



Freedom, Blessing, and Safety: Icons of American Christianity

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Born and raised in the communist country of Czechoslovakia and now a citizen of Slovakia, I have had the special privilege of studying in the USA for several years. During this time, I have developed a number of precious friendships and experienced a lot of love and care from Americans. I have also acquired some understanding of American culture and American Christianity. I write now as a brother in Christ to point out some dangers that might be underestimated or even go unnoticed by insiders. I will focus on three concepts, which, according to my observation, are very precious to American society and to American Christians in particular: freedom, blessing, and safety. Even though my reflections could sound critical, I offer them as a humble contribution to the spiritual health of this country and as my sincere “Thank you” for all that my wife and I received here.

FREEDOM

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the

Good things—even freedom, blessing, and safety—can stand in the way of our being the people God has called us to be. These concepts, icons of American Christians, deserve reconsideration in the light of the gospel.

son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:31-36)

Freedom was a momentous word for Christians under the oppression of communism; we were longing and praying for it, singing and dreaming about it. And, in spite of the persecution, we were also experiencing it. I will always treasure the secret Bible camps, basement worships, and smuggling of Christian literature. I was forced to get serious about my faith at an early stage of my life, and that was a special mercy.

Nevertheless, we were constantly hoping for “external” freedom that would allow us to practice our faith openly. And the day came: the wall came down, the evil regime collapsed. As a university student, I had an opportunity to participate in the vanguard of that unique revolution. We went to factories, schools, offices, and homes, proclaiming the ideals of the new era—talking about democracy, human rights, and, of course, freedom. People came out to the city squares, singing, praying, and even smiling (Slovaks hardly smile!). We were excited, drunk with freedom. I even got into politics (talk about being drunk!).

Then the reality struck: power struggle, revenge, “privatization” (a fancy word for robbery), new businesses like drugs and pornography, new religions like Baha’i and New Age. Christians realized that people’s hearts do not change with the regime, and that democracy meant more work and fewer excuses. In my case, this disillusionment produced a vision of establishing a school that would teach about the real freedom described in John 8:32. Today, this school is a reality, striving for the renaissance of Christianity in post-communist Eastern Europe. (For more information, visit www.bsmt.sk/eng/.)

Now, let’s come to a country of which freedom is a hallmark—the USA. If someone came offering freedom to American citizens, the reaction might differ only slightly from the one in our text: “We are descendants of Abraham *Lincoln* and have never been slaves to anyone. What in the world do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” Even after the clarification that “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin,” there would be many Christians here quick to object that Christ “loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev 1:5). And rightly so! Furthermore, some of you here would be glad to point out that the Greek verb in John 8:34 is a present active participle (the one doing evil continuously), so it does not include those of us who only sin from time to time! Nevertheless, believers should not dismiss this passage too quickly, for in it Jesus was talking to those who had believed in him.

In 2 Pet 2:18-20 we learn how false prophets and teachers can rob Christians of their freedom:

For they speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice people who have just escaped from those who live in error. They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for people are slaves to whatever masters them. For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the

world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

Let me suggest that there are many false prophets and teachers in America and that they are much harder to identify than the ones produced by communism. The atheistic ideology in Slovakia was primitive and brutal, and therefore very apparent. It was relatively easy to tell “the bad guys” from “the good guys.” Here, however, the false prophets are much more sneaky and devious. The challenge doubles when they operate under cover of such cheerful terms as “blessing” or “safety,” as will be shown later.

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To warm up, let’s start with the most visible (and therefore the least dangerous) form, the TV commercials, and, with the help of 2 Pet 2, let us unmask these false prophets: “For they speak bombastic nonsense,” advertising “licentious desires of the flesh [to] entice people. They promise them freedom,” as in “Get your degree, set yourself free!” Or, the one for the gigantic truck: “It’s not more than you need, it’s just more than you are used to!” Or, for an eastern European like me, the most bombastic nonsense is the claim that light beer is actually good beer!

There is a simple but profound truth in 2 Pet 2:19b: “People are slaves to whatever masters them.” We have to admit that those stupid commercials do a good job of controlling people’s minds and hearts, making them buy things they do not need with money they do not have. What I found even more scandalous is that many Christians here call this abundance of stuff “blessing.”

BLESSING

You’ve heard it before: “We have so many things. We are so blessed!” To be sure, the connection between stuff and blessing is not an American invention; it is a natural one, found even in the Bible, especially the Old Testament. The problem becomes evident when we listen to what Jesus Christ says about blessing: “Blessed are the poor in spirit....Blessed are those who mourn....Blessed are the meek....those who hunger and thirst for righteousness....the merciful....the pure in heart....the peacemakers....those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake....Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Matt 5:3-11). This sounds very different from: “Blessed are those who have a lot of stuff.”

Jesus offers us so much more than just satisfying our physical needs. The tragedy is that we are just like the crowd in John 6:25-35. Jesus Christ offers himself as the bread of life, but people would rather have free food.

It's okay to have stuff. Just do not call it a blessing! Call it necessity or, if you have more than you need, call it an opportunity to share; and if you do not share, call it a burden or a problem, just do not call it a blessing, for "it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:23). Again, we in Slovakia have it easier—not because we are more spiritual, but because we cannot afford all that stuff. And that makes us more free, or, as Schleiermacher would say, more dependent on God.

SAFETY

"Safety first!" was one of the countless rules I learned when I entered the USA. (I never thought a free country would have so many rules.) Don't get me wrong; I do "respect the rules of the house I enter." Nevertheless, let me help you understand my mixed feelings when such a rule determines Christian action.

The communist world in which I grew up was anything but a safe place for Christians. My father was one of those "rebellious" pastors who obeyed God rather than men. Not only was he involved in various activities that the atheistic regime considered illegal, but he even encouraged and supported us, his six children, to participate in them. I remember a lady with tears in her eyes pleading with my father to stop ruining the future of his children by being such a vigorous Christian. Regardless of the eventual outcome (everyone in our family lives happily ever after), in that time we acquired the most precious things for our future: faith and trust in a God who cares. This is not to say that we were brave; we just did not have another option. We could not rely on human rights or justice, not even on insurance, savings, or a retirement plan, so we relied on God. Moreover, we learned that being saved is far more important than being safe.

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The post-9/11 America is experiencing some of the concerns that people in my country live with on a daily basis. As sad as this situation is, as much as we all wish things would get back to "normal," the present real or imagined danger should not hold us back from doing God's will. On the contrary, circumstances like these should prompt us to carry out our Christian mission with even more haste, for the time is near. Just as for Paul in Ephesus, in Slovakia, after all those years of oppression, "a wide door for effective work has opened" (1 Cor 16:9). Today, we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a significant difference. That is why it is painful for me to see how fear and insecurity enter many Christian hearts and minds in this country, resulting in losing the vision, diminishing the excitement for mission, cutting mission budgets, canceling mission trips, etc. It brings back my earlier memories, because fear and isolation were the major tools of the communist regime to destroy the church.

Yes, mission is not safe. It is, in fact, a high-risk endeavor, one that takes not just money, time, or energy, but also lives. However, what would have happened to our Christianity if Jesus Christ or his apostles had been worried about safety while proclaiming the gospel? Peter earned his Master's rebuke when bringing up a safety issue: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Matt 16:23). And what would happen to our salvation if Jesus Christ were Mr. Play-It-Safe?

Therefore, listen to Christ's words, "Go on your way!" and his warning, "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:18). Remember, there is no safer thing to do than what God wants you to do; there is no safer place to be than where God wants you to be. Do not be afraid to go, travel, sail, or fly, for the Lord promised that "you shall mount up with wings like an eagle" (Isa 40:31). He does not give you eagle's wings to beat the traffic on your way from Sunday worship to a restaurant, but to carry on his mission in this world. But if you are more concerned about safety than doing God's will, then get lots of duct tape, wrap your house in plastic for extra protection, and stay inside; because, you know, it's not safe out there!

In Christ, we've got all it takes to be free indeed. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). Get rid of the unnecessary burden, forget the worries about safety, get the eagle's wings, and get to work. Or, as the apostle Paul would say it: "through love become slaves to one another" (Gal 5:13b). That is our glorious calling; that is our freedom. ⊕

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