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In Christ we are set free. We have heard HOW this freedom is gained, by our “believing on Jesus” and by “continuing in Jesus’ word”, thereby we shall know the truth, and the truth shall make us free (from John 8.31-32, KJV). Last week we heard what our belief in Jesus and our discipleship of Him sets us free FROM: the demands of the law in terms of our personal salvation; our former bondage to sin; the grip of spiritual death upon us; and the prospect of our rejection at the time of future divine judgement because of unforgiven sin.

Now this freedom in Christ was often misunderstood in the early days of the Church, and sometimes still is. Not surprisingly, some Christ-believers from a Jewish background struggled to relate this new faith-based freedom to their former Jewish ways: were they still to keep the Mosaic law or not? – and in particular, were they still to circumcise their sons as evidence of their continuing obedience to that law? In Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches the Holy Spirit deals with these matters. We read of “false brethren unawares brought in, who came privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage” (Galatians 2.4, KJV) – in other words, these intruders tried to replace Gospel freedom with rules-led bondage once more. These “Judaizers” were duly seen off in no uncertain terms! (v 5, and eg., Romans 3.20-26 and 7.4-6 / II Corinthians 3.17-18).

Equally unsurprisingly, some Christ-believers fresh from a Gentile background were “all over the place”! They knew little about Moses or the law, instead simply placing their faith in “Jesus Christ as Lord”, through whom they gained forgiveness, salvation - and “freedom”. Now this freedom sounded rather good! - “By faith in Christ I am now free / Jesus forgives all my sins anyway / So I can carry on in all my old ways” - a classic case of having their cake and eating it too. In parts of Paul’s letters to the Ephesians and the Corinthians in particular, the Holy Spirit explains to these Gentile believers that this “freedom in Christ” has nothing to do with licence.

Just so for us. To walk in this freedom aright, firstly we are to avoid the old Jewish “legalism tendency” that insists that our Christian lives are ultimately still about “keeping all the rules” (egs., Galatians 2.4 as mentioned, and 5.1). Our acceptance before God is no longer about such rule-keeping, but about plain faith in God’s Son Jesus Christ (eg., Romans 5.1 / Ephesians 2.8-9 / etc). Thus concerning the right use of food and drink for example, or of Sunday observance, theatre-going or television, or of fasting or tithing and so on, Christians are not bound by strict rules, but have the freedom to behave responsibly and appropriately in these matters under the Lord. Whatever our daily decision-making may involve, the Ten Commandments remain as valid as ever in terms of our moral conduct, while no longer affecting our salvation.

Secondly we are to avoid the other extreme, that of the old Gentile tendency of “Just do it”, where no restraint is necessary because our forgiveness is guaranteed anyway. Not so! (eg. Romans 6.2, 11-18 / II Peter 2.9-22). We are being reminded in this Reflection that our freedom in Christ brings responsibility as well as privilege, beautifully summed up in Galatians 5.13 – “For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (and other egs., I Peter 2.9-16 / I Corinthians 6.12, 8.9 and 10.29 -33).

In the Epistle of James we read of “the perfect law of liberty” (1.25) by which we shall be judged (2.12). So we close this time with this lovely scriptural irony: that we rightly use our freedom from THE law by still keeping to A law, “the law of liberty”, which in turn is still based on “the two great commandments” of love for God, and love for one another (Matthew 22.36-40; see also for example Ephesians 4.1-3, 13-16, 20-32, and 5.1-21).

In our Christ-won freedom we walk in this “law of liberty”, as God’s “workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Ephesians 2.10), “always abounding in the work of the Lord (I Corinthians 15.57, and eg., Galatians 6.9 / / II Timothy 2.21). We do these “good works”, not trying to earn salvation by being good enough (Ephesians 2.8-9), but out of our loving, grateful obedience to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, the Source of truth, and the Giver of freedom.

Truly, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain ...” (Revelation 5.12).

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