

STUDY 16

The Freedom of the Church— Now and Then

Deane Meatheringham

Scripture: Romans 8:1–25, especially vv. 1–4

THE THEN COMES INTO THE NOW

What wonderfully blessed people we are to know now that the future judgement of the Law has been abrogated (Rom. 8:1–4).

- Our future Judge has come into our space and history to condemn all flesh where sin dwells.
- Justification is an eschatological act of God's grace and truth.
- Christ's atoning death for our sins was the great judgement of the world (John 12:31). In a world which streams with so much blood, lies, ruin and misery the most profound crisis we can face between God and ourselves has been effected by the destruction of guilt and the taking away of the sins of the world.
- The crisis of our judgement was *in Christ Jesus* as the order of this mortal world has been broken through in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

O Lord, I do not deserve a glimpse of heaven, and I am unable with my works to redeem myself from sin, death, the devil and hell. Nevertheless, you have given me your dear Son, Jesus Christ, who is far more precious and dear than heaven, and much stronger than sin, death, the devil and hell. For this I rejoice, praise, and thank you, O God. Without cost and out of your pure grace you have given me this boundless blessing in your dear Son. Through him you take sin, death and hell from me, and grant me all that belongs to him. Amen.¹

FREEDOM NOW

The whole of Romans 8 teaches us the new liberty for everyone from the Law of sin and death. It also tells how God meets the bending and breaking of the law by establishing it anew in Jesus Christ. God sets us free for a life of obedience and hope in the new life of the Spirit under his grace (Rom. 8:4, 12–16, 17–27).

¹ Luther's Prayers, edited by Herbert F. Brokering, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, 1994, pp. 15f.

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The Church is to go on living in the freedom of Christ:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1; cf. John 8:36).

- By not cancelling it with treacherous teaching on rewards and losses at the judgement.
- Smothering freedom by cajoling believers with tasks for congregational management.

FREEDOM FOR THE CHURCH LIVING BY THE SPIRIT

The regeneration of the Holy Spirit works simultaneously in the present time in union with our being liberated in Christ from the Law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1–4). Life in the Spirit is a life under God’s will of grace.

- The coming of the Spirit is the entering now of the life of the age to come (Heb. 6:5).
- Paul presses the truth that we no longer live by a legal letter but in the competence of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6).²
- ‘The Lord is the Spirit [the Spirit belongs to the divinity of the Lord], and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom’ (2 Cor. 3:17). ‘The letter [*gramma*] kills but the Spirit gives life’ (2 Cor. 3:6).
- The Spirit wills us to cleave to Christ and keeps us there to go after Christ and go forward with him (Col. 3:1–3; Phil. 1:21; 1 Thess. 5:10).
- In the freedom of the Spirit we are able to take fresh directions without a legalism (Acts 8:24; 10:19; 16:7).

Problems arise when we separate the work of the Spirit from the ongoing ministry of the Word, leading the Church into Gnosticism. Without the Spirit the Church sterilises the Word and hardens in its orthodoxy.

The Spirit ‘is immanent to the Word (for this Word is a perpetual act); he imbues it, flushes it, brings it, carries it home from within for the individual soul . . . The Gospel is always the Spirit in action, not from afar, not from an old inspired past which never loses its force, but also from the direct present using that timeless past.’³

As we find ourselves in the communion of the Spirit we are in a vitalising force which wakens all of our powers for living ministry and the Spirit awakens life in the created world. The Spirit awakens our lives for the world ahead, causing us to sigh and to hope for the promise of the Gospel to set us and the creation from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:18–25).

² See my study on ‘The Pastor and the Gift of the Spirit’, NCTM Ministry School, 2010.

³ P. T. Forsyth, *Faith, Freedom and the Future*, Independent Press, London, 1912, pp. 30–1.

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THE FUTURE FREEDOM OF THE CHURCH

The promise of the Gospel is our future inheritance of the earth, the Kingdom and ultimately God himself. As I said in my earlier session, the Father's plan in creating all things in his Son was to make a home for his people by regenerating the creation, by abrogating our deserved judgement and by glorifying his Church.

- Now under Christ as Cosmocrator he leads his saints with creation to its goal of ultimate redemption through his defeat of all evil and death in his cross by abrogating our condemnation and as the first born of the dead (1 Cor. 15:20–28).

With the resurrection of Christ the order of this mortal world has been broken through. On resurrection morning we have the first day of the new creation. The crucified, dead and buried Jesus *appears* first to Mary and then to the other disciples as a normal human being who was first mistaken for the gardener (John 20:1–23). There was no body, minus its spirit, left in the grave. Jesus' soul had not gone to heaven. Jesus' body had been transfigured, changed and glorified. Jesus had surmounted death and the first morning of the new world had begun.

- As 'the first fruits' Christ is the pledge of the full harvest (1 Cor. 15:20).
- God does not regard the bodies he created as redundant and worthy only for the scrap heap. He will change them to coincide with Christ's body (Rom. 8:11, 21; 1 Cor. 15:19–21; Col. 3:3; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2; etc.).
- The term 'intermediate state' gives some Christians anxiety about what happens when we die? Do we have a 'soul snore' until Christ's final appearing brings the resurrection of the dead? Is there a gap between a believer's death and the Parousia?
- 'How do we link these together? Only by thinking of them exclusively *in Christ*, in the one person of Christ in whom human nature and divine nature are hypostatically united, and in whom our human existence and history are taken up into the divine life'.⁴

FREEDOM IN THE NEW CREATION OF ALL THINGS

I make my starting point again with the risen Christ being the first fruits as a creature of the creation (1 Cor. 15:20; Rom. 8:18–25).

- 'Resurrection and creation belong together, for the raising of the dead and the annihilation of death are viewed—and rightly so—not only as surmounting the consequences of the Fall, but as the consummation of creation-in-the-beginning'.⁵
- With the creation being set free from its bondage to decay, Paul says the creation 'will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom. 8:21).

⁴ Thomas Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1976, p. 102.

⁵ Jurgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness Arise!: God's Future for Humanity and the Earth*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2010, p. 67.

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- The children of God are God's heirs who inherit his promise initially given to Abraham and reaffirmed by Christ (Rom. 4:13; Matt. 5:5).
- Our glory will be our complete transformation in the image of the true man, Jesus (1 Cor. 15:49; Col. 1:15; 3:10). In Christ's image we will reflect the glory of God and the glory of his grace (Eph. 1:5–6).
- The freedom of glory will be expressed in our now fulfilling the creational mandate of Genesis 1–2 but with indwelling sin now non-existent.
- We will inherit God himself (Col. 1:12; 3:24; Rev. 22:4; 1 Cor. 13:12). We will no longer need images or pictures to represent God for we will live in unhindered participation and full enjoyment of God. In perfect perichoresis the world will be in God and God in the world (1 Cor. 15:28).

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).