The Freedom of the Soul

Cogitatio

The idea I will trace from the medieval through the modern eras is that of the freedom of the human soul, and how it is gained according to *Everyman*, "Anatomy of the World," and *Pilgrim's Progress*. The definition of freedom, or liberty, that I will be using is taken from the OED, namely, "freedom from the bondage or dominating influence of sin, spiritual servitude, worldly ties, etc." (OED I.1.a). The bondage of the soul to sin includes the mind, will, and affections (i.e., what makes up a human soul)—so that the whole person is infected by sin. Consequently, the dominion of sin over means that the soul is turned away from God toward itself, thinks only of itself, loves only itself, and wills only that which it believes will serve itself temporally. In other words, the soul becomes its own god. Freedom, then, in consistence with the definition outlined above, consists in the soul turning outward again toward God in faith, love, and obedience.

This idea of the soul's freedom, what it consists of, and how it is gained, intrigues me because first, I am a Christian, and thus I am fascinated by theology and Church history. Second, I find it important for myself and other Christians to understand how such a concept was understood in the medieval period of the Church. Though it shifts between the medieval Church (as found in *Everyman*) and the Protestant Church after the Reformation ("Anatomy of the World" and *Pilgrim's Progress*)—the idea of how the soul's freedom is gained has had staying power because it is one of the most important subjects in history, and especially the Church's history.

Meditatio

The concept of the soul's freedom—specifically, how it is gained—shifts between the medieval and the early modern era. In the Middle Ages, the prevailing belief was that the freedom of the soul (i.e., freedom from the dominion of sin and self toward loving, faithful service to God) was progressively won over time by means of good works. After the Reformation, Protestants hold that God gives the soul its freedom, which results in loving devotion to God on the basis of grace received.

Everyman showcases that the soul's freedom is gained over time through one's good works. The play opens with God's declaration says that all humanity is "drowned in sin" (NAEL 559). These vital words explain the overwhelmed state of Everyman's soul an idea later reinforced by Good Deeds, who complains to Everyman, "here I lie, cold in the ground: / Thy sins hath me sore bound / That I cannot [stir]" (NAEL 570). Nevertheless, there is no thought of divine help at this point—Everyman must resurrect his good deeds to appear before God liberated from his sins so that he won't be condemned. With Knowledge, Confession, and Penance, Everyman does just that, and with Good Deeds resurrected continues to Priesthood, where he receives the sacrament of the eucharist and last rites, whence he goes to the grave with Good Deeds (NAEL 571-579). Although the play mentions God's mercy, grace, and redemption, its accent remains on what Everyman does to resurrect Good Deeds and win his soul's freedom so he can stand before God.

In John Donne's "Anatomy of the World," Donne makes a similar argument as the character of God does at the beginning of *Everyman* when he says, "the heart being perished, no part can be free" (NAEL 953). To put it as *Everyman* does, humanity is "drowned in sin;" however, man cannot resurrect himself or his good deeds by his works (NAEL 559). Instead,

Donne recalls Christ and His work with lines like, “from the carcass. . . / Creates a new world; and new creatures be” and “she took the weaker sex, she that could drive / The poisonous tincture, and the stain of Eve” (NAEL 951, 953). Moreover, Donne again emphasizes that, “except thou feed. . . on / the supernatural food, religion. . . thou’rt less than an ant”—here, Donne references Christianity, but especially Jesus Christ, Who established a new creation and Who is “the bread of life” (NAEL 953; *English Standard Version*, Jn. 6.35). Donne’s allusions to Christ and His work serve to accent both man’s inability to save himself and Christ’s work as already finished. The soul’s freedom comes, then, after the heart has been enlivened again and restored to health by Christ.

Christian faces a similar plight in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, where he is introduced as being convicted of his sin, but without any help: “he looked this way and that, as if he would run; yet he stood still, because. . . he could not tell which way to go” (NAEL 97). Soon, though, Christian is met by Evangelist, who tells him to go to the wicket gate (NAEL 97). The fact that Evangelist must get to Christian and give him the parchment roll is itself significant. It foreshadows the fact that, all along the way—to the wicket gate and beyond—Christian will need and receive help that is beyond himself in order to gain and retain the freedom of his soul. At every moment of his journey (but especially in his first encounter with Evangelist), Christian is illustrated as someone in constant need of help that comes from outside himself. He cannot start or finish the journey in his own strength, but help has to come from somewhere else. His freedom, then, is not gained by him when he opens walks through the wicket gate himself, but when it is opened for him, and he is pulled through. I believe the idea of the soul gaining its freedom shifted the way it did because of the Reformation, when a number of Reformers

emphasized man's inability to save himself (i.e., free his soul) and is utterly dependent on God to do so.

Ruminatio

Each of these beliefs concerning how man's soul is freed have continued until today. Some Christians believe they are able to free themselves, while others are convinced of their and others' inability to do so. The contrast is especially stark between Roman Catholics and Reformed Christians. While Roman Catholics generally believe similarly to Everyman, that they must work for their freedom, Reformed Christians believe that God must free man's soul.

Although I understand the necessity of good works in the Christian life, I'm convinced—as a Reformed Christian—of man's inability to free himself from sin and to serve God. Therefore, while I differ substantially from the perspective of *Everyman*, I'm in agreement with Donne and Bunyan.

The Reformed view of how the soul's freedom is gained (in agreement with many other Protestant denominations) converges with the Protestant conviction that God gives the soul its freedom, which enables it to serve God in loving devotion. Consequently, Reformed Christians are closely aligned with Protestants like Donne and Bunyan.

My experience of reading upstream has strengthened my convictions as I've gained greater insight into the teachings of the Church prior to the Reformation. More than ever I'm heartily convinced that, like Bunyan's Christian, we must flee to the cross of Christ to be truly freed from sin. Furthermore, reading upstream has given me a greater sense of the current need of our day to rightly understand the Gospel of Christ and its implications for our lives—namely, living a life of love in response to God's love for us in Jesus Christ.