

Editorial: We've been free longer than 250 years

We have been free longer than 250 years. And we have been abusing our freedom longer than 250 years.

I will explain by way of Peter, Paul, and Mary.

First, I'll say a word about religious freedom.

First, religious freedom

We are focused on freedom as we approach the 250th celebration of our nation's birth. Religious freedom is key among the freedoms we are celebrating, and rightly so. Along with celebrating religious freedom, we must guard it. But to guard it, we have to agree on what religious freedom is.

That agreement is not the subject of this editorial, though I will say this: In our polarization, we have polarized religious freedom. We aren't in agreement on how far the freedom extends or when it's being infringed. But we all agree, I think, religious freedom must exist.

Religious freedom is bigger than our polarized definitions, however. But again, this editorial isn't about those definitions. It's about another definition entirely, one that ought to matter most to Christians and ought to undergird any political understanding Christians have of religious freedom.

One reason we are polarized is because we don't have a firm grasp of the definition of the freedom that matters most. I'm not going to solve that problem. I'm only going to point to it.

What freedom is

Paul stated this definition pretty clearly in writing to Christians in Galatia. They also misunderstood freedom.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:13-14, NASB).

Peter, being more direct and less verbose than Paul, put it this way: “Act as free people, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it [your freedom] as bond-servants of God” (1 Peter 2:16, NASB).

This is how a Christian should understand and embody freedom. And if we call ourselves a “Christian nation,” we as a nation are obligated to embody the freedom we claim to have in the manner Peter and Paul describe. But we don’t. Not as a nation, we don’t. And far too often as the church, we don’t. Instead, we turn our freedom into an opportunity for the flesh.

What freedom isn’t

More often than not, we use our freedom to cover our evil. Ah, but what is evil? This is like Pilate asking, “What is truth,” or the lawyer asking Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” We know what evil is. Our God-given conscience tells us. But if our conscience is too dull, the biblical prophets spell it out clear enough.

So does Paul: “The acts of the flesh [evil] are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Galatians 5:19-21, NIV).

Don't tell me we don't act like any of that. There's plenty of much of it among us, and none of it is a lesser evil than the other. I'm speaking of both the nation and the church.

Oh, but God forgives us, and we don't have to follow that old law anymore anyway. So, it's OK. We're free. Paul had something to say about that, too.

It is true grace and forgiveness are free gifts to us through Jesus, Paul told the Christians in Rome. It is true that in Christ we are under grace, not law, Paul added. And no sin is greater than God's grace, he continued.

So, then, should we "continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! ... [Should we continue] to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" (Romans 5:12-6:23)

But we do, because we think that's what our freedom is for.

For 250 years, we in the United States have sought life, liberty, and happiness on our terms, and we've called it "Christian." But it's sin.

Freedom biblically understood isn't the freedom to go about our life on our terms. There are no "our terms." The terms are either obedience to sin leading to death or obedience to God leading to life. And there's the rub: We think we are free from both. We've bought the lie.

Ultimate freedom

Where does Mary come into all of this? I'm glad you asked.

Mary is one of our best examples of freedom in the Lord. When the angel told Mary she would conceive and give birth to a son who would fulfill centuries of prophecy, waiting, and longing, Mary was astonished: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" Fair question.

“Nothing will be impossible with God,” the angel said, to which Mary said: “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:26-38, ESV).

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say Jesus learned from Mary's example of submission to God. When he faced his own impossible moment—the cross—he said: “‘Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done’” (Luke 22:42, NIV).

And Jesus submitted to God's will and gave up his life so we may live.

This is what freedom looks like. Does our freedom look like that?

Almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus purchased this freedom with his life. This freedom has been ours ever since, no matter what any government does, no matter what laws regulate religious freedom.

As we celebrate 250 years of pursuing life, liberty, and happiness free from King George III's dictates, and almost 235 years of legalized religious freedom, let us remember our most important freedom is not given, nor can it be taken away, by any earthly king or government. And let us be clear about just what that freedom is and what it requires of us.

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