



# THE THEOLOGY OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

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*an examination of what it means to be 'free in Christ'*

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M. V. Pereira



## **The Theology of Christian Liberty**

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# INTRODUCTION

It has rightly been said that “we have a glorious liberty in Christ.”<sup>1</sup> It has also been said that “there is no doctrine so easy to distort as that of Christian freedom.”<sup>2</sup> In an effort to recover the true glory of liberty in Christ and dispel distortions of it, this study will take a unique approach to understanding what it means to be “set free in Christ.”

Most volumes written on the subject of Christian liberty typically begin within a thematic framework. That is, they immediately enter into discussion with a set of assumptions concerning the theme of Christian liberty, presenting and supporting their arguments by Scripture and reason. This study will take a fresh look at the doctrine of Christian liberty from God’s Word, in an exegetical rather than systematical manner. The aim of this effort, again, is to recover the true glory of this marvelous teaching and dispel distortions of it.

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In the sections that follow each of the Greek words that are used in the NT, which are translated and convey the meaning of ‘liberty’ or ‘freedom,’ will be analyzed. This is an exhaustive survey, in that every instance of each respective word will be considered in its respective context. Each word will be introduced in terms of its definition and historical meaning, analyzed with regard to relevant grammatical use, and finally considered in a brief contextual examination.

While there are a few related Greek words that will be briefly evaluated at the end, the bulk of this study will evaluate the one principal Greek term for freedom (*eleutheria*) in each of its respective parts of speech (i.e. verb, noun, adjective).

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, *The Epistles of Peter*, 114.

<sup>2</sup> Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, 239.

# THE BASIC PRINCIPLE: ‘TO SET FREE’

The basic principle of “freedom” or “liberty” in the New Testament is that of being set free from something or someone. The controlling idea behind the meaning of liberty in the Greek is most basically found in the verbal usage of the term. The following examination of the usage and meaning of the verb serves to underscore the basic principle of the theological concept of liberty as it is employed in the New Testament.

## Statistics:

- Greek transliteration: *eleutheroō*
- Part of speech: **verb**
- Basic meaning: ‘*to set free*’
- Occurrences in the NT: 7 instances found in 7 verses
- Exhaustive index: Jn. 8:32,36; Rom. 6:18,22; 8:2,21; Gal. 5:1

## Definition:

The basic meaning is “to make free” (Abbott-Smith) or “to set free” (BDAG, Friberg, Louw-Nida, Vine). Most literally it conveys the idea to “loose or release from” (LSJ). According to Friberg, it is used “of freedom from binding legalism make free (GA 5.1)” and elsewhere “of nature’s deliverance from decay and corruption free, deliver, liberate (RO 8.21).” It represents action “to cause someone to be freed from domination, free, set free from the Mosaic law, with implication of God as patron (Gal 5:1), someone (John 8:32, 36), sin (Rom 6:18, 22)” (BDAG). The idea of liberty is present, so as “to make free, set at liberty” (Thayer) or “liberate” (EDNT, Strong). Figuratively, “to exempt as from moral, ceremony or mortal liability: deliver, make free” (Strong). Moulton says that “the verb appears to be always punctiliar in the NT” (VGNT).

## Grammatical Use:

The following *subjects* are presented as acting upon this verb: *Christ* (Gal 5:1), *creation* (Rom 8:21 [passive]), *law of the Spirit* (Rom 8:2), *Son* (John 8:36), *truth* (Rom 8:32).

The verb is presented as acting upon the follow **objects**: “you/your” (Jn 8:32, 36; Rom 8:2) and “us” (Gal 5:1).

It is used with the following **prepositions**: “from, away from” (Rom 6:18, 22; 8:2, 21), “into” (Rom 8:21), and “in” (Rom 8:2).

So in summary, the Scripture says that *Christ/the Son/the law of the Spirit/the truth* sets free people (*you/us*), *from* and *in/into*. The question is *from* and *into* what? Context reveals the answer.

### **Contextual Use:**

The predominate entity from which people are freed is **sin**.

## **Freed From Sin**

**John 8:32**, “And you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” along with **8:36**, “so if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed,” are unmistakably describing freedom from sin (i.e. the enslaving power of sin wherein the depravity of self is lord and task master continually driving the soul in the way of sin) since v.34 is the basis of the argument.

The same is true for: **Romans 6:18**, “and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness;” **6:22**, “but now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life;” and **8:2**, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.”

The consequences of sin are in view for **Romans 8:21**, “that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God,” since the creation is not sinning but rather suffering the consequences of humanity’s sinning.

So the predominate use of *eleutheroō* (‘to set free’) is in regard to the active dominion of sin and its future consequences. This particular use appears to lay the foundation of all other uses of liberty in the New Testament, and most clearly extols the glory of Christian liberty found in the blessed free gift of grace through the substitutionary atonement secured by our Lord Jesus Christ for all

who trust in Him alone. Grace is both freely given and freeing when received.

## Freed From The Bondage Of Legalism

The final instance of the verb form of freedom is found in *Galatians 5:1*, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” The context of Galatians clearly reveals that Paul is arguing against the destructive bondage of legalism, that is using the law as a way of salvation (cf. 2:16-21; 3:2-3, 10-14, 19-29; 4:1-7, 21-31; 5:2-12; 6:13-15). A concise summary of the contextual use of freedom in Galatians is well stated by Campbell, “In particular it contains a clear statement of justification by faith and builds on that foundation a defense of Christian liberty against any form of legalism.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Campbell, “Galatians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 587.



# THE SUBSTANCE

The substance of “liberty” in the New Testament essentially conveys the state, condition, or quality of liberty as perceived in consequence to the act of being set free. While the verbal usage is most essential in understanding the theological concept of liberty in the New Testament, an accurate understanding of its substance is certainly very important as well. The substantival understanding of liberty is presented in the noun usage of the term, an examination of which follows.

## Statistics:

- Greek transliteration: *eleutheria*
- Part of speech: **noun**
- Basic meaning: *‘freedom, liberty’*
- Occurrences in the NT: 11 instances found in 10 verses
- Exhaustive index: Rom. 8:21; 1 Co. 10:29; 2 Co. 3:17; Gal. 2:4; 5:1,13; Jas. 1:25; 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:16; 2 Pet. 2:19

## Definition:

Plainly, “liberty: with reference to the religious life (1 Cor 10:29; 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 2:4; 5:1; 1 Pet 2:16; 2 Pet 2:19), to ‘the law’ (James 1:25; 2:12), to ‘the glory’ (Rom 8:21)” (Abbott-Smith). According to Friberg, it is “as a state of being free *freedom, liberty*, opposite Gr. *douleia* (*slavery, bondage*); of a life rescued from spiritual and moral wrongdoing *freedom* (2C 3.17)” and “as the liberation of nature from decay and corruption *freedom* (RO 8.21).”

“In a number of languages the concept of freedom is expressed as a negation of control or domination, for example, ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is present, there is no longer domination’ or ‘... a person is not dominated’ or ‘... a person does not feel under constraint’” (Louw-Nida). According to Thayer, it means “liberty,” which works out as liberation “from the yoke of the Mosaic law, Gal. 2:4; 5:1,13; 1 Pet. 2:16; [and] from Jewish errors so blinding the mental vision that it does not discern the majesty of Christ, 2 Cor.

3:17.” He goes on to suggest that it is “freedom from the dominion of corrupt desires, so that we do by the free impulse of the soul what the will of God requires: i.e. the Christian religion, which furnishes that rule of right living by which the liberty just mentioned is attained, James 1:25; 2:12.” Finally, it is noted to be “freedom from the restraints and miseries of earthly frailty, manifested in the glorious condition of the future life, Rom. 8:21.”

It is “the state of being free, freedom, liberty” (BDAG). This is especially “of freedom which stands in contrast to constraint of the Mosaic law, looked upon as slavery Gal 2:4; 5:1 (in contrast to legal serfdom)” (BDAG).

### Grammatical Use:

The noun is used as the **subject of** only one verb passively, the verb “be judged” (1 Cor 10:29). The meaning is thus, freedom was judged.

It is found as the **object of**: “promise” (2 Pet 2:19), “have” (1 Pet 2:16), and “spy out” (Gal 2:4). Thus, false freedom was “promised,” true freedom is “had,” and was “spied out” in different contexts.

It is used as the **adjunct of** the verb form of freedom three times, in Romans 8:21, Galatians 5:1, and Galatians 5:13. The meaning in the first two cases conveys the idea of being *set free* (verb) for<sup>4</sup> *freedom* (noun). The second is similar, but the verbal action is *calling* rather than *freeing*.

The noun form of freedom is used four times **adjectivally**, that is to describe other nouns. In 1 Cor 10:29 it is used to describe Paul personally and in Gal 2:4 it is used to describe Paul, Barnabas, and Titus. In each of these cases the individuals in view are described as “free,” specifically with regard to the Mosaic Law (including its misuse). The final instance is found in Romans 8:21 where “free/freedom” is used to describe “glory.” Thus the literal statement there is “freedom of the glory” (NAS, ESV). Most

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<sup>4</sup> The accusative case is used in Romans while the dative case is used in Galatians.

translations render it “glorious freedom,” which has glory modifying “freedom” rather than the “children of God” which is contrary to the context and every other use in the passage (cf. vv. 17-18).<sup>5</sup> In the fourth instance, the noun freedom/liberty adjectivally modifies the “law” (James 2:12), so that the law that James is referring to is a law that is described as “a law of liberty.”

Finally, the noun for freedom is *modified* once by an article in the construct of the “perfect law” and thus can literally be rendered, “the perfect law, ‘that’ of liberty” or “of ‘the’ liberty” (Ja 1:25). So that the law is described as that which is both perfect/complete and one of “the” freedom/liberty known in Christ.

### Contextual Use:

Because the noun form substantially represents something, rather than portraying an action or serving as a description of something else, it warrants the most extensive examination. Each instance of *eleutheria* will be considered within the most appropriate and contextual category.

## Change of Jurisdiction

(Related to the Mosaic Law)

**1 Corinthians 10:29** - "I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my **freedom** judged by another's conscience?"

This statement follows a very long list of concerns, principles, insights, and admonitions concerning things lawful and edifying to those in the church of Christ. In fact the contextual unit begins in 8:1, “Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all

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<sup>5</sup> “The word δόξης in the phrase τῆς δόξης τῶν τέκνων τοῦ θεοῦ (*tēs doxēs tōn teknōn tou theou*, the glory of the children of God) modifies not ἐλευθερίαν (*eleutherian*, freedom) but τέκνων (contra KJV, RSV, NIV, Moule 1959: 175; rightly Morris 1988: 322; Moo 1991: 554), for the glory in this text is consistently ascribed (as in vv. 17–18) to the children of God” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998], 437).

have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.” This whole section from 8:1 to 12:1 (cf. “Now concerning...” formula) is dealing with worship, regulations, laws, granted freedoms, principles of stewardship, submission, and order, as well as the key of Christian love and thus the principal aim of edifying other believers.

Notice (1) the immediate context of 10:23-33 and (2) that this statement is related to the discussion in the larger context, most notably: 8:4, 8-13; 9:1, 12, 17-23, 25, 27; 10:8, 11-13. This indicates that the contextual concern is regarding how Christians are to conduct their lives, particularly in relation to one another in the church, not themselves being under the Mosaic Law. The key points of the larger and immediate context clearly deal with OT laws that were prescribed to Israel. As the church takes root in this transitional period between covenants, disciples of Christ who observe all that He commanded are free from obligation to the Mosaic Law and are thus not to be judged as violators of it in customs that are no longer binding.

“The best answer seems to be found in the language ‘my freedom,’ ‘being judged,’ and ‘being denounced,’ which recalls Paul’s defense of his own conduct in chap. 9. Since so much of the language in the immediately following verses echoes 9:19-23, it seems probable that in dealing with the issue of Christian freedom in regard to *adiaphora* like eating marketplace food, he has felt compelled to offer a final word of defense, precisely because this was the issue on which they were judging him.”<sup>6</sup>

Garland suggests that “Paul may have used the ‘I’ ‘for the sake of vividness when a more universal application is in view’ (Wallace 1996: 391; cf. BDF §28), thus presenting himself as a paradigmatic example for his readers.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Fee, 486. See also Kistemaker and Blomberg.

<sup>7</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 498.

The whole context abundantly and clearly centers on the subject of conscience and particularly concerning Mosaic Law. It is quite striking that those who argue for a philosophical view of “liberty” under some Christian ideal, fail to acknowledge the fact that Christian liberty is never spoken against the backdrop of sin as it relates to morality, but rather sin as it relates to customs defined by the Mosaic Law—of which the New Covenant believer is not bound. As for morality, the New Covenant believer is most certainly bound. Thus, Christian “liberty” is *not*, as some would say, “of a conscience no longer dominated by binding scruples (1 Cor 10.29)” (Thayer). In this context, the issue fundamentally pivots on jurisdiction, the transition from one covenant to another (Mosaic Law to New Covenant Law—‘Law of Christ’). Christians are liberated from Mosaic Law but this is not equivalent to being liberated from the moral law of God, which is likewise manifest in the commands of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 9:20; Gal 6:2; James 1:25; 2:12; Matt 28:19-20; John 14:15; etc.). Thus, liberation from Mosaic Law is by no means liberation from moral constraint. Christian liberty is not moral freedom.

How does conscience (cf. vv.26-30) relate to freedom in this context? The conscience is clearly that agency of conviction or acquittal on the basis of knowledge, which could be rightly or wrongly informed. To be a New Covenant believer and live as though you are still under the Old Covenant and its particular regulations is to wrongly inform your conscience (or remain ignorant of the knowledge of the New Covenant). This relates to the concept of a “weaker” brother in the foundational context of this passage and elsewhere (cf. 1 Cor 8:7, 9, 10, 11, 12; 9:22; Rom 14:1-2; 15:1). In these cases, weakness most apparently relates to the lack of understanding the radical change that Christ has brought about through His initiation of the New Covenant. This lack of understanding may be otherwise seen as a lack of maturity in Christ. It is a lack of clarity on the place of the Mosaic Law in the life of the Christian that is the issue here.

To understand the principle presented in 1 Cor 10:29, we must first consider that a certain action would indeed be sin if it was performed by a Jew under the Mosaic Law, yet if likewise performed by a genuine Christian under the New Covenant, it may not be sin. Whereas the moral righteousness of God does not change, the regulations and commands given to Israel vary with those given to the New Testament church. Thus, sin defined by *moral* standards is always sin—for all people at all times—but sin that is defined by ceremonial and civil prescription is discontinuous between OT Israel and the NT church. Just as the Old and New Covenants differ, so their respective ceremonial and civil prescriptions differ. The case in point is that certain foods were clearly prohibited in the Mosaic Law (cf. Lev 11; Deut 14:3-21; etc.), and yet New Covenant believers are free to partake of them (cf. Mark 7:19; Luke 11:41; Acts 10:15; 1 Cor 6:13; Col 2:16). What is or is not eaten, for example, is not in and of itself a matter of morality. However, the choice to obey or not is a matter of morality, and thus if God commanded that we not eat of certain foods, then to eat them would be to sin. As this relates back to the context concerning the conscience, “something morally neutral becomes a sin if one thinks it is wrong but does it anyway (Rom 14:22-23).”<sup>8</sup> So, although *what* you are choosing may be morally indifferent, the *act of your choosing* is not.

While indeed the true and rightly extracted principle of preferring a believing brother in Christ should not be ignored,<sup>9</sup> this principle is not itself the sole issue of the ‘liberty’ that is in view. The freedom that Paul is here laboring to explain, exhort, and illustrate is only found in contexts that deal with misunderstanding

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<sup>8</sup> John S. Feinberg, Paul D. Feinberg and Aldous Huxley, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1996), 44.

<sup>9</sup> “If we have to choose between offending a Christian and offending a non-Christian, we should offend the non-Christian. The profit and edification of our brother or sister in Christ is of greater importance. Not only that, but our testimony will be harmed more by arguing with and condemning fellow believers than by standing by them in love.” (John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1996], 248).

and misapplying Mosaic Law in the Christian life. Thus, it would be incorrect to assume that this passage is teaching a principle of liberty that suggests that Christians should abstain from practices of questionable morality merely on the basis of the conscience of other believers. In other words, it is not that Christians are actually free—provided they are “mature” enough to handle playing with fire—to accept what would not be morally acceptable by other Christians who are “weaker” (where the use of “weaker” is often taken to mean that this believer cannot handle the temptation of, or level of exposure to, the world and sin that the “stronger” believer can). This popular conception of “Christian liberty” is demonstrated in statements like, “I personally believe that I could go places and see things which the average Christian could not. Although I don’t think I would be hurt by them, I avoid them because of my testimony.”<sup>10</sup> Public testimony is always important but secondary to private holiness, and should be the outworking of it. To assume an inward relationship to sin that is different than one’s outward relationship to sin, is hypocrisy not liberty. Paul was not promoting differences between one’s morality which is known only to God and self and that which humans see. He was not promoting a relative morality, like, “be more moral around those who are weaker,” or “have a higher standard of morality around people who may stumble into sin because of your choices.” He was informing his readers’ consciences regarding customary regulations of food (cf. 1 Cor 8:7-13), days of worship (cf. Rom 14:5; Gal 4:10; Col 2:16), circumcision (cf. Rom 2:28-29; Gal 5:1-6), washings (cf. Heb 9:10), etc., that are defined in the Old Covenant and no longer binding on the New Covenant worshipper.

Lastly, in the immediate context it is unambiguously clear that Paul is urging Christians to make certain that their aim is to glorify God in every detail of their life (1 Cor 10:31) and to do so without offending others (vv. 32-33). Since glorifying God in moral matters

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<sup>10</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *The Epistles (1 Peter)*, Thru the Bible commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 58.

always involves the pursuit of holiness and since the charge is to not offend God, believers, and unbelievers alike, the freedom that Paul speaks of in v. 29 simply cannot be in relation to morality.

## Deliverance

(Related to Salvation)

**2 Corinthians 3:17** - "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is **liberty**."

The focus in this context clearly centers on salvation. Great emphasis is placed on the Holy Spirit, which distinctively underscores the breaking-in of the New Covenant. This is clearly seen as in contradistinction to the Old Covenant in context (cf. 3:3, 6, 7-11, 12-18; 4:1-6). "It needs to be remembered that Paul's main concern in chapter 3, is to highlight the greater splendour of the new covenant of the Spirit (cf. vv. 3, 6, 8, 18) which he contrasts with the lesser splendour of the old covenant of the law."<sup>11</sup> The context here is definitively not freedom from the Mosaic Law, as above,<sup>12</sup> but salvation, which is distinctively marked by the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup>

The context indicates a meaning of freedom from condemnation, guilt, and judgment. Notice that 4:1 carries the point, "as we received mercy." This joined with 4:3 and 4:6, explain 3:18 to portray the Spirit's work as a transformation into glory

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<sup>11</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 99.

<sup>12</sup> "The widespread idea that Paul has in mind freedom from the law should be dismissed." (David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001], 196-97).

<sup>13</sup> "When people live under the old covenant in the way some of Paul's contemporaries did (seeking acceptance before God by works of law), there is no freedom. The demands of the law cannot be fulfilled and therefore they stand under its condemnation. But under the covenant of the Spirit there is liberty. There is no more remembrance of sins (Rom. 4:6-8), and no condemnation of the sinner (Rom. 8:1)." (Kruse, 100).



precisely because the veil of unbelieving blindness (3:15) has been “taken away” (3:16), which is the true liberation. So that the presence of the Holy Spirit frees us from blindness and the bondage of self-destruction to behold the glory of Christ (4:6), who is our salvation. Paul’s later focus on endurance through trials and persecution—even facing death—builds on his point of salvation here and affirms it (cf. 4:7–5:9).

While the greatest focus seems to be on salvation, we may also observe that “it is significant that *eleutheria* is unqualified, which suggests that Paul would not wish to exclude any type of freedom that is implied in the context, such as the freedom to speak and act openly (v. 12); freedom from the veil (vv. 14–16), whether the veil of spiritual ignorance concerning truths of the new covenant or the veil of hardheartedness (vv. 13, 14); freedom from the old covenant (v. 14) or from the law and its effects (v. 6); freedom to behold God’s glory uninterruptedly (v. 18) or to conform to Christ (v. 18); or freedom of access into the divine presence without fear.”<sup>14</sup>

**Romans 8:21** - "that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the **freedom** of the glory of the children of God."

While the creation is not a recipient of “salvation” as humans are, it is here said to be set free or delivered from its present bondage of corruption. The creation itself is set free from the present curse and related bondage that would otherwise lead to destruction. Common themes of “glory” and “transformation” are present in both passages. There may even be an allusion (cf. 2 Cor 4:6, “who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness’”) to the continuity that the God who created, will someday restore; both testify to “the glory of God in the face of Christ.”

**1 Peter 2:16** - "Act as free men, and do not use your **freedom** as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God."

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<sup>14</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005), 312-13.

The context here starts in v.13, “submit yourselves.” This is the main verb that extends from v.13 through present verse, such that every other action presented is subordinate to “submit yourselves.”<sup>15</sup>

It must first be acknowledged that Peter does not here specify what kind of freedom is in view. The text does not identify what the reader is freed *from*. Elliot sees it referring to the social and legal status of those addressed. Robertson links it with Gal 4:26 as freedom in the “ethical sense” of the term. Kistemaker suggests that Peter “wants the readers to know that the Christian is free indeed because he has been set free from the power of sin.”<sup>16</sup> Jobes agrees and argues that “throughout his teaching, Peter affirms that Christians have been set free from their former way of life so that they can become slaves of God and live in obedience to him rather than as they once did.”<sup>17</sup> While the ethical sense may very well be included in the meaning, it does not appear to satisfy the context the best.

The context begins with a call to submit to the governing authorities, and immediately following calls for honor to the king and to earthly masters. Later in chapter 3, when Peter sums up this section of exhortation, he says that Christians are not to be “returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing” (1Pe 3:9). This appears to sum up both (1) the idea of not responding to the persecution of the world in a way that would dishonor Christ and (2) to keep looking toward their future glorious inheritance. Following this, he exhorts them to submit and be obedient to the governing authorities even if they suffer

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<sup>15</sup> “In each case the implied verb is ‘submit’ from v. 13 rather than ‘live’ as the NIV renders it. The Greek text lacks a verb, and hence as interpreters it must be supplied.” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2007), 131.

<sup>16</sup> Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and the Epistle of Jude*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953-2001), 101.

<sup>17</sup> Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 177.

persecution by them (cf. 3:13-22) because we are saved in Jesus Christ “who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him” (1Pe 3:22). In light of both the immediate and greater context, the evidence points to this freedom being the freedom that is associated with salvation.

Thus, “Peter here begins to specify how citizens of God’s holy nation are to relate to the sociopolitical authority of the world in which they live. It may be tempting for Christian believers, especially in pagan societies, to construe their loyalty to Christ as a license for rebellion against the ungodly authorities that govern them.”<sup>18</sup> “Peter has in mind not political or social freedom (which for household servants [2:18–25] and wives [3:1–6] was limited at best), but freedom in Christ from the ‘ignorance’ (1:14) or ‘darkness’ (2:9) of paganism. The freedom of the epistle’s readers was the result of being ‘redeemed’ (1:18) with the blood of Christ.”<sup>19</sup>

The point is, they are not truly slaves of the world or its authorities, they are truly free in Christ. “Christian freedom rests not on escape from service but on a change of master.”<sup>20</sup> They are “aliens and strangers” in this world because they are citizens of heaven. But as free men (in Christ), “it did not relieve them of their duty of submission to the civil powers. Believers should render due submission ‘for the Lord’s sake’ (v.13) without feeling that they are the slaves of government.”<sup>21</sup> This meaning of salvation is closely linked with a changed life that gives testimony to the lordship of God (cf. 1:3, 14-16, 22; 2:1-3, 9-12). This lordship of God is clearly attached to the close of our present verse, “as bondslaves of God.” “Christian freedom consists not in freedom from a master, but in

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<sup>18</sup> Jobes, 174.

<sup>19</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 128.

<sup>20</sup> Jobes, 176-77.

<sup>21</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 Peter* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1992), 169.

the voluntary submission to God as our rightful master.”<sup>22</sup> The reference to “slave” indicates “as being wholly His and bound to be doing His will. The use of such a strong term, ‘slaves,’ does not imply involuntary servitude for the believer, but stresses the unconditional, absolute obedience due to his Master. . . . They find true liberty in faithfully doing His will.”<sup>23</sup> So, it is only within the outworking of salvation that “Peter explains that true freedom is consistent with obedience to God’s will.”<sup>24</sup>

In summary, Peter is admonishing the believers who are under Roman persecution to not allow their freedom (which is here primarily salvation in Christ and thus allegiance to Him as supreme King) to be used as a covering under which they could rebel against earthly authorities, because they are slaves of God. This is further crystallized in the example of Christ that follows in the context (cf. 2:21-25).

**2 Peter 2:19** - "promising them **freedom** while they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved."

Peter apparently sees a strong almost indistinguishable connection between enslavement to sin (evident in moral conduct) and being captive to eschatological destruction (judgment). This is the case here in 2 Peter 2:19. The context presents false teachers (cf. 2:1, 17) as “promising . . . freedom” (2:19) to “those who barely escape from the ones who live in error.” (2:18). The sins of sensuality, fleshly desires, and corruption are clearly presented as a shackling power that reveals the true nature of person—“slaves of corruption; for by what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved.” But what is it that these false teachers who practice vagrant

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 169-170.

<sup>24</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 129.

sensuality are promising? What is the meaning of this “freedom” that they promise?

While they show themselves to be under the power of sin, such is certainly not what they were promising. One is a means and the other an end. Their present corruption served as a revealing means that their coming end was destruction (cf. 2:1). But the context is heavily marked by eschatological (coming) judgment (cf. 2:1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9-10, 12-20; 3:3, 7, 9, 10, 16). Thus, “if ‘freedom’ was one of their catchwords, they could have given it a broad spectrum of significance: freedom from judgment, freedom from moral constraint, perhaps also freedom from fear of the powers of evil (cf. v 10). But so far as we can tell, freedom from fear of eschatological judgment will have been the fundamental freedom.”<sup>25</sup> “They were promised freedom from the fear of final judgment and certainly also from conventional moral constraints.”<sup>26</sup> So when Peter mentions corruption, he “denotes not merely the decay which sin produces in this life; it also involves that spiritual corruption which leads to perdition.”<sup>27</sup>

Again, the close link between lawlessness and the freedom of future judgment are profoundly clear here. This stands in striking antithesis to antinomianism, which is quite possibly part of their teaching. Indeed, “such teaching may have arisen through a distortion of Paul’s gospel of freedom, since we know from 3:15–16 that some were perverting his teaching.”<sup>28</sup>

## Gospel

(Related to Legalism)

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<sup>25</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *2 Peter, Jude*, WBC (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 275.

<sup>26</sup> Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2006), 246, quoting Vögtle.

<sup>27</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *2 Peter* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1992), 127.

<sup>28</sup> Schreiner, 359.

**James 1:25** - "But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of **liberty**, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."

The two instances of *eleutheria* in James are quite unique in that they do not explicitly represent something independently, but rather ultimately modify the meaning of the "law." In this case, James' reference to "the law" is modified by the designation "*the liberty*" or "*that [law] of liberty.*" The article for liberty designates a definite, known or established "freedom," which could very well be that freedom that Christ taught and is so closely associated with the gospel (cf. John 8:31-36). "In chap. 2, James's description of the law suggests that he has at least one eye on the 'fulfillment' of that law in the teaching of Jesus."<sup>29</sup>

Concerning the law, "the context makes clear that the reference is to 'the implanted word' in verse 21 or simply 'the word' in verse 22. Now it is given a different designation. 'Law,' without the article, has a qualitative force: the object being examined or looked into has the authoritative nature of law. In calling the Word 'a law,' James refers to that authoritative body of truth that is the foundation of the Christian faith. It is the message contained in the apostolic preaching and now embodied in the New Testament. Christians accept this body of truth as the authoritative standard by which life is to be regulated."<sup>30</sup> "This Word is not a law of liberty because it liberates us from obedience to God's holy commandments or even from a single point in any of them; the gospel itself and true faith impel us to this obedience."<sup>31</sup> This is supported from the text in that "the genitive 'of liberty' is subjective, denoting that this law gives the experience of freedom in the lives of those who voluntarily observe it."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 94.

<sup>30</sup> D. Edmond Heibert, *James* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1992), 121-2.

<sup>31</sup> Lenski, 9:574.

<sup>32</sup> Heibert, *James*, 122.

“Freedom is not from the works of the law (as in Paul; James has no precise phrase ‘works of the law’ as in Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16; 3:10), but rather it connotes a release from self-interest and a new capacity to practice God’s will in the interests of one’s needy neighbor (v 27).”<sup>33</sup> Thus, “it does not promote antinomianism but prompts obedience without compulsion.”<sup>34</sup> So in this way, this “liberty” is a freedom that is only found in the truth (cf. John 8:33) of Jesus Christ revealed in the gospel and therefore opposes legalism and exults in the grace of God—the gospel. Rather than external and self-determined conformity to some moral code, the law of liberty points more fully to love (cf. 2:8). Indeed it is freedom from the bondage of self and pride to “love, the fruit of faith, does freely what God bids in the law; this is liberty indeed . . . Blessed are we when we are doing the Word, doing it by believing and by loving (1:25).”<sup>35</sup> Motyer calls this law of liberty a “paternal directive arising from love.”<sup>36</sup>

“As long as the law remains external, as long as it has not become an internal principle, an impulse of love, law and liberty are at odds. When the law is written on the heart, internalized, which is the distinctive mark of the new covenant (Jer 31:31ff), then law and liberty go hand in hand.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ralph P. Martin, *James*, WBC (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 51. “Certainly Paul was against legalism, the use of the law as a way of salvation — that could only lead to death — but when it came to the ethical life of the Christian, it was another matter. On that topic Paul draws on the earlier Christian tradition in terms similar to James (Gal. 5:13, which combines freedom and law; Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21; and 1 Cor. 7:10, 25, where a dominical saying ends the discussion; cf. Dibelius, 119).” (Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990], 100).

<sup>34</sup> Heibert, *James*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> Lenski, 574-5.

<sup>36</sup> Motyer, 70.

<sup>37</sup> Wolff, *General Epistles of James and Jude*, 45, quoted by Heibert, 151.

In sum, the meaning of *eleutheria* here connotes the substance of the gospel and thereby calls for obedience in the gospel to the opposition of legalism. James calls the guiding moral standards by which Christians are to live, the “law of liberty,” distinctively marked out as the “law of love” (cf. John 13:34). He does not call it the “law of requirement for salvation” or the “law of that saves” or the “law of the rabbis” or the “law of Moses.” To be sure, it is a law to be obeyed, but not in connection with salvation.

**James 2:12** - "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of **liberty**."

This instance is virtually identical in final meaning to that of 1:25 (see above).

In this verse, James warns believers that they will be “judged” by this “law of liberty.” Hiebert rightly notes that “‘judged’ here does not have the meaning of ‘condemned’ (cf. 4:11) but rather conveys the thought of standing before the Judge, who will assess their character and conduct ‘by a law of liberty’.

This expression occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in James 1:25, but the thought is clearly indicated in John 8:32-36. The absence of an article with either noun gives prominence to the character of this law that will be the standard of God’s judgment. The designation is James’s way of distinguishing this law from the Mosaic law, especially as interpreted by the rabbis.”<sup>38</sup>

**Galatians 5:1** - "It was for **freedom** that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

As noted above, in the description of the verbal action to set free, the context shows that “freedom” here represents freedom from the bondage of legalism. This is made plain by the context, both immediate (“do not be subject *again* to a yoke of slavery” Gal

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<sup>38</sup> Heibert, *James*, 151.



5:1, 2, 3, 4) and wider (cf. 2:16-21; 3:2-3, 10-14, 19-29; 4:1-7, 21-31; 5:2-12; 6:13-15).

So while the meaning of freedom here is very similar to that of Gal 2:4 and 1 Cor 10:29 (see above), since both contexts relate to the teaching that Christians are not under the Mosaic Law, the contexts differs significantly in that in Galatians the issue is the use (or rather *misuse*) of law as a necessity to salvation and in Corinthians it is the causing of offense by the insensitive manner in which some Christians were throwing off the Mosaic Law. This became a cause of offense in the church (cf. 1 Cor 8:1-13)<sup>39</sup> and a significant stumbling block in efforts to evangelize Jews (cf. 1 Cor 9:20; 10:32-33).

So in summary, the freedom that is in view here in Gal 5:1 (and 5:13) is clearly related to legalism and most fully represents the gospel. In fact, the word “gospel” could almost be substituted and still make sense: “It was for the *gospel* that Christ us free, therefore keep standing firm...” and “For you were called to the *gospel*, only do not turn the *gospel* (of your salvation) into an opportunity for the flesh (knowing that you are saved by grace and not works of the law)...” (cf. 1:6-9, 11). This understanding is consistent with the context as well as related exhortations to Christians found elsewhere (cf. Eph 4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:12; 4:1).

**Galatians 2:4** - "But it was because of the false brethren secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy out our **liberty** which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage."

In this context, the same principle as above is in view. Paul, Barnabas, and Titus all knew that they were no longer subject to the Mosaic obligation of circumcision, yet some in Jerusalem were seeking to demand obedience to that Mosaic requirement. The purpose was indicated, “in order to bring us into bondage.” The most convincing explanation of this statement is that these “false

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<sup>39</sup> To those who kept observing certain Jewish customs and could not in good conscience eat meat offered to pagan idols.

brethren” were seeking to add requirements to faith in Christ for salvation (cf. Gal 1:6–9).<sup>40</sup>

**Galatians 5:13** - "For you were called to **freedom**, brethren; only do not turn your **freedom** into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another."

The use of “freedom” here is identical to that of 5:1 (see above). This verse makes plain that Paul’s “point is not that those who live in the Spirit are free from all moral norms or moral constraints, as if those who live in the Spirit enjoy unbridled freedom. Instead, those who yield to the Spirit conquer sin and live in love.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> It may well be argued that Gal 2:4 is dealing primarily with obedience to Mosaic Law without any specific allusion to misuse or legalism. This position would most accord with the usage found in 1 Cor 10:29 and would fit well in the development of Paul’s argument against legalism in Galatians. While this conclusion remains a viable option, there are four substantial considerations that seem to weigh in favor of the view that the adjectival use of *freedom* in Gal 2:4 is alluding to a liberty that is in opposition to legalism rather than merely an argument for change of jurisdiction: (1) Those who were opposing this “liberty” were identified as “false brethren,” which would suggest legalists rather than those who are referred to as “weaker” in 1 Cor; (2) The purpose clause, “in order to bring us into bondage,” suggests legalism rather than some ill-informed persistence in the observance of Mosaic Law (deprecated jurisdiction), which Paul elsewhere describes as “holy and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12) and “good if one uses it lawfully” (1 Tim 1:8) rather than bondage; (3) Paul’s purpose for opposing subjection to the legalist’s efforts is indicated as “so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you” (Gal 2:5), which is the main purpose of Galatians and militates directly against legalism; (4) This conception of “freedom” is the predominant case in Galatians and is most consistent with the overall context.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 484.

# THE IDENTITY

Whenever “free” is used in the New Testament to describe someone, the adjective form is most often employed as a means of identity. While the majority of instances of this type occur in regard to the socio-political status concerning slavery, there are a few instances given in a theological context, which will be briefly considered below.

## Statistics:

- Greek transliteration: *eleutheros*
- Part of speech: **adjective**
- Basic meaning: ‘free’
- Occurrences in the NT: 23 instances found in 23 verses
- Exhaustive index: Matt. 17:26; Jn. 8:33,36; Rom. 6:20; 7:3; 1 Co. 7:21-22,39; 9:1,19; 12:13; Gal. 3:28; 4:22-23,26,30-31; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:11; 1 Pet. 2:16; Rev. 6:15; 13:16; 19:18

## Definition:

As a descriptive word, it plainly means “free” as in “(a) a civil sense, not a slave (Jo 8:33; 1 Cor 7:21, 22; 12:13; Gal 3:28; Eph 6:8; Col 3:11; Rev 6:15; 13:16; 19:18; (fem) Gal 4:22, 23, 30;) and (b) as regards restraint and obligation in general (Matt 17:26; 1 Cor 9:1; (*ek*) 1 Cor 9:19; (*apo*) Rom 7:3; (*inf.*) 1 Cor 7:39;)” and specifically as free “from the law (Gal 4:26; 1 Pet 2:16), from sin (John 8:36), and from righteousness (Rom 6:20)” (Abbott-Smith). Friberg identifies this term as denoting that which is free “of political and social freedom allowing for self-determination free, independent, not bound (JN 8.33); of freedom from taxation exempt (MT 17.26); *spiritually*, of freedom from sin and death free (JN 8.36); *morally*, of freedom from self-seeking through self-control free (1P 2.16).” “Properly, one who can go whither he pleases” and thus “free, exempt, unrestrained, not bound by an obligation 1 Cor 9:1, 19” (Thayer). The meaning conveys two basic categories: “(1) pertaining to being free socially

and politically, free (2) pertaining to being free from control or obligation, independent, not bound” (BDAG).

### **Grammatical Use:**

This adjective is presented as the **subject of** the following verbs: *there is* (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11), *to be, exist* (1 Cor 7:22), *hid* (Rev 6:15). These are grammatically the actions that the noun modified by “free” do. So that in Rev 6:15, the “free hid themselves.”

The **objects** that are described as “free” include: *to be, exists* (Matt 17:26; John 8:36; Rom 7:3; 1 Cor 9:1, 19; Gal 4:26) and *to become, be born* (John 8:33; 1 Cor 7:21). So that, in John 8:36, “you” is the noun that “will become” described as “free.”

There is one example where “free” is used **adjectivally**: *of all [men]* (Rev 19:18). The idea is that the “all men” who are described as “free” are in view.

Finally, the adjective “free” is twice **modified by other adjectives**: *all* (Rev 13:16) and *son* (Gal 4:30).

### **Contextual Use:**

The predominate description that this term conveys is a freedom from obligation, particularly servitude.

## **Free From Obligation To A Particular Law**

(The Concept of Being ‘Exempt’)

**Matthew 17:26** – “When Peter said, ‘From strangers,’ Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are **exempt**.””

**Romans 7:3** – “So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is **free** from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.”

**1 Corinthians 7:39** – “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is **free** to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”

In these instances, the generic concept of exemption is portrayed. Exemption simply conveys the condition in which a person is not under a particular law that they would otherwise be under. It may be that the person was once under the jurisdiction of a given law (like marriage) and are no longer, thus they are now declared “free” from that law (cf. Rom 7:3).

It is interesting to note that in each of these cases exemption is linked to a person’s status or essential identity. In Rom 7:3 and 1 Cor 7:39, the person’s marital status is the focus, while in Matt 17:26 Jesus is teaching a lesson on the basis of a person’s true identity in relation to God (i.e. son or stranger). The main idea here is that this use of “free” describes someone as not under a certain jurisdiction. The clearest illustration is seen in Romans 7:1–6, where Paul uses the social example of marital law and its conditions to portray a change of jurisdiction with respect to the New Covenant believer and the Mosaic Law. Consequently, this adjectival use of the term is most closely associated with the “Change of Jurisdiction” substantival use (see the section entitled “The Substance”).

## **Free From The Abiding Power And Consequence Of Sin**

**John 8:36** – “So if the Son makes you **free**, you will be free indeed.”

In this instance, the true disciple of Christ is said to be “free” from the abiding power and future and final consequence of *sin*. This use is most closely associated with the “Deliverance” substantival use (see the section entitled “The Substance”).

## **Free From The Abiding Power And Consequence Of Righteousness**

**Romans 6:20** – “For when you were slaves of sin, you were **free** in regard to righteousness.”

In this instance, the unbeliever is said to be “free” from the abiding power and future consequence of *righteousness*. This powerfully portrays the inverse idea that righteousness is a master to those who are born in “newness of life” in Christ (cf. Rom 6:4). In essence, those who are “free in regard to righteousness” are not under the power and are not identified with the ultimate consequence of righteousness and life (cf. Rom 6:22), instead they are “slaves of sin”—thus being under the power and identified with the ultimate consequence of sin and death (cf. “for the outcome of those things is death,” Rom 6:21; “the wages of sin is death,” Rom 6:23).

## Free From Servitude

Jn 8:33; 1 Co. 7:21-22; 9:1,19; 12:13; Gal. 3:28; 4:22-23,26,30-31; Eph. 6:8; Col. 3:11; 1 Pet. 2:16; Rev. 6:15; 13:16; 19:18

These instances all exhibit a meaning relative to the classic socio-political understanding of servitude or binding obligation to another person in service. Thus, in these instances, one is “free” in the sense of not being a slave or bondservant of another. While this contextual use of the term contributes to our understanding of the term in other contexts, this use is clearly non-theological and therefore outside of the technical scrutiny of this study.

## RELATED TERMS AND CONCEPTS

In addition to the principal Greek term for freedom (*eleutheria*), which was examined in the previous sections, there are several other words that convey the concept of liberty to some fashion. These terms are considered below.

### Liberty

**Acts 24:23** - "Then he gave orders to the centurion for him to be kept in custody and yet have some **freedom**, and not to prevent any of his friends from ministering to him."

The original word behind this rendering (*anesis*) is defined literally as "a loosening, relaxation" (Vine). It is translated "freedom" (NASB) and "liberty" (ESV, KJV), and aligns quite closely with the principal idea of liberty as defined in the verbal form discussed above.

It is noteworthy, however, that in every other place it conveys the idea of rest or relaxation (cf. 2 Cor 2:13; 7:5; 8:13; 2 Thess 1:7). Josephus uses the same term to convey "leniency or relief."<sup>42</sup> In light of the mention of chains in 26:29, it has been argued that this text is "not dealing with an example of *custodia libera* but rather with some form of lenient military custody. . . . Paul is allowed to have some freedom of movement and to be attended by friends."<sup>43</sup> This mention of "freedom" is limited and qualified by "some" and thus does not quite convey the idea of "being set free," but rather "relaxed." Moreover, this is a unique usage of *anesis* and is presented in the context of historical narrative that does not teach or relate any theological meaning to the concept of Christian liberty.

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<sup>42</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 714.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*

**1 Corinthians 8:9** - "But take care that this **liberty** of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

Here the word translated as "liberty" in NASB, KJV, NKJV, and RSV is *exousia*, a term that is not translated as "liberty" in any other verse of the NT. The term is used 102 times in the NT and in the preponderance of cases denotes authority or authoritative power. Thus, it is in this context understood to denote "a state of control over something, as in *freedom of choice, right* (e.g., the 'right' to act, decide, or dispose of one's property as one wishes" (BDAG). This term relates to this concept in several other places<sup>44</sup> but never in the context of a freedom of choice in moral matters. People do not have the authority or 'right' to elect sin. People certainly have the ability to choose sin, and fallen humanity exercises that ability all too often, but ability does not imply authority. The truth remains that no person, Christian or otherwise, has the authority or right to sin. Therefore, even if this term is rendered "liberty," it (1) is not addressing moral choices in this context, (2) does not imply or encourage moral autonomy.

## Released

**Romans 7:2** - "For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is **released** from the law concerning the husband."

**Romans 7:6** - "But now we have been **released** from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter."

In 2 of 27 occurrences, a word that conveys a fairly wide range of specific meanings<sup>45</sup> is employed to convey the meaning: "to cause the release of someone from an obligation (one has nothing more

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<sup>44</sup> John 19:18; Acts 5:4; Rom 9:21; 1 Cor 7:37; 9:4, 12, 18; 2 Thess 3:9; Heb 13:10; Rev 13:5; 22:14.

<sup>45</sup> *katargeō* — meaning: abolish, use up, nullify, overthrow, pass away, destroy, become nothing, come to an end, void, and released.



to do with it), be discharged, be released” (BDAG). “The term always denotes a nonphysical destruction by means of a superior force coming in to replace the force previously in effect, as, e.g. light destroys darkness.” In Romans 7:2 and 7:6 the term denotes “release by removal from a former sphere of control: *free from*,” in a passive voice it means to be “discharged from, be freed from” (Friberg). This use is in precise alignment with the verbal meaning ‘to set free’ (see above)—the controlling conception of Christian liberty.

**Luke 4:18** - ““The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim **release** to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind, To **set free** those who are oppressed,”

In this case the Greek term that is rendered “release” and “set free”<sup>46</sup> is *aphesis*, a word that is in every other instance in the NT rendered “forgiveness” (cf. Matt. 26:28; Mk. 1:4; 3:29; Lk. 1:77; 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:22; 10:18). The meaning of the word is to “dismiss, release, acquit” as by (literally) “lifting off.” Thus, in this case it is “the act of freeing and liberating from something that confines, *release*” and in all other cases, “the act of freeing from an obligation, guilt, or punishment, *pardon, cancellation*” (BDAG).

**Acts 26:32** - “And Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been **set free** if he had not appealed to Caesar.””

Here a term that most literally means “to loose from” (*apoluō* – *apo*, “from;” *luō*, “loose”) is rendered “set free” (“set at liberty” KJV) in the sense of freed from imprisonment. It is rendered “released” in

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<sup>46</sup> “ἀποστεῖλαι ... ἐν ἀφέσει is a circumlocution for ‘to set free’, and θραύω\*\* is ‘to break, bruise’. The insertion adds nothing to the sense, and it is hard to see why it was made (Holtz, 39–41), unless perhaps we are to stress the idea of forgiveness in ἄφεσις.” — I. Howard Marshall, 184.

Heb 13:23. As in the context of socio-political servitude, this aspect of “set free” or “release” is non-theological.

## Freedman

**1 Corinthians 7:22** – “For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s **freedman**; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave.”

While virtually all descriptions of a freed person are presented with the adjective form of freedom (*eleutheria*), there is one instance where a technical term is used (*apeleutheros*). This term is only used in 1 Cor 7:22 and most basically describes “a person who has been freed from slavery: *emancipated slave, freedman*; figuratively, of Christians, set free from sin by Christ: *free person*” (Friberg). Thus, *freedperson* is used figuratively of Christians as a “freedperson of the Lord,” because He has freed us from the powers of darkness, the slaveholders of this age (BDAG). It may be said that in 1 Cor 7:22 it describes a person who has been “presented with (spiritual) freedom by the Lord” (Thayer), and thus the contextual use of this word “brings out the spiritual emancipation in contrast to the natural ‘freedman’” (Vine). This most closely relates to the “Deliverance” aspect of freedom described in “The Substance” section above.

## CONCLUSION

*What is the final analysis?* No appeal to Christian liberty can justify unholiness. The vital conclusion from this study is quite simple: *the New Testament NEVER relates any explicit claim of “freedom” or “liberty” to moral matters.*<sup>47</sup> Christian liberty does not mean that Christians have freedom of moral choice. Christians do not have “liberty” to mingle and flirt with the world so long as it does not offend another person or cause them to stumble. The essential question is, will your choice offend God—even if not a single human finds offense? The true test of moral choice is holiness. True Christian liberty will never contradict holiness and the pursuit of personal sanctification. The rich theology of Christ’s redemptive work is the crown of Christian liberty, a truth that is antithetical to the notion of freedom of moral choice.

To test if a choice is one of Christian liberty, ask yourself, is this something that I have been freed from by Christ? This is the controlling concept of Christian liberty, to be freed from something by Christ that you would otherwise not be freed from. If a choice deals with moral responsibility, it clearly does not belong to the category of Christian liberty because Christ does not free His disciples from moral responsibility.

While these observations may seem elementary and obvious, there remains great confusion on this subject. Not infrequently is the approach to the study of Christian liberty accompanied with

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<sup>47</sup> All explicit citations are addressed in the sections above. A careful contextual study of passages that implicitly discuss or allude to Christian liberty fully validates the conclusions deduced from the explicit presentation of “liberty” in the NT. Passages that are pertinent to the discussion of Christian liberty, that should be considered in conjunction with this study, include: Rom 1:24; 3:8; 6:1-2, 6-7, 15-23; 7:1-6, 7-13, 24; 8:2, 12, 15-16; 14:1-9, 13-15, 21-23; 15:1-3; 16:18; 1 Cor 6:20; 7:21-24, 32, 37; 8:7-13; 9:15-18, 19-27; 10:23-30; 2 Cor 3:2-5; 5:9-15; 6:14; Phil 3:20-21; Col 2:8, 16-17, 20-23; 3:16-17, 22-24; 4:12; 2 Thess 3:11, 14; 1 Tim 1:5-8; 4:2-5; 6:2-3; 2 Tim 3:1-5; Titus 1:13-16; 2:14-15; 3:1, 9; Heb 2:14-15; Jude 4.

preconceived notions of its meaning. A great many problems arise from importing modern and even personal ideas into the meaning of a given text. The only solution that will prove to be in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament is an examination of the inspired text of God's Word at its most technical level. An exegetical analysis that demonstrates careful attention to context is crucial to all theological conclusions. This study has attempted to remain faithful to these principles of interpretation.

The freedom that God has granted is sadly undervalued, and its meaning tragically misconstrued. May we strive to grow in our understanding of this glorious truth and may God be glorified in our liberty!

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