

Title: "The Communion of Saints"
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Gal. 3:23-29

Scriptures: Gal. 3:23-29; 5:13-15
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"The Communion of Saints"

In 2009 the Washington Post in 2009 ran an interesting story about a woman name Peggy Bartels. In 2008, Peggy Bartels, drove a 92 Honda, did her own laundry, and was a secretary at the Ghanaian Embassy to the United States. By all accounts she lived an ordinary life. But one morning at 4am, she received a phone call from her home country: The king of Otuam, Ghana, the city in which she grew up, had passed away, and when the elders performed the ritual to choose his successor from among his relatives, her name was chosen.

Peggy was now a King.

Of course, at first Peggy didn't believe it. But the caller insisted. She reminded him that she is a woman, and wouldn't "Queen" be a better position for her. The caller replied "King is the position that is open." As the article says:

In the humdrum of ordinary life, people periodically yearn for something unexpected, some kind of gilded escape, delivered, perhaps, by an unanticipated inheritance or a winning lottery ticket.¹

In Peggy's case it came in that 4am phone call, or at least at the moment she said "yes" after a few days of thinking it over.

She was suddenly the leader of 7,000 people, with the power to appoint elders and adjudicate disputes. She was now the owner of 1000 acres of land, an eight bedroom palace (though it was in disrepair), with a driver and a personal chef. Her royal regalia includes a sword, gold bracelets, and a large, heavy gold crown.

But King Peggy, has not used her new position, influence, or treasure to her own advantage, but has worked to improve Otuam's schools, start a scholarship program through an American church to pay for the education of 30 Ghanaian children all the way through college, she has constructed wells, established a bank that supports local agro-business, and worked to improve the lives of young women especially by creating programs that help reduce teen-pregnancy and provide more educational opportunities.²

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/09/15/AR2009091503393.html>

² <http://mentalfloss.com/article/32035/washington-dc-peggielene-bartels-secretary-ghana-shes-king>

I share that story as we continue our series on the Apostles Creed because Peggy's story pictures on a temporal level the meaning of the next article of faith: "I believe in the communion of saints." As we look at our passages from Galatians, we will find that "the communion of saints" means:

Those who have faith in Christ are a new community that shares in Christ, his inheritance, and gifts, therefore we must use those gifts to love our neighbor.

First, notice in Gal. 3:23-25 Paul emphasizes:

I. We are members of the communion of saints by Faith not by Law.

The issue in the Letter to the Galatians is that someone has come in after Paul and preached that Gentiles (anyone who isn't a Jew) who had believed in Jesus, must be circumcised in order to truly be put in the right before God and to be a part of God's family in Christ. Perhaps to put it in the language that we are using to define the Communion of Saints—Paul's opponents are teaching that a person must be circumcised to be a part of the new community and in order to share in Christ, his treasures, his gifts.

Basically chapter 2-4 are Paul's argument that no one can be right with God by obeying the Law, or by any form of working. Paul has many reasons, I encourage you to spend some time reading Galatians and considering all of them, but right now, quickly, I will point out 3.

A. Law is temporary and is no longer in effect.

Just look at the words that indicate time and the verb tenses in these sentences; they indicate a division between then and now.

²³ **Now before** faith came, we **were** held captive under the law, imprisoned **until** the coming faith **would be revealed**. ²⁴ So then, the law **was** our guardian **until** Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But **now** that faith **has come**, we are **no longer** under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.

In other words, "Now"—the time during and after Christ's life, death, and resurrection—is the time of faith, "then" was the time of Law. He is not saying that faith never existed before (after all Abraham was justified by faith 430 years before the Law, 3:6), or even that people were saved under the Old Covenant by self-powered obedience to the Law. He is saying that the age of Law—"then" is over, and the age of faith "now" has come. The people of God are not constituted or defined by Law obedience, because that time has passed. Now is not then.

For some reason the image that came to mind for me was Grover from Sesame Street coming close to the camera saying “near” then running some distance away and yelling “far” over and over. NEAR is not FAR, and FAR is not NEAR. And Paul is saying, THEN is not NOW, NOW is not THEN. THEN was the era of Law, NOW is the era of faith.

And this is good news because:

B. Law cannot do what faith can.

The purpose of the Law and the purpose of faith are different. Law was (v. 23) to “hold us captive, imprison and to be our guardian, some scholars translate it “babysitter” (v. 24) until the time of faith. Faith was revealed “in order that we might be justified” (v. 24). Because we are all imperfect sinners, doing the Law, doing any works in order to set yourself right with God doesn’t work—it can’t work, and we’re going to talk more about this in two weeks. But for now, look at Law and Faith they have two different purposes. Trying to be justified by Law is like trying to hammer a nail with a loaf of bread—it just won’t work. The Law cannot do what faith can—namely, receive the grace of God and the declaration “justified!”

And...

C. Law and faith cannot be mixed.

Because the time of Law is over, and because Law cannot do what faith can, if you mix any amount of Law—trying to be right with God through what you do—with faith, it ruins faith. Law mixed into grace is the yeast that leavens the whole lump, the rotten apple that spoils the whole barrel, the red sock that ruins the load of white laundry. To add even a drop of Law to salvation by grace through faith ruins that very faith. This is why Paul opposes the imposition of even the one law of circumcision on the Gentiles—as he says in Gal. 3:10-12, and 5:3 to submit to one law for salvation is to be responsible for the whole law (all 613 commandments). So then, we see that:

I. We are members of the communion of saints by Faith not by Law.

Paul also tells us:

**II. As the Communion of Saints,
we are a new community
that shares in Christ, his inheritance, and gifts.**

This passage is famous for v. 28, but when you actually slow down and consider the whole paragraph it is astounding how densely packed it is with descriptions of the gifts of Christ that come to those who are united to him by faith. By my count there are five gifts listed here, and notice how each is integrally related to being “in Christ.”

A. In Christ, faith came in so we might be “justified” (v. 24) In Gal. 2:17 Paul uses the phrase “justified in Christ” almost synonymously with “justified by faith.” We’ll be talking about this more when we hit “I believe in the forgiveness of sins,” but for now it’s the picture of each of us standing before the judgment seat of God with all of our sins and rebellion and brokenness laid bare before him. And if we trust and believe in Christ, instead of God pronouncing us condemned he declares us forgiven—not only with our sin wiped away but He also counts us as if we have lived a perfect life—because Christ *did* live a perfect life. In Christ through faith we are declared to be just, in the right, upright, forgiven.

B. In Christ, we are free from the captivity of the Law and sin. We are *no longer under a guardian* (v. 25) the guardian under which we were captive and imprisoned (v. 23), imprisoned under sin (v. 22). Instead we are “free” because we are in Christ. This is the language of redemption, of being released from bondage and slavery. The image of God rescuing the Israel from Egypt, or of Jesus casting out demons.

C. It is the case that we are not under the guardian “for (because) *in Christ Jesus* we are **sons** of God, through faith” (v. 26) The retention of the word “sons” here is important. In the ancient world, only sons were heirs, only sons inherited the property and position of their Father. It isn’t a relic of patriarchy, but rather a profound and radical statement. Everyone by faith, regardless of social standing, sex, race, or any other factor—is a son—an heir of God in Christ, and an heir of the promise to Abraham (v. 29) which Paul identifies as the the Holy Spirit (v. 14). In other words, all that belongs to Christ will belong to you at his return, and between now and then the Holy Spirit, including His fruit and gifts, works in us to carry us through to that day.

D. If we “were baptized into Christ Jesus” (v. 27) we “have ‘put on Christ.’” As Paul explains Romans 6 baptism acts out and pictures the death of a believer’s sinful nature, and the new life, indeed new creation, we are in Christ. Elsewhere in Ephesians 4:24 and Col 3:10 Paul explains to “put on the new self” is to be re-created, its becoming a new person. You are “born again.”

E. Finally, in Christ, we are a new community a new people, in which all differences between slaves and free, male and female, Jew and Greek have not been removed but reconciled. You see sin not only puts us under the wrath of God for our rebellion, but it also puts us at enmity with our fellow man. But *in Christ*, this is not so, this enmity is one of the things that will come untrue. There is no longer any condition but faith—all can believe whether slave, free, Jew, Gentile, male, female. And all true believers are necessarily drawn into this new community, Paul assumes there are in fact all of these kinds of people in the church, and they together are *one* in Christ Jesus. In the words

of Peter Leithart: There is no awakening of faith that does not lead into the community, and there is only one kind of holiness, separation to the communion of saints.³

Or John Wesley: *Solitary religion is not to be found there [That is, in the Gospel]. 'Holy solitaries' is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness.*

Or the church Father Cyprian around 250 AD: *He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the church for his mother.*

So then,

II. As the Communion of Saints, we are a new community that shares in Christ, his inheritance, and gifts.

Finally,

III. Because we are the Communion of Saints, we must use Christ's gifts to love our neighbor.

Here we turn over to Galatians 5:13-15. Having defended justification by faith against his opponents in Gal. 1-4, in the final two chapters Paul turns toward the practical implications of justification, freedom, adoption, and the gift of the Spirit with 5:13-15 giving us the central principle that guides our Christian lives.

A. Our Blessings in Christ are for the purpose of doing good.

He says in v. 13, "Do not use your freedom as opportunity for the flesh, but *through love* serve one another." In other words, your freedom is not for you to take advantage of, but should be employed for the good of brothers and sisters in Christ. What Paul says here in Gal. 5:13 of freedom he says elsewhere of salvation in other terms. Ephesians 2:8-10

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, ***created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.***

We were saved by grace, and created in Christ, for good works.

Or Titus 2:14

³ <http://www.leithart.com/archives/000854.php>

[Jesus Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are **zealous for good works**.

Redeemed and purified for good works.

All the blessings of being in Christ, which come to us by faith, are not for our sake only, but are to be used for the good of everyone especially the church (Gal. 6:10).

B. Fulfilling the Law

He backs up this principle, by grounding it—finding the reason for it, in the Law. “For [meaning: because, this is the reason we serve one another] the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

So, the reason we should use our freedom, and all our blessings, to serve one another in love is because it **fulfills** the Law. A first glance that this is confusing if not contradictory—Paul just told us (multiple times and in multiple ways in Galatians) that we are not **under** the Law, the age of the Law has passed, that we are not justified by the Law.

If we look closely though, we see some careful distinctions in how Paul is talking about the Law.

1. First, The Law is fulfilled not kept, done, or obeyed. Paul never says Christians should keep the Law or Laws, do the Law or Laws, or obey the Law or Laws. He says we *fulfill* the Law. Notice he speaks of the “whole Law” (v. 14), not of particular laws—because he is after the essence of the Law. He follows the Lord Jesus in Matthew 22:37-40:

³⁷ And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰ ***On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.***”

In other words, by faith in Christ you are freed from legal demands in such a way that you now actually fulfill the essence, that fundamental moral principle that reflects God’s holiness, the heart of the Law—love your neighbor as yourself.

When we approach the Law and its commands as a ladder to be right with God or change our behavior it always turns out like when I tell my son, “Don’t hit your brother with that stick” and he drops the stick and hits them with his hand—he followed the Letter, but he missed the essence which is “don’t hit your brother” or even deeper

“be kind to your brother.” Christians are called to fulfill the essence of the Law—not in order to be justified, or free, or made new—but because we have been justified, freed, and made new.

2. Second, its the Spirit, not the Law, that gives the power to love our neighbor.

The Law does not contain within it the power to make us obey its demands, but the Spirit works in the lives of believers to empower us to love our neighbor. No surprise then, that the very next thing Paul says to the Galatians is “walk by the Spirit and it will produce love.”

C. Love your neighbor, as yourself.

But what does it mean, in real terms, to use Christ’s gifts to love our neighbor? A few suggestions:

1. Because we are justified by faith we no longer relate to people based on their ability or inability to live up to our expectations of them but live out costly grace.
2. Because we were redeemed and set free at the cost of God’s own Son, we work for the physical and spiritual freedom of people—even if it costs us or causes us pain.
3. Because we are sons of God due to inherit all things in the New Heavens and New Earth, not because we deserved it but because God set his love on us—we let go of our fear of being taken advantage of, and of our condescension toward those who “don’t deserve” our help—and we hold on loosely to money and possessions in this life and live a life marked by radical generosity.
4. Because we have put on Christ and are a New Creation, we take seriously the call to put sin to death and no longer feed the old man’s desires for empty levity, false intimacy, and fleeting leisure.
5. Because we are a part of the New Community that is one in Christ, we love people who are hard to love, we intentionally forge relationships with people who are different from us, and we stop stereotyping and talking about “them” and “those people” and we see all people as real people who like us need Christ and need his gracious gifts.

Love of neighbor requires intentional effort to look to another person’s best interests instead of our own. It will by its very nature cost us something, but it can never cost us more than we have been given in Christ.

III. Because we are the Communion of Saints, we must use Christ’s gifts to love our neighbor.

Each of us who believe has received an unexpected call, whether in the middle of the night in our bedroom or on a Sunday morning—Lord willing maybe right now—in this room—, to something that—if we had set out to earn it or to become it—we never would have received it. It is a gift of God’s grace, and offer of a new life with new blessings.

We likewise have received, and if you aren’t a believer you can receive, a new title “sons of God,” a new legal standing “forgiven and in the right,” a new power and authority—the Holy Spirit, a new people made up of every tribe and tongue, and because these things are true also a new duty: “love your neighbor as yourself.”

On King Peggy’s website she writes this:

If you are born to some prosperity, you are fortunate for two reasons: you have many physical comforts, and you are in a position to help others who do not.

How much more for the Communion of Saints who

by faith in Christ are a new community that shares in [the ETERNAL comforts of] Christ, his inheritance, and gifts and are called to love our neighbor.