

FAITH'S FREEDOM

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(Galatians 1.1-12; Luke 9.49-50)

By Garth Ewert-Fisher

INTRO

We live in a world awash in fantasies of freedom. We spend enormous amounts of time and money on these fantasies. We fantasize a free life based variously on power – sex – fame – leisure (see ads for the lotteries). Whole industries develop out of these fantasies. Careers are shaped by them. Politics are affected by them. BUT the world in which we live is conspicuously and sadly lacking in the experience of freedom! Living in the land of the free has not made us free; we are a nation of addicts and complainers.

But ... not everything to do with freedom is a fantasy. There are realities of freedom, at least for people of faith. People of faith believe God is free. God created the world, not out of necessity, but in loving freedom. Since a free God is at the centre of all existence we too have freedom. We are NOT mere creatures of necessity or chance. At the centre of our belief is the story of Jesus, the freest person who ever lived. And there is the on-going witness of the Spirit who is free, like the 'wind that blows where it wills.'

It is part of my daily work, as a person of faith, to discriminate between the fantasies and the realities of freedom. When I set God at the centre of my life, I realize vast freedoms and surprising spontaneities. When I centre life in my own will, my freedom diminishes markedly. I live constricted and anxious. For this work of discernment, we can use all the help we can get. Galatians is one such resource.

CONFUSION in GALATIA

IN GALATIANS, the words for **freedom** occur more frequently than in any other letter (10 times). Greek words for freedom occur 28 times in Paul's letters compared with just 8 times in the rest of the NT.

This was the problem in Galatia – an area we know as modern Turkey.

What does a truly free Christian life look like?

Paul had come to Galatia and planted churches some 25 years after the death of Christ. He had proclaimed a gospel of freedom but then some evangelists from the mother church in Jerusalem had come to Galatia and said in effect:

'Paul is a nice fellow and he meant well. Did you know he was originally taught the gospel by the apostles in Jerusalem. But now he has **deviated** from the Jerusalem authorized version of the gospel by preaching a gospel of his own devising.'

Paul, they charged, was merely telling people what they wanted to hear. That's why he did not tell them of the inconvenient and painful requirement of circumcision. In their view, Paul was offering his gentile converts a cheap, watered-down facsimile of God's truth, rather than explaining the full and salutary discipline offered in the Law of Moses. "Paul has **short-changed the you** by offering you less than the whole gospel!"

Paul is furious.

I can't believe your fickleness—how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ by embracing a variant message! It is not a minor variation, you know; it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God. [MESSAGE]

'I am astonished...' – all the verbs expressing what is wrong are in the present tense: astonished, deserting, turning confusing, perverting. Paul insists on a singular gospel; any other is a false gospel, a lie.

We don't much like this Paul. He's too intense, in your face. We tend to be tolerant, if not indulgent. Paul, however, will not be tolerant when people he loves are being told lies about God. He knows such lies **reduce people's lives** and imprison them in old guilts, anxieties and fears.

One of the wickedest things one person can do to others is to lie to them about God, to represent God as other or less than God is. It is wicked to misrepresent God as an angry tyrant storming through the heavens, out to get every trespasser and throw them into the lake of fire. It is wicked to misrepresent God as a senile grandfather dozing in his heavenly lazy-boy rocker with no interest in what is going on in the world.

Paul, himself, had once believed lies about God. Those lies launched him on a career of imprisoning and even killing those who didn't share his wrong ideas. He was the scourge of the church. All of his fine intellect, energy, and moral passion were put to the task of hate and persecution. But then he met Christ and all that passion was re-directed into giving witness to the freedom that Christ brings.

OUR CONFUSION

I think we can understand Paul here. The church too talks a good line when it comes to freedom but we have enormous difficulty living it. **Today we say to one another:**

"If you're a different color, you need to be in a different church.

If you're a different gender, at least if you want to be in ministry, you need to be in a different church.

If you're a different sexual orientation, you need to be in a different church.

If you play music according to the custom of a different century, you need to be in a different church.

If you play music mostly written in the past 40 years you need to be in a different church.

If you have a rival understanding of liturgy, or the Bible, or baptism, or of spiritual gifts, **you need to be in a different church!"**

That part of the tragedy and the scandal of the contemporary church. If you asked some Christians who the enemy is, they'd most likely say the enemy is other Christians. And the internet makes it much much worse, because there judgmental Christians using the shield of anonymity pass on hearsay and half truth about apparently ghastly things alleged to be happening in formerly respectable churches – a practice that used to be called malicious and self-righteous gossip but is now simply called **blogging**.

GRACE in GALATIA

Well, Paul couldn't blog, but neither would he hide behind an anonymous letter.

*Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand!
Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.
I am emphatic about this. The moment any one of you submits to
circumcision or any other rule-keeping system, at that same moment
Christ's hard-won gift of freedom is squandered. (5.1-2)*

Only in Galatians is the grace and peace formula expanded by the addition of a confessional tradition: 'the Lord JC gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.' In the very beginning of the letter, Paul wants to underscore two themes of fundamental importance: The gospel is about JC's gracious self-giving, that is, his death (2.20), and that self-giving must be understood as an apocalyptic rescue operation. God's gracious invasion of the world is not merely a new human possibility. We live in 'this present evil age' longing for the age to come when God's justice and peace will finally and fully be established. As a result of Christ's death and resurrection, we have been set free from the powers of this age, though they still enslave the world at large.

The key word is rescue. This is not a removal from, but a rescue from the power of. We are NOT rescued out of the world, and not from limitations and boundaries, but from sin – that which separates us from God and his creation and destined redemption.

Something is done to us or for us before we can do anything. Human freedom to live results from **God-initiated resurrection**.

This is God's work of grace which invites us into the truly free life – a life of spacious joy and generosity, a life of welcome and warm embrace, a life free of shame and guilt, a life of active discipleship and the hard work of reconciliation. This is true freedom!

FAITH'S FREEDOM

Martin Marty is a distinguished church historian who has observed a lot of church life over the course of his career. In a humorous article -'Open Season' – he writes the following:

"Here is a recommended summer reading list: *Robert's Rules of Disorder, Extreme Boxing, No-Rules Gladiatorial Games... The Laws of Rugby Football, Professional Wrestling: Anything Goes, and Taking My Bat and Ball and Going Home*. That is the recommended list—if you are participating in, attending, reading about or **hoping to survive church conventions**. When the people who show they are Christians by their love gather to attend to business and wage war, it helps to be aware of how other extreme sports operate. These books will help."

Marty quotes sociologist Bronislaw Malinowski who says: "Aggression like charity begins at home."

"No matter whether it is a high-church or low-church, congregational or episcopal or connectional or pres-byterial or synodical or confessional polity at work, the plot of a five-day convention always goes something like this: Sunday night participants arrive and celebrate with a Eucharist or gala or hymn-sing. "We are not divided, all one body we." Monday one gets a glimpse of the Lord's work through the agencies of mercy, justice and education, and the mood stays up. Tuesday committee reports arrive, to mixed receptions. Wednesday features open hearings and then floor debate as factions and fronts vie for position. Thursday the participants vote. Most votes break on a 51-49 margin, and the losers sulk as they plot next years revenge. **Friday everyone goes home mad.**

We wonder about our upcoming MC Canada Assembly in Saskatoon.

The Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) began in 1902-1903 with the union of congregations from the [Rosenorter Mennonites of Saskatchewan](#) and the [Bergthaler Mennonites](#) of Manitoba. The conference first met in 1903 in Hochstadt, Manitoba, and was organized to promote "home missions." The Mennonites generally had large families and were

constantly looking for land, and it was hoped that the conference would aid in the challenging task of keeping them united.

The constitution, adopted at the second meeting of the conference in Eigenheim, Saskatchewan in 1904, strongly affirmed the autonomy of individual congregations: "The Conference has no [authority](#) to interfere in the internal matters of a congregation unless called to do so. **It is not a legislative, but an advisory body.** The union it promotes does not consist in agreeable forms and customs, **but in unity of love, faith, and hope, and in connection with this a common work in the kingdom of God.**"

[GAMEO]

Did you hear that? I hear **faith's freedom** in those words. Those early delegates and leaders had a sense of grace of God's grace which invites us into relationships of trust, graciousness, forbearance, and the patient hard work of loving each other beyond difference and disagreement. I think it is a wonderful statement. Let me read it to you again.

"The union it promotes does not consist in agreeable forms and customs, **but in unity of love, faith, and hope, and in connection with this a common work in the kingdom of God.**"

May this be our unity as well.

AMEN

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