

Gal. 3:23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

We Believe: The Church – A Community of Faith

Galatians 3:23-28

In the days of the New Testament this is how most everyone saw things: birth equals worth. You were born into a certain social status, and you stayed there.

Your standing in the community was based upon the level of honor the community gave you. You didn't just claim this, it had to be accepted by the community. The primary way in which you got your honor rating was from your birth and your family's standing in the community. So, if you were born to a family with a very high honor ranking, you were immediately respected by the rest of the community. If you had the misfortune of being born to a low ranking family in the community, you were seen as deserving little respect from the day you were born until the day you died. Where you stood in this social pecking order determined who you ate with, did business with; who you married; spoke to, and who spoke first in a conversation. It determined most of the social patterns of your life, and it pretty much all depended on your birth.¹

Birth equals worth. And this was as true in Jewish villages in Israel as it was in the Greco-Roman world beyond Israel.

So, a common saying among the Greek people in those days was "[I thank the gods] that I was born a human being and not a beast, a man and not a woman, and, a Greek and not a barbarian."² Birth equals worth.

Likewise, a prayer popular among the Jews of the day was: "Blessed be [God] who did not make me a Gentile; blessed be He that did not make me a slave; blessed be He that did not make me a woman."³ Birth equals worth.

Don't we thank God we were born into a culture that has advanced beyond such primitive systems of classifying and stereotyping and categorizing people!

Anyway, it is against this backdrop that Paul writes this letter to the sisters and brothers in Galatia, who are having a hard time wrapping their heads around a way of thinking that completely contradicts the birth-equals-worth culture in which they live. Jews thought non-Jews were unclean and Romans thought some of the Jewish religious practices were just weird. Romans loved to eat pork and could not understand why Jews refused to eat it. Romans thought observing the Sabbath was just laziness, and they could not fathom why there was no image of the Jewish God in the temple in Jerusalem. One of the biggest differences was that, for Romans, religion played a small part in making moral decisions, but all of the Jews' moral laws were God-given.⁴

Now, imagine a new message that begins to circulate throughout the Roman Empire: a man named Jesus, a Jew by birth, was crucified for being a blasphemer and seditionist, was raised from the dead, appeared to many of his followers, and, will return to establish a new and lasting kingdom of love in which sins are forgiven, everyone is equal, and peace will reign. This new message starts in Israel, and has spread quickly, gaining believers among many who are not Jewish; men and women; entire households including slaves and their owners; wealthy and poor; and this is creating a real problem for the traditional social structures and rules.

How are Jewish Christians supposed to gather with Gentile Christians without being made unclean? How are slaves and masters supposed to behave when they gather in a house church to share a meal and worship? There are women who are taking teaching responsibilities and some of the men don't know what to do with that. All of the distinctions that have been the underpinning of their social interactions are being tossed out like trash, and this whole worth-by-birth idea is just falling apart.

So some folks come in try to restore order. From now on, they say, we need to re-establish the

¹ From the video lecture "Honor and Shame: Core Values of the Biblical World" by Dr. Richard Rohrbaugh, Biblical Archaeology Society, Washington, DC, 2008.

² Quoted in Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians*. Eerdmans, 1998, p. 270.

³ Witherington, p. 271.

⁴ From "Jews as the Romans Saw Them" by Robert Louis Wilken, a review of the book *Roman and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*, by Martin Goodman at <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/05/001-jews-as-the-romans-saw-them>.

distinctions we had before things got all confused. Never mind what Paul and his bunch told you. If Gentiles want to be Christians they need to be circumcised and follow the Law so that Jewish Christians don't feel so unclean around you. Wealthy people eat first, poor people get the leftovers. Women teach only women. Slaves keep your place and don't start thinking you're equal to your masters.

So Paul writes this letter to the Galatian churches and he repeats the things he taught them before: *our worth does not come by our birth; our worth does not come by our keeping the law of Moses; our status, our worth, our identity comes by nothing other than the grace of God through Jesus the Christ.*

And he's kind of emphatic about it. *You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?* He says that the law of Moses was like a, well, he uses a Greek word, *paidagogos*, which was a slave who was charged with taking care of the children of a family. The *paidagogos* got the kids up in the morning, got them ready for school, walked with them when they went out in public as a protector, helped them with their homework, and pretty much raised the kids until they were adults. The *paidagogos* had a lot of authority over the kids when they were kids – could even discipline them – but, when they became adults, the *paidagogos* no longer had authority over them.

Paul says that's a good way to think of the law of Moses – it was there, like our *paidagogos*, our teacher, protector, disciplinarian, until Jesus came and we became heirs of the kingdom, adopted heirs of God, sisters and brothers of Jesus. *"Therefore,"* says Paul, *"the law was our paidagogos, until Christ came."* Now that he has come, we are no longer slaves to the law, but we have been made right with God through the faith given to us by Christ. Anyone who has been given new life in Christ has his or her identity given to them as sisters and brothers of Christ. No longer is your worth defined by your birth but by your rebirth in Christ Jesus.

So, Paul says, get your minds around this because it is completely counter-cultural and counter-intuitive: *there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* These distinctions don't exist anymore. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

And, I have no doubt, if Paul were here today, he would be saying the same thing. *You foolish Presbyterians. You foolish Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans. Who has bewitched you into thinking that every time you disagree about something you're supposed to go out and start another church?*

Who has tricked you into thinking I care about all the minute distinctions you keep making, dividing people up into liberals and conservatives, fundamentalists and progressives, Democrats and Republicans, contemporary and traditional, high church and low church, applauding and non-applauding; pews and chairs; young and old; connectional and independent? I thought the Galatian churches were bad, but you all make more distinctions than anyone. Those divisions and distinctions, those evaluations of worth are old-world. What I say to the Galatians, I say to you: in Christ there is neither liberal or conservative, fundamentalist or progressive, Democrat or Republican, contemporary or traditional, young or old, or any of the other ways you divide yourselves into us and them. There is no "them". There is only us, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

The message of Paul here in Galatians is beautifully, and I think, perfectly summed up by the quote on the cover of our bulletin this morning:

Believers are never told to become one; we already are one and are expected to act like it.

We are one community built not by our works or our birth or our education level or how sophisticated our theology is or how progressive or how traditional we are. We are one community bound together by the faith instilled in our hearts by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ living in each one of us. We are one, we are supposed to act like it.