

# FACE . . .

## Is the Automobile Essential to Freedom? No!

MARY HINKLE SHORE

Several months ago, some friends needed a car just at a time when I was looking for a way to test whether I could live without one, so I sent my car to live with another family. Before I say what I have learned from this experiment, I offer a word about my circumstances: I live in a city with an adequate transit system and a good collection of bike paths and lanes. I am able-bodied enough to ride a bike and walk to and from bus stops. I live only three miles from my workplace, and my work does not require driving during the workday. I do not feel terribly afraid of walking in my city, even after dark. I do not have children or others who depend on me for rides. Certainly, these circumstances make life without my own car easier for me than it might be for others.

Still, I had my list of excuses for why I needed a car. How would I shop for groceries? If I biked to work wouldn't I always look rumpled? It's so cold here in the winter; the quarter-mile walk to the bus stop would be terrible! Isn't it rude to be always asking for rides to special events? In spite of these excuses, I gave up the car. In a way that surprises me now, I was free to let the car go, and I have been freer living without it. Here is what I have found.

*You really do have the time.* Somewhere Annie Dillard counsels, "Spend the afternoon. You can't take it with you." Does it take longer for me to get places on the bus or bike? Sometimes it does, but is that a problem? What is the hurry, anyway? Americans almost never ask this, but we should. When you are in a rush, what are you rushing toward, and why? If you are always trying to make up time on the road, why are you doing that? Is the pace you are keeping freedom, or is it bondage?

I almost always arrive less rumpled for the work I do precisely because I have not rushed toward it. Both riding a bus and biking have natural limitations on any effort to compress travel time after the trip begins. It is not possible to make up much time on the road, so I need not fret. I ride past snowmen under construction. I catch the scent of grass just mowed. I am relaxed and making progress at the same time.

*Biking and walking count as exercise.* Freedom as Americans know it has come to include the freedom to slide our ever widening backsides into ever more luxurious car seats. It is also the freedom to spend billions on the treatment of illnesses related to having too much food and too little physical activity—and millions more on exercise equipment and health club memberships that we never seem to have time or inclination to use. Wouldn't it be simpler just to walk somewhere we might

(continued on page 316)

# TO FACE

## Is the Automobile Essential to Freedom? Yes!

ROLF A. JACOBSON

**I**n the early 1980s, I lost both of my legs to cancer. People often ask me, “Were you afraid of dying?” “No,” I respond, “I was afraid of living.” What would life be like without the freedom to go where I wanted to go, do what I wanted to do? How would a person with no legs walk that lonely valley? How would I get around?

There was nobody who could give me back my legs. But three fairly recent developments in our culture gave me back my mobility—and thus my freedom: (1) the emerging cultural commitment to accessibility (things such as ramps, curb cuts, elevators, handicapped parking, etc.); (2) the lightweight, high performance wheelchair (especially the Quickie wheelchair, developed by Marilyn Hamilton and currently celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary—thanks and congratulations to Marilyn!); (3) the hand-control equipped automobile.

We do not often speak about freedom of movement—at least not in comparison with those other freedoms that regularly fill the press: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion. But without freedom of movement, these other freedoms are considerably encumbered. Freedom of speech does not mean as much if a person cannot travel to hear the speech of some provocateur—or to be a provocateur. Freedom of the press does not mean as much if the newspaper does not land on your doorstep—or if the investigative reporter cannot get around to investigate. Freedom of religion does not mean as much if you cannot get to your chosen place of worship.

Allow me to expand—in a slightly inflammatory fashion—on this last example. Picture a world in which no personal automobiles exist, and you are a homosexual person living in a neighborhood where the neighborhood pastor’s imagination for the gospel dries up after the slogan, “One marriage. One man. One woman.” Or—to flip the coin on its other side—imagine that you are a business woman who employs seventy-five people, but the neighborhood preacher’s misunderstanding of biblical justice leads her to weekly Sabbath harangues against capitalism, employers, and Adam Smith.

These two admittedly exaggerated examples could be multiplied a hundred-fold by many more subtle illustrations: you are a Lutheran living in a Mormon city; or a Jew living in a Lutheran town; or a handicapped person and the closest accessible church is fifteen miles away. Freedom of religion requires the ability to get around, and the automobile offers turn-key access to the power of choice.

Every single day, the automobile facilitates billions of free choices. A father

*(continued on page 317)*

normally drive? Biking to work and walking from bus stops burn calories and plunge us into the outside world. These things are more comfortable during some seasons of the year than others, but almost always they are healthier for us and for the world around us than driving a car.

*Community is better than isolation.* The next time you are on the road, notice how many people are driving alone. We all say that we need our cars to haul people or things, but we often use them just to move ourselves and a briefcase from place to place. At the same time, many solo drivers are so uncomfortable with the isolation—or with the idea of wasted time—that they spend the whole trip on the phone, thereby compromising both the experience of conversation and the act of operating a motor vehicle safely.

How much better to carpool with a friend or to strike up a conversation with someone on the bus! I am not quite a “regular” on any particular bus, but I have witnessed the community that some of the regulars have with each other, and for my own part, I have had conversations that include everything from news about how the baseball game is going to invitations to come with me to church. These exchanges are usually with people I would not meet any other way. People who ride the bus recognize diversity not as a liberal catchword but as lived experience.

*Starting small is still starting to make a difference.* About his hermitage, Thomas Merton wrote, “Up here in the woods is seen the New Testament: that is to say, the wind comes through the trees and you breathe it. Is it supposed to be clear? I am not inviting anyone to try it. Or suggesting that one day the message will come saying NOW. That is none of my business.”\* Neither is it my business to say whether or how much you need the car(s) to which you carry keys.

Even so, most readers of *Word & World* recognize that Americans consume far more than our share of the earth’s resources. We also know the feeling that there is nothing we could do that would make any real difference. We cannot all move to Holden Village and live out our days in dim off-the-grid light, using toilets that we are exhorted not to flush. Is there something we could do here and now, somewhere we could *start* to live more simply?

I do not have any illusions that by biking to work I am now only using “my share” (whatever that means!) of the earth’s riches. Yet I want to do something and not nothing, so I do this. I hope that without a car, I am leaving a slightly less huge footprint on the globe. I hope also that I am offering a slightly less hypocritical witness when I say that in Christ we are freed—freed to praise God, love the neighbor, and care for the earth. ⊕

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\*Thomas Merton, “Day of a Stranger,” in *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master: The Essential Writings*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist, 1992) 217.

drives his daughter to a daycare that accommodates her learning needs. A mother drops off her child at a school that offers her son an educational experience superior to the one he would receive at the local school. A married couple drive to a food co-op that offers the organic produce they prefer. A woman leaves a low-paying job where she is harassed, because she can drive to a new employer that promises her a better future. A man remains living in his own home, but is still able to care for his aging mother, because he can drive the twenty miles necessary to help her out in her twilight years.

Would you prefer a world in which you were limited to the options in employment, worship, education, grocery, relationship, and material goods available to you within walking distance of your house? Perhaps some of you might answer, “Yes.” Most would answer, “No, my family’s life is better because I have the freedom to shop, worship, and work wherever my car can take me.”

None of this is to say that there are not significant challenges and even problems with the automobile. At some point in the future—maybe sooner, maybe later—the world will have to develop an efficient, large-scale alternative to petroleum-based fuels. And in a world in which mass hunger is an unaddressed crisis, food-based fuels may or may not be an alternative that responsible Christians can embrace. I am not defending the internal-combustion engine as much as the automobile.

It may be necessary in the future to cut down on how much we use cars and how we use them. The excessive speeds at which many drive and improper uses of personal cars present societal challenges. Almost every one of us has lost loved ones to car accidents. Some of those accidents were unnecessary—accidents in which irresponsible speeds, distracted driving, dangerous conditions, or alcohol played contributing roles. Surely our society can still do more to prevent car-related tragedies.

The personal vehicle is a fundamental good in our society. It is not a basic good or essential need like food, shelter, or medicine, without which a human being cannot live. Nor does the car provide an ultimate good or good in-and-of-itself—the kind of good that one lives for or that provides meaning in life. If you think that your car provides you with that sort of good, you may want to make an appointment with your pastor or spiritual director as soon as possible. But the automobile is part of what Bernard Lonergan called “the good of order.”\* It is one of the goods that equips and assists people to pursue ultimate goods and provide for essential needs. ⊕

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\*Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Minneapolis: Seabury, 1972) 47–52. I have altered Lonergan’s typology slightly. Lonergan writes of the “particular good,” “good of order,” and “terminal value.”