

## **Christian Freedom**

### **Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

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The apostle Paul was smack-dab-in-the-middle of a huge controversy when he wrote “For freedom, Christ has set us free.” (Compare Acts 15 with Galatians 2)

Christian headquarters in Jerusalem, headed by Peter and Jesus’ brother James, was insisting that if gentiles wanted to be baptized Christians they first had to become Jewish. This meant that the new converts, along with following the Jewish dietary and moral laws, had to be circumcised. This was the ancient sign of covenant between the One God and the Jewish people. Jesus was a Jew. Paul and James were Jews. It was only logical that if a gentile wanted to become a Christian they first had to become a Jew.

For Paul, this negated the whole point of Jesus’ message, death and resurrection. The outward signs of religious behavior are not what saved one from sin and death, in Paul’s view, rather it is only the loving grace in Jesus Christ that makes us right with God. Thus whether one was Jewish or not, circumcised or not, male, female, slave or free, none of that mattered. All that mattered was that one received the loving grace of God into their hearts and then lived like it or as Paul puts it, “The only thing that counts is faith working through love.” (Gal. 5:6)

These are amazing and radical words coming from a zealous, Jewish rabbi who in Christ Jesus found a totally new way of relating to God. It transformed his life and as a result he helped to transform the world.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement in 18<sup>th</sup> century England found himself embroiled in a similar controversy. Rejecting the Calvinist doctrines of “predestination”....the notion that God is control of each and every event, the outcome of our lives, our choices and our faith are pre-ordained before we are even born....Wesley insisted that human beings had free will. Each of us are free to choose faith or not, to choose good or evil, to freely choose how we are going to live. A loving God would not create human puppets. Rather what God really wants from us is love in return and toward each other, and love is only love if it is freely chosen.

As a result of his views Wesley left the establishment Church of England, which restricted membership and the sacraments to the landed and wealthy, to take his gospel message and worship out into the streets, marketplaces and jails. Anyone was welcome to join a Methodist class society. Outward religious behavior was not nearly as important as what was going on in the believer’s heart and life.

Wesley was accused of heresy by many. Critics labeled him an “antinomian”, which means “one who denies the relevance of law”. It was a term reserved to those who chose to assert free will rather than predestination, held to universal atonement or stressed human responsibility. (Richard P. Heitzenrater, Wesley and the People Called Methodists, Abingdon, Nashville, 1995, p.18) They argued that the Methodist rejection of religious legalism suggested a “do your own thing” attitude toward a faith where “anything goes”. On the contrary, Wesley sought holy living, the practical, and in his case methodical, discipline of the Christian life, primary in service to others. (Heitzenrater, pp.106-7, 121) For the Methodists just as for Paul, “The only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

Folks often ask “what is the difference between a Methodist and any other Christian?” What it is that makes us special?

Taking Christian freedom seriously we United Methodists are unique in a number of ways:

- We do not take the bible literally but that is not to say we take it lightly. John Wesley suggested that along with the bible as the primary source of God’s revelation, reason, church tradition and personal experience also reveal who God is and what God wills for us today.

- We encourage diversity of thought and expression about our faith, rejecting dogmatic conformity. United Methodists can be liberal or conservative, contemplative or charismatic, they love to sing the old hymns or learn the new ones too.

- We are an “open communion” church; all people regardless of church membership are welcome to receive the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, as well as the programs and ministry of the church.

- We are a “connectional church”; interconnected by a common mission and network of resources to 38,000 other United Methodist churches in North America and many more around the world.

- We insist that personal spirituality and social responsibility cannot be separated, “touching heaven, changing earth”; in the end how we live our lives is our true religion.

Let me give you an example of a good Methodist.

Wesley Branch Rickey, was born December 20, 1881, in Stockdale, Ohio.( John C. Chalberg’s Rickey and Robinson: The Preacher, the Player and America’s Game, Harlan Davidson, 2000) He went to his mother’s Methodist church every Sunday. After high school graduation he attended a Methodist college, Ohio Wesleyan University,

eventually getting his law degree from the University of Michigan. Baseball was Branch Rickey's first love. He returned to Ohio Wesleyan to coach the college baseball team.

In 1904 he took the team to South Bend, Indiana, to play Notre Dame. When the team arrived at their hotel to check in, the hotel manager said, "I have rooms for all of you - except for him" - and he pointed to the team's catcher, Charley Thomas, who was black.

"Why don't you have a room for him," Rickey asked.

"Because our policy is whites only."

Rickey responded, "I'd like to have Charley stay in my room. Can you bring in a cot?" After long deliberations, the innkeeper relented. Rickey sent the ball players to their rooms. But when he got to his room Charlie Thomas was sitting on a chair pulling frantically at his skin and sobbing.

Years later Dr. Charles Thomas was a highly successful dentist who never forgot his coach and whose coach never forgot him.

Sixty years ago as the General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey hired the first African American Major League baseball player, Jackie Robinson. Rickey was determined to racially integrate America's pastime. Jackie Robinson was not only a brilliant athlete he was also a decorated World War II veteran, a university graduate and a man of faith. When Rickey interviewed him for the job he asked Robinson if he could withstand the racial taunts, insults and physical threats that he would have to endure.

For three grueling hours Rickey role-played an insulting fan, an opposing ball player, a vicious teammate. Finally, Robinson asked, "Mr. Rickey, are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?"

Rickey replied, "Robinson, I'm looking for a ball player with guts enough not to fight back!" He reached into his desk and brought out Papini's book The Life of Christ and he read Jesus' teaching, "whomsoever shall smite thee on right cheek, turn to him the other also." He read from Papini's comments, "To answer blows with blows, evil deeds with evil deeds, is to meet the attacker on his own ground ... Only he who has conquered himself can conquer his enemies."

Rickey put the book down. He said, "Can you do it? You will have to promise that for the first three years in baseball you will turn your other cheek. Three years --- can you do it?"

Their non-violent resistance to injustice inspired millions, including Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Their courage together changed America for the better not just in the silly game of Major League baseball.

One hundred years ago a Methodist wouldn't consider coming to church without a suit and tie, or a dress, hat and gloves. One hundred years ago the idea of bringing one's morning coffee into a sanctuary was unthinkable. One hundred years ago a good Methodist wouldn't think of smoking tobacco, drinking a glass of wine, playing a game of cards or dancing...in public.

The outward signs of religious behavior are not what make one holy. Paul knew that as did John Wesley. We are free of such empty piety for it is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ that makes us whole. That is what we celebrate this morning as we take Holy Communion together this morning.

But that freedom doesn't mean we can do anything we want. We are not free to harm ourselves or others. Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson exercised their freedom, but not just for their own self-interest. In so doing contributed to the liberation of many, many others.

You and I may or may not be in a life situation that will change the world in a dramatic, historic way such as Rickey and Robinson, but each of us is called to do our part. Each of us in our own context is free to 'touch heaven and change the earth with head, heart and hands'. That's what it means to be a Methodist.

"The only thing that counts is faith working through love."

Amen.