

The Freedom of a Christian case study

“On the Freedom of a Christian” *An Arab Lutheran Perspective*

I have always loved Saint Anselm’s view of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. But this “understanding” is, no doubt, contextual, and the outcome of what is being understood depends a lot on who is doing the understanding. As such, I see the beauty of theology in context as the incarnation of God’s word in and through *all* the people of God serving an amazing, awesome, living and loving Creator. Hence, when it comes to how freedom, and more specifically the “freedom of a Christian,” is perceived, one can only offer a deeper appreciation, respect and gratitude to all voices around the Lord’s table.

In the Arab and Middle Eastern context, there has been an emphasis on communal living and thinking, in comparison to a more independent or individualistic approach in some Western contexts. Both approaches have their own unique values and richness. The Middle Eastern community has often been shaped by a way of thinking and belief that one should “surrender” to the will and plan of the heavenly God in what is perceived as *destiny*. This contrasts with a desire by some cultures to attribute outcomes to one’s own ability, power or personal achievements. “Insha-Allah” is an Arabic word that you can almost always hear in a conversation of any sort among people of Middle Eastern descent. It simply means “God willing.” Those words come from James 4:15 (NIV): “Instead you ought to say, “If it is the Lord’s will [Insha-Allah], we will live and do this or that.” Ironically, this phrase is used by Christians and Muslims alike in the Middle Eastern context. But in it you find a sense of “surrender” to God’s will and plan. It is a recognition that my freedom to do anything begins with God granting me life to be able to do what God is calling me to do. The Middle Eastern mentality goes even further in recognizing that one is literally a “slave” to God and in not shying away from that word but considering it an honor to be called a “slave to God.”

This is where often we hear Arabic names such as “Abdullah,” abbreviated at times in the West as “Abdul.” “Mr. or Mrs. Abdul,” a name would be called out, perhaps a stereotypical Arab or even perceived as a Muslim name. But the reality of the name is that it speaks to the commitment and honor of being a “slave of God” or Allah. Here I must be quick to add that the word “Allah” is not the name of the Muslim God but simply the Arabic word for “God.” Christians call on “Allah” as their God and on Jesus as the son of “Allah,” Son of God. Even so, I often find myself explaining over and over my own name as “AbdulMasih.” Many think I must have been a convert to Christianity since I have that famous “Abdul” piece in my name. But what many do not realize is that the word “Abdul Masih” literally means “slave (servant) of Christ”! My name doesn’t get any more Christian than that in the Arabic language, yet even after I say that I was born and raised in Jerusalem, many wonder how come I am of the Christian faith!

Paul uses those exact words as he begins his epistle to the Romans, saying: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). The Arabic

translation is “Paul AbdulMasih”! And the way Paul uses that language, once again, affirms to us how he perceived himself as a “slave of Christ.” “Slave” and “free” might seem like an oxymoron, but not when it comes to our relationship with Christ. Being slaves to Christ means that we are now totally free to do the will of the Lord of the heavens. Now we are free to serve since we have been “purchased” by the blood of the Lamb that was slain for us and for our salvation. Jesus has paid the price on the cross of Calvary, and now we have been freed from sin, called not just as servants or slaves but truly as the children of the Most High. Romans 8:15 (CSB) puts it this way: “You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Instead, you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’”

Now as children of God, we have been freed from our slavery to sinfulness to serve a living, loving and forgiving God. Immersed in God’s amazing grace, we find ourselves experiencing the freedom to serve the neighbor and to live for the sake of the world. Our love toward God is now manifested in our love toward our neighbor:

Those who say, ‘I love God’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars. After all, those who don’t love their brothers or sisters whom they have seen can hardly love God whom they have not seen! (1 John 4:20 CEB).

As such, the church as the body of believers becomes the expression of this Christian freedom in and through the serving of our neighbors. I always say that the church is not a relationship with the building, but the building of a relationship — a relationship with God and with one another.

To our Lord Jesus we give all power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise, now and forever! Amen!

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