

THE FREEDOM IN CHRIST ACCORDING TO SAINT PAUL THE APOSTLE

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ABSTRACT

This study briefly presents the Apostle Paul's concept of freedom in Christ, which is not identical with the modern understanding, which focuses primarily on its political and social dimension. Without underestimating it, a great importance is given to its spiritual dimension, which is experienced by the Christian as the avoidance of enslavement to sin and passions, and as love for God and neighbor. Thus, the experience of freedom in Christ is not limited to the avoidance of sin but is expanded and given a positive content through the practice of love. With love as its content, freedom in Christ, according to the Apostle Paul, is not an individual matter, but is realized in the Church, where man receives the grace of the Holy Spirit and participates in the Body of Christ.

Keywords: *freedom in Christ; Apostle Paul; love; Church; Orthodoxy; divine grace; spiritual life.*

INTRODUCTION

Having received the heavenly call from Christ, you showed yourself to all as a preacher of light, with the teachings of grace shining forth; for, having abolished the ministry of the letter of the Law, you shone forth the knowledge of the Spirit to the faithful; for this reason, even to the third heaven, according to your worthiness, you were raised up and have reached heaven.

The holy hymnographer praises St Paul the Apostle, since he received the call of God to become an apostle of the Gentiles and to enlighten all with the teachings of divine grace, freeing man from the letter of the law and showing him the knowledge of the Holy Spirit, with the result of being made worthy by God to ascend to the third heaven and participate in the grace of heaven. In this short, but so successful and beautiful hymnographic reference, the importance of the call to apostolic dignity and the teaching of the word of God is highlighted, which teaching goes beyond the letter of the law and leads to enlightenment and knowledge of the Spirit.

1. THE MEANING OF THE FREEDOM IN CHRIST

The encounter with Christ, on the road to Damascus, represents the decisive experience of St Paul the Apostle, which transforms him from an enemy into a teacher of the Gospel; it frees him from Pharisaic egocentrism and makes him a follower and apostle of Christ. Through this experience, St Paul the Apostle acquires a personal knowledge of the freedom in Christ, which he therefore teaches to the Gentiles. The content and dimensions of the freedom in Christ are the subject of the present study, because this [freedom] is,

naturally, related to, but not identified with, the ordinary meaning of freedom, which is used in everyday speech and in social life. Next, therefore, we will try to demonstrate the particularity of freedom in Christ, taking as a basis the teaching of St Paul the Apostle, comparing it with the contemporary meaning of freedom and referring to the double way that is experienced by the Christian: as deliverance from slavery to sin and passions, (on the one hand, and on the other) as love for God and neighbor.

Today, freedom is perceived, first of all, as political freedom, in other words, as the possibility that we have, as citizens, to decide on the forms and bearers of state power, as well as to make our own choices in our personal and social lives, within a legitimate order, which respects our dignity, as persons, and ensures our individual rights. This freedom is not absolute, but relative, because it stops where the freedom of others begins. This delimitation is reasonable, because, in a different way, the freedom of one would affect the freedom of the other and, thus, the meaning of freedom would be self-undermined. The importance of political freedom for harmonious social coexistence is obvious and, reasonably, is recognized. However, its value is relative, not only because it is inferior to the true one, that is, to the freedom in Christ, but also because it does not represent a premise for it at all; even in a situation of extreme lack of social freedom, the Christian can be free in Christ.

What, however, is the meaning of the freedom in Christ? Addressing the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes: “Stand firm therefore in the freedom with which Christ has made us free” (Galatians 5:1), and a few verses later, “for you, brothers, were called to freedom; only do not use freedom as an opportunity to serve the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). From these exhortations it is clear that: a) Christ represents the giver and foundation of freedom; b) the new thing that Christ gives us is freedom, which must not be used “as an opportunity to serve the flesh,” that is, as an opportunity for sinful behavior, but to serve “one another through love,” in other words, as love in the service of one’s neighbor. Therefore, love is a gift of Christ, which man receives and preserves when he avoids sin and cultivates love.

On the contrary, when man satisfies, without discernment, all his desires, even the most obsessive ones, by doing what he wants, then he does not expand his personal freedom, but sinks into sin and submits to passions. This spiritual dimension of freedom, which St Paul the Apostle highlights as the avoidance of sins and passions, which completely enslave and dominate man, is, over time, particularly important, because man tends to be attracted to what feeds his egoism, with the result of gradually losing self-control and his own freedom.

Freedom in Christ is possible for every person, even for those who live in a situation of extreme lack of social freedom, such as slavery. In the time of St Paul the Apostle, slavery represented a fully accepted social reality, which the Holy Apostle addresses, giving advice to both slaves and masters. And, while he declares equality of all ¹, and on the other hand, he advises masters to approach slaves with justice and equality, signaling that they too are judged for their behavior, because they have their own Master in heaven².

¹ “Servants, obey your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ, not with eyeservice, as men pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that every one, whether bond or free, that whatsoever good work ye do, the same shall he receive of the Lord for reward” (Eph. 6:5-8; cf. Col. 3:22-25).

² And you, masters, do the same to them, putting aside threatening, knowing that your Master and theirs is in heaven, and that with Him there is no partiality.” (Eph. 6:9; cf. Col. 4:1).

2. FREEDOM IN CHRIST AND THE SLAVERY OF SIN AND PASSIONS

Does St Paul the Apostle contradict himself when, on the one hand, he preaches the freedom of man, and on the other hand, he accepts the social reality of slavery?

The answer is negative, because freedom or slavery does not depend on social position, but on keeping the will of God or on insisting on sin. The slave is free in Christ when he follows the word of God, and the free becomes a slave when he commits cunning deeds and submits to his own passions. In this way, freedom, as a social state, is distinguished from spiritual freedom, that is, from the freedom in Christ, in which both free and slaves can and do participate³.

Interpreting the specific exhortations of the Holy Apostle Paul and wishing to declare the meanings of freedom and slavery, as well as to highlight their consequences, Saint John Chrysostom presents examples of free people and slaves. The righteous Joseph, although sold into slavery by his brothers and having the Egyptian priest Potiphar as his master, was, according to the Holy Father, the freest of all men. His slavery did not hinder him at all in the exercise of virtue and in upholding the will of God.

On the other hand, the wife of Potiphar, who was socially free and had Joseph as a slave, was a slave to the passion of fornication, which led her to her immoral proposal to Joseph and, further, to slander and deception. Likewise, Joseph's brothers did not benefit from freedom but became the most miserable slaves ("they were the worst of all slaves"), because the passion of envy led them to decide to sell their brother and to tell lies to the merchants and then to their father. Thus, a person can be a spiritual slave, even when he is, from a social point of view, free, but he also has the possibility of not obeying the thought and of progressing in the freedom that is in Christ, even in a regime of slavery.

In this way, without underestimating the social differentiation between free people and slaves, a great importance is given to the spiritual dimension between freedom in Christ and the slavery of sin and passions, which refers, equally, to free and slaves. For this reason, slaves are called not to change their social status, but to keep their morality unaltered, to have courage and to rejoice. Addressing, in the second person singular, to the slave, Saint John Chrysostom says, with his unparalleled linguistic ability: "It is not this slavery that harms, beloved, but the slavery by nature of sin. And if you are not a slave to this glory, dare and rejoice; no one will be able to do you any wrong; if you are a slave to it and if you were free a thousand times, freedom is of no use to you. For what use would you have, tell me, if you do not serve any man, but subject yourself to passions?" This observation allows the Holy Father to admire Christian teaching: "This is Christianity: in slavery it gives freedom"⁴.

Experiencing the freedom in Christ is not limited to avoiding sin but extends and acquires a positive content through the exercise of love for God and neighbor. Love represents the ethos of the freedom in Christ⁵. Love for God is expressed through obedience to His will, which represents the exercise, par excellence, of freedom, not simply because it is done willingly, but also because it allows man to participate, through grace, in God's freedom. Since man represents a creature "in the image" of God, he does not submit, through obedience to the divine will, to an authority foreign to him, but desires and carries out those

³ Miltiadis Vantsos, *The commodification of the human body. An ethical view of slavery and prostitution*, Ed. Ostrakon, Thessaloniki, 2019, pp. 42-43; Theodore Nikolaou, "Freedom of will and salvation in Christ", in *Theology* 59/1 (1988), p. 506.

⁴ Saint John Chrysostom, *Subject of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *PG* 61, col. 157-158.

⁵ Konstantinos Delikonstantis, *The Ethic of Freedom, Philosophical Questions and Theological Responses*, Domos Publishing House, Athens, 1990, pp. 34-35.

of his nature, moving towards the likeness of God and the familiarity, through grace, with His glory. As St Paul the Apostle characteristically emphasizes, "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord" (II Cor. 3:17-18). Therefore, when man willingly obeys God and receives His grace, then he is made to shine by grace and reflects it to others. At this point, we also refer to the interpretation of Saint John Chrysostom, who is the best hermeneut of St Paul the Apostle: "Just as silver, which is exposed to the rays of the sun, can also emit rays, but not from its own nature, but from the brightness of the sun that it receives, so the soul that receives a ray from the glory of the Spirit reflects it"⁶. Therefore, although man, as a creature, has a relative and limited freedom, when he receives grace and is likened to God, he participates in the glory and divine freedom.

Therefore, since the freedom in Christ is lived as love and obedience to God, it does not represent an individual premise, but is realized within the Church, where man receives the grace of the Holy Spirit and participates in the Body of Christ⁷. Through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, [man] is freed from the bonds of death and acquires the possibility of resurrection and eternal life. Moreover, as St Apostle [Paul] emphasizes, "and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain." However, His resurrection justifies faith and takes it out of the fear of death, which threatens and harasses life, and gives man true freedom, which is not dependent on the conventionalism of this world, since it can also transcend [the world], extending itself into eternal life. The believer who does not fear death does not submit to worldly causality and is free in Christ.

This freedom is also manifested through love for one's neighbor. Usually, people consider that our freedom is delimited by the presence of others, consequently, its safeguarding and expansion must inevitably be done at their expense. While a contemporary man desires to be autonomous and act according to his desires, the free man in Christ breaks free from sin and pursues the will of God.⁸

CONCLUSION

St Paul the Apostle calls us, as we saw in the paragraph mentioned above, to a freedom that is not lived as a dissolute satisfaction of personal desires, but as love in the service of one's neighbor. The latter is not an obstacle and threat to freedom, but the neighbor whom the Christian loves, accepts and forgives, in the etymological meaning of the word, in other words, communicates with him in the same space. When freedom is lived as love, others do not represent factors of any delimitation, but, on the contrary, of the development of personal freedom. This loving dimension of freedom prevents its transformation into self-sufficiency, since the impetus and criterion of any act is not limited to oneself, but also includes one's neighbor, who is loved as oneself. The difficulty of living freedom as love is precisely since we perceive and treat our fellow humans with suspicion and antagonism, while we are called to approach them as brothers in Christ, that is, as St Paul the Apostle calls the recipients of his Epistles.

⁶ Saint John Chrysostom, Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Homilies VII, 5, in PG 61, col. 448.

⁷ Georgios Mantzaridis, Christian Ethics, vol. II, Karyes, 2015, pp. 242-243.

⁸ Athanasios Despotis, "The theological interpretation of the concept of freedom in Rom. 6-8", in In the footsteps of the Apostle Barnabas. Charistiarly Tome in honor of the Archbishop of New Justinian and all Cyprus, Mr. Chrysostomos II, Nicosia, 2008, pp. 192-193.

In *conclusion*, this brief treatment of the freedom in Christ, according to St Paul the Apostle, we note that Christ does not simply free man from sin and its consequences but calls him to a personal communion of love with God and his neighbor, in which communion and true freedom is experienced and man becomes worthy to the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

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