

Dear Brother in Christ,

One of the most precious legacies of the Lutheran Reformation is a proper understanding of Christian freedom. The freedom that God has given to us in Christ is not an abstract concept. Rather, it is a precious doctrine of Scripture that not only assures us of what God has done for us in Christ, but it is also a doctrine that has practical applications in every area of our lives.

There are many things that can cause us to lose sight of that Christian freedom, not the least of which is the *opinio legis* that afflicts every one of us. In addition, circumstances and challenges that arise in the Christian life and in the life of the church can also lead us to act in ways that do not faithfully apply the doctrine of Christian freedom.

Those who provide pastoral care to God's people—because they are leaders in the church and because they are looked to for advice and example—must constantly review the doctrine of Christian freedom and strive to apply it to situations in their lives and to let it shape the instruction that they provide to their flocks.

As an encouragement to you to keep this precious doctrine at the center of your ministry, the Conference of Presidents offers the pastoral letter below.

Serving with you in Christ,

WELS President Mark Schroeder

Pastoral Letter on Christian Freedom

WELS Conference of Presidents

We are members of the body of Christ who have been set free from slavery to sin and death and adopted into the glorious family of God! Set free in Christ, we cherish our new status as liberated children, and we cherish the Christian freedom that enables and empowers us to serve Christ and serve our neighbor.

Our world and our culture are obsessed with personal freedom and personal rights. Sadly, much of what unfolds in our culture under the banner of freedom is really licentious slavery to sin and self. Our world and culture do not understand genuine freedom.

In the Christian church we are not immune to the influence of our culture. The American mindset that idolizes personal freedom is deeply ingrained in each of us, and our sinful nature easily asserts personal freedom as a license for self-centered behavior. This is not Christian freedom. It is not godly behavior. It has nothing to do with freedom as God defines it. In the church we encounter and sometimes display attitudes and mindsets that reveal a distorted understanding of Christian freedom. This flawed thinking distorts practices and leads to outcomes that threaten the unity of the Spirit and may break the bond of peace. The sinful heart is an idol factory, fabricating false gods to worship and serve. It is easy for our sinful nature to love the gift of personal freedom more than the Giver, and to worship freedom more than the Servant who set us free.

The goal of the Conference of Presidents in sharing this pastoral letter is not to react to a particular problem but to address the fundamental problem endemic to all of us: our own sinful nature and the *opinio legis* that is essentially self-centered and law-driven. Our desire is not to fix something that is broken but daily to crucify our Old Adam and put to death our *opinio legis*. Our desire is to encourage brothers to study Holy Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the writings of Luther to deepen an understanding of Christian freedom that centers on trusting Jesus and serving others. In Jesus' name we invite you to set personal preferences aside and with a Christ-centered and other-centered heart seek what is best for your neighbor. We invite you to discuss these things with brothers in the ministry and work together in the best interest of the kingdom of God.

We are free *from* sin and its consequences

"It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

As human beings born of sinful parents, our natural will was bound and enslaved by sin and death. St. Paul describes his unconverted attitude before he met his Savior: "At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another" (Titus 3:3). These words came from a man who at the time was fully committed to outward obedience to the Law of Moses. He was in every way a Pharisee of Pharisees, faultless in his legalistic righteousness (Philippians 3). His description of self is characteristic of every unconverted heart; we too were slaves to sin, death, Satan, and self. We cannot ever grasp the fullness of our freedom in Christ unless we have stood aghast at the depth of our own personal slavery to depravity.

Laws and rules, which we naturally view as the way to set ourselves free from the guilt and punishment of sin, never set free; they only tighten the shackles of human bondage. The more laws we pass and rules we make the less free we are, for the law brings wrath (Romans 4:15) and causes sin to increase (Romans 5:20). The law is a burden too heavy to bear (Acts 15:10).

Jesus set us free! Our Savior has washed us in his blood and cleansed us from our sin. Our Lord's perfect obedience to all of God's will is our righteousness. The obedience of Jesus is imputed to us, and we are clothed in his garments of righteousness—the beautiful perfection of our Savior himself. We have been renewed by the Holy Spirit of God, reborn and adopted into God's holy family. Our mind, our will, our identity, our focus, our purpose in life have been redefined away from living for self, so that now with a joyful servant's heart we serve the living God in righteousness and purity, and we serve our neighbor in sacrificial love. "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:4-7).

We Christians are completely free in Christ. We are set free from sin's guilt and condemnation. Satan has no power to accuse and condemn us. Death holds no grip on us. Sin is no longer our master; we are able to say "no" to sin and "yes" to godliness. The world cannot compel us to conform to its ways, and even our own old sinful self has been overcome by a new creation, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

This freedom in Christ is found only where Christ is found; that is, in the places where he has chosen to reveal himself and be present among us. Everywhere else is slavery. We experience freedom when we hear the proclamation of the pure gospel of *Christus pro nobis*. Such freedom is not found in empty moralizing or "how-to" instructions for better living. We breathe Christian freedom in the lifelong practice of repentance, turning away from sin and looking to the Lamb of God who has removed our guilt forever. We celebrate our freedom in baptismal awareness, living each moment in the power of our rebirth in the Spirit and reveling in our place

in God's family. We experience freedom at the Lord's Table, where we meet and see and touch and taste Christ. Only in the pure gospel do we find freedom from false piety, freedom from the false gods of our own making, and freedom from false Christs.

In the gospel of freedom—in the person of Jesus Christ alone—we experience the fullness of Christian freedom!

We are free *for* service to God and our neighbor

“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13).

As servants of the Most High God, our goal is to serve God. We serve him by serving our brothers and sisters in Jesus and serving our neighbor in humility. Set free by our Savior, we live out our freedom in service to Christ Jesus and in complete submission to his will. Our freedom in Jesus finds its ultimate expression in emulating the one who did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. Martin Luther wrote beautifully and succinctly:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

These two theses seem to contradict each other. If, however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purpose beautifully. Both are Paul's own statements, who says in 1 Cor. 9[:19], “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all,” and in Rom. 13[:8], “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was “born of woman, born under the law” [Gal. 4:4], and therefore was at the same time a free man and a servant, “in the form of God” and “of a servant” [Phil. 2:6-7].¹

True freedom, truly *Christian* freedom, is anchored in the Word of the Lord, in the Word of the gospel. We live by faith in the promise, not by sight. We rest in God's Word, not in our own preferences or personal feelings.

True Christian freedom is lived out in Christian love. True freedom in Christ is the God-given desire and ability to glorify God and to serve my neighbor. It is to build up, not tear down. It is to reinforce the unity of the Spirit and strengthen the bond of peace, not to divide or create dissension.

True Christian freedom is exercised in the righteousness of Christ, in the certainty that our Christian life of sanctification is holy and pleasing to God in heaven because of his holy Son. We serve with the confidence that the Lord will provide for us, bless us abundantly, and protect us as we live in “the world of the other”² and focus on doing what is best for others.

American ideas about individual rights and freedoms come out of the Age of Enlightenment and breathe the spirit of Arminian free-will rationalism. They are not rooted in Scripture or in the gospel of freedom rediscovered in the Lutheran Reformation. Our own sinful flesh thrives on a spirit of self-assertion and self-determination. Because we are deeply immersed in this culture and so easily succumb to this mindset, it is critical that we return continually to Jesus' cross—the cross by which Christ set us free, the cross where our

¹ Luther, M. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, p. 344.

² This expression was used by Gerhard Forde to describe the Christian life that flows from justification by grace through faith: “The faith born of the unconditional promise finds a new world opening up . . . the world of the other, the world of the neighbor” (*Justification: A Matter of Death and Life*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

Savior set aside his individual rights as the Son of God in order to serve his creation and rescue the lost and condemned (Philippians 2).

The recent global pandemic has brought many assertions of individual rights and freedoms. Well-intentioned Christians have maintained their right not to wear masks in group settings or not to get vaccinated against a virus. Other sincere Christians have insisted on masks, vaccines, or other behaviors or practices and have labeled noncompliance as “unchristian” or “unloving.” Neither assertion demonstrates an understanding of the freedom for which Christ set us free. Each manifests an inward focus on personal perspective. Each brings to light a tragic captivity to self—a selfish clinging to personal rights or a selfish insistence on imposition of personal will. Political viewpoints have prevailed over Christian love. Each of us regularly needs to examine our hearts and ask ourselves: Am I being slanderous, malicious, or unkind? Is my behavior overtly unloving? Am I demonstrating an attitude that reflects the gentle, sacrificial love of Jesus?

Instead of invoking personal freedom, return to the cross of Jesus, and there with a view of your suffering Savior—who gave up his rights for you to set you free from the curse of sin—ask the questions, “My personal preferences aside, what can I do for the good of my neighbor? How can I best serve my neighbor in meekness and Christian charity, for his health and welfare? How can I meet my neighbor, listen to his viewpoint, seek to understand his thinking and concerns, and strive to serve him—wherever he is at—in Christian love?”

Christian freedom does not justify sloppy pastoral practice. It does not excuse practices that reflect unsound theology. It is not a cover for indifference or a lack of Christian love.

While the practice of personal freedom may entail *exercising* my personal rights, the practice of Christian freedom regularly entails *setting aside* my personal rights because of Jesus and his gospel and for the good of my neighbor and his needs. A legalist in one form abuses God’s good law to make rules where God has made none. A licentious person hides behind personal freedom when he clings stubbornly to what he wants to do and asserts his right to do it. Both abuse Christian freedom.

A proper view of Christian freedom changes the way we do things. It enables us to confront, discuss, and correct misguided attitudes and assertions:

- **“If something is neither expressly commanded nor expressly forbidden in Scripture, it is therefore an *adiaphoron* and a matter of Christian freedom.”**

Our hermeneutic does not permit a biblicist interpretation of Scripture in which everything not explicitly commanded or explicitly forbidden is a matter of indifference. We often synthesize passages from different parts of Scripture to discern God’s will, and we conclude on the basis of general principles or multiple passages that God either wills or forbids certain practices. (For example, although there is no chapter and verse that specifically commands infant baptism, we correctly infer that the practice conforms to God’s will.) Synthetic interpretations draw correct doctrinal conclusions on the basis of multiple passages or general scriptural principles.

- **“If something really is an *adiaphoron*, then I am free to do or not do it.”**

Even when we have established clearly that a given practice is neither commanded nor forbidden, we do not necessarily rush to implement that practice. Determining that something is an *adiaphoron* is not the last word on the subject. It is the beginning of the conversation, not the end. If a practice is truly an *adiaphoron*, Christian love compels us to ask the next questions: Is it wise? Is it edifying? Is it unifying? Is it compatible with faithful Christian practice all around us, or might it cause confusion, uncertainty, division, and dissension? Does it rightly divide law and gospel? Is it unnecessarily novel? Does it reflect a confessional Lutheran understanding and practice, or will it inadvertently communicate false theology? Not everything permissible is beneficial (1 Corinthians 6:12).

- **“I don’t have to think about how the practice of my Christian freedom will impact anyone else.”**

This reflects a gross misunderstanding of how Christian freedom is to be exercised, and it exposes an absence of love. We are not islands to ourselves. Our practices spill over into the lives of people around us. What happens in one congregation can impact many others. We are always to exercise Christian freedom in a spirit of Christian love, with loving concern for how what we do might impact others. “God has combined the members of the body . . . so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:24,25).

- **“I know what works best for us in our context. I am unmoved by your concerns because you don’t understand the special circumstances I’m dealing with.”**

Every ministry context is special, yet every ministry context is the same. People, culture, circumstances, preferences may all change, but the fundamental things that characterize human beings and human needs do not change. Those things are not unique; they are not special. They are common to every human being and every cultural context in every place around the world.

Practice Christian freedom by consulting with other brothers in the ministry. Your ministry is not that different from theirs. Their wisdom and discernment can offer valuable insight to help you contend with challenging circumstances and apply godly solutions. Listen. Be respectful. Be collaborative. Be brotherly. You will be blessed as you learn from sanctified men who have already navigated difficult pathways. You may gain wisdom from the mistakes of others who have fallen into pitfalls, learned from their missteps, and grown from the experience. Likewise, it is good for experienced men to have their assumptions challenged by fresh thinking. As iron sharpens iron, mutual encouragement and civil discourse is a two-way street to be navigated with love and humility.

- **“I have to come up with my own creative solutions to the challenges we are facing.”**

We enjoy great creative latitude in our approach to resolving challenges in ministry. We recognize that continually doing the same things over and over because of personal preference or rote adherence to tradition is bondage to form and slavery to practice. At the same time, it is for good reason that we do not capriciously adopt novel practices in the church without careful reflection and sober discussion with brother pastors. Open and candid dialog on any issue will help bring to light the root causes driving a need for change or a need to retain the *status quo*. The hubris of our sinful nature easily leads us to think that our own personal creative solutions will bring previously undiscovered answers to problems the Christian church has confronted for centuries. Circumstances and surroundings may change, but human nature does not change, the problem of sinful rebellion against God does not change, and God’s gospel solution for fallen sinners does not change. In seeking creative solutions to knotty problems, we are not free to turn away from God’s own fundamental solution: law and gospel rightly divided, sin proclaimed and grace revealed, confession of sin and forgiveness for every sinner. Creative “solutions” that turn away from the means of grace are no solutions at all. Remember, where Christ is found—that is, in the places where Christ has chosen to meet with us—there is freedom; everywhere else is slavery.

- **“In matters where Scripture does not speak, I have a right to choose whether to do or not do something; nobody should be permitted to tell me what to do.”**

As servants of the Servant, we willingly submit to others and subordinate our autonomy to the greater good. This is freedom to love and to serve, to submit and to obey, to accept guidance and to take direction. This is the spirit of Jesus reflected in attitudes and actions that put others first and serve in his gentle name. Christian love and Christian liberty are never in conflict with each other;

they are never pitted against one another. They walk together harmoniously in a spirit of Christian humility that serves Jesus and our neighbor.

When we don't like something, when we encounter a practice that makes us uncomfortable because it is new or different, when something is unfamiliar to us—it may be easy and convenient to make a theological case for why such things are wrong. The same is true when we want to advocate for something we like. We may easily build a case from Scripture to validate or vindicate our viewpoint. We can dangerously manipulate Holy Scripture to support our personal preferences. We are called to preach the good news of freedom in Christ. Our call is not to champion political or social or medical causes. While we may be free as American citizens to speak out in favor of such causes, as Ministers of the Gospel we exercise great restraint in doing so, lest our opinions become obstacles to the preaching of Christ. Holy Scripture alone is the infallible Word of Truth. All other sources of information are of human origin and subject to error. The exercise of Christian freedom calls for great discernment and collective wisdom, so that we do not cause others to stumble. The exercise of Christian freedom requires careful self-examination, so we can recognize when we are sliding into the ditch of legalism on the one side or license on the other.

Christian freedom is the ability and desire, given by God himself, to focus on Christ and our neighbor as we joyfully carry out our Christian vocations. Dr. Luther captures this truth beautifully in his treatise on the *“Freedom of the Christian”*:

As our heavenly Father has in Christ freely come to our aid, we also ought freely to help our neighbor through our body and its works, and each one should become as it were a Christ to the other that we may be Christs to one another and Christ may be the same in all, that is, that we may be truly Christians.

Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. But alas in our day this life is unknown throughout the world; it is neither preached about nor sought after; we are altogether ignorant of our own name and do not know why we are Christians or bear the name of Christians. Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us. . .

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.³

Brothers, we swim in a culture that does not understand these things. We pray fervently that we are not caught up in the confusion about freedom that swirls all around us. We are shaped by what we imbibe, be it the books we read, the news we listen to, or the websites and social media we frequent. We encourage you to immerse yourself in the truly liberating Word of truth, to be guided by Holy Scripture in your exercise of Christian freedom.

Christian freedom is not merely an abstract concept; it is the joyful reality of our existence as new creatures in Christ! It is not merely a principle; it drives our attitudes and our thinking through practical application across our Christian lives. We see obvious application to issues such as: masks and vaccines; church governance models; worship forms, styles, and preferences; protocols for extending divine calls; and many other areas of application. Our purpose in sharing this pastoral letter is not to encourage a specific application for every issue in every context. Our purpose is to invite you to re-examine the foundation of Christian

³ Luther, M. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 367, 371.

freedom, to understand and cherish its beauty, and to exercise your freedom in Christian love. Our goal is not easy application but careful, evangelical practice.

You are always free to live for the glory of God and for the benefit of your neighbor, without thinking of personal rights and preferences, just as our Savior did for you. We encourage you to rejoice in the treasure of Christian freedom we share. We encourage you to be informed by Luther and the Confessors; their wisdom is relevant and applicable today. Devote yourself to these things, so that Christian freedom may abound and Christian love may prevail.

The grace of our Lord + Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you. Amen.

WELS Conference of Presidents

Epiphany 2022

Suggested reading list

Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians

Bondage of the Will, by Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 33.

"Freedom of a Christian," by Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31.

Lectures on Galatians, by Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26-27.

"Treatise on Good Works," by Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 44.

Formula of Concord, Article I, "Original Sin."

Formula of Concord, Article II, "Free Will."

Formula of Concord, Article III, "The Righteousness of Faith before God."

Formula of Concord, Article IV, "Good Works."

Formula of Concord, Article X, "Church Practices Called *Adiaphora*, or Indifferent Things."