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Champions of Freedom: The Good News of Liberty and Fellowship with God

Introduction

"The question of freedom is one of the most confused in the whole history of philosophy, a labyrinth ", said Leibniz. Not so for biblical Christian theology. Obviously, these two perspectives are based on different premises and therefore different inferences. Freedom is a fascinating core value in Scripture. Life is inseparably associated with the reality of freedom. In Scripture, creation is freedom from nonexistence. The Exodus is about freedom from bondage, oppression, and from the indignity of slavery. The story of God's people in fact is the story of freedom from evil and from all its manifestations. The Israelites' festivals are all related to freedom. (Passover, feast of unleavened bread, feast of first fruits of barley, Pentecost or feast of First Fruits of Barley, Feats of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Jubilee). The weekly Sabbath is also linked to liberation according to Deuteronomy 5. The promises of God for the future of God's people are all related to freedom. Freedom from war, freedom from harm, freedom from violence, freedom from being subjugated, submitted, and exploited.

Freedom is then inseparable from peace. Freedom is a prerequisite to peace. This is true at the personal level of inner peace, which is an expression of freedom from guilt. In the Bible, this is equivalent to the freedom of being forgiven by God. Also, at the societal level, freedom is a prerequisite to peace. Without the freedom to self-determination, sooner or later, strife, and rebellion, nourish the motivation of freedom fighters whose aim is to overturn the yoke imposed on their people. Peace then requires freedom.

In an attempt to understand the concept of freedom, a distinction has been made between negative freedom and positive freedom.^[1] Historically the latter is connected to the so-called "Republicanism," "a political philosophy according to which the highest values of the political commonwealth are to do with serving the common good, the readiness to sacrifice one's own

good for the good of the many, respect for dignity, integrity, heroism on the battlefield in the defense of the Republic.”^[2] Obviously, for Seventh-day Adventists, committed to

non-combatancy, these national ideals are not accepted unconditionally. Universal values which benefit the whole human family created in the image of God are paramount. Early Seventh-day Adventists protested against the imposition of nationalist ideals which conflict with universal values.

Negative liberty is the model mainly embraced in liberal democracies, in which the basic values are to do with individual freedom, entrepreneurship in the economy, and aspiration to personal riches.

Extremes in both definitions of liberty create crises in communities.

Political freedom is not all there is when it comes to freedom. There are incontrovertible dimensions of freedom that must be taken into consideration and embraced. For Christians whose lives are modeled after that of Jesus, autonomous freedom is not the highest value to be branded at the expense of the good of many, the community, or the human family at large. The depth of human solidarity for Christians is a powerful incentive to save lives, sustain lives and to contribute to the life in dignity and decent living of other members of the human family. There is far more to Christian freedom than meets the eye.

An Orthodox thinker delineated the issue as follows: “Theology recalls the limits of autonomous freedom, based on its experience of freedom in Christ. For the church, the human rights ethos is not the supreme ethos. The biblical commandment of love expresses a way of living and a dimension of freedom inaccessible to human rights, which are marked by the claim of “my” right: for this, the highest form of freedom is for the church that man “can freely sacrifice even his own rights in favor of another.” This attitude is not a moral of resentment which stems from an existential weakness, as Nietzsche thought, but the sign of an interior vigor which is not a human work but a gift of divine grace.”^[3]

By virtue of its intrinsic universality, freedom is not a stand-alone property. Biblical freedom is born from God's love. Freedom is interrelated with and inseparable from love. Love is indeed the goal of freedom. This is because love cannot be forced. It is the heartbeat of any legitimate covenant, whether between God and humans or between humans ourselves. God created freedom for love to be a reality.

The Heart of the Matter.

The heart of the Torah which Jesus summarized in his teachings is connected to love.

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, The Lord is one!

You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Deut. 6:4.

Jesus calls it the great and foremost commandment (See Matt. 22:37,39)

He adds, the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

Then he comments: “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”

To create the conditions for love to be possible, God created freedom. Eternal fellowship in love is incompatible with coercion, force, intimidation, or violence.

The Hope of Eternal Freedom and Fellowship in love is God's goal, purpose, and objective in God's comprehensive commitment to save humans created in God's image.

A closer look at freedom.

What the Bible calls the gospel or good news is the prediction of the liberation of human beings and creation from evil, oppression, oppressors, and opprobrium (or shame). This is what God has promised and which is the foundation for our hope. For God tells the truth. God will fulfill God's promises. As the Bible in Isaiah and in the book of Revelation puts it, God is the God of truth, the God of Amen (Isaiah 65:16). The etymology of the root of this Semitic word conveys the idea of stability, reliability, security, something, or someone you can depend on. God is someone

you can stake your life on. Our security is in Him. As underlined throughout Scripture, God is the God of freedom.

The gospel is the good news of God liberating those who are oppressed, confined, or crushed by coalitions of evils.

But whether from the first stories of the book of Genesis or the inaugural discourse of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth or in the book of Revelation the gospel is always about freedom, liberation, and liberty.

For this freedom to materialize God overcomes enemies who are oppressing his people. In this sense, the expulsion of Satan from heaven, the fall of angels from heaven, and the fall of Babylon The fall of Babylon in particular, is an integral part of the good news. It frees God's people from being oppressed, possessed, dominated, and used as agents of evil spirits and their allies in social, cultural, political, and economic realms.

Champions of freedom should make this very clear.

The gospel is the end of the domination of human beings. It is the announcement of the advent of freedom.

On the personal or individual level, freedom is the end of internalized dominance. No follower of Jesus should indulge the pride of feeling or believing in one's superiority over others. At corporate levels, Christians cannot be complicit in systems of domination and discrimination. The good news is the announcement of the dismantling of matrixes of dominations. It is the reconfiguration of all ecosystems of dominion. It is the renunciation of dominionism, a Christendom's attempt to dominate public and secular spaces.

The gospel is liberation from subjection. It is freedom therefore peace and security for women and girls. God has promised children will be delivered from the scourges of wars and abuses. No more child soldiers or infant and puppy trafficking. No more harm. God promised that there will

be no more violence in God's kingdom. Even the animal world will be stripped of its impulses of violence. The following picture in Isaiah 11:6-9 reveals an era of post-violence.

“The wolf will dwell with the lamb,
 And the Leopard will lie down with the young goat,
 And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
 And a little boy will lead them.
 Also the cow and the bear will graze,
 Their young will lie down together
 And the lion will eat straw like the ox.
 The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,
 And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den.
 They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain.
 For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
 As the waters cover the sea”

The gospel is about freedom from demonic spirits, those who in the end time counterfeit the three angels' messages. They go around the world spreading a counterfeit gospel. God will defeat them too. This is signified as the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16).

The gospel is also the liberation of the whole of creation, nature, our world that is, which is subjected to corruption, suffering and death (Romans 8:20).

In the same context as Romans, the gospel is the good news of the revelation of the children of God. This means there will be a work of restoration of what was intended from creation. It will be a recreation of the image of God, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God. Christ is the hope of glory.

But this liberation has a purpose; not only to create space for real life as God intended it but core to life is fellowship with God with the triune God who is love.

The gospel in this perspective is liberation from alienation. No more curtains of separation. It is not by chance that the New Jerusalem has no temple in it. Thanks to the new covenant of direct access to God through Jesus Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, heavenly high

priestly ministry, and the Second Coming as lord of an eternal kingdom, all people of God are priests with access credentials to the presence of the throne of grace.

Jesus the Face of Freedom.

Jesus is the ultimate manifestation of freedom. Freedom is inconceivable without him.

Jesus Christ is sovereign, supreme, and all-sufficient. He has become the only needed sacrifice, the only mediator, our all-sufficient savior. The lord of the whole of our lives.

This means that the expectations we have from others should never imprison us into feelings of grievances and grudges.

Others do not determine how we feel regardless of their opinions. They are stripped of the power to make us feel bad. We are free to live even with enemies. This dimension of freedom is indeed liberating.

Christian freedom is profound even stronger than death. The most extraordinary verse on the commitment to Christ is found in Rev. 12:11.

“They overcame him because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.”

For victors over the accuser of the brethren, loyalty to Christ is more valuable than their own life. Christ is the supreme value.

This shows that for Christians, freedom is not the supreme value; God is.

God’s sovereignty, supremacy, and primacy inform all aspects of life. This is the way of piety; otherwise called righteousness. The right positioning of oneself towards God in reference to everything is the hallmark of a genuine Christian life. It is called the fear of the Lord.

Championing freedom is a way of inviting people to embrace genuine freedom that comes from a relationship with the God of freedom and love.

Jesus made an enlightening statement: He said, He is the way, the truth, and the life.

The way to freedom is to direct access to God and fellowship in love with the triune God.

In fact, Jesus declared that if He as the Son makes one free, that person is free indeed (John 8:36). “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Freedom is also connected to truth. Jesus said in John 8:31 “If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Jesus brought the truth about God. God is not a solitary monad, but a communion of Father Son, and Holy Spirit. One God in three persons, a relational God, whose essence is nonetheless indivisible.

The revolution Jesus brought is the new covenant of direct access to God. The freedom to come to the throne of grace, without mediation but with God’s mediation. It is the freedom to have direct access to God. A God who welcomes wayward humanity. The parable of the prodigal son is an illustration of this new revelation of the hospitality which God graciously and generously offers.

It is the freedom to come to the house of God as David prayed in Psalm 23.

“I will dwell in the house of God, forever.”

It is freedom from evil and Jesus taught us how to pray.

“Deliver us from evil.”

The spiritual dimension of freedom includes freedom from demonic influences. Earth is an occupied territory. Evil spirits have fallen to this planet according to Revelation 12.

Nevertheless, the good news of freedom is that Jesus Christ has disarmed them.

In Colossians 2, talking about the cancellation of debt of the redeemed, Paul specified,

“He made you alive together with Him having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Colossians 2:13-15).

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists are called to be champions of freedom. This belief in the pivotal role of freedom is predicated on the character of God, and the purposes of God for the world.

Adventists adhere to the five principles of the Reformation. The lens through which they read the principles of the Reformation is freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief which at its core undergirds all freedoms.

For every one of these Reformations principles, Adventists highlight the undergirding gift of freedom God offers.

1. The principle of Sola scriptura highlights freedom from human-constructed traditions in favor of God’s revealed absolute will and purpose for the world.
 2. The principle of Sola gratia frees human beings from depending on merits for their salvation.
 3. The principle of Sola Fide underlines freedom from salvation by working through bargaining with God.
 4. The principle of Solus Christus affirms the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
 5. The principle of soli Deo Gloria highlights the liberation from self-glorification, and the hierarchicalization of people into superiors and inferiors. The end of the competition. It is freedom from self-esteem to an absolute dedication to honor God.
- Champions of freedom restore the understanding principles of the Reformation. There are other principles of the Reformation that are inseparable from freedom.

6. The priesthood of all believers highlights the revelation and good news of the new covenant: Direct access to God with no need for mediators. Persons, places or objects, or ritual performances
7. Freedom of conscience (*conscientia fidelium*) brings freedom from being dominated or domesticated. It is connected to equality and human dignity.

This freedom was difficult to integrate within the ethos of the Reformation. Reformers were not necessarily tolerant. Eg. Calvin as in the letting of the burning at the stake of Michel Servette; but also Luther himself did not show tolerance to anabaptists or Jews.

Seventh-day Adventists by virtue of championing freedom of thought conscience and belief, restore this critical principle of the Reformation and extend freedom of conscience to all.

[1] In the western tradition, Isaiah Berlin, popularized this distinction. See Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*. Edited by Henry Hardy (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002). *Liberty is the new and expanded edition of Isaiah Berlin's Four Essays on Liberty*.

[2] Evgenii Dainov. *Politics in 40 Words: A Dictionary* (Sofia, Bulgaria: New Bulgarian University Press, 2020), 142.

[3] Constantin Delikostantis. "Vatican II et les droits de l'homme. Réflexions d'un orthodoxe sur les relations entre liberté Chrétienne et liberté moderne." *Le concile Vatican II et L'église orthodoxe. Colloque théologique Chambesy*, 16-19 octobre 2013), 212.