

Called to Freedom

Opening Address

By Gerhard O. Forde, President

»Exsurge Domine, et iudica causam tuam! Arise, O Lord, and judge your cause! ... Arise O Peter ..., Arise thou also, O Paul, we beg thee ... Let every saint arise and the whole remaining universal Church ... Let intercession be made to almighty God, that his sheep may be purged of their errors and every heresy be expelled ...«

These dramatic words from the Bull of Pope Leo X (June 15, 1520) threatening Martin Luther with excommunication remind us that we have to do here with one who was judged by his Church to be a heretic. The dramatic language doubtless bespeaks the fact that His Holiness was at the time exercising his role as vicar of Christ on earth from the vantage point of his hunting lodge. »... Foxes are tearing down the vines ... An especially wild boar out of the woods is snorting about and uprooting the vineyard!«¹ The carefully groomed gardens of civilization and church are in peril! The hunters must to the rescue!

A wild boar indeed! And it can hardly be disputed that the most wild and uprooting of his »heresies« is our subject at this Eighth International Conference for Luthers Research: Luther's understanding of freedom and liberation. And judging from current complaint this understanding seems to be about as »heretical« today as it was in the 16th century and probably for about the same reasons. Luther is usually charged with »heresy« on two counts: too much bondage on the one hand and too much freedom on the other. The fact that the charges appear contradictory is no doubt a measure of the world's puzzlement. So it is fitting that we should take some time for consideration of Luther's vision of freedom. My purpose in this paper is to concentrate as directly as possible just on this vision of freedom, to the virtual exclusion of a host of questions about law, ethics, social responsibility, politics, etc., that need also to be talked about.

1 BULLA LEONIS X CONTRA ERRORES MART. LUTHERI ET SEQUACIUM [E var 4, 263 ≙ Dokumente zur Causa Lutheri [1517-1521]. Bd. 2: Vom Augsburger Reichstag 1518 bis zum Wormser Edikt 1521 / ed. and ann. by Peter Fabisch and Erwin Iserloh. MS 1991, 364-368 / 365-369].

I gladly leave that to others! That means I plan to concentrate on freedom as a theological rather than as an ethical, social, or political concern. I do so because usually when we set out to talk about Luther's view of freedom we find ample excuse to talk about everything else but. There is a reason for that, of course. As I shall try to point out, Luther's idea of freedom is itself radical enough to engender an anxiety which sends us scurrying to do damage control. So it would seem that some attention just to the understanding of freedom itself might be the proper place to start in this session of the congress.

Freedom! Liberty! Liberation! Just to say the words is to enter the Holy of Holies of modern society. We sing of it; we preach it – though perhaps only too rarely; we march for it; we protest about it; we fight for it; our documents claim it; our politicians promise it; we die for it; everyone wants it desperately and claims it as a right, yet few, if any, are ever satisfied that they have found it. Do we even know what we are looking for? Can Luther help us? That, I take it, is what we are here to consider.

What is Luther's contribution to our quest? First of all, I think we must say that it was Luther who initiated the modern discussion of and quest for freedom when he called for a reform of the Church's teaching on the matter.² He raised the discussion to a level and a pitch unknown since the days of St. Paul. He understood freedom first of all as an actual liberation, not as a covert enslavement of the self. This uproots everything. Prior and even subsequent to Luther, freedom appears predominantly as a defensive doctrine. In early Christianity it appeared as a defence against gnostic and manichaean fatalisms. Freedom had to be postulated to make sense of Christian claims. How can humans be held responsible for sin on the one hand and redeemable on the other if there is no freedom? So humans had to be accorded at least some freedom in order shift the blame for sin and evil from God to human beings. God didn't cause evil, humans did by wrong exercise of freedom. Recent interpreters put their finger on the defensive nature of the argument when they dub it »The Free Will Defense«.³

2 In this regard it is significant that theological treatises on freedom prior to and even after Luther are rare if not virtually non-existent.

3 See for instance, Antony FLEW: Divine omnipotence and human freedom. In: *New essays in philosophical theology*/ ed. by Antony Flew and Alisdair MacIntyre. NY 1955, 144-169; and John HICK: *Evil and the God of love*. NY 1966, esp. 302-327.

Erasmus used this standard defense in his argument against Luther.⁴ If there is no free will, how can we be held responsible for our misdeeds or be rewarded for our good ones? So the argument went – and often still goes. We justify God and indict ourselves in the same move.

The effect of the free will defense, however, is not to liberate but to enslave. Human beings are granted just enough freedom to be found guilty for their sin and perhaps to cooperate with divine grace in doing meritorious deeds, but not much more. As a defensive doctrine, freedom does not liberate, but precisely makes certain that one remains enslaved under the law. It is Law that gives freedom its opportunity. The result is that law takes over the conscience and traps the self in its own deeds, whether they be good or evil. We cannot escape.

Luther raised this whole discussion to a new level by insisting that freedom was not a defensive but an offensive doctrine. He rejected the free will defense and saw freedom as the fruit of the gospel, not the law. »Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom« (2 K 3, 17). Like Paul, he proclaimed freedom in the gospel as an offensive doctrine in the double sense of the word, a liberation, a setting free of the captives, and at the same time and for that very reason something of an offense, a scandal. We have to do with something entirely new, a new creation, a new age. Thus the problem of freedom is a theological problem, first and foremost, a spiritual matter.⁵ It is a matter of what we believe in and hope for. Christian freedom, for Luther, means in the first place to be liberated from the pervasive power of Law in the inner life, the conscience.⁶ It means to get the Law »out of there«, to be made a new creature. This is something quite literally fantastic. We stand, as Luther liked to say, like a cow staring at a new gate. What is this freedom? How can it be? Is it not dangerous? Can we really be set free from the Law? This is the question before the house.

We need to look at this more closely. What is the power of the law? It rests in the matter of temptation. The power of the law is not merely its intellectual or moral persuasiveness. Rather it is that as fallen beings, we are tempted – by the devil, for Luther – to believe that the Law is our salvation, the remedy for sin, our escape hatch over against the sting of death. The result is that we are trapped

4 See ERASMUS: On the freedom of the will. In: Luther and Erasmus: Free will and salvation/ trans. and ed. by E. Gordon Rupp and A. N. Marlow. Phil 1969, esp. 89 f.

5 Am 31, 344 $\triangle$ WA 7, 50, 13 f.

6 Am 27, 4 $\triangle$ WA 40 II, 3, 5-8.

by temptation, trapped in our own projects, be they good, bad, or indifferent.⁷ Luther's scandalous claim that in the sight of God even our best works are mortal sins indicates the radical nature of the shift that is being proposed. We cannot get out of ourselves because we are under temptation. That means we can't because we really don't want to. The temptation in this case is to be convinced that freedom is really a dangerous idea. And such temptation is the devil's art. That freedom from Law is dangerous and impossible seems quite sane to us. What should we do if there were no Law? How can we answer? We have no defense.

The problem we face is seduction of the spirit. That is to say that we are quite convinced by the arguments against freedom. But how then shall we escape the seducer? Christ is for Luther the only answer. Christ must simply defeat the tempter and drive the law out of the conscience. Christ is the end, i.e., both the goal and cessation of the Law to those who have faith (R 10, 4). The freedom which Luther championed was the freedom of faith, the freedom for which Christ has set us free (G 5, 1), liberation of the conscience from the power of law, sin, and death. We are set free, Luther says, »not from some human slavery or tyrannical authority but from the eternal wrath of God«. Such freedom »comes to a halt« in the conscience, »it goes no further«.⁸ Indeed, for Luther, this is the highest reach of freedom. »This is the most genuine [verissima] freedom; it is immeasurable. When other kinds of freedom – political freedom and the freedom of the flesh – are compared with the greatness and glory of this kind of freedom, they hardly amount to one little drop.⁹

But now it seems that such freedom of the »inner man«, freedom of conscience, is as much a heresy for the modern world as it was for the 16th Century. For the world, modern as well as ancient, does not believe in either the value or power of such inner freedom. The modern world especially has complained that since freedom, for Luther, is pure inwardness, it doesn't get out into the »real world« where it can do some actual good.¹⁰ Indeed, where it is taken with any

7 Am 27, 8-10 $\triangle$ WA 40 II, 8-10.

8 Am 27, 4 $\triangle$ WA 40 II, 3, 21 f.

9 Am 27, 4 $\triangle$ WA 40 II, 3, 24-26.

10 See for instance Eberhard JÜNGEL: *The freedom of the Christian: Luther's significance for contemporary theology* (Zur Freiheit eines Christenmenschen: eine Erinnerung an Luthers Schrift (engl.)) / trans. by Roy A. Harrisville. MP 1988, 50f.

seriousness at all, the most prevalent reaction seems to be a kind of scepticism and anxiety. Can it really be? Has not Luther gone too far? Is he not too naive about freedom's possibilities? Does his view not lead to license and antinomianism? (Being an antinomian, of course, is about the worst thing one can be! Almost any heresy can be permitted these days, but not that!) Is it not subversive to social order? And so on and on and on.

What are we to say of such complaint? First of all it is in place to point out that here as in so many cases opposition to Luther's argument does not refute but rather substantiates and illustrates it. To say that freedom will never work is precisely to show that one doesn't have it and to betray one's unbelief. The scepticism expressed is simply a reenactment of one's bondage. It is simply to illustrate what has been claimed: that we are under temptation and cannot escape enslavement to law. Arguments with Luther usually turn out to be confessions. Unless, Luther said, Christ dwells in the conscience and drives out all fear, we are captive and there is no hope. To believe in freedom, one must be liberated.

What conscience under temptation by law is afraid of is precisely that freedom isn't going to work. Things will get out of hand. So freedom will be considered dangerous and will have to be curtailed. Law returns with great fanfare as the savior.

But the assertion that anxiety about freedom only causes us to reenact our bondage leads us more deeply into the subtlety and complexity of the matter. It is in the nature of the case not strange that the world and even the church has rarely, and certainly not wholeheartedly followed what Luther has to say about freedom. The papers for this conference – particularly those on the reception of Luther's view in the years following the Reformation all the way down to the present – certainly indicate that unqualified reception of Luther's view was rare.¹¹ But Luther was well aware that his view – which he believed to be Biblical and Pauline – had never found much favor in the Church or the world. »They fled this morning star«, he said, »yes, this sun, as if their lives depended on it; for they were in the grip of their own carnal ideas ...«¹²

¹¹ See especially those by Mark U. Edwards, Walter Altmann, Martin Brecht, and Marc Lienhard.

¹² Am 33, 270 $\triangle$ WA 18, 771, 30-34.

Through the years, therefore, anxiety seems to have dictated that discourses on Luther's view of freedom are always expected finally to reassure us that things are not so bad as they seem. Everyone waits for the other shoe to drop! In one way or another, moralisms reassert themselves, all with the aim of bringing freedom under control and forestalling the damage it might do to our little moralistic kingdoms. We always seek the comfort that along with the »Gabe« there is the »Aufgabe«; that hidden in the indicative is the imperative; that we must not only think of freedom as freedom *from* something, but also as freedom *for* something. Freedom is never the last word, the ultimate goal. A vast defensive rhetoric builds itself on the foundation of anxiety that reduces Luther's vision to the banalities against which he directed his scorn. The offense is leached out of freedom and it dies a lingering death. It is, I think we could say, a dangerous thing to have a congress on Luther's contribution to the understanding of freedom because it is all too likely to turn into one more defense against Luther's view! We could set out yet once again to have a hand at domesticating the wild boar!

Theologically both before and after the Reformation the most common domesticating move has been the attempt to qualify the Pauline claim that Christ is the end of the law to those of faith. »Reason«, as Luther would put it, simply cannot entertain such an idea, the idea that in Christ the law comes to an end, that law is over and freedom begins. As we have seen, freedom as usually conceived needs law as the mediator of possibility. What shall we do if there is no law to tell us what to do? But is Paul then wrong in his claim? Theologians as usual, however, found a way to have their cake and eat it too. They made a distinction in the content of the law – something Paul had never done – a distinction between the ceremonial or ritual laws on the one hand and the moral law on the other. Then they proceeded to say that Christ was the end of the ceremonial law but not the moral law. Christ ended the necessity, that is, for sacrifice, circumcision, food and ritual regulations, etc., but not the demands of the moral law (e.g., the decalogue). Christ died, it seems, to save us from the liturgiologists! One might grant, of course, that that is no small accomplishment, but the price does seem a bit high!

Luther categorically rejects all attempts to qualify the claim that Christ is the end of the Law, the whole Law. Freedom is not a defensive doctrine. It is »offensive«. It is about the new creature, the new creation. Both early and late Luther attacks the idea that Christ is the end of the ritual law but not the whole

law. In both the early (1519) and late (1531/1535) Galatians lectures he pounds away on the issue whenever he gets a chance.¹³ In his argument against Erasmus he says that this error has made it impossible to understand Paul and has obscured the knowledge of Christ. Indeed, he claims that »even if there and never been any other error in the Church, this one alone was pestilent and potent enough to make havoc of the gospel«.¹⁴ The presupposition for true freedom, for Luther, is that Christ is the end of law in its entirety. The freedom of the Christian means just such liberation. »The Christian is a free Lord of all and subject to none.« So reads the first of Luther's two theses on freedom from the treatise on »The freedom of the Christian«.¹⁵ It is for Luther as for Paul a matter of a new creation.

But, to say it once again, such pronouncements cannot fail to be rather frightening or even maddening to us. Is it not dangerous so to speak? Can humans really handle such freedom? Surely the other shoe must drop! What usually happens is that we hurry on by that first thesis into the safe haven of the second: »The Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.«¹⁶ At last! We are saved from the specter of freedom! But Luther would not bid us so to hurry. The second thesis is not a defense against the first, not its contradiction. It is rather the quite natural outcome of the first. The point of the treatise on Christian freedom, Luther said, is to see how they fit together. Indeed, we will never get to the second thesis unless all our moralistic pretense has been shattered by the first. It is really the first thesis we have the hardest time with. That we should be free Lords of all, subject to none, free from the law, is inconceivable for us. Its just not reasonable. Reason can only cast us back on the law. And »As soon as reason and the Law are joined«, Luther could put it, »faith immediately loses its virginity«.¹⁷ There is no way for the trapped conscience from law to freedom, simply no way. No real argument can be made to dissuade

13 For the 1519 Commentary, see Am 27, 161. 188. 223. 230. 248. 256f. 264f. 287. 358. 378 $\triangle$ WA 2, 451, 10-15; 468, 32f; 491, 5f; 496, 30f; 508, 12f; 514, 10f; 519, 18f; 534, 26f; 582, 31f; 596, 9f.

For the 1531/1535 Commentary, see Am 26, 122. 130. 138. 156f. 180. 202. 330. 446f; 27, 138f $\triangle$ WA 40 I, 218, 12f; 229, 34f; 242, 16-18; 268, 24f; 302, 18f; 329, 17f; 510, 32f; 671, 25 - 672, 28; 40 II, 177, 33-35.

14 Am 33, 258 $\triangle$ WA 18, 764, 13f.

15 Am 31, 344 $\triangle$ WA 7, 49, 22.

16 Ibid.

17 Am 26, 113 $\triangle$ WA 40 I, 204, 12-18.

reason and law from their hold on the conscience. The only way is that Christ and his work simply throw out the law, expel all dependence on our own work from the conscience. Faith means to be so grasped by Christ that the demands of reason and law are simply no longer heard. They are ended, killed, devoured. It is, for Luther, hardly a matter of argument – as though faith could argue reason into freedom. There is no way across the chasm from law to freedom. For reason is committed to law. There can only be a violent break. »Faith«, Luther pronounces, »slaughters reason and kills the beast that the whole world and all the creatures cannot kill.«¹⁸

It is in this light that one should consider the images used in »The freedom of the Christian«. They are explicitly not such as could be drawn from the realm of reason and law. Faith is »intoxicated« by the promises of God. The faith that clings to the promises of God will be so closely united with and altogether absorbed by the promises »that it will not only share in all their power but will be saturated and intoxicated by them«.¹⁹ Faith in the promises of God is itself the greatest obedience. Any trust in one's own works is the ultimate in rebellion and idolatry. And finally, of course, there is the celebrated image of the union of the soul with Christ as a bride with her bridegroom. Christ displaces reason and law in the conscience by means of a »marvelous exchange«. Because of the wedding ring of faith everything Christ has – all his righteousness and works – becomes the believer's and everything the believer has – all the sin and death – is taken by Christ.²⁰

The point of the violent talk and the move to different images is precisely to move to a different view of freedom. Freedom means actually to be set free, free from law, free from sin, free from the flesh and its lusts, free to be the creature God intended. To be sure, that is not yet entirely possible in this life. Death, sin and the law constantly beset us. So for the time being we can have it only in union with Christ through the »wedding ring of faith«.

Now and then I have referred to Luther's view of freedom as a »vision«. I have done that deliberately. Luther's view is just that, I believe, a vision of the freedom granted in Christ which will one day be completed. Luther believed that we would actually one day be free – free from sin, free from law, free from

¹⁸ Am 26, 228 $\triangle$ WA 40 I, 362, 15f.

¹⁹ Am 31, 349 $\triangle$ WA 7, 53, 15f.

²⁰ Am 31, 350f $\triangle$ WA 7, 53, 34 - 55, 23.

wrath, free from death. Free! To be sure we don't have it yet. We don't even have a very good idea of what it is. But in faith, Luther thought, we can begin to sense it, to catch the vision. And it can, by the grace of God, grow. Not, indeed, the kind of growth one might trace according to our theories of progress – immanent improvement according to some legal or developmental scheme. It is rather to be increasingly possessed, or as Luther put it, intoxicated, by the promise, the vision itself. And it will one day reach its goal. We will be free.

Now this has profound implications for our understanding of who we are and what life is meant to be, for theological anthropology. We will, one day, be free. That meant for Luther that we will freely, joyously, and spontaneously live in love to God and neighbor and in care of the earth. That will be who we are. We will live, that is to say, as the creatures God had in mind when he first called the cosmos into being. But that means that what stands behind this vision of freedom ultimately, is a belief in creation. Humans are created precisely for this kind of freedom, free spontaneously and joyously to love and care, quite apart from the law, to be free Lords of all, to do with creation as they want. Think of that!²¹

21 This understanding of creaturely existence is implicit in Luther's argument with Erasmus about the fall. Erasmus argued the standard free-will defense. The tree of knowledge gives free will its opportunity to choose between good and evil. The command mediates possibility. That the wrong choice is made is, of course, serious but cannot mean that freedom is entirely lost. Enough must remain to allow the system mediated by law to survive. So there is, in the end, no real freedom.

Luther argued in quite different fashion. Creatures, he said, were originally left to their own counsel, to take care of the garden. They were, quite simply, free to do as they wanted and were not to worry about »good and evil«. The warning not to eat of the tree of such knowledge did not, therefore, give freedom its opportunity, but rather *took away* freedom. It took away the freedom to dispose over »that which was above them«, the question of life and death. That was God's business. To step over that line, therefore, is not an exercise of freedom, but precisely a succumbing to temptation, a descent into a bondage to death, sin, and law. It is to become obsessed with the question of good and evil, i.e., to be trapped by the law in the game of self-defense. Law does not therefore mediate freedom. It takes it away. Luther then draws the conclusion which makes connection directly with the quest for Christian freedom: »By way of comparison one might say that the gospel has left us in the hand of our own counsel, to have dominion over things and use them as we wish; but Moses and the pope have not left us to that counsel, but have coerced us with laws and have subjected us rather to their own choice.« To be free, for Luther, seems to mean precisely to be left »in the hand of one's own counsel«, not to be placed under the constraint, external or internal, of Law, not to worry about good and evil and

Thus in »The freedom of the Christian« Luther says that the works of those justified by faith in the free mercy of God should be thought of in the same way as the works which Adam and Eve did in Paradise before the fall. They would be the freest of works, done spontaneously only to please God. »The works of the believer«, Luther says, »are like this. Through his faith he has been restored to Paradise and created anew, has no need of works that he may become righteous ...«²² The believer, like Adam and Eve in Paradise does works out of freedom only to please God, to care for the body and the creation God has given. Of course Luther is well aware that we are not there yet, not wholly recreated, but that doesn't alter the vision. Freedom is at the very heart of creation itself. We are created to be free. But this also means that the scepticism so often expressed about Luther's naivete in matters of freedom and spontaneity is in the last analysis also a scepticism about creation itself. The suspicion that freedom will never work is at the same time the suspicion that creation was a bad job! Luther believed in creation. His doctrine of freedom is a measure of that belief. His celebrated statement about faith in his preface to Romans is but one example of what it means to be set free.

»Faith ... is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God ... It kills the old Adam and makes us altogether different [people], in heart and spirit and mind and powers; and it brings with it the Holy Spirit. O it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them.«²³

death. It is just that, no doubt, that frightens us. For we cannot but fear that we will »go wrong«. We literally can't trust ourselves. We have lost faith. We don't believe in the creator or in creation, Luther would say. We cannot conceive of a free being – one who naturally out of sheer delight lives to please God without a worry about »good and evil«. »Reason« cannot believe or understand that. And that is just what Luther's claim is about. Reason believes in the Law. It has no entry at all to freedom or salvation. We may sense this new territory, but we cannot fathom it yet. So we really are like a cow looking at a new gate! It is ironic but quite consequent that Erasmus, who argues for freedom of the will ends with enslavement, while Luther who argues for the bondage of the will champions the freedom of the Christian (Am 33, 118f ≙ WA 18, 671, 19 - 672, 24).

²² Am 31, 360 ≙ WA 7, 61, 1-17.

²³ Am 35, 370 ≙ WA DB 7, 10, 6f. Luther's view of creation should be scrutinized much more closely in this regard. In his 1527 »Preface to Sermons on Genesis« he can say, »For without doubt the highest article of faith is that in which we say: I believe in God the Father, almighty creator of heaven and earth, and whoever rightly believes that is already supported and set right

Freedom, for Luther as for Paul, is therefore not something peripheral or dispensable for the Christian. It belongs to the very fabric of creation; it is that to which human beings are called. It is not incidental or accidental to the Christian life, it is that life itself. In his »Judgment on monastic vows« Luther comments on Paul's declaration in G 5, 13, »You ... are called to the freedom«, by saying: »You can take it from this that no one may teach or permit anything that is against evangelical freedom. This freedom comes from divine authority. God ordained it. He will never revoke it. He can neither accept anything that runs counter to it, nor allow anyone to violate it even by the most insignificant ordinance.«²⁴

One need not ask, for Luther, what such freedom is for. It as St. Paul pronounced, for freedom itself. »For freedom Christ has set you free« (G 5, 1). It is a freedom *in* Christ, not from or for something. To retreat from freedom is simply to make Christ of no effect. If it is our purpose to ask what Luther's contribution to the quest for freedom and liberation is, it is simply that Luther unlike virtually everyone believed that what the fallen world really needs first and foremost is more freedom, not less. What is distinctive about Luther's view is the *hilaritas*, a certain fearlessness, even recklessness, in setting forth the claims of freedom.

Whence comes this fearlessness and recklessness? It comes from the fact that Luther also knew the nature of human bondage. The vision of freedom can be understood only over against what he has to say about human bondage. Indeed, as we have contended throughout, the promise of freedom itself exposes and even drives us to enact our bondage. Because Luther knew the nature of that bondage he was not afraid of a gospel which sets people free. One who has some idea of what bondage is can be trusted with freedom.

But still, is this not all too naive, yes, even too optimistic? The question will always be with us no doubt. What if it doesn't work? There is always, of course, a back-up plan, the rather menacing left-hand rule ready to use all the force of the

and restored to that from which Adam fell. But those who come to the point of fully believing that he is the God who creates and makes all things are few, because such a person must be dead to all things, to good and evil, death and life, hell and heaven, and must confess from the heart that he can do nothing out of his own strength« (WA 24, 18, 26-33). The many statements he makes in his Genesis commentary about the created perfections of Adam and Eve indicate his high doctrine of creation.

24 Am 44, 309 ≙ WA 8, 613, 9f.

law to see to it that we will stay in line whether we like it or not. There is always the judge, the jury, and the hangman. But that is a rather grim business and not the subject of our present inquiry. Our question is about freedom. What do we do if the gospel of freedom doesn't work? Shall we just cease preaching it? Shall we just sign the whole enterprise over to that judge, jury, and hangman? The question can be put to Luther himself since he was so often depressed in his later years by what he thought was the limited success of the Reformation. The Galatians commentary of 1531/1535 is sprinkled with remarks on the problem. The following comment is, I think, typical.

»... When the rabble hear from the Gospel that righteousness comes by the sheer grace of God and by faith alone, without the Law or works, they draw the same conclusion the Jews drew then: 'Then let us not do any works!' And they really live up to this.

What then are we to do? This evil troubles us severely, but we cannot stop it. When Christ preached, he had to hear that he was a blasphemer and a rebel; that is, that His teaching was seducing men and making them seditious against Caesar. The same thing happened to Paul and to all the Apostles. No wonder the world accuses us in a similar way today. All right, let it slander and persecute us! Still we must not keep silence on account of their troubled consciences; but we must speak right out, in order to rescue them from the snares of the devil ...

Therefore when Paul saw that some were opposing his doctrine ... he comforted himself with this, that he was an apostle of Jesus Christ for the proclamation of the faith to the elect of God ..., in the same way we today are doing everything for the sake of the elect to whom we know our doctrine is beneficial. I am so bitterly opposed to the dogs and swine, some of whom persecute our doctrine while others tread our liberty underfoot, that I am not willing to utter a single sound on their behalf in my whole life.«²⁵

What is one to do if the gospel of freedom in Christ doesn't seem to work? Luther's answer appears at first, no doubt, to be utterly uninspiring. Nothing! One can do nothing about it! One can only go on preaching to liberate consciences from the snares of the devil. One might be tempted to try the Law, but the wicked will most surely not be helped thereby. Yes, we can and no doubt will exhort and admonish but, Luther seems to realize more and more, that only makes matters worse.²⁶ One can only go on preaching the gospel.

²⁵ Am 26, 305 f $\triangle$ WA 40 I, 474, 30 - 475, 29.

²⁶ Am 27, 53 $\triangle$ WA 40 II, 67, 22 f: »... In our churches, where the true doctrine of good works is set forth with great diligence, it is amazing how much sluggishness and lack of concern prevails. The more we exhort and arouse our people to do good works, to practice love toward one another, and to get rid of their concern for the stomach, the more lazy and listless they become for any practice of godliness.«

This is the final step in the reconstruction of the doctrine of freedom. Luther recognized that freedom, if it is truly to be liberation, cannot be forced. There is no way to argue that one ought or must be free. To do so would be to make a law out of it and thereby lose the whole game. Freedom can only be its own apology. Freedom, that is, can be propagated only by setting people free. It is the end of the Law. It must not betray itself in its own defense. Luther is supremely aware that the preacher of the gospel of freedom is in a real sense without levers. »Therefore anyone who wants to proclaim Christ«, he says, »and to confess that he is our righteousness will immediately be forced to hear that he is a pestilent fellow who is stirring up everything.«²⁷ But there is nothing to do about that but suffer the abuse – which will come from both the righteous and the unrighteous – and go on preaching. And if there is fear that nothing is being done, if the Law accuses of laziness and indolence, the only thing to do first and foremost is just to be still and listen. Luther has a marvelously shocking and gutsy comment on G 4, 27: »For it is written; Rejoice, O barren one that does not bear; break forth and shout, thou who art not in travail; for the desolate hath more children than she who hath a husband.«

»... Sarah, the free woman ... that is, the true church, seems to be barren; for the Gospel, the Word of the cross, which the church preaches, is not as brilliant as is the teaching about the Law and works, and therefore it has few pupils who cling to it. Besides, it has the reputation of forbidding good works, making men idle and faint, stirring up heresies and sedition, and being the cause of every evil. Therefore it does not seem to have any success or prosperity; but everything seems to be filled with barrenness, waste, and despair. Hence the wicked are fully persuaded that the church will soon perish along with its doctrine.«²⁸

Our temptation is always to resort to the Law, to some scheme or other, to some attempt to prove our relevance, some program for church growth or other to preserve ourselves from extinction. But Luther will not go that way. He sticks to his guns. He carries out our argument for us: »But I have not done anything good and am not doing anything now!« Luther's reply:

»Here you neither can nor must do anything. Merely listen to this joyful message, which the Spirit is bringing to you through the prophet: ›Rejoice, O barren one that dost not bear!‹ It is as though He were saying: ›Why are you so sorrowful when you have no reason to be sorrowful!‹ ›But I am barren and desolate.‹ ›Regardless of how much you are that way, since you have no righteousness on the

²⁷ Am 26, 45I-453 ≙ WA 40I, 677, 28f.

²⁸ Am 26, 443 ≙ WA 40I, 667, 10f.

basis of Law, Christ is still your Righteousness . . . Moreover, you are not barren either, because you have more children than she who has a husband."²⁹

Freedom comes from the gospel. It cannot be sold out under any circumstances, lest everything be lost.

But now we must draw this to a close. Much, of course, remains to be said. Some words are called for, no doubt, on the persistent questions about whether this view of freedom actually leads us out into the »real world«, as we like to call it, where it might contribute to the struggle for liberation from the ills, political and social, that continue to plague us. I have two comments to make. First of all, Luther's understanding of freedom through the gospel of Jesus Christ in fact gives us an entirely new world, the world of the neighbor. It is a sheer gift. It is what Luther called the world of the »outer man«. The world of the neighbor, the »outer world« or the left-hand rule of God, is never just immediately »there« like the physical, empirical world. It is a world given back to faith. It is of the essence of sin that we are curved inward upon ourselves. Left to ourselves we can never make it into the »outer« world. We are not content to do our work in the left-hand kingdom. That is just our bondage, our enslavement. What we so often call the »real world«, a world supposedly something other than the purely »spiritual«, is not what Luther meant by the world of the »outer«, but mostly just a projection of our own agendas beyond ourselves. We can't get out of ourselves. We have to be freed for that.

The fact that freedom is a spiritual matter, that it occurs »in the conscience«, and that there it »comes to a halt« and »goes no further« means precisely that one so liberated is now given a wondrous new world, the world of the neighbor—to take care. For every possibility that one might turn inward on one's own projects is excluded by the fact that Christ is the end of the law. All the space in the »inner world«, the conscience, is occupied by Christ. There is no room for a self that wants to feed only on its own self. One is turned inside out. The law can't get in there any more. It can only be turned back to the world where it belongs to be used to do what it is supposed to: take care of people not tyrannize them.

The fact that freedom »comes to a halt« and »goes no further« than the conscience is an indication of the eschatological nature of the matter. The Kingdom of God comes by faith alone. But that means that for the time being

29 Am 26, 447 $\triangle$ WA 40 I, 672, 29f.

there is a big sign on the eschatological kingdom: KEEP OUT! GOD ALONE AT WORK! COMING SOON ... BUT IN THE MEANTIME, MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS! But the line must be drawn absolutely. Luther's absolute HALT! here is precisely the driving force behind any move of freedom into the outer world. It is the key to how Luther's two theses in »The freedom of the Christian« fit together. Only the free Lord of all can make it to the outer world to be the perfectly dutiful servant of all. All genuine movements of liberation have to be movements of freedom.

My second comment flows quite naturally from this. To be a liberator in any sense that could correspond with what Luther was talking about, I believe, one has to be liberated. Surely the collapse of so many movements in our day which pretended to liberate but did not ought to make us acutely aware of that. Too many of these movements turned out to be just the worldly double of the law's invasion of the conscience. And like that law, they end by tyrannizing and killing. Luther's contribution is to try to tell us that before we set out to liberate we had best look to our own liberation lest we submit again to a yoke of bondage and tyrannize others with it.

Ever since Luther raised the discussion about freedom to a new level, there have been repeated attempts to correct, augment, change, revise, and of course, reject his vision. The freedom in Christ he preached has usually been deemed either too dangerous or too fragile to survive on its own. Luther apparently believed that there was power in freedom itself. It is, after all, the gospel. It may indeed be a tender plant in this age. But one would think that it needs to be nurtured and encouraged, not stifled. Why the terrible shape of the world today? Have we lacked for schemes and programs? Have we lacked for laws? Is the only way to betterment to be purchased at the cost of freedom? Have we not tried all this? Luther believed that what the world needs is more freedom, not less. It might just be interesting to pay some heed to that belief. For freedom Christ has set you free. So St. Paul said. Luther was one of the few who heard and echoed that. So it comes to us. We are called to freedom.