

# The Christian's Declaration of Independence

by John Howard Yoder



ALL MEN ARE ENDOWED by their Creator with certain inalienable rights . . . among these rights . . . liberty. . . ."

The two great revolutions whose anniversaries fall in July made of "freedom" their rallying cry. By "freedom" they meant the end of submission to a king, of taxes which they deemed unfair, of control of thought and expression. They understood freedom as liberation from outside influence; their idea was that, if the outside hindrance could be removed, their freedom would be achieved.

One of the major efforts of spiritual gear-shifting involved in thinking Christianly is that of getting over this revolutionary idea of freedom, as meaning being left alone to do as one wants, "free" of any outside influences or controls. The freedom of the Christian is not freedom from as much as freedom to: what matters is not from what we are freed, but for what.

For the Bible is more realistic than the revolutionaries of 1776 or 1789; it tells us that we have a choice, not between freedom and unfreedom, but between two kinds of slavery. We cannot be our own masters—being one's own master is the worst kind of unfreedom, because then one has the most demanding of masters and the most in submissive of servants—but God gives us the freedom to choose whom we will serve.

It is the feeling of many, especially of many young people, that to be free would mean having no rules to follow, no one to give account to, no one whose wishes have to be considered; in short, to "be one's own boss." But the Bible tells us that if we do not obey God, we have no choice but to obey sin; and that is no freedom.

Already in the story of Adam and Eve we see the fatal mistake. They were led to believe that, if they wanted to be really free, the way to prove their freedom was to disobey. They learned, but too late, that when they made that choice they were making themselves the slaves of sin and losing their real freedom to live in fellowship with God. They had confused freedom from with freedom to, and freedom from God is no freedom at all.

This is where we must start to understand what the Bible means by redemption. To redeem means to ransom, to buy free. When the Bible says that we were in need of redemption it means much more than that we needed forgiveness; it means that we were sold into slavery, under the power of sin; that we were not free to know and to do the good. We ourselves had absolutely no means of procuring our release; only a divine intervention could help. And the Bible tells us that Christ, by becoming an obedient slave, obeying to the point of death, obtained our liberation, gave His life as a ransom for many. But not to make of us freedmen; we have now become the slaves of God.

*"You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (I Cor. 6).*

*"Do you not know . . . that you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart . . . and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" (Rom. 6).*

All our thinking about our life as Christians is wrong if it does not start from here. What should we think about our bodily appetites and drives? We will not ask whether we have a right to this, whether we are free to do that; we begin with, "You are not your own," and then we search, with God's promised help and that of other Christians, to know what it means to glorify God in our bodies.

What should we think about the liberties we have in a free country, where in many ways we can "get away with" many kinds of behavior? "Live as freemen, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; live as slaves of God" (I Peter 2).

What should the young person do with the freedom to dispose of his time and his money which is given to him in the teens and early twenties? "So speak and so act

as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty" (James 2).

What shall the wage earner or businessman in comfortable America do with the great latitude he has to dispose as he wishes of the fruits of his industry? What shall the Mennonite do with the freedom given him by the fact that his church does not, as do some sister churches, make stated claims on his earnings and ownings? "You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

In the law of the Old Testament (Deut. 15) there was provision made for the case of a slave who would prefer remaining in his master's service even when he would have the right to be freed. His choice was sealed by a physical mark, a hole pierced in his ear lobe. It may very well be this kind of thing which the Apostle Paul is referring to when he writes to the Galatian Christians (chapter 6), "Let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." The marks on his body, the scars from the lashings and stonings which he received as a slave of Christ, were to him the signs of his belonging to the Lord Jesus, which led him to fulfill out of free choice what James called "the perfect law of liberty."

So the Christian declaration of liberty, the starting point of his history, is a declaration of dependence. Having learned that "everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin," and that "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8), the Christian makes the free choice of slavery to God, opens his life to his owner's orders, and finds the joy of being free for what life was really meant to be. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom . . . and we already . . . are being changed into his likeness," is what the New Testament means by saying that we are children of God. This is true liberty, the purpose of God with all creation, the reason man has free will; the "glorious freedom of the children of God."