Play and Freedom: Patterns of Life in the Spirit

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Abstract: This article explores the pneumatological theme of the freedom of the Spirit from the perspective of experience. It deploys a recently developed methodology of attending to affective and experiential dynamics in pneumatology to identify two significant patterns or modalities of Christian life in the Spirit that are indexed to the Spirit’s freedom: a pattern of divine resistance to human attempts to control God, characterized on the human side by experiences of disruption as well as dynamic creativity; and a pattern of life free from the tyranny of the law, characterized by a modality of play or playfulness, as explored in the work of Nimi Wariboko. In identifying and illuminating these patterns, this article extends a project of seeking to make explicit the connections between Christian doctrinal concepts and Christian experience into a new domain, and responds to a long-standing concern that theologies of sanctification emphasizing freedom have little to say about the positive shape of Christian life in the Spirit.
this methodological approach holds that pneumatology is most generative when it takes its orientation from Scripture’s own language about the Holy Spirit—the activities Scripture explicitly ascribes to the agency of the Spirit, and the specific imageries Scripture deploys in describing the Spirit—in the first instance. I make an extended case for these methodological assumptions in *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, and will not repeat those arguments here.

Why explore the theme of the freedom of the Spirit from this perspective? One answer is that doing so furthers the agenda proposed in that book of seeking to refuse too-easy bifurcations in theology between reflection on doctrines in the abstract and reflection on the experiential and subjectivity shaping dimensions of doctrines. In the present case, the argument being suggested is that the attribute or perfection of divine freedom is not just a way of talking about the asety of God or the non-contingency of divine action. The suggestion is that it shapes divine-human encounter in more experientially direct and specific ways, and that this shape emerges particularly clearly when examining divine freedom through the lens of pneumatology—the freedom of the Spirit.

A second reason to examine the freedom of the Spirit from the perspective of experience is that it will help answer a long-standing challenge that has been raised against theologies of sanctification that emphasize Christian freedom from the tyranny of the law, especially as articulated in early Reformation receptions of Augustine. The most interesting form this challenge has taken, in my view, is the argument that such approaches to sanctification are likely to result in an overly thin vision of Christian life. Oliver O’Donovan provides a thoughtful contemporary articulation of this line of critique, which has been voiced in various forms since Luther’s own day:

> It has proved possible to mount [an account of Christian life in the Spirit] which, sheltering behind the Lutheran *simul iustus et peccator* formula, takes only its second half seriously. Sanctification was mentioned only to be bound and gagged, reduced to a disillusioned consciousness of moral possibilities unrealized, speculation on a gracious work of God that was never to be performed.³

The concern here is that there is a risk in accounts of sanctification that focus on the experience of liberation from the law of generating a picture of Christian life that has little positive moral, ethical, or spiritual content, because it is defined

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only or primarily negatively, in terms of release from the tyranny or slavery of the law.

As I hope to show in response, emphasis on the Spirit’s freedom can help to fill out a positive account of what Christian life in the Spirit looks and feels like from an affective Augustinian perspective. In this, it can provide resources for explaining how life in the Spirit from this perspective is not a flat, negatively defined landscape in which the only thing to talk about is non-condemnation. Rather, it is a dynamic drama of freedom that is saturated with meaning, worked out against the horizon of the living Spirit of God, who moves in power in the world and in human lives.

**The Spirit in motion**

One way of putting the argument in what follows is to say that there are certain patterns or dynamics that tend to recur in Christian life in the Spirit that are usefully explicated in terms of the freedom of the Spirit as we encounter it. Although God’s freedom is by no means constituted by the response to human lives and activities—God’s freedom is of course simply intrinsic to God’s nature—I want to argue that this freedom is very often encountered by Christians and made salient to them in the form of particular patterns of experience. To support this argument, I turn now to a series of pneumatological images in Scripture that resource this theme.

The locus classicus in Scripture for the connection between Christian experience of the Spirit and divine freedom is John 3:8:

> The wind [to pneuma] blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

This verse describes the work of the Spirit in salvation as work that is characterized by dynamic motion. As “wind,” God’s Spirit is encountered as an efficacious force that cannot be seen but can be felt and heard, and which is prone to sudden shifts in intensity and direction. The consequence of this dynamism is that the Spirit’s work is fundamentally unanticipatable and unmanipulable from the perspective of human beings. As Amos Yong explains, wind imagery is particularly appropriate for capturing the ‘vital, energetic, and dynamic’ nature of the Spirit.

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4 For an ‘affective Augustinian’ theology of sanctification, see Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*, pp. 183–231. The arguments in the present article about the positive shape of life in the Spirit are additional to the arguments made there. The latter include especially the political implications of an affective theology of grace in light of the embeddedness of affects in bodies and in the material world, and a limited affirmation of a role for Christian spiritual practices in sanctification.

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of God as well as the Spirit’s ‘unpredictability’. David Ford makes the same point: wind imagery ‘evokes imaginatively a God who is free … who overflows our categories, who challenges our knowledge of origins and purposes … who has an energy we cannot harness … and who can blow us in new directions’. To be born again in the Spirit is thus to be caught up in new divine purposes whose outworking in human lives cannot be predicted in advance. We encounter the Spirit’s divine freedom in the fact that the Spirit, like the wind, cannot be anticipated or controlled. The importance of wind imagery in pneumatology is underscored in the description of what is perhaps the paradigmatic encounter with the Spirit in the church, at Pentecost: ‘And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind’ (Acts 2:1).

A similar mixture of dynamism and power is present in the other major image of the Spirit’s descent at Pentecost, that of fire: ‘Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them’ (Acts 2:3). Fire warms and burns, and like wind it is constantly in motion—leaping and flickering, diminishing, and growing. The fire image is picked up again, now with connotations of purgation and judgment, in John the Baptist’s description of Jesus’ baptism as being one ‘of the Holy Spirit and fire’ (Mt 3:11–12; Lk 3:16–17). This imagery, in turn, is likely drawing on the description of the cleansing power of the divine ‘spirit of judgment’ and ‘spirit of burning’ described in Isaiah 4:4–5 and elsewhere.

The Spirit is also closely associated in Scripture with flowing and pouring water. Isaiah refers at several points to the Spirit being ‘poured out’ from heaven, in an analogy with rain, to make land fruitful (Isa 32:15; cf. Isa 44:3), and Joel uses a term associated exclusively with liquid (shafakh) to describe God’s spirit being ‘poured out’ to generate dreams, visions, and prophecies (Joel 2:28–29). Water imagery of these kinds combines connotations of cleansing (as in baptism) and vitality (making land fruitful) with, once again, a particular kind of dynamism—forceful but non-schematic movement. Imagery of the Spirit as moving water is then given powerful christological reconfiguration in John 7, which describes the Spirit in terms of ‘rivers of living water’ flowing from believers’ hearts, which come from Christ to satisfy the thirsty:

On the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, ‘Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, “Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water”’. Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive. (Jn 7:37–39)

And John 7, in turn, builds on the description in Ezekiel 47 of a superabundance of water flowing from the temple to give life to the surrounding land, producing fruit for nourishment and ‘leaves for healing’ (Ezek 47:1–12).³⁹

In all of these images, the Holy Spirit has power, efficacy, and purpose. The Spirit judges and burns, cleanses and heals, gives drink to the thirsty, bestows life and salvation, and empowers for witness. But in each case the divine power and purpose is also encountered in a way that communicates a particular kind of motion—a dynamism, an unanticipatability, a resistance to schematization.

A similar dynamism, contrasted explicitly with rigidity and inflexibility, is also present in Ezekiel, in the use of spirit language to describe God’s gift of hearts of flesh to replace hearts of stone (Ezek 36:26–27). The imagery from Ezekiel is then taken up in 2 Corinthians, which describes letters ‘written not with ink but with the Spirit of God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts’ (2 Cor 3:3). In Paul’s gloss on Ezekiel, the rigidity of stone becomes associated more explicitly with death, and the organic motion of hearts with life (‘for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’ (2 Cor 3:6)).

Wind, fire, flowing water, hearts of flesh instead of stone: each of these pneumatological images is multi-layered, building on a complex network of semantic associations as well as scriptural intertexts. For present purposes, my interest is in the sense of movement that the images share. Each image speaks to the ways that the Spirit encounters human beings as a dynamic power that is always in motion. In this dynamism, I suggest, we are seeing a semiotic representation in Scripture of the divine freedom as a characteristic of the Spirit with experiential implications.

Resistance to instrumentalization

Part of what these scriptural images of the Holy Spirit do, I argue, is to capture something that Christians discover experientially as they try to locate and discern the work of the Spirit in their lives and in the world. These pneumatological images speak to the way the Spirit is experienced by human beings as ungraspable, uncontrollable, uncircumscribable. ‘You hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.’ Christians learn that the Spirit is free as they come to experience the Spirit’s resistance to

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human attempts to restrict the scope of the Spirit’s work to a level that can be anticipated and controlled.

To draw out these dynamics, I turn to the account of the freedom of the Spirit found in the Pietist theologian Christoph F. Blumhardt, one of the great unsung pneumatologists of the past 200 years. Blumhardt describes these dynamics of pneumatological experience in terms of the Spirit’s resistance to what he calls ‘human mechanisms’ and ‘systems’:

It is a mistake when people believe that the Holy Spirit goes along naturally with human mechanisms and traditions. This view turns the Spirit of God into nothing more than an amplification of human opinions, so that every “Christian” phenomenon ends up being viewed by its proponents as a work of the Spirit, even if it is wrapped up in the most monstrous superstition.

In developing this aspect of his pneumatology, Blumhardt is responding to forms of Pietist spirituality which he believed had domesticated the living God by limiting the expected site of the Spirit’s work to specific practices of Bible reading and preaching, confessionally enshrined theological systems, and styles of worship practice. As a result of this domestication of the Spirit, Blumhardt believed that his fellow Pietists had become blind to the selfishness and ‘egoism’ behind much of their Christian practice, and had made themselves deaf to the call of the Spirit to advocate for the working classes who were being crushed by the forces of industrialization.

Blumhardt diagnosed these failures in the church first and foremost as a theological failure to take the freedom of the Spirit seriously enough. According to Blumhardt, ‘God is all sorts of things, just not a system … Wherever people have made a religion into a system, that religion is always distant from God’. From his perspective, human beings are always trying to reduce God to a manageable set of ideas and practices so that they can secure the benefits of forgiveness and eternal life without having to deal with the awesome and unsettling reality of the living God. One way Christians do this is by conflating the instruments through which the Spirit has worked in the past with the living Spirit: ‘Instead of using the gifts that have been given to look forwards, in order to attain the final goal [of the Kingdom of God on earth], people instead turn

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10 Christoph F. Blumhardt was a proto-Pentecostal faith-healer and politically engaged German Pietist who was active in Württemberg from 1880 to 1919 and was an important influence on Dialectical Theology. The discussion that follows builds on the more extended arguments and analyses in Simeon Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross in the Preaching of Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt: The Holy Spirit Between Wittenberg and Azusa Street* (London: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2010).


around and marvel at the gifts, and ultimately make an idol out of them’. 14

According to Blumhardt, this is what often happens in revival movements. After
an initial awakening, the heirs of such revivals forget that the Spirit is always in
motion. They start to focus their attention on the instruments through which the
Spirit once moved in power rather than continuing to seek after the living Spirit,
who has moved on. A powerful and creative movement of the Spirit in the
church hardens and ossifies, while the living Spirit of God blows elsewhere.

But, as we have seen, the living Spirit is free—the Spirit is wind, water, and
fire—and therefore resists domestication. The Spirit’s work cannot finally be
anticipated or controlled from the human side. I suggest that the resistance to
circumscription Blumhardt is describing is part of what is being communicated
by the major biblical images for the Spirit that we looked at above: you cannot
encompass the wind, you cannot bottle a flowing river, you cannot give a
blueprint for the heart.

Interestingly, a similar sort of argument lies behind early Protestant
critiques of what the Reformers saw as problematic attempts in medieval
Catholic spirituality to restrict the Spirit’s work to specific rituals and
practices, performed by particular classes of individual. Huldrych Zwingli
saw this particularly clearly. His critique of Catholic theologies of baptism
was grounded explicitly in an appeal to the Spirit’s freedom: ‘God alone
baptizes with the Spirit, and he himself chooses how and when and to whom
that baptism will be administered’. 15

Christoph Blumhardt puts the same point like this:

[L]iving interventions of God do not repeat themselves once and for all
according to the same schemas, or take place mechanically through ‘means of
grace’ alone. God’s intervention comes much more like a thief in the night. 16

This pattern of the Spirit’s working has consequences for Christian experience.
It means that if Christians want to follow the Spirit’s leading and avoid ‘seeking
the living among the dead’ (Lk 24:5), they have to enter the ‘drama’ by being
open to new callings and new experiences. 17 They need to be open to being
taken out of their comfort zone, and to the Spirit working through more than
just the usual or expected methods and instruments, through usual people, and
in the usual ways. 18 Some of the most reliable signs of the Spirit’s presence and
work will therefore be a certain kind of experience of disruption, on the one
hand, and a certain kind of creative freedom, on the other. Because the Spirit

14 Blumhardt, Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes, p. 116.
16 Blumhardt, Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes, p. 47.
18 Blumhardt, Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes, p. 39.
is free, Christians cannot be certain that the Spirit will work through the same means and according to the same patterns as in the past. The same instrument that was once a transformative site of the work of the living Spirit can later become a dead letter, as Paul explains in 2 Corinthians 3. Indeed, the one thing Christians can be sure of is that the Spirit will resist idolatrous attempts to reduce the Spirit’s work to something they can manage, anticipate, and control.

Recognizing this has implications for Christian experience. It means that the Holy Spirit often works in human lives through experiences of disruption, of being unsettled, of finding human plans thwarted.\(^{19}\) It also has attitudinal implications, at least aspirationally: a posture of listening, openness, and ongoing discernment, as well as a kind of epistemic humility. We know that the Spirit is always moving and always working, and indeed always working for the good of God’s Kingdom. But we also know that the form this takes will often be surprising and unexpected, and indeed unsettling, from the perspective of Christian experience.

Before moving on, a caveat. It is important to remember that the Spirit’s resistance to problematic forms of systematization is not in itself anti-systematic. Systems are not problematic simply by virtue of being systems. Rather, the Spirit’s resistance to systematization is part of the drama of life in the Spirit. The Spirit is also free to use ‘systems’, to follow patterns, and to prefer certain kinds of instruments. In light of this, perhaps the most useful way of tracking the pattern of the Spirit’s resistance to being pinned down is through attention to idolatry. The Holy Spirit is most likely to confound human patterns and expectations when they have been co-opted by sin to achieve some idolatrous end.

At the same time, the dynamic quality of the Spirit’s work as Christians experience is not exhausted in this resistance to idolatry. Spirit language and Spirit imagery are also a perpetual reminder, deeply grounded in scriptural witness, that the work of God in the world is creative, dynamic, and excessive. I will return to this last point later in the article.

**Spirit freedom as freedom from the law**

Thus far, I have examined a first pattern of experience that emerges from human encounter with the Spirit who is free and whose activity therefore cannot be anticipated in advance. But there is a further dimension of human encounter with the Spirit that we find in the New Testament when we examine the relationship between freedom and the work of the Spirit. This is the close association in Paul’s letters between the work of the Spirit and the experience of freedom from the tyranny and slavery of the law. When Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:17 that ‘the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord

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\(^{19}\) On this ‘cruciform’ pattern of pneumatological experience, see also Zahl, *Pneumatology and Theology of the Cross*, pp. 184–94.
is, there is freedom’, he is referring not least to something that Christians experience. The Spirit is free, and the Spirit also generates an experience of freedom in Christians. In the next part of this article, I will first explore further this reading of Paul, before drawing on a category from recent Pentecostal theology that I will argue can help us to understand the shape of freedom from the law as it is experienced by Christians.

I begin with the nexus of assertions about the relationship between the Spirit, freedom, the law, and the experience of fear that we find in Paul, especially in Romans, Galatians and 2 Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 3, life in the Spirit is glossed specifically in terms of a contrast with the lifelessness of the law, whose ‘ministry’ is ‘death’ (2 Cor 3:3, 6–7). In this famous passage, Paul juxtaposes the ‘ministry of the Spirit’ (3:8) with that of the law. His exposition has several features that are relevant here. First, in two separate verses he makes clear that the location or site of this ministry of the Spirit is in what he calls ‘the heart’ (3:3). Second, he indicates that the upshot of encounter with this ministry of the Spirit is some sort of subjective encounter with freedom: ‘Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’ (2 Cor 3:17). Third, this freedom, in turn, is closely connected, in the next verse, with the transformation of Christians ‘from one degree of glory to another’, through the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18). In connecting the Spirit, the heart, freedom from the law, and Christian transformation, 2 Corinthians 3 is a foundational text for pneumatology in an affective Augustinian key.20

One way to get a handle on the theological resources of 2 Corinthians 3 is by attending to the ways that Paul develops the chapter’s network of associations elsewhere in his corpus. In Galatians 5:1 and Romans 8:15, this same Christian freedom in the Spirit is understood in contrast to ‘slavery’: in the Spirit the Christian is free as opposed to being under ‘a spirit of slavery’ or under ‘a yoke of slavery’. This slavery, in turn, is associated with the condition Paul refers to as being ‘under the law’: in Galatians 5, we read that being ‘called to freedom’ (5:13) involves being ‘led by the Spirit’ such that ‘you are not under the law’ (5:18). In Romans 8:1–2, it is furthermore clear that being free in the Spirit and no longer under the law involves freedom specifically from some sort of condemnation that would otherwise obtain: ‘There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ because those who are in Christ have been ‘set free’ by the Spirit ‘from the law of sin and death’.21

Romans 8:15 is particularly important for understanding this Spirit-given freedom because it makes clear that for Paul freedom from the law’s slavery is

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20 For analysis of the complexities of this text, see Michael Cover, Lifting the Veil: 2 Corinthians 3:7–18 in Light of Jewish Homiletic and Commentary Traditions (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

21 In Romans 7:6 Paul appeals to the same Spirit/letter distinction as in 2 Corinthians 3:6, again associating the law with death and captivity, and the Spirit with new life apart from the law’s captivity.
not just a concept or a theological principle—Christian freedom is not just a description of the soul’s status before God. It is also something that we experience emotionally, especially as freedom from fear: those who fall back under the spirit of slavery ‘fall back into fear’. As James Dunn explains, ‘Not least of Paul’s delights in justification by faith was that it had liberated him from what he now recognized to have been a spirit of slavery, whose motivation was fundamentally one of fear’.22 Finally, the presence of the Spirit in the hearts of Christians establishes the new relationship of the Christian to God simultaneously as filiation and freedom from slavery: ‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying “Abba! Father!”’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God’ (Gal 4:6–7). In Pauline theology, to be brought into the domain of divine freedom, in the Spirit, and to be a ‘son’ rather than a ‘slave’, is not least to live free from a certain kind fear that is produced by the law.23

The Spirit of play

To show that freedom in the Spirit has a kind of affective basis or background in this way is a valuable step. But this does not in itself do much to address the challenge we saw at the outset: the charge that where sanctified life is defined as life free of the law it risks being little more than an empty set because it is defined only negatively, as freedom ‘from’ rather than freedom ‘for’. In light of this challenge, is there more we can say about the life of Spirit-empowered freedom from the law beyond the fact that it is a life no longer characterized by a certain kind of fear? I think there is, and for this I turn to the work of Pentecostal theologian and ethicist Nimi Wariboko. In a remarkable innovation, Wariboko has built on this network of associations in Pauline theology to lay the foundations for a new creative synthesis between classical Protestant theologies of justification and Pentecostal pneumatology.

22 Dunn makes the same point elsewhere, commenting on Romans 8:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:17: ‘There could hardly be any clearer reminder that the Spirit was experienced as a liberating power … Paul … experienced his new-found faith as liberation and attributed this powerful sense of liberation directly to the Spirit’ (James D.G. Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (London: T&T Clark, 1998), pp. 435, 389).

23 The theological and experiential density of what Paul is describing is evident in Galatians 4:8–10, where slavery is both a slavery to ‘weak and beggarly elemental spirits’ and slavery to ritual laws through ‘observing days, and months, and seasons, and years’. In other words, we are talking about a ‘spiritual’, even demonic, slavery as well, not just a moral and psychological one. My argument is not that freedom from the affect of fear constitutes the whole of Christian freedom in Paul’s view. It is rather that it constitutes a core and irreducible dimension of it, such that we are not fully understanding such freedom if we do not understand it as including affective experience of freedom from fear of the law’s judgment.
In his book *The Pentecostal Principle*, Wariboko’s key move is to deploy the category of ‘play’ to explicate the distinction between grace and works: ‘*Grace is a negation of work. But play is its style of negation.*’ This elegant thesis has wide implications. What does it mean to say that the ‘style’ of life under grace, free from works, is helpfully glossed as a form of ‘play’? In the final part of this article, I will exposit and extend Wariboko’s insight in dialogue with recent theoretical literature on ‘play’ in ludic studies. The goal will be to show how characterizing freedom in the Spirit as a ‘playful’ freedom gives further shape and descriptive texture to Christian life in the Spirit, free from the power of the law.

Wariboko is not the first to recognize the value of the category of ‘play’ for making sense of Pentecostal experience of the Spirit. When he asserts that ‘Pentecostalism is the sacred in a playful mode’, he is following in the footsteps of Pentecostal theologians including Jean-Jacques Suurmond and Wolfgang Vondey. Wariboko’s account of play also draws on ideas about play in Georgio Agamben as well as Hans-Georg Gadamer, among others. Wariboko’s innovation, vis-à-vis this background, is to connect ‘play’ to pneumatology via the Pauline category of freedom from the law.

To examine this move further, it is necessary to establish what is meant by the term ‘play’ in the present context. In one of the classic modern studies of the subject, *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith draws on tools from a range of academic disciplines to show how play is a highly complex phenomenon in human and animal behavior that tends to defeat attempts at a single overarching definition. According to Sutton-Smith, ‘We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is … [t]here is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity’.

In an effort to bring some order to this ambiguity, Sutton-Smith presents a typology of seven different ‘rhetorics’ of play that occur in ordinary

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27 Christoph Blumhardt is getting at something similar, in a proto-Pentecostal mode, when he asserts that ‘the radicalism of the Apostle Paul against all statutory law-giving has justified for all time the prayer for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit’ (Blumhardt, *Gedanken aus dem Reich Gottes*, p. 182).
language usage and that have been addressed in the history of play research. Some of these rhetorics, like the play of fate in games of chance, are very ancient, while others, like play as finding fulfillment through recreational pleasure, are either modern or have been substantially reconfigured in the modern world.

It is the modern rhetorics Sutton-Smith identifies that are most helpful for understanding what Wariboko is up in connecting pneumatology and play. This is because much contemporary usage of the language of play is shaped by the rhetorical contrast that has emerged in modern capitalist societies between play and work. Sutton-Smith traces this rhetoric, in a Weberian key, to Protestant ideas about the sacredness of work and the corresponding ‘denigration of play as a waste of time, as idleness, as triviality, and as frivolity’. Sutton-Smith continues:

Typically the work ethic view of play rests on making an absolutely fundamental distinction between play and work. Work is obligatory, sober, serious, and not fun, and play is the opposite of these. This distinction, while influenced by Protestant religion, derives its major impetus from the urban industrial view of time and work … So when play is opposed to work and is said to be optional, fun, nonserious, and nonproductive, this can be from the point of view of factory work and other forms of economic discipline.

This rhetoric of play as non-work is a powerful one, and has had a great influence. Very often, to affirm the ‘frivolity’ and economic purposelessness of play is to express a cultural and political position that is deeply subversive

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29 The seven rhetorics Sutton-Smith identifies are: play as progress (as a practice that plays a role in human psychological and social development, especially in children), play as fate (as in games of chance), play as power (as in sports and other contests), play as identity (as in the way identity is performed and maintained through cultural practices like celebrations and festivals), play as the imaginary (as in imaginary play and in improvisation of all kinds), play as rhetoric of the self (as in the psychology of individual recreation), and play as frivolous (as in comedy and the tradition of tricksters and fools). For an overview of the typology, see Sutton-Smith, The Ambiguity of Play, pp. 9–12. For a summary of other attempts within ludic studies to define ‘play’, see Gordon M. Burghardt, ‘Defining and Recognizing Play’, in The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

30 Sutton-Smith is keen to emphasize that the category of play, in a full-field and historically sensitive account, cannot and should not be reduced to a foil for work, and points out some distortions that have emerged in the play literature from such reductions. See e.g., Sutton-Smith, The Ambiguity of Play, pp. 191, 201–13, 218–19. However, it is the contrast with work that is particularly illuminating for modern Christian pneumatology.

31 Sutton-Smith, The Ambiguity of Play, p. 201.

in the context of late modern capitalist societies. In an instructive example, Sutton-Smith documents the trend of attempts to justify play by reframing it in economic terms. As he shows, in late modern capitalist contexts, we are so resistant to play’s logic of frivolity and non-seriousness that even when we claim that it is important for children to play, what we tend to mean in practice is that play is to be affirmed and fostered not for its own sake, but insofar as it shapes children into healthy and resilient participants in the economic machine.33

Against this backdrop, much of the theological value of ‘play’ as a category is that it affirms a positive vision of an alternative way of being in the world, under the aspect of grace. As Wariboko puts it, ‘play is an expression of the freedom of the spirit’.34 The contours of this positive vision can be drawn out by focusing on several important contrasts that are often drawn in literature on play.

Perhaps the most important contour of play for present purposes emerges from the contrast Wariboko focuses on between ‘instrumental’ and ‘non-instrumental’ activity. Wariboko draws on Agamben to describe play as as non-instrumental activity: ‘True play has no end—it is non-instrumentalized, and is governed by non-zero-sum-dynamics. It is a pure means, totally given to its freely evolving potentialities’.35 In other words, play denotes a realm of behavior and a way of engaging with the world that is valued and pursued for its own sake, rather than as a means of attaining some future goal. Play is activity that is not determined by urgent and serious ends, but is a kind of end in itself. As play researchers often emphasize, play is ‘autotelic’ and ‘intrinsically motivated’.36 Thus when a student studies out of sheer love for the subject rather than to get a certain mark on an exam or to improve their career prospects, in this sense they have a ‘playful’ rather than instrumental relationship to their intellectual work. This does not mean that they do not take their intellectual work seriously. But it does mean they do not see their work as just a means to a particular economic or social end.

Gordon Burghardt, who studies play in animals, gives a more precise articulation of the point about non-instrumentality. In Burghardt’s view, a behavior is likely to be a form of play when ‘the performance of the behavior is not fully functional in the form or context in which it is expressed’.37 This is a useful qualifier:

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36 Burghardt, ‘Defining and Recognizing Play’, p. 14; Sutton-Smith, The Ambiguity of Play, p. 188.
it is not that play is necessarily non-functional in all respects. It is rather that it does tend to be orthogonal to function in a given setting or in relation to a typical goal.38

For Wariboko, the resistance of play to functional and instrumental explanation is revealed as having great theological power when understood in relation to one particular mode of instrumentality: the instrumentality of religious law. Human beings tend to use God’s law as a means to an end, above all the deadly serious end of securing the favor of God and avoiding divine punishment. On this basis, Wariboko draws on Agamben to argue that the law possesses an ‘inherent “violence”, “transgression” and instrumentality’.39

It is in this particular and crucial sense that Wariboko can say that ‘the logic of play is the logic of grace’.40 Wariboko continues:

Grace … by definition is a genuine gift and not a secretly instrumentalized one. Freely it is given and freely it is received. It has no purposes. No self-addressed envelope from the giver to send something in return … [That is why play] is the essential character of a spirituality governed by the grace-principle rather than the work-principle. It is the state of religion that is deprived of the spur of necessity, want, and purpose—human-divine relationship reorganized in the spirit of play.41

In this context, the particular power of the category of ‘play’ is that it helps articulate why the shape and character of Christian life, filled with the Spirit and free from the law’s tyranny, is neither a cynical embrace of moral license nor a solipsistic wallowing in the hopelessness of sin.

Recall for example O’Donovan’s argument that this sort of account risks reducing sanctification to ‘a disillusioned consciousness of moral possibilities unrealized, speculation on a gracious work of God that was never to be performed’.42 Wariboko helps us to see why what is being described here could

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38 As Burghardt points out, a play behavior can still have some possible function without ceasing to be play, and in some cases it may have a function which is simply not yet recognizable to the observer. See Burghardt, ‘Defining and Recognizing Play’, pp. 13–14.


42 O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology* 3, p. 76.
come to pass only in inadequately pneumatological visions of divine grace. As Wariboko articulates so well, life free from the law is life in the Spirit, and the Spirit is always embracing the world in creative, liberating, joyful motion. Life under grace is ‘life … lived in the expectation of the new, and not in the fear of the subsuming of life by death’.\(^{43}\) In this sense, play (or playfulness) is not so much a type of behavior as a kind of positive modality or attitude undergirding the experience of life in the Spirit.\(^{44}\)

Furthermore, and crucially, the joyful motion of pneumatic life has a particular engine and a particular shape. Namely, it is a vitality and motion that is grounded in the liberating experience of freedom from judgment and from the fear of death. It is always grounded in and draws its motive power from the fact that the law has been “deactivated”, rendered inoperative’. It is in this particular sense, for Wariboko, that the ‘activity of grace is play’: it is play because it is ‘free from work, disengaged from the serious business of the law’. In the Spirit, Wariboko writes, the law is ‘not abolished’, but has instead become ‘a “playful thing”’, because ‘grace has severed the nexus between violence and the law’.\(^{45}\) Ultimately, Wariboko argues:

Play is [simply] a radicalization of grace. It is a necessary outcome of the … innermost dynamics of grace insofar as grace resists assimilation into the calculated purposefulness and rational tradition of work theology.\(^{46}\)

Wariboko is not the only theologian to explore these dynamics in recent years. Kathryn Tanner has described the dynamics of grace, in terms similar to Wariboko’s, in the context of its disruptive power within lives shaped by the values and habits of finance-dominated capitalism. For Tanner, the Christian concept of grace provides a radical riposte to the instrumentalized, efficiency oriented, time-horizon-constricted affective landscape of capitalism. When work and economic productivity have become everything, and one’s value as a person is measured solely or primarily in financial terms, then the possibility of being fired or having no money becomes, as she puts it, ‘a lingering threat hanging over all I do’.\(^{47}\) For the Christian, however, whose value has been secured fully and completely in Christ, and the worth of whose works ‘is assured through the grace of Christ’ who will always ‘make up the

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\(^{44}\) On play as modality, see Elisabetta Palagi, ‘Playing at Every Age: Modalities and Potential Functions in Non-Human Primates’, in Peter Nathan and Anthony D. Pellegrini, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Development of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 70–82. According to Palagi, in non-human primates ‘playful and serious contexts do not differ in the actual behavioral patterns performed, but in the modality they are performed’ (p. 70).


difference’,⁴⁸ there is freedom from the anxieties of work. ‘One can honestly admit faults without fear, assured of God’s mercy in Christ.’⁴⁹ On such a basis, the Christian can engage with the world with ‘a certain detachment’, such that work itself becomes a kind of ‘[w]orking as though not working’.⁵⁰ To put the same point in Wariboko’s terms, grace allows us to have a ‘playful’ relation to work, free from the tyranny of ‘the instrumental logic of capitalism’.⁵¹

Wariboko’s account of grace as ‘play’ echoes a number of further themes that recur in play studies. One such theme is that play is often characterized as being, in the most positive sense, ‘non-serious’. Sutton-Smith calls this the ‘frivolity’ of play. In its ‘idle[ess]’ and ‘foolish[ness]’, play engages in ‘playful protest against the orders of the ordained world’. In play, human beings do not take themselves or the world so seriously; they move instead in a realm of humor, self-deprecation, and spontaneity.

Paul, via Wariboko, helps us to see how these dynamics are soteriologically grounded. We are free to live in playful protest against the seriousness of the law because in Christ the law’s power has been deactivated. Burghardt observes that animals play more often when they are ‘adequately fed, clothed, healthy, and not under stress’, and are thus in what he calls a ‘relaxed field’.⁵² In other words, animals tend to play only when they know they are not under stress or under threat. Life in the Spirit, under the grace of God, is the ultimate ‘relaxed field’. In this space, even death itself, the most ‘serious’ power of all, has lost its sting.

Another aspect of play that has a powerful pneumatological analogue is that it is creative. Sutton-Smith speculates that one of the evolutionary benefits of play is the way it fosters creative problem-solving in organisms. In the field of play, there is space for ‘the actualization of novel connections’. This may be why ‘play contains so much nonsense, so much replication’.⁵³ When you are in a ‘relaxed field’ and free to play, a natural fruit is creativity.

Theologically, such creativity is associated with the Holy Spirit as the one who gives life and renewal. As the psalm has it, ‘When you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the ground’ (Ps 104:30). In the Spirit, human beings are given to see new opportunities and possibilities, to make novel connections, and to see potentialities of life and growth where others might see

⁴⁹ Tanner, Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism, p. 98.
only death, decay, and foreclosed possibilities. Wariboko describes the creativity of grace in a Pentecostal and pneumatological key:

Grace is an appearance of something new into creation, human life, human condition—which breaks into the order of things ... It is a movement toward openness to future possibilities, dislocating human lives and situations towards their future forms, nudging them toward full actualization of their potentials. In its dislocating movement, [grace] has a novum character signaling it as a response to the current order of things ... [authorizing attention to] potentialities [which] exceed the current structuring of individual and social existence.54

In this vision, life under grace, in the Spirit, is a very long way from the ‘barrenness of outcome’ that some theologians have been concerned about, in which sanctification risks being more than a ‘disillusioned consciousness of moral possibilities unrealized’.55 Radical grace leads not to ‘barrenness’ but to joyful and creative ‘play’. Indeed, according to Wariboko, it is these pneumatological qualities of ‘creative restlessness [and] emergent creativity’, of ‘flexibility of experimentation and creative freedom’ that have helped make Pentecostalism the quintessential religious movement of the late modern era, and which help explain its astonishing success in a very wide range of contexts.56

One final dimension of play that I have not yet mentioned is also one of the most obvious: usually we experience play as fun.57 This dimension has particular resonances with the Augustinian vision of Christian life as always ordered to delight. As I have argued elsewhere, one of the simplest but most profound implications of Augustine’s vision of Christian life is that the Spirit’s sanctifying work is experienced as joy and delight.58

At the root of Augustine’s theology of delight is a simple argument of great power. If God is love, and if Christian love is a Spirit-enabled participation in God’s love, then it follows that such love is experienced as joy and delight in that which we are given to love. This is what Augustine is saying in the well-known line from Sermon 159: ‘One only loves, after all, what delights one’.59 That Augustine really does mean what he says is evident in a comment in Nature and Grace about what it feels like to fulfill the law:

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55 O’Donovan, *Entering into Rest*, p. 76.
57 This is part of what Burghardt is getting at when he describes a key characteristic of play as the fact that it is ‘voluntary’, ‘pleasurable’, and ‘autotelic’. See also Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, p. 188.
Whoever then have turned to the Lord their God … with their whole heart and their whole soul will not find God’s commandment heavy. After all, how can it be heavy when it commands love? For either one does not love, and then it is heavy, or one loves, and it cannot be heavy.60

What Augustine’s insight means is that any vision of Christian discipleship whose primary affective orientation is in practice dour and joyless, or dull and passive, is a vision that has lost experiential contact with the character of divine love. Wariboko puts it well: ‘The saved person hears the divine melody of salvation not … in … pious chants of servility, but in the transformation of a sinful life into the joyful play of eternal redemption and regeneration’.61

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the biblical theme of the freedom of the Spirit from the perspective of Christian experience. The result has been to draw out two specific patterns or modalities of Christian life in the Spirit. These patterns are of course not exhaustive. To speak about patterns or modalities in this way is to provide a vocabulary for characterizing the experiential texture of Christian life that is more general than the mere naming of correct behaviors or feelings a Christian should have, while also avoiding the trap of a false completeness. The fact that the Spirit is free means that theological descriptions of patterns of life in the Spirit such as the ones elaborated here will inevitably be provisional and partial in scope, and descriptive rather than prescriptive in function.

The first experiential pattern emerged in bringing together a series of biblical images of the Spirit that convey the dynamism of the Spirit with a pneumatological critique of idolatry articulated with particular incisiveness by 19th-century theologian Christoph Blumhardt. I argued that for sinful human beings to encounter God’s Spirit is to encounter disruptive resistance to in-built human tendencies to seek control over God’s work in human lives. Because Christians are so prone to giving in to the tendency toward idolatry, this sort of divine disruption of expectations about God’s work is more than just a one-off or occasional feature of Christian experience. It proves in practice to be a major pattern of life spent in engagement with the Spirit who is free. The positive corollary of this pattern of disruption is that the Spirit’s work is

60 Augustine, nat. et grat. 69.83 (English: Augustine, Answer to the Pelagians I (New York, New City Press, 1997), p. 260). In Augustine’s vision, this fact is both a reality of pastoral experience and a consequence of the very nature of the Godhead. According to the logic of Augustine’s theology of love, if experience of the love poured out by the Spirit were truly heavy, then such love would be a participation in a God in whose internal life there is something other than pure unconditioned delight.

61 Wariboko, The Pentecostal Principle, p. 187. The insight also has implications for discernment of the Spirit. It means that if Christians seek the working of the Spirit in their lives, a crucial place to look is to their joys.
characterized by creative dynamism. From a human perspective, the Spirit is constantly working in new ways and through unexpected instruments; life in the Spirit is in this sense always life lived in expectation of the new.

The second pattern of life in the Spirit, I have argued, is a modality of play or playfulness. To gloss the Pauline understanding of life in the Spirit, free from the slavery of the law, as a life of ‘play’ is to describe how Christian life under grace is more than just a negatively defined freedom from condemnation. When Wariboko asserts that ‘Grace is a negation of works; but play is its style of negation’, he is articulating how freedom from condemnation has positive content, precisely because it is freedom in the Spirit. Although, as Rowan Williams rightly says and as the previous pattern has underscored, ‘freedom in the Spirit is uncircumscribed’, 62 it is also the case that life in this modality has a kind of affective shape and atmosphere, even a value-system. Although ‘play’ is not a directly biblical term, I have argued, following Wariboko, that it is a category particularly well-suited to drawing out the experiential texture of life in the Spirit, as described in Scripture, in positive rather than just negative terms.

Glossing the freedom of the Spirit as a playful freedom has both critical and positive purchase. Critically, it authorizes the questioning of spiritualities whose affective pattern is controlling, rigid, judgmental, humorless, uncreative, defensive, or otherwise absent either dynamism or delight. Positively, bringing the Augustinian register of ‘delight’ together with the Pentecostal image of ‘play’ results in a vision of Christian life as creative, active, liberated, dynamic, loving, and joy-filled.

To live in this way, in the Spirit, is to live as a child. ‘Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 18:3). Sutton-Smith observes toward the end of his book that ‘all forms of play promise that one can never quite lose while still at play’. 63 Read theologically, this observation is a description of life in the Spirit under the aspect of grace. In play a person is free to engage with the world creatively, actively, energetically, but without fear of ‘serious’ consequences. The Christian is free to play with things that once seemed deadly serious, to find delight in what were formerly objects of fear, and to take themselves much less seriously. Resting in the ‘relaxed field’ generated by the reality of divine grace, the Christian, like the securely attached child, is liberated to experiment, to explore, and to get it wrong. To live knowing that you ‘can never quite lose’ is not just a relief, though it is certainly that. Nor is it just a recipe for creativity, though it is that too. Ultimately, it is nothing less than a mode of participation in the divine life. Life in the Spirit is a life shaped by God’s own freedom, ordered in delight to the God who is love.

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63 Sutton-Smith, The Ambiguity of Play, p. 212.