

III

"THE GRAND RISK"

Text: John 8:31-36

by

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God decided at the very beginning of everything that man would be authentically free. Because of this divine choice he who is absolute and ultimate in himself made a decision that from then on ruled out absolutes within man's experience. This is the Grand Risk of God. Try to follow through the implications of this risk.

First of all, when God gave to man real freedom, he rejected absolutes as far as history is concerned. The precise inflexible determination of historical events has been ruled out by God; freedom means in its very essence variability and possibility, so that static, predetermined views of history are clearly non-Biblical, non-Christian.

This means that both kinds of historical fatalism have been rejected; that is to say, both positive fatalism and negative fatalism. The positive fatalist presupposes the inevitable, irresistible spread of goodness over the earth since God is good and God is sovereign. But, in the decision for freedom, positive fatalism is made meaningless.

The negative fatalist presupposes the steady, inevitable deterioration of man and history because he sees only inky black forces within history and concludes, therefore, a permanent downward slide for man and his societies; but this view is absolute, and the doctrine of freedom has cancelled out absolutes. Ironically, these two apparently opposite fatalisms go together. The individual who optimistically expects the steady, invincible triumph of good within human history is usually disappointed when reverse trends show up, and consequently, ends up with the disillusionment of negative fatalism, an absolute idealist today, a grim pessimist tomorrow. But, both are faulty from the beginning. This past week the question was raised in one of my study groups: "Is the world getting better or worse?" The question was followed by a second one: "It doesn't seem that Christ has done much good in the world if after two thousand years people and societies seem to be as bad or worse as ever." How does one handle such a question? The Christian view holds the two opposites in tension. The grace of God is at work in history and man in freedom is choosing in both directions, both for and against God's will. Therefore, the Christian sees history as the continuous mixture of crises and growth. The world is, in fact, better, and yet the problems of man's sinfulness are as real and as painful today as they were in the first century. Both growth and crises are working together. Man is better and worse. His need for the Redeemer is as real as was his forefathers.

The most dramatic new voice in the theological world today is Jurgen Moltman of Germany who has attempted to grapple with this very issue in his book, "The Theology of Hope."

"Hope alone is to be called 'realistic,' because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught. It

does not take things as they happen to stand or to lie, but as progressing, moving things with possibilities of change. Only as long as the world and the people in it are in a fragmented and experimental state which is not yet resolved, is there any sense in earthly hopes. The latter anticipate what is possible to reality, historic and moving as it is, and use their influence to decide the processes of history. Thus, hopes and anticipations of the future are not a transfiguring glow superimposed upon a darkened existence, but are realistic ways of perceiving the scope of our real possibilities, and as such they set everything in motion and keep it in a state of change. Hope and the kind of thinking that goes with it consequently cannot submit to the reproach of being utopian, for they do not strive after things that have 'no place,' but after things that have 'no place as yet' but can acquire one. On the other hand, the celebrated realism of the stark facts, of established objects and laws, the attitude that despairs of its possibilities and clings to reality as it is, is inevitably much more open to the charge of being utopian, for in its eyes there is 'no place' for possibilities, for future novelty, and consequently, for the historic character of reality. Thus the despair which imagines it has reached the end of its tether proves to be illusory, as long as nothing has yet come to an end, but everything is still full of possibilities. Thus positivistic realism also proves to be illusory, so long as the world is not a fixed body of facts but a network of paths and processes, so long as the world does not only run according to laws but these laws themselves are also flexible, so long as it is a realm in which necessity means the possible, but not the unalterable."

Therefore, as absolutes in history are not God's will, a second fact also emerges. Absolutism, as far as man is concerned, is also ruled out. Think of this in three ways: in terms of man's inner piety, secondly, his relationship with his neighbor, and thirdly, his relationship with God.

Inner piety can never be absolute because of freedom. This means that perfectionism is impossible. Perfectionism works against both man and the gospel, and was never a good idea in the first place. It assumes that a man can arrive at a place where he only makes right choices. But, our Christian hope is not in such a static state of affairs where the Christian man is no longer in need of help from God or neighbor, rather, the way of freedom is the true Christian hope, and freedom involves both burden and joy. Because of our right to make real choices, we often fail in meeting the options that face us and, therefore, we end each daily journey as a complicated mixture of wise and foolish, good and bad choices. As freedom denies to us the seclusion of personal absolutism, it also opens the daily chance for new beginnings and forgiveness, for hope of new opportunity. If it were not for freedom, then Christian forgiveness and repentance would hardly make sense.

In the question of man's encounters with his neighbor absolute relationships are ruled out too. Christian freedom has opened up a far better possibility.

An absolute human relationship assumes that there can be no growth or variation in our relationships with people; such a view attempts to keep interpersonal relationships predictable and unchanged, but such may be a possibility between a man and his stamp collection, but it can never be true of the relationship of a man and other people; and to wish for it is to desire meaningless encounters.

I have just read a fascinating book entitled, The Way of Freedom, which contains previously unpublished letters and essays of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. One of the most interesting two letters in the book consists of an exchange of correspondence in 1936 between Bonhoeffer and his famous teacher Karl Barth. Bonhoeffer's letter is written first in which he asks several theological questions of his professor and then expresses his personal disappointment in the fact that he (Bonhoeffer) had not been requested to write a chapter in a book that had just been published in honor of Barth. Bonhoeffer, showing his hurt feelings, finally says, "This must mean that you no longer consider me in your circle." Barth replies to his young friend who was later to become such a very great man with some wonderfully sound counsel:

"You should not draw such tragic conclusions from the fact that you were not invited to contribute to the Festschrift! I am quite sure that Wolf had no intention at all of exercising anything like a censorship on the invitations which he sent out then. For some reason you were not just in his line of vision, or in more concrete terms, he had probably forgotten you; there was certainly no question of an 'objective verdict.' Besides, I did not think that there was much reason for speaking of a 'circle' particularly associated with me. On the one hand I would find it very difficult to say where (within the possibilities that can be considered, i.e. leaving aside German Christians, Papists, etc.) this circle ceased, while on the other hand I would also find it very difficult to say where it began in a rather more definite sense. As far as I am concerned you are certainly nearest to me when you do not make the question whether you are 'inside' or 'outside' a matter of special reflection but cheerfully leave it open from day to day."

These are the words of a liberated man who has understood that in Jesus Christ we belong to each other but not in direct and absolute terms. No one individual can ever become the property of another person and to wish for such a relationship with another human being is to misunderstand the freedom we have in Jesus Christ. Freedom in Christ has opened up something greater and richer in human relationships. We are closest to a friend when each day is open and fresh before each other so that in belonging to Christ we see our neighbor in the context of his grace, his decision toward the neighbor as well as his decision toward me. This means that the neighbor is meant to be as genuinely free as I am meant to be.

"Absolutes are impossible for us" said Blaise Pascal and this fact even holds in regard to man's deepest of all relationships, his relationship with God; absolute trust, absolute obedience, absolute discipleship, are impossible because God has granted something better. God has risked the relationship to faith, and faith is relative, not absolute. The strongest Greek word for faith that Paul makes use of in the New Testament is a good example of this relative nature of faith. In Romans 14:5 Paul writes, "Let us be fully persuaded or convinced." The Greek word is "pleromi." We inherit the English word "plenty" from this Greek root. What Paul is saying in effect is this: "One must have plenty of evidence, enough evidence to satisfy his questions." "Plenty" is not equivalent with "all." "Enough" is not to be confused with "everything."

We can never be absolutely sure of God because Man in his finiteness is incapable of gathering in the whole possibility of evidence. But, in a deeper sense, the reason is found on God's side, who chose in his sovereign freedom against an absolute relationship. He chose not to cancel out man, to coerce

our senses with overwhelming evidence so that browbeaten and backed to the wall we were daily forced to admit his existence and power.

God chose the wiser and stronger way. He decided to risk absolute, ultimate reality to our wager and so it stands that we must risk upon God's character, his love and his power, as he revealed it in the law, the Prophets and in the condescension of Jesus Christ, the Word became flesh. All of this means that our faith must be a growing reality, in flux, in transition, in weakness and in courageous venture, all because God made us free at the beginning and when he found us as lost sheep without a shepherd, broken and disillusioned as a result of our bad use of freedom, it was God's wise choice to set us free again. So freedom is a gift received twice.

The doctrine of freedom is the doctrine of the greatness and the love of God who has brought together in one thrilling unity both omnipotence and goodness. How sure he must be of himself to set us free.

"Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'

"They answered him, 'we are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How is it that you say, "You will be made free?"'

"Jesus answered them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house forever; the son continues forever.

"So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."