Christian Freedom:

An Interpretation of Galatians 5:2-15

Name: Joshua Lian

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I. Introduction

Galatians has traditionally been labeled the “Magna Carta of Christian Liberty”. Chapter five is the place where Paul actually names freedom and discusses it. In the post-modern age when people start to be rather unsure about what freedom actually is and why it is something worth pursuing, it is vital to discuss it and see how the Christian understanding of freedom can be relevant in the post-modern world.

II. Establishing the Text

A. Textual Boundary

It is notoriously difficult to decide the textual integrity of this selected passage. Galatians 5:1 seems to be something like a thesis statement introducing the topic on Christian freedom that is discussed in 5:2-12. But it is actually also the concluding statement of the previous section on the free women and the slave woman. Therefore it actually belongs to both parts.

Galatians 5:13-15 begins with a gar which seems to be quite obviously a signal of concluding statement of 5:2-12, but it is also an introduction to the following passage (5:16-26) about the tension between being led by bodily desires and the Spirit.

My final decision follows the that of the UBS which sets the section as verses 2-15. The reason is because the first word ide in verse 2 marks quite clearly the
beginning of Paul’s direct and strong address to the receiver of his message. Paul
concludes his comparison between Hagar and Sarah with a summary in version one,
and verse two he focuses his argument and concludes it.

As for the ending of the passage, I decide that verses 13-15 are an important
part of Paul’s argument about Christian freedom. It sets up dialectic. And Paul’s
argument about freedom is incomplete without this part. Therefore I treat 5:2-15 as
Paul’s complete argument of Christian freedom.

B. Textual Criticism

UBS lists no obvious doubts about any word in its rendering of the Greek text.
But Riches does list an interesting textual variant in verse 14 by Marcion.1 Instead of
“the whole law is fulfilled in one word”, Marcion reads “the whole law is fulfilled
among you”. This reading may be regarded as Marcion’s emphasis on the
distinctiveness of the Christian freedom as different from the practices of the Jews.
And it clearly sets out the communal understanding of Christian freedom in the early
church.

C. Textual Contours

I compared various versions and found that NRSV renders best the original
Greek. Therefore I will present the textual contours using the NRSV text as follows.

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1 John Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries*, (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 246-47.
Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that

if you let yourselves be circumcised,

Christ will be of no benefit to you.

Once again I testify to every man

who lets himself be circumcised that

he is obliged to obey the entire law.

You who want to be justified by the law

have cut yourselves off from Christ;

you have fallen away from grace.

For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything;

the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

You were running well;

who prevented you from obeying the truth?

Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you.

A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough.

I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise.

But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty.
But my friends, why am I still being persecuted

if I am still preaching circumcision?

In that case the offense of the cross has been removed.

I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters;

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 neighbor as yourself.”

If, however, you bite and devour one another,

take care that you are not consumed by one another.

D. Textual Plot

Paul begins this passage by arguing against circumcision. It is obvious that Paul treats circumcision as bondage to law (v. 1). And circumcision is against Christ (v. 2) and against grace (v. 4). Then Paul treats circumcision as symbolic of the whole law (v. 3), saying that obeying the entire law is part and parcel with keeping the circumcision.
Paul then presents the alternative which is in Christ (v. 5). And the key to receiving Christ’s righteousness is through the Spirit and by faith, waiting for the righteousness that is to come. Instead of the work of the law, such work of the faith is love (v. 6). So love is the ultimate result of faith and Spirit.

After setting out clearly his position, Paul then turns to mention a certain group of people who are against such truth and are preventing others from working freely in Christ (v. 7). Paul uses several interesting images here. The first is yeast and dough (v. 9). Paul thinks that those people who he is arguing against are like yeast in a batch of dough. Even a little bit of yeast can have a huge impact on the whole community. Second, he urges believers to run freely (v. 7) instead of being stumbled by such false teachings. Third, although the gospel is free, it is nevertheless an offense (v. 11). It is an offense that challenges even Paul, putting him in persecutions. Finally, Paul makes fun of those who want circumcision, saying that they can do better by castrating themselves (v. 12).

At the end of the passage, Paul turns to the positive side of the argument. He introduces the new thing that believers have to bind themselves to—other people (vv. 13-14). Paul introduces the fulfillment of the law which is to be found in love. And at the very end, Paul seems to be a bit worried that oppositions in the church might devour the whole community.
III. The Literary Context

It is important to see where the passage locates in the book of Galatians. Here is my attempt to structure Paul’s argument in the book of Galatians.

Greetings (1:1-5)

The Problem (1:6-10)

Paul Claims His Apostleship (1:11-2:14)

Theme: Christ Justifies Us (2:15-21)

Argumentations (3:1-5:1)

Freedom and Responsibility (5:2-6:10)

Last Words (6:11-18)

There are several things to take note here. First, Paul leaves out thanksgiving and prayer at the beginning which is found in most other letter of that time. This points out that Paul is enthusiastic about arguing against false teachings. Second, the passage of our concern in this paper is found at the beginning the “application” part of Paul’s letters. It is usually the place where Paul repeats and responds to his central argument and links the theme of the letter to something very practical at the end, yet keeps its “argumentative” flavor. Third, the freedom which is our concern in this passage leads to responsibility later in the letter.
IV. The Historical Context

We can observe the historical context from the book itself. Paul faces the problem of serious distortion to his version of the gospel. The “other gospel” is leading people astray according to Paul. He begins to argue for his authority as an apostle and sites an example of Peter showing that it’s the message that counts, not the authority of the apostle itself. The problem seems now to center upon circumcision. Paul then lays out his version of the true gospel to counter such misconception. He cites the example of Abraham to stress the importance of God’s initiative and uses this to show the importance of Jesus’ work on the cross and the promise of the Holy Spirit. He then continues to contrast the law that brings death and the promise that brings life. And the servant that is of the flesh is in stark contrast to the son that is free. He encourages faith that helps bring about love and the power of the Holy Spirit. And he is also keen to stress the consequences that should follow the reception of his version of the gospel. First, there should not be any more barriers separating God’s children. Second, the Holy Spirit should help bear good fruits. And third, faith should bring about loving and tender service to neighbors.

Relevant to the historical context is also Paul’s life and when he wrote the book of Galatians. Scholars are divided between the North and the South hypotheses. According to the North hypothesis, Galatians is written in Corinth or Ephesus after
the meeting in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-19) probably during Paul’s second or third missionary tour in AD 50/51 or 54/55. And according to the South hypothesis, it is written in Antioch before the Jerusalem meeting in AD 48. The two hypotheses try to deal with problems concerning Paul’s chronology and harmonization with Acts. But the influence to the interpretation of our passage is rather trivial.

V. Christian Freedom in Canonical Perspective

Christian freedom has its deep roots in the saving works of God in the Old Testament. Yahweh is the God who saved the Israelites from the slavery of the Egyptians. God in the Old Testament is God the liberator and the God who freed slaves.2 But this freedom is also tied with social responsibilities. “My neighbor is not simply a restraint on my freedom, but one whom I am to love as myself (Lev. 19:18)”3.

In the New Testament, Christ is the central figure that frees people. And Christ frees people from sin and death (Rev. 1:5-6.) Besides, the New Testament also emphasizes the “voluntary” dimension of freedom. “If the Old Testament emphasis is on God’s people as freed slaves, the New Testament emphasis is on God’s people as free slaves.”4

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4 Bauckham, *Freedom*, 15. (Italic is of the original author.)
VI. Theological Interpretation

It is interesting that in order to discuss about Christian freedom, Paul actually discusses faith, hope and love in this passage. Here I will begin the theological interpretation by looking at some keywords in the passage. And I will conclude the interpretation with a discussion of how this passage seeks to shape individuals and communities.

A. Circumcision and Law

In accordance with the consensus reached in the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, Paul argues that it is not necessary for people to be circumcised before they can be Christian. As is seen in Acts 15:5, circumcision is put together with the law, both of which signifies God’s covenant with the people of Israel. In Galatians, Paul treats it as completely unbeneﬁcial, giving people bondage instead of freedom.

B. Hope of Righteousness

There is a tension here. On the one hand, Jesus has achieved righteousness on the cross. But on the other hand, Christians have to wait and hope for the final righteousness that is only to come in future. Here hope is part of the freedom that Christians have. Because Christians have this hope of righteousness, they are able to be freed from the slavery and bondage of everyday life.
C. In Christ

The key to freedom is Christ’s work. It is Christ’s faithfulness that is effective. And Paul here stresses that Christ’s work annihilates the work of the circumcision and the law. Christians are not just of Christ but also “in” Christ. And this is possible only by the Spirit and through faith. “In Christ” means also that we are no longer “under the law” and are therefore free.

D. Faith Working through Love

According to Paul’s Abrahamic argument, it is faith that proceeds law. And law is only beneficial to let people know what is sin. In this passage, Paul opposes the works of the law. But he does not say that we do not need to work as a result of faith. In fact, Paul emphasizes the outcome of faith which is love. People need to practice love to overcome the disunity in the church.

E. You Shall Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Here Paul follows Jesus to set this Leviticus commandment as the fulfillment of the law. We can even say that Paul proposes love as the new “law of Christ”. To believe in Christ is to follow Christ’s example. And the spirit of the law is embodied in Jesus death on the cross. Every people have different laws at different times and contexts, but love will never change.
F. Individual and Communal Significance of the Passage

Paul is clearly dealing with the problem in the community. The problem is that some people are holding fast to old laws that bring bondage and death. Paul deals with this problem in the person and work of Jesus Christ. By depending and waiting for the righteousness of Jesus, believers are free to love others. At the individual level, people have to trust in Jesus and love others. At the communal level, this passage sets up new standards of laws, but this time not in propositional terms but in a story form, looking upon the example of Christ.

Christian freedom is achieved with the work of Christ. Through Christ’s work and the giving of the Spirit, people are freed to respond with faith and hope. Love is the result of such faith and hope and is the sign of a healthy community of faith. This is the holistic understanding of freedom in Galatians 5:2-15.

VII. Application

The Christian freedom Paul argues in this specific context of the churches in Galatians has deep application possibilities in our modern time. First, Christianity as a religion often falls into some kind of moralism, believing in lots of different sets of doctrines and trying to keep different sets of rules. While it is good to do good, it is dangerous if not reflected upon and becomes some kind of bondage that does not
nurture faith. Freedom in Christ is no set of specific rules to follow, but the example of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Second, there is often disunity in the church when people argue about miscellaneous things. Paul here sets up “love your neighbor as yourself” as the guiding principle of a community split up into two. By focusing on Jesus Christ and how believers are to respond to this in hope, faith and love, Paul resolves the conflict with theological sharpness.

Third, people outside the church often have the impression that believing in Christianity means doing lots of works. But by focusing on Paul’s argument of Christian freedom, we can correct this wrong idea of doing lots of works even in the church. People shouldn’t do these works in an expectation of justifying themselves, but should regard freedom in Christ as the source of power and strength.

Four, in an age when freedom becomes just right and no responsibility, Christian freedom can correct the false impression that freedom is individualistic and nothing about other people. Freedom is positive and it is closely related to not just oneself, but about other people.

In a word, Christian freedom is an important aspect of Christian faith that is often missing in the church.
VIII. Conclusion

Christian freedom when expounded holistically is very helpful in the post-modern context when people start to think that freedom is just the right to do whatever I want to do. When this concept is also invading into the church, we need to reeducate the concept of Christian freedom so that Christians have good witness to the world. And Christian freedom is also helpful for the faith development of the community. It is hope, faith and love combined.

Bibliography


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