

## **Notes on Another Reading of the "Freedom of a Christian" (1520)**

**(March 25, 2009) by Dr. Peter Krey**

Martin Luther (1486-1543) stated that his pamphlet, "The Freedom of a Christian" contains "the whole sum of the Christian life." [1] Oswald Bayer, perhaps the foremost Luther scholar of our day, notes that this work "has not yet received from Luther scholars the attention it deserves." [2] As his best-seller, "The Freedom of a Christian" came out in 38 editions during Luther's life time. This number included ten editions in Latin and 22 in German. [3] The more popular German edition is shorter than the Latin, simpler, and very spiritually direct, like Luther's Small Catechism. This edition is mostly unknown, however, because all English translations in America are from the Latin edition. Read this edition available in Luther's Spirituality and you will find such gems as "One who hears the word becomes like the word, pure, good, and just" (page 268) and "Which is the word that gives such abundant grace and how shall I use it? The answer: it is nothing but the preaching of Christ in accordance with the Gospel, spoken in such a way that you hear your God speaking to you!" (72)

Luther organizes his pamphlet into three parts:

- Part One: Points 1-19: the inner person or the soul
- Part Two: Points 19-24: the outer person or the body
- Part Three: Points 25-30: the relation of outward persons.

Right in the introduction or dedication, Luther's language is filled with conflict and tension (70).

"It is necessary that Christ be a sign and stumbling block, resisted and contradicted by those, who take offense, who need to fall and be resurrected again" (70).

Luther's theology continually places opposites in tension bringing change, growth, and development.[4]

First two contradictory statements present the tension between freedom and responsibility:

"A Christian person is a free sovereign, above all things, subject to no one" [by faith].

"A Christian person is a dutiful servant in all things and subject to everyone" [by love].

Scripture speaks of this conflict in terms of freedom and servitude.

The next opposition comes between the inner person or soul and the outer person or body of the Christian.

**Point 2** "Relative to the soul, one is a spiritual, new, inward person. Relative to the flesh and blood [body], one is a physical, old, outward person." A clear identification of the body with the old person would be an oversimplification, because Luther speaks of the spiritual not in an object itself, but in how the object is used. So how the body is used could also be spiritual.

**Point 3** Freedom and righteousness or arrogance and captivity are not bodily and external. Luther maintains that external conditions do not reach all the way to the soul.

**Point 4** argues that external things are irrelevant to the righteousness [or integrity] of the soul. Whether one wears holy clothing or everyday clothing; whether healthy or sick, one can have integrity.

**Point 5** The Word of God, the Gospel preached by Christ makes the soul of a Christian alive, righteous, and free (71). The soul is moved by the Word of God (72). It is written that the Word of God helped them. Christ was sent only to preach the Word of God. All good things overflow out of the Word of God to help God's people.

**Point 6** The gospel has to be preached in such a way that you hear your God speaking to you! (72) So that you can come out of yourself, have your coming out party! When you are addressed by the Word, you surrender to the Word and trust the Word boldly.

**Point 7** Forming the Word and Christ in us is the only work and exercise of a Christian (73), which is the dynamic of faith. The only work you need is to believe in the one God sent, that is in Jesus Christ. Obeying the first commandment of the ten is the one out of which the obedience to all the others flows. It represents the treasure of faith, because it requires trust in God and trust in God's Word.

Isaiah 10:22. "Freedom of a Christian" itself is like the brief summation, the brief nutshell, and gospel lives can overflow from it and, like a primal flood cover the earth. In other words, those filled by the Word of faith, filled by trust in God are a remnant out of whom the overflowing promises of God can come and cover the earth.

"The faith [required by the first commandment is that] in which every commandment stands fulfilled [and it] will overwhelmingly justify all who have it." (73).

**Point 8** Faith alone without works is a superabundant treasure. Scripture is filled with commands, which are old testament and by promises which are new testament. Here OT and NT are understood as the last will and testament of Christ, who died for us making us the heirs of all God's promises. The whole gospel is inside of this word: "testament." [\[5\]](#) When capitalized, the OT and NT can also mean the parts of the bible, but Luther understands them in a more profound sense.

**Point 8 to 9** goes from the law to the gospel (74).

"Believe it and you have it, don't and you won't." Everything is received by faith and lost without it. In the following statement Luther summarizes a section from his 1520 "Treatise on Good Works":

"For I have placed all things in a compact form inside of faith, so that whoever has faith has all things and is saved and whoever does not have faith has nothing" (74).

Luther considered faith or trust an all-inclusive currency out of which all righteousness comes and returns, much the way all things go in and come out of gold, when it is used for money. Not all things, however, even if people believe that everything can be changed into money and money can be changed back into everything. Friendship and love and trust are some things that money cannot buy. Everything in the life-world can be changed into language and words are a kind of currency in this sense.

"Words and words are all I have to steal your heart away." [\[6\]](#)  
Luther argues that faith and trust are like currencies.

All things go in and out of gold. All things go in and come out of money. All things go in and come out of words. All things go in and come out of trust and faith. Luther also argues that all the other commands issue out of the First Commandment and return into it, because it requires faith in God. "Thus faith goes out into works and through works comes back to itself again, just like the sun goes forth to its setting and comes again at its rising" ("From on Good Works," LW 44:79).

"The promises of God provide what the commandments require" (74). Luther called the Gospel, the promises of God and he called the Law, God's commands. Promises and commands are performative speech acts, which do not reflect realities, but bring into existence the realities they pronounce. Because there is more to performatives than their merely being statements, promises are broken or kept rather than just true or false.

**Point 10** The Word and the soul are like an iron put into a fire, making the iron become red-hot. "The one who hears the Word becomes like the Word, pure, good, and just." (268)

Luther is saying that the work of the soul has to be done in the self and a focus on the self is necessary before considering an action agenda, [\[7\]](#) to use other words for "works" (74-75).

**Point 11** By believing God Luther means that we look upon God as addressing us in good faith. A lawyer noted that their code words for, "I am going to sue you!" are "You are no longer operating with me in good faith." Not to believe God is to hold that God is not relating to us in good faith (75).

**Point 12** Luther used the picture of an iron in the fire for the soul in the Word. Now he uses the picture of a marriage between Christ the bridegroom and the soul as the bride. "Christ and the soul become one body" (75). This is called the marvelous exchange and the struggle is the deadly duel which is involved for the joyful marriage to take place.

The exchange: old birth for the new birth  
Our birth is exchanged for the birth of Christ

Poverty, for riches

Hatred, for love

Sin, for righteousness

Death, for life

A curse, for a blessing

A whore, for a happy housemother and wife

In the masculine: a whore-monger, for a happy house-father and  
husband

Those last words are harsh, but probably accurate. We receive all the attributes of God, while Christ takes our birth, sin, and mortality and in the almighty power of God overcomes them and provides forgiveness.

**Point 13** You can be filled with good works from head to toe and yet this marriage has not transpired.

Luther is uncovering the source of all good works, which is the faith of the heart. Trust and faith are the head and the whole essence of righteousness (77).

**Point 14** Luther says, "What other good things do we find in Christ" as if he were opening a sack filled with presents, as if opening a treasure chest. Christ is like Santa Clause with a

sack full of presents. It is here where what I call the existential rapture becomes obvious, but the tension of opposites right from the start generates this growing and maturing in Christ (77). "The Christian person is lifted up so high over all things!" (78) (Carl Gustav Jung calls this tension of opposites the transcendent function.) [\[8\]](#)

In Christ we receive the first born son status, whether we are sons or daughters, no matter our birth order. The real Son of promise is Jesus Christ. The first born is the heir and becomes the king/queen and priest. We are not heirs to earthly possessions but of spiritual goods, "although temporal goods are not thereby excluded." "Christ teaches us inwardly in our hearts." We could also use the word sovereignty instead of rapture: a person is lifted up so high over all things. We receive a truly almighty sovereignty over a spiritual kingdom: such is the authority and freedom of a Christian. Even evil and death have to serve the Christian (78).

**Point 16** Who can even imagine how high the honor and status of a Christian are? The person is in Christ and Christ is in the heart of the person:

In the ascent of faith, it goes to → the first born son and heir, whether a son or daughter - through the Nobility of the spirit → to a king or queen → to a priest interceding before God → to Christ → and into God.

The descent in love reverses the directions from God → Christ → priest → king or queen → first born and heir → all the way down, humbly serving "the least of these."

This existential rapture takes place by faith and not by works. To want it by works, Luther says, is like Aesop's dog with a bone in his mouth, sees his reflection in a stream and tries to snatch the bone out of that dog's mouth and loses both his bone and the reflection. Works will not provide these benefits.

**Point 17** We are the priesthood of believers: what of pastors? They are merely performing a different function; they are not different in status.

The power and privilege usurped by the clergy estate, where they used their sword of the spirit and sword of iron, for their material benefit, obscured the whole gospel. They took Christ away (79). Christ has to be preached (80). This Word of God has to be preached. It makes us rejoice in the core of our being. Christ becomes our sweet heart of love.

**Part Two: Point 19** Here in Part Two, Luther moves the Christian from being a sovereign to being a servant; from the ascent in faith to the descent in love, from faith to love, from the soul to the body (80-81). It is in the external that we achieve the first fruits.

**Point 20** The spirit has to harness and discipline the body. The inner self is united with God; the flesh has a recalcitrant will and desires pleasure. We are to pummel the body so it conforms to our spirit. Note: "The spirit is strong but the flesh is weak."

**Point 21** Works have to be done freely out of love, done for our neighbor, and be done for nothing, just to please God. Therefore we have to subdue the obstinate willfulness of the body. But righteousness remains by faith and not by doing more and more



good works (82). With one's righteousness secure in faith, "for the sake of one's body, a person cannot be idle, but must practice doing many good works" (82).

**Point 22** The examples Luther gives are Adam and Eve, the bishop, the tree and the fruit, and the carpenter. Adam and Eve were created righteous and tilling the soil and gardening was their joyful response. Unless a pastor or priest is first ordained a bishop, a person going around consecrating churches and ordaining pastors is an impostor and will never that way become a bishop (83). Neither do we become good persons by doing good works.

**Point 23** A good and righteous person does good and righteous works and not *vice versa*. A tree bears the fruit and not *vice versa*. The self has to grow and mature and the action agenda depends on that. The action agenda of a psychotic person does not make them whole, but the therapy, the talking cure, which heals the disturbed and distorted self, does it. In the empathy and trust of the relationship, the self becomes whole, not through doing good. When a person has faith and receives grace, then the person seeks to please God by works.

**Point 24** Righteousness or evil does not follow from works but from faith. The beginning of sin is to depart from God and from trust in God (84). It is a falling out of relationship.

We have to start with the person, not the works. In the eyes of people (*coram hominibus*) good works = a good person. Luther is writing about the person before God, i.e., (*coram Deo*). But to make external works determinative makes for the blind leading the blind. One must look inside the person. Luther looks at our

soul with in-depth psychology or theology. We do not believe in salvation by works but by faith.

Law (commands) and Gospel (promises): the Word of God in the form of commands frightens us into contrition, while in the form of promises of grace we are comforted by faith (85).

**Part Three Point 26** Our outward bodies in relation with others:

Here good works are required for which our faith has to get to work with pleasure and love (86). All works are done for the good of the neighbor and not in order to go to heaven or do penance. Because we have received all things over abundantly by faith in Christ, all our works and our whole lives are left over to be able to serve our neighbor freely with love. We empty ourselves (Phil 2:5) and becoming human, we take the role of servants: the *kenosis* theme (86-87).

**Point 29** Here Luther takes the ascent of faith into Christ: To my neighbor I will become a Christ just like Christ died for me and I freely serve my neighbor for nothing. Mary humbles herself and goes under the law in solidarity with common folk (88). Paul circumcises Timothy but not Titus. Christ has Peter pay the head tax, even though children of the king pay no taxes. We are to submit to civil authorities. Works done in penance are for our selfish salvation and they are not done for others (89).

Luther now describes the joyful economy of abundance. We inherit the whole last will and testament of Christ who died on the cross. Thus as heirs, God's possessions must flow from one person into another and be [held] in common. Each person should accept the neighbor as if the neighbor were him or herself. Christ is the currency and Christ is the clearing house of all

our gifts received from on high. Even our faith and our righteousness is not for ourselves but are for others.

**Point 30** This great paragraph (90) is lost in the Latin version of this pamphlet. It shows how the existential rapture ends as well as begins Luther's summary of the Christian faith and life.

A Christian is in ecstasy, outside him or herself, *extra nos*. A Christian's ecstasy is in Christ and in the neighbor: in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love. In faith one ascends above oneself into God and from God one descends below oneself and yet always remains in God and God's love. The heavens open and the angels of God ascend and descend upon the Son of Man. This is another look at the existential rapture. The Son of Man can refer to Christ or to anyone in Christ or who has Christ in his or her heart. Christian freedom is higher than any earthly freedom as the heavens are above the earth (90).

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[1] Philip and Peter Krey, Luther's Spirituality, (New York: Paulist Press, 2007). The numbers in parentheses throughout, are the pages in this our book. The popular edition of "The Freedom of a Christian" can be found on pages 69-90.

"One who hears the word becomes like the word, pure, good, and just" can be found in the Endnotes on page 268.

[2] Oswald Bayer, Theology the Lutheran Way, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), page 61.

[3] Peter Krey, Sword of the Spirit, Sword of Iron: Word of God, Scripture, Gospel, and Law in Luther's Most Often Published Pamphlets (1520-1525)" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2001), page 42.

[4] Luther does not mention the Pre-Socratic philosophers in "Freedom of a Christian," but the dynamic change that Luther brought, made Heraclitus of Old (540-475 BCE) come to mind for me. Parmenides (515-ca.450 BCE) opposed him. 1/ Heraclitus said that everything changes but change itself. Parmenides held that everything stays the same. Nothing changes. 2/ Heraclitus believed that "war is common, strife is justice, and everything happens according to strife and necessity." Robin Waterfield, The First Philosophers: the Presocratics and the Sophists, (Oxford University Press, 2000), page 40. Luther believed in the conflict theory of atonement, God dueling with the devil. 3/According to Robin Waterfield, [like Luther] Heraclitus thought in the coincidence and even the identity of opposites (page 33). 4/ Aristotle complained that he broke the law of non-contradiction (page 33). Luther's opponents also claimed he taught nothing but a pack of contradictions. 5/ Luther opposed human and divine teaching and Heraclitus is said to have taught that a human being has reasoning, but there is also the divine word (*logos*) and human reasoning is born from the divine *logos* (page 32, footnote 2). Luther like Heraclitus opposed human and divine teaching. 6/Heraclitus taught that reality liked to conceal itself and wisdom does not come from factual information, but seeing hidden meaning behind appearances.

Luther's Theology of the Cross resembles Heraclitus here, but is much more complex in terms of suffering, extinguishing desires, and exploring foolishness for the sake of wisdom. 7/When gold was money, Heraclitus said: "All things can compensate for fire and fire can compensate for all things, like goods for gold and like gold for goods." For Luther trust/faith is a currency out of which everything issues and returns. What did Heraclitus really mean by fire? He identified it with the *logos*, and the alternation of opposites in processes, day and night are one, as times of the day, for example. Could his creative fire resemble Luther's faith as the power of God at work among and through us? See William F. Lawhead, The Voyage of Discovery: a Historical Introduction to Philosophy, Second Edition, (Stamford, CT: Wadsworth, Thomson Learning, 2002), pages 16-19.

[5] The latter statement derives from my dissertation, Sword of the Spirit, Sword of Iron, page 385, where I note that Luther, with his ability to put complicated thoughts into a nutshell, could lure a whole world of meanings into single words, like "gospel" and "testament." It could also be that Kenneth Hagen wrote this in his book, A Theology of Testament in the Young Luther: the Lectures on Hebrews, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974). See my dissertation footnote no. 318 on page 265. Hagen states on pages 86-87 in his book, that Hebrews defines faith as a substance (11:1), which Luther understood as possession, because Luke 8:43 says, "She paid all her substance to physicians." Thus faith is the possession of things hoped for." Thus Luther says if you have faith, you have all things, and without faith, you have nothing. *Glaubstu so hastu, glaubstu nit, so hastu nit* - in his Early New High German.

[\[6\]](#) From a song by the Bee Gees (1968), but also by Elvis Presley (1970) called "Words."

[\[7\]](#) For the concept of an action-agenda, see my Gettysburg Reformation Day Lecture, "Luther's In Depth Theology and Theological Therapy (Using Self Psychology and a Little Jung)," Seminary Ridge Review, Autumn 2008-Spring 2009, Vol. 11, No. 1-2:97-115.

According to Self Psychology, the self has a bi-polar structure, one pole for mirroring (for ambition and acceptance), the other for merger and idealizing (for values and ideals). A tension arc stretches between these poles, which push and pull each other in different directions. Along the tension arc are arrayed the inborn talents and acquired skills. The action agenda issues out of this tension arc between the poles in the self (page 101). The self is at issue rather than its action: its cohesion, vigor, and harmony as opposed to its fragmentation. Self-Psychology deals with the weakness or strength of selves over what they do, their action agenda. (Ibid.) This psychology correlates roughly with Luther's teaching of justification by grace rather than works.

[\[8\]](#) Joseph Campbell, editor, The Portable Jung, translated by R.F.C. Hull, (New York: Penguin Books, 1971), page 298.