

Called to Freedom
Galatians 5:1, 13-15

3rd July 2022

When I was a boy, during the lead-up to the Bicentennial celebrations in 1976, the Broadway musical *Shenandoah* was very popular. Perhaps the best-known song from the show was “Freedom.” Maybe you remember the words:

*Freedom ain't a state like Maine or Virginia/
Freedom ain't across some county line/
Freedom is a flame that burns within us
Freedom's in the state of mind.¹*

It got me thinking a lot about freedom. What is it? Where is it? There are places in the world where people are free and places where they are not. I learned in school that the United States is a place of freedom; the former Soviet Union was not. I later learned that in the land of the free, this didn't mean everyone; there are people who have had to fight for the freedom that is rightly theirs. There are places where liberty is in the air one breathes, and there are places where it's not. Sometimes the freedoms and rights that you thought were guaranteed can be taken away. Sometimes you can be so close to freedom, see it at a distance, and yet know that where you're standing, you're not free. A line, a border can make all the difference. On one side, you're free; on the other side, enslaved. What is it like to live enslaved or with limited freedoms within a stone's throw of freedom?

Years ago, at the General Assembly meeting in Detroit, I was deeply moved by the [International Underground Railroad Monument](#) on the Detroit River. Detroit was a terminus on the Underground Railroad. On the other side of the river, to the south, lies Windsor, Canada. The other side was freedom. The memorial is a bronze, life-size sculpture of an African-American family—mother and father and children—carrying their bags; alongside them are several citizens of Detroit, white, who are pointing the way to freedom, across the river, into Canada. *There! There!* On the memorial are the (known) names of people who helped African-Americans make it to freedom. It also lists the (known) churches and the (known) ministers that helped make the journey possible. Sometimes you can see freedom at a distance, but you have to venture forth and risk something to get there.

Freedom isn't only a state or region. It's also a state of mind. It's an idea, a thought, a concept. And, as we shall see, it's also something else.

This weekend Americans celebrate the birth of a nation, the birth of an idea that was a long time in the making. Before the political and military revolt of the 1770s, there was a revolution of ideas centuries earlier that eventually gave birth to the idea of freedom. Liberty. While it's taught in schools that the concept of democracy has its origins in Greek civilization (that's essentially true) and in the Enlightenment philosophy that swept through Europe (that's also essentially true), it's important to remember that the idea of freedom also has a source in the biblical witness and through the Bible's influence on thought and culture,

particularly those nations with a strong Reformed, Calvinist, Presbyterian bent, such as in the United States.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever *any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.*”

These ideas in the Declaration of Independence didn't just appear from nowhere. In fact, similar ideas are found in John Calvin's (1509-1564) magisterial work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559. He writes that public servants, those with power, that is, public officials, including monarchs, have the responsibility to care for the needs of the people. If the welfare of the people is in question, then the people might have a right to do something about it.² Then those in authority are not fit to serve.³

It's easy to poke fun at Calvin. But we cannot underestimate the influence of his pen, mind, and heart upon the formation of the United States. Calvin and Calvinist theologians held enormous sway over the intellectual life of the British colonies, primarily through the voice of the minister. Presbyterians in New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and Congregationalists in New England represented that Calvinist voice. These were the people saying no to bishops and no to kings.⁴ Through the influence of clergy educated at Harvard and Yale and the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), clergy educated in Scotland, England, and the Continent, Calvinist ideas combined with ideas that flowed from the Scottish Enlightenment in Edinburgh and Glasgow and provided the intellectual framework for independence. For this reason, the American Revolution was known in the Houses of Parliament in London as the “Presbyterian rebellion.”

The British army closed many Presbyterian churches in New Jersey because the ministers, sometimes called the Black Regiment, referring to their black Geneva gowns, were preaching sedition. The British vandalized or destroyed Presbyterian churches. The British converted the First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York into a stable. The British burned the Presbyterian Church in Elizabethtown, New Jersey.⁵ The church I served in Mendham, NJ, founded in 1738, was a field hospital for Washington's troops that camped for two winters at Jockey Hollow, near Morristown. The pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Patrick Allison (1740-1802), was a chaplain in the Continental Army and a close friend of George Washington. After the war, Washington presented Allison with the gift of a walking stick, which you can see in a display case in the former manse of First and Franklin Presbyterian Church in downtown Baltimore. An Anglican loyal to the Crown, Dr. Charles Inglis, rector of Trinity Church in New York City, noted in 1776, “I do not know one Presbyterian minister, nor have I been able, after strict inquiry, to hear of any who did not by preaching and every effort in their power promote all the measures of the Continental Congress, however extravagant.”⁶

The person who best represents “extravagant” Presbyterians—it feels odd putting these two words together, “Presbyterian” and “extravagant”—was the Reverend John Knox Witherspoon (1723-1794), president of the College of New Jersey, the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence and later a member of the Continental Congress. In pulpits and lecture halls in Princeton and through his writings, Witherspoon was one of the most vital voices for independence. John Adams (1735-1826) called him a “high Son of Liberty.” A native of Paisley, Scotland, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh, with an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of St. Andrews. When Witherspoon arrived in Princeton in 1767, he was part of an elite class of highly educated individuals who served the cause of liberty, not because it was rational, but because such a cause flowed from his conscience, from his conviction as a Christian. The early founders were not trying to form a “Christian” nation, but Christian ideas were shaping their actions. In July 1776, British troops in Long Island burned Witherspoon in effigy.⁷

Scripture bears witness that God is always on the side of the oppressed. God is a God of liberation. Whether it’s release from Pharaoh’s chariots or the grip of the Babylonian Empire, the ministry and message of Christ who came “to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18), and then Paul’s experience of the Holy Spirit as freedom, we find this broad, overarching theme of scripture, a theme near and dear to the heart of God: liberation, liberty, freedom. *God wants our freedom and has granted us freedom.*

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). It’s similar to what Paul wrote to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free, do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1). What’s striking about the way Paul talks about freedom is that it’s not an idea or a concept. It’s not a place or region, or territory. Instead, there is a different kind of freedom. This freedom is something discovered and experienced through a *relationship* with the Lord. Freedom is something Paul learned in and through his experience of the Spirit. And to be called into a relationship with the Living God is a call to freedom. It’s an extraordinary gift, but it also comes with a heavy burden of responsibility.

Unfortunately, too often in our society, freedom is understood as the liberty to do whatever one likes, whenever one wants, free and independent from any responsibility for anyone or anything, with no obligation to care for one’s neighbor, with no obligation to advocate for others whose liberties are at stake. Some think this is what the American Revolution was all about. American individualism says I’m free to do whatever we want, whenever we want, and be whatever we want to be. To be free is to be self-sufficient. Free to do it, “My Way.” That’s certainly one way to talk about freedom. It’s also a pretty good description of *hell*.

In his classic work *On Christian Liberty*, written in 1520, Martin Luther (1483-1546) said, “A Christian...is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian...is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.” This paradoxical statement beautifully captures the *Christian* idea of freedom. For us, freedom is found in and through our relationship with Christ. When we know Christ and are known by him, we discover what freedom looks and feels like—we are given space, space to breathe and live and thrive. With Christ, as we come to know Christ more and more, as our relationship with him deepens, we are transformed, we are

changed, and we experience freedom. That's what the Holy Spirit is always trying to do for us, working for our release from whatever binds us. We discover within the hold of God's love and grace that we are forgiven, loved, accepted, and *wanted* by God, and with this comes freedom—which means we can let our guard down and not be afraid. We can relax, relax and fall into the arms of God, allowing Christ's Spirit to carry us, hold us, transform us, and love us. That's what it means to be free.

From a Christian perspective, this means we are never really our own. We don't belong to ourselves. And, so, we can't be individualists, off doing our own thing. By virtue of the waters of our baptism, we are bound to one another, and we are bound to Christ. We are, as often Paul described himself, *doulos Christou*: a slave or servant of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve. We are called to serve others—not because we have to, but because we freely want to. We enact our freedom by freely caring for our neighbors, serving one another, loving one another, and giving ourselves to others as servants of Christ. And in that state of freedom, we are free to give ourselves to our neighbor in love. In fact, in Christ, I might choose to give up my freedom, give up what I want for the sake of my neighbor who needs something from me. “For you were called to freedom, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another” (Gal. 5:13).

As servants of Christ have an obligation to our neighbors, whomever our neighbor happens to be, because Christ is committed to them too. When we know that to be in Christ is freedom, that in Christ we know we are already free, this awareness frees us to extend freedom to others, to share it. To know we're already free means we don't have to worry about it being taken away from us. We can let others be, be free, free to choose and exercise their conscience. It also means we are free to work and strive and even fight for the freedom of others, on behalf of others who are still bound. Freedom begets freedom.

Yes, “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). God desires our freedom. And the Spirit always, now and forever, works for our liberation, liberty, and freedom—all for the glory of God.



Arch Street and the steeple of Second Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, PA.

¹ *Shenandoah* (1974). Music by Gary Geld, lyrics by Gary Udell.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), Book IV, Chapter XXV, “The Church and the State.” To those with civil authority, “...if they remember that they are the vicegerents of God, it behooves them to watch with all care, earnestness, and diligence, that in their administration they may exhibit to men an image, as it were, of the providence, care, goodness, benevolence, and justice of God... If they fail in their duty, they not only injure men by criminally distressing them, but even offend God by polluting his sacred judgments....” IV.xx.6.

³ Calvin is very clear that regents and magistrates deserve respect and should be obeyed. “But in the obedience which we have shown to be due to the authority of governors, it is always necessary to make one exception, and that is entitled to our first attention, –that it do not seduce us from obedience to [God], to whose will the desires of all kings ought to be subject, to whose decrees all their commands ought to yield, to whose majesty all their scepters ought to submit.” (IV.xx.32).

⁴ Bradley J. Longfield, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 32ff.

⁵ Longfield, 45.

⁶ Randall Balmer and John R. Fitzmier, *The Presbyterians* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 37. See also Lefferts A. Loetscher, *A Brief History of Presbyterians* (Westminster Press, 1978).

⁷ Longfield, 41.