

Alternative freedom: Galatians 5:1-26

by [Rodney S. Sadler Jr.](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

Americans celebrate freedom as a national right and immortalize its twin sister liberty in the glorious statue that many of our ancestors saw as they came to this country. For me, the great-great grandson of enslaved Africans, freedom is a cherished gift long withheld from those in my familial lineage. It is a goal long sought by my ancestors, one attained only at the high cost of shed blood and spent lives. It is a goal that echoes in the rich baritone of Martin Luther King Jr., who pleaded with our nation to “let freedom ring” for those who have been denied this right. The quest for freedom also arises in Paul’s epistles as a paramount end. It is characterized by his exhortation in Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Americans steeped in the freedom tradition may read this epistle and conflate Paul’s emphasis with our national obsession; but could it be that we wrongly assume a connection between these concepts?

Certainly Paul’s concern has to do with being freed from constraints that had been burdensome and oppressive. The freedom he sought was liberation from a legal system that infringed upon personal liberties, creating a bondage to the law, so to speak. The forms of bondage from which Paul sought to escape were ethnically sensitive and prescribed certain restrictions and benefits for some (Jews) while imposing no obligation on others (gentiles). Paul’s total commitment to freedom as a gift resounds in the ears of we U.S. citizens who descend from those who sought freedom, whether it was from a foreign or a domestic force, and whether it was gained through immigration or emancipation.

Freedom is a core value grounded in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; yet the concept evolved through time. These days freedom seems to mean “freedom” from obligation to anything beyond us. Freedom of speech has come to mean that we can say whatever we feel, no matter if it is right or kind or even fair—without threat of reprisals. The crisis over Don Imus’s deliberate denigration of the Rutgers women’s basketball players and the subsequent discussion about the content of hip-hop lyrics demonstrate how far we push the

envelope. The Klan has employed the right to freedom of assembly for more than a century to legitimate its rallies celebrating their hatred of and terrorist activities toward African Americans, Jewish Americans and Latino immigrants. Sometimes freedom seems to mean compromising our ethics and values for the sake of doing what feels good; we justify our vices by saying, "I'm grown. I'm free to do whatever I want as long as I don't hurt anybody." The latter part of that statement, however, is often compromised for the sake of the former. We cite freedom to legitimize bad behavior. But is this the freedom that Paul sought?

No. Paul's view of freedom should in no way be confused with our own. Paul spoke of freedom from the law— release not just from a law thought to be burdensome, but from a law that had proven ultimately ineffective for establishing right relationship with God. One would be free from the burdens of sin and death, this tragic partnership that the law by itself could never eradicate (3:21), and even from the corruption of "this present evil age" (1:4). Freedom from the law meant liberation from the ethnic boundary markers that prohibited true fellowship between gentiles and Jews in Christ (3:23-29). Paul advocated a freedom that provided all Christians with the opportunity to worship God sincerely in common fellowship.

Unlike American freedom, Christian freedom is not about personal liberty; Christian freedom comes with an undeniable sense of obligation and servitude, and complete submission to God and to Christ Jesus. Hence, Paul identifies himself as "a servant of Christ" (1:10). Though the Greek term *doulos* is often translated "servant," the NRSV most often translates it as "slave." Paul's sense of freedom is not a transcendence of obligation to God. Instead, he says, we are freed from the power of the law, sin and death in order to fully submit to God and to fulfill God's will as a slave of Christ. Freedom from the law obligates us to God in Christ Jesus.

Christian freedom was never intended to be freedom from responsibility to others. In Galatians 5:13 Paul exhorts his audience: "Through love become slaves to one another." Paul is advocating not a sense of self-indulgence, not just a "freedom from"; the freedom we receive in Christ is a "freedom to" commit ourselves fully to each other. We are now subject to a new law, Christ's law. In Galatians 6:2 Paul tells us: "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." We are called to be slaves to our sisters and brothers, placing their needs above our own. We are called to the freedom of Christ, who in the garden chose the Father's will instead of his own.

As we approach the day of symbolic celebration of our national freedom, I commend to you the notion of Christian freedom. This freedom makes no space for myopic egocentrism, but is a radical submission to God and humanity that forsakes personal gratification in order to fulfill God's calling in our lives. As Martin Luther notes in "On Christian Freedom," "A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." May Christian freedom be our ideal this Independence Day.