

Unmistaken Identity

Chris Currie

Galatians 3:23-29

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What color is your parachute? What is your enneagram number? What is your Myers-Briggs type? If we were going to play that game with the books of the Bible or more specifically Paul's letters, what congregation would we be? Would we be the Philippians who were you might say we were teacher's pet Christian communities as far as the first century goes? Would we be the Corinthians, living a kind of fast and loose and anything goes life? Would we be like the Galatians, happy to hear the news of our liberation in Christ, but not quite ready or willing to relinquish the requirements of the law and the legalist traditions of our ancestors? If I had to assign a spirit animal to Presbyterians, it would probably be the Galatians. For starters, the Galatians most likely shared our DNA. They were a region of people who had settled in Asia Minor from the British Isles and were most likely Celtic in origin or at the very least Gallic speakers, thus Galatians. Paul had lived among them and converted these communities to the radical implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that in Christ's life, death, and crucifixion, they had been set free from bondage to sin and set free from bondage to the ritualist observance of legal requirements in regards to their faith. In other words, their only 'law' was the gospel of Jesus Christ, not dietary, ritualistic, or other traditions handed down to them. In Christ, Paul taught them, the old age of trying to make ourselves right before God was obsolete and done away with and they were new creations in Christ, set free to love their neighbor, even their difficult ones, not because it gets them credit with God or fulfills their end of the law, but because such a way of life and engaging in such relationships is what true freedom looks like and feels like and is what their true identity already is in Christ. As our passage ends: '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.' You can live as if the world still has a pecking order and divisions between Jew and Greek or subordination with regard to race or subjugation of women, but that is no longer reality Paul proclaims. Christ has given us a new identity, an identity that sets us free from a life of have-to's, a life of self-justification, a life of trying to prove ourselves, a life of trying to fulfill the requirements of religion. Christ, Paul tells the Galatians, has already given us an identity that is whole and beloved before God, an identity that transcends our self-imposed divisions, an identity, where there is no one cultural norm, no one elevated gender, no one exalted class or caste or race, no Paul tells us and the Galatians, all are one in Christ Jesus. Paul believes that is true reality. Even when we fall short and even in a world that often does not reflect the beauty, the transcendence, and the bonds of that reality.

It's a lot easier to play the ends against the middle and settle into our corner of division isn't it? To pretend that is reality and to leave everyone else to figure it out or fend for themselves...In his book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing us*

Apart, author Bill Bishop quotes the historian Lizabeth Cohen who wrote that at one time in history, 'politicians tried to 'convince voters of some common good, as Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower all struggled to do.' But a new political strategy that applied techniques of market segmentation to politics led the nation away from [common] ideals requiring candidates to 'at best construct a composite vision out of the specialized interests of their distinct constituencies, and at worst avoid discussing any common good of all.' Bishop then declares that when politics began applying 'one-to-one marketing methods to elections, they abandoned the possibility of a common good.' In an interview with marketing executive J. Walker Smith, Smith explained that the art of politics had shifted to see who could best maximize customer loyalty and he remarked about this shift in both parties, by the way, that it's a 'business philosophy applied to politics that I think is really dangerous, because it's not about trying to form consensus or work for the common good...it's a business philosophy applied to politics that is all about polarization.'¹

When we baptize a child into this Christian community and into the larger church, when any of us were brought to the waters of baptism, indeed when Paul talks to the Galatians here about their baptism, he says, 'as many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. That is not just a pretty statement, that is a political statement. That is not just a platitude, that is a statement about reality, that when we strip all the superficial and the trivial and the nonessential away, at the center of everything is our common life and baptism into Jesus Christ and his community. In terms of our baptism, I truly believe that water is thicker than blood. That who we are and to whom we belong in Jesus Christ trumps all other allegiances, even to family, tribe, nationality, political party, cable channel, college football team, age cohort, race, sexual orientation, and skin pigmentation.

But we also have to acknowledge that we live in a world that prospers on divide and conquer and that believes living our lives as if water is thicker than bloods is weak, ineffectual, naïve, and what losers do. If money can be made off polarization and division, why refrain from that kind of prosperity? If we can win by applying a business philosophy to politics that is all about polarization, why pursue something different? Wouldn't it be easier of all the Fox News people went to the same church and the MSNBC viewers went to a different church; wouldn't life be less complicated if those who support a social justice agenda were their own self-segregated community and those who prefer a more evangelical agenda found their own community and pretty soon we would all find our comfortable place in our tiny 'Christian' rivulet of Netflix or Cable or Apple TV or the Sports Package or whatever like-minded identity reinforces us and keeps us completely comfortable. Aware or unaware, such Balkanization of our Christian witness and our social cohesion is leading to a fragmented society that has no interest in the common good as far as it extends beyond our

¹ Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort*, 194-195.

own noses and our own interests, not to mention the fact that such a witness seems a far cry from the Christian community Paul is telling the Galatians that we already are, where there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, but one community tethered together in the name of and by the grace of Jesus Christ. Everything else is just settling for less. Everything else is choosing to settle for something less than the boundary-breaking, culture dissolving, identity transforming community, that helps us to become more than a collection of our dislikes and polarities, a community that cares about the common good and people that may not move the needle on any scale of social importance, but with whom Jesus Christ does not choose us without.

Author Marilynne Robinson, in one of her insightful nonfiction essays writes that ‘in the last few decades a profound, if relative, change has taken place in American society. No doubt as a consequence of a recent vogue for feeling culturally embattled, the word ‘Christian,’ she observes, ‘now is seen less as an identifying ethic (way of life), and more as an identifying demographic.... Christianity as an ethic goes steadfastly against the grain of what we consider human nature. The first will be last; to him who asks, give; turn the other cheek; judge not. Identity, on the other hand, appeals to a constellation of our worst human impulses. It is worse than ordinary tribalism because it assumes a more than virtuous us on the one side, and on the other a them who are very doubtful indeed, who are, in fact, a threat to all we hold dear.’² In other words, if life is just about finding comfort in our like-minded group or living within the boundaries of our tribe, then I wonder if wasting our time with the community Paul proclaims to the Galatians makes much sense. What could we possibly learn from the people of a different generation who share our pew? Why does it matter that there might be someone in our midst who has come to this place feeling like a stranger, perhaps looking for belonging, and is offered an act of hospitality and warmth? Why waste our time with such awkwardness? Why struggle to love someone who sees the world so differently than we do when there is absolutely nothing keeping us from writing them off, except this antiquated statement about reality by Paul that there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In addition to Father’s Day, today is June 19th or Juneteenth, a day that at least at the moment, is a semi-official holiday. As a child growing up in Texas though, I have very early memories of fellow African-Americans celebrating this holiday in parks and public spaces with cook outs and barbecues and family gatherings. As I understand it, the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863 legally freeing slaves in the Southern states who were in rebellion in the American Civil War, but those African-American slaves in the Southern states, particularly as far away as Texas, were not notified of their freedom until June 19, 1865, until Union Army General Gordon Granger proclaimed it shortly after arriving

² Marilynne Robinson, ‘Awakening.’ In *The Givenness of Things*, 98, 104-105.

in Galveston, Texas. Even though these enslaved people had legally and in reality, been free for two and a half years, they continued to live their lives as slaves and understood themselves to be enslaved even though that reality no longer existed by law or by hard fought military campaign. The Emancipation Proclamation had been signed. The war was over. But it was not until the news of their altered status was communicated to them by General Granger were they able to become the free people they already were by law and by military victory. They had been set free even if had not been fully realized in the context of their own lives. I wonder if that historical example might not help us understand who we are as a Christian community. Fully free and one community in Christ and yet still enslaved by an identities and polarizations in ourselves that have not been done away with and transformed.

There are not many communities in our world right now willing to listen in all directions, to work to live together as a community where everybody is somebody, to embrace a reality and a future that includes us but also those with completely different worldviews, not because one worldview wins and dominates and subjugates the other but because what we share in Christ and who we are in Christ transcends, subverts, and exposes the paucity of all else that we think is important. Whatever else the church is or needs to be, we can never exist as a community completely comfortable in and captive to our host culture, or a community that believes we need any other identity than the one we receive through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. By his grace, Jesus Christ enables us to let go of all our silly Christian prerequisites in order to become his community in his world, even a world that is hell-bent on us settling for a more polarized and customized identity. We can't fix everything; we cant wave our magic wand or bury our heads in the sand, but we can choose, daily, over and over and over again, to live together as a community of mutual forbearance in a world that sees no value in such commitment, a community that welcomes the insider, the outsider, and everyone in between, in a world that prospers on polarization, to live together as a community that seeks the common good of all and is willing to talk about things that no one else want to talk about. By grace, we have been given the opportunity to live as a community that takes our baptism into Jesus Christ seriously, even if it requires that we take everything else a little less so. A community baptized and clothed in Christ, where water is thicker than blood. According to Paul's letter to the Galatians, this is already who we are, this who God has declared us to be (whether or not we can always see it for ourselves). So may we all pursue this reality with joy and confidence, and may our life together always reflect our unmistakable identity in Jesus Christ even when it is hard for us to see. Amen.