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The reason for God 3 – Christianity is a straitjacket that steals our freedom – SN 1.24.10

- **2 Corinthians 3:17** - Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
- **Galatians 5:1** - It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.
- **James 1:25** - But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

One common criticism of the faith is that it gives many things but freedom isn't one of them. If you want to live under the control of others, be a Christian. If you want freedom, try something else. Christianity is a straitjacket.

From Fake Steve Jobs...*I do not believe in your crazy made-up Western "God." I believe that what you are teaching people is at best a fairy tale and at worst an extremely dangerous and negative set of beliefs that have generally made the world a worse place and are too often used as a way to rob people. It sickens me to think of the way "Christians" have perverted the teachings of Jesus.*

Tonight we'll look at this common accusation in its various forms. Here's one:

Christianity is destructive to community (that is, to people living together in peace and harmony) because it requires conformity around a narrow set of beliefs.

The idea is that we will all get along better if all of our organizations are inclusive, open-minded, and do not have firm beliefs that tend to divide those who are in from those who are out. Churches in particular are notorious for telling people that they are wrong, that they are sinners, even that they might end up in hell. Christianity says that some things are heresy and others are immoral, and these are too narrow to allow for freedom.

Reactions? (Keep in mind that I already know that you disagree with that, but what would you say in trying to influence an unbeliever to see it differently?)

Two hypothetical organizations:

GLBT Action Committee

Society for Traditional Marriage

Each has a reputation...

Liberal and open-minded

Conservative and closed-minded

Diversity
Accepting of all

Conformity
Rejecting of those who differ

Couldn't be more different, right?

But let's say a board member at the GLBT has a religious conversion and decides that homosexual behavior is a sin. And let's say that a board member at the SFTM has a conversion and decides that gays ought to be able to marry. In each case, the reaction is the same. No matter how kind or unkind the members choose to be, the dissenting person will have to be removed from leadership. Each group has values that define it, and it makes no sense to have someone on the leadership team that fundamentally disagrees with the mission of the society.

The nature of a community is that it has beliefs and values that define it and make some people outsiders. Political parties, labor unions, the High School band, the public schools, the football team – some are much more rigid than the church.

The better standard for a community is to ask if it leads people to treat others with love and respect, or hatred and violence? Does an organization teach people to be kind and loving or condemning and mean? Obviously some churches fail these tests and should go out of business. But the way of Jesus, if actually followed, brings to the wider community both grace and truth.

Both Jesus and Paul told us to practice that unpleasant thing called church discipline, and confront people who want to be Christians and yet live any way they choose. It's tougher than ever to do such a thing and have even Christians understand, let alone unbelievers. But it is our duty to do so, and every community does the same.

Christianity destroys other cultures, replacing local wisdom and customs with Western Christian ones.

I think it's *The African Queen* where Humphrey Bogart finds Kathryn Hepburn out in the jungle playing an old church organ and trying to teach the natives to sing hymns in order to make them Christian. That's how many think of missions and such things surely have happened. In Haiti we saw a bunch of Haitian kids dressed like Mennonites from Pennsylvania and we realized that we too have to be careful not to take the particulars of our culture and enforce them on others. But is it true that Christianity stamps out other cultures and replaces them with a uniform Western sensibility?

Keller points out that all of the first Christians were Jewish, and that you could say that the center of Christianity was Jerusalem. That changed over time, and eventually the vast majority of Christians were in the Mediterranean world of Greece and Italy and North Africa. That changed over time and eventually most of the believers were in Western Europe and North America. Actually that has shifted again and the majority of the world's Christians live in the southern hemisphere and Keller says that more Christians live in Africa than on any other continent, but the day is coming when China is the population center of Christianity.

Keller: "Why has Christianity grown so explosively in these places? African scholar Lamin Sanneh gives a most intriguing answer. Africans, he said, had a long tradition of belief in a supernatural world of good and evil spirits. When Africans began to read the Bible in their own languages many began to see in Christ the final solution to their own historic longings and aspirations as Africans. Sanneh writes: 'Christianity answered this historical challenge by a reorientation of the worldview.... People

sensed in their hearts that Jesus did not mock their respect for the sacred nor their clamor for an invincible Savior, and so they beat their sacred drums for him until the stars skipped and danced in the skies. After that dance the stars weren't little anymore. Christianity helped Africans to become renewed Africans, not re-made Europeans.” [Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*].

The same cannot be said for secularism, individualism, American-style materialism. Those philosophies tend to crush local cultures. The same can't be said for Islam or Buddhism, religions that have always been geographically and culturally tied to the land where they originated.

The church's first major issue (Acts 15) was whether to make Greeks behave like Jews (come under the OT Law). They decided (with God's direction) to NOT do so. When Paul writes in Galatians that it is for freedom that you have been set free, this is the particular issue he has in mind.

Revelation 21-22 – people from every people, tongue, tribe, and nation!

Christianity takes away our freedom to choose our own way of life.

Instead, it requires people to meekly follow what the Bible says. The Western idea (Kant and others) is that an enlightened person is one who chooses for himself rather than listens to authority. Some go as far as to say that authority exists only to subjugate people and take their money, and that any claim to truth is an attempt to wrestle away someone's freedom.

Before I say anything else, let me point out an obvious fact. Chinese Communism certainly would like to establish a religion free nation. Does it increase or reduce people's freedom to choose their own way of life? The Soviets tried the same thing. Getting rid of faith (or trying to) doesn't bring freedom.

Christianity? I hope that as we practice it, the answer is different.

Freedom. I'm all for it. "It is for freedom that Christ set you free", Paul writes in Galatians against the legalism that can bind us.

But what is freedom? An interesting text on freedom: **1 Peter 2:13-17** - ¹³**Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority,** ¹⁴**or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.** ¹⁵**For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.** ¹⁶**Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.** ¹⁷**Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.**

Find freedom in submitting to God and express it in submitting even to the government.

There is a freedom that supposedly is found in tossing off restrictions – the freedom you feel on vacation. But there is the freedom that is found in submitting yourself to some discipline – learning to play guitar, for example. It takes a while and it takes away your chance to do many other things, but the fruit is that you can play the guitar freely, almost naturally. And there is the freedom that you find with someone you love, freedom to relax and not have to put on a persona, and that freedom comes when you give up other freedoms and bind yourself to that person.

Freedom in Christ is like the last two. It's freedom from guilt, increasing freedom from sinful habits that destroy, and it is the freedom that comes from having hope for the future, for eternity.

And here's the main thing: People who say that Christianity robs us of our freedom to choose how we live assume that there is no single Truth out there. If there really is no god and no ultimate

truth, the best we can do is make up our own truth. What we believe is that there IS truth and we submit ourselves to it, and thereby find freedom within it.

God does indeed grant everyone the freedom to “choose this day whom they will serve”. But how can he give us freedom to make up truth? That’s like asking for the freedom to choose how much gravity you’ll accept.

Next week: What about Christianity’s record of injustice? (Inquisition, Crusades, with trials)