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Martin Luther's theology of 'Freedom of a Christian' and its implications for 21st Century African Church

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Abstract

The question in what respect is a Christian free and in what respect he is bound, is a question of great interest to Christians across the globe living in many different contexts. This problem however can generally be resolved with a proper understanding of the freedom of a Christian which has universal principles and culturally varying applications. This article attempts to relate Martin Luther's theology of freedom of a Christian to the modern day understanding of the same. In this way we can understand the universality of this truth and at the same time have tools to analyse and evaluate the culturally varying ways in which this can be applied with respect to the African church. The author maintains that this theology of freedom of a Christian is useful for reflecting on the needs of both the society and the church in today's Africa.

Keywords: Freedom, Theology, Christian and African Church

1. Introduction

Freedom is the outcry of almost every person in the world today. Both the rich and the poor, children or adults, leaders or followers, young and old, married or unmarried, employees and employers, Christians and non-Christians all want freedom.

The quest for freedom for all these people entirely depends on what they perceive as having entangled them. An African man once asked to describe the outcry of the African people, responded in a single word 'freedom.' This single response gives a deep implication of the issue of freedom. The author is strongly of the opinion that freedom is so necessary in any organised society. Patrick Henry quoted by James Robinson in *The Absolutes: Freedom's only Hope* says,

Liberty necessitates the deminutization of political ambition and concern. Liberty necessitates concentration on other matters than mere civil governance. Rather, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, free men must think on these things (Robinson, 2002).

The above quotation only serves to show the immense importance of freedom in the world. It also demonstrates that the same cry for freedom is not a new phenomenon. People across the centuries have always yearned for freedom and they can do all it takes to pursue freedom.

It is also important to underscore at this point that all people have their own unique way of defining freedom. To some people, freedom means not being under parental control, to others from the leadership of their bosses, while to others from the oppression of their masters. It is also interesting to hear some married men and women crying out for 'freedom' from their overly demanding spouses. There is also a common outcry of freedom from the oppressed people or terror regimes in the world today.

The Christian being part of the larger society is not immune to these cries. This therefore draws our attention to the need for Christians to have a proper grasp of the concept of true freedom, and especially how the church in today's Africa ought to interpret true freedom based on Martin Luther's perspective of Christian freedom.

2. Working definition of freedom

At this point, we will begin the discussion by looking at a working definition of freedom. As noted earlier in the discussion, freedom is understood differently by different groups of people in a particular society. Webster (1960) gives two definitions of freedom.

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First, he defines freedom as the state of quality of being free, especially exemption or liberation from the control of some other persons, or some arbitrary power, liberty or independence. The second definition that he gives which the author deems fit for a working definition for this article is: Immunity or exemption from specified obligations, discomfort, a being able to act, move or use without hindrance. A being able of itself to choose or determine action freely, a being free from usual rules and patterns (McKechnie, 1960).

The sociologists have observed that many of the problems now experienced in today's world, can be traced back to the use and misuse of freedom. The whole issue however arises out of a faulty understanding of freedom. The Christians have not been left out in the whole scenario.

To many people, freedom is doing whatever it pleases without any 'chains' around. This however cannot be defined as freedom according to Luther because freedom itself is not entirely free. When ones' understanding of freedom is thwarted, even the exercise of it will be thwarted. This could be one of the many reasons why the world is full of chaos. People have a false understanding of freedom.

It is worthy noting the fact that many people in the Christian circles have had interesting arguments on the question of freedom and more specifically on these two questions: 'How free is a Christian?' And 'what is true freedom?' one of the key people in attempting to answer these questions is Martin Luther.

3. Martin Luther's theology of Freedom of a Christian

Martin Luther was a pious monk and a scholar who taught about tradition, but confirmed in growing a conviction of what the centre of Christian message really is. In October 1520, this was three years after the debate about indulgences from the 95 theses broke; Luther speaks of the freedom of a Christian.

Luther in his definition of freedom especially for a Christian gives two seemingly contradictory statements. He says; 'a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.' He also continues to say; 'a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all' (Luther, The freedom of a Christian, p. 344). These statements on the surface are seemingly contradictory but they do convey a profound truth with regard to Christian freedom.

According to Luther, freedom is not merely what people see from the outside, which is walking and/or interacting with other people freely. Neither is bondage according to him, being in 'chains' or imprisonment. It goes further and deeply into touching the inner self. To Luther even though we are Lords through justification by faith, we also should be servants to our neighbours. He therefore, understands true freedom mainly in terms of the inner self, the soul. Luther understands that one can be free in his own eyes, but in reality walks in real bondage because his soul is not free. He goes further into observing that:

What can it profit a soul when the body is well, free and active, and eats, drinks, and does as it pleases? For in this respect, even the most godless slaves of vice may prosper (Luther, The freedom of a Christian, p. 597).

According to Luther, true Christian freedom only comes from faith and so to understand freedom, we ought to understand faith. David Truemper when quoting Luther notes that: Faith justifies, frees from the crushing compulsion to perform, liberates from mere retribution, ascribes the truth to God and unites us with Christ (Truemper, 2003). In Luther's view therefore, faith produces freedom, and this freedom is freedom from 'false opinions about works.' The false opinions about work does not free us from work, it only frees us from false opinion that works make God like us more.

Luther argues that a Christian is a free lord of all, subject to none. The same concept is advanced by Apostle Paul in the book of Romans. Paul mentions that when Christ has set one free, he is free indeed. This freedom that Paul talks about is subjective to the rule of Christ who is the ultimate master for any Christian.

The second tenet of Christian freedom from Luther's understanding is that a 'Christian is a dutiful servant of all.' The validity of this argument can be supported from what the bible teaches from the book of James that 'faith without action is dead' (James 2:26). Luther therefore says that once we put our faith to work (as noted earlier that Christian freedom comes from faith), we freely become obedient slaves to please God, without any thought of gain but in love that is not constrained.

Thirdly, Luther frequently looked at the example of Christ as described in Philippians 2. He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant. Luther writes: 'although a Christian is thus free from all works, he ought in his liberty to empty himself, take upon himself the form of a servant To serve, help and in every way deal with his neighbour as he sees that God through Christ has dealt and still deals with him' (Luther, The freedom of a Christian, p. 366).

It is therefore logical to believe the truth of what Luther says in that freedom and slavery are both fully and completely true of all times. Luther says; I am always free of the crushing compulsion to make or sustain my life before God. I am always bound to make God's justice and mercy real for my fellow human beings (Truemper, 2003). The author is of the opinion that the excellence of Luther's theology is hinged on his definition of freedom and has been shaped by the Christian doctrine of love. A proper understanding of love from a Christian point of view is critical in our pursuit of true freedom. Todd quoting Luther says: A justified man, the believer, is free and owes allegiance to no one but Christ. At the same time, being the most free, he is the most free to serve (Todd, 1964). This concept is meaningful in our pursuit for true freedom.

To summarise Luther's concept of true freedom, Christian freedom hinges on two facts. First, a Christian lives not in oneself but in Christ and secondly is in serving his neighbour. Through faith that trusts in the promises of God, he lives in Christ and through love and service, he lives in the neighbour. This therefore means that by faith, one is caught up beyond oneself into God, and by love, one descends beneath oneself into one's neighbour. Steinmetz in quoting Luther says:

Shut your eyes and open your ears and perceive not how Christ rides there so beggarly, but hearken to what it is said and preached about this poor king. His wretchedness and

poverty are manifest, for he came riding in an ass like a beggar having neither a saddle nor spurs. But that he will take from us sin, strangle death, endow us with eternal holiness, eternal bliss and eternal life, this cannot be seen wherefore you must hear and believe (Steinmetz, 1993).

The incarnate Christ in his life on earth portrayed a perfect picture of true freedom advocated for by Martin Luther; the freedom of loving God and service to fellow mankind. In concluding his treatise, Luther notes:

‘..... a Christian lives not in himself but in Christ and his neighbour otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith and in his neighbour through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbour’ (Luther, *The freedom of a Christian*, p. 371).

A proper understanding of freedom will therefore lead a Christian to serve his neighbour following the example of Christ.

4. Distorted understanding of freedom in today’s Africa

It is heartbreaking to observe how in today’s African society, people have misunderstood true freedom. This faulty understanding accounts for the numerous reasons as to why the modern African society is faced with myriad of challenges. Problems like wars, murders, robberies, sexual harassments, child abuse and even political instabilities are just but a few pointers of a distorted understanding of freedom.

A distortion in understanding of true freedom affects all people. It affects the rich, the poor, common citizens and even the leaders both in the church and in political arena. An African leader, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, perceived true freedom in terms of political power. In that sense he declares, ‘seek ye, first, the political kingdom and everything else will be added unto thee (Oruka, 1997).’ The above statement does not demonstrate freedom; on the contrary, it demonstrates true bondage to political power and ideologies. This perspective stands in sharp contrast to the biblical teaching in Matthew 6:33 that we should first seek God’s kingdom. The first step to true freedom begins with God.

A philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was also not left out of such a distorted understanding of freedom. According to Sartre, freedom is determined by humanity and not God and as such, he pushed his arguments to the point of saying that God does not exist (Oruka, 1997). This also is a real bondage to humanistic philosophy and human wisdom and is not freedom at all.

The above are but just few examples of people who have been trapped in real bondage in their attempt to push for what they call ‘freedom.’ To them, freedom is doing what pleases the person doing without caring for others views. In demonstrating the vanity of this approach to freedom, Cassidy quotes an old man in one of the African nations who understood the vanity of interpreting freedom based on human standards and in total disregard for God. This man confessed that; ‘we have our freedom (political freedom), but we are unhappy inside (the inner man is in bondage) (Michael Cassidy, *Gotified Osei-Mensah*, 1976).

5. Rightful Understanding of Freedom of a Christian

We will at this point endeavour to give a proper understanding of true freedom for a Christian. To be conscious of freedom is to be conceptually and practically aware of the things or rather those elements, be they social or physical which deny freedom.

For the Christians, true freedom comes from our identity in Christ, and from this, to realise that we draw our dependence from God alone. Our definition of freedom as Christians ought to show our distinctiveness from the rest of the world. The worlds’ definition of freedom is egocentric that is it focuses on oneself but for the believers, Luther advocates for a Theo-centric definition of freedom.

To define freedom based on the human standards and not according to God’s standards revealed in the scriptures shows in reality how we are bound. Luther mentions that vices like anger, brutality, brawling and slander should not be found in the Christians. Our freedom as Christians who are slaves to righteousness in Christ should have a higher standard than the rest in terms of ethics and morality. Paul in the book of Ephesians encourages believers to discipline their nature, values and habits by constantly putting to death the acts of unrighteousness... so that they do not have dominion over them.

It should be understood at this point that freedom does not mean freedom from limitations. This is because the Bible in Romans 6 speaks of being set free from the law of sin and death and being held captive to that which is righteous. Our freedom is fully and wholly dependent on Jesus Christ and the commandments of God. Jesus himself being the greatest example and motivator of all ages in his teachings taught of the profound facts in regard to freedom. He said, ‘if you follow my teachings, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’ Freedom in this case refers to freedom from the enslavement of sin as the scripture says that everyone who sins is a slave to sin.

The proper understanding of freedom for a Christian should be based on our identity in Christ, our service to each other and to our neighbours as we live at peace with them. Freedom should be based on our abilities to fulfil our aspirations in such a way that it also allows others to fulfil theirs. This gives no room for pride since the bible in Philippians 2 teaches that no one should seek his own good but in humility to consider others better than themselves. The Danish philosopher and thinker Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) agrees to this view of freedom. He notes ‘freedom is the ability to be the self that God ordained man to be’ (Ruegsegger, 1986). The above concept is what Luther advocates. The kind of freedom which God wants us to embrace is one that looks up to him in worship and not to worship any other. It also seeks to serve one another. Jesus Christ when teaching about the commandments summarised the Ten Commandments by saying ‘love the Lord your God (worship and serving Him) and love your neighbour as you love yourself (serving one another).

6. Implications for the African Church

The author finds the following as some valuable lessons for today’s African church to learn and embrace:

Firstly, the church in Africa needs to realize that true freedom is only found in laying our treasures and cares on Jesus. Apostle Paul in his epistle to the Galatians 2:20 say; 'I no longer live but Christ lives in me and the life I live now, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me.'

Secondly, the church in Africa also needs to realize that freedom is not a license. Too many people in today's world think that in a free society one can do anything one likes. This however is not freedom. Our freedom requires discipline in terms of self-control and service. Tutu says freedom 'requires discipline in specific and required parameters.' He goes on to say that freedom is a coin with two sides, that is, it embraces rights as well as obligations, duties and responsibilities' (Tutu, 1995).

Thirdly, it is also necessary for the church in Africa to take heed in their exercise of freedom not to infringe the rights of their neighbours. Tutu cautions us that 'your right to stretch your arm ends where my nose begins' (Tutu, 1995). These words convey a profound truth that needs to be embraced by the African Christians. They should learn that in their exercise of freedom, there are 'chains' attached to that freedom. Freedom is not free enough.

Fourth, we live in a century where the aspect of serving others has been perceived as being for the lowly in the society. The African church should be taught again the importance of having a selfless spirit of service. Those in the African church who have been privileged to have better education should in the spirit of service, lay down their pride and in the spirit of service and following the example of Jesus, be ready to serve others. This service should be motivated by love but not forgetting its cool boundaries and above all to guard their freedom for it is a wonderful gift.

Fifth, the biblical teachings in the African church also need to be intensified so as to curb the secularist teachings that are tremendously spreading especially among the young people. This kind of teaching advocates for a libertarian approach to life. A life that is free from all sorts of dos and don'ts. It is only through the rightful understanding of biblical doctrine of love can the church in Africa fully impact the lives of its people and thus helping them set a clear way of understanding freedom.

Sixth, since the young people are the ones who hold the future of Africa, the Christian church in Africa should learn from the other world religions on how to teach and train its young people because these are the future leaders. The church should also learn from other religions on ways to begin programs and forums in the church aimed at teaching the young people on how to rightfully exercise their freedom. These programs can be taught within the churches or outside during retreats and picnics or open forums of discussions. The church can also organize once in a while on having the youth participate in awareness campaigns on ways to rightfully exercise freedom by way of serving others.

Seventh, from the general observation, it is apparent that many people in the world today have a distorted understanding of freedom. The church in Africa should broaden its teachings into addressing freedom in the church. The clergy should not only preach academic sermons in the pulpit but rather get down into touching the needs of the

members of the congregation by addressing that freedom is not necessarily the absence of 'physical chains.' Such sermons will help the church members to do an introspection to see if they are really free in the inside or they are only free outwardly while in the inside, they are bound by chains of hatred, bitterness, and unforgiving spirit among other vices. Finally, the church leadership in Africa are also not left out. They need to be active participants in pointing out the need to exercise true freedom by loving and serving those who are under them and not to be lords over them because Jesus our perfect example made it clear that he came to serve and not to be served.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have found out that freedom in general, and freedom of a Christian in particular is a real issue of debate in Africa today. The problem with freedom mainly arises from a faulty understanding of what true freedom really is and what freedom of a Christian means. We have also noted that for the African church to fully embrace freedom, it is of paramount importance for them to understand freedom in terms of service. First to God and secondly to their fellow human beings. We have also noted that freedom is not the capacity to do as one pleases; rather it is the capacity to care and serve others following the example of Christ. With the rise of modern thinking, right understanding of freedom is of necessity. The African church should therefore endeavour to teach its members that true freedom is not the capacity to do as one pleases. It is being attached to God who is our creator.

Luther's theology of freedom of a Christian is in line with the biblical concept of the same. according to Luther, the best way to understand Christian freedom is to see it through the 'lenses' and the example of Jesus Christ who, though being God did not consider equality with the father something to be grasped but emptied himself taking the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7).

The church in Africa this century ought to understand that true freedom of a Christian is not the capacity to do as one pleases. This is both simplistic and 'worldly' view of freedom. The freedom of a Christian is the capacity to do the will of our heavenly father. Luther's theology of Christian freedom still does reflect the words of Jesus when he said; 'if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mark 8:35). This is the path of service. It is freedom to do God's will. The radical demands of the Christian life are an implication of what Luther understands of freedom of the Christian and this is made clear throughout Luther's writings.

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