

# Nature and Purpose of Our Freedom

by Russell Aldwinkle

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*The sermon explores the nature and purpose of freedom from a Baptist perspective, emphasizing the importance of responsible freedom, the Christian Gospel, and the relationship between freedom and love.*

**Duration:** 22:19

**Scripture:** Romans 7:21

**Topics:** "Freedom"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the nature and purpose of freedom from a Christian perspective. They emphasize that true freedom is not simply the absence of external constraints or the adherence to a moral code, but rather it is found in trusting in Jesus Christ. The speaker references the struggles of Saint Paul, who recognized the internal battle between his desire to do what is right and the sinful nature within him. They also highlight the importance of love, stating that true freedom comes from experiencing God's love and responding by loving others. The sermon concludes by emphasizing that the Gospel offers this freedom to all who believe and trust in Jesus.

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## Transcript

Mr. President and fellow Baptists, the theme assigned to me this morning is the nature and purpose of our freedom. The very term freedom, or liberty, is an exciting and intoxicating one. In the course of centuries of human history, many different interpretations have been put upon it, and the most intense passions have been aroused by it.

In the 18th century, much blood was shed in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity. In England in the 17th century and on this continent, later on in the 19th, bitter civil wars were fought in which the appeal to freedom played a dominant role. Two destructive world wars have been fought in the name of freedom, to overthrow tyranny and secure the liberties of men and nations.

And so the list could be continued. And we may well ask what Baptists have to do with such an explosive word as this. What do Baptists think of when they speak of freedom? With great boldness, we have chosen for the theme of this conference, the text, And the Truth Shall Make You Free.

I suspect that most of us would tend to react by talking of our freedom from the tyranny of priesthood or of the state. But Baptists were originally concerned with spiritual liberty. And by this they meant not only human rights, but the freedom of the spirit of God to have free course within the true church.

And to secure this freedom, they felt compelled to break with a long and venerable Christian tradition embodied in the Latin hierarchical priestly and sacramental church which had dominated Europe for over a thousand years. While retaining the priesthood of all believers, Baptists put a radically different interpretation upon the nature of priesthood. They contended that they owed nothing to any man and depended on Christ, the one and only mediator of our redemption.

Yet in our claims to freedom at this point, Baptists need to be on their guard against a serious misunderstanding of the priesthood of all believers as this was understood by the Protestant reformers. When 1 Peter 25 applies the phrase a holy priesthood to the whole body of believing Christians, he reminds us that we are priests only as members of the Christian fellowship. The priesthood of all believers does not mean only the right to private judgment and intellectual freedom which Socrates and Bertrand Russell would also stoutly maintain, but the freedom within the community of believers to be, as Luther said, Christ to our neighbour.

To show forth the special kind of love and compassion which flow from Christ and works in those who are members of his body, the church. When we assert freedom from priestly dominance in a sacramental sense, we are not claiming necessarily freedom of thought in a general sense, though this may be very important even for Christians. We are claiming freedom to love as Christ loved all those for whom he died and claiming this freedom as members of his fellowship of believers.

But in repudiating a certain understanding of the church, Baptists are not repudiating entirely the importance of the church as the redeemed community through which God works. Or when asked about freedom, we may begin to talk about the separation of church and state. And to assert with our 17th century forebears the crown rights of the redeemer, insisting that Christ is the only Lord of the conscience and master of men's lives.

Or we may quote with justifiable pride the famous words of Thomas Helwes, one of the first English Baptists, when he declared that King James I of England had no sovereign authority over the souls of men or of their faith. For this he was promptly put in jail and disappears from our sight. Or we may deduce from these principles a general claim for religious freedom, of a man's inalienable right to join or not to join a religious body, to be free from coercion, threat, torture or legal pressure from either church or state.

The Baptist World Alliance has a noble record in its defence of the rights of our oppressed Baptist brethren all over the world, but we should also be ready to fight for the freedom of all men in any part of the world, whether they bear the name Baptist or not. And perhaps also we need to remind ourselves that we cannot consistently claim such freedom for ourselves without the willingness to concede to others the same freedom. Provided a man accepts the rule of law which is binding for all citizens, he should be as free to be an atheist as a Baptist, however much we may dislike the views he may hold on the subject of religion.

We have no right to expect that radio and television should carry only the views with which we are in agreement, or to suppress books and literature which express anti-religious views, provided this is done through proper and legal channels. A limited censorship may be justified in defence of children and minors, which would not be proper for adults. In any case Baptists should have no sympathy with the idea of an index of prohibited books and reading, enforced by civil and ecclesiastical sanctions, which has marked Roman Catholic thought and practice for many centuries.

It remains to be seen how much the present renewal in the Roman Church will mean a liberalising at this point. And there is also the delicate point of theological and intellectual liberty in our own ranks. Baptists in

repudiating creeds, and we have usually had in mind the great historic creeds, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, in repudiating these creeds formally, we have not always been willing to tolerate theological diversity, though our Baptist claim to liberty must surely involve this.

Every attempt to impose a rigid and narrow theological uniformity on Baptists has led to division, schism and separation, some of them tragic for our Baptist witness in the world. For some people outside our ranks, and we have to face this, the very name Baptist is synonymous in their minds with division and theological tension. This does not mean that questions of truth and right belief are unimportant.

They are. But Baptists must learn to allow diversity in theological forms and language if they are to maintain their unity behind the common confession of Jesus as Lord. Of course there must be some real and substantial unity of belief if there is to be a common life in the Church.

If I came to the point when I could no longer affirm with a good conscience the divinity of Christ, I would not think it right to call myself a Christian. I might be a philosophical theist, or a humanist, or an ethical idealist, or what not, but I would not think it proper to call myself a Christian. It is quite another thing, however, for me to insist that you accept exactly the form of words or exactly the same categories of theological thought to express what I mean by the divinity of Christ as for you to insist that I accept precisely your form of words.

The basic question is whether we are sincere in confessing Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. If we are, then other matters can be, and indeed must be, left to the individual, as Baptists have always insisted should be the case. Our freedom, then, is responsible freedom and needs to be tempered by the convictions and the needs of the community of believers.

Or we may think of the freedom of the local church to organise its own life under the Lordship of Christ, to elect its own officers, call and ordain its minister, preach and teach its members, both young and old, as well as engage in public worship without let or hindrance, freedom to proclaim the gospel, in other words, to be missionaries. Few of us would wish to question the desirability of the above freedom or deny that such freedoms are properly involved in a true understanding of the gospel. Yet there are profounder questions which agitate our minds.

Freedom from external constraint may lead to anarchy. This is true within states and between states. The only way in which communities can hold together is when the majority of citizens accept certain laws in common and agree to try and abide by them.

In the state, the police force and the armed forces exist as a last resort to coercion if normal procedures do not prevail. But who in the United Nations, for example, can enforce the law, even if the states concerned can agree as to what the law is? But similar problems exist within the Church, with this difference that few Christians would want to fall back on physical force or legal coercion. It has long been maintained by Roman Catholics that it is right to use the civil arm and civil force to compel theological conformity, both as a protection against civil anarchy and also for the good of the soul of the individual concerned.

It is possible that the Roman Church is making a major change in its traditional attitude on this point, but we cannot be absolutely sure of this yet, and many of us await with very great interest what will be said by that Church on the subject of religious liberty. In the meantime, Baptists must continue to affirm their own strong convictions on the matter of religious liberty. Yet Baptists face the same problems of liberty and authority.

If freedom means the liberty to pursue our own selfish and unredeemed purposes, then this means anarchy, whether in Church or state. Live as free men, says Peter, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil. It is possible for men to enjoy a wide and varied political and even religious freedom, and yet fall into bondage.

Our true freedom, then, is not to do as we like, but to love with the love wherewith God has loved us in Christ. We are to be free for other men in love and service, as Jesus found his freedom in perfect obedience to the will of God. But here is the rub.

How do we sinful men and women come to love in this sense? Not by saying, go to now, I will love. We need freedom from ourselves before we can be free to love, in the Christian sense. And how does this come about? If ever we are to be helped at this point, we need truth, not in the abstract, but in the concrete.

And this is why the Christian Gospel is so relevant. Truth for Christians is a person and not a proposition. And we are thus driven back to the most fundamental of all our questions.

We sometimes speak as if it's a comparatively easy matter to do the good, or to choose between good and evil. And yet St. Paul has spoken for us all at this point. I discover this principle, says St. Paul, that when I want to do the right, only the wrong is within my reach.

In my inmost self I delight in the law of God, but I perceive that there is in my bodily members a different law, fighting against the laws that my reason approves, and making me a prisoner unto the law that is in my members, the law of sin. And this is the crucial problem of freedom. The famous philosopher Immanuel Kant in the 18th century says the exact opposite to St. Paul.

Kant believed that when I know that I ought to do a thing, therefore I can do it. For, says Kant, when the moral law commands that we ought now to be better men, it follows inevitably that we must be able to be better men. And if Kant is right, all we need to do is to go to men and say, cut out the nonsense, gird up your loins, act like men, be free.

Yet the profoundest religious minds have always denied that the problem of liberty is as simple as this, and certainly the experience of most of us, I suggest, is on the side of St. Paul, rather than with the philosopher at this point. If we are ever to be able to love in the Christian sense, it is only because God has first made known his love to us. Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus, for the divine nature was his from the first, yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave.

Bearing the human likeness revealed in human shape, he humbled himself and in obedience accepted even death, death on a cross. This is the basis of our true freedom we love, because he first loved us. And only because God has loved us in this sense is it possible for men to be truly free.

This is the freedom that Baptists are offering to men in the name of the gospel when we declare that the truth shall make you free. We must remember that behind the New Testament great word for truth lies a Hebrew word which survives in our familiar Amen. The root meaning being to fix, to confirm, to establish, hence steadfastness and trustworthiness.

And the truth we offer to men and women in the gospel is not primarily intellectual understanding, though that is involved, but the absolute faithfulness and trustworthiness of the God whom we meet in the person

of Jesus Christ. This is the truth that makes men free. And in the contemporary world this has obvious relevance, I think, at three points of special tension.

In the realm of sexual morality, in the revolt against colonial bondage and the dominance of the white man, in relation to the deep fears, often unconscious, which affect us all in a nuclear age. Some voices are suggesting that it is no longer possible to speak of moral principles in the area of sexual morality, and that young people must trust to the spontaneous guidance and intuition of love in specific situations when moral decisions have to be made. But we do our young people a grave disservice in pretending that there is no moral law, or that God has not established our world upon the structure of a moral foundation.

Yet it is also true that law alone never made a good man. The freedom the gospel offers is not the mere external imposition of a moral code. It is not merely a system of negative prescriptions, but the freedom to trust in Jesus Christ.

This is what frees men, and however lofty our code, and however noble our principles, until we come to give ourselves in this kind of trust, we are not yet free. We have been reminded that the fight against the tyranny of the white man must not be replaced by the tyranny of the coloured men. We are not jumping merely from one arrangement of power to another arrangement of power.

When we look at this from a Christian context, our freedom is to love each other in Christ's sense of love, and this means the willingness of us all, whatever our colour or station, to submit to the transforming influence of the Spirit of God. And neither the white man nor the coloured man is exempt from the claim which Christ makes upon us in this respect. When Baptists make bold claims for freedom of conscience, freedom from the power of the state, freedom from ecclesiastical tyranny, we must continually remind ourselves that it is the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free that should most deeply concern us.

When we condemn the Roman Catholic for distorting the nature of the Church, we should ask ourselves, have we allowed the Spirit of God to destroy ambition, pride of place, social prestige, love of money in those churches of ours which claim to reproduce the pattern of fellowship and love which truly reflects the nature of the Body of Christ? True liberty will always be humble, ready to repent, free from censoriousness, tolerant of others, in the true sense of considerate and respectful of their rightful liberty, eager to love rather than to dominate. Only if Baptists can show forth this kind of liberty do we deserve to survive, or to ask God to bless us. We inherit a noble tradition of men and women who knew freedom in this profound sense.

And all we can do is to pray for strength to walk with fidelity and constancy in their steps. And may His truth make us truly free.

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