

## Original Contributions.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE  
EARLY CHURCH.

## No. IV.—A FREE CHURCH UNDER CHRIST.

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"With freedom did Christ set us free; stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage."

With this ringing call does the Apostle challenge the Galatian Christians to steadfastness in their Christian liberty. The burden of this utterance is that Christians are free. The thought is all the more emphatic that the Apostle's expression can be rendered either "With freedom did Christ set us free;" as in the text of the Revised Version; this displaying the *instrumentality* of deliverance, or "For freedom, etc," as in the margin, thus bringing out the *object* of deliverance.

Freedom was a precious characteristic of the early church; a boon not always comprehended in its full significance by its members, but an essential feature of its constitution and life.

There are many kinds of bondage. Paul specifies, or suggests, bondage to sin, in which all men are involved; bondage to error and superstitions, characteristics of false faiths, in which all heathen idolators were involved; bondage to the law, in which the Jews were involved. Beside these, political bondage, of one people to another, or personal bondage, of one man to another, were of small significance.

From all the serfdom Christ came to set men free. The prophet had seen him, in vision, proclaiming "liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound," and preaching a year of jubilee, when slaves should be set free.

Jesus announced himself as a liberator, "If therefore the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." "If ye abide in my word then are ye truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

The freedom of the Christian is constantly insisted upon in the New Testament. The Church, as the company of Christians is called, is a free institution. Its members are freemen in Christ Jesus. The only bondage in their new state, was bondage to Christ, which was the highest freedom.

This freedom was wide-reaching. It was, first of all, a freedom from sin. The guilt of sin had been washed away. The power of sin had been broken; or, what was the same in reality, they had been so renewed in heart, and so strengthened with might by the spirit in the inner man, that they were able now to withstand sin's power. The condemnation of sin no longer confronted them. They were justified through faith and had come into Christ Jesus. And there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ.

It was a freedom from error. Christ was now their teacher. Christ is the truth. As his faithful disciples they might know the truth, and the truth would make them free. Christ was the light of the world. Following him they would not walk in darkness, but would have the light of life. Christ was the way. Following him they could not err. However ignorant, or superstitious, they may have been, they could now walk in the calm confidence that a knowledge of truth brings. The chains were broken from their minds and hearts. They were heaven's freemen.

It was a freedom from the law. Law is a yoke. It brings men into bondage. It is not made for a righteous man but for the lawless and the unruly, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers, for manslaughterers, for fornicators, for abusers of themselves with men, for men-stealers, for liars, for false-swearers, and all other unhealthful moral factors. Its object is to restrict, to restrain, to punish. No man can be under it and be free. Only the man who lives above law, who does right for right's sake, and for God's sake, and who refrains from wrong, not because the law says "thou shalt not," but because he hates wrong, is a free man.

The Law of Moses was no exception to the rule. It was better, far, than most laws. Nevertheless it also "was added because of transgressions." It was given to restrain, to restrict, to punish. And to be under it was to be in bondage. "But I say that so long as the heir is a child he differeth nothing from a bondservant, though he is lord of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the term appointed of the father. So we also, when we were children, were held in bondage under the rudiments of the world; but when the fulness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."

It was this fact that gave a momentous significance to the exhortation which heads this article. The Galatian Christians had been rescued from the bondage of idolatry. Now, Judaizing teachers were among them endeavoring to persuade them to "be circumcised and keep the law of Moses." Paul says "Beware! Law service is bondage. Even we Jews were in bondage under the law, and were only delivered from it through Christ. For freedom did Christ set us free—you Gentiles as well as Jews. Stand fast therefore. Don't put your neck under this yoke, new to you but old to us. It is a yoke of bondage. Guard your freedom."

This freedom from law, however, was not a freedom to do wrong. It was liberty. It was not license. "Use not your freedom for an occasion to the flesh." "As free, and not using your freedom for a cloak of wickedness, but as bondservants of God."

It was freedom to do right, and the new life tended toward righteousness. It was a spiritual freedom. And the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance; against which things "there is no law."

Here was the most perfect freedom. Law is restraint. But there is no law against the spiritual life. They could be, and do, anything which that life involved, without restraint. There were no barriers here to limit action; no "thou shalt not," to make afraid. This glorious freedom was the natural element of their new life, and the natural outcome of it.

There was no allegiance here but to Christ. There was no service here but the service of love. If they were good citizens it was for Christ's sake. If they "served one another," it was for love's sake. They needed no law to compel them to live uprightly. They needed no "officer of the law," to restrain them from injustice and injury to their neighbors. Love was their law. And in obedience to love's sway, they found their truest freedom and their highest happiness in a life which made them at once the stablest supports of good government, and the truest friends of men.

If it shall be said that this is a highly wrought picture of the life of the early church, it may readily be admitted that this is rather the ideal, which was possible to it, than the real. And yet it must be admitted also that, considering how abject was the slavery from which its members were, one and all, brought, the ideal came surprisingly near being realized. If the church as a whole did not reach the full consciousness and enjoyment of that glorious freedom, we are permitted to see instances among its members, where this was reached. And we are reminded that the heights which some reached but marked the levels to which it was the privilege and the duty of all to attain. In which reminder, there is an admonition to the Christians of every age.

## Correspondence.

## SWEET VALLEY, PA.

We are pleased to hear from our many friends by the monthly visits of THE CHRISTIAN. Our work this winter is passing along very pleasantly in the two churches for which I am ministering. We held a three weeks' meeting with the church in Huntsville with home forces. The meeting was of good interest. We had three confessions and one reclaimed who formerly was a Methodist.

We also held a three weeks' meeting at Sweet Valley, which closed last night. We had more ministers with us during this meeting than any series of meetings we ever held. We had Bro. and Sister J. P. Topping, both ministers of the Christian Connection church in this place. Sister Topping is the pastor. My father, R. H. Bolton, was also with us. Bro. C. A. Frick, of Westmoor, also favored us with a visit. Bro. Topping preached two sermons, my father seven, and the writer the balance. The result of the meeting was twelve additions, nine by confession and three by statement. One of those added by statement was Bro. Topping, who has come over to the position taken by the Disciples of Christ. His wife will come as soon as her year with the Christian Connection church has expired.

Bro. Topping is a man of ability, and Sister Topping is a fine worker in the church. Any church needing a pastor would do well to write to him at Sweet Valley, Pa.

We are glad to know the work is going forward in the provinces. We are much interested in the work there.

My father took up the work at LeRoy, Pa., where he was employed for one year, beginning last Sunday.

May the Lord bless you all in your work in my prayer.

Yours in the Master's service,  
J. W. BOLTON.