

Liberty

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“Give me liberty or give me death.” That famous line from Patrick Henry closed a speech that motivated the Virginia Assembly to join the revolution. Liberty was prized to the point that men jeopardized fortune and reputation, not to mention life itself, to possess it. Yet, people now, people then, people throughout history have misunderstood it.

While pondering the concepts of “the law of liberty”, “the liberty of the children of God,” and being “free, liberated, from sin and death,” I thought I might be able to find some good illustrations in quotes from our founding fathers. As I read, I was more and more impressed by the close parallels between the liberty upon which this nation was founded and the liberty upon which the Kingdom of God was founded. But that should not have been so amazing to me. The ragged band of free thinkers who came to this wilderness came for liberty, willing to fight to possess it. Their concept of liberty was not a parallel to the New Testament; it was the New Testament. They took what had languished for many centuries all across Western Civilization and brought it back to life.

Curiously, the French watched our little experiment in liberty carefully, tried their own, and failed. Their revolution quickly degenerated into revenge, collapsed into a new monarchy, and evolved into what we see today. What was the difference? I liken it to 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” Immediately following is this, “We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image.” Liberty without transformation fails.

Political and New Testament liberty have deteriorated along identical tracks. Liberty both in the church and in the world has become a balancing act, a series of compromises, an illusion carried off by smoke and mirrors. I read a quote from Ron Paul that I have embellished a little, “Conscription, forcing men into the military, as a means to defend liberty makes no sense. Those who desire to preserve what they believe to be liberty take that liberty from some to preserve it for others. Those for whom they try to preserve it would not fight to keep it nor will they appreciate or understand the gift or the price of it.”

Knowing what liberty is, what the word means in the New Testament, seems an important endeavor. It is like those other Bible words that have been so obscured by religion that the words themselves have become, to many people, meaningless. Faith is an example: basing every choice on the humanly impossible promises of God. And you have to know more than two in order to graduate from self-interest. If all you know is that God has forgiven you through the sacrifice of Jesus and that you can go to heaven – that’s like thinking that liberty is being able to do what I want. Some important pieces are being left out. Or love: doing what is best for the other person, regardless of the effect on me. In order to graduate from self-interest, I have to love more than just the people who love me. Liberty, also, is not about me. My liberty is about you. That’s the point of James’ line, “So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the law of liberty.” If liberty is focused on my right to make my own choices, we are back to performance, how well I chose. Rather, the law of liberty by which we will be judged has to do with how I integrated my liberty with yours – love – and how I trust God to make this impossible system work (which is faith), especially when we mark out conflicting boundaries. We are those who look intently into the perfect law of liberty, seeing that only with godly character can I be successful in a system of faith and love.

Abraham Lincoln said, “Our defense is in the preservation of the spirit which prizes liberty as a heritage of all men, in all lands, everywhere. Destroy that spirit and you have planted the seeds of despotism around your own doors.”

Abraham Lincoln also said, “The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act as the destroyer of liberty. Plainly, the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of liberty.”

I think it useful for each person to develop his or her own definition of liberty from all of its passages in the New Testament. In English, you need to look into all the free or freedom passages and all the liberty passages, because the same root word, sometimes a noun and sometimes a verb, is translated both ways. Your concordance can sort them out. There are less than 30.

Let's start with John 8:31 – 32, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.” More accurately, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall liberate you.” What did Jesus mean by that? In the exchange with the audience that follows you can see two applications: (1) You can be freed from slavery to sin, and (2) you can be freed from self-deception.

Looking at the second one first, do you know people who are slightly out of touch with reality? How do people get that way? I suppose you could catalog lots of reasons. Perhaps a lot of them could be lumped under, “Avoiding the uncomfortable.” I just don't want to deal with my particular problem, so I'll fool myself into believing that I'm really OK.

- Many addicts sincerely believe they could quit if they wanted to.
- Both men and women absolutely believe that the latest fashion looks good on them.
- Many people have convinced themselves that their problems are either bad luck or the fault of other people or the fault of the government, and have nothing whatever to do with the fact that they can't hold a job and spend money on cell phones instead of the electric bill.

And why do they stick with this failed world view? Just consider the responses Jesus got in John 8. “We are Abraham's descendants and have never been in bondage to anyone.” Today's history book writers don't have a corner on revisionist tendencies. Or, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” If you can't deal with what is plainly happening in front of you, attack – make up something so far out that no one can answer it – because it is that stupid. Repeat it three or four times and even you will begin to believe not only that it makes sense, but also that it is true. From the addict to the fashion disaster to the victim mentality, self-deception is a way of life for the majority of the world.

“You shall know the truth” – most people find that terrifying. Truth and light are the enemy unless the liberty they bring also comes with a way to break out of the downward spiral of life. Sin exercises control in several ways. One is through self-deception. God has promised that we will be able to handle the truth about ourselves – and not that we will become accustomed to being failures. Liberty must, either in the gospel or in government, liberty must be transparent, honorable, and healing – so that sin (or corruption or conspiracy or mismanagement) will no longer be a refuge, but rather a place from which to escape at all cost.

In Romans 7, Paul wrote a touching and honest lament from a person in whom the Spirit does not live. “For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not do, that I practice.” That is an apt description of true slavery to sin. Don't apply that “slavery-to-sin” label to those who volunteer for sin, who willingly embrace it. They are not slaves but hired men, free agents, even equal partners with evil. Slaves are not such voluntarily. They fell into it

by bad choices, and now they are stuck, able to escape clinical depression only through self-deception.

Without transformation, liberty fails. The burden of failure will become too heavy and we will collapse. Being forgiven is not enough. If we were only forgiven, we would still be slaves of sin – forgiven slaves, but slaves nonetheless. Freedom from sin, liberated from sin, is not about being forgiven – that’s the free from death part. Liberated from sin means that we are being transformed, no longer trapped in behaviors we hate anyway. “Forgiveness just gets you even. Faith puts you in the black.” Jesus said, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” Emancipation – from what? Thomas Jefferson observed, “The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield and government to gain ground.” We need something better than the natural progress of things. Jefferson’s answer for government was, “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” If Jefferson were alive today, even as the oldest living ex-president, he would still be on the no-fly list.

In Romans 8, Paul writes about being free, liberated, from the law of sin and death. Death – meaning both physical death and spiritual death. People fear death because of the unknown it represents, and because of the justice they fear will follow. As Hebrews 2:15 says, “Release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage.”

The liberty to which we have been called is simple. (1) We can live in reality, not self-deception, which makes life so much easier. (2) We have been freed from the natural downward spiral by the power of the Spirit that dwells in us. (3) We are freed from fear of death, rather being in haste to get there, which is one of the symbolisms of the unleavened bread in the Lord’s Supper. I can no longer be coerced or manipulated into things I would rather not do because coercion and manipulation imply fear (as John put it, “There is no fear in love.”). I’m free. If you want me to do something, just ask. If I like the idea, I’ll go along. Liberty is the death knell of authority.

Back in 1974, then-Secretary of the Treasury William Simon said, “If it were not for the basic honesty of the American people, this government would collapse in a month. We could not hire enough people to enforce our tax codes, if indeed there would be enough honest people to do it.”

We pay taxes, theoretically, because it’s the right thing to do. We abhor corruption (and, having travelled a bit, that notion rises higher and higher on my list of things I love about our country – we abhor corruption). We volunteer for military service. And on top of that, we rescue wounded enemy soldiers and treat them. We fund the vast majority of humanitarian efforts around the world. And we do not do it because we are rich. Other countries are wealthy enough to muster some compassion once in a while. We do it because – that is what liberty does. Liberty means we can see the needs and not be restrained by fear that in the near future we will need those resources to combat oppression. Our liberty has been granted by God. It is ours. Only the victim mentality can take it away. Liberty means that I can break out of my self-deceived cocoon and see the badly abused liberty of others. In our government or in the church – it’s the same liberty. Liberty makes love possible. Without liberty, we are mired in self-deception and cannot see beyond ourselves. Liberty makes faith possible. Without liberty, we have no confidence that doing the right thing will ever work. Liberty is the focal point of worthwhile life.

In 490 BC, the Persian empire was expanding rapidly, rolling over anyone so foolish to resist them. In the court of Darius and later of Xerxes was a Greek advisor. As plans were made to overrun Greece with an army of overwhelming size, the Greek advisor repeatedly cautioned

them. “You don’t understand. The Greeks are free men, not slaves like your armies. They will stand and fight to the last man, not for their homes or their families. Surrender would preserve their homes and families. They will stand and fight for liberty.” Neither of those Persian kings understood liberty, so dismissed the advice – and lost – twice – which so weakened the Persian empire that they never rose again. Ever since that time, military historians have used the heroic stands of Greek warriors as an example that soldiers fight harder when defending their homes and families. Those historians do not understand liberty either. Surrender will preserve peace; my home and family will survive. Instead, risking home and family, I stand and fight for liberty. Even in death, they were free.

Our liberty in the gospel is even more powerful than the misunderstood and underestimated liberty of Greek warriors. We have the power of the Spirit to free us from the constant drag and erosion of sin. We have the unvarnished truth; we get to live in reality. We accelerate toward the end of physical life. Give me liberty or give me death.

Liberty – the right to choose based on facts without pressure, deception, or fear. With something so basic and so powerful, what could possibly go wrong? As Will Rogers said, “Liberty does not work so well in practice as it does in speeches.”

Both Peter and Paul found it necessary to correct a common misunderstanding of liberty in their time, which I observe has continued to this day. “Do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh.” “Not using liberty as a cloak for vice.” Yes, liberty says that you can make your own choices. But a bad choice is still a bad choice. Liberty does not turn a bad choice into a good choice.

But if I am forgiven, what difference does it make? The reasons for good behavior have been badly taught for many centuries – perhaps because some people think that they need a weapon to keep liberty in check. Political liberty gets abridged because those in authority fear that someone will take advantage and get away with it. So, all give up liberty so that a few might be caught. I tried to put that as kindly as I could, and it still doesn’t make any sense. The problem is the fundamental assumption. People think of good behavior as a goal, rather a by-product of another process. If regulated behavior is the goal, liberty cannot survive. Yet, governments and churches keep trying to make it work. The New Testament reasons for good choices, good behavior, are completely different from the behavior management school of delusion. Listen to the reasons for good behavior given by the liberty school of reality and notice that all of them are centered on someone else, not me. My choices are not about me, my liberty is about others:

- All things are lawful but...(1 Corinthians 6:12 – 20, 10:23 – 33) not all things are profitable or edifying.
- We are the Temple of the living God, therefore (2 Corinthians 6:16 – 7:1) clean this place up.
- Unrighteousness is not “fitting” (Romans 1:28, Galatians 5:1 – 14) Fitting? (John 17:20 – 23) “That the world may believe that Thou sent Me.” We advertise liberty, not license.
- Malice and wickedness spoil sincerity and truth (1 Corinthians 5:8)
- Display the power of God (2 Corinthians 4:7) through liberty.
- Works of the flesh are contrary to the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16 – 25, Colossians 2:18 – 3:10)
- We are no longer slaves of sin (Romans 6:1 – 18, 8:13); stop acting like a slave.
- Everyone who has this hope purifies himself just as He is pure (1 John 3:3)
- Failing to put off the old man grieves the Holy Spirit of God (Ephesians 4:30)

- Inconsistent behavior causes the name of God to be blasphemed (Romans 2:24, Isaiah 52:5, Ezekiel 36:22)

Do you see how liberty is not about me, it's about you? Liberty is about displaying the power of God, not about being a nice person. I am free to choose what is in your best interests. Until church-goers and voters stop looking at their own interests, liberty will continue to wither.

Liberty allows us to succeed. A lack of liberty has us sniffing around the edges for loopholes.

Thomas Jefferson said, "Rightful liberty is unobstructed action according to our will within the limits drawn around us by the equal rights of others. I do not add, 'within the limits of the law,' because law is often but the tyrant's will, and always so when it violates the rights of the individual."

The tyrant is anyone who thinks that you need to follow their liberty, not your liberty.

- 1 Corinthians 10:29 "Why is my liberty judged by another's conscience?" The context concerns meat sacrificed to idols. Paul presents a balanced view. I am free to eat, but I also seek to give no offense. This is the answer to the "squeaky wheel syndrome" so prevalent in churches and special interests. The list of acceptable activities is governed by the least mature and the most vocal. Stand and fight. How? Teach them about liberty: without liberty there can be no faith, no love, no rescue. We would be hopeless.
- Galatians 2:4 "...to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ." A great many church-goers have the idea that we have liberty within a set of boundaries. The problem is that your boundaries and their boundaries are not the same. Paul related, "We did not yield submission to them for even one hour." Stand and fight. How? Teach them about liberty. If I give in to what I believe to be wrong, liberty, faith, love, and rescue die. If you must take my liberty by asserting yours, you are rejecting Jesus' prayer for unity and walking away from the very gospel you seek to maintain by your authority, proving that the Spirit does not dwell in you.
- 2 Peter 2:19 "While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves." Peter's description paints a picture of the clever word merchant who can make bad sound good. The gospel is simple. If it sounds complicated, it is probably wrong. However, dismantling bad doctrine is hard – because a lot of thought went into blowing it by the unsuspecting. Stand and fight. Teach liberty, because liberty is simple. Bad doctrine is complicated. Bad doctrine abridges liberty.

Many church-goers believe that one must have all the right doctrines to be acceptable to God. If that were true, we are all toast – burnt toast. It is as if the gospel went underground for hundreds or even thousands of years only to be recently rediscovered by my group. Think of it this way – the church is an illustration of God's sense of humor. Good News – truth, freedom, liberty – are all in the custody of people. OK – faithful people, but still... As Brian said in class one Wednesday evening, "God didn't need to be a rocket scientist to know that people were going to mess this up." Another piece of evidence against evolution – we are no closer to getting it right today than they were Jerusalem in Acts 15. That's part of the plan.

Liberty includes the right to be wrong. Liberty does not convert wrong back into right, but it gives me the space to figure it out. So, why would I ever be concerned about whether you have the right understanding – as measured against my understanding? Because what I see is a crack in the foundation of your faith. You may get lucky and that crack will cause nothing catastrophic. But, my experience has been that foundation cracks bring leaks, settling, damage to the load-bearing walls, and an out of kilter appearance. When trials of faith come, and they will

come, the damaged house may collapse. I do not want you to lose your investment in the house, and I do not want to lose my investment in you.

Galatians 5:1 “Stand fast in the liberty by which Christ has made us free.”

Thomas Jefferson said, “Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty.”

So we have this precious gift, liberty – freedom to live in reality without pressure, deception, or fear. But, as commonly presented in a skewed, self-centered manner, the liberty part is overlooked in favor of the gift part. This gospel is made to appear as the receivers’ paradise. We tend to appeal to the self-centeredness of the weak by emphasizing that many things from God are called gifts. We invoke the birthday-present mentality instead of responsibility. God’s gifts, including liberty, are “things given,” not honoraria, not gaily wrapped tokens of love. Rather, the things God has given are tools that we may accomplish God’s eternal purpose. Consider the gift-list of the New Testament and the context of each, how each gift is a tool, not a grant, not a dowry:

- Gifts of enlightenment, partaking of the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, and the powers of the age to come (Hebrews 6:4 – 5) are tools for building hope (6:11).
- Salvation is a gift (Ephesians 2:8) – a tool to protect our thinking (Ephesians 5:17).
- Gift of righteousness by grace results in justification (Romans 5:15 – 21) which puts us in control, no longer slaves.
- Gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23) which gives us the liberty to do well.
- The gracious character of God in us is a gift (2 Corinthians 9:15) to enable sharing.
- Gift of service (1 Peter 4:10 – 11) with the ability which God supplies to glorify God.
- Gift of answered prayer (2 Corinthians 1:11) spreads thankfulness to many.

We tend to teach, “Gimme, gimme, gimme,” rather than stocking my toolbox to build a better temple.

I can participate in this giving by presenting my most treasured possession – my liberty.

- Romans 6:18 “Having been set *free* from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.”
- 1 Corinthians 9:19 Though I am *free* from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more.

The gospel is about liberty, not birthday presents. The things God promises and gives are things that are beyond the physical grasp of a human being. It’s a no-brainer that God was going to have to supply those things if His plan were to work. What are labeled as gifts are really just God’s set-up for our success. I stand in the middle of a stage full of props placed by God. I have the liberty to use them – it is almost terrifying that I have to make choices about God’s stuff, which is why the next step after liberty is faith.

My Lord has given me the right to make my own choices, to make my own mistakes, to be free from self-deception and able to unravel outside deception, to be enslaved no longer by all those times when my good sense takes a vacation because someone else lives in here, too, who keeps things going when I’m out. I look forward to getting off this Titanic the earlier the better. My liberty is precious and I will fight to defend it. God gave it. No church and no government can take it, unless I believe them and give it away.

But how do I do that?

Pull that civil liberty parallel back into focus. According to the founding fathers, each citizen has the right to make unfettered choices within the boundaries of the equal liberty of others. This is where we find the only legitimate function of government – to regulate boundary disputes. Each citizen cedes consent, not liberty, to a central organization to decide where my

liberty ends and yours begins. But exactly how that is to work, the limits of that power, are a bone of considerable contention.

Ronald Reagan said, "Concentrated power has always been the enemy of liberty."

Thomas Jefferson said, "I would rather be exposed to the inconveniences attending too much liberty than those attending too small a degree of it."

George Washington said, "It will be found an unjust and unwise jealousy to deprive a man of his natural liberty upon the supposition he may abuse it."

Liberty in our country and liberty in the Kingdom of God are the same. As Paul put it to Timothy, "Law is for the lawless." Our various levels of government make laws about behavior, again theoretically speaking, in order to protect the liberties of those whose libertarian space has been invaded. The wisdom and the effectiveness of those attempts to protect liberty have had their good days and bad days.

Liberty in the Kingdom has the same problems. Reagan's observation about concentration of power works just as well for organized religion. Jefferson's inconvenience has been found to be too inconvenient. Washington could have been describing the lack of confidence of church leaders toward their own followers, upon the supposition that they may abuse liberty.

Many believe that we must find a balance between liberty and authority. Jesus taught in the parable of the wheat and tares that we can't start pulling out the weeds in the kingdom, because in doing so we will trample all over the wheat. Wait for harvest at which time the separation is easy. So, we can't deport the weeds. Besides, then we would need a chief agronomist to decide which is which, and to inspect the seed before planting.

Authority can be an attractive alternative to liberty, especially with the inconveniences of true liberty, the hard work of making my own choices, and the frightful responsibility liberty entails, especially responsibility for my own bad choices. If I cede my liberty to you, I can blame you.

Liberty and authority are mutually exclusive. You can't have both. With apologies to Ben Franklin for quoting him way out of context, "Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

But how would that work? The church without people in authority? Such a concept is foreign to most.

Two years ago, on Sunday afternoons, we embarked on a study first of "honor," as in "honor your father and mother." This led to a study of "obey," then to "authority," and finally, "liberty." You can go back and get the notes. Bottom line, the only humans granted authority in the church were the apostles, and then only in the areas of financial support and edification. Sadly, they are all dead leaving no heirs.

The most concise advice about whom to follow is in Hebrews 13:7, which, by the way, uses both the middle voice, implying voluntary action, and hegemony, following another because it makes good sense for my prosperity. It should read like this, "Volunteer to follow your hegemones (sorry, there is no English equivalent), who have spoken the Word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct."

Whose faith follow. Look for successful faith. Follow it. Don't follow a person, follow the faith. Liberty is not compromised because you are choosing to follow a successful model of the faith you seek. No coercion, manipulation, or fear. Will we follow different manifestations of faith? Yup. Does this make central organization next to impossible? Yup.

Authority seeks to cause good behavior. It does not work. Even if we could bring people to a highly consistent level of good behavior, we would be assembling nothing more than a

group of very well behaved lost people. Godly behavior is an outcome of liberty, to be expected and highly prized. But the pathway is essential – starting from liberty; because of liberty, through faith; because of faith, through love. Liberty is the linchpin. Liberty without transformation fails.

Give me liberty or, please, give me death.