

FREEDOM'S RING

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"Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev. 25:10).

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Who Should Rule The Congregation?

Some of our answers to the question above have been simplistic. One such answer is to declare that Christ is the head and only ruler of the church. Of course, we all know that Christ, being head of the church is its authoritative ruler. But he is not present bodily in our congregations to direct their corporate activities, so he leaves that to the disciples. Their aim is to do the will of Christ, but he does not decide for them whether to build a building, involve a quartet in the praise service, or appoint John Doe to be an elder. While praying for wisdom, disciples must make those decisions. But who among the disciples has authority in that area? Who should rule the congregation?

No person or persons have authority to bind obligations on others. We have no lords, but brothers. Yet persons may choose and plan a course of action for the group. Who has that prerogative?

In our voluntary associations with other believers, no system of organization is prescribed in the Scriptures, hence none is essential. We are not told that such associations should be independent, autonomous, presbyterian, structured, or unstructured, but we are urged to be involved with others for common good.

You may believe that elders have the authority to rule the group. (None of the terms used relating to *rule* carry the concept of authoritative rule. But that is another study.) Granting for argument's sake that elders can bind and loose, who gives specific persons in the group that authority? Is each man an elder? No, the congregation selects and appoints them. Otherwise, any authority claimed would be usurped. So any authority rests in the people--- the disciples themselves.

Such understanding leads us to conclude that assemblies should be autonomous---self-ruled. For some reason our people in the Churches of Christ have rebelled at the thought that each group should be directed democratically, but that is the implication of autonomy. The group selects and empowers those who serve in functionary capacities, and the group retains the right of recall of any elected person. That is true autonomy.

In our civil democracy, no one has *inherent* authority, but that does not mean policemen, judges, or other officials have *no* authority. By vote the people choose and authorize others to serve the common good. If the authority of an official-- even that of the President--- has not been given by the people, autonomy is lost.

By our traditional methods of selecting and dealing with representatives of the groups, we have followed only a modified, abridged democratic procedure. That has left the door open for some problematic abuses.

First, it has commonly led to a self-perpetuating body of elders who consider themselves rulers, or administrators, rather than shepherds. If the group thinks it best to unseat them, they generally find it difficult, painful, upsetting, and sometimes impossible. The autonomous solution is for the congregation to decide by secret ballot periodically their approval or recall.

Second, our misdirection in this area has permitted one of our frustrating roadblocks to progress---*minority rule*, or

objector rule. For some reason our people have always protested *majority rule*. The alternative to *majority rule* is *minority rule!* True autonomy is lost to *minority rule!* Just a small percent of those in a church can control its policies and practices by their vocal objections. Progress and constructive change are blocked by the minority dedicated to maintaining the status quo---tradition, orthodoxy, "old paths," inherited patterns, mindless ruts, conditioned responses, sectarian attitudes. Even a majority convicted of the urgent need for redirection is expected to sit on their conviction to please the objecting minority.

We do not want to brand all objectors as mean and selfish, though some are. They want the right thing, but they want to enforce their convictions at the cost of overriding those of the majority in the group. Without appointment to authoritative function, they usurp the authority of the assembly.

We are not suggesting that we run roughshod over the weak. If the objector is a weak brother who would be caused to sin by violating his conviction, then that one should be taught and strengthened before change is implemented. If a person becomes stubborn and refuses enlightenment in the area of his conviction, then he needs to be instructed in the grace of "becoming all things to all men" for the good of all.

Unfortunately, one of the prices paid for progress is the loss of some from the congregation. Those who leave in favor of another group, however, as badly as we wish they would stay, do not necessarily leave God. They are not the weak brothers, but those who claim to be strongest. They want others to conform to them while they refuse to make concessions to others.

What percentage of the vote would be counted as a majority? That would have to be decided by each group. We would not want this to be implemented without love and respect. Even an overwhelming majority would still consider the depth of conviction of the objectors and their longtime dedication to the group. Where love and respect do not rule, majority rule will not solve all problems.

Our technical orientation has developed the "scruple mentality." We would do well to begin emphasizing the *unity of believers* over the *unity of scruples* (Rom. 14).

Implementation of majority rule by ballot will not prevent or solve all problems, but it will give priority to the convictions of the majority over those of the minority. []

Hook's Points

If you send Email by **FQMC31A@prodigy.com** and it is not delivered, try **hookc@teleport.com**. If that does not work, check at <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/freedom>. I am trying to change my address but am having problems.

Only 83 *Free In Christ* were sent out in May! But the Internet has extended our outreach beyond my imagination, thanks to the tireless work of Vic Phares. Check his site out: <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/vic>.

We enter June with \$1,211.00 in our working fund. Thank you, generous partners!

Welcome new readers. This is free for the asking. And if you move without notifying us---sorry! No regular mailing date. May skip a month. This is a sort of family circle. Glad to hear from you. You are a sort of life-line for me.

Reached 70 degrees 8 days this year. 48+” of rain since October. SW or NW!

After 39,600 copies of the original text of *Free In Christ*, I am pleased now to send out the eighth printing with larger font, many corrections, and minor revisions.

All About Families is a weekly e-mail newsletter edited by Norman Bales designed to strengthen families and marriages. Recent topics include: “Marriage Crisis Survivors”, “Teaching Values To Children”, and “How to Become Somebody When You Feel Like Nobody.” To subscribe send a message to mcoc@softdisk.com with the Subject: **SUBSCRIBE FAMILY**. Also check out our website for past issues at: <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/mcoc/family>. -Vic Phares. This is another free service offered by Vic.

Benjamin Netanyahu---a hard name to pronounce. But I'm sure the would-be “end times” prophets will surely learn to pronounce it as they revise their theories to fit their expectations of Jesus returning to that troubled land to set up an earthly kingdom. His spiritual Kingdom was set up and went forth from there nearly two thousand years ago. Will that which began in the spirit end in the flesh? (Gal. 3:3).

From E-mail, Snail Mail, and Guest Book

☺ You have whetted my appetite for more. God Bless You in your work. Your message is the “shot in the arm” that the Church needs. -Tom Pardon, pardont@usit.net

☺ I received a copy of *Free In Christ* yesterday and am looking forward to studying it. I find it a shame that so many of the preachers in the brotherhood feel restrained from preaching on freedom in Christ. Paul was not restrained, was he? I think there is an awakening going on as more and more of us within Churches of Christ begin to embrace the unity that Christ prayed for before his crucifixion. Thank you for your ministry and may God richly bless your efforts. -Keith Cox, 102350.152.com

☺ I am 20 years old and a member of the Church of Christ. I have become very discouraged with some of our fellowship because of attitudes of legalism and such. It was such a relief to find your page. I would like to be added to any mailing lists you maintain. -Gabe Waggoner, User977273@gnn.com

☺ I am a Christian but not a member of the Churches of Christ. I enjoyed your web site. -Jay.

☺ I am pleased to find this site. I have enjoyed Bro. Hook's writing in the past and am excited to find this source. -Gary Boswell, gboswell@aea14.k12.ia.us

☺ Went to Lincoln Christian Seminary. Find it interesting that our non-denominational brotherhood has a web site. The church must meet the needs of the people through the mass media of the current generation. Paul did this 2,000 years ago ☺. -Jim Hill, hill@boulder.nist.gov

☺ I have enjoyed reading Cecil's book, *Free In Christ*. -Bill Ulrich, wulrich@mts.net

☺ Raised in the church, I have just recently begun to really question the legalistic posture which I have noticed within many congregations. Brother Hook's writing was recommended to me by a brother here who has become a wake-up call to me. Thank you for illuminating the reasons behind the doubts which I have had, but not really accepted in the last twenty years. Unity through diversity is an awesome concept. I am once again excited to be a Christian! -Scott, NEQC89A@prodigy.com

☺ Good finding you on the net. I just came across your page a few days ago. I am happy you are continuing to challenge us to think! -William Smith, wsmithjr@iamerica.net

☺ I have just completed reading your book, *Free In Christ*. Sometime ago I began to question my basic beliefs and have struggled with fear and doubt. Your book has truly helped me to see the “freedom in Christ” that I knew was there. I know today that I am accountable for my own freedom in Christ and must find that within myself with God's guidance and power. -Mary Lou, Bremerton, WA.

☺ Greetings to you in the holy name of Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I thank you very much for your few books given me through missionary Neal Whittaker, U.S.A. The books were so good and suitable to know the truth and salvation among Christian folk. I request you to send me more books and tapes for free distribution in work in India. -J.B.M. Prasad, India

☺ I wish to order your book, *Free In Christ*. I found your address on the Internet. I run a ministry called *Street Lights*. We are in our beginning stages. We travel from city to city and pass out tracts on the streets. We seem to be led to the poorest sections. The need is great there. I believe the Lord is calling me to be “Free in Him.” Thank you for your ministry. -Joanne, Niagara Falls, NY.

☺ A person on the Christian Unity email list group suggested this web site. After checking it out I see why. I thoroughly enjoyed what I have read thus far. I am a member of the Worldwide Church of God, and as you may have heard, we have experienced unprecedented revival the past few years in our climb out of the pit of legalism onto the freedom highway of grace. Jesus has performed a miracle of miracles among our fellowship by placing our focus squarely on Him. I can really relate with the writings I have read thus far at this site. I will be returning to read more. Thanks so much. -Alan Ray, Lovelady, TX, raysmfg@intrastar.net

[I wrote Alan, commending the great steps they have taken. Also, I expressed amazement that the whole Worldwide Church of God could be changed together without loss. His reply is condensed:]

☺ The Worldwide Church of God's journey has not been without great cost. Almost ½ of the membership split off and started dozens of splinter groups. Families and friendships have been torn apart. Needless to say, contributions to our headquarters in Pasadena, CA are way down (and he tells of other problems.) We have a long way to go, but we are headed in the right direction. The legalistic structure we used to live under only created a facade of unity amongst ourselves because it caused us to be alienated from other Christians. Why, we didn't even consider them Christians! Now that the walls have been torn down, many noted theologians and religious leaders have called upon their memberships to embrace us as brethren and give us encouragement. It has been truly inspiring.

[Then I got this letter from Davis Grove, Martinsburg, WV who did not know Alan:]

☺ I've been looking for better answers to many Biblical questions that haven't been answered in the Worldwide Church of God. WCG has been moving from legalism to grace over the past two years to the point that we have lost 50% of our members and over 50% of our income and over 50% of our full time ministers. For some, the changes are too fast and for others, too slow. I like the one story about correcting things in the organization being like finding the pole cat in your chicken house. Sometimes it doesn't pay to get too excited. Prayer and faith in Jesus Christ to work things out with as little disruption of the faithful members seems to be a better way than the leaders (???) saying, “This is the way it is going to be, take it or leave us.” What you have to offer seems to come with wisdom from above. I sent a request for a copy of each book you have listed. We're retired too, but we have always been cheerful givers. We are beginning to share our giving where we receive encouragement and help that we can share with others. I hope we will be partners in the months and years to come. In addition

to the books, we will try to share a little extra from time to time.
Davis R. Grove, drg@access.mountain.net .

[These two brothers and I have continued to correspond. They have the rare qualities of honesty and openness in non-defensive restudy. They feel with us in our efforts to escape legalism in the COC. They are praying for us. They are telling others in the WCG to check my stuff out on my web site, and that includes a 350 member discussion group on their web site. Let us pray for them as they pray for us.]

☺ I scanned your book *Free In Christ*. I found it to be interesting and challenging. I am ministering in Halifax, Nova Scotia and am leading the church here in exploring what it means to be "just Christians!" I am also organizing meetings between the other ministers from the Restoration Movement in our area. Four ministers from the churches of Christ, Independent Christian Church and Disciples are meeting together to pray and talk! It is an answered prayer for this to be happening. God bless your work! -Keith Brumley, 104374.370@compuserve.com .

☺ We have really enjoyed reading Cecil Hook's books, and also enjoy getting *Freedom's Ring*. Keep up the good work, and God bless you. Phillip & Joni Presley, presley@companet.net .

☺ Glad to see Vic found/made the time to get all of the last two books up on the site! I appreciate Cecil's work and his heart to minister to all of us who have been wondering about what we REALLY believed. The winds of change, no, of the Spirit, are blowing across our fellowship, and it will be exciting to see what happens when more of us have opened our eyes to clear thinking and honest interpretation of the Scriptures. The congregation of the church of Christ in San Leandro, CA is struggling out of its complacency, and we are looking to God to lead us. -Tim Castle, eltsac@aol.com

☺ Freedom's Ring is ringing loud and clear, and being enjoyed beyond ability to express gratitude, appreciation, and support. Keep the bell ringing and freedom in Christ on the march! -Roy and Betty Tidwell, Salem, OR, 104511.131@compuserve.com .

☺ Thank you, brother Cecil, for writing your books. I'm half-way through with *Free In Christ*. I recommend it to anyone and everyone. You have changed my life by guiding me through the Word and exposing me to new interpretations /thought patterns that I was taught were dangerous. I praise God that I am not the Judge!!! -Vino Mazzei, Cuba, MO.

☺ I have enjoyed your books, monthly newsletter, web site, and now I can continue to look forward to your articles, news, and thoughts that challenge my perspectives on scriptures, church, form, and function. God is blessing your work and consequently, His church is being strengthened! -Curtis Pritchard, curt.pritchard@enumclaw.wednet.edu.

☺ I received your paper today and want to say that I think you are right on target with your front article. I have been quite curious for some time as to just why the COC brotherhood has been so legalistic in its approach to the gospel message. There is hardly any aspect of its practice that doesn't require the idea of being obedient to some law found in the N.T. I highly suspicion that much of it is the result of being obsessed with the professional clergy and relying on it to formulate doctrine. -Dale McCreight, d.mccreight@juno.com.

☺ I've enjoyed reading some of your articles online. I'm a minister of a church of Christ in Hampton, IA. I come from a variety of backgrounds. When searching for a Bible College to attend, I became aware of the "Restoration Plea." The ideals of the movement are beliefs I've always held. Little did I realize that many of the churches and colleges of the movement have abandoned those principles long ago, in favor of legalism and elitism. Your works are very refreshing. I plan to use them to help the leadership here gain a new "restoration vision." -Dave Nelson, davnels@willowtree.com.

The Importance of Baptism

My car radio is set on one of the seven "religious" radio stations here. Some good things are heard. It speaks well of our community that there would be so much interest in religion.

Of course, different viewpoints are expressed by the speakers. One thing most of them seem to agree on. Even though they all practice baptism, they all downplay its importance so that it is seldom mentioned except when someone asks about it. They generally imply that only the legalists or cults would connect it in any way to salvation. Any insistence on baptism would be adding a meritorious work to the finished work of Christ on the cross. They contend that "by grace through faith" excludes any human action.

So, since it is all by faith regardless of works, as long as a person believes, he is eternally secure. Some claim that if he then lives a perverse and impenitent life, he will not lose his soul unless he loses his faith. Sophisticated logical gymnastics of Olympic quality maneuver around all the baptism references. Those who say baptism is essential are proof texting, they contend, while they pull out all the proof texts to indicate that faith is the only thing required of us. Their explanations may not be worded just like these that I list below, but they reach these conclusions.

What Jesus really meant in the Great Commission was "he that just believes shall be saved." Some later scribe must have injected "and is baptized" into the text (Mk 16:16).

Jesus did not mean *water* when he told Nicodemus he must be born of water and the Spirit. He was talking of physical birth! He told a grown man that he would have to be born physically! (John 3:3-5).

What Peter actually meant on Pentecost was "repent and be baptized because your sins have already been remitted" (Acts 2:38).

When Peter commanded Cornelius and his family to be baptized in water, it certainly could not have been for the remission of sins for they had been saved already as their baptism of the Holy Spirit would indicate (Acts 10 & 11).

Ananias made an embarrassing flub in telling Saul to wash away his sins in baptism, for he must have known that Jesus had already forgiven those sins on the Damascus Road (Acts 9 & 22).

Instead of Paul telling the Philippian jailer to believe in Jesus and then speaking to him the word of the Lord, he should have said, "Just believe in Jesus! Nothing else needed!" (Acts 16). A midnight baptism for a whole family! Paul must have been off his rocker!

Forgive me if I have resorted to offensive style in trying to shock you into restudying this popular misconception about the place of baptism.

Even those who teach that faith is the only condition of salvation usually deny that factual faith is enough. They say it must be a trusting faith. "Accept him in your heart." Well, now, that's a work---a condition we must meet! "Accept him and pray the sinner's prayer." (Not Biblical advice!) That's a work! "Repent." Another work!

It is true that we are saved by faith, but not by factual, dead, or inactive faith. We can perform no work of merit. Our salvation is totally by grace---a gift. We do not merit gifts nor add to them by our deeds. But any gift must be accepted. Salvation is not forced on a person or given against the will. (No election with its irresistible grace!)

To illustrate, I may be destitute with debts I cannot possibly pay. A friend may call me and say, "Come by my house at noon tomorrow and I will take care of your every need." The next day I go, and he gives me a check which I take to the bank to cover all my debts. Now, suppose I had refused his offer, saying, "I cannot come to pick up the check and take it to the bank. That would look like I was trying to earn it!"

Jesus says in essence, "Believe in me, change your heart about your sinful practices, and be baptized in a ceremony depicting your identification with me in my death, burial, and resurrection into a new life. Then the forgiveness brought by my death, burial, and resurrection will be effective in your life." I accept! Who with any sense of logic could say that I was doing a work of merit, trusting in works, or trying to add to the finished work on the cross?

No, baptism does not save us. Nor does faith! Nor works. Neither have saving power. God saves us through the atonement of Christ. The gift is available. The check is written. Only those who accept it will benefit from its gracious offerings.

Water does not have power to give new life or to wash sins off one's body, but those metaphors mean something. Cornelius and his family were righteous, but they had to be redeemed through Christ (Gal. 4:5). The Holy Spirit fell on them to show that God would accept Gentiles who would accept Christ. Then they accepted him. Paul directed the jailer to the road of faith and then told him things to do on that road to accept salvation.

The faith--the means of access to God by faith in Christ--is the *gospel*, the good news. "A great many of the priests were obedient to *the faith*" (Acts 6:7). God will inflict vengeance upon those "who do not obey the gospel" (2 Thes. 1:7f). *We must both believe it and obey it!*

I accept you as a fellow disciple without judging your baptism. God does not have to consult me as to whom he can dispense his grace. I do not try to limit him. Neither do I try to

through love" (Gal. 4:6). If our faith is not working through love, we gain nothing, but lose all.

To disciples in Ephesus, Jesus warned, "But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent" (Rev. 2:4f). This dire warning was to a church, but individuals compose the church.

Lack of faith working through love allows some to forsake the Spirit-directed life to follow fleshly desires. Concerning the works of the flesh, Paul wrote, "I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal. 5:19f). The impenitent adulterer was to be delivered to Satan in hope of bringing him to repentance (1 Cor. 5:1-5).

There are many exhortations to do good works and to repent when we stumble. As long as we have a tender conscience seeking to do God's will, we can have full assurance of our eternal salvation. But if we choose to renounce our faith or to continue to practice a sin, we have reason to live in fear of judgment.

There is a middle ground between eternal security and total insecurity. While a believer realizes his vulnerability to sin, he relies on God's promises to give him strength to overcome it and to cover it by his atonement. []

dispense it for him. But conscience forbids that I advise you that you can accept God's offered gift of salvation apart from immersion into Christ, your Savior.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it the gift of God--not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...(Eph. 2:8f). Acceptance of the gift is no work to boast about, but what of the good works to follow in the sanctified life? Can we boast of them? No.

Those works are the loving response to God's gift. Do they have anything to do with salvation? Jesus said so when he dividies the sheep and the goats in judgment (Matt. 25:31f). He did not give a regimen, schedule, or quota to perform to fulfill a lawful requirement, but Paul adds, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. While a person cannot do enough works of love to earn, merit, or add to salvation, failure of loving response brings loss of both sanctification and soul.

Legal rituals have no merit, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working