



A Reflection on Christian Freedom

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1 Introduction

Over the coming weeks and months public health orders made in response to the Covid-19 pandemic are set to change to reflect a transition to “covid normal.”¹ These changes will have implications for churches, whose local leaders will have to make decisions about how public health orders affect their local context, and how these will be implemented. Among these considerations are questions about whether churches should require proof of vaccination for people who wish to attend public worship, or other events hosted by the church. In Victoria, for example, the roadmap of changing restrictions sets out different capacity and density limits for religious gatherings based on the vaccination status of those in attendance.²

Much of the public discussion of churches’ response to this context of changing public health orders has centred around the question of freedom. This document aims primarily to offer some theological reflections on the theme of freedom, in order to help local leaders to in turn reflect on this theme. This document is expressly *not* offered as an attempt to suggest any particular decisions which should be taken in local contexts — which are likely responding to different public health orders in any case. Rather, the hope is that this will encourage local decision-makers to think broadly about how wise discernment can be led by the wisdom of our tradition.

2 Two Kinds of Slavery, Two Kinds of Freedom

In chapter 5 of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians Paul engages in a sustained reflection on the nature of freedom. The context into which Paul was writing is somewhat different to our own: primarily concerning the inclusion of Gentiles in the emerging Christian movement, which was originally a movement within Jewish communities. Nevertheless, what Paul explores in Galatians chapter 5 can be instructive for us, even in our quite different context.

One of the striking observations of this chapter is a seeming contradiction; Paul says:

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery ... but through love become slaves to one another.”

— *Galatians 5.1, 13c*

¹ While different states will continue to have slightly different public health orders, these are part of a Federal framework: [Framework for national reopening – October 2020 | Australian Government Department of Health](#)

² <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/victorias-roadmap>



Paul, who in other letters portrays himself as a slave to Christ,³ exhorts his audience to not submit themselves to a yoke of slavery; and then, only a few verses later, calls this same audience into a kind of slavery to one another. In doing this Paul is using the language of 'slavery' in two distinct senses, to refer to two different ways of understanding freedom. In the first sense of the term slavery, Christian freedom is *freedom from* slavery; while in the second sense of the term slavery, Christians are called to be *freed to* slavery.⁴

The distinction in Paul's letter between 'freedom-*from*' and 'freedom-*to*' can be seen as reflecting the two concepts of freedom identified by the British-Latvian philosopher Isaiah Berlin in his 1958 lecture *Two Concepts of Liberty*.⁵ Berlin names these two distinct understandings of freedom as: negative freedom (freedom-*from*), and positive freedom (freedom-*to*).

Negative freedom refers to a lack of restraint or interference on an individual. In the social and political philosophies Berlin has in mind this is primarily understood in terms of the restraints imposed on individuals by governments, but we can also think more broadly about other forms of restraint or interference. Negative freedom seeks to open up a space where an individual can do whatever they want.

Positive freedom refers to an individual's ability to in fact do the things they want. Rather than simply having the possibility of doing various things, positive freedom refers to the capacity to in fact do them. I may want to become a doctor, or run a marathon, but in order to achieve these things I need to develop certain capacities. I might need to become a hard worker or become educated, train my body or cultivate a certain type of personality. Positive freedom refers to an individual being able to direct their actions towards some desired goal or outcome.

From the vantage point of these two concepts of freedom we can begin to see how it is that disagreements in public discussions around Covid-19 related public health orders have become so intractable. Although it is significantly over-simplified, we can imagine how these two concepts of freedom might mean that people can talk to each other about "freedom" and yet mean quite different things. For some people, "freedom" implicitly means invoking the notion of negative freedom: "I want to be able to do what I want, and that means there should be no interference which determines what I do." For others, "freedom" is implicitly about positive freedom: "I want to do what I want, and that means following external guidelines which will allow me to do what I want."

In reality there are a range of views which implicitly draw upon different ideas of freedom at the same time. These two imagined examples are offered simply to show how two people might both be talking about

³ See, for example, Romans 1.1, where the language of 'servant' (NRSV) is in fact the same word as 'slave' (Greek: *doulos*).

⁴ What it is exactly we are indeed freed *from* and freed *to* will be explored further in the following sections of this piece.

⁵ Berlin's lecture is a little bit technical, but not very long: [I_Berlin Two Concepts of Liberty.pdf \(dixie.edu\)](https://www.dixie.edu/~berlin/I_Berlin_Two_Concepts_of_Liberty.pdf)



“freedom,” but meaning quite different things. As we continue to engage in conversations with each around responses to changing health orders we might ask:

- *What do we mean when we invoke the language or idea of “freedom”?*
- *How might we better understand what someone else means when they talk about “freedom”?*
- *What are we trying to be free from: restrictions? risk? illness? intrusion?*

3 ... and Another is Like it

What is interesting in both of the two concepts of freedom identified above is that they tend to focus primarily on individuals. What is at issue for the negative freedom *from* external interference is the individual’s ability to be unrestricted; and what is at issue for negative freedom *to* do what one wants is the individual pursuing their own desires. If we turn back to Galatians chapter 5 we see that the Apostle Paul does not understand freedom in similarly individualistic terms:

“For you were called to freedom, sisters, brothers, siblings; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”

— *Galatians 5.13-14*

For Paul, the Christian notion of freedom which he develops is never simply about an individual being free from all interference or restraint; at the same time, it is also not simply about an individual developing the capacity to in fact do what they want. Rather, Paul encourages his audience — and us — to think more broadly about how our individual concerns give way to the concern for our neighbours.

The giving way of our individual concerns in favour of concern for our neighbours is part of the transformation which is brought by Christ, and empowered by the Spirit. This transformation is not simply about making good individual choices, but allowing our individual self to be transformed by the work of the Spirit. Paul explores the challenge of this transformation by contrasting ‘flesh’ and ‘Spirit’ as competing forces battling within us:

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.”

— *Galatians 5.16-17⁶*

What Paul implies here is that we as individuals are not sealed off from the forces around us. All human beings are shaped by things beyond us: whether these are social, political, cultural, economic, or spiritual. Another way of stating this is that human beings are inherently relational: we are who we are because of the

⁶ Paul discusses similar themes in Romans 7.14-25.



relationships we have to God, to others, and to the world. We see this too in Paul's writings. Galatians chapter 5 ends with two contrasting lists: "the works of the flesh" (*Gal. 5.16-21*) and "the fruit of the Spirit" (*Gal. 5.22-26*).

The list of vices — or "works of the flesh" — offered by Paul reflects a common convention by other Jewish writers of his day. These lists of vices were a way of recalling Jewish communities to their identity and belonging within God's people, by naming stereotypical characteristics of Gentiles (that is, non-Jews). Paul flips this convention on its head in Galatians, using his list of vices to urge the Galatian community to remember that they are all part of God's reconciled community: Jew and Gentile alike. The sign of this community being reconciled is that it is freed *from* the influence of forces which divide (the desires or works of *flesh*), and are freed *to* a common life driven by the *Spirit* which promotes unity and bears good fruit within the community.

In expanding who is included in the Christian community in Galatia — both Jews and Gentiles alike — Paul is extending (and importantly not replacing) the message of liberation which God first spoke to the Israelites through Moses:

"[I am the Lord,] I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.'
... but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery."
— *Exodus 6.7, 9*

The freedom which God has always offered God's people is to belong to God, and be a *people*: not simply individuals. At the same time, we also see in this passage from Exodus that the external circumstances of the Israelites' slavery meant that they could not listen to God's call of freedom. This mirrors the point made by the Apostle Paul that we are relational, and when our relationships are marked by abuse, oppression, and harm, then we can become unable to listen to the call of God to be free. It is not until the Israelites began to be released from slavery and oppression that they were able to listen to God's call.

When we think about the question of freedom in our context, therefore, we might keep in mind the need to be in good relationships with others. This may mean addressing barriers of mistrust, marginalisation and exclusion which are keeping us from being reconciled to one another and listening together to the Spirit of God. At the same time, we would be wise to attend to what influences are shaping our individual perspectives, and what values these influences are promoting.

It might be helpful to ask ourselves:

- *Who am I listening to during the process of discernment?*
- *Are there barriers which need to be overcome so that we can listen to God and one another?*
- *Am I being transformed to bear the fruit of the Spirit during this time of discernment?*



4 The Fragile, Partial Freedom of the World

So far we have considered the question of freedom by looking at two dominant ways of thinking about freedom as individuals: freedom-*from* and freedom-*to*. We then expanded our consideration of freedom by thinking about how individuals are shaped by their relationships with others, and so we must consider communal dimensions of freedom: *I* am only free if *we* are free. The last dimension this piece will consider is the degree to which freedom is actually possible within creation. In talking about freedom in the context of public health orders, and the need to build reconciled communities, it can be easy to place our entire focus on human actions. However, in the same way that in the previous section a focus on the individual led to a focus on the relationship between the individual and others, so too must we focus on our relationship to creation itself.

The Covid-19 virus is itself a product of nature: our world is one in which nature has the potential to both sustain life, and also hinder life. When we take a step back to think about creation as the broad horizon in which human life exists, then we must consider the ways in which creation itself limits our freedom (in both positive and negative senses). As creatures, the capacity of human beings to fully experience freedom in reconciled communities is limited by the brokenness of creation itself. Much of our human attempts to protect freedom are themselves responses to the challenges to freedom which creation presents us. The freedom of an individual to do what they want is significantly limited by the effects of disease, for example — regardless of what other societal restrictions might be placed upon them.

The brokenness of the world is also not limited to the ambivalence of nature in relation to human life. Human society itself seems incapable of realising the fullness of freedom in a reconciled community. The current pressing question of whether public worship, or other events hosted by churches, should require proof of Covid-19 vaccination (or proof of medical exemption) seems to imply exclusion regardless of which position local leaders affirm. Requiring proof of vaccination (or proof of medical exemption) excludes those who are not vaccinated; while not requiring vaccination will exclude those who feel unsafe or vulnerable in group public settings without vaccine requirements. There seems to be no perfect way to fully realise the freedom of a reconciled community. The freedom of human beings, as creatures, seem also to be marked by the imperfections and brokenness of creation itself.

This limited capacity to realise the fullness of freedom in a broken world can be seen in the imperfect ways our local expressions of church seek to be welcoming to others. In many local contexts our welcome is compromised by inadequate accessibility for people with disabilities; by cultural and linguistic misunderstandings and even racism; by relationships broken over issues related to gender and sexuality. Some of these failings reflect willful forms of bigotry or prejudice, and will need us to continue to pursue the freedom which God's Spirit brings. Other failings are not intentional, and reflect the ways in which as human



communities we are ourselves shaped by brokenness, and are not yet able to listen to God's call until we ourselves begin to be freed.⁷

All this is to say that the freedom we seek to realise as we are led by God's Spirit may only be fragile and partial. This should not excuse us from seeking to listen to God's call towards free and reconciled communities; however, it might help us to appreciate that we cannot always perfectly express the freedom to which we are called. Our free welcome of others is always already compromised, and we may be wise to not hold our decisions to the standard of perfection which only God in Christ can bring.

We might then ask ourselves:

- *How can we create partial places of freedom: do we need one policy for everything the church does?*
- *How will we respect and protect the fragility of our freedom as a community?*
- *In what ways is our free welcome of others already compromised, and can we do anything about that?*

5 Conclusion

The current questions being pressed upon the whole church by Covid-19 are significant, and deeply complex. It is not entirely clear how to connect the tradition we have received to this radically new occasion. At the same time, there are ways of understanding and enacting freedom which might helpfully guide us as we discern together a path forward for our local contexts. The hope of this piece has been to help resource this collective work of discernment.

In thinking about freedom we might be guided to think deeply about what we mean when we each talk about "freedom." Do we mean the same thing? We might also be encouraged to think beyond the narrowness of individuals, and remember that we find who we truly are in relationship with God and with each other. The call of the Gospel is a call to reconciled communities which seek to love each other. We are only free if we are free together as God's people, bearing the fruits of the Spirit's work among us. In this we are able to see the Church's common life as a resistance to the captivity of the whole of creation to the forces of brokenness and failure. As we continue the communal work of discernment may we seek after God's transforming Spirit, encouraged by the words of *The Basis of Union*:

"On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, it has the gift of the Spirit in order that we may not lose the way."

— *Basis of Union, para. 3.*

May this be our hope and prayer.

⁷ I really do need to thank another *Growing in Faith* panel member, Heewon Chang, for illuminating this point about compromised welcome for me.