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Life in the Spirit of Christ

by
John York

I want to be brutally honest with you about some things. Things that have troubled me for years, things that we say the right words about and we wish were true perhaps, but in truth they are not true. The first is this phrase “No competition between light houses.” It’s been used many times this week with reference to Christian Colleges and Universities. When I lived in Texas it was used at the area-wide men’s fellowship dinners. Where I now live in Nashville it is used between sister congregations. No matter how many times we say it, it’s not true! Colleges and universities compete for students, and they compete for faculty and staff and they compete for dollars! Some of that is certainly healthy — it improves the product of Christian education — some of it is not. In the church, we compete for preachers, for every new family that moves into the area, and much of the growth experienced by one congregation is at the expense of others in the area. I’m not suggesting anything mean spirited about that, it is just how we are.

Another reality that is troublesome to me is this business of freedom that we have been talking about all week. Freedom in Christ sounds so good, I desperately want to believe it and live it and share it. But the truth is that freedom is very, very dangerous. We know that from our experiences outside the church. Think about life in Sarajevo today. When

there was no freedom there was no war, but when freedom came people who had lived peacefully with each other for decades suddenly craved power and territory and needed to purge those with ethnic identities not their own. Freedom and democracy in South Africa has led to brutal bombing and killing and sabotage. And what about Freedom in America? Why is it that the biggest champion of freedom in the world is also the most violent country in the world? Why is it that more people are killed with guns in Los Angeles than are killed in traffic accidents — and that’s with 68,000 car accidents a year? In the name of freedom, what do we do with Haitian refugees? This state and other border states are in financial crisis in large part because of illegal immigrants and more specifically children born in this country to illegal immigrants. Who has the right to be a citizen? Who has the right to be included in government programs? Who has the right to live in this country? Because of the gracious gifts of Mrs. Seaver and others, we have enjoyed this week in Malibu, but would we have come if Pepperdine was still located next to the Watts district?

As for freedom in Christ, freedom in the church, I will never forget teaching a class one Sunday at the East County church in Gresham Oregon, when a visitor raised his hand to make a comment. He said he thought the worst thing that had ever happened to

the church was the publication of all these versions of the Bible. It brought nothing but confusion because now you couldn't tell what God's word really said anymore.

Dangerous Freedom

Freedom is dangerous. For about 20 years now, in my memory at least, there have been rumblings about an identity crisis in the church. That's about how long the grace awakening has been going on. Sure, in the fifties there was the anti-cooperation issue, but at least people still read the same Bible, we all shared the same worship order, we all knew the truth. There was this sense of control and having all the answers. Now with freedom we find diversity, and fear, and suspicion and polarization. We have our own war going on within our brotherhood that seeks to portray particular churches and preachers and yes, universities, as the ultimate enemies of God. Call them legalists, call them libertines, call them traditionalists, call them change agents, accuse them of new hermeneutics or old hermeneutics (my favorite because of the buzz word "hermeneutics" — something just sounds bad when you say it), call them conservatives or liberals. Pick your church paper and almost without exception you will find this war of words, the polemic against others in the church of Christ who are not enlightened, who don't have the truth that I have, who have left the faith, who have legendized the 1950's or abandoned history to get on the new wave. It is that language and that warfare — it is that fear and suspicion that freedom is any enemy, not a friend — that brings me to Galatians this morning, to overhear Paul tell a group of churches in that region

you, brothers, were called to be free! Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. If you keep biting and tearing one another to pieces, watched out that you are not consumed by one another.

On the surface at least, the fight is a different one in these churches. The Judaizers are trying to bind circumcision and the keeping of law on the Gentile Christians. I want to at least put in a word of sympathy for those folks, because they are afraid — terribly afraid that without the structure and constraints of the Law, without the shared identity of circumcision, there will be no boundaries for behavior. Freedom from law sounds and feels like the slippery slope of libertinism, of people living however they

please. Maybe there were people here like those we read about in Corinth, maybe not. You don't need libertines to be afraid of them and to assume that if there is no law there can only be chaos.

Paul was a Pharisee of Pharisees himself. He understands this fear, but he also has a response to it. Freedom is no license because it is constrained by the Christian commitment to love and serve others and because they have been clothed with Christ. That means for Paul and his audience, "I no longer live but Christ lives in me." That is not some sort of symbolism for Paul, that is the real presence, the mystery of God's presence through the Spirit in the believer.

These people who have been baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. In chapter three, he reminds them that they did not receive the Spirit through the law but through hearing with faith. To turn back to the Law was to turn back to the flesh — "Having begun with the Spirit are you now ending with the flesh?" he asks. Pursuit of salvation through keeping the rules, through the performance of law and perpetuating the rite of circumcision was turning back to works of the flesh. In chapter four he reminds them again that God has put his Spirit in them and it is the Spirit who cries out, Abba, Father, confirming that they are not slaves but sons. Now in chapter five he says, "Walk by the Spirit." Live with the understanding that the source of life and the means to live life as God intends is to be found not in the Law but in the God-presence of the Spirit. There is indeed a war going on between the Spirit and the Flesh. They are opposed to each other to prevent you from doing what you would do. But the solution is not found in the Law! Human pursuit of rules-keeping is the other side of the coin to libertinism — both are human agendas. Both are determined by the human will. In such a battle, the human loses — heads you lose, tails you lose. As Paul would say to the Romans, knowledge of the law just makes sin more enticing. It is not that works of the flesh are not obvious and obviously sinful. They're plain enough, he says, as he gives a representative list: sexual immorality, impurity, licentiousness — all obvious. We have no doubts about the evils of idolatry, and sorcery. Beginning with the next one, however he turns to issues of relationship and the list gets more personal: hatred, strife, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, envy. Fortunately he switches back to some obvious ones that fit other people at the end: drunkenness, orgies, and the all encompassing *and the like*. Life in the Spirit has nothing in common with these works of the flesh. No one who engages in these activities has any part in the Reign of God.

The outcome of the Spirit in one's life, however,

is the virtuous life — instead of false loves and hatred and fits of rage and evil towards others there is love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Everyone living in the Hellenistic world knew these were virtues, signs of the best in humanity. But what makes Paul's virtuous life different from the Jews in Qumran or the Roman moralists of his day is the source of that virtuous life. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

I've been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me. The life I still live in this body of flesh I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

Christ in me means the Spirit of Christ in me to empower me in this battle against the flesh and to produce, to grow up these virtues within me. It is not my will-power, it is not my knowledge of law — it is the Spirit that gives the fruit. If we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us allow the Spirit to do his work within us. Keepers of the law and the Libertines who act in defiance of law are both flesh-tenders. Both attacking life from a totally human perspective, in which the human self is solely responsible for the outcome. While on the surface the law keepers are at war with the libertines, in fact they are the same side of the battle. Legalist versus libertine is a false battle, a human struggle in which there are only losers. The true battle is between flesh and Spirit. Those who have been crucified with Christ have crucified the flesh and been given the Spirit. For those who live by the Spirit, there is no room for conceit, no place for saying, "I'm better than you are," no provoking of one another, no envy of one another.

Freedom in the Spirit

As I think about applying this text to our own time, to our own church battleground, I am reminded of Paul's conversation with some disciples of John in Ephesus when he asks, "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" And they respond, "No, we have never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." For a brotherhood so committed to the text, to a method of interpretation that says "It says what it means and means what it says," it is amazing how well we have rooted out the entire doctrine of the Holy Spirit from our preaching and even our history as a movement. The fear and suspicion of emotionalism and what we now call charismatic activity forced us to not speak of the Holy Spirit at all, or to say that the only operation of the Holy Spirit is in the Word. That effectively puts total

responsibility for conversion and for the growth that we call spiritual growth not on God but on us. We have allowed extremist forms of interpretation to rob us completely of the presence of God in the Holy Spirit. We read the texts, we talk about love, joy, peace, etc. but we are responsible ourselves for fixing ourselves, for making ourselves more holy. We love Acts 2:38a, but not Acts 2:38b. We make sure people are baptized for the remission of sins, but rarely does someone mention the fact that we will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But if preaching grace is dangerous, if preaching freedom is dangerous, preaching the Holy Spirit is suicidal! Here comes the slippery slope again. But my personal fear is that if we don't preach it, we create a people with no power to fight the war with the flesh. We are left only with flesh against flesh, rules against license, competition between lighthouses because we can't turn on the lights.

You don't have to be a charismatic to believe that God is pleased to dwell in us through his Spirit. Paul really means it when he says "you are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in you. How can we live by the Spirit when we can't even admit his presence? No, this is not the slippery slope that leads to being a charismatic! This is not about needing signs of the Spirit's presence. It is about faith. It is about putting teeth in that enigmatic word, "providence." It is about admitting what makes prayer powerful and effective. It is about giving God the credit for the virtuous life he seeks to create within us. It is about a solution to the war of words and strife and enmity in the midst of a people who call themselves the Church of Christ. Think about us! Not just the finger pointing negative press and pressure tactics to go back to the 50's or soar into the 21st century in the name of change. Think about the moral and ethical decay within the lives of people in our fellowship. We were a people who lived by the rules and were miserable. We discovered grace and freedom and our lives went south and marriages fell apart and still we were miserable. And each time the charismatics knocked on our doors and pulled people away, we pulled back further and further because if there is a "Holy Spirit Presence" today, that must be what it looks like and we know that they are wrong. Therefore there is none. But to say that God's Spirit is not manifest through signs today is not to say that God's Spirit cannot and does not indwell God's people today.

Much has been said and written in the past few years about our need to recover the transcendence of God, and I agree wholeheartedly with that — being reminded of his wholly otherness, of the mystery, of all that is beyond human comprehension. I want to

argue this morning that we need to recover the imminent God as well — not the “Jesus is my buddy” imminence, not the imminent God of human design, but the imminent God who is present in his people through the Spirit — every bit as mysterious as the transcendent God, just as incomprehensible to human intellect, just as unseen, but experienced by faith; experienced by the Spiritual growth which God produces in us — not us, God. No, our intellects don’t get shelved; no, it’s not some mystical wait for that peaceful, easy feeling. It is the human acceptance of God’s loving invitation to work and will his pleasure within us. It is giving God the credit for the virtuous activity that he does through us. It is saying with Paul, *I have been crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ, lives in me.* It is putting

away both sides of the flesh coin, the side that would throw off all constraints in the name of Freedom and the side that would close the borders and stake out guardians for the truth.

It is the Spirit of God within us that guarantees our inheritance. It is the Spirit who produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We who have been crucified with Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us also walk with the Spirit.

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Until man is redeemed he will always take a fly rod too far back, just as natural man always overswings with an ax or golf club and loses all his power somewhere in the air . . . it is natural for man to try to attain power without recovering grace. . . To (my father), all good things -- trout as well as eternal salvation -- come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy.

**-Norman Maclean
*A River Runs Through It***