

THE WISDOM OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Dealing with freedom, *Galatians 5:13*

The Greek philosopher Aristotle, who lived more than three-hundred years before Jesus, addressed misunderstandings some people had about liberty in a democratic society, writing that:

*“They define liberty wrongly (for there are two things that are thought to be defining features of democracy, the sovereignty of the majority and liberty); for justice is supposed to be equality, and equality the sovereignty of whatever may have been decided by the multitude, and **liberty doing just what one likes**. Hence in democracies of this sort everybody lives as he likes, and ‘unto what end he listeth,’ as Euripides says. But this is bad; for to live in conformity with the constitution ought not to be considered slavery but safety.”¹*

Even though his thoughts come from the distant past, they resonate with debates currently taking place in our own nation about the nature of liberty and its relationship to law and to others. Aristotle may, therefore, provide us some intellectual context for the debate but he provides no answers for us. We look instead to the ruler of the kingdom in which we claim citizenship; we look to Jesus who announced that he came to “proclaim liberty to captives”² (*Luke 4:18*) and we look to the example of the early church as people who were living out the liberty he proclaimed. We will therefore consider the early church’s teachings about freedom as a way to help us think about the freedom being debated in our nation today.

“For you were called to freedom”³

- Slavery offered a common, defining reality for people in the biblical world. It was a social state connected to warfare and poverty into which anyone, at any time, could fall. But it was also a social state out of which one could rise at any time. While intellectuals reasoned about the proper treatment of slaves and while some slaves held dignified, respected positions, slaves were nevertheless ‘property’ and endured many hardships. Freedom was, therefore, something desired and something prized.
- In a world run by masters and built on the backs of slaves, the Bible offered a different perspective on the issue. Consider the following two features of biblical freedom:
 - **Biblical freedom is not liberty.** God’s rescue of the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt offers a defining context for freedom in the Bible, informing readers that God

¹Aristotle. (1944). *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, translated by H. Rackham*. (Vol. 21). Medford, MA: Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. Emphasis added.

²All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

³Galatians 5:13.

- freed Israel from its enslavement so that they could be bound to Him (*cf. Exodus 5:1; 19:1-6; Deuteronomy 33:1-5*).
- **Biblical freedom is living as God intends one to live.** God's rescue of Israel from Egypt included enabling them to be His priests, His image-bearers in the world, which He tied to their obedience to His covenant (*Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:1-14; cf. Genesis 1:26-28*).
 - With the preceding two features in mind, consider the following summary of the New Testament's discussion of freedom:

Romans 8:18-25

"Corruption" enslaves the creation and humanity

Romans 6:15-16

Corruption (sin) enslaves us because we prefer its rule

Galatians 5:1

Jesus came to set us free

Galatians 5:13-14

Jesus' freedom enslaves us

Applications

- To begin to understand the Bible's presentation of freedom, we must embrace the Bible's, rather than our society's, definition of "freedom".
- Biblical freedom is not doing as we want; it is the ability to have a love-motivated relationship with God that enables us to do what He wants.
- God's 'wants', His commands as our king, involve:
 - Treating people with the love, mercy, and forgiveness that characterizes Him (*cf. Exodus 34:5-7; Matthew 5:38-48*).
 - Looking out for the interests of others rather than merely fighting for our own interests (*Philippians 2:1-8; Matthew 7:12*).
 - Being prepared to give up our rights in this world for the benefit of others (*1 Corinthians 8:1-9:27*).
- The freedom God offers to us through Jesus, the freedom that defines His kingdom, requires us to trust Him rather than trusting in our world's structures of power like, for example, politics, wealth, or education.

God, through Jesus, offers us real freedom. His freedom, however, centers on doing what He wants rather than what we want. We should therefore ask ourselves whether our lives reflect that freedom.