

Freedom

B Y W I L L I A M H . W I L L I M O N

The freedom of American, democratic, popular, capitalist culture is based on the fiction of a self-constructed self. Thus, the heart of the Christian life seems a holy paradox: the more securely we are tethered to Christ, obedient to his way rather than the world's ways, the more free we become.

Before I read very far into Jonathan Franzen's latest book *Freedom: The Novel*, I realized the ironic point of his title.¹ Franzen has a wonderful ability to construct rounded characters who win our interest and sometimes even our affection. He is a master of dialogue and character development. Everyone in the novel talks about their freedom but they are anything but free. Characters leave home, end marriages, have sex with multiple partners, abandon children, sally forth bolstered by various drugs and alcohol, and change jobs all in the exercise of their freedom. "Free" is defined by all of them in the conventional modern American way—I am most free when I am least attached to anyone other than me. Their servitude would be funny (*Freedom* is very funny in many places) if it were not so sad.

If there is one thing that we Americans believe in, it is freedom. In fact, freedom has become the whole point of being an American. We are currently expending a fortune in young lives and money to bring the blessings of freedom to the enslaved people of Afghanistan. Curiously, many Afghans are unimpressed by our brand of glorious freedom.

Freedom has become our favorite definition of a human being. Freedom—defined as the maximum ability to choose whatever life I want to live with a minimum of external attachments—is the essence of our humanity. A person who is externally determined, who lacks freedom of choice, who has succumbed to any limitations upon self-expression is hardly a person.

This American freedom project is full of irony. Our attempts at unfettered license occur only by the dogged denial of our widespread suspicion that

contemporary Americans are anything but free. Jerked around by invisible forces beyond our control – the economy, government meddling, hormones, DNA, giant corporations, environmental pollution, peer pressure, advertising (the social sciences continually adds to the list of external determinants of human behavior) – in our more lucid moments we suspect that our vaunted contemporary boasts of freedom are but the rattling of our collective chains.



Of course I would know none of this if I were not a Christian. Augustine, I suppose, was the first to note that a pagan world specializes in the construction of guilt cages. It is the particular genius of paganism to hide its various mechanisms of enslavement. Modernity is that form of paganism that enjoys thinking that it has at last achieved humanity with unconstrained vistas. People of the past were tied down, prejudiced, limited by their gender and class, but we are free. I can now choose from one hundred and twenty different channels on my television. I am free to do anything I want to do. I can write my own script – all the while failing to see how modernity fails to give me anything worth doing or a life worth living.

In my more cynical moments I think that American democracy has created something called the free individual because it has found that allegedly free – that is, unattached – individuals are easier to manage than people who are tethered to a tribe, a family, a community, or a church. If you give me a maximum amount of freedom with a minimum amount of responsibility, you can lead me just about anywhere you like.

The world tells us that our exuberant self-expression is validation of our personal freedom. We fail to see that we are free to say about anything we want, except to say, “No thanks.” We are free to construct any story for our lives except one denying the rigidly enforced story that the point of our lives is to be unfettered, unconstrained, unattached, and free of any story other than the one I have freely chosen. Ironically, the story that the point of life is to be free to choose the life we want is a story that we did not choose – it was externally imposed upon us by a culture that cannot think of any purpose for living other than to be free to choose our own self-constructed purpose for living. We relish our freedom to have anything we like, failing to see how advertising creates our desires, limiting our ability to know what we like other than what advertising tells us to like. The modern world – bewitched by the fantasy of the role-less, unattached, free individual – fails to acknowledge its own peculiar forms of servitude.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Madame Roland was brought to the guillotine to face execution on trumped-up charges in 1793. As she prepared to die, she bowed mockingly toward the statue of liberty in the Place de la Révolution and uttered the words for which she is now remembered: “liberty, what crimes are committed in your name!”

Christians, attached as we are to the story of Jesus Christ, are busy in our lives and in our liturgies trying to believe two countercultural ideas about freedom: most of what passes for “freedom” around here is a lie; and there is no real freedom apart from the freedom to be who God has created us to be.

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supermarket. My “free” society offers me the maximum number of choices. So I move my cart down the supermarket aisle grabbing this and that all in the hope that I might thereby accumulate the right stuff to make my life worth living. Lacking any basis of discerning what counts for wise choices, I tend to grab a bit of everything, flitting from this enticing experience to that one, never alighting anywhere for

long. Thus there is a kind of drivenness about modern life that is anything but free. I not only can choose but I must.

Surely this is what Paul meant when he said that some live as if “their god is the belly” (Philippians 3:19). Gluttony is an unavoidable sin among us: gluttony is mandatory to keep the economy functioning.

As the great theologian Bob Dylan has noted, “you’re gonna have to serve somebody.”² So when it comes to the modern usage of “freedom,” there is a sense in which Christians do not believe in freedom. Most of what passes for “freedom” is servitude. Everybody is standing somewhere. Everyone is attached to something. All of us are busy living out stories that were externally imposed upon us, lives that we did not freely choose. As Spinoza said, if a rock could think, and if you threw that rock across a river, that rock would think that it was crossing the river because it wanted to.³



Christians hold the curious view that there is no freedom apart from God and the Creator’s intentions for his creatures. It is Augustine’s “our hearts are restless until they rest in thee,” but it is also that freedom is not a personal achievement or discovery. True freedom is a gift. The patriotic bumper sticker that proclaims “Freedom isn’t free” lies.

While freedom is a favorite subject of pagan philosophers—one of their beloved philosophical abstractions—it is rarely discussed in Scripture. Jesus,

good Jew that he is, shows little interest in the subject. In one of those rare occasions when Jesus uses the word “free” (*eleutheros*) he says to those who believed in him, “If you continue in my word...the truth will make you free” (John 8:31). In indignation his disciples rattle their chains and protest, “What is this ‘make you free’ bit. We have never been slaves to anyone!”

They lied. Egypt, Assyria, then Babylonia...and now with the heel of Rome on their necks, they had been in servitude to anyone with an army big enough to blow through town and put them in shackles. Jesus reminds them of their enslavement to sin (8:34) then reiterates, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (8:36).

This short exchange reminds me that freedom is not a right, not a possession, certainly not a gift of the U.S. Army. Freedom is a gift of God; it is grace that only God can give. There is no freedom to be who God means us to be, no freedom from sin and from the alluring servitudes of this world except in servitude to Christ.

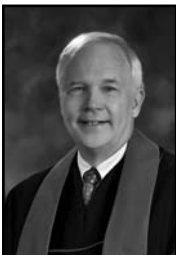
In the Passover Seder, the ritual meal in which Jews celebrate their freedom from Egyptian slavery, contemporary Jews are reminded that God “freed us from the yoke of Egyptian slavery so that we might be slaves to him.”

Why are the Hebrews freed from slavery – because God is in favor of liberation? No. In Scripture the slavery of sin is false worship, submission to false gods. The Hebrews are freed from slavery to the Pharaoh so that they might find their true freedom in service to Yahweh as a holy people, a nation where everyone gets to be a priest.

At the heart of the Christian life is a holy paradox: the more securely we are tethered to Christ, the more obedient we are to his way rather than the world’s ways, the more free we become. Or as Jesus put it, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

NOTES

- 1 Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010).
- 2 Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” © 1979 Special Rider Music.
- 3 Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) gives his famous thought experiment involving a conscious rock in Letter 62 to G. H. Schaller (The Hague, 1674).



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