



EXPANDED EDITION

EUGENE H. PETERSON

TRAVELING
LIGHT

GALATIANS AND THE
FREE LIFE IN CHRIST



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If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you. . . . So if the Son sets you free, you are free through and through.

JOHN 8:31-32, 36

We join our prayers today in intercession for men and women in our society who are trapped:

those who are trapped in poverty with no sign of relief;
those who are trapped in jobs that engage but a fraction of their powers;
those who are trapped in families where love has ebbed away;
those who are trapped in unwanted alliances out of which they cannot break;
those who are trapped by the fear of discovery, or by dependency on others; or by the need for drugs, or by an addiction to alcohol.

O Thou whose will it is that we be free, and who didst give Thy Son that we might be delivered from all coercive powers;
make us examples of Thy freedom, proclaimers of Thy freedom, and instruments of Thy freedom;
snap our chains that we may loose the chains of others.

Then shall the joy of the liberated rise from the earth like a mighty hymn of praise, Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

ERNEST T. CAMPBELL



Free for All

WE LIVE IN A WORLD AWASH IN FANTASIES of freedom. We spend enormous sums of money and immense amounts of psychic energy on these fantasies. We fantasize a free life based variously on power, on sex, on fame, on leisure. Whole industries develop out of these fantasies. Careers are shaped by them. Political movements are launched and fueled by them. But the world we live in is conspicuously and sadly lacking in the experience of freedom. The fantasies are barren: they give birth to nothing in word or deed. For all our elaborate and expensive fantasies, the actual lives that most people live are filled with impotence, boredom, obscurity, and hassle.

Living in the land of the free has not made us free; we are a nation of addicts and complainers. Being provided with freedom of religion has not made us free; coercive cults and enslaving superstitions continue to proliferate.

Assembling with people in church and listening to ringing proclamations of freedom—“He whom the Son sets free is free indeed!”—has not made us free. Our churches are attended regularly by the inhibited, the obsessive-compulsive, the fearfully defensive—enough of them to provide outside observers with a stereotype.

But not everything that has to do with freedom is fantasy. There are also realities of freedom. They are not, perhaps, as conspicuous, but they are there, at least for people of faith. These people believe that

God is free. He created the world and the people in it freely and not out of necessity. Since a free God is at the center of all existence, and all creation and every creature issues from a free act, freedom and not necessity is always the deeper and more lasting reality. At the center of that belief is the story of Jesus, the freest person who ever lived. And there is recurrent witness of the Spirit who is free, like the wind that “blows where it wills.” In every culture and land there is abundant testimony that persons who trust in God participate in this freedom. My own experience supports the testimony: when I live in faith I live freely. When I set God at the center of my life, I realize vast freedoms and surprising spontaneities. When I center life in my own will, my freedom diminishes markedly. I live constricted and anxious.

I live in a vortex where these fantasies and realities mingle. The life I live in the world cannot escape the fantasies, but neither can it avoid the realities. Like so many others who have chosen to live by faith, I find that it is a daily task to discriminate between the fantasies and the realities. And I need all the help I can get.

TRUTH IN NEED OF FOCUS

There are moments when a single truth seems to cry out for focused proclamation. For me one of these moments came in the early 1980s; freedom in Christ seemed the truth in need of focus. The end of a millennium was in sight. It would soon be two thousand years since Christ lived and died and rose again. The world had seen a succession of political and social revolutions that had featured the word *freedom*. Especially in the Western world, but hardly confined there, aspirations to freedom were very strong. But when I looked at the people I was living with as pastor—fairly affluent, well educated, somewhat knowledgeable about the Christian faith—I realized how unfree they were. They were

buying expensive security systems to protect their possessions from burglary. They were overcome with anxieties in the face of rising inflation. They were pessimistic about the prospects for justice and peace in a world bristling with sophisticated weapons systems and nuclear devices. They were living huddled, worried, defensive lives. I wanted to shout in objection: Don't live that way! You are Christians! Our lives can be a growth into freedom instead of a withdrawal into anxious wariness. Instead of shouting I returned to my regular round of work—preaching and teaching, visiting and counseling, praying and writing, encouraging and directing—but I was determined to seek ways in which I could awaken a hunger and thirst for the free life among people who had lost an appetite for it, and then, having awakened the appetite, to find the food and drink that would satisfy it. The more I did this, the more I became convinced that the experience of freedom in the life of faith is at the very heart of what it means to be human.

No truth is ever out of date, and none should be promoted at the expense of the whole truth, but there are occasions when particular truths must be emphasized. Is this such a time? Just as the fourth century required an emphasis on the deity of Christ, and the sixteenth century an emphasis on justification by faith, perhaps these last years of the twentieth century need an emphasis on the freedom that comes to maturity in a life of faith in Christ. Maybe living out this Christ-freedom is a gift we can offer the world as it passes its millennial milestone. So that is what I set myself to do.

SLOGANS AND CANT

In the process of doing this work I encountered difficulties. For instance, there was the matter of terminology. The word *freedom*, once a vessel light and swift, has become barnacle-encrusted with slogans

and cant, sluggish in the waters of discourse, unresponsive to nuance or insight. For centuries philosophers and theologians and poets kept the word clean in the service of truth. But in recent decades it has been appropriated by people who want to sell ideas and things for a profit, quite apart from any interest in truth.

Political propagandists and advertising copywriters have a monopoly on the word. If someone wants to use it to say something carefully and truly about persons or God, who has ears to hear? The word is immensely attractive and awakens such deep longings in us that it is no wonder that those who want us to buy their goods or enlist in their projects make promises of freedom.

The word freedom is used with deliberate cynicism by many to disguise operations that are enslaving. It is also used carelessly and thoughtlessly by others so that it has long since lost connection with truths that root experience in reality. Shouting the word *freedom* does nothing to bring about its reality. Labeling thoughts or actions as free does not alter their actual nature. Freedom is not an abstraction, and it is not a thing. It is a gift and a skill. It is a gift that another provides; it is a skill that must be exercised by each person within the learned limits of reality. If we would understand freedom, we must be taught; if we would acquire freedom, we must be trained.

HELP FROM A SPECIALIST

I found my best help in doing this in St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. Among the writers of Scripture, Paul is the specialist in matters of freedom. This can be seen in the frequency of Greek words for freedom found in Paul's letters (28 instances) in comparison with the rest of the New Testament (8) and the Apostolic Fathers (6). And in Paul's writings the words for freedom occur more frequently in his letter to

the Galatians (10 times) than in any other letter (7 times in Romans; 7 times in 1 Corinthians).

Through the Christian centuries this letter has often been used by God to restore vigor and passion to the life of faith and to confront the world with the realities of a free life in Christ, a life that is free for all: given freely to all of us, making all who receive it free; enabling us to live freely in relation to God and all others. The truth of the Galatian text is documented in the lives of free persons. It is possible. The experience is valid. We are not in realms of fantasy. We are not reduced to necessity. Free in Christ, we are free for all.

So I set myself deliberately between Paul's words in Galatians and the words of the people I lived with in church and in the world. I tried to listen in both directions and let the words interact with each other. I pondered and I prayed. I taught and I preached. I encouraged and I directed. I attempted to keep both elements in tension in my imagination and in my ministry—the element of Galatians, churning and surging with the energy of freedom, and the element of people who have given up on freedom and who live apathetically or fatalistically.

I wanted to stay immersed in the complexities of a full life, to accept all the necessities of a responsible life, and still to live freely. This book is an interim report on the continuing work of training and being trained in a way of life developed at God's initiative and in relation to his freedom. It is not biblical exposition or commentary in any classic sense; it is more like prayer—a continuing conversation that searches after understanding, sometimes digressing, but returning again and again to the word of God in the text to listen, to reflect, to answer, and to learn.

The development has not been orderly. Sometimes I am puzzled by Paul, sometimes exasperated by people, sometimes dismayed at my

own slowness of heart to believe. I am put in numerous situations, both personal and pastoral, in which I feel there is little or no freedom. There are other times when I am with people who, even while they experience the entrapments that life springs on them, still go their way with a light step and graceful mien. Every time this happens it is a marvel. Together, over a period of years, we experience the detailed rightness of what it means to live as free persons, traveling light.

Some things became clear very early. For one thing, all the rah-rah formulas of freedom that our society spawns are nonsense. They are either simplistic, escape-hatch freedoms from responsibility or vulgar, manipulative freedoms to exploit others. Many people have tried one or more of them, found them unworkable or immoral, and, hearing of no other freedom, succumbed to “lives of quiet desperation.”¹

It also became clear that there are no absolute freedoms. Absolute freedoms are fantasy freedoms. They deny God and they ignore creation, using only the ego as a base for freedom. They brook no qualification, no limitation, no compromise, no relationship. They do not grow out of wise and artful dealing with the human condition, but rather, severed from the actual, they float colorfully and aimlessly in the air like helium-filled party balloons. “The first condition of freedom,” say Will and Ariel Durant, “is its limitation; make it absolute and it dies in chaos.”²

PIONEERS OF THE FREE SPIRIT

I, for one, do not underestimate the difficulties in living free for all, of traveling light: it is persistently hard. Nor can I do it on my own: I need Christ and a community of faith. But there is nothing more worthwhile doing. Many Christians today have to all appearances ceased to be what Jacques Ellul calls “unconscious revolutionaries.”³

It is necessary to rouse awareness, to waken the spirit, because freedom is essential if all would be truly human. I am convinced that people settle for far too little in matters of freedom. Christians, in touch with the God who grants us a freedom far richer than its political and cultural versions, are in the privileged but awesomely responsible position of pioneers of the free spirit, the free life. Nicolas Berdyaev insists: “God has laid upon man the duty of being free, of safeguarding freedom of spirit, no matter how difficult that may be, or how much sacrifice and suffering it may require.”⁴

To discover movements of freedom in oneself where there has been only fear-ridden and cowering subjection; to stimulate a free word or act in persons submerged in apathy or pessimism, sluggishly living out their days with diminishing expectations and dwindling energy—these are gloriously worth doing.

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