

THE INWARD SOURCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, FREEDOM, AND RESPONSIBILITY

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Sometime several years ago, on a Sunday visit to a Church in Alabama, I heard at a men's Sunday School class a story about a quarrel between a brother and his elder sister. Without meaning it, he had been annoying her by constantly running round the room. She called her Dad and complained, knowing that she was his favorite. As expected he took her side and made junior sit down on a chair with instructions not to move for half an hour. Dad gone, she taunted him: "Ha! Ha! Dad made you sit down quickly enough." But, maintaining his dignity and his innocence, he made the splendid retort, "Outside I'm sitting down, but inside I'm standing up"—a good example of our basic human right and duty to individual inward dissent within the restraints of obedience to outward authority, and of our basic right and freedom to engage in such dissent. I was able to use the tale to illustrate one or two points in Calvin's teaching on Christian liberty and conscience, and in a discussion with colleagues whether some aspects of our current practice in the Church might not conflict with Reformed tradition on this matter, it was suggested that I might write a few things down for further discussion.

INNER FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY AT THE REFORMATION

The Inner and Outer Forum

It was accepted at the Reformation that, as things are, both with respect to our human nature and our Christian faith in the world we live in, a Christian is forced into two quite distinct roles. He or she must be both a public person and a private one, living in such a way that, even in the healthiest state these aspects do not merge into one another. Calvin works often with the distinction which he picks up from Paul's teaching about the "inner" and "outward" person (cf. e.g., 2 Cor. 4:16, Rom. 7:22). His teaching suggests that we are each forced to decide about our reactions to life, its pressures and challenges, at two levels, the open and the secret.

Calvin not only distinguishes, but actually at times separates the outward realm in which we live publicly from the "inner forum of conscience." He describes the Christian life as lived always under a "twofold government." In the outer forum we deal with our fellow men and women, and are under the powers that operate in Church and society. In the inner realm at the same time we live in intense privacy and personal responsibility with our conscience before God alone (Inst. 4:20:i & 4:10:5). His use of the word "forum" in this connection, is, I think, deeply significant. It suggests indeed that each of us is engaged in debate and decision within these two distinct centres of responsibility. The outward forum includes Washington, Ponce de Leon, the Presbytery, the local Church, the family and the business sphere; but all the time, deep down, there is the ongoing debate between the inner self and God. The relationship between these two aspects of our life must

be determined by each individual at the level of, and on the initiative of, his or her inner freedom.

The outward forum before which we live such a large part of our life, is, of course vitally important. It is in this sphere that we give our Christian witness, do our Christian works and fulfill our duties of earthly citizenship. It is often for us a matter of simple and straightforward duty to obey the external rules without question, though there can arise the situation in which we have to disobey man in order to obey God. But occasionally we may find ourselves having to decide to render external obedience even though we may find ourselves inwardly very much at variance with what we are compelled to do. Such "public obedience" to which we have at times to force ourselves, can be given along with deep inner reservations (Inst. 4:20:25) and "spiritual freedom can perfectly well exist along with civil bondage" (Inst. 4:20:1).

The Solitude and Impenetrability of the Individual

As the person inwardly debates and decides before God, the individual is isolated. In the outward forum, the world and the Church are there with all their pressures and promises and compromises. But in the inward forum it is as Augustine described it: "God and my own soul--nothing else." Even though no one could at times speak more eloquently of the warmth and strength of the Christian fellowship, Luther described the Christian as being like the "sparrow that is alone upon the housetop hovering between heaven and earth." He stressed the fact that in death and in the day of judgment each stands alone before God entirely beyond the range of help from any other except Christ. But, distant though we are from each other in these crises, we can at present nevertheless "shout in one another's ears" an appeal to prepare ourselves each in our lonely isolation now for that final great personal crisis. (See e.g., the introduction to his famous series of sermons at Wittenberg 1522 L.W. 51:70.)

Calvin's teaching presupposes the same background to human existence. For example, he insists that confession of sins should be made in such solitude to God alone (of course within the context of life in the Church). Only where the individual fails to attain a true sense of consolation through such deeply personal confession has he or she to seek out another for help in attaining it. He stresses, too, the hiddenness of what goes on in the inner life of the person. He was, of course, deeply concerned about the need of the Church for outward discipline. It has a right to make rules and expect loyalty and punish offenders. But all this can take place only on the surface of its life. In no measure can the judgment of the Church penetrate into, or evaluate anything within that sphere where the inner life is lived before God, and ultimate decisions are made by the individual. "The ungodliness of the inner life, and anything secret, do not come under the Church's judgment" (Comm. on 1 Cor. 5:11). In the deep inner recesses of our personal life, each of us is impenetrable.

Inner Freedom and Its Potential

In the solitude and impenetrability of the individual lies the secret source of all freedom, of all hopeful change, and of all human rights. The Reformers, as we have indicated, believed that each individual was indeed free to make a quite independent and responsible inner decision, and to live in spiritual liberty, no

matter what their outward circumstances might be. They also believed that it was the individual exercise of each spiritual liberty that was most likely to bring about in the long run the most effective and radical changes in Church and society. Calvin would no doubt have heartily approved of the little boy's stance in his story, recognizing, as all parents must, that unless the sanctions enforcing conformity can at the same time as they are applied win the approval of the heart those who are temporarily restrained by them will in the long run, as the tension mounts, begin to express their inward revolt in more open and disruptive ways.

After all, we have to remember that the important turning points both of the Renaissance and the Reformation took place when truly radical decisions were made inwardly against the most severe external pressure to conform. Our story illustration makes us think of Galileo, outwardly recanting his criticism of the current doctrine of the immobility of the earth, yet at the same time muttering under his breath "nevertheless, it moves." And we recognize that in Luther himself, the final decision to challenge Rome outwardly was the result of long built-up inward pressure.

The Power of the Church, and the Inward Freedom of the Individual

There are, of course, vicious aspects of our isolation from one another within human life. Our redemption by Christ means that we are now made members of his body in which we experience a deep communion that transcends all our isolating and segregating barriers, and enables us to "lay down our burdens" within the community, and find them lifted by Christ (Of Luther's early treatise on The Blessed Sacrament of the Body of Christ LN. 35:43-73). Mother Church, as Calvin insisted, is there to give us nurture and guidance (4:1:4). But though within the Church our burdens of sin and care are lifted, our responsibility for our own inward and solitary decision before God is not lessened. It is, indeed, within the Church alone that each of us is set free and alone to decide. **WITHIN THIS UNIQUE COMMUNITY WE ARE NOW DELIVERED FROM THE FALSE PRESSURE OF COMMUNITY.** Calvin discusses our individual freedom in the nineteenth chapter of the third book of the Institutes (in a chapter in which he follows Luther closely), and in his later chapters on the Church and State he refers back to this previous discussion, as if to point out that living in community in no way cancels our inward liberty. Especially talking about the individual within the Church, he says that even though we should be inclined to obey, yet "each of us is to keep his freedom," and "the Lord alone is to be heard." It is love, and not law, that must bind us together in freedom (cf. Institutes 4:10:31-2, 4:20:1-2, 32).

We have noted that in his discussion of the power of the Church, Calvin insisted on its inability to probe conscience or the "inner man." Certainly the Church has the right and the power from Christ to judge whether or not its members and pastors conform outwardly to the law of God and its own justifiable laws, and it must exercise this power when judging the fitness of any person for office or membership. In this process it might have to probe certain aspects of "private behaviour," but it should never imagine that Christ has given it any right or power to understand or evaluate what goes on deep within the human heart. The jurisdiction of the Church extends to the outward life, but inner attitudes are not within the sphere of its powers of discernment and do not come under the scope of its judgment (Institutes 4:12:6). The Church must recognize that its ecclesiastical laws and discipline "bind only outward works" and must "leave the conscience free" (4:10:4). As long as the

pastor, or office bearer, or theological candidate is willing outwardly to conform, he or she is free to have and maintain inward reserve even towards ecclesiastical laws, just as firmly as he or she would maintain such inward reserve or resistance against State laws which have to be outwardly obeyed.

Of course when Church and/or civil government in its demands upon us is fully and simply reflecting God's law then the conscience is bound to wholehearted observance. But many ecclesiastical and civil laws are about what Calvin calls "things intrinsically indifferent," and in relation to these the individual owes only outward conformity. Calvin recognized that many such ecclesiastical practices and customs were foolish enough to deserve only lip service. **THE CHURCH ITSELF, HOWEVER GOOD ITS LAWS, MUST BE SATISFIED WITH ONLY OUTWARD CONFORMITY, AND IT HAS BEEN GIVEN BY CHRIST NO AUTHORITY IN THE REALM OF CONSCIENCE.**

In drawing such severe limitation to the power of the Church, the Reformers took issue with the Roman Church of their day. That Church had not only sought to secure its outward authority over the individual through its complicated system of ecclesiastical law, but it had extended its "unlimited and barbarous empire" into the realm of conscience, and with its use of the confessional, under the guise of pastoral counseling it has subjected the souls of men and women to "cruel butchery" (4:10:1) allowing psychological "bullies and thugs" of the day to inflict deep wounds and intense torture on miserable souls (Inst. 3:4:2-3). In this way, of course, Rome sought to secure its authority and crush all potential to inward dissent where it might originate in the freedom of the will before the Word of God.

The Reformation involved the destruction of the confessional system. No one henceforth was to be subject to a process that would put him or her under pressure or obligation to reveal inner reaction or to conform that response to an expected pattern (Inst. 3:4:7). The Church must begin again not only to respect the inward sovereignty of the individual, but to encourage the individual to resist intrusion into the deepest levels of privacy, and to assert and maintain a freedom dearly won by the sacrifice of Christ. Calvin's word encouraging civil disobedience when the conscience is in danger of violation could equally apply in ecclesiastical affairs: "We have been redeemed by Christ at so great a price as our redemption cost him, so that we should not enslave our consciences to the wicked desires of men" (Inst. 4:30:32). It is not only the right, but the duty of the individual to maintain an inward reserve before God.

OUR PRESENT CHANGE OF EMPHASIS

Since the sixteenth century, there has been some shift of accent in our basic assumptions about life, the Gospel, and humanity; and it is not difficult to locate some of the points of which these aspects of Reformed teaching give rise to questioning and discussion today.

Our stress today is on togetherness, and we do not like the individual to think too much about solitariness unless to regard it mainly as a curse. It is significant that in our most recent worship book we have robbed the hymn, "Here O my Lord I see thee face to face," of its real meaning by making it "Here O our Lord we see you face to face." We tend to identify reality with the outward world rather than with the inward, and we regard any form of withdrawal from outward life or any suspicion of split-mindedness as psychologically undesirable.

We are afraid, too, that to emphasize the individual as the Reformers did, might

lessen our zeal for social justice and community action, and in this respect we question their priorities. In a recent TV interview in England the Archbishop of Canterbury was severely taken to task by an activist clergyman because in his recent call to the nation he had stressed so heavily the responsibility of each individual for improving the state of affairs around him. The critic felt that the Archbishop was out of touch with the Church and the world for everybody knew it was affirmed that it was quite useless to appeal to the individual when it was the system that was entirely wrong!

Possibly we have diverged most from the Reformed tradition in the confidence we have developed in the power and right of the Church, in its exercise of pastoral care, to probe the inner life, to analyze it, and to dissolve the undesirable contradictions sometimes caused by forms of the Gospel. We have ways of putting pressure on individuals, especially within our institutions, to discard what would formerly have been regarded as a healthy and natural reserve.

Moreover, we tend to use such intense pastoral care as a means of discipline. Whereas the Reformed Church was concerned to ensure that the external life of a candidate for the ministry, for example, was free from scandal, accepting the candidate's own word about the heart's intentions, we are even more greatly concerned to ensure that, in spite of his or her profession, the internal life is free from anything abnormal. Instead of a pattern of outward behavior being regarded as a norm, we tend to substitute a pattern of inward development, defined by the psychological expert as healthy or unhealthy, mature or immature. And in certain cases where, according to custom, one would expect disciplinary proceedings to be taken, the matter is shelved by referring it to the expert in pastoral counseling.

POINTS FOR RE-EVALUATION

We choose here two aspects of our Church life today that might benefit from some reconsideration of the practice of the Reformation.

Preaching to the Individual

In our preaching to the individual today, we constantly remind him or her of his or her INVOLVEMENT with others in social sins, problems, responsibilities, and possibilities. Might our approach be more effective, and more in accordance with things as they really are, if we gave greater priority to an appeal to the individual in his or her APARTNESS? In the Gospels we find Jesus often selecting an individual, sometimes deliberately singling him or her out from among the crowd, for his exclusive attention. Can we not assume that through our preaching it is His purpose to reach towards, find, and address Himself to the individual in this way today? Of course the Reformers insisted that all true knowledge of God involved obedience, and one aspect of this obedience was acceptance of the task which involvement in the world laid upon us as Christians. But such obedience can only be the accompaniment and the fruit of personal surrender to God Himself, and the individual is most effectively called to such personal surrender when, as it were, he or she is taken apart from that very involvement and addressed as a solitary individual. In our present day concern to avoid undesirable purely individualistic piety, and narrowness of ethical concern, are we not in danger of failing to point the individual towards the reality of God Himself, and of putting him or her in touch with that Kingdom which, though it is not of this world, can nevertheless change

everything in the present structure of things?

Moreover, when it comes to the appeal for individual involvement and obedience, might it not be wiser, and more effective in the long run for social reform itself, if we spoke less often than we are tempted to do about the necessity of our participation in the widest social and international concerns, and tried more patiently to begin exactly where many people feel they really live. After listening, as I have had to do, to innumerable sermons and addresses during the last fifteen years, I have often wished that preachers and teachers would face me even sometimes with the kind of appeal that was given much more frequently fifty years ago than it is today--with the call to face more frankly than I am prone to do, the full implications of forgiveness and repentance in the immediate context of my daily life, and to live in Christian love, chastity, honesty and godliness within my home, family and personal affairs--all this without my having to wait for the next election or the coming social revolution.

The Place, Use, and Nature of Pastoral Counseling

Pastoral care, within the Reformed Church, was based on the belief that the ministry of the under-shepherds should as much as possible reflect the ministry of the Good Shepherd. Therefore the sheep to whom the Word is spoken should be known as intimately as possible by the one who speaks the Word and who is prepared to lay down his or her life in the service of the flock. The people in their turn should know their pastor and not have to regard the pastor as a stranger (John 10). Pastoral care was also thought of as being especially helpful to the individual who was unable to grasp fully for him or herself the promises and the comfort normally offered in the public preaching (3:4:14). Linked up with the administration of discipline, pastoral care helped to make discipline effective and to temper, at times, its inevitable harshness. When it involved pastoral conversation, the aim of the pastor was to point to Christ and the Word rather than to probe the individual's inner state (3:4:3). It is unfortunate that in the Reformed Church the tyranny of which the Reformers sought to purge the Church in abolishing compulsory confession ultimately tended to reappear in connection with its discipline, and indeed at times pastoral care tended to become simply an adjunct to discipline.

Today, however, we have to ask whether in our tendency to make pastoral care a substitute for discipline, and, indeed, a means of discipline, we are following a healthy line of development. Might we not here be in danger of subjecting one individual to both the power and judgment of another in a manner that is quite alien to the Reformed tradition? We have to ask seriously, too, if the chief concern within all such pastoral ministry is that of really encouraging the sinner to look away ("with both eyes," as Calvin insisted--Inst. 3:4:3) from his or her own subjective state to Christ and His word. It is perhaps at this latter point that we are tending to depart most from our own tradition. Is our new found confidence in being able to probe and judge the "inner person" really justified? In a review of Southey's *LIFE OF WESLEY*, one critic remarked that the best comment might be that of the woman of Samaria: "Sir, thou has nothing to draw with, and the well is deep."