

Concordia Theological Monthly



N O V E M B E R • 1 9 5 8

Concordia Theological Monthly

VOL. XXIX

NOVEMBER 1958

No. 11

“The Freedom We Have in Christ” *

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THE topic “The Freedom We Have in Christ” penetrates to the very heart of the Christian faith. Every word is significant. The keyword is “Christ.” We shall first define the terms and then emphasize their theological import for the joy and comfort of the Christian.

The question, “What do you think of the Christ? Whose Son is He?” is as relevant today as it was when Jesus addressed it to the Pharisees. So is the question: “If David thus calls Him Lord, how is He His Son?” (Matt. 22:42, 45 RSV, as in all succeeding passages). Who is this Christ in whom we have freedom? The answers differ. There are those who think it is still necessary to prove that such a person actually appeared in history. Others regard Him as no more than David’s son. The freedom we have in Christ calls for a clear-cut confession. Nothing less than that of Peter will do: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). Every child that has memorized Luther’s explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles’ Creed knows that Jesus Christ is “true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also

* “Christ Frees and Unites” was the theme of the third assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, Minneapolis, Minn., U. S. A., August 15—25, 1957. It was discussed on the basis of five addresses on as many subtopics, the first of which, delivered by Dr. Chitose Kishi of Japan, being on the subject, “The Freedom We Have in Christ.” Fifty-one theses were formulated to summarize the discussions and were received by the assembly for further study. In the preface Bishop Hanns Lilje said: “We hand them over to all Lutheran congregations in the world, to their pastors, teachers, and members. . . . We ask you to give these theses your prayerful study and careful consideration.” The systematics department of Concordia Seminary discussed them in its departmental meetings, and its members agreed to keep the discussions alive by sharing some of their thoughts with the readers of this journal.

true man, born of the Virgin Mary," but some theologians do not know it. Some have never peered into the empty grave on Easter morning, but still lament with Cleopas: "But we had hoped that He was the One to redeem Israel." (Luke 24:21)

The term "Christ" is more than a mere name. For that the name "Jesus" would have sufficed. The angel instructed Joseph to give this name to the Virgin's Son in order to reveal the purpose of His coming into the world, for He should save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). As the Savior Jesus could lay claim to the title "Christ." He was the promised Messiah or Christ, the Anointed, for God, His God, anointed Him with the oil of gladness above His fellows (Ps. 45:7). God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power (Acts 10:38). Prophets, priests, and kings were anointed among God's chosen people. Thus God anointed Jesus to be our Prophet, Priest, and King.

Christ is our Prophet. A prophet spoke as God's mouth. At the transfiguration of Jesus God's voice proclaimed from heaven: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him" (Matt. 17:5). It was fitting that we should have such a High Priest as Jesus Christ, "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens," One who had "no need, like those high priests [of Aaron], to offer sacrifices daily, first for His own sins and then for those of the people; He did this once for all when He offered up Himself" (Heb. 7:26, 27). He is our King in grace, power, and glory. He declared His kingship to Pilate (John 18:37). He assured His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (Matt. 28:18). Once crowned with thorns, He now saves us for His heavenly kingdom. "To Him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen" (2 Tim. 4:18). For "God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9-11). This is the Christ, the promised Messiah, in whom we have freedom.

Who are the "we"? Are all the children of Adam speaking or only the disciples of Christ? We assume the latter, a much smaller

group. The answer to this question also determines the significance of the term "have."

The term "freedom" is limited by the phrase "in Christ." We are speaking of the freedom to which Christ frees. He came to set men free, to give them liberty, to release from bondage, to rid them of a heavy burden. But is it not superfluous to define freedom? Surely everyone knows what it is! Alas! not so. Freedom is becoming a scarce article in the world. Many have never tasted it and know no more about it than the deaf know of music or the blind of color. Despots have coined their own definition of freedom in order to deceive their slaves. They have defined freedom as liberty to do anything within the restrictions imposed by the masters. That is the freedom of the bird in a cage or of a dog chained to a post. That is not the kind of freedom we have in Christ.

It may be helpful to see what the freedom we have in Christ is not. Men have misinterpreted even this freedom. Some have identified it with an earthly freedom for which men have fought with the sword and died on the field of battle. "Give me liberty or give me death," cried Patrick Henry. The freedom for which he pleaded is indeed precious, but the freedom we have in Christ by far excels that for which heroes have died in battle. Should anyone think of civil liberty, let him remember James, who was free in Christ but died by Herod's sword. Should anyone think of personal freedom, let him remember that many of the early Christians were slaves. Onesimus was free in Christ but Philemon's slave. The freedom we have in Christ is something bigger and better than any measure of social, political, civil, economic, or any other kind of earthly freedom. Men have sometimes tried to reduce it to such mundane dimensions. At the time of the Reformation the peasants were misled to think of it in such terms. Disillusioned, many thereafter turned away from the freedom we have in Christ.

Serving an earthly master does not conflict with the freedom we have in Christ. Paul points out this truth in 1 Cor. 7:17-24. The fact is that this freedom is such a power for good that it tends to correct social evils in the course of time. Christians in the joy of their freedom are the light of the world and the salt

of the earth (Matt. 5:13, 14). However, Paul prefaces his remark on manumission with the words: "Were you a slave when called? Never mind" (v. 21). He comforts the Christian slaves with their freedom in Christ, saying: "He who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men." (Vv. 22, 23)

The freedom we have in Christ grows in brilliance against the background of the bondage from which Christ has made us free. This bondage was self-imposed. God had created man free, in His own image, both male and female (Gen. 1:27). Both parents of the human race were thus created. At the close of the sixth day God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good (v. 31). Man was created in true spiritual knowledge, righteous and holy (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24). In this state he enjoyed the company of God. He had the power not to sin, was not in bondage to sin. He enjoyed complete freedom to will and do what was pleasing to God. He was free from the bondage of the fear of death. All of this was changed when he obeyed the voice of the tempter. The voice of God now frightened him into hiding. He was conscious of his sinfulness. He was afraid. This was the first day of his march to death. What misery! Thank God for the first rays of the Sun of righteousness, with healing in its wings (Mal. 4:2), the first gentle breeze of the freedom we have in Christ. God, merciful and gracious, comforted our first parents with the promise of the woman's Seed (Gen. 3:15). The gloom of the sinner's despair was dispelled by the promise of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Adam was in need of comfort. So are his children. Adam begot a son in his image (Gen. 5:3). Adam died. Seth died; so did his son and his son's son. The funereal refrain "and he died" has sounded the knell of every generation to the present day, for through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all men sinned (Rom. 5:12). "Because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man" (v. 17). Thus all die in Adam. (1 Cor. 15:22)

Disobedience to God's command, sin — death! Through fear of death the sinner was subject to lifelong bondage (Heb. 2:15),

for he who is not free in Christ is spiritually dead and in that state condemned to eternal death. The widow who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives (1 Tim. 5:6). Before accepting Christ the Ephesians were spiritually dead through the trespasses and sins in which they 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. 2:1,2). The present tense is in order, for this can be said of all men, at any time, who are not in Christ. Paul confesses: "Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind" (v. 3). Such is the background against which we must view the freedom we have in Christ: spiritual death, temporal death, eternal death—slaves to sin, slaves to Satan, under God's wrath, under the curse of His Law!

To point up the seriousness of this condition, let us think of the holy God, who said, "The day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). God is not an Eli, whose sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them (1 Sam. 3:13). God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29). This God spared not His own Son, when the sins of the world were imputed to Him (Rom. 8:32). He caused Him to cry out on the cross: "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" (Matt. 27:46). He prepared for the devil and his angels the eternal fire, in which also the cursed will die the eternal death. (Matt. 25:41)

But did not God reveal Himself to Moses as "the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:6,7)? Indeed, for that reason He in love gave His only Son. "God is love" (1 John 4:8), but His grace and mercy, His love, is revealed in Christ. Apart from Him there is nothing but the bondage of fear. At this point we turn again to Christ our High Priest.

God's Holy Spirit has given us a sufficient record of the life and labor of Christ in both Testaments of His Holy Word. Jesus should save His people from their sins. The prophets of the Old Testament who prophesied of the grace that was to be ours searched and inquired about this salvation. They inquired what

Person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory (1 Peter 1:10, 11). Foreshadowed by the Old Testament cultus and foretold by the prophets, the freedom which we have in Christ should not have been news to the disciples on Easter Day. "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25). This rebuke was well deserved. Guided into all the truth by the Spirit of truth (John 16:13), the New Testament writers were later able to speak of the liberating work of Christ in the words of the Old Testament. The freedom latent in the words of prophecy stood out in bold relief in their message.

Sin led to bondage. What did Christ the Savior do about it? Sin is the transgression of God's Law. Jesus fulfilled God's Law for us, for "as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." (Rom. 5:18, 19)

In order to emphasize the full extent of Christ's work of redemption, dogmaticians have distinguished between the active and the passive obedience of Christ. Strictly speaking, His obedience extends over His entire life to the moment of death. "God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law" (Gal. 4:4, 5). From the moment of His incarnation until He had finished the work which the Father gave Him to do, the Son was obedient to the Father's will. His prayer in Gethsemane is characteristic: "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). The eternal Son of God took "the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7, 8). His Passion marks the climax of His perfect obedience, for "although He was a Son, He learned obedience through what He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). Insofar as His obedience was an activity it was His active obedience; insofar as He came to bear the consequences of our sin, His entire life was a passive obedience. All His suffering was active, because He assumed it voluntarily, and all His activity was

a suffering, insofar as it was an assumed burden. *Passio eius fuit activa et actio fuit passiva.* (St. Bernard)

This one obedience of Christ may be viewed from two angles: Inasmuch as He rendered a perfect fulfillment of the Law in our stead, His obedience may be regarded as active; inasmuch as He willingly assumed the burden of our guilt, His obedience may be regarded as passive. He came not to abolish the Law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). His obedience was perfect. The Father declared: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 17:5). He took no risk when He challenged His enemies: "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46). Peter refers to Him as a lamb without blemish or spot (1 Peter 1:19). He was truly "holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens" (Heb. 7:26). His obedience, the active as well as the passive, was vicarious, for one man's act of righteousness led to acquittal and life for all men (Rom. 5:18). The Law is both mandatory and punitive. Christ's obedience satisfied both aspects of the Law. "For our sake [God] made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). In Him, not having a righteousness of our own, based on law, we have the righteousness which is through faith in Him, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:9). Since He fulfilled the Law perfectly in our stead and suffered the penalty of our guilt, the Law cannot make any claims on us by demands, threats, nor condemn by its curse. Christ knew no sin; still He was numbered among the transgressors, made sin for us. "God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3,4). Made sin for us, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree.'" (Gal 3:13)

This then is our situation: through His life, suffering, and death Christ atoned for the disobedience of Adam and freed us from the bondage which resulted from it. By His obedience we are made

righteous (Rom. 5:19). Now we may pray: "Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress. Bold shall I stand in that great Day, For who aught to my charge shall lay? Fully through these absolved I am From sin and fear, from guilt and shame," for He was made sin, "so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). He redeemed us from the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13) — redeemed us, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal. 4:5) — as free sons of God! In Him we have died, for in Him all have died (2 Cor. 5:14). He destroyed him who has the power of death, that is, the devil (Heb. 2:14). He accomplished all of this as our only Savior (Acts 4:12). His work of breaking the chains of bondage and setting us free is complete — "It is finished!" (John 19:30). His work was done "once for all" (Heb. 7:27). Christ's resurrection is God's divine attestation to these facts, for Jesus Christ "was designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). God "raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rom. 4:24, 25). As we ponder 1 John 1:7 we remember that Christ freed us not only from the guilt but also from the power of sin. The love of God manifested in the gift of His Son and the love of the Son revealed in His willing obedience gives us strength to resist the temptations of the world, the devil, and our flesh. As we look upon the cross we pray: "Let the water and the blood From Thy riven side which flowed Be of sin the double cure, Cleanse me from its guilt and pow'r."

The Lutheran Confessions have many things to say about the freedom we have in Christ. They warn against any abridgment of it. The Augsburg Confession, for example, insists that it is not lawful for any bishop to institute or exact services with an opinion of meriting grace, contrary to the Gospel, Gal. 5:1 (Art. XXVIII). On the other hand, it is lawful for bishops or pastors to make ordinances that things be done orderly in the church, 1 Cor. 14:40. It says: "Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike" (Art. VII). The Confessions caution, however, "that herein all frivolity and offense should be avoided, and especial care

should be taken to exercise forbearance toward the weak in faith. 1 Cor. 8:9; Rom. 14:13." (FC Ep X)

We return to the pronoun "we" and the verb "have." Who are the "we"? In one sense every member of the human race is included; in another sense the number is much smaller. The freedom we have in Christ has been procured for all men: "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (John 3:16). Jesus is the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world (John 1:29). "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). To object that if God had intended to free the whole world, the entire human race would have to come to faith in Christ, is to substitute a false theological conclusion for numerous clear statements of Scripture to the contrary. Peter warns his readers against false teachers among them who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction (2 Peter 2:1). Even these men, rushing headlong to destruction, had been ransomed with the precious blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:18, 19). Though the freedom we have in Christ has been procured for all men, the greater number will not enjoy it (Matt. 7:13, 14). Jesus said: "If you continue in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:31, 32). Only the true disciples of Christ enjoy the freedom we have in Christ.

For this freedom must be enjoyed through faith. Jesus said: "This is the will of My Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the Last Day" (John 6:40). He told the unbelieving Jews: "You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am He" (John 8:24). He corrected the Jews who boasted of freedom because they were descendants of Abraham by telling them: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (v. 36). Paul explains: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption, which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by His blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23-25). Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty; therefore Paul warns: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to

a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). "Give me liberty or give me death," said Patrick Henry. Lose the freedom we have in Christ and you have death!

Christ our High Priest, in whom we have this freedom, would not have us lose it. He intercedes for us with His heavenly Father. John's comforting words addressed to those whose fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ will always apply to God's penitent people: "My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). No one is slighted, for John continues: "And He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (v. 2). "We have," we are included!

Christ our Prophet, anointed with the Holy Spirit, revealed Himself by word and deed as the Son of God and Savior of the world. His Spirit predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory (1 Peter 1:11). On the day of Pentecost it was His Spirit that filled the apostles and gave them utterance (Acts 2:4). Thus they received power when the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they became the witnesses of Jesus to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). In becoming witnesses of Jesus the apostles proclaimed the freedom we have in Christ. In repeating their message we now do the same. The freedom in Christ is exhibited and communicated through the means of grace. Paul says of Baptism: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3, 4). In Holy Communion Luther correctly answers the question, "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking?" thus: "That is shown us by these words, 'Given, and shed for you for the remission of sins'; namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words. For where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." Luther quotes the words of Jesus which assure us of freedom in Him. To be baptized into His death, to receive in faith the body and the blood given and shed for the remission of our sins, is to have the freedom we have in Christ.

The words of Christ in the Gospel actually offer and convey pardon and reconciliation, the freedom we have in Him, for the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins (Matt. 9:6). When He said to the paralytic, "Take heart, My son; your sins are forgiven" (v. 2), Christ freed this penitent sufferer. This message of reconciliation Christ had His witnesses record in the Gospel and still proclaims through His church. The risen Lord, about to withdraw His visible presence from His disciples, breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:22, 23). As the word of creation is effective in its power to the present time, so the Word of Christ offering forgiveness actually produces what it says in a heart that does not harden itself against the Spirit. Furthermore, it matters not whether the Word is spoken or written (Luke 24:47; John 20:31; 1 John 1: 3, 4). Thus encouraged, Christ's disciples continue to administer the means of grace, making disciples of all nations by Baptism and teaching them to observe all that He has commanded them, as He is with them always, to the close of the age. (Matt. 28: 19, 20)

Christ our King will bring this age to a close. The age in which we have freedom in Him but do not enjoy it to the fullest extent will be succeeded by an eternity of perfect enjoyment. There will no longer be a kingdom of grace but only of power and glory. We shall serve Him there but in the freedom of perfect love, for the marks of the nails in His hands and feet and the mark of the spear-thrust in His side will in all eternity remind us of the fact that He freed us lost and condemned creatures from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that we should be His own and live under Him in His kingdom — in the freedom we have in Christ, anointed to be our Prophet, Priest, and King.

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