

# On Christian Freedom

By Hans Joachim Iwand

The conspicuous and special nature of Christian freedom consists in that it is anchored in a liberation that God has accomplished to and for humans quite apart from our assistance. That is, that something took place and had to take place to open the door to freedom for us. Therefore one may not speak of Christian freedom without recounting this act of God that came about to free humanity.

This is different from what we encounter in philosophy. Since most people have a philosophical idea of freedom they easily mistake it for Christian freedom because philosophy, and in a remarkable way the philosophy of German idealism which understood itself as the philosophy of freedom, always grounds itself in a timeless axiom, namely, that humanity is free by nature.<sup>1</sup> "Man is created free, is free, even if he were born in chains."<sup>2</sup> Philosophy grounds human freedom in humanity's power to think and to fix autonomously the standards of human affairs, as well as those of business and the political order.<sup>3</sup> This is what most people currently mean by freedom when they regard freedom, in the West in contrast to the East, as the highest good in the spiritual world. That should not be denied; but we have learned how weak and powerless our freedom has proven to be, as it was furnished by the totalitarian state and its rise to power in an unexpected experiment. We cannot forget this failure of the idea of freedom in the decisive hour (a failure even among the leading spiritual strata of the nation in both high and lower schools, in court proceedings and cabinet decisions). Therefore we lack faith in the idea of freedom, whose weaknesses we have witnessed.

There are many explanations for this. We can more or less explain this failure by the vicissitudes of external circumstances, by the weakness of democratic institutions, or by the lack of moral consciousness. But we should go a step further. We should ask if the historical facts are not beginning to take revenge on us and that because the idea of freedom was divorced from that liberating deed of God for humanity—his deed in Jesus Christ—that it is for this reason that it has become so weak and feeble against the power of sin and death. We should further ask whether or not because of this it has become totally "inward" and shatters as soon as it comes in contact with the reality of life.

It is the same with our idea of freedom as with a flower that one has pulled up from its roots. It still smells as it did before, looks as pretty and still adorns the room in which we live. But the days of its beauty are numbered. It no longer draws life from its roots or power from the deep.

That is the great difference between the concept of freedom as we encounter it today (and widely understood by Protestants) and the Biblical, Reformation idea. When Martin Luther speaks of the freedom of a Christian he speaks of it as a sign of the act of liberation by the Trinitarian God. He will know nothing of any innate human freedom. Rather, when he does speak of such a thing he speaks, much to the annoyance of the Humanists of that time, about a human will in bondage. Freedom for Luther is Grace not Nature. That we have lost it (freedom) is not due to external circumstances, but rather to the fact that we have lost God—the God who in Jesus Christ proved his victory over sin and death (see 1 Cor. 15:56f.)

That is not quite all. According to the meaning of the Reformers, who in this matter are pupils of Biblical knowledge, only the righteous person can be free. As long as one is not righteous, as long as a person is not clothed, dressed, in possession of righteousness,<sup>4</sup> one cannot be free. Therefore the Reformers did not ask first about freedom but about righteousness because they knew that where one finds the righteousness that avails before God, there one simultaneously

finds freedom. It constitutes one's relation to the world and, if one may say so, a person's great and wonderful superiority over the world.

It may be that we can still scarcely imagine the kind of person who has recognized the righteousness of faith as the root of freedom. But it might not have been entirely by chance that together with the discovery of the righteousness of faith there actually went hand in hand the great world transforming and (in a positive sense) world altering act of freedom. There were indeed those Reformers who had learned something from the righteousness of faith, something which we, for the most part, have lost: namely, the ability to engage in battle against the powers of evil and death. Their freedom did not consist in the fact that they boasted of their autonomy. Rather, that in service to [16] their Liberator as co-workers with God they took part in his victory. The Reformers knew that God does not free people in order to abandon them to themselves, for that is essentially human bondage—that one is left to oneself. Rather, that God frees us in order to enlist us in God's army so that, as the young Luther once said, we may now fight against the powers and principalities, which remain our tyrants even now. The freedom of a Christian thus necessarily denies the world as it is and leads to a new world that God had in mind when he accomplished his liberating deed in Jesus Christ.

Luther himself eagerly presented this kind of freedom: that humanity takes part in Jesus Christ's perfection of power while at the same time Christ takes part in our weakness. The result is that no one knows himself any longer apart from Christ and likewise understands that it is the lie of all lies—the essence of all unbelief—when a person searches for freedom, true freedom, in himself and does not receive it from God or use it in God's service. The opposite thought, so characteristic of Luther's thoughts on freedom, might well lie in the fact that this man wins the capacity from out of such freedom to change himself and become a servant to others. His righteousness does not exist over against the unrighteous but rather no longer separates itself from them but seeks them, helps them, and transforms them. The same is true for his intelligence, his power, his dignity and his honor. All is changed into the alien shape. All serves, all makes the other free and righteous and intelligent and gives him back his honor and thus changes permanently the state of the world. One could say that those who have been freed by God go through the prisons with a key in their hands to unlock the cells of their fellow prisoners. They yet remain in jail, but they alter the prison into a place in which God's liberating deed becomes real.

That is, if I understand it rightly, the reality of freedom for the Reformers is exactly the same for us. Christian freedom is not a thing of which we may boast in relation to God, as has occurred in the modern world. Our relation to God does not mean freedom but rather, righteousness and grace. Freedom is the relationship in which we, as those freed and declared righteous by grace, may engage the world in order to take part in it ourselves so that all may know that the bars of our prison have been removed. Christ is the victor. We are able to rise from slumber (Rom. 13:11). We can throw off our chains as Lazarus did his grave clothes (John 11:44) and exit the tomb of the world of the dead into the morning of the freedom of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

## Notes

1 Cf., on freedom as a postulate in the founding of practical reason Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1788), A 58f. See also H. J. Iwand, "Studies on the Problem of the Captive Will" (1930), reprinted in *Um den rechten Glauben* (München, 1959), pp. 31-61, here on p. 39.

2 Friedrich von Schiller, *Die Worte des Glaubens* (1797): "Der Mensch ist frei geschaffen, ist frei / Und würd er in Ketten geboren!"

3 If freedom is defined by the nature of thought then—according to the opinion of Fichtes,

Hegel, and Schelling—it explains human self-determination.

4 Luther on Galatians 3:27 (1535): "Docet ergo Paulus baptismum non signum, sed indumentum Christi, imo ipsum Christum indumentum nostrum esse. Quare baptismus potentissima ac efficacissima res est. Ubi verro induti sumus Christum, indumentum iustitiae et salutis nostrae, tum etiam indumens Christum vestimentum imitationis" (WA 40/I: 541, 32-35). "Paul teaches then that Baptism is not a sign, but rather being clothed with Christ, yes even that Christ himself is our clothing. Therefore Baptism is an outward powerful and effective thing. Where we are truly clothed with Christ, as the clothes of our righteousness and his salvation, there we put Christ on as the clothing of imitation." [cf., LW 26: 353].

5 Luther on Romans 7:17 (1515): "Quocirca qui ad confessionem accedit, non putet se onera deponere, ut quietus vivat, sed sciat, quod onere deposito aggreditur militiam Dei et aliud onus subit pro Deo contra diabolum et vitia sua domestica. Quod nisi sciat. cito, recidivet. Ideo qui non intendit deinceps pugnare, ut quid petit absolve et ascribe militia Christ?" (Rm II: 179, 2-8 = WA 56: 350, 12-17). "Who therefore goes to confession should not believe that he lays down there a weight so that he can now live in peace, rather he knows that at the same time that he lays down that burden he enlists in the service of God and takes on another weight for God against the devil and his own inherited failure. If he does not know that he will soon experience a relapse. Whoever is therefore not determined to fight from now on for what he asks then is he to be absolved and transferred to the service of Christ?" [cf., LW 25: 339].

Cf., Luther on liberation from the domination of the Law and sin. Rm II: 159,23f. = WA 56:329, 14f., on Romans 6:14 (1515) [LW 25: 316] as well as on divine military service WA 2: 584, 29, on Galatians 5:16 (1519) [LW 27: 361] and WA 8:123,6, *Against Latomus* (1521) [LW 32: 252].

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