

St. Paul and the Notion of Freedom

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St. Paul says “Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil. 3:8). Paul is referring not only to his Jewish and Pharisaic ancestry but also to the persecutions that he endured in the course of his evangelical mission. In Phil. 3:5-6 Paul sets forth his credentials in Israel: (1) he is circumcised on the eighth day, (2) he is of the tribe of Benjamin, the most illustrious member of which was king Saul (3) he is a Pharisee unto the law. Paul was not a convert like the Gentile Christians whom he was baptizing. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews. Unlike proselytes (converts) he could stake a claim to Israel even by bloodlines. Jerome (cf. *On Illustrious Men* 5) states that Paul’s parents were from Gischala (modern Gush Halav) in Upper Galilee, and were taken captive by Romans to Tarsus.

1. Freedom from the Mosaic Law and the Accompanying Jewish Identity

Consequent to his Pharisaic identity he was convinced that “curse is he who was hung on a cross” (Dt. 21:22-23). Hence, Paul the Jewish theologian zealously persecuted the believers who at that time had been known as the *Way* because they rejected as a matter of principle, the Mosaic Law which was considered a revelation of the Divine Will. For a Jew loving observance of God’s law created and preserved communication with God. In as much as the Law could accomplish this, Paul was blameless. Paul’s orientation to the Law changed after his experience on the road to Damascus. This change of orientation was not a deliberate choice of Paul, but a necessary consequence of his experience of encounter with the Risen Christ. We maintain that this experience of encounter with the Risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, and the experience of being caught up to the third heaven as recounted in 2 Cor. 12:1-5 which we maintain occurred in the Temple (cf. Acts 22:17). Both experiences were mystical – a heightened level of awareness and experience of union with God, which in no way encouraged flight from the world.

2. Freedom for Christ

Paul’s encounter with the supernatural necessarily brought about radical changes in Paul’s life. Phil. 3:7-8 articulates that these changes in Paul’s life consisted in a reversal of objects of value, and the content of honour. What was viewed as gain became loss. He had become scum on account of his evangelical work (1 Cor. 4:13). There is a purpose or exchange for all this loss. The only object of Paul’s desires is Christ and whatever Christ wants of him. He rejects claims to his own self-worth or to self-satisfaction from keeping the Law. Now the sole basis of worth and honor flow from one’s relationship to Christ. Thus, although Paul continues to affirm the holiness of the Mosaic Law (Rom. 7:7-12). It was meant to be a guardian or custodian until the coming

of Christ (Gal. 3:24-25). The Pauline view of freedom is best understood in terms of the reversal of objects of value and the content of honour, in Paul's life. Paul refers to this reversal in Rom. 3:21 – 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it ...' Now the Law has become redundant. 'For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law' (Rom. 3:28). What does this mean then with regard to our personal relationship concerning the Law? 'Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law' (Rom. 3:31).

From the Lucan writings about Paul, we also gather that Paul referred to freedom mainly to demonstrate that the new dispensation of salvation made by God through His only Son Jesus was apart from the Mosaic Law. Acts 13:16 is specific: So (in Antioch of Pisidia- v.14) Paul stood up (on the Sabbath), and motioning with his hand said: 'Men of Israel, and you that fear God, listen ... and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses' (Acts 13:39).

3. Specific Instances of Pauline References to Freedom

We give below the list of Pauline references to freedom, or freedmen. Paul refers to freedom by the Greek noun **evleuqeri,a** (*eleutheria* - 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 2:4; 5:1, 13) or **avpeleu,qeroj** (*apeleutheros* – 1 Cor. 7:22), or adjective **evleu,qeroj** (*eleutheros* – Rom. 6:20; 7:3, 39; 1 Cor. 7:21; 9:1, 19; 12:13 Gal. 3:28; 4:22, 23, 30, 31; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:11). Paul uses the Greek verb **evleuqero,w** (*eleutherow* - Rom 6:22; 8:2, 21, 26) to describe God's act of setting men free from sin. In all instances the use of freedom is exclusively in relation to exemptions from the Mosaic Law. Hence we conclude that Paul is interested in the concept of freedom, exclusively from his theological perspective of demonstrating that the Mosaic Law has become redundant after the coming of Christ.

4. Freedom as Transcendence

The Pauline notion of freedom based upon the universal salvation offered by the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Rom. 3:29; 15:10-12; Eph. 3:6). The Pauline notion of liberation is transcendent and not secular, for the very reason that is centered on the oneness of the Body of Christ, transcending race, and culture (cf. Rom. 12:5; 15:5; Gal. 3:28; 2 Cor. 5:17). Nevertheless it does have implications for daily life. The universality of salvation offered through Christ breaks down barriers between Jew and Greek, male and female (cf. Gal. 3:28). The Christian possesses the Spirit of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:9). The believer is not conformed to the world but is transformed in mind (cf. Rom. 12:2). Therefore, the believer becomes a new creation in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17) having taken on the mind of Christ (cf. Phil. 2:5). The *ekklesia* is a harmonious relationship that is in one accord in Christ (cf. Rom. 15:5). As Paul would say in 1 Cor. 12:12, we who are many are one body in Christ. Hence we conclude that freedom for Paul is union with Christ. Freedom in Pauline writings does not have material nor temporal content, although it has consequences for the respect of human liberty and human rights. It is the inner transformation in union with Christ that renders ineffective the oppressive structures that are operative externally. Hence, Paul also presents two household codes

calling upon Christians to obey one another (cf. Eph. 5:22-6:9). This becomes clear when we examine Paul's letters to Philemon and Colossians.

We have chosen Paul's letter to Philemon and Colossians for two reasons: first, they are related; second they are concerned with slavery. On the basis of Col. 4:9 which speaks of Onesimus, the runaway slave described in Philemon, we gather that he, Philemon was a leader of a house church at Colossae. But who was Philemon? The identity of Philemon is crucial to our perception of the message conveyed by the text concerning the issue of 'slavery.'

Several theories prevail:

1. John Chrysostom maintained that Onesimus was a runaway slave who came to Paul during his flight. Paul baptized him and convinced him to return to his master with a letter of mediation. Philemon was placed in an awkward position because although under pressure from Paul as he was the head of the house church, by taking back Onesimus he would be accused by society of not upholding proper household discipline that calls for punishment of runaway slaves.
2. Peter Lampe (1985) proposed that Onesimus knowingly fled from the household of Philemon because of conflict between them. Onesimus fled to Paul who was a friendly third party, beseeching him to intercede on his behalf. Onesimus was not a runaway slave but simply absent without leave.
3. Allen Callahan (1997) is of the opinion that the traditional interpretation of this letter by John Chrysostom was used to uphold the argument that the Bible supported slavery (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:18-15). Callahan rejected the identification of Onesimus as a slave. He argues that Phlm 16 has been misinterpreted in slave owning societies to hide the real meaning of the letter, in the attempt to uphold the legitimacy of slavery. Callahan says Onesimus is really Philemon's brother (i.e. the real meaning of "in the flesh"). Onesimus has been mistreated by Philemon. Onesimus had fled from home and Paul is asking that he be taken back and not be mistreated as though he was a slave. Callahan says the letter is not about slavery but about relationships among blood kin.

Paul asks Philemon to take back Onesimus (Phlm. vv. 15-18) because of his faith in Christ (Phlm. vv. 4-10). Paul asks Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother (Phlm. 16 – "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother"). The inner transformation of Philemon must cause a transformation in the relationship. Paul does not ask Philemon to free Onesimus. The inner transformation in Christ will transform the relationship even though the external social system will stand unaltered. The inner transformation in Christ will so transform the relationship that the oppressive elements inherent in the external social system will become neutralized.

5. Some Practical Insights

Both Onesimus and Philemon were from Colossae. Hence, Paul's letter to the Colossians must also be considered in understanding Pauline notion of freedom. The letter to the Colossians deals with a heresy. Clinton Arnold having studied local evidence has pointed conclusively to a syncretistic movement as the cause of the heresy. Arnold concluded that the Colossian philosophy was a combination of Phrygian folk belief, local folk Judaism and Christianity. So, he argues that "the worship of angels" was one of the characteristics of the false teaching and means worship directed to angels. Arnold has demonstrated that the term "angel" was central in the religious life of people of Asia Minor. The invocation of angels was a common means of protection against evil, and of assistance in dealing with affairs of daily life. The syncretistic tendency posed a real threat to the community, and it was viewed with apprehension as a form of regression into the world. Adherence to the false teaching meant that one still belonged to the world (Col. 2:20). The syncretistic movement had threatened the very boundaries of the community, even as it does today (cf. Civic leaders pay homage to various deities as a sign of solidarity with all religions). Paul does not advocate such conformist behaviour which may be politically expedient. Freedom also means liberation from the shackles of superstition, and syncretism in our present time.

Paul's understanding of freedom must also be discussed within the larger framework of his anthropological view of humanity. For Paul, the human condition before Christ was not only bondage to sin and death, but also an enslavement to the "spirits" of this world. Paul says in Gal. 4:8, "In not knowing God you were enslaved to beings that were no gods." These "gods" have been identified with the "elements of the world" (Rom. 4:3) or the spirits thought of as controlling the world elements (1 Cor. 2:12). Angels were considered in Judaism as promulgators of the Mosaic Law. Yet because the Law held humans in bondage, Paul says the angels symbolized the inferiority of the Law to the promises that God himself made to the patriarchs of old. Yet, such angels who have held sway over humanity until now no longer do so because their rule has been broken by the coming of the *Kyrios*, Jesus Christ. Hence, the Pauline notion of freedom challenges Sri Lankan Christians to transcend superstitious practices some of which are deeply ingrained in culture, and overcome the need to seek assurance for the future by recourse to astrology.