

Freedom Under God

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This text was originally published by Echoes of Service (now known as Echoes International) in 1985.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Revised Version (1885), the King James Version, or are David Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

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Myrtlefield catalogue no: bib-bk.007/sc

The Freedom of the Gospel

Free indeed

The purpose of this book is to remind us of the glorious liberty, freedom and boldness that we can enjoy through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We need never be ashamed of the gospel. In a dark and lost world where sin has made a slave of mankind and religion has often added to burdens instead of removing them, the gospel genuinely sets people free.

Let us renew our sense of the glory of the gospel by recalling first the majestic, soul-delivering claim of Christ: 'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36); and then this equally stirring statement from one of his apostles: 'For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1).

Freedom can be lost

The second purpose of this book is to remind us how easily and quickly those freedoms can be lost. This is the most surprising thing. We all love liberty, we all praise freedom. The last thing anyone would do, we imagine, is to give up his or her freedom. But history proves us wrong. The history of the church, as that of Israel, contains a melancholy record of liberties given up, of freedoms thrown away and of many a return to bondage.

Let us recall some of the more outrageous examples in history. We think for instance of the believer's blood-bought right of present access into the very holiest of all in heaven, immediately upon his or her repentance and faith. Yet for millions of people not only was that liberty lost sight of, but the chancel screen¹ in innumerable church buildings enforced the idea that the ordinary people of God could not approach the (supposedly) most holy part of the church building on earth, let alone the immediate presence of God in heaven.

Or we think of those nameless but numerous Christians driven by persecution from Jerusalem and Judea to Antioch and suddenly, without orders or permission from Jerusalem or any other headquarters save the risen Lord himself, taking it upon themselves to preach the gospel to the Gentiles with astounding results. And then our minds go to John Bunyan² languishing in prison for preaching without getting permission from some civil magistrate or diocesan bishop.

Or we think of the early churches with their strong sense of direct responsibility to the Lord, and obliged to recognize no other head in earth or heaven except the Lord himself. And then we remember millions in many countries across centuries bowing down before some

¹ An ornate partition serving as a visual barrier between the laity and the altar.

² The 17th century Puritan best remembered as the author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. His ministry coincided with the Stuart Restoration of 1660 which made unauthorized preaching a punishable offense.

mere human being as their all-authoritative and supposedly infallible high priest. And we remember the millions who were obliged to accept the monarch of the realm — and in some eras a notoriously loose-living monarch at that — as supreme head of the church.

These contrasts are distressing. It is even more disconcerting to recall how soon, through whom and with what motives this tendency to surrender our God-given freedoms was introduced into the early churches. On the basic matter of salvation, there were some 'believers' in the very first church at Jerusalem, so Luke tells us, who urged that believers should be circumcised. This was a doctrine which Peter declared to be utterly contrary to salvation by grace, and which would have put a yoke on the neck of the disciples had it been allowed (see Acts 15:5, 10–11).

Then for all their sophistication, the church at Corinth seem to have resented Paul, that great 'Apostle of the Free Spirit' as F.F. Bruce has called him.³ Yet Paul says to them, 'For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face' (2 Cor 11:20).

Then again, it seems that it was the very keenness of the Colossian believers to make great progress in the things of the spirit that put them in danger of false forms of spirituality, which would have robbed them of enjoying the fullness of the gospel.

Our safety lies in recognizing that the ways that lead eventually to spiritual bondage are not self-evidently stupid or wicked at their beginnings. Rather, they do often seem spiritual, wise and practical. Indeed, to the religious or philosophical but unregenerate mind, it is the work of the cross and the doctrine of justification by faith that seem weak and foolish. Not only that, but to the untaught or unspiritual believer, God's methods for establishing and running the churches likewise seem to be weak and foolish. Such is the case that Paul has to appeal to any believers in Corinth who feel they are wise by this world's standards to be prepared to become fools so that they may really become wise (see 1 Cor 3:18).

Let us also, then, become fools, that we too may become wise.

Free access to the word

The bedrock of our liberty is to always remember and maintain that our sole authority is not the church or its councils, organizations, officers or traditions. Our supreme authority, by which in fact all these other things must themselves be judged, is the word of God (see Mark 7:1–13). The maintenance of freedom depends on our wholehearted obedience to Scripture. Israel's history in the time of the judges teaches us how disobedience to God's word invariably brings people into bondage. We are not obliged to obey or submit to any authority or tradition that is not based on holy Scripture; and we must not continue traditions that either usurp or conflict with the commands of Scripture. Our criterion must not be *Is this or that true Orthodox, or Brethren or Reformed teaching or tradition?* but *Is it Scriptural?*

Next, our freedom depends on maintaining the right of men and women everywhere to have direct access to Scripture, to read it, to understand the gospel and be saved. That will mean retaining clearly in our minds the true answer to the question: who gave us the Bible?

³ *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* is the name of a book by F. F. Bruce, published in 1981.

The answer some would give is that the church gave us the Bible, and that therefore only the church or its official teachers can interpret correctly the meaning that the church intended the Scriptures to carry. The claim is utterly false. The church did not give us holy Scripture. The church was given holy Scripture by God through his holy apostles and prophets. Paul makes the point explicitly and emphatically. The church did not appoint him as an apostle. The church did not impart the gospel to him. He received it from the Lord Jesus by direct revelation. Indeed, he insists that when he subsequently came to Jerusalem, the apostles and leaders there imparted nothing to him (see Gal 1:1, 11–12; 2:6).

The issue at stake is vital. Suppose we had been in Arabia when Paul was there, and suppose we had come to Paul and asked him how we could be right with God. He would have told us then by word of mouth what he subsequently wrote down in his epistles. The question is: could we have listened to what Paul said, understood it, believed it and been saved there and then? Or should we first have had to take what he said to the church in Jerusalem or elsewhere, and let the church tell us what Paul meant before we could be sure that we had got the meaning the church intended, let alone be saved? The answer is obvious. The principle of it applies equally to us today and to the right of every man and woman to have direct access to Paul's apostolic writings.

I am not forgetting or denying that the risen Lord has given his people evangelists and teachers to help them understand what he has said to them through the apostles. We should be sincerely grateful to the Lord for these gifts of his church, avail ourselves of them, respect and honor them for their spirituality and learning. But we must not idolize our helpers, nor turn them into our masters. Evangelists and teachers are not inspired apostles, nor do their systems of theology carry the same authority as holy Scripture.

Do not let our spiritual laziness, or our unawareness of the limitations of the academic method, lead us into the mistake of supposing that only academically or Bible-college trained people are capable of understanding and interpreting the word of God correctly, or are fit to be evangelists and teachers. History would teach us that the idea is mistaken and can lead to barrenness and bondage.

Accountability to Christ

We all of us must constantly long and pray for those deeper and further ministries of the Holy Spirit, for that illumination of the eyes and for that strengthening of the inner man which Paul holds out before the grasp of every believer (see Eph 1:17–19; 3:14–19). We have not yet attained; we must tirelessly press on to apprehend that for which we were apprehended by Christ Jesus, and to be continually filled, taught, led on and empowered by God's Holy Spirit. But we must still be careful, or else our very desire to make spiritual progress diminishes in our minds the glory and the extent of the freedom and boldness which we already have in Christ through the gospel. There is a danger of confusing and weakening ourselves, of losing our joy and confidence and of falling again into bondage.

Direct access to holy Scripture, and direct access into the Father's presence and assurance of complete acceptance there, are cornerstones in the freedom of every true-born and free-born child of God. There is another cornerstone to the freedom which the gospel brings us, and that is the direct responsibility and accountability of the individual believer to Christ.

There are many commands in Scripture that are quite clear and explicit. They are not up for debate: all they need is to be obeyed. Moreover, there are areas of life, like church life, where the individual believer is told to obey them that have the rule over him (see Heb 13:17). But it is no accident or oversight on the part of Scripture that there are many matters on which Scripture itself does not lay down definite, clear-cut regulations. In these matters, our Lord not only allows but requires the individual to make up his or her own mind before the Lord — with help, maybe; but without interference from others (see Rom 14:1–12). This is not because our Lord delights in anarchic individualism. It is because he died that he might be Lord of each individual, he and no other. It is an extremely important part of the development of the individual's character that they shall build into it, by constant practice, this habit of direct responsibility and accountability to the Lord. We must each one stand one day before Christ to give account to him. On that occasion, if he has to tell us that such and such an action of ours was wrong, it will be very important for us to be able to say, 'Sorry, Lord; but we did what we did, not out of carelessness, not out of convention or fashion, not under pressure to conform to others' opinions, but because we genuinely thought that this was the action that would please you'.

Therefore, we cannot afford to allow any pressures or undue controls to rob us of this awesome freedom and responsibility of direct accountability to the Lord.

Freedom for the gospel

We must now turn from thinking about the freedom which the gospel brings us, to thinking briefly about the freedom which we must allow the gospel.

The word of God cannot be permanently bound, thankfully, by man's persecution (see 2 Tim 2:9); but we need constantly to pray that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified (see 2 Thess 3:1).

If we believe that justification is solely by faith and not by some rite or ceremony, then we must see to it that our behavior is always straightforwardly consistent with the truth of the gospel. As far as we are concerned, this is so that the truth of the gospel may continue in people's minds uncompromised by our inconsistent behavior, and that they themselves may not be encouraged to persist in or return to some yoke of bondage (see Gal 2:3–5; 11–12).

We must also seek grace not to impede the progress and acceptance of the gospel in other cultures by insisting on attaching our own culture to it.⁴ We must also be careful as Paul always was to keep the gospel free from being confused with politics, either in the minds of the people or in the minds of their governments (see Acts 17:1–9; 18:12–17).

We must ourselves follow the Lord as conscientiously as we know how, but we must never imagine that God is confined to working through us. The Savior will not have us to forbid others from working in his name 'because they follow not us' (see Luke 9:49–50, KJV), but rather to rejoice in the fact that Christ is preached, never mind who the preachers are or their motives (see Phil 1:15–18). We must sometimes be prepared to surrender, not the truths of the

⁴ Of course, we must distinguish between the contemporary culture any one of us inhabits, and that historical context that is inextricably bound up with the fact that our Lord was born of the seed of David after the flesh (see Rom 1:3). The latter is not a question of cultural context that a Christian may set aside for the sake of witness in a foreign culture.

gospel, but our own personal rights and freedom, so that the gospel may not be hindered (see 1 Cor 9:12; 19-23).

In all then let the words of Christ ring constantly in our ears for our own encouragement and as our ambition for those to whom we preach: 'So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:36).

The Freedom of those who Preach the Gospel

Free to respond to the Lord

The task which the Lord laid upon his apostles and disciples of evangelizing the world was staggeringly large, even when one considers how small the world was that they knew. Mark tells us that as they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord worked with them (see 16:20). I will now simply run through some well-known passages in order to remind us how crucial it proved to be on many occasions that the Lord's servants were free to respond directly to his direct guidance; and how he stamped his will and choice on the directing of the work and his workers.

Take first the apostles and the way they divided up the various fields of work among themselves. Two examples will suffice.

First, the momentous and crucial work of opening the door of faith to the Gentiles. Here is Peter on the topic: 'Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe' (Acts 15:7). Of course, Peter is referring to his vision (see ch. 10). We notice that neither he nor the others had regarded it as a foregone conclusion that he, as the most important apostle, would naturally be expected to initiate this enormously important part of the work. God had to intervene and make the choice. —

Peter's brief reference in Acts 15 makes it all sound easy. Actually, as we know from chapter 10, overcoming Peter's reluctance to go to the Gentiles proved quite difficult. What a mercy it was, then, that amid all his preparatory struggles, he did not have to refer the question to base and consult his fellow apostles at Jerusalem. In that case I fear he might never have gone. To judge from their initial attitude afterwards, without the evidence of the subsequent working of God among Cornelius and his people, the brethren in Jerusalem might never have given him permission to go and preach, or if that, then certainly not to go and eat in a Gentile's house. But Peter did not have to seek permission or approval. He was free to respond to the direct leading of the Lord.

This does not mean that Peter was arrogantly careless of what his fellow apostles might think. When, upon his return to Jerusalem, his action was seriously called into question, he did not ignore his brethren's objections, but patiently explained to them how the Lord had led him, and how the event proved it to be the Lord's leading (see 11:1–18).

The Lord organized the work

Our second example concerns the way in which the work was divided up so that by and large Peter, James and John took the gospel to the circumcision, while Paul and Barnabas took it to the uncircumcision. The question is: who organized things this way? The answer is: the Lord did, by suitably gifting his servants and leading them into their different spheres of work until the apostles as a whole eventually came to realize what the Lord had already done: 'they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised' (Gal 2:7ff). Of course, the rest of the apostles expressed themselves happy about the arrangement and each of the two groups of workers gave each other the right hand of fellowship.

Once more the apostles as a whole seem to be following behind the movement of events – which is not a bad position to be in, if it is the Lord who is supposed to be leading.

We may at this point say to ourselves that the examples so far have all concerned apostles, and that we are not apostles. Then let us step down a rank or two, and consider the case of Philip the evangelist (see Acts 8:4–40). We are told that he took the gospel to Samaria. With our knowledge of the history of relations between Samaria and Jerusalem, we need no telling that Samaria was an exceedingly sensitive area for the Jews to take the gospel to. If ever the utmost care was required in choosing the right missionary for the particular field, it was on this occasion. And what is more, there was a grave historic-theological matter that would have to be settled, once any Samaritans professed to receive the gospel. It was so grave that it would require apostles to be sent from Jerusalem, and the professed Samaritan converts to submit to the laying on of their hands, before God would be prepared to recognize their conversion as genuine.

The Lord chose the servant

How long, then, we wonder, did the apostles deliberate before they chose Philip as the evangelist for Samaria? The answer is: they did not choose nor send him. The Lord chose him and guided him to Samaria providentially through the scattering that took place after Stephen's persecution. The apostles only heard about it after it had happened. And from the record it is obvious that no apostolic headquarters controlled or directed Philip's subsequent movements on the field either. If truth be told, Philip was a difficult man to keep track of, as he responded to the direct leading of the Lord.

The planting of the church at Antioch (see Acts 11:19–39) was another highly significant advance for the gospel. This was the first predominantly Gentile church to be founded outside of Palestine of which Luke gives us any record. We cannot help noticing that this great advance was neither planned nor directed by Jerusalem. It was not even led by Paul. It 'happened' through a number of nameless believers who were forced to leave Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom. It is not even said that they were evangelists. At first they spoke the gospel to the Jews only. Then some among them (perhaps it is significant that they did not come from Jerusalem, but from Cyprus and Cyrene) suddenly decided to speak the gospel to the Greeks as well. This initiative was so successful that before they knew where they were,

they had a new-born church on their hands. Luke's explanation is that 'the hand of the Lord was with them' (11:21).

Once more, the church at Jerusalem only got to hear about it after it had happened. They sent Barnabas to find out more. It is interesting to see what he said to the people at Antioch. He did not say: 'Well, I'm glad it has managed to turn out all right this time. But next time, before you take such far-reaching initiatives, you really must get in touch with home base and get approval'. Nor did he say, 'You know, it's a bit irregular setting up a church like this on your own initiative. But now you've done it, you must recognize that you come under the control of the church at Jerusalem, who will presently send out some officers to run the church for you'. Not at all. He simply told them 'to cleave to the Lord'.

That does not mean that Antioch went on after that in rigorous isolation. They gladly received Paul when Barnabas introduced him, and profited from his teaching for a whole year. Subsequently they expressed their love and fellowship with the Christians in Judea by sending famine relief to them. But how important it was that those men of Cyprus and Cyrene were free to respond directly to the Lord when he prompted them to take the initiative of speaking to the Greeks.

Free to adopt various methods

As we know, Antioch became a base for further pioneer work. Here we notice with interest a number of things. First, the decision that the Holy Spirit was calling Paul and Barnabas to pioneer work was a collective decision taken, if not by the church as a whole then by the prophets and teachers in the church as they waited together on the Lord (see 13:1-3). The church certainly 'committed them to the grace of God for the work' (Acts 14:26). That does not mean, of course, that the church virtually gave Paul and Barnabas permission to 'go out as a missionary'. No one did that for Paul except the risen Lord. Nor does Luke say that the church sent them out. Rather, he says that the Holy Spirit sent them out (see 13:4). And certainly, the church at Antioch exercised no control over their movements on the field. The momentous decision, for instance, to bring the gospel over to Europe (see 16:8-10) was taken by the workers on the field in direct response to the Lord's direct guidance.

The other interesting thing from this time onwards is Paul's habit of working in teams. From Acts and elsewhere it is evident that not everyone in those teams had exactly the same amount or the same type of work to do (see 13:5; 14:12; 20:34). Clearly Paul was the dominant spirit and leader. Although decisions may normally have been taken collectively within the team (see 16:10), on one occasion at least Paul insisted on having the last word even against Barnabas as to who should be in his team (see 15:37-39). Timothy was happy to join his team and his local brethren were happy for him to do so (16:1-2). Thereafter he served in the gospel with Paul like a son with a father. Both he and Titus were subsequently happy to stay behind at Paul's suggestion to help in churches and districts where they had pioneered with him (1 Tim 1:3; Titus 1:5).

On the other hand, not all missionaries worked in Paul's teams or in Barnabas' teams either. For instance, there was that powerful preacher and apologist Apollos. He traveled the Roman world very much on his own, apparently and very much on his own initiative (see Acts 18:24-28). Paul records about him, 'I strongly urged him to visit you with the other

brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity' (1 Cor 16:12). No one apparently, except the Lord, controlled his movements, not even Paul.

Paul tells us that he himself was in the habit of earning money in order to pay his own expenses and those of his team (see Acts 20:34). It gave him tremendous freedom of movement. Nonetheless, he was sad that so few assemblies contributed to his work financially, and was grateful that the Philippian assembly did so more than once (see Phil 4:10–18). On one occasion, Epaphroditus volunteered to be the channel through whom the Philippian assembly sent its gift of money to Paul. It proved very dangerous work for the channel (see 2:25–30), but of course those repeated gifts of money gave neither the assembly nor their channel any positive control over Paul and his team. They surely never thought it would.

My little survey is ended. I have chosen to dwell upon the evangelist's and missionary's freedom to be, either by himself or in company with his team, directly responsible to the Lord's direct guidance.

You will perhaps say to me, and quite rightly, that Acts is descriptive and not prescriptive. Then what shall we make of it all?

We can hardly say, can we, that in those days communications were so bad that the missionaries could not be controlled from their home bases; and therefore, for want of a better alternative, they had to depend on the Lord's direct guidance? If he guided and controlled their work in those times, it was the best way. It is the best and happiest way still. Certainly, none can argue that the freedom to respond direct to the Lord's guidance, which Luke describes in the Acts, was either a bad or an inefficient thing which ought now to be scrapped. The Lord, you see, still works along with his servants.

3

The Freedom of the Churches

Simplicity

The churches as depicted in the New Testament certainly had a delightful simplicity that gave them maximum individual freedom. In those days, there was no division of God's people into priests and laity with only the priests being thought holy enough to administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. That idea of a specially holy class within the people of God had not yet been taken over from Judaism. All God's people were priests.

Plurality of elders

Internally, the churches were led and ruled by elders (or bishops as they were alternatively called). Not all churches necessarily had elders from the moment they were formed. Paul seems to have followed the very understandable practice of allowing a church of new converts to develop a little while, so that noticeable growth and ability might indicate who among them were being marked out as bishops by the Holy Spirit (see Acts 14:21–23; 20:28; Titus 1:5). But in all churches that we know of in the New Testament as having bishops, there was always a plurality of bishops. No one man ruled as a bishop over his fellow-believers. Nor is there any evidence that in those early days these elder/bishops formed a professional class of trained men distinct from the so-called laity of the church.

Fellowship between the churches

Externally, the picture the New Testament gives us is of an ever-increasing number of individual churches. These churches enjoy considerable intercourse and fellowship with each other, knowing a spiritual unity that arose from the sharing of the same eternal life and from acknowledging the same loyalty to the same Lord and Savior. It was one of the beautiful results of the gospel in those days that not only within individual churches were Jews and Gentiles accepted as one in Christ, but predominantly Gentile churches were encouraged to stretch out hands of fellowship to the church in Jerusalem and send practical assistance to their Jewish fellow Christians.

Each church controlled by the risen Lord

At the same time, there is no evidence that any one church was ever under the control of any other church. Take the attitude which the church at Jerusalem took to the church at Antioch (see Acts 11:19–30). The church at Antioch was founded and working before Jerusalem even heard of it. And when eventually Jerusalem sent Barnabas to investigate, there is not the faintest suggestion in all Luke's record that Jerusalem advised the new church that, from now on, they would come under the jurisdiction of the church at Jerusalem and accept its administrative directives and regulations. What Barnabas did urge on Antioch was that 'with purpose of heart they would cleave to the Lord' (11:23). That was not simply good advice for the development of personal individual sanctification. It was, as we shall later see, an expression of the good government and health of a church as it was understood in New Testament times. Each church stood under the direct control of the Lord. The secret of their welfare, stability, good order and fruitfulness, therefore, was to cleave as individual churches to the Lord.

It is true that when later a dispute arose in Antioch about the doctrine of salvation, the church at Antioch sent a delegation to Jerusalem. There were two reasons for that (see Acts 15:1–35). The false teachers who had started the dispute at Antioch claimed to have come from the apostles at Jerusalem (see 15:24). Naturally, the church at Antioch wanted to make sure that that was not so. Secondly, it was natural that in questions of doctrine, the believers at Antioch should refer to the apostles. We all do the same still: only we do not refer to them in person but to their apostolic writings. (And incidentally we still find what Antioch found, that James, John, Peter and the other apostles all agree with Paul.) But when the leading apostles removed to various parts, the church at Jerusalem retained no special authority as a church. Also, it is instructive to notice that nowhere in the inspired New Testament writings does the risen Lord indicate that some other church in some other city should take over a central administrative role after the destruction of Jerusalem. The risen Lord himself remained the immediate headquarters of every individual church.

It is often pointed out, of course, that when Paul left Timothy behind in Ephesus, Timothy had authority over the elders of the local church, and similarly Titus throughout all the churches in Crete (see Titus 1:5). But again, that was very natural. These were churches which had come into being through the pioneer evangelism of Paul and his fellow-workers. We nowhere read that Paul put a Timothy or a Titus in any church which he and they together had not founded. There is no record for instance that either Paul or the apostles at Jerusalem appointed elders in Antioch.

In the New Testament, there is no evidence of any machinery for the establishment or running of a confederacy of churches. There is no word of general conferences to which all the churches are invited to send representatives or delegates, who can then come to decisions which can be sent back to the churches as helpful advice or as binding regulations. All this came later.

By the second century many churches had given up their full autonomy. In many provinces, the churches were now all under one bishop. Even so, some of the old freedom remained. The decisions of conferences were not regarded as binding on these bishops. Each of them was still regarded as being responsible directly to the Lord and to him only. In matters

of discipline, for instance, one bishop did not have to accept decisions taken by other bishops. But with a certain inevitability, the decisions of the conferences became more and more binding on all those churches which sent delegates, until at length there came into being one great universal confederacy of churches with its head in Rome, its decisions enforced by the State. What a tyrant and destroyer of spiritual liberty, and indeed of the very gospel itself, that confederacy came to be!

Now to anyone whose mind is conditioned to thinking that confederacy of some kind is the only reasonable way for churches to proceed in the modern world, the system of autonomous churches that we find in the New Testament must look impossibly weak. Indeed, to some people, insistence on the complete autonomy of each assembly seems a denial of our Christian duty to work for unity.

But it cannot actually be so. None ever labored harder than the Apostle Paul to secure that Jewish and Gentile Christians throughout the world should exhibit their oneness in Christ to the full. But building an organized confederacy of churches was obviously not Paul's way of promoting or maintaining that unity. In actual fact, it was those who later introduced and insisted on creating a machinery of confederacy that were responsible for introducing publicly expressed divisions among the churches since, naturally, there were churches who refused to give up their direct responsibility to the Lord in favor of a confederacy that had no authority in Scripture.

All confederation is divisive

All confederation is divisive. Take a thousand assemblies that hitherto have enjoyed happy intercourse but have remained autonomous. Attempt to organize them into some kind of confederacy. Some will doubtless go along with the scheme. Others will insist on retaining their original freedom, not as a self-indulgent luxury, but as a God-given responsibility. All you then have to do is to invent labels for the two groups and you publicly advertise to the world the disunity which confederating some of the assemblies has created.

The arguments that have raged and still rage over church doctrine have understandably bred impatience in many devoted and practically minded servants of God. 'The world is perishing,' they say, 'so why waste time and energy arguing about church doctrine, when we ought to be concentrating on our prime task of taking the gospel to the lost?' They may well add, 'The New Testament does not lay down any one single pattern for church life, indisputable in all its details. Therefore, as long as new converts are shepherded and fed, the church at large built up, counseled and cared for, and all involved in a vigorous and practical fellowship in furthering the gospel, what does it matter which precise pattern of church organization is followed? After all, does not freedom here mean freedom to run the churches more or less as we may judge best in any particular context and country?'

I have a great deal of sympathy with this insistence that the only church doctrine that is worthwhile is that which promotes the practical spirituality, godliness, love, worship, growth and evangelistic zeal of the people of God. But unless I have grievously misread the New Testament, it is precisely this concern that lies behind its instructions for the running of the churches.

The church a body

Watch Paul, for instance, as he comes to regulate the way the meetings of the church are run (see 1 Cor 12–14). He bases himself on the great and glorious spiritual reality that, as a result of our great salvation, all believers have been baptized into one body and must be allowed to function as a body does. The health and development of each member, and thus the health and growth of the whole body, depend on each member's being free to exercise his or her gift. It is a matter of exceedingly great practical importance that much of the grace and strength that comes to each individual believer from the Lord does not come direct from the Lord, but channeled through other members of the body. It is therefore vital to the health and growth of each one of us that the Lord be allowed his sovereign freedom to use all the members as channels of his grace (Eph 4:16).

Whatever way a church organizes its meetings, one thing it must not do is to arrange so that one member, and only one member, shall constantly do all the preaching, teaching, evangelism and spiritual ministry. If they do, and if they are a brilliant and gifted member, the result may well appear to be much smoother and initially more edifying than the results of giving freedom to all suitably gifted members to take part in worship and ministry. But in the end, in spite of much profit received, the God given gifts of many members will tend to atrophy. Lacking practical exercise, these members will not grow in spiritual stature as they should. It is seriously detrimental to the growth of the body of Christ if in this matter we depart from the pattern of the New Testament.

Party spirit

It is similar considerations of practical spirituality that move Paul when he comes to deal with the wrong of incipient party-spirit and denominationalism in the church at Corinth. It is obviously a matter over which he feels very deeply, for he broaches the subject in chapter 1 and he is still talking about it when he comes to chapter 4. Using himself, Cephas and Apollos as examples (see 1 Cor 4:6), he describes the wrong practice in these terms: 'each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ"' (see 1:12; 3:4; 4:6).

Each of these great servants of God doubtless had a different emphasis in his teaching, and a different style of preaching. That was natural and healthy. It was also natural that some believers would find one emphasis and style specially helpful and attractive and other believers another (though all believers, of course, needed all the emphases and styles). But in Corinth, they were beginning to divide the church by forming into different groups around these different preachers. And Paul rebukes them severely and at length.

What was wrong with the practice? Many things! In the first place, it detracts from the unique honor of Christ and confuses the very basis of salvation. 'Was Paul crucified for you?' Paul demands indignantly. 'Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?' (1:13). Let Paul's teachings be of greatest importance: the difference in category between Paul and Christ is infinite. It would be a monstrous and public diminution of the unique glory of the Savior for a believer to allow themselves to be baptized into the name of someone other than Christ, or even into the joint name of, say, Paul-and-Christ. So how then is it not a similarly monstrous

and public diminution of the unique glory of Christ, and a confusion of loyalties, for a church or a group of churches to allow itself to publicly carry some other name than Christ's?

Moreover, Paul condemns the wrong practice because it frustrates God's deliberate strategy in choosing the cross as the means of our salvation (see 1:18–31). It was absolutely vital to our salvation that our faith in any human's strength, wisdom or glory, should be destroyed and abandoned; that Christ should become everything to us: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption; and that we should understand it clearly from the very beginning that it was not the power of some man's preaching, the force of his wisdom, or the clarity of his doctrine that put us in Christ. That great work of regeneration was performed by God and God alone (see 1:29–31). This being so, it surely begins to be very evident why every single church in New Testament times was left directly dependent on God and obliged, by its very autonomy, to constantly feel its dependence on God. It was neither weakness nor foolishness. It was God's deliberate strategy.

Each church dependent on the Holy Spirit

Thirdly, Paul points out that to group believers round teachers like himself or Apollos distracts their attention, trust and dependence away from the Holy Spirit. This then impedes their learning the deeper things of God and leaves them still carnal and immature (see 2:1–3:5). Great and good, valued and honored, as are all God's servants (see 3:5–9). What a vast debt we owe to the vast army of them, all down the centuries to the present time. It is only as the people of God learn to depend on the illumination of the Holy Spirit that they really learn anything. That is why each assembly in the New Testament is left dependent on the active lordship of the Holy Spirit operative in the meetings of the church (see 12:1–11).

If it should be that any church feels that the Lord has shown them valuable truths and doctrines and principles, it is natural that that church should wish all the other churches everywhere to benefit from those insights. But the way to achieve that is surely not to take a number of autonomous churches and organize them into a confederacy, distinguishable from all other churches by the few special doctrines they hold. Rather, it is to encourage all churches to trust ever less in their confederacies, indeed to abandon them altogether, and to learn as individual churches to depend ever more wholeheartedly on the living Lord, the Holy Spirit. With him, there is freedom for us all to look direct on the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (see 2 Cor 3:17–4:6). It is he who shall lead his churches into all the truth.

It cannot be but that we all feel distress at our own personal weakness and at the weakness of many of the assemblies that we know. But that was no imaginary picture which the Apostle John painted when he reported seeing the risen Lord walking among his lamp stands (see Rev 2:1). That same living, active Lord walks still among his churches, addressing each one individually by name and calling each one to its own peculiar experience of himself and of his recourse to correct its faults, maintain and increase its strengths, quicken its zeal and cause its light to shine more brightly.

About the Author

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