

What is the Biblical Nature of Human Freedom?

An Invitation to a Banquet: “In Feasting You Will Continually Feast...”

In the Bible, the first words spoken by the Sovereign God to Adam are words of freedom – and this makes the Bible unique. All of humanity yearns for freedom, but how do we advance it in the face of coercion and tyranny? In Genesis 2:16, almost all English translations reflect similar words: “You are free to eat...” In the Hebrew, the language is far more robust: **“In feasting you will continually feast...”** אָכַל תֹּאכֵל; transliterated as *akol tokail*, being two tenses of the verb “to eat” which equal the force of an active participle – a feast where the feasting never ends).

The biblical metaphor for freedom is the invitation to a banquet of unlimited good choices

Now, who does not like to enjoy a feast with family and friends? This is the nature of human freedom given in the Bible. On many occasions, in speaking in Christian churches or to skeptical university audiences, I have defined this language of freedom. And for fun, I have asked everyone there, all things being equal, “Who here does not enjoy a good feast?” Virtually no one raises his or her hand. In other words, the whole world is united in good biblical theology, whether they know it or not – we all love a good feast. The verb “to eat,” or “to feast,” introduced in Genesis 2:16, is one of the most important ideas in the whole Bible. Hebrew holidays are feasts; the Passover is a fast feast for the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt; in the book of Isaiah, the mountain of Yahweh is a place of feasting and drinking, and also Yahweh invites the thirsty to come and drink at no cost; Jesus blesses the wedding feast at Cana; the Lord’s Supper is a feast of thanksgiving for the deliverance from sin which Jesus accomplished on the cross; the wedding supper of the Lamb is the feast which inaugurates the eternal kingdom of God, where as the redeemed, we all sit down together; in the third chapter of Revelation, Jesus invites us to eat with him; and in the last chapter of Revelation, the tree of life is restored, and the “free gift of the water of life” are the final words of the Spirit to the churches.



“Feast” by Catherine Elliott (2006).

Or the Freedom to Refuse the Invitation and Eat Poison Instead: “In Dying You Will Continually Die...”

But freedom by definition is a gift, and all gifts, when given, carry the risk that the gift will be rejected. The whole text in Genesis 2:15-17 reads this way:

“Yahweh God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And Yahweh God commanded the man, ‘In feasting you will continually feast from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day you eat of it, in dying you will continually die.’ ”

In Genesis 2:17, almost all English translations reflect similar words: “You will surely die.” In the Hebrew, the language is far more robust: **“In dying you will continually die...”** מוֹת תָּמוּת; transliterated as *moth tamuth*, being two tenses of the verb “to die” which equal the force of an active participle – a death that always keeps dying). In other words, we see a powerful contrasting parallel in the languages

“In feasting you will continually feast...” versus “In dying you will continually die...”

Two Questions

First, what is the nature of “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?”

This is a Hebraicism, a way of speaking that includes everything on a given topic within a range of opposites. For example, we recognize this in Psalm 103, where David speaks of our transgressions being removed from us, “as far as the east is from the west.” All of space is contained within the opposite extremes of east and west. Or we recognize this in Isaiah 44 when Yahweh says, “I am the first and the last,” and when Jesus says in Revelation 22, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” All of time is contained within the opposites of beginning and end, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are greater yet. Thus, in Genesis 2, “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” means that all knowledge is located between the opposites of good and evil. And here, who alone can know everything? Only Yahweh God. And who alone can know evil in its totality and not be tempted or polluted by it? Only Yahweh God. Thus, for man and woman to eat of the forbidden fruit is a) to say that God is not good because he is supposedly withholding something; b) to think they can redefine good and evil as they see fit, and hence; c) to think they can make themselves equal to God. The folly of the first sin, sparked by the lies of the ancient serpent, is that Adam and Eve chose to eat of the one fruit which led to death. They thus rejected the unlimited menu of good fruits given to them, including the tree of life, which was given so they would live forever. They became slaves to sin and death, forfeiting freedom and eternal life in that moment.

Second, why does the sovereign Yahweh God allow man and woman to choose death? Why give us such a terrible freedom?

Let’s look at it this way: A gift that is forced is not a gift; and love is a gift, but forced love is rape. If freedom were forced on us, we would not be free – we would be mere puppets or slaves. We could not be the image-bearers of God, given authority to be stewards of his good creation. Since God is free, then as his image-bearers, man and woman were made free. Freedom is the power to do the good; but when we do evil, we are no longer free – we are slaves to evil. Only the true and sovereign God is free in his goodness not to do evil. As finite creatures, if we are without the freedom to say no to his gift of freedom, we would be puppets or slaves. To put it another way: Without the freedom to say no, we do not have the freedom to say yes. Yahweh God is radical [a word which means “root level”]. In the Garden of Eden he gives man and woman a **level playing field to choose between good and evil**. He gives us the power of informed choice, the power to consent to his government or not. He allows the ancient serpent, Satan, access to the Garden to demonstrate the reality of this choice. And the contrast is clear in the Hebrew syntax: Yahweh defines terms accurately as he calls life good and death evil; Satan later defines terms falsely as he reverses reality and calls death life, and life death. **Human freedom depends on an accurate definition of terms.** Now, had Yahweh God instead given the first man and woman no such freedom, he would have stooped to the level of a pagan deity, to the nature of false gods who rape and enslave, but do not love. He would not be sovereign. But he is the sovereign Yahweh God, the only One great enough to give us the gift of freedom.

The Three All-Defining Doctrines of the Bible

This promise of freedom occurs in the biblical order of creation. On its own terms, the Bible is the only fully true story ever told. And unless we know its story line, we cannot enter into its truth. That story line can be summed up in the three all-defining doctrines located in Genesis 1-3:

Creation → Sin → Redemption

Several other ways to sum up these doctrines are these:

The Order of Creation → The Reversal → The Reversal of the Reversal

The Wholeness of Creation → Brokenness → Restoration to Wholeness

Freedom → Slavery → Return to Freedom

Genesis 1 is the grand design of the order of creation, where God, as Governor of the universe, declares everything “good.” Man and woman are the crown of his creation, the image-bearers of God. When they are made, and set as stewards of the good creation, God declares it “very good.” In Genesis 2, we learn how very good it is as God makes his first covenant with man and woman. A covenant is a promise God makes to us, and he guarantees it will be fulfilled if we accept and honor it. In Genesis 2 it is **the covenant of freedom**, beginning with the words, “In feasting you will continually feast...” But in the reversal of the order of creation, freedom is lost, and the need is for redemption – a word that means “to buy back out of slavery.” In the exodus, Yahweh redeemed the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt; and in Jesus, God paid the redemption price from slavery to sin, offering it to all humanity. In order to serve the reversal of the reversal, we must first know the original order of creation which centers on the covenant of freedom. We oppose coercion and tyranny by living and offering freedom in the name of Jesus.

The Contrast with the Babylonian Genesis and All Pagan Religions

In contrast to the Bible, all pagan religions or secular constructs, when traced back to their oldest known origins, have no sense of a good order of creation. They assume brokenness of trust, murder, war, slavery, promiscuity and tyranny from the outset. Pagan religions and secularism involve people, who like all of us, were made in God’s image, made for freedom. But, being distanced from the biblical order of creation, they lost memory of the source and nature of human freedom while still yearning for it. The most well-known pagan origin story is the Babylonian genesis, and many skeptical scholars in the last 150 years have tried to say it is older than the biblical Genesis. It is not. And these scholars also argue that the biblical Genesis actually derives from Babylonian genesis. It does not. But all pagan religions do come ultimately from Babylonian religion.

A brief review can help show the contrast. At the start of its story line, the Babylonian genesis is chaotic in its description of the original gods and goddesses. A chief god, Apsu, is murdered by another chief god Ea. Apsu’s wife, the goddess Tiamat, wants to avenge his death. Then Ea’s son Marduk squares off in battle with Tiamat, with an army of gods and goddesses on each side. Marduk wins, splits Tiamat’s skull and scatters her blood to the winds. He then splits her carcass into two halves, and with one half makes the heavens and with the other makes the earth. This makes him the chief god. He forces all of Tiamat’s defeated army into slavery, and then they complain about the menial tasks they had to perform. So Marduk killed the god Kingu, who was the new husband of Tiamat, and with his blood created man and woman to be slaves to the defeated gods. Slaves to slaves.

So the Babylonian genesis starts with acts of destruction. But how can you destroy something that has not been already created? The Babylonian genesis has no concept of a good creation, or even a story of how the original gods and goddesses came to exist. Thus, it shows how it comes out of the experience of human brokenness; not the biblical order of creation which truly comes first, which is good and which has no destruction in it. In the destructive story line of the Babylonian genesis, the gods and goddesses are slaves to competing tyrannies and war, and man and woman are made to be slaves to slaves. This is the opposite of the biblical nature of human freedom. Every other pagan religion cannot rise above the assumption that murder, war, distrust and brokenness have always existed; and though secular thought is rooted in a reaction to Greek religion, it too cannot rise to any concept of a good order of creation.

The Biblical Witness

As the history of redemption unfolds in the Bible, the goal is to restore us to the original covenant of freedom. True government in the Bible is honored when judges, kings and other leaders derive their authority from Yahweh, and thus serve human freedom and the original consent of the governed rooted in the order of creation. In Deuteronomy 30, at the end of his life, Moses sets before the Israelites the choice between life and death, and calls them to choose life. In Joshua 24, just before the Israelites entered Canaan, Joshua calls them to choose whom they would serve. Would it be the destructive pagan deities of Babylon, Egypt or the Amorites; or would they, like Joshua, choose to serve the good Yahweh? In 1 Kings 18, Elijah preaches the shortest sermon in the Bible, calling on the Israelites to stop wavering between two opinions. Choose whether to serve the good Yahweh or the destructive Baal. At the beginning of Galatians 5, the apostle Paul sums up the reality of the New Covenant – for the sake of freedom Christ has set us free from slavery to sin.

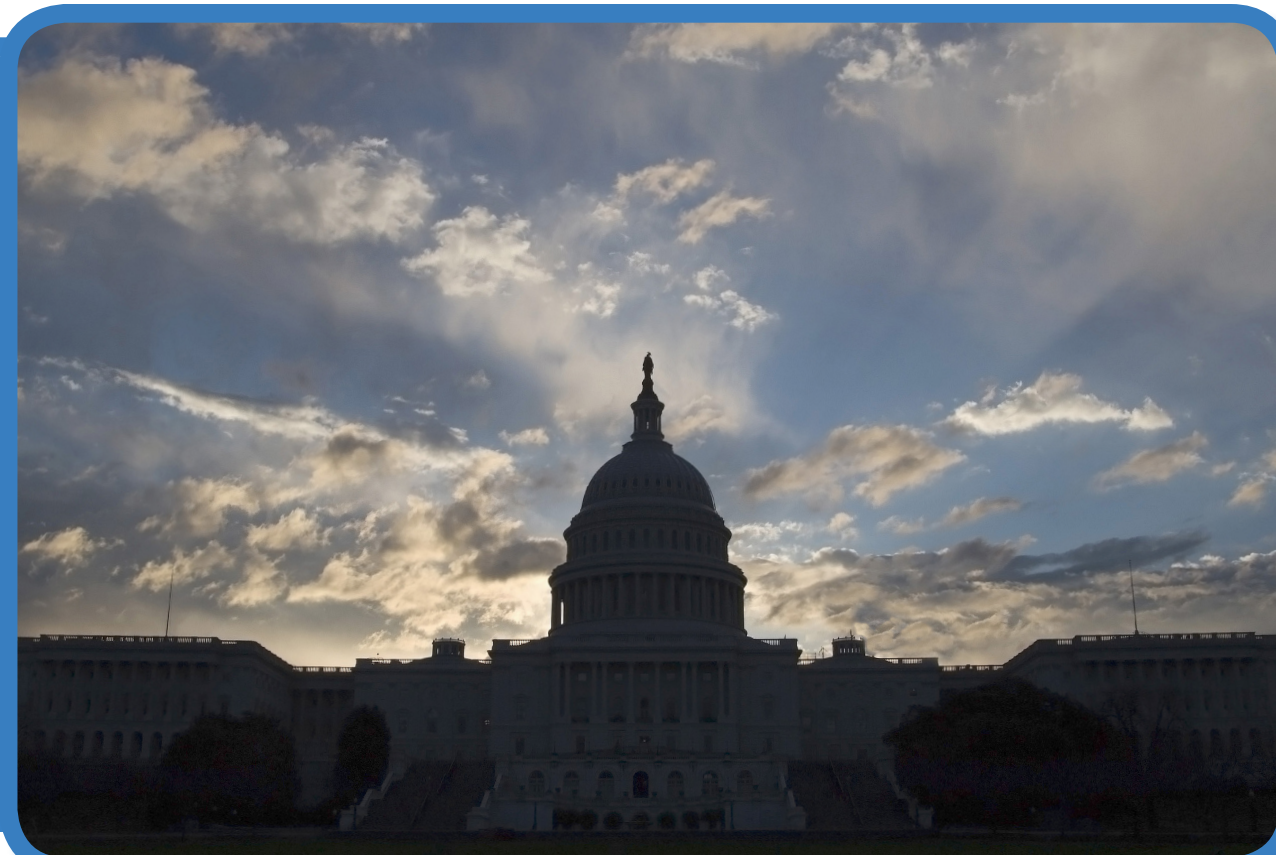
Across Church History

The Christian church began its first three centuries under the fire of persecution from the Roman Empire, and reasonably honored her biblical birthright of seeking human freedom for all people. But when the church became legalized under Constantine, and banned idolatry and grew more and more identified with the state under Theodosius and Justinian, the church began to impose itself on people – violating her biblical birthright of freedom. From the Medieval Ages to the Reformation, there was a growing movement toward religious and political freedom. It gathered speed following the Reformation, and found political fruit in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. Here, religious, political and economic liberty were honored for all people equally, and the “unalienable rights” of life, liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness were rooted in the Creator, the God of the Bible.

The Biblical Ethics of the Consent of the Governed

In the political context of the United States, human freedom is centered on the concept of “the consent of the governed” [see Wall Chart I: “What is the Consent of the Governed?”]. “Ethics” is a word which refers to how we treat each other. The Bible is centered on ethics – how we are to love God, and love our neighbors as ourselves [see Wall Chart IV: “The Six Pillars of Biblical Power”]. The Declaration of Independence celebrates the unalienable rights given by the Creator, including “Liberty,” which is the legal language of human freedom, and “That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed...”

The Source for the consent of the governed is the Creator, tracing back to the first words of Yahweh God to the first man. **And there are two crucial elements for the human freedom of the consent of the governed:** 1) **an accurate definition of terms** (“life is life” and “death is death”); and 2) **a level playing field for all ideas to be heard equally, allowing truth to rise to the top.** In the face of coercion and tyranny, are we believers in Jesus seen as those who celebrate the feast of freedom, the banquet of an unlimited menu of good choices? Are we seen as hospitable to the yearnings for freedom which all unbelievers also have? Do we have confidence that such freedom is the most powerful means to allow truth to be understood and embraced? If we honor the biblical nature of human freedom, it is able to transform any culture, and will lead the way to the Second Coming and full establishment of the kingdom of God.



The United States Capitol Building at dawn.

There is no freedom to say yes to the good without the freedom to say no. And when people are free to say no, they are much more likely to say yes.
There is no coercion in the Gospel. This is the radical presupposition of the Bible.