addicted or headed to addiction to alcohol. Increasingly, the same is true with prescription drugs. One pastor I know could not relax without several beers after work and could not sleep without the aid of a sleeping pill.”*<sup>vi</sup> There are many young people in our churches who are confused, perhaps enslaved, or even guilt ridden instead of living in the freedom Christ has purchased for them. John Calvin also reminds us of the importance of properly comprehending this freedom we have in Christ. He writes, *“But, as we have said, unless this freedom be comprehended, neither Christ nor gospel truth, nor inner peace of soul, can be rightly known...And the knowledge of this freedom is very necessary for us, for if it is lacking, our consciences will have no repose and there will be no end to superstition.”*<sup>vii</sup> The gravity of this doctrine and its proper comprehension may be more important than we think.

My goal this morning is to remind you of this precious, but delicate freedom we have in Christ. I want to show you some ways in which this freedom might be applied so that you will be able to shepherd your people better in the proper use of their Christian freedom. The approach of this paper is to survey the New Testament to understand the broad scope of this doctrine. I believe that in broadening our understanding of this doctrine, instead of just focusing on certain aspects of its application, will bring more clarity to a much maligned topic. I believe much of the confusion and questions can be resolved and abuses curtailed by stepping back and looking at the whole forest of what the New Testament teaches about Christian freedom, before we look at the specific trees of application.

Before I take you to the relevant Scriptures regarding our freedom in Christ, let me tell you briefly about my story with this doctrine, which may help illustrate the importance getting this doctrine right. When this topic came up a couple of years at the planning meeting for the Grace Pastors Fellowship, I eagerly volunteered to research this topic and present my findings. There is a story behind this eagerness. You see, the story is the struggle I have had to understand the concept of Christian freedom. I grew up in a Mennonite culture that tended to be somewhat legalistic and therefore had little understanding of Christian freedom or any teaching on the subject. The Christian life was often defined more by what I could not do

than the liberating gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Then, in God's gracious and wonderful providence, I was introduced to reformed theology and began associating with and pastoring people who had very different understanding of the Christian life from what I grew up with. Suddenly, many of the things of the list of "thou shalt not" in my upbringing were now permissible, of course, as long as they were not abused. I felt like I was liberated and was gaining a more mature view of the Christian life. But in the exercising of my Christian freedom, I always thought something was missing. Yes, I understood many aspects of the doctrine of Christian freedom, but the line between the proper use and abuse of my Christian freedom was still a bit blurry for me, and, at times, in exercising my Christian freedom, my conscience was not free. I know now I did not properly ground my freedom in the gospel. As so, because of my struggle I eagerly volunteered for this assignment. This paper by no means plumbs the depths of Christian freedom, but I hope we can at least learn something together this morning so that we can shepherd our people more effectively.

### **Foundation of Christian Freedom**

I begin my exploration of Christian freedom where many today seem to skip over when they discuss this topic. The discussion usually begins with a subset of Christian freedom, namely its application or exercise, discussing things that are "disputable" or

“indifferent” – things that are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture. Things like the kind of music a Christian can listen to or what kind of movies Christians can watch, or can a Christian consume alcoholic beverages, or can a Christian smoke cigars, or what places a Christian can go, or what is modest or immodest dress, or what kind of video games can a Christian play, or is it permissible or not to participate in online dating, or is there freedom in the way children are to be educated, etc. I know the answer to some of these queries is relatively easy, but these are some of the things that plague the conscience of Christians. It is not necessarily wrong to begin with this subset of Christian freedom, but I think there is a lot more work that needs to be done before we can come to the question of what is permissible and what is not for the Christian. A proper foundation needs to be laid, a gospel foundation.<sup>viii</sup> I am convinced that a failure to understand the gospel will lead to the abuse and misunderstanding of Christian freedom. This abuse and misunderstanding comes from a failure to wrestle with the gospel and its implications before jumping right into application. It is not difficult to see how this as it follows the pattern of the apostle Paul, especially in Romans. In fact, Romans 14 is one of the watershed chapters on Christian freedom. However, we should not go to chapter 14 until we have worked through chapters 1-13. Al Martin unapologetically argues, as so often does, *“Until you understand this foundation,*

*don’t you dare talk about Christian freedom.”*

This is also the pattern found in The Second London Baptist Confession of 1689 as it begins its discussion on Christian freedom by affirming the gospel. Chapter 21, section 1 launches into its exposition into this topic by maintaining,

*The liberty which Christ hath purchased for believers under the gospel, consists of their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the rigor and curse of the law, and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the fear and sting of death, the victory of the grave, and everlasting damnation: as also in their free access to God, and their yielding obedience unto him, not out of slavish fear, but a child-like love and willing mind.*

And so, this is where we begin. And in the gospel there are two foundational, contrasting truths that help formulate a careful and accurate picture of Christian freedom. These contrasting truths are, first of all, humanities original slavery to sin in Adam. And then, secondly, the complete freedom Christ won for his people on the cross.<sup>ix</sup> These two contrasting truths are clearly seen together in in John 8 where Jesus is having a dispute with the Jews and says to them,

*So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a*

*slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed...*” (ESV)

There’s the contrast: between being slaves to sin and being set free by the truth of Christ.

There are a number of ways the bible teaches the indisputable fact that all humans are naturally slaves, and conversely, the miraculous freedom there is in Christ. I am not going to elaborate on all of the ways in which we were slaves and how Christ has set us free. But I will elaborate on just a few of them. I know these truths are basic to the Christian life and are perhaps basic to our minds. But we need to be reminded of these truths as they need to sink deep in our minds for them to be our guide in the exercise and application of our freedom.

First of all, we are by nature slaves of sin. The apostle Paul makes that rather clear in Romans 3:23, “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Again in Romans 5:12 it says, “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...” This slavery to sin is the condition every human being finds himself or herself in despite how “good” they may seem. But, oh, the wonder of the grace and power of God. The apostle Paul puts it this way in Romans 6:17-18, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of

righteousness.” I am reminded of the lines from two great hymns written by Charles Wesley. The first is from “And can it be?”

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
Fast bound by sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye defused a quickening ray  
I woke the dungeon flamed with light  
My chains fell off and I was free  
I rose, went forth and followed thee.*

The second is from “O for a thousand tongues”,

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean,  
His blood availed for me.*

These lines cause our hearts to rejoice as they describe one of the primary ways in which we were enslaved but set free by Christ. These contrasting truths are important because when we attempt to exercise our freedom, we must realize we cannot use our freedom to sin. There are literally hundreds of imperatives in the New Testament we are called to obey. We are not free to disobey God. St Augustine describes people under four different conditions: “Before the law he never fights nor strives against sin. Under the law he fights but is come. Under grace he fights and conquers. But in heaven it is all conquest, and there is no combat more to all eternity.”<sup>x</sup> Sin is still sin. However, we are not free from sinning nor are we free from temptation to sin. But we are free from the enslaving power of sin. Again, Bolton makes this very clear: “O believers, you will never be will captives to sin again; you may be captives, never subjects; sin may tyrannize, never reign.”<sup>xi</sup> It is important to know this. We might

know this well here this morning, but we cannot assume all who come through our church doors will.

A second way in which we were enslaved and now have been set free by Christ is we were by nature slaves of the world. Ephesians 2:1-2 says, *“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world...”* The apostle John concurs with Paul in 1 John 2:15 where it says, *“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”* But as Paul clearly declares, *“But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”* It is through the cross we are set free from the enslaving, governing power of the world. The world and its moral dictates are no longer our guide. The only alternative to the will of the world is will of God found in the Word of God. This is important when considering the exercise of our Christian freedom because we are in an ever-present danger in being conformed to the pattern of this world (Romans 12:1-2). Tim Challies points out that worldliness is *“...like gravity, always there, always pushing down on you, always exerting its influence on you.”<sup>xii</sup>* He shows how this conformity can happen in at least two ways: actively pursuing the world or by passively allowing the world to slowly have it's eroding influence in our lives. This eroding influence happens when we are not cautious and discerning in our

entertainment intake, or when we listen more to secular thinkers and writers than those who love God and his Word, or when we maintain closer friendships with unbelievers, or when we are apathetic in our use of the ordinary means of grace dispensed through the local church. In our understanding and in our exercise of Christian freedom, we must remember we are no longer slaves of the world nor are we free to act in ways that conform to this world.

Thirdly, the bible teaches we are free from the law. Now, the topic of “law” as it pertains to the Bible is a huge topic that needs to be thought through as one explores the topic of Christian freedom. In fact, *“the role of the ‘The Law’ in the life of the Christians has historically been on the most difficult and contentious points in divinity.”<sup>xiii</sup>* Although his paper is not about the role of the law in the Christian life, it is important to know that the freedom we have in Christ sets us free from the law as a covenant, from its curses, accusations, condemnation and rigor. Our confession puts it this way,

*All which were common also to believers under the law for the substance of them; but under the New Testament the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected, and in greater boldness to access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.*

This freedom from the law is solely due to the law-fulfilling work of Christ on the cross

(Romans 8:1-4). We will discuss there more later on.

Lastly, we are free from the tyranny from man-made doctrines, rules and regulations (Rom. 14:4; 1 Cor. 7:23; Col. 2:20-23). In the gospel and because of the gospel, we are free from the legalistic restrictions people may put upon us to bind our conscience. Our conscience is to be bound by the Word of God alone. Our Baptist Confession clearly states:

*God alone is the Lord of conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or not contained in it. So that to believe such doctrines, or obey such commands out of conscience, is to betray the true liberty of conscience; and the requiring of implicit faith, and absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience and reason also.*

According to Bolton, scripture directs us in two ways in this freedom: we as Christians are not to usurp mastership (Matt 23:8-10), nor are we to undergo servitude (1 Cor. 7:23). What this means is, *“...we are not to acknowledge any our supreme master, nor are we to give our faith and consciences, nor enthrall our judgements, to the sentences, definitions, or determinations of any man or men upon the earth, because this would be to make men masters of our faith...”*<sup>xiv</sup> This does not mean that we have masters who are over us whom we are to obey. We are to obey those whom God has put in authority over us and those whom God commands us to obey in Scripture (Rom. 13). However, in Christ we have freedom

of conscience where we are called to obey God first and whatever he commands in the Word of God. Our consciences are to be held captive by the Word of God.

These are just some of the freedoms we have in Christ. These freedoms are the result of the twin truths of our slavery in Adam and our real freedom purchased for us on the cross. But they form an important foundation for how we comprehend and practice our freedom in Christ.

### **Goal of Christian Freedom**

What is the goal of Christian freedom? I believe Zechariah’s prophecy in the gospel of Luke, before Jesus was born, gives us a clear picture of what practice of Christian freedom will look like in our lives. Zechariah prophesied these words in Luke 1:68-74:

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.”* (ESV)

The goal God has in mind for the deliverance or freedom we have in Christ is that we “might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” The important truth that Zechariah is teaching here is our Christian freedom is not something with

which we serve ourselves. We were set free in Christ so that we will serve him, not ourselves. It is so important to keep this goal in mind. The exercise of our freedom is meant for us to serve Christ.

But notice how we are to serve him. There are at least three descriptions in this text: first, this service is to be done without fear. Fear is something that can easily paralyze any human being, let alone the Christian. But this description of our service does not mean there is to be complete absence of fear for that would contradict Scripture (Matt. 10:28; 1 Peter 1:17). I think the fear this prophecy is talking about is more likely fear of man (Matt. 10:28), fear of condemnation (Rom. 8:1) or perhaps the fear of persecution (John 15:20).

Secondly, notice the ethical or moral description of the manner in which this service is to take place – in holiness and righteousness. Holiness is to characterize our Christian freedom. Our Baptist Confession puts it this way: *“They who upon pretence of Christian liberty do practise any sin, or cherish any sinful lust, as they do thereby pervert the main design of the grace of the gospel to their own destruction, so they wholly destroy the end of Christian liberty...”* Living in righteousness and holiness are signs that Christ has set us free. I like the way Richard Sibbs puts it: *“I say there are two courts: one of justification, another of sanctification. In the court of justification merits are nothing with, insufficient; but in the court of sanctification, as they are ensigns of a*

*sanctified course, so they are jewels and ornaments.”<sup>xv</sup>*

Thirdly, notice the duration of this service – all our days. This life of service because of our freedom in Christ is not something that is seasonal or occasional. This is what Christian freedom looks like every day. Everyday we live with the comprehensive, radical goal of serving him.

### **Enemies of Christian Freedom**

There is one more issue before we get to the watershed chapters in the Bible on the application of Christian freedom.<sup>xvi</sup> I have found the doctrine of Christian freedom to be exceedingly valuable, yet surprisingly vulnerable. The devil wants nothing more than to destroy our freedom in Christ. As a result, there are at least two specific enemies of Christian freedom that do their utmost to rob us of our exhilarating freedom. They are like two lawyers trying to depreciate the doctrine of Christian freedom.<sup>xvii</sup>

The first one is legalism. Legalism is always lurking in the shadows seeking to tempt and enslave its unsuspecting victims. The common definition among evangelicals is something like *“Trying to earn your salvation by doing good works.”<sup>xviii</sup>* This form of legalism is clearly exposed and answered throughout Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where he fiercely resisted this false gospel.<sup>xix</sup> However, there seems to be different shades of legalism. Underneath this generic definition there gathers a *“web that extends more widely, which is*

woven intricately and invisibly to trap the unwary. And the web is always much stronger than we imagine, for legalism is a much more subtle reality than we tend to assume.<sup>xx</sup> This subtler form of legalism, which does not actually seek salvation by what it does, but teaches that a person is a better or stronger Christian if they obey certain rules or prescriptions. Let me share with you a rather dated illustration that serves to describe this subtlety. In 1928 Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse was speaking at a conference in Montrose, Pennsylvania, where about 200 young people were present. He speaks of the experience one day when two women came to him in horror because some girls were not wearing stockings. These women wanted him to rebuke those who were not wearing stockings. Barnhouse's response is epic. This is how he describes it:

*“Looking them straight in the eye, I said, ‘The Virgin Mary never wore stockings.’ They gasped and said, ‘She didn’t?’ I answered, ‘In Mary’s time, stockings were unknown. So far as we know, they were first worn by prostitutes in Italy in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the Renaissance began. Later, a lady of the nobility wore stockings at a court ball, greatly to the scandal of many people. Before long, however, everyone in the upper classes was wearing stockings...’ These ladies, who were holdovers from the Victorian epoch, had no more to say. I did not rebuke the girls for not wearing stockings. A year or two afterward, most girls in the United States were going without stockings in summer, and nobody thought anything about it. Nor do I believe that this led toward disintegration of moral standards in the United States. Times were changing,*

*and the step away from Victorian legalism was all for the better.<sup>xxi</sup>*

This form of legalism and judgementalism can cause a lot of harm and division among Christians, and especially, in the church. It is a deceptive enemy of the blood-bought freedom we have in Christ. The fundamental problem with legalism is that it suffers from a poor Christology, namely the sufficiency of Christ.<sup>xxii</sup> We must avoid trying to force our opinions over disputable matters on others who do not share our opinions.

The second enemy trying to depreciate our Christian freedom is antinomianism or variations of libertinism and licentiousness. The Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines antinomianism as *“One who holds that under the gospel dispensation of grace the moral law is of no use or obligation because faith alone is necessary for salvation.”* It depreciates the grace of God in how we deal with the remaining sin in our lives. Instead of encouraging a life of meticulous pursuit of practical holiness, it leads to a life that is careless in this pursuit. I don't think anyone one of us this morning would deny a sanctifying role for God's moral law in the life of a Christ as no one would deny the plain teaching of Eph. 6:1-3, where children are told to obey their parents in the Lord. There are literally hundreds of imperatives in the New Testament for Christians to obey. Contrary to antinomianism, *“the New Testament heightens, not lessens, the place of the moral law in the life of the believer, for the indicative has been*

*heightened through Christ's mediatorial work*<sup>xxiii</sup>

We still have a relationship to the moral law or will of God, but it is in and through Christ. As Richard Gaffin explains,

*"Briefly, apart from the gospel and outside of Christ the law is my enemy and condemns me. Why? Because God is no longer my enemy but my friend, and the law, his will, and law in its moral core, as reflective of his character and of concerns eternally inherent in his own person and so do what pleases him, is now my friend guide for life in fellowship with God."*<sup>xxiv</sup>

We are not free to disregard any of the commands in Scripture that reveal the character and will of God. We are still to actively live holy, Christ-like lives. As Tim Keller points out, *"Any failure to present full, eager, complete obedience and submission to God as ultimately a great joy – as a way of resemble, know and bring delight to God – is a tendency toward the antinomian spirit."*<sup>xxv</sup> This "antinomian spirit" can often lead to the abuse of Christian freedom. Again, the only solution to this enemy of Christian freedom is a more comprehensive understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ and what he actually accomplished in his person and work.

### **Exercise of Christian Freedom**

So far we have worked through the nature and qualities of Christian freedom, the foundation of Christian freedom, and the goal of Christian freedom. Now I believe we are ready to think about its exercise.<sup>xxvi</sup> With regards to the exercise of Christian freedom, I believe there are at least seven points that need to be

made. The first point I would like to make is the simple reality that there is such a thing as "disputable matters" or matters of "opinion", matters neither right nor wrong. The sixteenth-century Reformers called such things as "matters of indifference", matters that are neither prohibited nor commanded in Scripture.<sup>xxvii</sup>

What this means is there are actions or activities or issues that can be considered "non-moral" where the bible gives no clear prohibition or no clear command. Not everything is as "black and white" as we often like to think it is or wished it were. There are "grey areas". This simple fact *"means that we have the freedom in Christ to enjoy many created things without fear of condemnation. Therefore, as Christians we have the privilege of freedom to enjoy various aspects of creation without fear of judgement"*<sup>xxviii</sup> (Rom.14:14a; 1 Cor. 10:26).

The way I often approach this by categorizing Biblical truth into three levels of importance. First of all, there is truth that is central to Christianity everyone must agree on. Some examples are the Trinity, deity and humanity of Christ, the resurrection, and salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, etc. If a person does not believe these things they are not Christians. These are salvation issues that cannot be denied.

Secondly, I believe there are certain truths that will create reasonable boundaries between Christians on this side of heaven. These truths will determine whether or not we

can pastor a certain church or what kind of church we will or can attend. Truths such as mode of baptism, church government, spiritual gifts, various aspects of the role of men and women in the church, maybe even eschatology, etc. A person can be a Christian if they hold differing viewpoints on these issues. But it is hard to have unity when leaders and members of a church disagree on these matters.

Then thirdly, I see there are matters that are truly indifferent or disputable. On these issues, there can be varying viewpoints. The differing viewpoints are not unimportant, however, Christians should be able to disagree but still be able to fellowship with each other in unity. I think the popular phrase rings true, *“In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”*

Now that we have established the fact of “disputable” issues, let's think about what these issues might be before we consider more directives or guidelines. I think even in those present here this morning it would be difficult to come to a complete census on what constitutes a “disputable matter”. In Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, 10 there is at least five issues that are in this list. Romans 14 highlight three of the issues and have to do with food, days and beverages. Food, days and beverages in of themselves are matters of indifference. In Romans 14:14, Paul was *“convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself.”* He also shows us in 1 Cor. 8:8 that at least food is a “disputable matter”.

He says, *“But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”* In 1 Cor. 9, Paul talks about his rights and freedoms as an apostle. He asks in verses 5-6 whether or not he was free to take a believing wife or have the freedom to not have secular employment while preaching the gospel (1 Cor. 9:14). However, just because Paul does not mention more “disputable matters” does not mean he has exhausted the list of disputable matters.

I will let R. Kent Hughes provide more possible items for this list of “disputable” issues.<sup>xxix</sup>

- (1) *Theater, Movies, Television, and Technology.* Some Christians might think Christians should not go to the movies or the theater or watch television. Others think they can, but that they should be selective, just as they are with the literature they read. And still others think there is total freedom to watch whatever they like.
- (2) *Cosmetics.* This is not the issue it used to be, but it is controversial in certain parts of the world.
- (3) *Alcohol.* Hughes points out that alcohol is a major issue, especially among American Christians today. Ironically, while there is growing medical evidence of its harmful physical and social effects, more Christians are exercising their freedom to partake. Hence, there is a rising tension and often this tension is between the older and the younger generations.

(4) *Tobacco*. You may be well aware of the two famous Christians in the Victorian Era in England by the names of Charles Spurgeon and Joseph Parker. Both these men were famous preachers of the gospel and would even exchange pulpits and enjoy sweet fellowship, until they had a disagreement. Spurgeon accused Parker of being unspiritual because he frequented the theater. However, Spurgeon liked to smoke cigars, which many Christians condemned. The story is told how on one occasion someone asked Spurgeon about his cigars, and he answered he did not smoke in excess. When he explained what he meant by excess Spurgeon said, “No more than two at a time.” And the question is, “Who was right and who was wrong?”<sup>xxx</sup>

(5) *Card playing*. Because of its association with gambling Christians are ambivalent about the use of traditional cards.

(6) *Dancing*. For some Christians this is a litmus test, especially among youth.

(7) *Fashion*. Some Christians can view the issue of “trendiness” as possible worldliness. Withering judgements are sometimes made both ways on the basis of clothing and hairstyle.

(8) *Bible translation used*. In some Christian circles your translation can be a quick ticket for acceptance or rejection. It used to be the King James Version. Now the ESV may have taken its place.

(9) *Music*. Today a heated controversy goes on regarding appropriate Christian music. The “worship wars” over the past few decades give

ample evidence of how heated things can get. There is also the issue of whether or not a Christian is permitted to listen to secular music. (10) *Material Wealth*. This tension is manifested in such forms as “Stop me if I’m wrong, George, but haven’t you – uh, been spending a lot of money on a car?” “Nope.” “No? You don’t think the money could be better used, say, in the leprosy fund?”

We could add many more “disputable” matters to this list and I am sure more will come up in our discussion – things like methods of education, certain uses of technology, appropriate Sunday attire, the celebration of certain holidays, dating. The challenge is, while all of these issues are “disputable matters” or matters of “indifference”, all of these things on this list can be used in sinful ways. But used rightly, they can be enjoyed with a clear conscience. That is why navigating through these waters can be a little complicated.

Secondly, we are to accept one another despite our differences of opinion (Romans 14:1). As long as we are on this side of heaven, it is virtually impossible to agree on everything. But we accept one another simply because the gospel demands it. The motivation for us to accept one another is because God has accepted us in Christ (Rom. 15:7). Sinclair Ferguson brings much needed clarity when he says, “*True, the Lord will not leave them as they are. But He does not make their pattern of conduct the basis of His welcome. Neither should we.*”<sup>xxxi</sup> When God accepts or welcomes

us, He does not find us agreeing with Him on every last detail of truth or with everything in our lives or with everything in our heart. Therefore, we are to follow God's pattern of accepting us. This means we can and should have fellowship with people we disagree with when it comes to disputable matters. We cannot wait only until we have sorted out our views on matters of opinion or for the other party to agree with us for unity to exist. We are to accept each other and not be their judge over opinions (Rom. 14:4, 10-12). It is sad how often we are quick to judge or criticize when a certain name is mentioned in conversation. We are to learn to accept people despite our differences of opinion in disputable matters without judging them. We need to leave that to Christ. Two great realities must coexist in the church – unity and diversity.

Thirdly, the exercise of our freedom is not everything, but the gospel is (Rom. 14:14, 21; 1 Cor. 8:13; 9:13, 19). The gospel is more important than the exercise of our Christian freedom. As a result, Christian freedom consists as much in abstaining as in using.<sup>xxxii</sup> I like how Erik Raymond puts it. He says, *“When the gospel comes to town and we are truly gospel-centered we remember that the true beauty of having liberty is both the freedom to enjoy them in light of the gospel and to lay them aside for the sake of the gospel.”*<sup>xxxiii</sup> The priority for Paul is gospel advancement. That is why he is determined not to put a stumbling block in anyone's way that would cause him or her to fall into sin (Rom. 14:13; 1 Cor. 8:9).

I am constantly challenged by how the apostle Paul describes his approach in 1 Cor. 9:19-23:

*“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”*

Martin Luther famously puts it this way: *“A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”*<sup>xxxiv</sup> This truly is the beauty of Christian freedom. The freedom is not just in what we can enjoy, but in what we can freely give up for the sake of the gospel.<sup>xxxv</sup> This seems so unnatural and contrary and therefore difficult for us, but the gospel is more important. The irony is that when we voluntarily lay aside our freedom for the sake of the gospel, we are still free!

Fourthly, there are times and situations, however, where our freedom should be exercised. I think we need the word of caution Calvin gives: *“But it is sometimes important for our freedom to be declared before men. This I admit. Yet we must be with the greatest caution hold to this limitation, that we do not abandon*

*the care of the weak, whom the Lord has so strongly commended to us.*<sup>xxxvi</sup> There is one issue in Scripture where the apostle Paul both limits his freedom and strongly exercises his freedom. The issue is the circumcision of Timothy and the opposition to circumcision with regard to Titus. In Acts 16:3 we read of how Paul wanted to take Timothy along to go the churches and report the decision the Council in Jerusalem came to concerning Gentile believers and circumcision. Circumcision was not required for salvation. But Timothy was not circumcised because his father was Greek and the churches where they were travelling knew this. So what did Paul do? He had Timothy circumcised! He did not have him circumcised because Timothy needed to be circumcised in order to be justified before God, but that he might not offend those Jews they were visiting, those weak in faith, who did not yet fully comprehend their freedom in Christ. However, when it came to Titus in Galatians 2:3, he did not compel him to be circumcised. What made this situation different was the context. Here in Galatians, Paul tells us there were false believers who had infiltrated their ranks to spy on the freedom they had in Christ and make them slaves (Gal. 2:4). He did not have Titus circumcised in order to preserve the gospel against legalism. The motivation was the gospel (Gal. 2:5). I think Luther is right in saying, *“For, as he would not offend or condemn anyone’s weakness in faith, but yielded for a time to their will, so, again, he would not have the liberty of*

*faith offended or condemned by hardened self-justifiers, but walked a middle path, sparing the weak for the time, and always resisting the hardened, that he might convert all to the liberty of faith.*<sup>xxxvii</sup> This describes the balance in our exercise of Christian freedom. Generally speaking, with regard to the weak, we lay our freedom aside. With regards to the self-justifiers, we should exercise our freedom. Therefore, the gospel is preserved in both the exercise and in the laying aside of our freedom. Pray that God will give us much discernment to keep this balance.

Fifthly, we cannot use our freedom to be mastered by anything sinful. Paul in, 1 Cor. 6:12-17, contrasts disputable matters with those that are outright sinful, between food and sexual immorality. We have the freedom to eat food, because eating food is what our stomachs were made for. However, our bodies are not meant for sexual immorality. In 1 Peter 2:26, instructs Christians to *“Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves.”* This is the challenge with our freedom. We cannot let the very freedom we love and practice to cause us to be mastered by sin. Calvin puts succinctly, *“And we have never been forbidden to laugh, or to be filled, or to join new possessions to old or ancestral ones, or to delight in musical harmony, or to drink wine. True indeed. But where there is plenty, to wallow in delights, to gorge oneself, to intoxicate mind and heart with present pleasures and be always panting after new*

ones—such are very far removed from a lawful use of God’s gifts.<sup>\*xxxviii</sup>

Sixthly, let us be determined to love and encourage our brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom. 14:15, 19; 15:1-5). There is to be a large measure of humility when it comes to exercising our Christian freedom. There should be no self-focus. And again, Christ is our motivation here. In Romans 15:1-4 Paul makes this very plain to the church in Rome:

*“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.” (ESV)*

The focus cannot be on our rights, but to love and encourage others. Calvin says, *“Nothing is plainer than this rule: that we should use our freedom if it results in the edification of our neighbor, but if it does not help our neighbor, then we should forgo it.”*<sup>\*xxxix</sup> This directive is easy to write about or even talk about. But it is challenging to practice and difficult to remember because it is so unnatural to us, especially living in the narcissistic culture we live in. We naturally want things to be about us. But we must remember the gospel. Our Lord Jesus, the one who was perfect and sinless, who still was the Son of God when he lived on earth, would have had the right and the power to demand so many things, humbled himself and *“did not come to be served, but to*

*gave his life as a ransom for many”* (Mark 10:45). But for us, as Hughes points out,

*“Exercising Christian liberty is very much like walking a tightrope. As you walk the rope with balancing pole in hand, at the one end of the pole is love for others and at the other hand is Christian liberty. When these are in balance, your walk is as it should be...we are all immensely free in Christ. Our only bondage is the bond of love to our fellow believers.”*<sup>\*xl</sup>

Lastly, the controlling factor is our accountability to God (Rom. 14:6, 8, 18; 1 Cor. 10:31). We must constantly ask ourselves, “Am I pleasing God in my exercise of Christian freedom?” Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” And the reason for this accountability is the reality that we will all have to give an account to God one day (Rom. 14:12). Let’s give Calvin the last word on this:

*“Only let my readers remember this: with whatever obstacles Satan and the world strive to turn us away from God’s commands or delay us from following what he appoints, we must nonetheless vigorously go forward. Then, whatever dangers threaten, we are not free to turn aside even a fingernail’s breath from this same God’s authority, and it is not lawful under any pretext for us to attempt anything but what he allows.”*<sup>\*xli</sup>

## Conclusion

We are immensely free in Christ. I would even say the freest people on earth. Our freedom was a costly freedom. But it is a freedom that liberates us from the shackles of sin and selfishness. May we as pastors be examples of this freedom to serve the Lord

Jesus Christ. My prayer is we will be able to help our people to center their freedom in the glorious gospel so that they will know how to walk in love as they live in the freedom in Christ. Amen.

<sup>i</sup> Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (Carlisle, PA, Banner of Truth Trust, 2010), 20.

<sup>ii</sup> These qualities come from Bolton.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>iv</sup> Colin Hanson, "Young, Restless, Reformed," *Christianity Today*, September 22, 2006, 32.

<sup>v</sup> John MacArthur, "Beer, Bohemianism, and True Christian Liberty," *Grace to You*, entry posted in 2015.

<http://www.gty.org/resources/Blog/B110809> [accessed January 8, 2015].

<sup>vi</sup> Darren Patrick, *Church Planter* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 51.

<sup>vii</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1. Edited by John T McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1960, 834, 838.

<sup>viii</sup> Albert Martin, *A Fresh Look At Christian Liberty #1*. Trinity Baptist Church. Montville, New Jersey, February 15, 2004.

<sup>ix</sup> Martin, *A Fresh Look at Christian Liberty*.

<sup>x</sup> Bolton, 26-27.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>xii</sup> Tim Challies, "How to be Conformed to the World," *Challies Blog*, entry posted February 17, 2016, <http://www.challies.com/articles/how-to-be-conformed-to-the-world> (accessed February 17, 2016).

<sup>xiii</sup> Mark Jones, *Antinomianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2013), 31.

<sup>xiv</sup> Bolton, 45.

<sup>xv</sup> Richard Sibbs, *The Complete Words of Richard Sibbs* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1973).

<sup>xvi</sup> Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 8-10.

<sup>xvii</sup> Albert Martin, *A Fresh Look at Christian Liberty*, Sermon #9.

<sup>xviii</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance – Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), Kindle.

<sup>xix</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 713.

<sup>xx</sup> Ferguson, *Whole of Christ*.

<sup>xxi</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*, Preaching the Word, edited by R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 253.

<sup>xxii</sup> Jones, 124.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Jones, xii, 38

<sup>xxiv</sup> Richard Gaffin Jr., *"By Faith, Not by Sight": Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006), 103.

<sup>xxv</sup> Tim Keller, forward to *The Whole Christ*, by Sinclair Ferguson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), Kindle.

<sup>xxvi</sup> This discussion regarding the exercise of Christian freedom will largely surround the information given in Romans 14:1-15:13, 1 Corinthians 6-10, and 1 Peter 2:16.

<sup>xxvii</sup> John Stott, *Romans: Encountering the Gospel's Power* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 89.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Erik Raymond, "A Gospel-Centered Church Understands the Place of Christian Liberty," *Ordinary Pastor Blog*, entry posted February 7, 2013, <http://blogs.thegospelcoalition.org/erikraymond/?s=A+Gospel-Centered+Church+Understands+the+Place+of+Christian+Liberty> (accessed November 9, 2015).

<sup>xxix</sup> R. Kent Hughes, 253.

<sup>xxx</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-55.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, "4 Principles for the Exercise of Christian Liberty," *Ligonier Ministries Blog*, entry posted August 28, 2013, <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/4-principles-exercise-christian-liberty> (accessed January 8, 2015).

<sup>xxxii</sup> Calvin, 842.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Raymond, blog post.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Martin Luther, *Concerning Christian Liberty*. A Public Domain Book. Kindle, 9.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Raymond, blog post.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Calvin, 842.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Luther, 30.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Calvin, 841.

<sup>xxxix</sup> *Ibid.*, 845.

<sup>xl</sup> Hughes, 260.

<sup>xli</sup> Calvin, 846.