Two stories—

Shane Clifton is a Professor of Theology at Alphacrucis College in Australia.

In October 2010, Shane Clifton suffered an injury while jumping a bicycle, an event he describes matter-of-factly as "a contingent event that is part and parcel for what it means to be a creature of the earth." Such a matter-of-fact description is, in fact, quite terrifying, for Clifton's everyday bicycle accident rendered him a complete (C5) quadripalegic.

In his memoir, *Husbands Should Not Break,* a memoir in which the author resists writing what he calls "inspiration porn,"

Shane Clifton speaks candidly about the depression and despair that attended his seven month rehabilitation in Prince of Wales Hospital in Sydney and the dark night of the soul that soon followed.

About the time immediately after his discharge, Clifton writes:

"Eventually I arrived home, and entered a house bedecked with balloons and streamers, to the cheers and tears of my wife and children. We were all excited but, although we didn't voice our concerns, we were also a little nervous— like newlyweds on a honeymoon, in love, but tentative. Not long after I arrived, Elly looked my way, smiled, and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. Looking on, the boys joined in spontaneously, a five-person hug that expressed our love and constrained our fear. There was one problem. I had forgotten to turn my wheelchair's power off, and with Jacob accidentally leaning against my joystick, we were propelled like a rugby scrum into the kitchen table, which in turn smashed through our rear window, spraying shards of glass in every direction. It put an end to our cuddle, but did give us something to laugh about. What we didn't realize at the time was that this event would turn out to be symbolic…"

To be sure, *Husbands Should Not Break* tells a harrowing story, yet *Husbands Should Not Break* also tells a surprising story.

It does not tell a story of Shane Clifton negotiating a life of challenge and struggle but nevertheless finding something approximating happiness.

It instead tells a story of how Shane and his wife eventually find a deeper and more abiding happiness than the happiness that had constituted their life prior to paralysis.

Under the conditions of his new, changed life Clifton discovered a happiness he had not previously known, a happiness that is discovered not in spite of his struggles but because of them.

To be disabled, Clifton writes, is to be in a near constant state of sheer vulnerability before others and absolute dependency upon God and neighbor. Such dependency usually strikes us an ordeal to be avoided at all costs but, through it, Clifton received a life he would not trade for any other life.

Paralysis liberated me, he says.

That's the first story.

Second story— you might've seen it in the news this week:

Irwin Bernstein, a retired Air Force veteran, was recently serving a second, post-retirement stint on the faculty at the University of Georgia. When the fall semester began last week, Professor Bernstein made clear to the students enrolled in his psychology class that he would not make any exceptions to his mandatory mask policy.

"No mask, no class," the professor wrote on the white board on the first day before handing out the syllabus.

Bernstein explained to the class that he had come out of retirement to teach them and that, because of his old age and underlying medical condition, he expected his students to respect his rule. He suffers type two diabetes and high blood pressure, and contracting the coronavirus could very easily be lethal to him.

If anyone suspected that perhaps the professor of psychology was conducting his own real-time psychological test, those suspicions were dashed by the next class.

On the second day of class, a student, Hannah Huff, defiantly showed up without a mask.

When handed a mask by a classmate, the student put it on but refused to wear it over her nose. When Professor Bernstein asked her repeatedly to wear the mask properly, she ignored him, pretending not to hear him. Finally Bernstein stopped pleading with her and announced to his seminar students that he was resigning.

On the spot.

He gathered up his briefcase and books and walked out of the classroom.

Later, the professor told the campus newspaper, “At that point I said that whereas I had risked my life to defend my country while in the Air Force, I was not willing to risk my life to teach a class with an unmasked student during this pandemic.”

Professor Bernstein, who’s nearly ninety years old, says he’s received many, many messages due to his decision to retire with some expressing support for his decision but many others expressing anger and using profane language over the way the professor impinged on the “liberty” of his student.

When asked about her refusal to wear a mask, the University of Georgia student, Hannah Huff, replied— with pride, “I can do what I want. If I don’t want to wear a mask, I don’t have to wear a mask. It’s my freedom.”

I begin with these two stories about freedom because one of these stories is about what Christians mean by the word freedom and the other of these stories is about what Christians mean by the opposite of freedom.

The contrast between these two stories reminds us, therefore, that, as much as it is anything else, Christianity is a language, and to be a Christian is, in no small measure, to work with words which possess particular meanings, meanings that are determined by the Word who was made flesh.

In other words, what we talk about when we talk about the word freedom is not necessarily— or rather, is necessarily not— what others talk about when they talk about freedom.

In writing about language and the training that language requires, the philosopher Stanley Cavell recalls a memory from his daughter’s childhood.

From an illustration in one of her very first board books as a toddler, Cavell’s daughter learned to say the word, “kitty.”

She pointed to the bright and simple illustration of a cat in her baby book and she sounded out the word, “kitty.”

Some weeks later, however, the little girl came across a fur coat— a mink— stroked it, and said the word, “kitty,” making Cavell realize that his daughter really did not know what the word, “kitty,” means.

The word “kitty” had a more specific definition than his daughter yet understood. Only when she gets to pet a litter of kittens, to watch them bob and chase after a tiny ball or

to feel them climb on her lap and up her chest or to hear their deep purring, will she learn the word's true meaning.

Only then, Cavell suggests, will she "walk into speech."

What is the speech into which Paul would have us walk when it comes to the peculiar, counterintuitive way he uses this word, "freedom?"

> "The Anointed freed us for freedom;" the Apostle Paul writes today at the climax of his letter to the Galatians, "stand fast, then, and do not again be restrained by slavery's yoke…for you were called to freedom, brothers [and sisters]; only let this freedom not serve as an occasion for the flesh; rather slave for one another by love. For the whole Law is summed up in a single utterance; to wit: "You shall the love your neighbor as yourself.."

Hang on—

Paul has spent four angry, polemical chapters declaring his opponents anathema for attempting to add the Law back onto the Gospel.

To add to the Gospel is to subtract the whole Gospel. Christ plus anything else at all is no Gospel at all.

To make our works necessary to the Gospel is to nullify the work of Christ.

Any false teacher who make circumcision a condition for acceptance by God should go all the way, Paul indelicately put it, and castrate themselves.

By the Law I died to the law…for if justification comes through the Law, then Christ died for absolutely nothing, Paul wrote in chapter two.

Your justification, your enough-ness, before God comes not through obedience to the Law, Paul has repeated over and over and over, it comes through faith, sola, alone. You are justified— only— in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone.

But now, having dispensed with all his talk of justification, it sounds like Paul is committing the worst and most common mistake preachers make; that is, taking away with one hand the free grace the preacher has given with the other hand.

It sounds like Paul is doing exactly what the false teachers do, muddling the Law with the Gospel, adding Do to the message of Done, confusing commands with promise, attaching our work to God's gift.

It sounds like Paul is saying here that Christ has set us free for exactly what Paul previously told us that Christ has set us free from; namely, a life lived in obedience to the Law.

“Christ has set you free to slave for one another by love,” and the word Paul uses there in conjunction with the word freedom is, in fact, the word for slave, δοῦλος, as though Gospel freedom is a form of slavery to God’s Law.

“For the whole Law is summed up in a single utterance,” Paul writes; “to wit: “You shall the love your neighbor as yourself.”

Evidently, we have not been set free by Christ to do whatever we want.

Christ has set us free to be slaves to the wants of God.

Notice in our text today:

If Gospel freedom is a form of slavery to God’s Law, then when Paul today warns us not to submit again to the yoke of a different form of slavery, the slavery he has in mind is what we most often understand in America as freedom.

In other words—

If true freedom is slavery to the Law of God, then true slavery is the “freedom” to be our own law.

If genuine freedom looks like bondage to the wants of God, then actual bondage looks like freedom to do whatever we want.

Paraphrasing St. Paul’s paradoxical understanding of Christian liberty, Martin Luther famously says in his treatise, On the Freedom of a Christian, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful slave of all, subject to all.”

Not only is this a peculiar way to define a word like freedom, it’s a definition of freedom that we cannot understand apart from remembering the fact that, out of all the peoples of the world, God has called the Jews to be his particular people.

That is—

When the Apostle Paul announces today, “For freedom, Christ has set us free,” the speech Paul would have us walk into— and be schooled by— is the grammar of the only scriptures Paul knew, our Old Testament.

I took a Jewish Studies course as a undergraduate at the University of Virginia, and I recall how in one class, during a discussion of the torah, the professor, Dr. Peter Ochs, joked that, “Any religion that doesn’t tell you what to do with your pots and your pans and your genitals isn’t a religion worth following.”

All of us in the class laughed at his joke despite the fact that none of us knew what he meant by it.

Finally, one brave student raised her hand and said, “I don’t get it.”

And Dr. Ochs smiled and said, “Any religion that doesn’t tell you what to do with your pots and your pans and your genitals lacks a god who is determined to make you fully free.”

When Paul uses a word like “freedom,” the speech Paul would have us enter is the language of the exodus.

Seldom do we notice, but when God gives the Law to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai he does so in order to set them free from captivity to false gods. The commands of the covenant are a means of liberation.

I recently watched the scene as depicted in Cecile B. DeMille’s film version starring Charleston Heston, and I was surprised by the movie’s accuracy to the text.

When Moses strides down the mountain only to discover the Israelites have stooped to worshipping a golden calf, Moses bellows at them, “You are not worthy to receive these ten commandments!”

“We will not live by your commandments, we’re free!” someone in the crowd shouts.

“There is no freedom without the Law!” Moses replies, pointing to the stone tablets in his hands.

God’s People, scripture says, are free because they live under God’s Law.

The commands of the Law are not the limits God sets around his People’s freedom.

The commands of the covenant, right down to every jot and tittle about pots and pans and genitals— commands that can be encapsulated, Paul says today, in the command to love our neighbor as ourself— are the way God sets his People free.

Free from what?

How does God telling us what to do constitute freedom?

The late Catholic theologian, Herbert McCabe, argues that all ten commandments of the Decalogue— as well as the hundreds of other laws of the Mosaic covenant— are meant to reiterate the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no God but Yahweh, the God who sets you free."

Thus the Law, McCabe says, is actually a Charter of Liberation (not limitation).

The commandments are ways we learn to live not as slaves to the false gods— and very often we're our own false gods— but as subjects of the true and living Lord.

McCabe observes how of all the animals God has made we are the only animals in creation who know not how to be creatures.

Thus, to be free is to be schooled in the vulnerability, contingency, and dependence that constitutes creature-hood.

That God tells us what to do with our bodies, for example, is a reminder that we are not gods; therefore, the bodies of others are not objects to which we're entitled.

That God tells us what to do with our pots and our pans is a reminder that though it's true that "man does not live by bread alone" it's just as surely true that man cannot live without bread, bread the mercy of our Maker alone provides.

That God commands us not to kill and to love our neighbor as ourself, even the neighbor who is also our enemy, is a reminder that we are but creatures and that this is the form our Creator's care of us took when he took flesh.

To assert, as St. Paul has in his Letter to the Galatians, that the purpose of the Law is not to justify you is not to suggest that the Law has no purpose.

The purpose of the Law is to teach you how to be a creature.

> It's not about being justified.
>
> It's about becoming human.

As fully human as, say, Shane Clifton.

In his memoir, *Husbands Should Not Break*, Shane Clifton writes, "In an instant, I was made one whom others, when hearing about such a life, say, "They'd be better off dead,"

and tell their own loved ones, “If that ever happens to me, unplug the machine,” but the paradox of paralysis, being rendered completely vulnerable and totally dependent and constantly aware of the contingency of my creature-hood, is that I’ve never been more free.”

I thought of Clifton’s book shortly after I was appointed to Annandale United Methodist Church.

During an August worship service, an usher flagged me from the rear of the sanctuary.

After the last few worshippers trickled through my communion line, I carried the body and blood of Christ to a woman to whom the usher pointed.

She and her husband sat behind the back pew, he in a chair pulled from the lobby and she in her wheelchair.

Afflicted with MS, her body was tense and her movements halting. I broke off a piece of bread. Praying it wouldn’t prove too large, I place it in between her clenched fingers. “The body of Christ broken for you,” I whispered.

I watched as her husband guided the host to her clenched but eager mouth. She chewed slowly as though she knew better than us that her life depended upon what lay within it.

He waited calmly. I watched the clock nervously. When finally she swallowed, her husband guided the cup to her lips. “The blood of Christ poured out for you, honey.”

He’d stolen my line.

Some of the wine dribbled out of her mouth and onto her easy-snap blouse.

Unwrapping the cloth from the stem of the chalice, he wiped her face clean and blotted the stain on her shirt.

“A Christian,” Martin Luther says, “is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful slave of all, subject to all.”

It took the better part of two verses of a hymn for Frank to serve Tina.

“I admire you,” I said to him later.

“For what?”

He genuinely did not know.

“For the way you are with her,” I said, “your patience and tenderness.”

“This is my life,” he said, “I don’t want any other.”

That’s freedom. That’s freedom.

That’s the freedom for which Christ has set us free.

We live at a time and in a culture that defines freedom the way the Bible defines sin: complete autonomy.

But the word autonomy in Greek, *auto* + *nomos*, literally means to be a Law unto your own self, which is as good a definition as any for godlessness.

To be free, our culture tells us, is to be free from external constraints and from the claims of others. Freedom so understood is the liberty to be left alone. Freedom is the latitude to do what you, as an individual, want to do.

That Christianity is a foreign language in such a culture can be illustrated by the fact that ancient and medieval Christians always depicted Hell as the realm where the unrepentant are granted the prerogative to do whatever they want to do.

At such a time and in such a culture, therefore, that God has told us what to do, that God has given us something to do, is not a burden but a gift.

Grace.

My oldest son, Alexander, left this week for his freshman year at William and Mary.

He’s starting college with a semester abroad in Costa Rica.

His flight left early Wednesday just past midnight so we were at Dulles late Tuesday night to see him off.

I was expecting to cry.

I was not expecting to cry because of the rows upon rows of Red Cross cots I saw set up throughout the terminal and the huddled groups of Afghan refugees holding frightened children and plastic bags of belongings.

Having checked his luggage, we left the ticketing desk.

Walking with Alexander towards the security checkpoint, I bumped into a young woman exiting a restroom.

She was wearing a soft pink hijab and held an impossibly tiny baby across her chest. Both of them, baby and mother, had dirt and blood on their clothes and cheeks.

I bumped into her and, in an instant, a news story, from which I had heretofore been comfortably removed, collided into me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “Excuse me,” I said, hoping to avoid tearing up in front of her.

As I helped her pick up belongings, I thought of the law, “Welcome the refugee among you and care for them, for once you were a refugee in the land of Egypt.”

Bumping into her, it was like walking into speech.

To be so reminded of my obligation to someone like her—

It wasn’t a burden.

It was a gift.

I left the airport that night more what God made me to be.

That’s freedom.

That’s freedom.

But to so understand freedom is to speak a strange and difficult language in a foreign culture whose words often mean otherwise.

Fortunately, Christ has given us the bread and wine that is his body and blood, Christ has given us neighbors and possibly even enemies, Christ has given us the poor, whom we always will have with us; so that, for a world in need of witnesses, we might learn to walk into this speech.