

"No Longer"

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²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.

²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There 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. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

(Galatians 3:23-29)

An image popped up in my Facebook feed this week from a place called Papa Christo's Greek Grill. It was a photo of a sign they had just hung up in the window of their restaurant, which read "We no longer have our Sunday All-You-Can-Eat BBQ's. Thanks to everyone who attended! We had a lot of fun!"

The cause, I can only surmise, is something that can happen when the words "all you can eat" are publicized: that too many people took those words as a challenge, or even a dare. The Sunday buffet probably started off great, but there came a point when the benefit began to decrease, and the cost began to rise, and the tradition became counterproductive for Papa Christo. The sign marks the tipping point. What once had been is no longer. It just wasn't working out anymore.

These words from Paul to the Galatians describe a similar tipping point. In the church of Galatia, there was a before, and there was an after. And the tipping point, the pivot point of change, was faith in Jesus Christ. "Before faith came," Paul wrote, we were "imprisoned," we were "guarded," we were burdened with so many rules under the law. The law was our police officer. The law was our prison guard. The law was our disciplinarian. And the law is what "justified" us in God's eyes.

But then Christ came. And when Christ came, an old kind of life died and a new kind of life began. "Now that faith has come," Paul continues, "we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." When we are in Christ, through faith, we are under a new set of rules. The old way has gone; it **no longer** exists.

And what, in Paul's view, no longer exists? Labels. Words affixed to something or someone for identification... shorthand ways to categorize the nature of something... quick and handy descriptors of a person, place, or thing.

To be honest, it seems a bit odd that this would be the thing that absolutely must change, given that labels help us every day. If I am shopping for a new shirt, it is helpful for me to be able to read a label and know whether it is meant for a small, medium, or large person. If I am looking at products on store shelves, labels tell me very efficiently whether the dark liquid in the jar is molasses or motor oil. Labels can even be important to our health. Just last year, right up the road, a 25-year-old professional dancer named Órla Baxendale died from an allergic reaction to a cookie she purchased at a grocery store in Connecticut. The cookie was found to contain peanuts, a fact that was not properly listed on the label.¹ Labels help us know the nature of things.

¹ <https://abc7ny.com/orla-baxendale-stew-leonards-peanut-allergy-vanilla-florentine-cookies/14360363/>



But when it comes to people, labels can be misleading and counterproductive. A label fails to honor a person's full identity, limits their God-given uniqueness and complexity, and often reduces them to a crude caricature of who they really are. Labels put people in little boxes, prisons of other people's making. This, unfortunately, does not stop us from labeling people.

In fact, we do it so often that we sometimes fail to see how we are labeling people. Peggy Campolo, the wife of the preacher and author Tony Campolo, was often very uncomfortable when she accompanied her husband on his preaching trips or book tours. Because of his popularity, they often rubbed shoulders with well-known and well-heeled people at parties and receptions. Peggy was a proud wife and mother of two, who worked at home handling all kinds of logistics for their busy family. Still, when people would ask her about herself, she always felt self-conscious about the answers she gave. Finally, she and Tony worked out a great way to respond.

So, the next time she was at a party, when a woman asked her in a somewhat condescending tone, "Well, my dear, what do you do?" Peggy was prepared. "Well," she said, "currently I am nurturing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition, in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order that God has envisioned from the beginning of time."

"Oh my," the clearly impressed other woman said. "I'm just a lawyer."²

Whether we realize it or not, we label people all the time. We get one piece of information about a person, and we immediately begin to assume all kinds of things about them. In our mind, we file them away into a little box, lock them into a little prison of our own making. And the moment we do that, we blind ourselves to the fullness, complexity, and natural beauty of that other person. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard is credited with saying, *"If you name me, you negate me. By giving me a name, a label, you negate all the other things I could possibly be."*

Peggy Campolo felt imprisoned by the labels others would impose upon her because they ignored and negated so much of what she did and who she was. And that unfair negation was exactly what Paul had in mind when he described what faith in Christ does to us and for us. *"In Christ,"* scripture says, *"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."*

For Paul, the labels of "Jew" or "Greek" spoke to nationality, ethnicity, and religious identity. What would be some corollary labels that we might use today? Israeli or Palestinian... Russian or Ukrainian... Evangelical or Presbyterian... white... black... Latino?

"Slave" or "free" were labels that related to economic status, class, and social location. Modern equivalent labels might include billionaire or working poor... entrepreneur or day laborer... migrant or native... legal or illegal... Democrat or Republican.

And the reference to "male or female" obviously relates today, as it did in Paul's day, to labels of gender identity and sexual orientation.

All of these labels are exactly the kinds that this passage in Galatians has in mind, the kinds of labels that, in Christ, are "no longer." By that, I do not mean to suggest that these terms do not describe real differences or that they do not hold meaning. They do. What I think scripture is saying is that these terms should not and cannot serve as the basis by which we judge one another, or categorize one another. These cannot be labels that we use to dismiss people who are different than we are. Because all people are created in God's image, all people are worthy of love, all people deserve respect as human beings with hearts, minds, and spirits.

And yet, we persist in doing the same kinds of things that were causing problems in Paul's day. People then, people now, we as a people have always slapped these overly-simplified labels on one

² "The Most Important Job," <https://www.316now.org/blog/2018/5/9/devotionthe-most-important-job#:~:text=Peggy%20told%20her%2C%20%E2%80%9C%20am,m%20just%20a%20lawyer.%22>

another... labels that rest on lazy, broken, polluted assumptions... labels that we create out of fear, jealousy, pride, or self-interest. And we have always used these labels to lock people up in little boxes, prisons of our own making, telling ourselves that what we've done is a good thing, because those people are somehow less worthy of respect. And that is exactly the kind of mess that Christ came to abolish. He has always wanted it to cease. He has always wanted it to exist no longer. The world is devoted to that old thing, but it just doesn't work out. In Christ, we are called to a different way.

But right now, it seems, we are moving in the opposite direction. Cheered on by people who claim to speak for Christ, the old labels are being picked up, dusted off, and repackaged as virtue. The old broken dichotomies are not only coming back, they are being defended, promoted, and celebrated. Labels are being handed out left and right, and the message is clear that one side is right and the other side is wrong.

So, if there was ever a time for people of faith to rise up and proclaim what this passage from Galatians really means it is right now, because people who are being slapped with certain labels are afraid right now. Black people are afraid. Gay, non-binary, transgendered people are afraid. Jewish people and Palestinian people alike are afraid. Afraid because they are being put into boxes that deny their full humanity. Afraid because the label-makers are dismissing the complex human stories behind these labels, and in some cases are trying to prevent those stories from being told.

As people of faith, we need to recognize that this is wrong. It is wrong to deny the humanity in another person's story. It is wrong to dismiss, ignore, or try to erase another person's story. The Bible is clear that the global diversity of human identity and experience is something that God not only created but intended. Because every human is made in God's image, every person's story is in a way God's story. And, in Christ, God's vision for humanity is made clear. Christ himself prayed for this vision with the disciples at the Last Supper. The vision is that we would overcome these differences and become one. Not that the differences would be erased or denied and everyone would be the same, but that we would find a way to honor all people for who God created them to be, and in that way, all be one in Christ Jesus.

In that spirit, some scholars believe that, in this part of his letter, Paul was referring to an early Christian baptismal liturgy... that this was a reminder to the Galatians to remember the words that were spoken when they were baptized into the faith.³ That would mean that, as the water was poured over their heads, they would have heard the actual words *"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."* The liturgy of their baptisms would have proclaimed, enacted, and embodied the revolutionary claim that the old labels of the world no longer apply... that in baptism they were being claimed by God to live a new way... that a new life began in that moment, and the old ways were no longer.

As people who follow Christ, this is our calling. In baptism, we are claimed by God to see differently, to act differently, to love and respect one another differently. And there is no part of us that didn't get wet with that water, no part of us that was not claimed by God for the purposes of God.

So, when we see the world labeling another person whose story is different than our own with a label that is meant to shame them, demonize them, or stow them away in some kind of box, we must stand up and say "no longer."

When stories of service and courage are erased, we must say "no longer."

³ <https://www.onemansweb.org/the-end-of-the-cosmos-galatians-3-23-29.html>

When people are reviled or rejected because of who God created them to be, we must say “no longer.”

Because, like the church of Galatia, we have been baptized into a new Way of being that sees the image of God in all people, and leads with love for all people. To any other Way, we must say “no longer.” ***Amen.***