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RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY

THE FREEDOM WE HAVE IN CHRIST

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LET US FIRST state what freedom we have *without* Christ.

In its Article II, the Formula of Concord speaks of the free will—or rather the slavery of the human will. It points out that man is by nature blind in all those things that concern our conversion and salvation (*hominem . . . ita penitus corruptum esse, ut in rebus spiritualibus, quae ad conversionem et salutem nostram spectant, natura caecus sit*) and states that we cannot by any efforts of our own re-establish our relation to God. But that does *not* mean—as the Formula of Concord continues—that man no more should be a rational creature (*rationalis creatura*) and no more should understand any thing of good or evil in external and civil things (*quod in rebus externis et civilibus nihil boni aut mali intelligere possit*). In things concerning food and bodily needs man can be clever, intelligent and rather energetic (*in civilibus externis rebus, quae ad victum et corporalem sustentationem pertinent homo est industrius, ingeniosus et quidem admodum negotiosus*).

As far as politics, business, trade unions, social welfare, medicine and such things are concerned, we have what you might reasonably call a free will. We have got common sense, including a sense of right and wrong. We can, to a certain extent, determine what really is good for ourselves and our country and perhaps also for mankind, and we can choose to do it—or not to do it. In fact, it is possible to accomplish much good in the area of national, political, and social life without having any belief in Jesus Christ. That is the freedom we have *without* Christ.

This does not mean, however, that we could do these good things *without* God. This freedom also we have in God, yet not because we necessarily believe in God, but because we are created by God. The sense of right and wrong, the power to choose the good and do it, are relics of the original goodness which man received at the Creation, when he was made in the image of God. Therefore this ability to do useful work, clever practical reforms and such things, should be gratefully accepted by Christian people, even if they are found among atheists or Mohammedans. Luther on occasion referred to the Turkish State as a good example in some respects for Christians. This meant no offence for him. He knew that God acts also through his creation, also by social instincts and political skill, which are his good gifts. Pastors should never try to prove that all the acts of unbelieving people are purely egotistic or necessarily corrupt. They are not. In the realm of this world man is capable of good and reasonable conduct. In social relief work, for example, a Christian can gladly co-operate with radicals or Hindus. If they are honourable and dependable they are led by God and are anonymous co-operators in his big work for maintaining order and justice, within the limits of the First Article of the Creed. But as soon as it comes to the true knowledge of God they are no more anonymous co-operators. In that respect they are helplessly blind and all their pretended wisdom is foolishness. The knowledge of God, that can be drawn from nature, creation and conscience, can give us just a vague idea of God's reality and his majesty, but it can by no means tell us, how to restore the true communion with God, which has been broken by sin.

We must be aware that most of the political freedom we prize so highly and are ready to defend at any costs, is a freedom that we can have without Christ. It must not be confused with the freedom we have in Christ. To be sure, political freedom also has its foundation in God's will and his commandments. It certainly is a part of his design, performed by the mighty powers of good will and good reason, by which he secretly works in our hearts and brains, in our feelings and instincts. But it is *not* a freedom in Christ. When circumstances are favourable it can be found outside the area of Christian influence, though you hardly ever find real democracy where Christianity has not been at work. This is because of the corruption of our natural powers by sin. Christianity restores the Law of God. That means a new attitude also towards state and community life. It gives us a better chance to fight corruption and selfishness in public affairs. But it is *not* freedom in Christ. It is a secular freedom, created by a good and rational use of the gifts that God has bestowed upon all his children, pagans, Christians, and Jews alike. The MRA may be quite right in trying to solve the problems of this world simply by enforcing the law of God among people. But you cannot save them and bring them into the Kingdom of God by the law. This limited, secular righteousness is not the righteousness of God that lets us become God's children.

What, then, is the freedom we have in Christ?

To answer that question we must first determine what kind of *slavery* we are subjected to *without Christ*.

Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin, Christ says. In what sense is he a slave?

St Paul answers: You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience (Eph. 2: 1-3).

The words "dead" and "slave" here indicate exactly the same thing: one who is in bondage, unable to change his position. The situation of man is this: he is under the influence of mighty and superior powers. He "walks" in his sins, he moves, acts, lives in an atmosphere, that must be called "sin", not because it consists merely of immoral and criminal acts, but because it is a life, in which God has *not* got his proper place and man does not fulfil his purpose, which is to love and serve God with all his heart. Man is hopelessly involved in the big rebellion against God and is subdued by the powers, that counter God's will. St Paul mentioned those powers in the passage I just quoted: this world, the devil, and the flesh. The prince of this world here is called "The prince of the power of the air" (or in Eph. 6: powers and rulers of the darkness of this world). He is not only something evil within our hearts. He is a ruler. He exercises some kind of spiritual power also above and outside all individuals, outside history, beyond this small planet. He is now "at work in the sons of disobedience". He has a secret but trustworthy collaborator in our hearts: our "flesh". "Flesh" is not the same as "body". Sin is not especially connected with the body or the physical life. When we

read about the "works of the flesh" in Gal. 5, the passage starts with "adultery and fornication". Some people would stop there. But St Paul goes on and mentions "hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, envyings" and other things that are purely mental and spiritual, connected with the soul and not with the body. The "flesh", then, is not our body, but our inherited selfishness, so deeply rooted in our nature. This fatal inheritance makes it impossible for man to love God with all his heart and his neighbour as himself.

It often happens that people do not feel this slavery as a bondage. A man might do so if he again and again is conquered by vices of which he is ashamed. But if he "follows the course of this world" and does not offend against its rules, he generally finds his behaviour blameless. "This world" is a very strong power and an enemy to God. It preaches its own gospel: Look out for yourself. After all, your life is your own. You can do what you like with it. You only live once.

Such a way of thinking appears quite natural and self-evident to us, not because it is logical but because we are under pressure, ruled by spiritual powers, inimical to God.

So we are slaves to sin: under devil, flesh, world—and death. "For the end of those things is death." Death is not simply the end of our existence. It is the final destruction of the life we should have lived, the final catastrophe for the happiness we were intended to share with God. It is quite appropriate that people all over the world find the death of a human being somehow shocking. It is only when man is degraded to the very deepest slavery under sin and Satan that he can accept the death of a fellow man with the same indifference as the death of a rabbit.

It is not quite easy to preach about this slavery to irreligious and indifferent people. The fathers of the reformation called the great mass of sinners *securi*, that is, self-confident; just the kind of people you find described in the tenth Psalm: In the pride of his countenance the wicked does not seek God; all his thoughts are, "There is no God". Thy judgements are on high, out of his sight. He thinks in his heart, "I shall not be moved".

If you tell such people that they can be made free, they very likely will answer as the Jews answered our Lord: We have never been in bondage to any one. How is it that you say, "You will be made free?"

Some of them might be brought to reflect upon the matter if you simply say: That's fine. If you really are free, then devote the next week—just one week!—to that noble way of life, which our Lord has taught us. Love your neighbour as yourself. Love all people you meet in the office, on the bus, in your home, just as much as yourself. And show it to them. If you try it next week, you will find before Thursday, that you are *not* free. There is something in your nature, which makes it quite impossible for you to love others as much as yourself. And yet this is not an unimportant thing. It is the second of the two great commandments. On judgement day you can reasonably expect to be asked, if you have loved your neighbour as much as yourself. If we cannot, there must be something wrong with us, something seriously wrong. Are we really not in bondage? Need we not to be made free?

Many people do feel that they are in bondage, even if they are neither religious nor vicious, but simply hard-working, ambitious and respectable folks. The law of God also appears as the "natural law", which is written in the hearts of all men. They know that there are many good things that they simply must do. They earnestly wish to do their best for their children and in their daily work. They would like to be perfect husbands, loving mothers, charming friends. But they have nerves. They live under pressure and stress. They are tired and uninspired, without power to do all the good things they know they ought to do. They often get irritated. They feel they have failed. They are—without knowing it—under the curse of the law.

Again, in our congregations very many people are under the curse of the law. They would like to be good Christians. They listen to their pastor and they generally listen most eagerly, when he speaks about their daily life. That's so practical, so easy to understand. "That isn't Theology! That's something for our everyday-life!" And they ambitiously try to do what they hear. They are deeply convinced that this is the way to become truly Christian. If you read to them Romans 3: "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that . . ." they very likely would continue: so that we might become holy, good and victorious Christians. They are deeply convinced that if you really listen to the Word of God and try to do it, *of course*, you can!

And then they discover the truth. They cannot. Their evil temper can be softened but not overcome. Their evil lusts can be controlled from without but not removed from within their hearts. And very often they share the experience of St Paul: I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Many of them have not the faintest idea that this is precisely described in their Bible. They had expected to be completely changed when they became devout. They are ashamed to speak of their failure. They think there must be something extraordinarily wrong with them. They are hopeless cases. They will never be real Christians.

And, of course, there is something wrong with them! Just the terrible thing, that is the fate of mankind: I am carnal, sold under sin, captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. The first thing you have to tell them in order to help them in their misery is the very fact that they can be happy to have discovered this. They would not feel so miserable, if God had not spoken to them in his Word and acted in their hearts with his Holy Spirit. His law has done exactly what it was designed to do. The law speaks not to make us holy. It speaks so that every mouth be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

And now there is the acceptable time to preach the freedom we have in Christ. When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of woman, born under the law. He came to fulfil the law, that very law, which we never can fulfil. God's own Son had to obey his earthly parents, he had to work hard, be patient with troublesome

people, experience all the irritating and burdensome vexations of a poor and harrassed life. And still he became obedient unto death. And this he did to redeem those who were under the law, so that we may receive adoption as sons.

He redeemed us from the curse of the law. The power of sin is the law. The law is the best armour of Satan, that "strong man, fully armed", who guards his own palace. He can use the law against us and against God. He knows he is right when he says that such people as you and I are not fit for the kingdom of Heaven and cannot enter it according to God's own law. He knows that God must deny himself and be untrue to his own holy nature, if he accepts sin. That is the triumph of Satan; that makes him the ruler of this world. Nothing could deliver us from this slavery but the ransom of the precious blood of Christ. He came to fulfil the law and to die for our sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. This was, says St Paul, to show God's righteousness, to prove that he himself is righteous *and* that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

Satan, then, has nothing to say. The law is fulfilled. God has not abolished an iota, not a dot from it. And still the law can no longer accuse. Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus who died.

This, now, is the freedom we have in Christ. It is the freedom that entitles me—wretched man that I am!—to be a child of God. It is the freedom for me, a sinner, who was sold under sin and who cannot get rid of the sin which dwells in me, to come to God, as happy and innocent, as if I had never committed any sin and had never experienced the law of sin which dwells in my members. I would never have dared to do so, if God had not done this for me. It would have been an insult to God's holy Majesty, a presumption and a blasphemy to offer him my heart and my prayers, if Christ had not died for me. But now I can do it in the name of my crucified Saviour, confident that he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, he who justifies the ungodly, he will accept me for Jesus' sake. This is the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Luther often described this freedom as a freedom of the conscience. This does not mean, that we have freedom to act or think according to our private opinions. That is a modern misinterpretation. Freedom of conscience means that our conscience is free from the terror of the law. We can accept the judgement, we know how true it is that we are sinners and remain sinners, and still we can praise God, love God, come to God, and serve God.

What, then, exactly does this glorious liberty signify?

First: freedom from guilt. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. He is the expiation for our sins. This freedom is absolute and complete for every one who believes in Jesus.

Secondly: it is the freedom from every kind of punishment. Upon him was the chastisement that made us whole and with his stripes we are healed. It must be said again and again that God will never inflict any sort of punishment on anyone who believes in Jesus. It is

not devotion and not humility if a Christian thinks that his misfortunes are a well-deserved punishment for his sins. They may be the discipline from a loving father. "God is treating you as sons." But you are free from punishment. This freedom is complete and absolute for everyone who believes in Jesus.

Thirdly: it is the freedom from the dominion of sin. This freedom is not complete, not as long as we live in this old body. Our human nature is corrupt, and so it remains. Therefore we have to put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit. We have to do it day by day. But the freedom we have in Christ is the freedom from slavery under the flesh. We can resist it and fight it. In every war even a victorious army sometimes and at some points can be defeated. So in this war we can suffer many adversities. But we know and we experience that "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world". Satan never can triumph as long as you go to Jesus. He might defeat me by his devices, but he is absolutely impotent in face of him who bore even these sins of mine in his body on the tree. When I keep close to Him I can withstand in the evil day.

Lastly: the freedom we have in Christ will one day be a complete freedom also from the sin, that dwells in us. That is when this mortal nature puts on immortality. Then our freedom will be absolute and last for ever.

The freedom we have in Christ, then, is a freedom of conscience—a freedom to be God's children. It must not be confused with the political freedom I have mentioned. Political freedom is external, a freedom of the body, of the civil life. The freedom in Christ is internal, a freedom of the spirit, of the hidden life in God. Political freedom is the liberty of your own will, the right to act according to your own wishes. Christian freedom is the liberty of your heart from the burden of bad conscience, the right to be God's child.

Political freedom, therefore, is not in all circumstances something good. Everything depends upon, how it is used. It can be controlled by good powers, with which our nature was endowed by the Creator. But it can also be—and in fact often is—an instrument for human selfishness. Freedom of thought implies freedom also of wrong and godless thinking. That is no reason to suppress freedom of thought or speech. Every restriction of that kind can be used against good and God-inspired thoughts. We have to risk the abuse of freedom and rely on the power of God and his truth. But we should never teach our congregations that political liberty is the special Christian order of civil life. We can teach them that our democracy seems to be one of the best forms of government history knows. It has its great advantages and it has its risks. It means a continuous struggle between good and evil powers in a nation, and it calls upon every Christian to shoulder his responsibility in that struggle.

The freedom we have in Christ does not necessarily demand political freedom. It can be found under all constitutions. It can be found even in a camp of slaves in Siberia. It is neither congruent with nor opposed to civil freedom. It may use civil freedom as a gift of God, but it does not need it. Its opposite is not external freedom but carnal liberty.

Carnal liberty means that the flesh, which is hostile to God and cannot submit to God's law (Rom. 8: 7), assumes command over us and claims its right to act according to its own wishes. Carnal liberty means—as we have seen already—slavery under sin. We are under the dominion of the flesh. Insofar as we do not resist it, it gives us a feeling of freedom. Only the poor conscience is under pressure, "for day and night thy hand was heavy upon me" (Ps. 32). The only way to escape that pressure is to render the conscience as dumb and dead as you can. But it remains an unhappy conscience under judgement.

Christian freedom, then, is the exact opposite of this. The conscience is free, but the flesh is in chains, crucified. "For you were called to freedom, brethren. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh" (Gal. 5: 13). "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (v. 24, cf. Rom. 6: 15-18).

Is there, then, any real meaning of "freedom" when we are at the same time—according to St Paul—"slaves of God", "slaves of righteousness"?

Indeed there is. Freedom always means the freedom to act according to one's own nature, to be free from all the bonds—external or internal—which prevent you from being yourself. Man was created by God, intended to be his free and happy child. Sin means the catastrophe for this freedom. When sin is forgiven and covered by the righteousness of Christ, man is restored in his original freedom. He is the child of God. He enjoys all the rights of God's children. He must, however, still struggle with his old man, his flesh, and he has to experience "the desires of the flesh, which are against the Spirit . . . for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want" (Gal. 5: 16). He must, therefore, constantly live in this opposition between Spirit and flesh, between new man in Christ and old sinner in Adam. That is the limit to our freedom. It is a freedom of conscience. "There it stops and it goes no further", says Luther.

But that is exactly why it implies such a cheerful and fearless liberty also in external things. Nothing is allowed to interfere with this liberty which might touch on the freedom of conscience.

The classical example in the Scripture we read in Galatians 2. In Antioch "false brethren . . . slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us under bondage". The freedom of conscience for the young church of Antioch meant freedom from the observance of the Mosaic law which had been the condition of salvation and the way to God for the Jews. The law had been a yoke upon their neck "which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (as Peter puts it, Acts 15). "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" (Gal. 3: 10.). "He who does them shall live by them"—and no one has done them all, so no one shall live. Freedom from this curse is found only in Christ. Therefore no works of the law—of whatever kind they may be—can save us. Not even prayers. Not love itself. However fervent, they are polluted by sin, and they also need expiation through Christ. Without Christ they are new sins, added to our old ones.

That's why it is disastrous to put anything, whatever it might be, at the side of Christ and say: "This *also* is necessary. Of course you must believe in Christ, but you must also . . .".

Now, in Antioch the discussion had arisen about the circumcision. The "false brethren" from Jerusalem claimed that a Christian must also be circumcised, if he was to be saved. There they met the furious opposition of St Paul. Otherwise he could be very generous and liberal towards old habits. He was willing to go very far not to offend anybody. He has proclaimed the rule: Though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all that I might win the more. For love's sake he was willing to become as a Jew to the Jews.

But in this case he took the opposite position. "We did not yield submission to them even for a moment." He did not allow Titus, who was a Greek, to be circumcised. Why? "That the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you." The truth of the gospel is annihilated, as soon as anything is allowed to share the place that belongs to Christ alone. The Scripture has consigned all things to sin and God has had mercy upon all and saves them all through faith in Jesus. Christ is the only Saviour and Mediator. He cannot share his place with anything else. Then he would be dethroned. "You are severed from Christ you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5: 4). If salvation is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace (Rom. 11: 6). If you would have the smallest part of the law—of prayers, love, self-sacrifice—counted as a merit and a reason why you should be a Christian, then *all* the law must be taken into account and you must be judged by *all* its inexorable commandments. "Now I, Paul, say to you that if any receive circumcision he is bound to keep the whole law."

To preserve the truth of the gospel it is absolutely necessary to keep the law separated from our right to be God's children. Those two things have got nothing to do with one another. And it is necessary not to "yield submission even for a moment" if anybody claims that any kind of works of the law are necessary for salvation.

To take an example. Many Lutheran churches have preserved the order of bishops. Some of them even have the apostolic succession. So has the Church of Sweden, and we appreciate it. A Lutheran church can very well introduce it again when it has been lost. So did the Church of Finland and some Baltic Churches in this century. For the sake of love and in order to facilitate communion with other churches we can accept this order. But if the Episcopalians tell us, that this order is essential for the true Church and that there can be no valid ministry and no true sacraments without bishops, we must not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved.

Another example is the abstinence from alcohol. For the sake of love a Christian can feel bound not to use his freedom in this case. He knows from Scripture, that all things in themselves are clean, but if his freedom puts a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of a brother, he prefers not to make use of his freedom. The whole thing,

however, is reversed, if any person or sect would try to bring us under bondage and proclaims it essential and necessary for every Christian to observe this total abstinence. Then a Christian cannot yield submission even for a moment. He is not bound to give up his abstinence, but he has to state very clearly, that this is a matter of freedom where circumstances, love and care for others have to decide. Some very fervent and pious Christians in Sweden and Finland went so far as to find it a duty for a Christian under such conditions not to be totally abstinent. Paavo Routsalainen, the famous Finnish pietist leader, could very demonstratively pull up a bottle and drink out of it when he met such people. The old ministers in my own diocese used to say: One drink you may take to annoy the Pharisees; the second you had better leave to annoy the devil.

This liberty must always be defended. "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5: 1). The freedom is so precious not for the sake of our individual rights; a Christian must always be ready to sacrifice his own wishes for the sake of unity and love. But our freedom is indispensable for the sake of the wounded consciences. There can be no freedom from the yoke of slavery unless we stand fast to the truth that Christ is the only and sufficient ground for our right to be God's children. If the law in any form is admitted to take the place of Christ, it will terrorise the conscience. There is an important difference concerning those three things we call *adiaphora*. Usually we can freely use them or not use them. But at a certain point they are no more *adiaphora*. That is when they are presented by others as necessary for salvation. Then we get into a situation, which the Formula of Concord calls *status confessionis*, that is, the situation where you have to make a firm confession of the truth. In *status confessionis* even indifferent and free things get a new importance. To take some Biblical examples: in 1 Tim. 4, St Paul tells us about people, who "forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth". Admittedly St Paul himself was unmarried and could abstain from meat and other food for religious reasons. But in this case he calls these precepts "doctrines of demons" and he states that those who teach them have "departed from the faith".

In the same way he tells the Colossians (2: 16) not to let anyone "pass judgement on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath". He orders them not to submit to regulations of the kind, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch". The Colossians then were in *status confessionis*. These doctrines were proclaimed as fundamental and as constituting the right relation to God. Then they were false. But St Paul himself could say just the same as advice for good Christian behaviour. But when he did so, he always argued going out from the right use of the freedom and the true love for the brethren "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another".

One point must be stressed before we finish. The freedom we have in Christ means that man is free to be himself. Christ restores God's creation. Everyone of us was created by God in a unique way. We are all different and God wishes us to be different. When our sins are forgiven and our flesh is crucified there remains a man who is redeemed. He is, however, nothing like a standard post-card angel. He is an individual. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor. 12). The body does not consist of one member but of many. God arranged the organs of the body, each one of them, as he chose. We must be very careful, therefore, not to allow the average member to impose the standards of his family, his class and his nation, on the congregation. When we are redeemed, we have the right to be *different* members. In a good congregation there ought to be some people who really are different and look not at all like ordinary churchmen. A certain standard of good manners is helpful. It has a healthy and educating influence. But it must not be transformed into a new yoke of slavery. People from other backgrounds and other social classes must feel that they are accepted as brethren, when they believe in Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither workman nor clerk. What is of any avail is the faith, that is working through love.

Let us sum it up:

The freedom we have in Christ is not a civil freedom and cannot be described in a declaration of rights. It is the freedom to be God's children in spite of our sins and in spite of the corruption in our human nature. It is a wonderful freedom of conscience, a joyful conviction that we are accepted by God. As God's free and happy children we may use in liberty his good gifts and be just the individuals we were intended to be by the Creator. We are made free for the true life he intended us to live: a life of loving service. By serving we are not annihilated as individuals. The single member of the body grows stronger and gets more itself, the more it serves. The limit to our freedom is the fact that we live in a fallen world. Freedom in Christ means slavery for the flesh. For the sake of our weak brethren we often have to abstain from using our freedom. But in the resurrection and in the world to come, we will together with all God's creation "obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God".

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