

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“What It Means to Be a Christian”

By Eric Howell
Galatians 6:7-18
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The New Testament reading this morning is from the very end of the letter from Paul to the Galatians. Galatia was a region that is modern day western Turkey, but what they were dealing with is just about universal and common for Christians everywhere—what is being a Christian all about—how does it relate to every other role I have and every identity I am. This is when Christianity was just a baby, the early years, when things were still being sorted out about what it means to be a follower of Jesus and what it means to live in the echo of the cross and resurrection of Christ. Those first clusters of Christians had a particularly hard time figuring out what it meant to be a Christian, struggling with (arguing about) different ideas on who was the truest kind of Christian. Paul’s letter to them about this issue is pretty heated.

Paul had earlier travelled through there sharing the gospel and making converts, starting churches, and teaching and preaching about the power of the cross of Christ, the importance of the life of the gathered church, and the hope we have for Christ’s return. And now he thinks they are compromising the gospel and isn’t at all happy about it. In most of Paul’s letters, there’s a long introduction that talks about how he’s thankful for them and prays for them. Not here. In most of the letters there’s a long conclusion sending greetings to people Paul loves. Not here. And maybe I’m wrong, but it surely looks like the letter’s penultimate verse is basically “Now leave me alone.” I’m now going to read for you every verse in Galatians that is nice, warm and fuzzy, kind and compassionate. Please settle in. 1:3, 6:18. Everything in between is salt and vinegar.

One big debate, maybe the most widespread, was Gentile vs. Jew. Some said, “It’s better to be a Gentile Christian because you aren’t spoiled by all that old-time religion. You are a fresh slate, a clean board. You don’t have to undo in order to do and be. Even if you aren’t a Gentile Christian you should try to act like one.” Someone else said, “No, it’s better to be a Jewish Christian. You have the tradition of Israel. Jesus was Jewish and so were all the first disciples. That may not mean that Christianity is just for Jews, but it does mean that if you are not Jewish you should become Jewish to be a follower of Jesus.” In Bible terms this is called un-circumcision and circumcision. Un-circumcised people were Gentiles. They were from all over the world. Circumcised people were Jews of Israel, living a tradition handed down to them since Abraham. Which kind of person is the truest kind of Christian?

This sort of debate raged in the church. You see evidence of it in Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Galatians. It’s a thread running through the New Testament as the church of Jesus begins to bring together people that were naturally and easily divided before. Now that they are coming together under Christ’s Lordship, they have some stuff to work out. It wasn’t easy. Within just a short time after Jesus was with us, in the halls of churches all over the world, you could hear the arguments go back and forth about what makes a true Christian. Maybe things haven’t really changed that much: Jew! Gentile! Republican! Democrat! Black! White! Male! Female! Free! Slave! Texan! --- whatever other people are who are not Texans! Circumcised! Un-circumcised!

Paul writes Galatians with this tension in mind and isn't at all happy about it. Preachers had inflamed the tension by following Paul into the churches that he had started to convince the Christian converts that he had won --- that a Gentile had to be circumcised to be a true Christian. The word has come to Paul and he is writing them to set them straight that you don't have to become anything other than a repentant believer in Jesus Christ for your salvation and to be the truest kind of Christian.

1:6 "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—as if there was one."

3:1 "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

5:1 "for Christ has set us free . . . do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

And then in 6:11, Paul pushes his scribe aside, picks up the quill himself and writes, "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand?" He finishes the letter with a flourish, in his own handwriting, to make his point, "Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor un-circumcision, but a new creation." (repeat)

There is a lot that could be said about why this particular issue of circumcision has troubled Paul and is so prominent in the New Testament. This sign was first commanded to Abraham in Genesis 17. It was to be a sign of the people of Abraham—a mark, the thing that signified that the Jews were in covenant with God. Far more than simply a medical procedure or a parent's personal choice, it carried the weight of religion, history, culture, tradition, identity, not to mention that God told them to do it. For a people whose history was less than easy, whose land and lives were always under threat, and who, at that time lived as a vassal state to the powerful and pagan Roman empire, something like circumcision must have gained in importance. It became one of those few things no one can take from you that ties you to a more glorious proud history and to the hope of a redeemed future to come. And to all of it, Paul says—"hey, it doesn't mean anything really whether you are or whether you aren't. What matters is what Christ has done, and has done in you. It's not just about the state of a part of your body. It's about the state of your soul."

I think it can come down to this: nothing replaces faith in Christ as the core of our identity. Nothing replaces God's love as the binding of our relationships. Nothing replaces hope in Christ for our salvation.

I was reminded recently of the great Virginian, Thomas Jefferson, whose fabulous home Monticello is on the back of a nickel, and was within my eyesight up on the hill most Winter days in Charlottesville --- when the leaves were off the trees. Jefferson was a proponent and architect of the wall of separation of church and state in the fledgling United States. He was also a serious thinker and fan of religion. For Jefferson there were two categories of religion. Good religion and bad religion. For him bad religion had miracles and doctrines and stuff like that. Good religion had only morals and ethics, and things like "do not murder, do not steal." This led Jefferson to conclude this, "religion is well supported; of various kinds, indeed, but all good enough; all sufficient to preserve peace and good order." (Notes on Virginia, quoted in Sheriden, Jefferson and Religion) Jefferson's conclusion is basically this: Christianity produces good citizens, therefore it should be tolerated and welcomed as a moral grounding of a democratic society.

Whether that's true or not true, or how religion ties to political theory isn't really the point. What Jefferson did is shifted Christianity to a function that supports a supposedly higher purpose—making good American citizens. There's nothing wrong with being a good American citizen in many, many ways. Today of course is a day we might be thinking about that and reflective on that more than most. But present this proposition to Paul and what do you think the response would be? Circumcision? Un-circumcision? Being an American? Not being one? Considered in the light of Christ, that's not what is most important; not citizenship in any nation, tribe, or tradition, nor any other allegiance, has a claim on us like our faith in Christ and our identity as Christians. It is as a Christian that you then figure out how you will be everything else you are, not the other way around—whether that is American or not, Jew or Gentile, Texan or whatever, scholar or ditch-digger, married or single, rich or poor.

The witness of scripture helps us with this. This past week I ran into an old professor of mine. I hadn't seen him since a class years ago. Sure that he would remember his star pupil from Greek study of Romans class. I introduced myself -- blank stare. He must have been in awe. I took his silence as an opportunity to share with him that when I am reading a passage, I'll often remember the way that in a book from 1996, he named three major themes in the New Testament. He wrote that these three images are lenses through which we can read the New Testament: community, cross, new creation. He talked about how these three capture in one way or another just about everything in the New Testament. *Community* reminds us that "the church is a countercultural community of discipleship, and this community is the primary addressee of God's imperatives. (MVNT, 196)." We don't begin by asking what should I do. We start from asking "what should we do?" When you read scripture about how we should love one another and serve each other, when you think about the body of Christ, you are reflecting on community.

The *cross* is a reminder that "Jesus' death on a cross is the paradigm for faithfulness to God in this world (197)." It was an act of self-giving love, and the community is consistently called to take up the cross and follow in the way that his death defines. When you read about the cost of discipleship and how being a Christian often requires a hard way of life, you are in the shadow of the cross.

New Creation is the reminder that "the church embodies the power of the resurrection in the midst of a not-yet redeemed world." We hang in suspense between Jesus' resurrection and His return. In this life there is joy in the midst of suffering and impatience with the way things are while finding God in our midst. *New Creation* means we live with some tensions between how things are and how things are supposed to be. . . and tension between how I am and how I am supposed to be. It is the orientation of hope, expectation, and belief that if Jesus was raised from the dead, then just about anything must be possible.

So I told my old professor that I return to community, cross, and new creation regularly. He said, "Really?" "Yes." "Well, that's great. That was the whole point of the book. Most people miss that. Who are you again?" It's the last of these images that Paul brings us to in Galatians just before he says, "Now leave me alone," after spending the whole book hammering on the centrality of the cross, and after almost ending the book in chapter 6 with instructions on how to live in community. After squarely arguing from his point of community and cross, it is this last piece that ends the letter. "Neither circumcision nor un-circumcision mean anything, but a *new creation*." No matter where you came from, you have been made new, not into someone else who has a different history and different

story, but into a new you with a story and journey laid out in front of you. In Christ, we have all been made and are being made into something new that crushes all the old categories and divisions. It doesn't matter who you are or what you have done, in Christ you can be made new. It's the ultimate answer to that question, "Who are you again?" You are made new. You are a child of God. You are a member of the family of faith. You are a Christian. At the end of Galatians, Paul concludes with "I bear on my body the marks of Christ." It is those marks that matter—the marks on our lives that are the marks of Christ.

The witness of scripture helps us see this, so does the witness of the Eucharist. In this simple sacrament, Community is here as we receive these gifts together and share them, as we in our diversity experience a god-given unity in the giving and receiving. The cross is here as we remember the cross on which Christ's body was broken and his blood was shed, and are called again to our own sacrificial living. *New Creation* is here as well. In Christ we are being made into something new -- something beyond nationality, race, gender, education. What happens here -- as we become Church -- is far more important than all those other things -- far more important than what marks we brought when we came to Christ. We aren't finished yet. We are still in progress, still on a journey. The world is. This is the journey on which God has called us, to be made new. In this bread and cup we together proclaim the Lord's death, until He comes. We together as a community, proclaim the Lord's death on His cross, until He comes and all is made new.