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**"PAUL AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY"**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Apostle Paul has been rightly described as the Apostle of Christian liberty. It was his dogged fight against the Judaizing tendency to enslave Gentile converts with Mosaic Laws which led to his arrest and eventual death in the city of Rome. However, it is unfortunate that modern Christianity, rather than towing the line of Christian liberty, has developed rules and regulations that have tended to ostracize the average Christian from fellowship within the Church. This paper examined the essential teaching of Paul on Christian liberty as espoused in Galatians 5 and juxtaposed this with modern trends at Christian legalism. The paper finally suggests ways in which the African Church can contextualize the concept of Christian liberty.

**The Liberty of Christ**

Jim Miller in his sermon on Christian Liberty in August 2002 ([www.sermoncentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com)) made this profound observation:

*What is Christian liberty, this thing to which all Christians have been invited? Responses to this important question have been approached, as you probably know, from many directions by many people. But, sadly, from my many years of observation, the subject of true Christian liberty seems rarely understood and seldom exercised by those who profess faith in Jesus Christ.*

It is important therefore that Christians from time to time should properly situate the concept of Christian liberty in the teachings of Paul. According to Miller, "when Paul sent his message to the Christians of Galatia, he emphasized emphatically the great doctrine of justification by faith, for this was the preaching they most needed." Galatians Chapter 5:1 is therefore, properly understood, a continuation of the argument in the previous Chapter, and should not be separated from it. It is designed to induce the Galatians to renounce their conformity to the Jewish law, and to become entirely conformed to the gospel. Paul advises the Galatians to be firm and unwavering in their faith; they were to be firm and unyielding in maintaining the great principles of Christian liberty. They had been freed from the bondage of rites and ceremonies inherited from Judaism; and they should by no means, and in no form, yield to them again. This verse could actually have been used by Paul to reply some of his critics who had accused him of preaching the necessity of circumcision, or that he had so practiced it as to show that he believed that it was obligatory on others. Under his example, or pleading his authority, it seems the false teachers, who claimed to be the disciples of Paul, had urged the necessity of its observance. Paul reacts rather vehemently by asserting that the freedom that is in Christ was more important than the bondage that is inherent in the legalistic observance of the Jewish rite of circumcision. This fact has often been misunderstood by most Christians as observed by Stewart in the following words: "we as believers are no

longer under the indictment of God's Law. We have been pardoned completely. This is a remarkable gift from God, the significance of which few people can truly comprehend and appreciate." In v.2 Paul draws the attention of his readers to some very important facts about circumcision in relation to their liberty in Christ. He reminds them that if they are circumcised with the understanding that it is necessary in order for them to be justified before God, then they have missed the mark. According to Burton (272), "the acceptance of circumcision is, under the circumstances then existing in the Galatian churches, the acceptance of the principle of legalism, the committal of the Galatians to a relation to God wholly determined by conformity to statutes and leaving no place for Christ or the development of spiritual life through faith in him and spiritual fellowship with him." He evidently did not mean that if any of them had been circumcised before their conversion to Christianity they should feel bad about it; nor could he mean to say that circumcision, in all cases, amounted to a rejection of Christianity, for he had himself procured the circumcision of Timothy (Ac 16:3).

If it was done, as it was then, for prudential considerations, and with a wish not unnecessarily to irritate the Jews, and to give one a more ready access to them, it was not to be regarded as wrong. However if, as the false teachers in Galatia claimed, circumcision is carried out as a thing essential to salvation, as indispensable to justification and acceptance with God, then the matter assumed a different aspect; and then it became, in fact, a renouncing of Christ as himself sufficient to save us. So with anything else. Rites and ceremonies in religion may be in themselves well enough, if they are held to be matters not essential; but the moment they are regarded as vital and essential, that moment they begin to infringe on the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and that moment they are to be rejected; and it is because of the danger that this will be the case, that they are to be used sparingly in the Christian church. Bartlett (1948) puts it this way: "Paul is speaking in this verse, however, not of his readers' standing in grace, but of the method of living the Christian life and of growth in that life."

### **The Value of Circumcision**

What then is the value of circumcision, one would like to ask? In v.3 Paul states: "For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law." Paul is saying here that the man who subjects himself to the law of circumcision binds himself to obey all the Laws of Moses. Circumcision was the distinguishing badge of the Jews, as baptism is of Christians. A man, therefore, who became circumcised, became a professor of the Jewish religion, and bound himself to obey all its peculiar laws. This must be understood, of course, with reference to the point under discussion; and means, if he did it with a view to justification, or as a thing that was necessary and binding. In other words, for Paul, there are two different reasons why a man would want to be circumcised: out of volition or coercion. When done out of volition, there is no legalism attached to it. Any Jewish male child is normally circumcised on the eighth day. In this case, circumcision is a mark of identity of the child as belonging to the Jewish tribe. Paul himself was circumcised in this sense. Again, a non-Jew could decide out of his own free will to be circumcised, since he wants to identify

fully with the Jewish tribe. This for Paul equally had no problem. However, when a man is coerced into circumcision in order to fulfill the Law of Moses as a necessary condition for justification before God, then Paul has an objection. When a man is circumcised from this perspective, then the death of Christ becomes meaningless. His work in regard to such a person is needless and vain. If a man can be justified in any other way than through Christ, then of course he does not need Him, and his adoption of the other mode is, in fact, a renunciation of Christ. Thus Bartlett (1948) avers: "To seek to add to what CHRIST has done for us throws grave doubt upon whether we have really understood and appropriated the grace made manifest and available for sinners on the Cross of Calvary." Tindal renders the phrase "Christ is become of no effect unto you" like this: "Ye are gone quite from Christ." The word here used ..... means, to render inactive, idle, useless; to do away, to put an end to; and here it means that they had withdrawn from Christ, if they attempted to be justified by the law. They would not need Him if they could be thus justified; and they could derive no benefit from Him. A man who can be justified by his own obedience, does not need the aid or the merit of another; and if it was true, as they seemed to suppose, that they could be justified by the law, it followed that the work of Christ was in vain so far as they were concerned. To use the words of Burton (275) "the two methods of obtaining righteousness are incompatible. He who turns to one foregoes the other."

### **Faith and Circumcision**

In v.5, Paul writes: "For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness by faith". (KJV). He turns his full attention now to the Christian: It is the man who has the Spirit of Christ who waits for the righteousness that comes by faith. The main idea behind the word "wait" is not that of waiting as if the thing were delayed; it is that of expecting. The sense is that true Christians have no other hope of salvation than by faith in the Lord Jesus. It is not by their own works, nor is it by any conformity to the law. The object of Paul is to show them the true nature of the Christian hope of eternal life, and to recall them from dependence on their conformity to the law. Paul begins his argument on liberty in Christ by making a very profound claim: "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love." By the use of the phrase "in Jesus Christ", Paul locates the sphere of his discussion.

It is only meant for those who are in Christ, those who have surrendered their lives to Christ. For such people, it makes no difference whether a man is circumcised or not. He is not saved because he is circumcised, nor is he condemned because he is not. The design of Christianity is to abolish these rites and ceremonies, and to introduce a way of salvation that shall be applicable to all mankind alike. In Christ all men are made equal before the judgment throne of God, as far as sin is concerned. According to Bartlett (1948), there is such a thing as bondage to freedom from form. "We are saved, not by our freedom from form, but by our freedom in CHRIST. It will do us no good not to put trust in our works, whether moral or ceremonial, if we do not put trust in our LORD. It is only in JESUS that we find salvation from enslavement to sin." Thus the man who is in Christ lives by his faith, and it is this faith that liberates him from the law. Faith here is understood as that which evinces its existence by

love to God, and benevolence to men. It is not a mere intellectual belief; but it is that which reaches the heart, and controls the affections. It is not a dead faith; but it is that which is operative, and which is seen in Christian kindness and affection. It is not mere belief of the truth, or mere orthodoxy; but it is that which produces true attachment to others. A mere intellectual assent to the truth may leave the heart cold and unaffected; mere orthodoxy, however bold, and self-confident, and "sound," may not be inconsistent with contentions, and strifes, and divisions. The true faith is that which is seen in benevolence, in love to God, in love to all who bear the Christian name; in a readiness to do good to all mankind. This shows that the heart is affected by the faith that is held; and this is the nature and design of all true religion. "Faith is for Paul, in its distinctively Christian expression, a committal of one's self to Christ, issuing in a vital fellowship with him, by which Christ becomes the controlling force in the moral life of the believer" (Burton 280).

### **The Persuasion of Men**

Paul now turns to the practical aspect of the liberty, which a Christian has in Christ. For Paul, the life of a Christian is like a race, wherein he must run, and hold on, if he would obtain the prize. It is not enough that we profess Christianity, but we must run well, by living up to that profession. That is why the Apostle asked in v.7: "Who did hinder you?" The word used here is ..... It means, properly, to beat or drive back. Hence it means to hinder, check, or retard. Doddridge remarks that this is "an Olympic expression, and properly signifies coming across the course while a person is running in it, in such a manner as to jostle, and throw him out of the way." Paul asks, with emphasis, who it could have been that retarded them in their Christian course, implying that it could have been done only by their own consent, or that there was really no cause why they should not have continued as they began. John William MacGorman (115) observes that "it is quite obvious that the Judaizers were claiming a higher authority for their message than they allowed to Paul." It is this claim to a higher authority that gave the Judaizers the boldness to go on destroying his works. Paul was at a loss as to why the Galatians would allow themselves to be jostled by such people. It is clear that Paul knows that some people had gone to Galatia to try to teach another doctrine to them. He made reference to this fact in Gal. 1:7b

"but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ." These were the Judaizers who come to preach the Gospel of circumcision. These were the people who were trying to lead them astray. Paul made it abundantly clear that the Judaizing opinion and practice which they were being taught, this persuasion of the necessity of their being circumcised, and obeying the law of Moses; this new doctrine, so contrary to the spirit of the gospel, and the design of Christianity; was never taught to them either by God or himself, or any other faithful minister of Jesus Christ, who first converted them to the faith. Rather, it is a mere delusion of Satan, and his emissaries the false apostles. To use the words of Stott (135) "the false teachers' message was inconsistent with the Galatians' call." In other words, the Judaizers, whether they called themselves messengers from the powers that be in Jerusalem, where as far as Paul was concerned, agents of Satan. Bartlett (1948) paraphrases the advice of Paul in these words: "Do not let these legalists defraud you of your rights and

blessings in the LORD. You have nothing to gain and everything to lose by accepting the counterfeit substitute they offer you." In v.8 Paul says: "This persuasion cometh not of him that calleth you." Rather it came from men. The opinion or persuasion referred to here was, no doubt, that of mixing the works of the law with faith in Christ in justification. The Apostle leaves them to judge whence it must arise, but sufficiently shows that it could be owing to none but Satan. It is dangerous for Christian churches to encourage those who follow, but especially who spread, destructive errors. And in reprovng sin and error, we should always distinguish between the leaders and the led. The Jews were offended, because Christ was preached as the only salvation for sinners. If Paul and others would have admitted that the observance of the Law of Moses was to be joined with faith in Christ, as necessary to salvation, then believers might have avoided many of the sufferings they underwent. The first beginnings of such leaven should be opposed. And assuredly those who persist in disturbing the church of Christ must bear their judgment. He concludes by warning them that they should not think this a small matter; they should not allow circumcision seem a little thing so as to disregard the Judaizers as inconsiderable, because they are few in number. He refers to them as leaven; and we know very well that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump. That is to say that a few false teachers, and a little of error and false doctrine, when allowed to creep into the congregation and church of Christ, may do unspeakable mischief by speedily infecting the whole church, as a little leaven leavens the whole lump.

### **The Offence of the Cross**

The phrase "And I, brethren" in v.11 confirms to us the fact that some people were actually attacking, not just the person of Paul, but also his teaching. Among other things, these opponents of Paul, accused him of teaching what they were teaching, that is the necessity of circumcision. On what they based this accusation, we do not know. It may have been mere slander; or it may have arisen from the fact that he had circumcised Timothy, (Ac 16:3), and, possibly, that he may have encouraged circumcision in some other similar cases. Or it may have been inferred from the fact (which was undoubtedly true) that Paul in general complied with the customs of the Jews when he was with them. Again, in the opinion of Burton (286), his accusers might be referring to his pre-Christian life, since we have no information that he ever advocated circumcision after he became a Christian.' It was in reaction to this accusation that he now asks:

"if I yet preach circumcision, why do I yet suffer persecution?" In his reply, Paul makes it clear that if he were preaching circumcision, then he could not have been suffering persecution from the hands of the Jews. But the truth is that everywhere he went, he was persecuted by them, simply because he is known to be an enemy to circumcision. If Paul were truly preaching such a doctrine, then the offence of the cross, which is preaching salvation only through the sacrifice of Christ, would have ceased; because, to be consistent with himself, if Paul preached the necessity of circumcision, he must then cease to preach Christ crucified, and then the Jews would be no longer his enemies. It is clear from the arguments of Paul here that his preaching against circumcision as a legal requirement for acceptance by God led to persecutions from his opponents. Paul stood firmly to oppose the

addition of any condition whatsoever to the acceptance of Christ by any body or group of people. For him, salvation is a free gift of God, which comes solely by a person accepting Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. We must not forget that the scandal of the cross, which Paul refers to in v.11, is that element or accompaniment of the death of Christ on the cross that makes it offensive (I Cor. 1:23), viz., to the Jews, deterring them from accepting Jesus as the Christ. "Whatever else there may have been in the fact of Jesus' death on the cross to make the doctrine of his messiahship offensive to the Jews, that which above all else made it such as the doctrine that men may obtain divine acceptance and a share in the messianic blessings through faith in Jesus, without circumcision or obedience to the statutes of Moses" (Burton 287). Bruce Goettsche, in his sermon on the topic "Offence of the Cross" on April 9, 1998 ([www.unionchurch.com](http://www.unionchurch.com)) observed that the Cross is offensive because of its barbarity, what it implies to humanity and because it declares us helpless to effect our own salvation.

### **Liberty not Reason for Sin**

Very much aware that on the one side it will probably be urged against his doctrine of freedom from law that it removes the restraints that keep men from immorality, and certainly on the other that those who accept it are in danger of misinterpreting it as if this were the case, Paul fervently exhorts the Galatians not to fall into this error, but, instead, through love to serve one another (Burton 290). Miller is of the opinion that Paul wanted his readers to understand the fact that being children of God and heirs of eternal glory does not free them from the most commonplace duties that their earthly relations impose. Freedom has to be gotten through submission to law. But this time to a different kind of law. This implies a total freedom from all the burthensome rites and ceremonies of the Mosaic Law. They were free; free from the servitude of sin, and free from subjection to expensive and burdensome rites and customs. They were to remember this as a great and settled principle. In the words of Stewart: "obedience to law is NOT required in order to be saved. We are still under Law (not the Mosaic law; but the "law to Christ," 1st Corinthians 9:21)." However, this freedom has its limits: "Only use not that liberty for an occasion to the flesh." By flesh, here, we may understand all the unrenewed desires and propensities of the mind; whatsoever is not under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit of God. Your liberty is from that which would oppress the spirit; not from that which would lay restraints on the flesh. The Gospel proclaims liberty from the ceremonial law: but binds you still faster under the moral law. It was necessary for Paul to sound this note of caution for the following reasons:

1. There was a strong tendency in all converts from heathenism to relapse again into their former habits. Licentiousness abounded; and where they had been addicted to it before their conversion, and where they were surrounded by it on every hand, they were in constant danger of falling into it again. A bare and naked declaration, therefore, that they had been called to liberty, to freedom from restraint, might have been misunderstood, and some might have supposed that they were free from all restraints.
2. It is needful to guard the doctrine from abuse at all times. There has been a strong tendency, as the history of the church has shown, to abuse the doctrines of grace. The

doctrine that Christians are "free," that there is liberty to them from restraint, has been perverted always by Antinomians, and been made the occasion of their indulging freely in sin. And the result has shown that nothing was more important than to guard the doctrine of Christian liberty, and to show exactly what Christians are freed from, and what laws are still binding on them. Paul is, therefore, at great pains to show that the doctrines, which he had maintained, did not lead to licentiousness, and did not allow the indulgence of sinful and corrupt passions.

### **Love as the Bedrock of Christian Liberty**

At the end of v.13 Paul has this addendum: "But by love serve one another." Paul enjoined them that by the proper manifestation of love one to another, they should strive to promote each other's welfare. To do this will not be inconsistent with the freedom of the gospel. When there is love, there is no servitude. Duty is pleasant, and offices of kindness agreeable. Paul does not consider them as freed from all law and all restraint; but they are to be governed by the law of love. They were not to feel that they were so free that they might lawfully give indulgence to the desires of the flesh, but they were to regard themselves as under the law to love one another; and thus they would fulfill the law of Christian freedom. Burton (294) is of the opinion that Paul having devoted practically all his effort up to this point, directly or indirectly, to dissuading the Galatians from coming into bondage to the law by undertaking to obey its statutes, he now gives as the reason for their serving one another that thus they will fulfill the whole law. The position of Paul becomes meaningful and consistent only when it is recognized that he held that from the whole law as statutes, from the obligation to obey any of its statutes as such, men are released through the new revelation in Christ. And that, on the other hand, all that the law as an expression of the will of God really requires, when seen with eyes made discerning by experiences, is love, and he who loves therefore fulfils the whole law. The gospel is a doctrine according to godliness, (1Tim 6:3), and is so far from giving the least countenance to sin, that it lays us under the strongest obligation to avoid and subdue it. The Apostle urges that all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this,

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." If Christians, who should help one another, and rejoice with one another, quarrel, what can be expected but that the God of love should deny His grace, that the Spirit of love should depart, and the evil spirit, who seeks their destruction, should prevail? Happy would it be, if Christians, instead of biting and devouring one another on account of different opinions, would set themselves against sin in themselves, and in the places where they live. In v.14 therefore we see Paul introducing a different law by which Christians are to be guided: the law of love. Love, for Paul, expresses the substance of the whole law; it embraces and comprises all. The Apostle, of course, here alludes to the law in regard to our duty to our fellow men, since that was the point which he particularly enforces. He is saying that this law would counteract all the evil workings of the flesh; and, if this were fulfilled, all our duty to others would be discharged. Let us observe how Paul's argument on Christian liberty takes a practical turn. With great skill he changes the subject from a doctrinal argument to a strain of practical remark, and furnishes most

important lessons for the right mode of overcoming our corrupt and sensual passions, and discharging our duty to others. He teaches that as love is a very comprehensive duty, comprising the inward affection as well as the outward action, so the word neighbor is of a very extensive consideration, and includes all persons, friend and foe, rich and poor, near and afar off; all that partake of humanity must be sharers in our charity: our inward affection and goodwill must extend to all, though the outward expressions of it can reach but a very few. Thus the law is fulfilled in one word, when we love our neighbor as ourselves: not as we do (often) love ourselves, but as we should love ourselves, namely, with a wise and well-guided love. The Apostle Paul, to enforce the foregoing exhortation to mutual love, urges in v.15 the dangerous effects, which their animosities and strifes, with their controversies and contentions, would most certainly produce. By biting one another, says he, you will destroy and consume one another. Paul compares the enmities and animosities, which were amongst them, upon the score of their differences in religion, to the biting, rending, and devouring of wild beasts. On the contrary, love should be allowed to flow in the Christian community so that their liberty in Christ can be further enhanced by the quality of life they live.

### **Modern Forms of Christian Legality**

Today in Christianity, the tendency is for many denominations to lay down rules and regulations for their members, some of which are out rightly against the spirit of the Gospel of Christ. Jim Miller in his sermon on Christian liberty in August 2002 give 19 ways in which modern Pharisaic legalism can be identified. That is an exhaustive list. However, we shall present below three types of modern Christian legalism found among Nigerian Christians:

1. The law on speaking in tongues: a lot of Pentecostal churches today teach that if any of their members cannot speak in tongues, then such a person has not been truly born again. They then bring a lot of pressure to bear on their members to seek and pray for the gift of speaking in tongues. The question one who like to ask is "What has a gift of the Holy Spirit got to do with salvation?" The possession of the Person of the Holy Spirit is more important than even the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is only a man who has the Spirit of Christ that can be talking about exercising the gift of the Spirit. The important thing to look at is whether a person is a Christian and not whether he or she can speak in tongues.

2. The law on Holy Communion: the orthodox Churches in Africa, particularly the Roman Catholics and Anglicans, have laid down several laws governing the administration of the Holy Communion. One of these have to do with telling their new converts who were polygamists to drive away their second, third or fourth wives before they can be allowed to take the Holy Communion. As a result of this action by these Churches in the early days of the history of Christianity in Nigeria, many of such polygamists either embraced the Islamic religion, or left to join the many African Churches that were being formed at that time. For orthodox Churches in Africa who still place one form of obstacle or the other on the path of their members who want to be baptized, it is time for us to understand that baptism is a symbolic act of an inner reality. It is a person who has truly accepted Christ as his personal Lord and Savior that is qualified to be baptized. Being in a state of polygamy can never prevent anybody from accepting Christ. Since this is so, then the Church in Africa needs to reconsider her stand on the issue of polygamy.



3. The law on dressing: most Churches today have come up with dress codes for their members. In a bid to prevent their members from dressing in the fashion of the world, they make laws, which regulate the type of dresses which their members can wear to the church. Some Churches went to the extent of circulating drawings of the type of clothes their members should wear to the Church. Much as one is seriously against nudity in any form, it is not in the position of the Church to turn itself into a fashion institute. Christian liberty involves allowing a person to come to church dressed as he feels like, taking into consideration the feelings of others. That should be the only proviso. The Church is not expected to make hard and fast rules about dressing. We wish to submit that these and several other laws that are being introduced into Christianity are not in line with the spirit of Christian liberty that is found in the Gospel of Christ. We must make it abundantly clear that these laws cannot give salvation. As long as this is so, then we must be careful how we go about implementing them.

### **Contextualizing the Concept of Christian Liberty**

Christian liberty is the prized possession of Christianity. It is necessary to state at this point that it is the spirit of liberty in Christ that has fuelled the world's greatest democracy, the United States of America. It is a country where every man or woman is allowed to achieve the optimum of his or her God-given potentials. The Church in Africa must stand firm to lead the Continent on this part of spiritual and political freedom. In concluding this article, we would like to make the following suggestions on how the Church in Africa can truly contextualize the concept of Christian liberty as taught by the Apostle Paul.

1. We would like to suggest that a lot of the Pastors in our Churches should be made to understand what Christian liberty is all about. If this is done, we believe that the excessive teaching on Christian legality will be reduced. We should be bold enough to admit that many of the Pastors we have in Africa are not grounded in the understanding of the true texts of the Bible. They should be encouraged to attend professional and well-recognized theological institutions, which would inculcate in them the principles of Christian freedom.

2. If the emphasis of the Pastors in their sermons and Bible teaching is on love, just as Paul did, then Christians will learn to live in harmony with themselves and the society around them. Since we have shown that the law of love is superior to the Christian more than the law of man, then rather than enslave Christians with the laws of men, they should be taught how to live by the law of Christ, which is love.

3. Christians should be made to understand that the essence of being born again is the acceptance of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. This is a purely personal decision. Any attempt to equate this spiritual decision with legalistic practices should be resisted as much as possible. Becoming a Christian should be left at the personal level. Every Christian should therefore be encouraged to ensure that his personal relationship is right with God, and not just the mere observance of the ordinances of men.

4. Legality should not take the place of personal spiritual experience. In introducing different kinds of laws in their Churches, it should be stressed that a man's personal relationship with God is more important than the observance of such laws. This is particularly true of the laws of speaking in tongues, dressing, etc.

5. Finally, Miller reminds us that "duties have to be learned, sometimes painfully, and repeated over and over until they become gracious habits. The value of this truth here is to press the importance of perseverance in all Christian duties, however irksome and hard at first, until bondage becomes freedom and delight." In other words, being born again does not mean that a Christian will become sinless. Righteous living for the Christian is progressive within the ambit of his liberty in Christ.

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