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Freedom, America, and the Missional Turn

A recent book by Os Guinness, *A Free People's Suicide* (IVP, 2012), raises the significant question whether the great American experiment with freedom has a sustainable future. The title of the book suggests that the endurance of the republic is questionable, and this is what the author believes. I found this work particularly suggestive for those of us who desire to see a deeper commitment to the mission of God in our churches.

The problem for America, says Guinness, is not external threats but internal. The title of the book builds off a powerful quote from Abraham Lincoln: "If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide." Freedom is sustainable, but only if those who are free give careful and continuing attention to the nature of freedom and those qualities that promote the health of a free society.

Guinness writes from a wide knowledge of classical authors and the writings of America's founding fathers. He faults contemporary Americans for a lack of historical perspective and an inattention to the character and conditions which allow freedom to flourish. "Freedom can no more take a holiday from history than from gravity, and the plain fact is that it is harder to be free than not to be free, for freedom's fire has not only to be lit once but must be kindled and rekindled all over again in each succeeding generation."

One of the great omissions that Guinness finds in the current understanding of freedom is that Americans (both liberal

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and conservative) generally understand liberty as negative freedom, i.e. freedom from oppression, fear, constraint, tradition, etc. Negative freedom is a fundamental component of what the Founders fought for, but it is a part, not the whole. Negative freedom must be balanced by positive freedom, which is not merely freedom from but freedom for. Negative freedom alone ultimately degenerates and becomes bondage for individuals or societies. So, for example, unlimited freedom to indulge any and every type of behavior leads to a culture of addictions, just as unlimited freedom to buy leads to a culture of debt.

But the Founders understood that freedom is not absolute. Freedom must be ordered; hence, the Constitution and the balance of powers. But structure alone will not preserve freedom. To structure must be added character or virtue, both in the private citizen and in the public leader. As Benjamin Franklin formulated it: "No longer virtuous, no longer free; is a maxim as true with regard to a private person as a Commonwealth." And John Adams wrote, "The only foundation of a free Constitution is pure Virtue. . . ." Liberty therefore is nurtured among people of character. Guinness states, "Freedom is not the permission to do what we like but the power to do what we should."

A question then arises: what is the source of virtue? Guinness answers that the framers of the Constitution were clear also on this point: virtue requires (some sort of) faith. This is true even for Deists like Franklin or Jefferson. So these three--freedom, virtue, and faith--are intertwined and interdependent; together they form what Guinness calls the golden triangle of liberty.

In America today a lack of understanding and appreciation for this interdependence puts the grand experiment at risk. We are naïve to assume that freedom will simply maintain itself by a kind of historical inertia. This book is a clear call to reinvigorate the public discussion of "first things" with careful attention to the wisdom of the founding fathers. Much is at stake. Guinness not only warns of decline, but charts a path toward renewal. May his call be heeded!

But now to the question of mission. As I read the book, I could not help reflecting on the degree to which the present state of the church in America mirrors that of the broader culture. For freedom is not only a political issue--it is a gospel issue as well. Redemption is in part about freedom, whether we look at Israel's exodus from Egypt, or the promise of return from exile, or the meaning of the atonement, or the ministry of the Spirit. And just as the founding fathers realized that freedom needed to be protected, so the early church (particularly the Apostle Paul) recognized that Christian freedom is always at risk of being distorted or morphing into something less than what God intends.

In the meeting of church and culture, influence goes both ways. Sometimes this is good, and other times it is not. But if Guinness is correct that modern America has lost the Founders' robust understanding of liberty, might this also be

true of the church? And might the future of the church as the "free people" of God be just as much at risk as the American republic? Is the crisis of the church in America today at least partly a crisis of freedom that stems from a distorted vision of Christian liberty?

I believe the answer to each of these questions is yes and that the current cultural understanding of freedom has adversely affected our understanding of the gospel. In particular, the problem lies with too narrow an understanding of freedom. As noted above, Guinness argues that many Americans today view freedom only in negative terms, as an absence of restraint, as freedom from. But the founding fathers understood that freedom from must be complemented by positive freedom, freedom for, freedom to live with excellence, integrity, and virtue.

It is in this narrowing of the idea of freedom that we see the unfortunate impact of the broader culture on the church's understanding of the gospel. We have now raised up several generations of Christians who have been taught that gospel liberty is freedom from. Jesus died to liberate us from the guilt and shame of our sins, from the righteous judgment of God, from the burden of the Law, and from "the power of cancelled sin" (to use Charles Wesley's fine phrase).

All this is wonderful, glorious, and true. But if we stop here, our vision of the gospel is truncated, and we miss the point and purpose of Christian freedom. In Christ we are not merely free from, we are free for. Liberty is not only negative but positive. In the gospel we are free to be like Christ, to love God and to love our neighbor.

Martin Luther framed this beautifully in his classic treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*. He wrote: "The Christian is the perfectly free lord of all subject to none. The Christian is the perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all." Here Luther captures what we might call the Pauline paradox of freedom: "You my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love" (Gal. 5:13). Freedom is not absolute but constrained by our duty to others. Negative freedom is joined with positive freedom (love for the neighbor).

Many Christians are pretty well convinced on the issue of negative freedom. We have left most of our legalisms behind. We feel less guilty about our weaknesses and transgressions. We are less concerned about judgment. But we are also more self-focused and narcissistic than we used to be. The divorce rate in evangelical churches is as high as or higher than the surrounding culture. Consumerism and consumer debt is just as much a problem. Addictions of various sorts are also no stranger to our churches.

It seems then that the common view of Christian freedom is not sustainable. Freedom understood only as freedom from ultimately turns inward (freedom for me) and collapses upon itself. Sustainable Christian freedom must be focused outward. It is the freedom to be what God intends us to be. It is the liberty to follow Jesus, to love our neighbors, and to be

people known for justice and compassion.

Os Guinness believes the American people need to return to the foundational ideas of the republic and seek a freedom rooted in virtue and sustained by faith. And even more must churches desiring to follow the mission of God form disciples who live squarely in the paradox of Christian freedom.



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Dave will be teaching a Doctor of Ministry
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