

Title: Freedom

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Text: Galatians 2:1-14

The New People of God

Independence Day:

On July 4, 1776 delegates from 13 British colonies in America signed the birth certificate for a new nation that would come to be known as the United States of America. That birth certificate was in the form of a grand and solemn declaration – The Declaration of Independence.

While we rightly see that declaration as the severing of political ties with Great Britain and her king, the rationale for the Declaration of Independence speaks to something much deeper than the politics and commerce of 239 years ago. It addresses what it means to be truly *human*. And it does so in a way that points to a radically new identity.

Just listen to these words from The Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

These are bold and wonderful words – “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” They describe the goal of creating a society in which people could become what their Creator intended them to be.

New Exodus:

Paul would have appreciated The Declaration of Independence. In fact, the letter he wrote to the Galatians was in many ways just that: a declaration of

a new identity for human beings, in which they were finally set free from the destructive slavery of Sin and Death.

Writing to the Romans he explained that:

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Romans 8:21 KJV

*Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the **glorious liberty** of the children of God.*

For Paul, this deliverance “into the glorious liberty of the children of God” was nothing less than a New Exodus. The original Exodus had set Israel free from Pharaoh’s oppressive rule. But even more importantly, it had given Israel a brand new *identity* as God’s Son – children of the Creator God.

In writing to the Galatians, Paul is making the same point. The New Exodus has begun, and with it, a *new identity* for human beings.

The New People of God:

Your identity is what makes you able to make your mark on your world. The Declaration of Independence pointed the way for a brand new country to confer upon its people a brand new identity with a brand new set of freedoms so that they could do just that – make their mark on the world.

In the past 239 years we have made great strides in fulfilling that vision. But we are also aware that *no human system can ever set us free*. To experience the “glorious liberty” that Paul describes, we need to join him in the New Exodus journey. And as we shall see, it is not a journey for the faint of heart!

Tale of Two Cities

Identity and Tribal Markers:

Of course, The Declaration of Independence did not appear out of nowhere. It was part of a long-running story of tension and struggle between England and her colonies in America. And the signing of The Declaration of Independence initiated an even greater event: The Revolutionary War. Like I said, exodus journeys are not for the faint of heart.

The same was true for Paul and churches in Galatians to which he wrote his letter. Paul had proclaimed a Good News which welcomed both Jews and Gentiles into God's Family. To become God's child required but one thing: faith in what Jesus had done on their behalf.

It is almost impossible for us to grasp just how radical this idea was in Paul's time and in the culture from which Paul came. The original Exodus people, the Jews, had been commanded by God to be a unique ethnic group, distinguished by such things as observing the Sabbath, eating only certain foods, and circumcising their male infants. In fact, if a man wished to convert to Judaism, the first thing he had to do was submit to circumcision.

Inevitably, the question of this *identity* was bound to come up as Christians spread the Good News across the Mediterranean world. In the words of N.T. Wright:

A good deal of Galatians hinges on the fact that circumcision was the key issue, almost to the point of obsession, in the churches where Gentiles had become members, including of course the churches founded by Paul himself.

It was all a question of identity, of knowing not only who you were yourself but who else belonged in your group, your tribe, your ethnic family.

(N.T. Wright, *Paul For Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*, p. 14)

Should Gentiles be required to adopt Jewish identity in order to join the New Exodus? Or was this Exodus so radically *new* that the old markers were no longer necessary?

Jerusalem:

The fight for freedom began in Jerusalem. Paul had been working among Gentiles, bringing them to faith in Jesus, and *not* requiring them to join the "Jewish tribe" as a prerequisite by being circumcised. This was a *New Exodus*, not a retake of the old one. His approach was not without its critics. As a result, Paul traveled down to Jerusalem to meet with the "Big Guns" and sort the matter out.

Galatians 2:1-2 NIV

Then after fourteen years, I went up again to Jerusalem, this time with Barnabas. I took Titus along also. I went in response to a revelation and, meeting privately with those esteemed as leaders, I presented to them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles. I wanted to be sure I was not running and had not been running my race in vain.

He explains that he brought along Titus as a kind of test case. Titus was not circumcised, but was accepted as a brother in Christ:

Galatians 2:3 NIV

Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek.

Why did Paul go to such trouble? He gives us a glimpse at the back story when he writes:

Galatians 2:4-5 NIV

This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

The Jewish Christian leaders in Jerusalem formalized their support for Paul by designating him as "apostle to the Gentiles," while affirming Peter as "apostle to the circumcised." The freedom of the Good News had been preserved and affirmed.

Antioch:

Affirming freedom is one thing; living it out is something else. It was one thing for our Founding Fathers to write The Declaration of Independence and affirm that "all men are created equal." It was something else for a growing nation to put that equality into practice.

Four score and seven years after the signing of The Declaration of Independence, President Abraham Lincoln came to the battlefield of Gettysburg where 50,000 soldiers had died in a battle over just what it meant for "all men to be created equal." Lincoln concluded his brief address with these words:

—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.”

Sometimes you have to fight for freedom. Or, as they say, “freedom isn’t free.”

This was certainly Paul’s experience as he and Gentile Christians attempted to live out their new freedom in Christ.

The church in the city of Antioch was the first place where Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus worshiped and fellowshiped together in a systematic and intentional way. It was here that they *together* were given the name “Christians” by their Greek neighbors. When Peter came to visit, he entered into their New Exodus lifestyle. But things changed when Jewish Christians from Jerusalem showed up:

Galatians 2:11-13 NIV

When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

The freedom that Paul had fought so hard to preserve – which guaranteed that the only “tribal marker” of Christians would be their faith in Jesus – was at risk of going down the drain. Paul would have none of it. He called Peter out publically:

Galatians 2:14 NIV

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

Peter was trying to walk two walks and travel two different journeys. But freedom doesn’t work like that. As Jesus said, “You cannot serve two masters.” Peter had no doubt wished not to offend the sensibilities of his

more conservative Jewish friends. Peter couldn't have it both ways. By being a hypocrite, Peter's "mark on his world" became a confusing blur that could be used to enslave people God had set free.

Freedom

One Tribe:

No doubt the hardest thing for the Jewish Christians of Paul's day to grasp was that God had re-created what it meant to be His Family. From now on there would be only *One Tribe*. That was the enormous "truth of the gospel."

This tribe would not be designated by things like race or culture. No longer would you wear on your body or demonstrate by your diet that you were God's child. There would be only one *tribal marker*: Faith in Jesus, the Faithful One.

It is just as tempting for us in our day to divide people into tribes and groupings as it was in Paul's day. We innately sort people according to their appearance, their beliefs and their actions. Our national and political culture tends to sort us into Red and Blue. Even if you define yourself as Independent, you still end up voting in a two party system. Pick your tribe. No matter how hard we try, our world will always be that way.

But not in God's New Creation! Paul's battle to protect our freedom reminds us that in Jesus the Creator began to repair of His Creation. In Jesus He conquered Death and forgave Sin. In Jesus He introduced to a sorry and divided human race a New Adam for a New Creation. The cemetery became the Garden of Eden. The Cross became the Tree of Life. The Exile that began when Adam and Eve were chased from the Garden became our New Exodus into God's new world.

It's important that we keep this in mind as we negotiate a fractured and partisan world. In its quest for fulfilling the promises of The Declaration of Independence our Supreme Court has recently extended the right to marry to same sex couples. How tempting to once again sort ourselves according to the latest social battleground.

But God has called us to a different journey. We are called to walk away from the world's old identities, both those we have chosen and those that have been foisted upon us. Only He can give us the courage to hold to His

definition of what it means to be truly and fully human. And only He can give us the grace to show His love to everyone, regardless of their tribe.

The New Exodus Journey is there for anyone who dares to take it. It is a journey that takes every one of us *away from our present self*. It is a journey in which we – day by day – discover our new and true identity. And we travel as members of the One Tribe that bears but one marker: Faith in Jesus our King.