

Free to Be...

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Romans 8:18-25

"For in hope we were saved."

Baptist Principles – Soul Freedom

Movement 1 – Trapped

Imagine the scene. A stage dimly lit and full of young women working in what seems to be a 1910 era sweatshop. They are all bending over their machines, attentive to their task, working hard as a hum of the machines offers and suggests a tonality of banality. They are all working and moving in rhythm, without any sense of passion or life. They are simply stuck in their rhythm and routine. Suddenly the lights dim and a center spot shines on one woman sitting at her station. The strings begin to play a hollow and haunting tune as the woman slowly stands and begins to sing. She begins to sing of the monotony, the drudgery and the soulless work she is engaged in, and immediately breaks into a rousing and beautiful song of living the good life, the fun life, the life of hopes and dreams. Before you know it, all of the women are standing, singing, dancing, doing flips and running around the stage. A bunch of young men join them, just back from driving the trucks, and sing about having a nice home, about having a supportive family and coming home to a good hot meal every day and a good, safe and predictable job. Next thing you know the men are tossing the women, the women are singing duets and there is a general hoopla happening on stage. It is the grand opening that one expects in every musical. The lights are bright, the music is fast and furious and the dream of a better life is painted so vividly by the opening scene that it is almost impossible to keep oneself from being swept into the hope and promise of which all the workers on stage sing about. Then, in an instant, the factory overseer runs in, shouting something about work to do, the music stops, the men run off stage, the women return to their workstations, and the main character slowly and sadly sits back down to join her colleagues in the hum and drum of their work. The haunting sound of the strings sounds over the stage as she looks up from the sewing machine and sings in a longing tone, "someday, someday."

If you can get past the formulaic nature of what one would find in almost every musical ever penned, you can see how the main character feels trapped. She feels trapped in her job, a job that pays little, but just enough to keep her alive, she feels trapped in her home where she is worn down with family responsibilities; she feels trapped in her life and yearns for something better.

Have you ever felt that way with your life? Have you ever felt that you could lift your head from the galley of your life, pushing the oars, stuck in the monotony and ready to break into a musical? You do not feel like you are free. You do not feel like you are free to live your life. You are stuck doing what parents tell you to do, what teachers tell you to do and you cannot do what you would like to do. Yet if you do not obey the wishes of the adults, then your life will get harder, more miserable and you will just have more work to do. You are trapped.

You are stuck in a job that is so miserable that is so soulless that you would rather jump into a pool of thumb tacks and lemon juice than go to work, but the job pays the

bills which will not go away, so you have to keep your head down and go to work. You would love to do something else, something that you are passionate about, but it would not pay enough. You are trapped.

You are stuck in a situation where you have to take care of a family member because no one else in your family will and you have to change all of your plans and your dreams for your life. The trip to Europe you had on your heart is not going to happen. The cross-country trip is canceled. The plans to live in the city for a while are lost. You are trapped.

It may seem like life is one big trap, a tar pit threatening to suck us in, that will not let us go and eventually will drown us. It seems at times like we are stuck in a holding pattern without any forward motion and that is the best that life can offer. Like Sisyphus pushing a bolder up the hill only to watch it fall down again and then repeating the process again and again, we may feel like we are stuck in the same routines and rituals of life. If we do not have any hope, if we do not have anything to look forward to, then we quickly become stuck. Think of the values and the purpose of life that we are so often taught outside of the ecclesial context. We need to make enough money to live and live well (to reference Whitehead), yet each time we make more money our expenses increase and we find that we need to make more. Perhaps this is the futility that Paul is talking about. The futility that we can find in chasing the material and the money is what holds us down. We are trapped.

It is as if we are living in chains, holding us to conscripted responsibilities and expectations keeping us from truly living. We do not have a say, we do not have a hope; we are trapped. We may find ourselves standing in the midst of the rush of life, of the hustle and bustle saying, “what’s the point?” The hopelessness is the spring that sets the trap on our soul. John Haught makes this point when he criticizes those he calls the “new atheists.” Haught claims that the “new atheists” do not consider the end to their thoughts; that if God does not exist then there is nothing after life and nothing to hope for. He reminds the “new atheists” of Sartre and especially of Camus, philosophers who taught a nihilism and existentialism that is part of the world because of the lack of hope. We can find ourselves living life with despair, wondering what might be the point if we cannot ever enjoy life and if there is nothing after this life. Sing your aria, prepare your musical number and then return to your sighs and the hum of your life as you realize that you are trapped.

Movement 2 – Liturgically Trapped

Maybe you look for hope in religion. Maybe you creak open the heavy oak doors of the church, the looming and ominous doors of history which speak of a different language, a different view of life and claims to offer hope and freedom from the traps of the world. You slowly find your way through the pews, through the smells and bells, the different and arcane music, the lofty and obtuse preaching and look for someone to come and cut you free. You look for someone to cut you free for you are still carrying the chains of the world. You are still weighed down with the desire to change your life, with your responsibilities and the demands which cycle and circle and sap your joy. You hold out your arms, shackled and heavy and an usher comes forward. An usher comes forward and you look with hope and anticipation. Maybe, maybe you will be set free. Maybe you will be able to dance and run. You imagine it will be like the Pilgrim losing his burden in

Bunyan's classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, you hope and expect the weight of the world to be released. Yet it seems that in many churches, in many religious communities, the chains of the world are taken off and only replaced with the chains of religion. The usher takes your chains and gives you a new set of chains which continue to weigh you down, hold you down and restrict your life.

Such a thought of the church may seem shocking and surprising to you, but consider the point of view of the early Baptists. These were individuals who desired to find freedom. They desired to be free in their relationship with Christ, but found the church to be weighing them down just as much as the world was weighing them down. The creeds that were recited in a forced and automatic way were some of the shackles the early Baptists looked to reject. The prayer books, the forced reading of scripture all were shackles in their faith. Baptists at that time claimed that for someone to demand that salvation fit a specific criteria and such a narrow understanding of Christ was limiting and restricting. They claimed that words forced were empty words and weighed them down in their faith, forcing a very specific belief and relationship with God. Scripted prayers forced the heart of the believer and the movement of the Holy Spirit. They found themselves liturgically trapped.

That was then, but what about now? Have we freed ourselves in our churches so that we can claim we are free for Christ? Have we claimed the freedom of the glory of the children of God? Think today of those churches which continue to not only tell you the answers are but also the questions. Think of the churches that tell you how you are supposed to read the Bible and what it is supposed to mean. Think of those churches that claim to know what is the most important in the world, and for whom Christians should pray. Think of those churches, and they are legion, which demand each Christian fit and be forced into a narrow theological world-view. They take the shackles of the world and replace them with liturgical and theological shackles continuing to weigh down the individual. The history of the church is one that claimed the grace of God was mediated through the church and the sacraments and such grace could only be received through very specific manners and in a very specific way. This is a claim that Baptist reacted against, and yet we continue to claim that the grace of God is mediated through specific churches via specific styles of worship and beliefs (for example, the Landmark movement). We are still liturgically trapped; many of us, even in the church, are not free. Are you free, or do you feel trapped. Do you feel as if you are forced in your faith, that you have become a part of an automatic worshipping machine? Is there a difference between the sweatshop of the world and the worship space of the church? Go to the large worship services and witness people speaking in unison, walking in lock-step and ask yourself if they are truly free. We run from the demands of the world and face the demands of the church. Our salvation is dictated to us, our consciousness is directed, our soul is captured and we are not free.

Movement 3 – Speaking Freely

We cannot find freedom in the world; we cannot find freedom in the church, where can we find freedom? We can find freedom in Christ. We can be free with our Lord; we can find freedom in Christ. All is not lost; we need not lose hope, for Christ breaks the shackles, Christ opens the gates and lets us loose. We can be free through Christ. Karl Barth describes it this way. He claims that God's grace is available for all of

us, regardless of the place or the platitudes of the church. God's grace is available for all of us, and all we need to do is say "yes." We do not have to jump through any hoops; we do not have to perform any special tasks or rituals, we just have to say "yes." Barth points out that we do not need to say "no" to one thing or another. This is not a life of rejection but a life of acceptance, acceptance of God's grace. We do not have to say "no" to sin to receive God's grace but just say, "Yes" to God. And here is the good news; you are free to do so. There are no restrictions, no lock to open, just the invitation for grace and glory. Through Christ, you are free.

As Baptists, we emphasize this freedom. We stress that you are free to say yes on your own, you are free to accept God's grace and grow into God's glory as you are. You are free to call yourself a Christian, to have a relationship with Christ. You are free to say "yes" and no one can shut you out or tell you otherwise. As E.Y. Mullins said, only the Lord is governor of your consciousness, no one else. Only God knows if you are being earnest or honest, and no one else. This is the idea of Soul Freedom, Soul Competency, Individual Liberty or whatever else you may call it. It is the idea that no one in the world, no one in the church can tell you if you can or cannot receive the grace of God. All you have to do is say "yes," and receive that grace.

You don't have to ascribe to a certain biblical interpretation, you don't have to ascribe to specific doctrines, you don't have to recite a creed, all you have to do is say "yes." It is as if you have been stuck in that opening musical scene. Your life is repeating itself again and again until one day the script is taken away, the music stops and you can leave the stage. You can leave the whole theater and live your life with God. It reminds me of the end of *The Truman Show* starring Jim Carrey. Carrey's character is sailing to the end of what he now realizes is a television set, determined to find some answers. When he reaches the end of the set, he has to make the decision, for the first time, to truly live, to truly be free of the script, the cameras, and the actors. He opened the door and walked into the world, free.

Cast off the creeds, the prayers, the demands and say "yes" to God. Say "yes" freely and honestly. When you say this, you are having what Baptists refer to as the Baptism of fire. You are saying "yes" to the Holy Spirit and giving your life to God. Don't expect this to happen in a revival experience, but be open to a variety of ways you can be changed. Walter Shurden, a famous Baptist scholar, claims that one can say "yes" to God in the fire of a revival or in the quiet of a simple hymn. We say "yes" in many different ways, but we are all free to say "yes" in our own way and in our own time. This is the beginning of the freedom that Paul is speaking of. It is a freedom to respond on our own, and we begin to taste the first fruits of the spirit. It is a freedom that leads us to the glory of God. Take that freedom and say "yes" to God.

Movement 4 – Living Freely

Live into that freedom. We are called to take those fruits of the Spirit, those fruits we receive through grace and live into our faith, our hope and our glory as children of God. We are called to live into our freedom. It is like Pinocchio dancing and singing without his strings. "I've got no strings to hold me down; to make me fret, or make me frown; I had strings; but now I'm free; there are no strings on me." We live now as we are free.

Live with that freedom starting in the church, knowing that you are already living into the glory of God that nothing can hold you down, can restrict or confine your faith. So we worship not wondering if we are getting the prayers right, not worrying if we are sitting the right way, not concerned if we are dressed the right way, but assured of our grace and our salvation. We become a part of a community not thinking that some are better than others, not thinking that some are closer to God than others, but assured that all of us are blessed children of God. Everyone is worthy to sit in these pews, to sing these hymns and to call themselves a blessed child of God. Everyone here is assured of their salvation.

When we say “yes” to God we have a taste of the hope promised to us; a hope that we will be in glory with God. That hope sets us free. I heard a story of someone who once was in a restaurant ordering some food and the waiter had the happiest and sunniest disposition that he could ever imagine. If you have never worked as a waiter before, than you may not be aware of how difficult, how challenging and demanding the job is. Yet this waiter seemed to have a sense of energy and joy that could not be matched. The individual turned to the waiter and said, “this isn’t what you plan on doing for the rest of your life, is it?” The waiter responded, “no sir, I’m an actor, and I know that some day I’ll be acting for a living.” The waiter had such hope that he could not be held down by what many would consider to be a job of drudgery and despair. The waiter had such hope for something better that he was free from the chains of his job even as he was living and doing his job.

The hope we look forward to, the hope we anticipate frees us from life. It frees us from the nihilistic worldview of Camus and Stare. It frees us from the despair of atheism. It frees us from the drudgery of the middle-management feeling of life because we know that there is something more. We are free to find the good in the moment because we know it may lead to something more. We are free to find hope in the end of the day because even if we are going to the same job tomorrow, we know there is something more. We are free from the liturgical chains holding us down and demanding a specific way of living, because we know that there is something more. We are free from the dictates and the demands and the control of our own lives and salvation because we know that we have received grace from God. We know that we have been promised something better. We know that there is something more.

We have to live into our freedom, and are responsible for our freedom. Shurden claims that many Baptists love Soul Freedom, but never carry it out. They only wait to be told what to do, how to live and how to express their faith. This is not being free. Rather, Shurden implores Baptist to take their freedom seriously and to live into their hope in the way that God is calling them. Shurden implores Baptists to be responsibility the freedom we find in our faith. Like going to college. For most college students, the freedom is new and exciting and yet at the same time carries responsibilities. For one could stay up late every night, sleep in every day and skip every class on the roster. This is not being responsible with freedom. Or one could study, take classes seriously, and live into the new found freedom.

It is similar with one’s faith. You can just go to church and sit, waiting to be fed. You could even avoid church altogether and claim you are saved and that is enough. Or you could take your freedom seriously and take the initiative to pray on your own, to read the Bible on your own, to engage in ministry on your own. To be the Christian that God

is calling you to be and to live into your faith. Through the grace of God, you are free, live into that faith.

We are free to love our enemies as ourselves. We are free to share the grace of God. We are free to serve those who are helpless. We are free to stop and care for the sick. We are free to stand with the oppressed and to speak truth to the power of the oppressors. We are free to be the Christians we are called to be.

Movement 5 – Suffering with Patience

Expect to find resistance as you live into your freedom. When you live in the world as if there is something better, something that cannot be earned with money, or gained with hard work, you will be seen as odd. When you claim that you have a hope in a new heaven and a new earth, in something beyond the drudgery of the day, you will be seen as different. When you reject the lie that material goods make you a worthwhile person, when you reject the lie that it is the person with the most at the end of the game who wins, when you reject the life that whoever makes more money is more successful in life, then you will be seen as different, as absurd, and maybe even as dangerous. You are free to claim that you have a hope in a God who offers forgiveness, you are free to claim you have hope in a savior who was crucified, who was executed by the world. You are free to claim that you live for a better time, and be prepared to be cast off, and ignored and ridiculed. It is not easy to be free.

Churches take away our freedom so that we can have security in knowledge of our salvation. When you become a part of a church where the responsibility is placed on each individual to know if you are or are not saved, it can be difficult because we might doubt our relationship with Christ. It would be easier to just have a set of questions and answers for individuals to recite, and then to know that we are saved, but then we would not be free. Our freedom would be lost for security.

Claim your freedom in the church, but know that there we will struggle. It would be easy for our denomination to state that all Baptists must ascribe to one specific set of doctrines and beliefs but then we would not be free. It would be easy for us as a church to demand that everyone ascribe to a theological litmus test, but then we would not be free. No, we are left with the mess of individual's understanding of faith. We are left with the mess of different interpretations. We are left with the mess of people disagreeing. It is not easy to be free and to live into our freedom. So often I have encountered someone claiming that as Baptists we need to change our structure so that we could have some control. So often I have worked with churches that are mired in tension because we do not have a central government. Yet this is the cost of freedom.

The cost of freedom goes deep in our faith because the world, the creation is not fully free. When you go and share the love of Christ in a place where all you can hear is despair, it will be difficult. When you show the love of Christ in a place where all you can see is brokenness it will be difficult. The cost of freedom leads us to demanding righteousness of the church. The cost of freedom leads us to taking risks and demanding justice of the world. We will suffer because we are free.

Bonhoeffer freely choose to stay in captivity of the Third Reich, even after he had the opportunity to escape. He choose to stay and to walk that final walk of his life to the gallows. No one could tell him what to do with his faith. No one could tell him what God

required. His life was taken, yet Bonheoffer was free. Bonheoffer was free and that freedom was costly.

Ah, you can hear and feel the groaning of creation as Bonheoffer walked to his death. You can hear the groaning and the pains of creation as we live into our freedom. It is not a groaning of sadness, it is not groaning of despair, but of hope. It was groaning of hope because one of God's children was living into his freedom of the glory of God. It is a groaning of hope because we know that things will slowly get better. It is a groaning of hope because through our witness, through our actions people will see that the world is not as it should be, but can get better. It was not easy, it hurts but it leads to a greater thing.

Yes, creation groans with us as we suffer in the freedom of our faith. When we stand up against the flow and the trends, when we face opposition, creation groans as we groan, in anticipation of a greater thing which is to come. The pains are like those of labor – anticipating a change, anticipating something new. Live into your freedom, knowing it will not be easy, but having hope. Having hope that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. Having hope that the sufferings of now will lead to a greater glory. We are free to live. Live, struggle and be free.

Movement 6 – Free to Be...

We are free to be. We are free to be that whom we have been called to be. Don't let anyone tell you if you are or are not saved. Don't let anyone tell you how you are supposed to be a Christian. Don't let anyone force prescribed creeds and confession upon you, forcing your faith into a mold. Let yourself be free and what you are doing is you are setting God free. The freedom of consciousness is not so much for the individual, but for God. Let God reach you in God's way. Let God speak to you in God's way. Let Christ reach out to you, call you and pull you in the way that Christ sees best. Let the Holy Spirit sing in your heart the song that the Holy Spirit finds suites you best. You have had a taste when God first called you of who you can be. You have had a taste of who God is calling you to be. You have had a taste of what God might be calling you to do. Hold to that hope, and live into that hope as you are free to be a child of God. Let God be free and live into the freedom of God. We are free. We are free to be. We are free to be children living into the glory of God.

So walk with Christ. Do not walk with one person or another. Do not walk with a prescribed method, but with Christ. Walk with Christ as you are, following wherever Christ may lead. Call him and ask. Ask that you may walk with your savior. Ask that you may walk with your Lord. Oh master, may I walk with thee. In lowly paths of service free. Tell me thy secret help me to bear, the strain of toil, the fret of care. Oh master free me, let me, call me to walk with thee.

AMEN