

Christian Freedom

Colossians 1:9-14

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

The Huntington Ball is coming next weekend. The Huntington Library hosts an annual party on the grounds of the library, complete with dinner and dancing under the stars. It is a black-tie affair, with tuxedos, and gowns, and jewelry. Thanks to the invitation of friends and members, my wife and I have attended on a few occasions.

Several years ago at the Huntington Ball, after enjoying the cocktail reception, we arrived at our table and where I was seated next to a woman, somewhat older than I, who had lost her husband many years before. We exchanged greetings and pleasantries, like you do in those situations, and then we sat down to enjoy dinner. There were flowers on the table for centerpieces that made it difficult to talk to people on the other side of the table, and conversations were taking place on the other side of me so the two of us soon found ourselves engaged in conversation about our families, and people whom we knew in common, and then about the library and some of the educational events they offer to the community.

Before long we were talking as if we were old friends. Then she confessed to me that when she discovered she was going to be seated next to a minister, it created no small amount of anxiety. What was she going to talk about with a minister? At social events everyone knows you should avoid politics and religion. How do you avoid religion when talking with a minister? Was I going to try and save her, or get her to go to church? Or criticize her values and choices? Why is it that people have this caricature of ministers making them the morality police? "I'm sorry mam but you've been driving your life above the moral speed limit! I'm going to have to write you a ticket." She then paid me a compliment, "You're just like a real person!" I don't know what she expected. But people have some funny ideas about those who take their faith seriously.

When I was a young man in high school, having newly discovered the remarkable value of faith in Christ, I was trying to learn all I could about it. I was reading the Bible and engaged in small group discussions with friends. My best friend was a few years older than me and was in seminary studying to be a minister. One beautiful spring day, while we were on the front porch of my family home, two young men in white shirts and ties came to the door. They were with Jehovah's Witness and they wanted to sit down and talk with the two of us about the Bible. I

was young and enthusiastic – and wanted to learn all I could, so we invited them in and began a conversation. But they had an agenda. They began by trying to show us in the Bible how we were deluding ourselves if we weren't part of their church. In fact, they were the only true believers, and all other churches were misguided. And they listed all the ways that true believers act, and all the ways that we were wrong about faith. Finally, my friend the seminarian said, "You work out your salvation and I'll depend upon Christ for mine." When the two began to protest, trying to engage him again, he simply restated, "You work out your salvation. I'll depend upon Christ for mine." The conversation was over.

Turns out that was a pretty good description of what the whole concept of justification by grace through faith alone is all about. The Apostle Paul is staking out a similar claim in Colossians. Some super-religious people came to town and convinced these young believers that they needed to be more religious. The problem for the Colossians was not that their faith and lives had no substance. Rather than focusing upon the sufficiency of Christ, they were all tied in knots over rules and regulations, ascetic practices that made them look religious - but this actually undermined their faith. There is a kind of religion that looks very . . . well . . . religious, but in reality it is just a self-improvement program that has none of the power of God in it, none of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Colossians didn't fully comprehend or appreciate who Jesus Christ really is and what that means for human life. How could you tell? They were all worried about their religion. They were all caught up with dos and don'ts, uncertain about their lives and easily influenced by any speaker who came to town with another self-improvement program.

Later in the letter the Apostle writes, "Why do you submit to regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings." In other words, this stuff is only of secondary importance and doesn't really matter in the end. There is a kind of religion that looks very serious and demanding but actually produces very little. It is characterized by self-imposed restraints and pietistic rules, with little of the freedoms that Christ intends for us. The key to balancing your life is to have Christ at the center of it. Real faith produces both gratitude and generosity.

You see there are two classic movements in the life of faith: that of justification followed by sanctification. "Justification by faith alone" means that Christ has already accomplished the work of justification on the cross. Therefore Paul will write later in this letter, "When you were

dead in trespasses . . . God made you alive together with him (Christ) when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.” Faith is a kind of coming to life again with the borrowed light and life of Christ in you. It’s not about looking religious. Paul knew how to look religious. He was an expert at it! But he considered all that religious effort useless rubbish compared to the joy of coming to life again in, with, and through, Jesus Christ. That is justification.

John Calvin writes about sanctification in his Institutes of the Christian Religion in terms of Christian freedom. Clearly we are not coming to life again simply to return to the evil of former days, with the kind of behaviors we are ashamed to admit to. The Ten Commandments are still an important guide to how we should live. We should be done with drunkenness, and lying, and using other people to meet our own needs. We can let go of all that self-destructive stuff that keeps us tied in knots, and let go of all the self-condemnation that we are not good enough and not really loveable. “If you knew what goes on in my mind you would never love me – and God knows what really goes on and so God could never love me.” All that crap is useless rubbish. We need strength within to battle against our self-destructive tendencies. Thanks be to God there is help right where we need it!

There is freedom now to live differently, without the damning self-talk that goes on in our heads. John Calvin has this idea he describes as “the freedom to be indifferent to things that are indifferent.” What kind of car should I drive? Can I drive a Lexus or should I drive a Chevy? What does God want me to drive? You’ll drive yourself nuts trying to weigh every decision you need to make in terms of whether it leads to your salvation or not. Do what gives you peace! Okay, maybe the \$250,000 Lamborghini is unnecessary but you don’t have to drive a Prius as if God cares what car you drive. There are good reasons to care about the natural world and to live simply but you can’t prove that you are worthy — because you aren’t and neither am I — which says a lot more about God’s love than it does about any of us. Neither the Lamborghini nor the Prius are going to give you any real life. It’s not what is outside of you that gives life, but what’s inside you.

So if sanctification allows us freedom to be indifferent to things that are indifferent, what does it look like in human life? If it is not religious good works, what is it? Paul defines it this way later in the Colossians letter, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with

compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . .”

A few years ago I was flying a kite with my grandson. It was a Ninja Turtle kite with a long double tail. He loved launching it and then running back to me so he could control the string. We let it out all the way but he especially loved pulling it slowly back to earth. For a kite to fly properly, it takes good aerodynamics, a good tail, some wind, but most importantly, it takes someone holding the string at the center. The tension keeps the kite from either blowing away in the wind or crashing unceremoniously to the ground. Our lives are somewhat like a kite. To soar they have to have something at the center. Christ is the one who holds our lives at the center and provides the tension needed for our lives to really take flight.

There are real struggles, and difficult decisions, and painful realities that we all must face in life. But in faith there is this insight. Christ is “before all things and in whom all things hold together.” The various aspects of our lives find completion and fulfillment in him. Our personalities and emotional life; our spirits and relational life, our marriages and family life; our work life; our congregation, our communities; our political and economic life are held together by this Lord of life. No aspect is beyond God’s concern. No dimension is unaffected by faith. The secret of life is this “Christ in you” holding your life together.

A mighty weight can be lifted from our shoulders. Nothing in particular may be changed in our circumstances, but we can be different. Justification by faith alone. I don’t need to earn God’s love, in fact I can’t. I don’t need to become super religious, obeying every possible requirement someone else thinks I should be obeying. You’ll drive yourself crazy trying to be everything everyone else thinks you should be. Just tell them, “You work out your salvation, I’ll depend upon Christ for mine.” And then begin the journey of sanctification, clothing yourselves “with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts . . .” These are the work clothes of the believer.

“You are called to freedom brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity

for self-indulgence but through love, become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Justification, the freedom from religiosity and then sanctification — a lifelong process of becoming more and more Christ-like, loving others rather than leading a life of self-indulgence that leaves us empty.

This weekend we have celebrated the life of two great Americans: Aretha Franklin and John McCain. They believed in something greater than themselves. Their accomplishments were a result of what was inside them.

“May you be made strong with the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father . . . Thanks be to God! Amen.