Christian Freedom and Responsibility

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The evangelical Lutheran church has often called a “church of freedom” because the idea of freedom has been part of its genetic coding; it’s built into its DNA, so to speak. However, “freedom” has become a slippery word and some would even consider it dangerous.

That was certainly the opinion of the organizers of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation back in 1967. They were trying to find a theme that was aspirational and relevant; a theme that was not too churchy but one that spoke to the world at that time and that was equally important for the Reformation. The term freedom kept coming up, but the organizers finally rejected it because they felt it was too dangerous! They felt that what the Bible and the Reformation meant by freedom was so vastly different from what people today understand by it that to use it as the theme would be misleading. Besides that, they felt that the term freedom was so controversial, so anti-Christian in the way it was understood, that the church should stay out of it altogether lest its message of freedom be seriously distorted.

Let me remind you of what was happening in western society at that time. It precisely in the late 1960s that you had the student riots in Paris and in America; it was the time of the great freedom marches and anti-governments protests in the west. It was also the time of the big liberation movements in colonial countries where anti-colonial powers were demanding freedom from what they regarded as Christian powers and Christian influence. It was the time of the sexual revolution that started in America that advocated free sex. This was also the time of situation ethics made famous by Fletcher – freedom to do whatever seemed right at the particular time, as long as your action was guided by love and did not hurt your neighbour. So consensual sexual relations outside of marriage, including adultery, was ok because people no longer felt constrained by, or accountable to, any external moral law or ethical standard, or even to the natural law written on the heart.

The organizers of the 450th anniversary of the Reformation felt that with all of these political, social, and personal longings and aspirations all swirling around, the theme of freedom, powerful as it was, might have been misunderstood if it was used as the theme. Indeed, Luther’s ideas about Christian freedom would probably be confused and distorted.
by the philosophical view of freedom which sees it very much in terms of autonomy, self-assertion, self-expression, and self-determination within the limits of the civil law.

That was 50 years ago, but the concept of freedom, Christian freedom, is still difficult for people to grasp. We no longer have the student riots, the freedom marches, and anti-government protests; we no longer have the sexual liberation movement because we now have sexual liberation – and it’s destroying our western countries. And we no longer have anti-colonial protests because former colonial countries by and large now have the autonomy and self-determination that they were seeking. But other things remain the same. Freedom is still understood very much individually and rationally as self-autonomy — the freedom to do what I want, when I want, to pursue whatever goal best serves my own self-interest, my own personal ambitions, my own selfish gratification. Freedom, at least in the west, is seen very much as my right to do any or all these things without any personal accountability or responsibility. That is the sad background against which I want to speak about what Christian freedom meant for Luther and what it means for us today as an ethic of responsibility.

Our guiding light, as we attempt to understand what Luther means by Christian freedom, is his famous twofold statement that comes at the beginning of his Freedom Tractate of 1520.¹ He says two things:

_A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none._

_A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all._

That for Luther is the paradox of Christian freedom – expressed by two statements that seem to be in flat contradiction. To Luther’s critics and to most non-Christians it’s sheer nonsense. It’s an utter contradiction. How can you be master and slave at the same time? Even many Christians don’t grasp what Luther saying here. Each of these two statements corresponds to one of the two parts of Luther’s tractate on freedom which I cannot go into tonight but which you can read for yourself.

The first part deals with faith, for it is through faith that we Christians are perfectly free lords of all, subject to none. This is not true of life in the world, as you will know from your

own experience. I am certainly not a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none in my work place, or in my home, or in my church, or out on the streets. This is true only of my faith-life before God. This was Paul’s argument against the Judaizers that he writes against in Galatians. He says there, “For freedom Christ has set us free—do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” Paul is saying that to be a Christian you don’t have to obey a set of rules, not even the Law of Moses with its Sabbath law, circumcision, and dietary laws. All that is necessary is faith alone. Through faith I am a lord of all and subject to none—and I must not let anyone burden my conscience by making demands of me that they say I must fulfil before I can be a Christian. The only thing I’m called to do is to repent—and even that is God’s work in me. So the first part of Luther’s tractate on freedom stresses that I am free from worrying about my salvation because Christ is my Saviour.

But here and now, in my body, in the civil realm, I am not free, but I am a servant of all and subject to all. Over against the world, I have no rights or privileges; only obligations and responsibilities to the neighbour—and the neighbour, remember, is anyone who needs my help. I am called to be subject to all, which is the very opposite of the modern notion of autonomy.

The task of Christian ethics is to keep these two statements together, to walk the tightrope between legalism and antinomianism. Our challenge is to navigate between legalism, on the one hand, where there is no freedom of the gospel and the Christian life is all law, and antinomianism, on the other hand, where the only thing is freedom and there is no place for God’s law or commandments. For those of you who are unfamiliar with this term “antinomianism,” it means literally to be against the law. In the Lutheran tradition, it refers especially to Christians who claim that Christ has done away with the law and that therefore there is no place for the law in the church or in the Christian life. The only place for the law, they say, is in the civil realm, in the courthouse, and in the government legislature where laws are made for the good of society, but it has no place in the church. That’s antinomianism and it is the dead opposite of legalism or nomism which is what the Judaizers in Galatians were guilty of when they were teaching that faith in Christ is not enough but you also have to observe certain laws as well. These are the two extremes, the two errors that the Christian and the church have to avoid. We are called to walk the narrow path
between these two extremes, and this is where Luther’s two statements are a beacon to light our path.

The basic problem with modern Protestant ethics is that it has failed to walk this tightrope. It has forgotten Luther’s twofold dialectical statement; it has only emphasised freedom and has failed to find a place for the God’s law in the Christian life. Note: finding a place for God’s law, namely, the Ten Commandments, is not in itself legalism. It would only be legalism if we said that you must first keep the commandments before God will accept you into his favour and give you the gift of salvation.

There are possibly two related reasons for the antinomianism of modern Protestantism which I will briefly mention. First, modern Protestantism (and this includes many global Lutherans)—understands the law in a purely negative sense. The law is that which tells you that you are a sinner; the law is like a diagnostic tool; it diagnoses your condition before God and tells you that you are a sinner and calls you to repent. This is the negative use of the law which in Lutheran theology is understood to be the principal use of the law.²

Let me mention in passing that this is different in the Reformed Church because Calvin taught that the main use of the law was the positive use where the law teaches us God’s will for our life rather than accusing us and exposing our sin, as in the Lutheran tradition. But if the law is seen as purely negative, then it has no teaching function and once it has exposed our sin it has done its work and it’s no longer needed. It makes it look as if the law itself is the problem rather than human sin. So that’s the first reason for the antinomianism that we find in much of Protestantism today.

The second reason for it is closely related to the first. It is because justification has been narrowed down to a purely forensic understanding where God on account of Christ through faith declares us forgiven, acquits us of the charge brought against us by God’s law, and sets us free. You see how these two viewpoints work together: first, the law accuses us of sin and then the gospel frees us from the law. Precisely, here is the problem, which we’ll come back to shortly. What we should say, of course, is that the gospel (which is another way of speaking about justification by faith) sets us free from the accusation and condemnation of

² On the twofold use of the law, see Bernhard Lohse, Martin Luther’s Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 270-3.
the law. That would be correct. But what modern Protestantism says is that the gospel frees you from the law – full stop! The problem with this reductionist view of justification, which understands the relationship between God and the sinner in purely forensic terms, is that it overlooks Luther’s other emphasis, which is the presence of Christ in faith in the life of the Christian; and if Christ is present, his Spirit is there also to renew our hearts and minds. Remember, the forensic view of justification locates everything outside of us. Through faith in God’s external word, when I put my trust in Christ, God declares me righteous, he forgives my sin, he rubs out my debt in the heavenly ledger book and instead enters Christ’s righteousness to my credit. But all that happens outside of me and is only one side of the picture.

The other side of the picture (which we call sanctification) is where in faith, in union with Christ, the Christ who forgives my sin now dwells within me through his Spirit in order to break the power of sin in my life and to sweep sin out of my life. And so we can say with St Paul, it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives within me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God (Gal 2:20). That’s the other side of the picture.

So if we put the two together we get the full picture. God not only declares us righteous, he also makes us righteous—and this is all part of justification even though, as I will point out in my paper tomorrow, there is a proper order here: the declaration and imputation of righteousness must precede renewal. But that’s for tomorrow. The important thing to stress here is that these two belong together and that only when they are kept together can you affirm the God-given place of the law or the commandments in the Christian life and guard against antinomian.

Both of these problems, the purely negative view of the law and the purely forensic view of justification, feed into yet another Lutheran problem, and that is the understanding of law and gospel as purely polar opposites. Here again truth and error are mixed together. This antithetical view of the relationship between law and gospel starts with a true statement in Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, but when it is extended into a general principal so that the gospel is only ever understood in contradiction to the law, we fall in error.

The truth of the law–gospel antithesis is explained by Luther in his Galatians Commentary of 1535. He says there that once the law has done its work in exposing sin, then the gospel
shuts the mouth of the accusing law and delivers us from God’s wrath and judgment. But here’s the point. Luther says that in connection with justification. He says it in connection with question asked by the penitent sinner who has a troubled conscience: How can I be sure God loves me, how can I be sure God has forgiven me? My life is such a mess—perhaps God expects me to clean up my life first before he will accept me. You know this sort of question; it’s the question of the anxious conscience. It was also Luther’s question. It’s the question of justification. And Luther’s answer is brilliant. He says: stop your introspective self-examination; stop listening to the law in your conscience. To people whose conscience is alarmed by the law, he says: tell the law to take a hike, to get out of your life; close your ears to the law and listen only to the gospel and the comforting message that Christ is your Saviour. Listen only to his promise: your sins are forgiven; you are washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. Luther says that it is in this situation, where justification is at stake, that the law must be separated from the gospel as far as the east is from the west. He says that once the law has exposed our sin, it must be dismissed and its accusing voice stopped by the gospel, for God’s final word is gospel, not law; grace not judgment.

Let me explain this further. I believe that the original intent of the law–gospel distinction was pastoral; it enabled Luther and the Wittenberg reformers to distinguish between two very different voices in Scripture. The one voice is the voice of the law which makes demands that we cannot fulfil and then accuses us before God. The other voice is the voice of the gospel which is God’s final word. The gospel silences the accusing voice of the law and forgives us all our sins when we believe in Christ; it makes no demands but promises everything without any strings attached.

Luther insisted that only by clearly distinguishing these two voices of Scripture could he properly apply the gospel to the conscience alarmed by the accusation of the law. It was not meant to be a new teaching but a new way of applying the words of Scripture pastorally that took account of the conscience and applied either law or gospel depending on where

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3 Although the confessions can say: ‘properly speaking, the gospel is the command to believe that we have a gracious God because of Christ’ (Apology IV; Tappert 160), they really mean that the gospel is nothing more than an invitation to take what God wants to give us, akin to the words “Take and eat; take and drink” in the Lord’s Supper.
people stood before God (*coram Deo*). Luther held that the impenitent needed to hear the law while the contrite in heart needed to hear the gospel.

However, as I said before, the Lutheran tradition in places has turned the law–gospel antithesis into a general theological principle. Where this happens, the gospel is understood as the formal antithesis to the law because the gospel is taken to mean freedom from the law—full stop. When that happens, the law–gospel distinction is no longer being used pastorally and homiletically but as a critical theological principle. That’s what happens in antinomianism when God’s commandments in Scripture are overturned and rejected in the name of the gospel because the gospel is God’s final word. This is not freedom but licence.

Biblical freedom, on the other hand, is always freedom to obey God and keep his commandments, which rejoice the heart (see Psalm 119).

If however the gospel becomes a general principle which is always antithetical to the law, the church is on the slippery slope to antinomianism. The gospel then becomes identified with any message that liberates from the oppressive constraints of the law. Here the law is identified with lack of freedom and autonomy while the gospel is identified with the word of liberation that frees us from the repressive demands of the law. In other words, law and gospel are understood dialectically as two radically opposite principals: one stands for oppression (the status quo) the other for freedom (the future). In this scheme of things, law and gospel can never work together. The law is always the bad news that we must oppose while the gospel is the good news that frees us from the law’s oppressive tyranny. This, I submit, is a sure recipe for antinomianism.

The one thing that antinomians most fear is that the commands of the law and the imperative to do good works will endanger the biblical & reformation teaching of *sola fide*: that we are saved by faith alone without the works of the law. Here we need to be reminded of the sound wisdom of the Formula of Concord (one the Lutheran confessional writings) which states that we are justified by faith alone without works, yet faith is never alone. This affirms the biblical principle that faith and works must never be separated unless the question of justification is at stake.

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4 This is not to deny that the proper distinction between law and gospel also has an interpretative function. It not only enables us to properly apply the Scriptures to people’s hearts but also to rightly interpret them.
I’ve been talking about the mistake that some Lutherans make of turning the law–gospel antithesis into a general principle. However, there is one place where we must set law and gospel in radical opposition and that is where the question of justification is at stake, but if this special case is made a general rule or pattern for the Christian life, it cripples our ability to use God’s commandments (God’s law) in a positive way in teaching theological ethics. Where the law is always opposed and overcome by the gospel, the only use of the law is to bring us to the point where we recognize our sin and our need for forgiveness. According to that scheme, the gospel then delivers that forgiveness and at the same time abolishes the law completely.

This also has implications for theological ethics because, according to that view, the church’s moral teaching (theological ethics) cannot be based on God’s law or commandments, as it should be, because the law has been overcome and relativised by the gospel. Therefore, theological ethics is said to be based solely on the gospel and the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is sometimes called Spirit-ethics. The truth here is that the Spirit does indeed play a role in Christian ethics but at the same time the Spirit should never be separated from the external word of Scripture, which includes the Ten Commandments and their elaboration in New Testament paraenesis as well as in Luther’s catechisms. In other words, in the Lutheran tradition at least, the Holy Spirit is not to be separated from, or played off against, the commandments in Holy Scripture.

Ethics is based on the law, not on the gospel or the enlightenment of the Spirit. The gospel certainly provides the motivation for ethics or the new life in the Spirit but the content of Christian ethics is derived from the law or commandments, not from the gospel. This Spirit-ethic also operates with a false idea of freedom. The freedom that Paul talks about, that Luther talks about, is responsible freedom. It is never a freedom set in opposition to the commands of Scripture but it is always a freedom to enact God’s commands without having to worry about the consequences of failing, because we are covered by God’s mercy and forgiveness through faith in Christ.

As we have seen, one of the errors of modern Protestantism is to absolutise freedom and to say that in Christ we are free – full stop. However, both Paul and Luther teach otherwise.

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5 I recognize of course that not all theologians hold that the commandments can in fact be used in teaching sanctification.
Freedom is never absolute, it is always qualified. It is never only freedom from but it is also freedom for. Furthermore, for many liberal Protestants, freedom in Christ is not just freedom from sin, death and the devil but it is especially freedom from the law—and not just the accusing law but the law in its totality. And if there is freedom for anything, they would claim, it is freedom to serve the neighbour according to the neighbour’s needs and the concrete situation at the time. But Paul and Luther would say that real freedom is paradoxically 1) slavery to Christ and 2) the freedom to serve the neighbour according to God’s commandments, not simply according to the neighbour’s felt needs. So when we instruct people in the Christian faith, we should never use the gospel to negate the law, for gospel freedom should never be played off against the commands of the law because they are meant to coexist in complete interdependence and harmony. The gospel is to be used to empower us to live according to the commands of the law, not to negate the law.

The American theologian Reinhard Hütter has a nice way of keeping freedom and law together. He says that the Christian ethic has a twofold centre: evangelical freedom and God’s commandments. The error of liberal Protestantism is the antinomian error of setting freedom and the commandments in opposition instead of seeing them as interpreting each other. Hütter rightly says that when freedom and the commandments are played off against each other, freedom lacks content and is formless, abstract, and insubstantial, but when they are kept together, God’s commandments are understood as the shape and form of our life of freedom with God. In a word, the commandments are the embodiment (Gestalt) of Christian freedom. That is a wonderfully faithful way of expressing Christian freedom.

Another way of explaining Christian freedom is to say that the commandments form the path of the Christian life. Responsible Christian freedom is not an abstract, empty concept. Rather its content is provided by the commands of scripture. Jesus says, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. Jesus’ followers have been freed from all their old legalisms and from slavery to their own passions and desires, freed to make Christ their sole desire. And so in union with Christ, and by the grace of the Spirit, we are free to follow the

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6 Hütter, The Promise of Lutheran Ethics, 42f. Note his comment: “The fundamental significance of the law is … to give concrete, historical form to the ‘divine life’ of the human creature deified by grace” (p. 43).

7 Reinhard Hütter, Bound to be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics, and Ecumenism (Eerdmans, 2004), 157.
Son in his own obedience to the Father—and through faith the Son gives us the gift of his own perfect obedience in fulfilment of the law for us. So the law we are freely invited to keep is the very law that Christ has already been fulfilled for us. That’s why Jesus can say that his yoke is easy and his burden is light – because the yoke of the law that he invites us to take on out of love for God and neighbour is not the law that is to be fulfilled—because we could never fulfil it by our own strength—but the law that he invites us to take on and to have a go at keeping is the same law that has already been fulfilled perfectly by Christ for us and for our salvation. So the burden of trying to keep the law or commandment ourselves has been lifted and we can receive it anew from God the Father with a joyful heart and a willing spirit.

I said earlier that responsible Christian freedom is not freedom from but freedom for; it is not freedom from the law but freedom for the law, that is, freedom to serve the neighbour according to the law. Responsible Christian freedom is freedom from preoccupation with our self so that we are free to serve others. You could say that Christians have the privilege of working as co-workers with God in the care of his creation, both human and non-human, and in the mission of the gospel. This is not so much a law (“you must”) as a gospel invitation (“you get to”). As Christians we have the privilege of working with God in his vineyard; we get to work alongside him in his ongoing work of reconciliation through the proclamation of the gospel, and in his reparative work as he uses us as his agents in the care of creation and the healing of relationships.

For Christians, doing God’s work, whether in the realm of creation or redemption is sheer joy for we have been liberated through the gospel from slavery to self, self-absorption and self-centredness, and freed to serve the neighbour and care for the earth. The gospel frees us from concerns about our own salvation so that we can be concerned about the salvation and welfare of others. Hence, we can say that we are free to keep the commandments because we have been freed from our own slaveries, addictions, and preoccupations. But of course we know that nothing in this life is perfect, least of all us. Of course, it’s true that in God’s sight we are perfect through faith because of Christ. When God looks at us, he no longer sees our sins and imperfections, but he sees Christ’s perfect righteousness, which he gives as a gift. This is our baptismal robe. But in ourselves, we still remain sinners and will spend a lifetime growing into this righteousness and holiness of Christ in order to make it
our own. So in Luther’s language, in God’s sight we are righteous and holy through faith, but in ourselves we are sinful and unholy. And so our experience is no different to that of St Paul as he describes it in Romans 7. I know what I should do, in my heart of hearts, but sin gets in the way. And so Paul cries out, as do we, who will deliver me from this body of death, from this hopeless situation? He then he answers his own question, and he answers for us also: Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.