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**Galatians — A Declaration  
of Christian Liberty**

By WILLIAM F. ARNDT

**I**T is not difficult to prove that one great topic of St. Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians is Christian freedom. The word "freedom" is, as it were, written with capital letters across the pages of this brief document. To introduce my topic I can hardly do better than quote Dean F. W. Farrar, who, after describing the tactics of the Judaizers opposing the Apostle, pens this eloquent description of the Letter (*The Life and Work of St. Paul*, Ch. 35):

It was against all this hypocrisy, this retrogression, this cowardice, this mummery of the outward, this reliance on the mechanical, that Paul used words which were half battles. There should be no further doubt as to what he really meant and taught. He would leap ashore among his enemies, and burn his ships behind him. He would draw the sword against this false gospel, and fling away the scabbard. What Luther did when he nailed his Theses to the door of the Cathedral of Wittenberg, that St. Paul did when he wrote the Epistle to the Galatians. It was the manifesto of emancipation. It marked an epoch in history. It was for the early days of Christianity what would have been for Protestantism the Confession of Augsburg and the Protest of Spires combined; but it was these "expressed in dithyrambs, and written in jets of flame"; and it was these largely intermingled with an intense personality and impassioned polemics. It was a De Corona, a Westminster Confession, and an Apologia in one. If we wish to find its nearest parallel in vehemence, effectiveness, and depth of conviction, we must look forward for sixteen centuries, and read Luther's famous treatise, *De Captivitate Babylonica*, in which he realized his saying "that there ought to be set aside for this Popish battle a tongue of which every word is a thunderbolt." To the Churches of Galatia he never came again; but the words scrawled on those few sheets of papyrus, whether they failed or



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not of their immediate effect, were to wake echoes which should "roll from soul to soul, and live for ever and for ever."

As a manifesto, or declaration, of Christian freedom let us, then, view Galatians in this article.

## I

For our orientation it will be advisable briefly to survey the passages in which the word "freedom" or "free" occurs. It is early in the Epistle that Paul first touches on this topic (2:3-5). In the historical sketch of his career he relates what happened when he and Barnabas, accompanied by Titus, went to Jerusalem. They held conferences with the apostles in that city and described the work they had done in Gentile territory. The visit, as far as Paul's account permits us to judge, was a pleasant occasion — except for one factor. There were false brethren in Jerusalem who used dishonorable tactics in opposing the message that Paul preached. Though they had not been invited to attend the conferences, they, like spies, wormed their way into some of these meetings, intent on discovering how far the freedom from the Law which Paul preached extended. That he stood at least for a certain amount of freedom was evident because he had with him an uncircumcised person, Titus, and evidently did not consider the friendly, brotherly contact with him polluting. What other forms of liberty did he allow? That was the thing they wished to know in order to be able to oppose him effectively. Paul says he did not yield to these false brethren for a minute. The meaning of the passage for his message of freedom will have to be adverted to again later.

A passage where the word "free" is used is the famous typological exposition of the story of Hagar and Sarah (4:21-31). Sarah, the free woman, is the type of the new Jerusalem, the Christian Church. We believers of the NT are her children; hence we, too, have freedom. So runs the argument.

In 5:1 comes the clarion call which contains the conclusion of the discussion: For liberty Christ has made us free; stand, then, firm and do not again become subject to the yoke of slavery.

In the practical section the possession of liberty is again asserted, but at once the appropriate warning is added: You are called for liberty, brethren; but do not consider liberty as a pretext for service of the flesh (5:13). While the passages enumerated are not



many, they are clear, and the thought expressed in them is found in numerous other statements which will have to be considered.

## II

In studying the message which Paul proclaims it becomes evident to us, even after a superficial reading of the Epistle, that at least one kind of freedom which he has in mind is freedom from the Mosaic Law. The term "Judaizers" has occurred above. The noun does not appear in the NT, but the verb on which the noun is based, *louθαίζω*, is found in 2:14 of our letter. It is the only instance in which a NT writer employs it. The context makes it plain that what the verb means is "to live like a Jew," that is, to observe all the rules and regulations to which a loyal Jew of that period submitted himself. In our terminology the term has taken on the additional significance of propagandist for the keeping of these laws. Zacharias and Elizabeth observed the Mosaic Law, but no one would call them Judaizers; they did not engage in attempts to make Gentile people adopt the Jewish way of life. There is another feature which must be mentioned.

As we see from Acts 15 and from our epistle the Judaizers of the apostolic age not only observed the Mosaic ceremonial laws and advocated their keeping, but they were of the opinion that to be members of God's family one had to practice such observance. James, the first bishop of Jerusalem, the Lord's brother, carefully kept the traditional rules of worship and Mosaic prescriptions having to do with purity, but he was not a Judaizer; he did not think that God requires these matters in the NT era. The Judaizers, however, distinctly taught that God demands this observance.

We can easily see how they came to hold such a position. They had been brought up in the belief that the Mosaic Law was divine and that whoever wished to have God's favor had to keep it. This was the view of the apostles themselves until the Holy Spirit, in the Cornelius episode related in Acts 10, led Peter to see that in the period of the new covenant the specific Mosaic ordinances are no longer binding. The Judaizers were like the disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees, who criticised the life of freedom from the traditions of the elders led by Jesus and His disciples. Jesus says of the critics (Luke 5:39), explaining their attitude:



"No one having drunk old wine desires new, for he says the old is excellent." The Judaizers were ultraconservative, to use a modern term. They felt at home in their ancestral religious abode and refused to yield to the arguments produced by Peter and his immediate associates as well as later on by Paul and Barnabas. These were based on direct divine revelation and on the OT Scriptures themselves — arguments showing conclusively that the Mosaic legislation was intended by God to have validity merely for the period of the OT.

They indeed could point to a fact which must have appeared impressive to all believers — Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, had observed the Mosaic Law, yes, perfectly. If *He* had not refused to travel this much despised road, what right did His followers have to consider themselves exempt from these ordinances? The chief argument on which they relied, however, so one imagines, was the authority and the majesty of the OT Scriptures. "It is written that we must keep the seventh day as the Lord's Sabbath, that we must practice circumcision, that we have to abstain from the eating of pork and of blood! The words are so plainly and largely put on the pages of the sacred rolls that he that runneth may read. We dare not set aside and declare invalid what our sacred Book prescribes." Thus they must have argued. We ourselves have experienced the overwhelming impact of the statement "It is written" when a religious question has to be decided. It is not difficult for us to visualize how invincible the Maginot line of the Judaizers apparently was.

To do them justice, one has to make one more admission. Jesus Himself, the Head of the Church, in the discourses which He had delivered and which His disciples, we can be sure, repeated at every opportunity, had not declared that in the days of the new dispensation the Mosaic Law should be considered abrogated. He had indeed clashed with the Scribes and Pharisees on points of religious observance, but the issues, as we see when we examine them carefully, never had to do with provisions of the Mosaic Law, but with the so-called traditions of the elders, which by the Scribes and Pharisees were placed on a level with, or even above, the commandments contained in the Mosaic code. Cf. Mark 7:8-13. When Jesus was confronted with the charge that His disciples had violated



the Sabbath Law by plucking ears of wheat and separating the grain in them, He had indeed said, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath Day." But it must be remembered that the "offense" which aroused the ire of the opponents of Jesus was not something the Mosaic Law had forbidden but a matter classed as sinful by the unjustified definitions and inferences of the Pharisaic party. Besides, the declaration that the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath Day merely says that He has the *right* to say whether and how the Sabbath is to be observed; the words do not signify that He decrees the Sabbath law is to be considered a dead letter.

I am aware that at times it is asserted that in one sole passage (Mark 7:14f.), in His statement about the nonpolluting character of foods, Jesus virtually declares the Mosaic food regulations null and void. Cf. *Interpreter's Bible*, ad loc. That interpretation cannot be held. He merely asserts that considered objectively and physiologically foods cannot produce a state of impurity. The question in debate was whether the partaking of food that had been handled with unwashed hands rendered one ceremonially unclean, and the point of discussion was not whether the old Mosaic distinctions between animals that may, and those that may not, be eaten, were still in force. It must, then, be considered established that Jesus nowhere in the words handed down to us makes a statement to the effect that in the coming era the Mosaic code with its many regulations should no longer be in force. The remark of Mark 7:19b, "cleansing all foods," said with reference to Jesus and His statement, must in the light of the context simply mean that our Lord opposed the idea that foods can by themselves make a person impure.

That the position of the Judaizers, however, was totally erroneous had become evident through the revelation granted Peter, referred to above, in which the Holy Spirit taught that contact with uncircumcised people is not sinful, that if they believe in Christ, they are to be baptized even if they have not received circumcision, and that the gift of the Spirit will come upon them as well as upon everybody else who accepts Jesus as his Lord and Savior. While the prohibition forbidding entering the house of a Gentile and having table fellowship with him belonged to the traditions of the elders, the law of circumcision was contained in the Scriptures them-



selves and had to be acknowledged as divine. The insight that came to Peter was hailed with joy by his brethren when he returned to Jerusalem, and in reply to anxious questions he related in detail the events in Joppa and Caesarea, which convinced him that Baptism and brotherly contact should not be withheld from uncircumcised believers. Acts 11:18 states: "When they [that is, the critics] heard these things, they became quiet and praised God, saying: So, then, God has given to the Gentiles also repentance for life." All this seems to have happened early in the history of Christianity, perhaps in A. D. 32 or 33, shortly after the conversion of Paul.<sup>1</sup>

In the years that followed, the apostles who remained in Jerusalem had scarcely any occasion of applying the new instruction with respect to the Gentiles. They were fully occupied, so we may conclude, with evangelistic work in Jewish communities located in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Cf. Acts 9:31.

Events outside Palestine that followed were confirmatory of the truth that freedom from the Mosaic ceremonial regulations had now been decreed by the Lord. Some Cyprian and Cyrenean Christians who had fled from Jerusalem in the persecution that burst upon the church after the murder of Stephen had come to Antioch in Syria, and there they did regularly what Peter had done in an isolated instance — they preached the Gospel to non-Jews, in this instance Hellenes, that is, to real Greeks, who were uncircumcised people. Their efforts were abundantly blessed; a large congregation was founded. The matter created some stir in Jerusalem, and in order to prevent a wrong course from being pursued, the mother church sent Barnabas, a thoroughly qualified teacher, who himself hailed from the island of Cyprus, to Antioch as a guide and adviser. When he arrived, he found the Antiochian Christians following the principle that circumcision and the keeping of the old ceremonial and ritual laws no longer were required for membership in the family of God. What was his reaction? He did not insist

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<sup>1</sup> One naturally asks whether the conversion and Baptism of the Ethiopian official, related Acts 8:26ff., did not show the apostles that the old Mosaic Laws were set aside? The reply is that we do not know whether the apostles were made aware of the evangelist Philip's contact with this man; furthermore, that it is possible, although hardly probable, that this stranger was circumcised and that hence the respective separatistic regulations of the traditions of the elders did not apply to him.



that the Mosaic code be followed. Rejoicing over what had been accomplished, he admonished the members of the church to cling to the Lord with their heart's determination (Acts 11:23).

But while freedom from the Mosaic Law was proclaimed in Antioch and received what we have to regard as divine sanction, a number of people of Jewish descent in Jerusalem and probably elsewhere held the opinion that this freedom was a fiction, that the Mosaic Law was still in force, and that to belong to God's people one had to practice circumcision. The first time this issue had arisen the narrow, legalistic views had, as related above, been successfully squelched. Cf. Acts 11:18. But a number of years later they were advocated again. Acts 15 informs us how people holding such convictions came from Judea to Antioch, set forth their opinions, and caused great unrest in the church.

It may strike us as strange that in congregations which were guided by the apostles there could grow up such a Judaizing party, holding views which were altogether at variance with the convictions of the inspired leaders. Several things must not be overlooked. In Palestine, where the apostles themselves were active, the question whether everybody who wished to be a disciple of Jesus had to be circumcised was not an issue. The people that were brought into the church all were Jews by birth and hence approved of circumcision. There were Grecians in the Christian community at Jerusalem, to use the term of the AV, whom the original Greek text calls Hellenists and who must carefully be distinguished from Hellenes, that is, real Greeks. The Grecians, or Hellenists, were Jews who spoke Greek as their vernacular. It was the language that marked them off from the so-called Hebrews in the early Christian Church, referred to Acts 6:1, who spoke the paternal Aramaic. Hence among the Christian people of Palestine, whether they were Hebrews or Hellenists, the question pertaining to the continuing validity of the circumcision law was not debated. This validity simply was taken for granted. The old rite was practiced universally. Another factor that comes into consideration was that the apostles themselves loyally observed all the regulations of the Mosaic code. They knew, it is true, that Christians did not have to take this course, but they likewise knew that it was not wrong to observe it. And since they had followed it from infancy, they



joyfully adhered to this mode of worship, being aware that in this matter they were dealing with an adiaphoron. Their example, of course, could not fail to confirm the Palestinian Christians in the desire to continue as much as possible in the paths traveled by their fathers.

Were not the apostles, then, so someone may ask, remiss in their duty when they omitted this particular Christian truth, that of freedom from the Mosaic code, in their preaching and instruction? But did they really omit it? I am of the belief, though I cannot prove it historically, that they did not remain silent on this point. The accusation brought against the first martyr Stephen (Acts 6:14), though it presented his teaching in a garbled and one-sided form, is evidence that freedom from the regulations of the old covenant was not an unknown topic in Palestine. But I am likewise of the opinion that the apostles did not emphasize this topic and by no means encouraged their Palestinian fellow Christians to think of availing themselves of such freedom; that they rather, whenever their advice was requested, urged that the old modes of life and worship be continued. To the Jews about them it would have been a terrible offense to see the followers of Jesus flout, let us say, the old Sabbath law; this at once would have characterized them in the eyes of their countrymen as enemies of the true God, as pagans in disguise. There were more important things to do than to assert Christian freedom by superheroic measures when it was not wrong to pursue the old ways. What was essential was the preaching of Christ's death with its blessed meaning and of His glorious resurrection. For that reason the matter of freedom from compliance with the old Mosaic Law was not put into the foreground.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> If anybody would like to pursue this subject from the point of view of psychology, let him think of the power of sentiment. The late Henry Cabot Lodge, Senator of Massachusetts, in a speech at Faneuil Hall, Boston, when he addressed both Union and Confederate veterans, said (I quote from memory) "It is sentiment that rules the world. It was sentiment that fought the (Civil) war, it is sentiment that has re-united us." The power of sentiment was to be seen in the converts from Judaism in Palestine. The old ancestral ways had become dear to them. The words of Jesus quoted Luke 5:39, adverted to above, apply here also. We must not forget that sentiment often is wrong, as it was in the case of the Judaizers. But how foolish if we forget its power and think that mankind is moved and guided by sound, rational considerations and arguments!



That the position of the Judaizers was entirely wrong was confirmed when Paul, Barnabas, and Titus came to Jerusalem as related Gal. 2:1ff. In my opinion this visit must be identified with the so-called famine visit of Paul and Barnabas of which we are told Acts 11:30 and 12:25. (Others think the Gal. 2:1ff. visit is the one described in detail Acts 15:2ff., which took the missionaries to the Apostolic Council.) Everybody could see that Paul fully agreed with Barnabas and the Christians in Antioch in their attitude toward the old Mosaic Law. There have been exegetes who have interpreted the difficult passage Gal. 2:3-5 as saying that Paul yielded and saw to it that Titus was circumcised. But this view does not agree with the context. On the contrary, we must hold that Paul stoutly upheld the principle of freedom from the old Mosaic yoke.<sup>3</sup>

Titus was not compelled to undergo circumcision; the apostles in Jerusalem did not insist that this rite be performed. It was as strong evidence as a person could desire that both Paul himself considered compliance with the old code unnecessary and that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem fully approved of his position. This position was directly and definitely confirmed when the hand of fellowship was given to Paul and Barnabas by the fellow apostles and no addition to their message was suggested. Cf. Gal. 2:7-10. There could be no doubt that Christ, the Head of the Church, had through the inspired teachers revealed that the keeping of the Mosaic Ceremonial Law no longer was required.

Not long afterwards occurred the painful scene in Antioch when Paul had to reprimand Peter, who after granting the uncircumcised Christians the full status of brethren began to waver and withdrew from intercourse with them, apparently bowing to the criticism of certain Jewish Christians. Here again the cause of freedom triumphed because Paul in an open meeting took Peter to task for

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<sup>3</sup> Vv. 4 and 5 have been differently translated. Schlier's rendering in his commentary on Galatians in the Meyer series strikes me as satisfactory. Assuming that we have here an anacoluthon, he translates: On account of the false brethren who had recently been brought in [that is into the church] and who had surreptitiously entered to spy out the liberty which we have in Christ Jesus in order to put us into bondage—to them we did not yield for one minute in order that the truth of the Gospel might remain your possession.



a wrong reactionary step, and we have every reason to believe that the consternation caused by Peter's momentary lapse into wrong conduct was dispersed and that the leader acknowledged his error and mended his ways. Cf. Gal. 2:11-16.

The evidence, then, that the Mosaic Law no longer was binding was simply overwhelming. But certain Judaizers, unwilling to accept this teaching, entered the Galatian congregations with their false propaganda and were remarkably successful. The new Galatian converts were led astray and began to give their consent to the skillfully presented arguments of the reactionaries. That they yielded a good deal of ground is shown by their observance of days and seasons, insisted on by the intruders. Cf. Gal. 4:10. That many of them had already submitted to circumcision may be doubted. One gets the impression that the errorists were hard at work to bring about acceptance of this rite and were listened to with respect and some approval, but that at least the majority of the Galatian Christians had not yet fully surrendered to these propagandists. It is at this juncture that Paul girds his loins and in the spirit of God gives battle to the opponents, writing this superb epistle.

How does he prove his thesis that the Mosaic Ceremonial Law no longer has binding force? One of the chief considerations he submits is that the Mosaic code was meant to be only temporary. This truth is set forth in 3:19: "What, then, of the Law? It was added for the sake of transgressions *until* the Seed should come to whom the promise had been given," etc. He had said a few verses before that the Seed is Christ. Now he says, the Law was intended to be in force "until the Seed should come." Elucidating this matter further, he says that "before the coming of faith we were all prisoners under Law, shut up for the faith which was to be revealed" (3:23). The Law served as a house of detention, guarding, restricting, restraining. Using another picture, he calls the Law our παιδαγωγός, a slave or servant who had to take the boys to school and see that they behaved on the way as well as at home. This παιδαγωγός had the function to take men to Christ, preparing them for the joyous age of freedom through imposing burdens and severe prohibitions. Now that the Gospel had come,



this παιδαγωγός no longer is needed. Cf. 3:24f. If anybody says that these are all assertions and that no proof is contained in them (except such as is contained in every divine pronouncement), we have to say that Paul knows this very well, and hence he does bring in real evidence, the statement of 3:26-29: the Galatian Christians who did not have the Ceremonial Law nevertheless have become children of God. In Baptism they have put on Christ. They form one group with the believers who were born as Israelites. There you have the proof that the Mosaic Ceremonial Law no longer is binding. People have actually become heirs of the promise without the Ceremonial Law.

To make this meaning perfectly clear Paul uses the illustration of a minor who, though he owns everything, nevertheless has not the use of his property until the time limit has been reached which the father has fixed (4:1-5); the minor is under stewards or overseers. This condition is not to be permanent; it is a temporary (and admittedly salutary) arrangement. So it was with the believers in the days of the old covenant; their Law was to be of limited duration. But in God's own time came the glorious hour when He sent His Son as our Substitute, who redeemed us from the Law. It was the hour of freedom that had struck; the condition of subordination under the overseers ceased. And that this blessed condition has arrived Paul again proves by what the Galatian believers, who did not have the Ceremonial Law, had experienced. God had sent the Spirit of His Son into their hearts as well as into the hearts of Jewish Christians, the Spirit that cries, Abba, Father. Here Paul's position has a strong, indestructible foundation.

In order not to make this article too long, I shall merely point to one more argument of Paul's showing that the old Mosaic laws no longer were in force. As he usually does when arguing a point of divine truth, he here, too, goes to the inspired Old Testament Scriptures for instruction and proof. He submits the famous typological discussion having to do with Hagar and Sarah (4:21-31). These two women, he says, were meant by God to teach us something concerning the old covenant, that of the Law, and the new one, that of the Gospel promise. That Hagar represents, as it were, the Law is confirmed by the fact that the word "Hagar" in Arabia



means rock, which significantly points to Mount Sinai.<sup>4</sup> Sarah, on the other hand, the free woman, represents the covenant of freedom. And what does the story, typologically considered, tell us? Hagar was expelled, which circumstance shows that the covenant of the Mosaic Law was not to abide; it will be, in fact it has been, terminated. Thus the OT Scriptures themselves refer to the transitional character of the Mosaic legislation. We have to admit that if it were not for Paul's inspired interpretation, we should hardly have found such a typological significance in the story of these two women, but Paul was led by the Spirit to understand it as presenting this prophetic lesson.

What fervent thanks we owe God for sending Paul with his message of freedom from the Mosaic regulations! If such a kerygma had not been proclaimed then, humanly speaking, Christianity would have become a little Jewish sect, with headquarters in Jerusalem or Galilee, and by and by it would have been absorbed by Judaism or in some other way have become extinct. Christianity could not have fulfilled its destiny as a divine religion for all mankind if these shackles had not been removed. We may think of the Ebionites, who while professing to be Christians, endeavored to cling to the old Mosaic dispensation and in the course of a few centuries disappeared.

Do we all realize that because freedom from the Mosaic legislation is set forth in the New Testament, the efforts put forth in wide circles of the Reformed churches to make some of the laws in the Mosaic code, e. g., the prohibition of the production of images, binding for us today, are in disagreement with God's will? that the position of the Seventh-Day Adventists reintroducing the keeping of the old Jewish Sabbath is a deplorable departure from the way of freedom which the church is to travel? Even for us, who have breathed the air of liberty from our birth, it is not easy to avoid errors akin to those of the Judiazers. They clung to what was old, traditional, customary, and such an attitude they main-

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<sup>4</sup> The Greek text of v. 25 is much disputed. Some exegetes, on the basis of the reading they adopt, think that Paul is here not concerned with the meaning of the word "Hagar," but with the location of Mount Sinai in Arabia, where the descendants of Hagar were living and with her status as a bond servant, which makes her the representative of the covenant of bondage, that is, of the Law.



tained had divine sanction. We are not always careful enough to distinguish between what is old, venerable, customary, traditional, and what is divinely taught. The course of the iconoclastic innovator has to be deprecated, but likewise the course of the blind traditionalist who holds that because something is old, it must have had a divine origin. In a church body which is growing, expanding, and constantly facing new conditions and issues the warning is certainly apropos that, in evaluating opinions as to the wisest course to pursue in a given situation, the great truth that in Galatians Paul hoisted the flag of freedom must not be overlooked and that such freedom is treated with contempt not only by those who fall back into the very errors of the Judaizers but likewise by those who throttle freedom by traditionalism or a similar wrong course.

A word ought to be added about the way of recognizing what in the OT belongs to the specific Mosaic code. Here the difference between the Lutheran and the Reformed system becomes very apparent. The Reformed say, all the commandments of God contained in the OT must be kept unless there is a declaration of God saying that a certain regulation, like that of circumcision, no longer applies. The Lutherans say no commandment of God in the OT has to be regarded as binding for us unless in the NT (or in the OT by some special means) it is declared to have eternal validity. The giving of the tenth is certainly commanded in the OT, and there is no statement saying that this law has been abrogated. Still we have to say that it is not one of the eternal laws of God, because there is nothing in the NT imposing it as a moral obligation on everybody, nor is there anything in the OT that says we are here dealing with one of the immutable laws concerning right and wrong.

### III

But there is another important topic to be looked at when we speak of freedom as proclaimed in Galatians. Paul not only states the truth that the Mosaic ceremonial legislation no longer is valid but also sets forth the principle that we as children of God enjoy freedom from the Law in every respect, not only from the special Mosaic regulations. Here we arrive at a topic which is still more central and vital for our faith than that of our attitude to the OT Ceremonial Law.



It is above everything else this freedom from the Law in general which Luther finds proclaimed by Paul in this manifesto of Christian liberty. In his commentary on Galatians published 1535, he says (to quote merely one passage from dozens of similar tenor) commenting on 2:19:

When the Law accuses you and brings to light your sin, your conscience at once tells you, You have committed transgressions. If you then hold to what Paul here teaches, you can carry on this dialog with your conscience: Yes, it is true, I have sinned.—Hence God will punish and condemn you!—No.—But the Law of God says so!—I have nothing to do with this Law.—How is that?—Because I have another Law which compels the accusing Law to shut up, and this Law is freedom.—What freedom?—That of Christ. For through Christ I have been made free from the Law. For this reason, the Law, which indeed is and remains a Law to the ungodly, is no Law for me, but my Law is freedom. It puts the Law, which condemns me, in bondage. Hence the Law, which formerly bound and kept me imprisoned, is now itself bound and held captive through grace or through freedom, which now is my Law. [St. Louis ed., IX, col. 218 f.]

My intention is not to intimate that Luther did not perceive the fight of Paul against the attempt to force the old Mosaic regulations on the Gentile Christians. He did indeed see this feature of Paul's message. In discussing Gal. 4:3 he says:

Although Paul calls the whole Law elements of the world, as can be seen from what I have been stating, he nevertheless employs this contemptuous language chiefly of the ceremonial laws. These, he says, if they accomplish anything, merely regulate external matters, such as details concerning food, drink, dress, holy sites, seasons, the temple, festivals, washings, sacrifices, etc. These things all belong to this world and were ordained by God merely for the present life and not in order to produce righteousness in the sight of God and salvation. Hence in this expression "elements of the world" he rejects and condemns all righteousness of the Law based on these external ceremonies, although they had been ordained and commanded by God to be observed for a given period; and he applies to them the most derogatory term "elements of the world." [St. Louis ed., IX, col. 478 f.]

But whoever reads Luther on Galatians soon sees that for him the freedom taught by Paul in this letter is freedom from the do-



minion of the *whole* Law, that is, not merely of the Ceremonial but of the Moral Law as well.

This is indeed a bold position to take. Can it be proved that Paul assumed such an attitude? If correctly ascribed to him, it must have appeared extremely radical to many of his contemporaries. It is unintelligible to a large number of Bible readers even today. The study of the Epistle will have to supply the answer.

A good way to start our investigation is to look once more at the position of the Judaizers. Was their characteristic belief merely this, that the old Ceremonial Law had not yet been abrogated? If that had been their sole error, Paul might have dealt more gently with them. We know with what consideration he treats the weak Christians who believed that it was wrong for Christians to eat the meat of animals slain at heathen altars in honor of false gods. Cf. 1 Corinthians 8—10. These people called something sinful that was not sinful. But though they erred, they were humble Christians, and Paul taught that they should be accorded loving treatment. "See to it that your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (1 Cor. 8:9). Altogether different was the attitude of the Judaizers. Not only were they violent propagandists for their wrong view touching the Mosaic regulations—the very opposite of humble believers in Christ—but they taught the faith-destroying doctrine of justification through good works.

Can this be proved? That such was their teaching is indirectly made evident through the stern language which Paul employs in speaking of their message. Though they undoubtedly called it the Gospel, he declares that it is no Gospel at all (1:6). The curse which he in that connection hurls against those that preached a different Gospel is an indication that what the Judaizers were propounding was not only wrong but also positively destructive of faith. When Paul, in speaking of the Antioch scene, discusses the basic issues, it is not freedom from ceremonies that he stresses but the truth that we are justified by faith without the works of the Law (2:16). The same antithesis of faith vs. works of the Law is brought before us when Paul asks the Galatian Christians how they had received the Holy Spirit—was it through works of the Law or through the message of faith (3:2-5)? It is worth noticing that the Greek expression "works of the Law" has no article either



before works or before Law; hence no special kind of law like that of circumcision is referred to, but Law in general, whatever its particular nature might happen to be. In the magnificent argumentation 3:6-14, where Paul with vigorous blows annihilates the position he attacks, what precisely is it that he wields his sword against? It is not adherence to the Ceremonial Law, but the view that righteousness and life might be obtained through doing "Law works." Furthermore, let 5:4 be noted here: "You have been removed from Christ, you who endeavor to be justified by Law, you have fallen from grace." Again it is not "*the* Law" that he speaks of but Law in general. If the position that Paul opposes so forcefully was the position taught the Galatians by the Judaizers — and that we have to assume — then certainly the fundamental error of the opponents was the belief that righteousness can and must be achieved by us through doing good works.

It is chiefly to oppose this heresy which, alas! is as common and widespread as mankind itself, that Paul has entered the arena. And he does it not only by defending with triumphant energy the teaching of justification by grace through faith but also by showing that the Christian is free from the Law, its obligations, its dominion and dictation, and that hence justification cannot come about through performance of works of the Law because the Law has been removed from its throne.

There are several clear, well-known passages which show that this is the position of the Apostle. We first look at the golden words which have instructed and thrilled readers throughout the centuries, 2:19: "For through Law I have died to Law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ." The Law itself, with its verdict of damnation, had helped to bring about his complete separation from it. It had pronounced curses against him; he said good-by to it, having sought refuge in the wounds of Christ. Could the Apostle have more forcefully expressed the truth that the believer in Christ is free from the Law, which, since the term in the Greek is employed without the article, must mean Law in general and hence include the Moral Law?

Equally definite is the beautiful passage 4:4f.: "When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under (the) Law, to redeem them that were under



(the) Law that we might receive the adoption of sons." It is true that in this connection the Mosaic Law and its temporary validity are discussed. But in speaking of freedom from this Law with its obligations, Paul uses the general term, saying Christ was sent to redeem those that were under the Law. Christ came to bring freedom from the yoke of the Law; those who were bound by the Mosaic code (which included the Moral Law) were free from these fetters; those who were subject merely to the Moral Law were likewise given freedom from this yoke through the work of Christ. When Paul in 5:1 and 13 declares that the Gospel has brought them freedom, it is a comprehensive freedom from the Law that he has in mind.

These words would certainly fill us with awe if we had not heard them many a time. Let us, to be concrete, employ the term *Ten Commandments* instead of *Moral Law*. We are told that we are no longer under the Ten Commandments; that they are not our master any more. This assertion is altogether unacceptable to many people and sounds to them not only bewildering but positively wicked. How can the Moral Law of God, the Ten Commandments, be declared to have lost its authority for the Christians? Are not the Ten Commandments divine? Do we not, through our interpretation, do the very thing of which Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees — that through their traditions they render the Word of God without effect? This matter calls for an explanation. The Moral Law of God is indeed divine, and no one can change it. The eternal verities which it expresses will stand in spite of the indifference and disobedience of man. The famous lines of James Russell Lowell here ask for a hearing:

In vain we call old notions fudge  
And bend our conscience to our dealing;  
The Ten Commandments will not budge  
And stealing will continue stealing.

What Paul proclaims when he speaks of freedom from the Law cannot signify that what the Moral Law of God declares sinful no longer is sinful for the Christian, that, for instance, while in the case of people in general the bearing of false witness is a heinous offense, for the Christian it would not be wrong to commit such a thing. That Paul does not wish to impugn the majesty of the



Law is evident from 5:14. "For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word: you shall love your neighbor as yourself." One is amazed to hear the Apostle, who had declared the reign of the Law ended, now suddenly referring to the Law as still existing and as evidently divine and holy. If anybody thinks that St. Paul advocates anti-nomian views, he totally misunderstands him. Cf. the emphatic statement Rom. 7:12.

But if the Apostle, on the one hand, does not wish to declare the Law abrogated or possibly made more liberal and tolerant, and, on the other, puts freedom from the Law on his banner, what does he mean? One of the most significant points of Paul's theology here comes before us. He teaches that in the Christian the doing of God's will is not accomplished through the Law but through the Holy Spirit. Freedom from the Law in the case of the believers in Christ does not mean lawlessness but that a new force is operating in them, the Spirit of God. What the Law cannot bring about — the joyful performance of God's will — the Spirit, who has taken up His abode in the heart of the Christian, makes a blessed reality. This topic Paul treats 5:13-25. Pondering this passage, we begin to understand the Apostle's teaching on the Law. He is not an enemy of it, but he opposes the thought that it is through the Law that we live as children of God. The righteousness of the Christian's life is not Law righteousness but Spirit righteousness.

#### IV

Is the Law, then, of any use at all to the Christian? It is indeed. It expresses God's will as to our actions. It states what is right and what is wrong. The Christian, as far as he is a Christian, does not need the direction of the Law on these matters because the Spirit leads him forward in the paths of righteousness. But unfortunately the Christian still is a sinful being; carnal, unworthy, ungodly tendencies still exist in him, the old Adam exerts his influence, and for the flesh (the term which Paul uses) the Law is still needed. In the Formula of Concord, Art. VI, this matter is set forth with power and clarity. A few sentences have to be quoted:

And, indeed, if the believing and elect children of God were completely renewed in this life by the indwelling Spirit, so that in their nature and all its powers they were entirely free from



sin, they would need no law and hence no one to drive them either, but they would do of themselves and altogether voluntarily, without any instruction, admonition, urging, or driving of the Law, what they are in duty bound to do according to God's will; just as the sun, the moon, and all the constellations of heaven have their regular course of themselves, unobstructed, without admonition, urging, driving, force, or compulsion; according to the order of God which God once appointed to them, yea, just as the holy angels render an entirely voluntary obedience.

However, believers are not renewed in this life perfectly or completely, *complete* or *consummative* (as the ancients say); for although their sin is covered by the perfect obedience of Christ so that it is not imputed to believers for condemnation, and also the mortification of the old Adam and the renewal in the spirit of their mind is begun through the Holy Ghost, nevertheless the old Adam clings to them still in their nature and all its internal and external powers. Of this the Apostle has written Rom. 7:18ff.: I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing. . . . Therefore, because of these lusts of the flesh the truly believing, elect, and regenerate children of God need in this life not only the daily instruction and admonition, warning and threatening of the Law, but also frequently punishments. . . . [Thorough Declaration, *Trigl.*, pp. 963—965.]

Hence we here are confronted with these amazing paradoxes: the Christian is free from the Law, and he is still under it; he does not need the Law, and he needs it every day; he can joyfully bid the Law adieu, and he has to contemplate it all his life.

It is in keeping with what has just been stated that the Apostle, having told us that we are free from the Law, finally puts a good deal of Law into his discourse, not fearing at all that some little minds will charge him with self-contradiction or inconsistency. Think of the blast in 5:18-21, which, after listing a number of sins that probably had a special fascination for the carnal nature of the Galatian converts, concludes with the stern pronouncement that those doing such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Then he continues to place a diet of Law before us, but in a very appealing way, enumerating some of the virtues that result from our being filled with the Spirit (5:22f.). And he adds, "against such things there is no Law," that is, when you are engaged in



doing the things indicated, the thunder and lightning of Mount Sinai, great realities though they are, will not touch you.

One more consideration should be mentioned. Owing to a certain timidity in us and an inordinate love of self we ministers are likely to preach this freedom from the Law with less enthusiasm and definiteness than we ought. On the one hand, we are afraid that our speaking on this topic with full boldness might open the floodgates of evil in our hearers and, on account of their misunderstanding of our message, lead them into a life of licentiousness. There come to mind the complaints of the aging Luther about the conduct of the people in Wittenberg. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the preaching of the Law, especially if it is vivid, is listened to gladly by people (cf. Herod finding the preaching of John the Baptist interesting, Mark 6:20); and that, besides, the legalistic way of doing church work is more easy than an evangelical course. How pleasant it is for us to hand out to our parishioners, figuratively speaking, two lists: one headed, things permitted; the other, things not permitted; and then to apply the propositions mechanically in a way that will not cause much loss of sleep. Remember, please, that this is metaphorical terminology which everybody has to translate into language fitting his own case. In view of all this it must be our daily prayer that the Spirit of God, who is to lead our parishioners into paths of righteousness, may fill us, too, and show us, on the one hand, how to preach the sweet message of freedom from the Law with due boldness, and, on the other, keep us from forgetting that in every Christian there is a struggle between the flesh and the spirit and that our language must not become an aid to Satan as he endeavors to take our hearers on the broad way that leads to destruction. St. Augustine in his beautiful work *De doctrina Christiana* writes (4:15): "Et quis facit, ut quod oportet et quemadmodum oportet dicatur a nobis, nisi in cuius manu sunt et nos et sermones nostri?" Yes, indeed, God has to grant us both what to say and how to say it; and let us not forget that He most willingly gives the Holy Spirit to those that ask Him (Luke 11:13).

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