

The Difference Jesus Makes: Liberty and Justice for All

There's an amazing verse in Galatians 3 that has changed the course of world history. It has changed it for the poor person who was born outside the boundaries of privilege and power. It has changed it for the slave who had no status in society, no role to play except what one man told him to do each day. It has changed it for women who had no legal status and who were treated as man's property. It has changed it for everyone who was on the outside looking in at God's chosen people, the Hebrew people through whom He revealed Himself. Maybe not all by itself, but the truth that this verse describes has revolutionized the history of the human race. Let me read Gal. 3:26-28 with the focus being on verse 28:

So you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have been made like Him. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. For you are all Christians -- you are one in Christ Jesus.

The world was divided into classes. The Roman world had "senators", the political elite, at the top and "equestrians", the wealthy business people a level lower. At the bottom were slaves and just above them were "freedpeople", those who had been released from slavery or who had bought their freedom. There were rules governing how these groups related to each other. For example, someone from the group called "senators" could not marry someone from the "freedpeople", by decree of Caesar Augustus. Seems he was always making decrees -- remember one of them brought Mary and Joseph to a town called Bethlehem.

In India there was, and still is, a caste system. At the top are the Brahmins, the priests of Hinduism, followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors), then Vaisyas (herders, farmers, merchants, craftspeople), then the sudras (farm workers, servants, labourers). Below all these are the Dalit, also known as the "untouchables" or the "Pariah".

In China, there are four classes to which people belong. Even in their ancient history, the peasant had a higher class than the merchant, which is different from what we see in Rome or in India, but there are social barriers in this system, just like in the others.

And that's been true around the world. The strong, the warrior prince, sits at or near the top, while the weak, the slave or servant or labourer, sits near the bottom. In every culture, there have been divisions between male and female, slave and free, and between the various classes that make up the social order. But not in the family of God united in Jesus Christ.

Even Jesus, though He was God come to earth, referred to His disciples as you would a member of your family. After He had risen from the dead and the women had been to the tomb and were rushing off to tell the disciples the good news of His resurrection, Jesus met them on the way and said,

Don't be afraid! Go tell My brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see Me

there.

John's gospel also describes Jesus telling Mary Magdalene to tell the great news of His resurrection to "His brothers".

A few days earlier Jesus had taught His disciples about the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and teachers of the law and said to them, by way of contrast:

Don't ever let anyone call you "Rabbi", for you have only one Teacher, and all of you are on the same level as brothers and sisters.

He paved the way for the great egalitarian church, the family of God which has only one Father, where everyone who believes is a brother or sister of Jesus Himself, and where there are no divisions, no class structures to separate one person from another.

This is the principle that Paul grasped and expressed so clearly in Galatians 3:28; that in the Christian church there should no longer be division between Jew and Gentile, between a slave and a freeman, between men and women.

Has the church grasped this principle? At first glance, one would have to say that our history shows a series of miserable failures on this issue, that we have had popes and cardinals and priests and ministers and bishops and archimandrites and archbishops that have not acted as if they were equal to the rest of the church, but as if they were above. We have had our privileged classes in the church, right from the very beginning.

The second chapter of James' letter to Jewish Christians scattered abroad starts like this:

My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favour some people more than others?

And he goes on from there to describe how some have offered preferential treatment to the rich among them, at the same time treating the poor as if they were in a lower class.

But if you pay special attention to the rich, you are committing a sin, for you are guilty of breaking that law (the law which says 'love your neighbour as yourself').

So, the church has had its struggles with this, with letting Jesus be the head, the one teacher, the Lord of all. We have our pride issues and we have been guilty through time of taking some of Jesus' authority for ourselves. But, there is a good side to this story as well, and today we will look at some of the people who have been champions of freedom and equality for all.

In ancient Rome the emperor was the law. He could do whatever he wanted and not even the senate could stand in his way. He could steal, abuse and kill people without fear. No one would call him to account, no one would tell him he couldn't do what he wanted. Until the empire became Christian and the bishop had a say.

In 390 AD some people in Thessalonika rioted, which made the emperor of the day, Theodosius the Great, very angry. He overreacted to the rioting and some 7000 people were killed, most of whom were innocent. The bishop of his city, Milan, was Ambrose, who asked the emperor to repent of this massacre. The emperor refused and the bishop kicked him out of the church. It took about a month for Theodosius to humble himself but then he prostrated himself in the cathedral in Milan and repented of his violent acts.

In his letter to Theodosius, Bishop Ambrose makes it very clear that he is concerned for the emperor's spiritual welfare, for he has placed himself above God's law by killing people without cause. Today we like to say that no one is above the law -- even if it's not true -- but that tradition applied in history dates back over 1600 years to the courage of Bishop Ambrose of Milan.

800 years later, a group of barons forced King John to sign the Magna Carta, a document that declared that the will of the King was not arbitrary and above the law, that no freemen could be punished except by the law of the land. Other provisions included no taxation without representation, no prison time without a trial, no seizure of property without just compensation.

In the preamble to the Great Charter, John acknowledges that he is king of England by God's grace and then states that the terms of the charter are written "having regard to God and for the salvation of our soul ... and unto the honor of God and the advancement of His holy Church." The first item, and the last, declare freedom for the Church. The main author was the Archbishop of Canterbury and the main effect was individual rights and freedoms which were now to be protected by the monarch, as well as the barons.

Personally, I think the Archbishop told King John to sign the Magna Carta if he wanted to be saved and that's why the King's preamble states that he is agreeing to this "having regard to God and for the salvation of our soul."

The great movement in the Western world away from the absolute rights of monarchs and dictators and towards the freedom of every individual began in the late seventeenth century, particularly through the writings of John Locke who was both a physician and a political philosopher. Locke is often described as a deist, but he considered himself a Christian and wrote The Reasonableness of Christianity in 1695. He often quoted Scripture in support of his argument which was, in short, that people have rights that are not given to them by kings or governments, but they are natural rights that belong to all persons. This concept of "natural law" became the starting point for the ideas that ended up in the American 'Declaration of Independence'.

Thomas Jefferson, who authored the Declaration, used phrases right out of Locke's writings, including, "but when a long train of abuses" and "consent of the governed". It also says that a government should be deposed when it violates the peoples'

“inalienable rights”, a concept that was part and parcel of the medieval church. You’ll be familiar with the phrase, “We hold these truths to be self-evident” and this, too, is a concept known to people in medieval times. Self-evident knowledge meant truth that is known intuitively, as direct revelation from God, without the need for proofs. This kind of knowledge is what Paul was talking about in Romans 1:20 where he wrote that people from creation on have been able to know God -- His eternal power and divine knowledge -- through what He has made. Self-evident, revealed by God.

The final paragraph of the Declaration appeals to the Supreme Judge of the world, another phrase taken from John Locke’s writings and linking the Declaration of Independence to Judges 11:27 where Jephthah describes God as ‘The Judge’.

Historians say that the ideas of the U.S. Declaration of Independence grew in the public mind through the Great Awakening of the 1730’s, a Christian revival that stirred the New England states in powerful ways.

The U.S. Constitution also shows a remarkable influence of Christian ideas. John Adams, who was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and became the second president of the United States said that the American government was “grounded on reason, morality and the Christian religion.” And this government intended to show the world how a nation could thrive with individual rights and freedoms protected and encouraged.

Where does the view that the rights of the individual are important come from? Malcolm Muggeridge once put it in these words:

We must not forget that our human rights are derived from the Christian faith. In Christian terms every single human being, whoever he or she may be, sick or well, clever or foolish, beautiful or ugly, every human being is loved by his Creator, who, as the gospels tell us, counted the hairs of his head.

Among the freedoms that have been won by Christians on behalf of all their fellow citizens are:

- freedom of religion, to worship as you feel convicted and compelled in your own conscience
- equality of persons -- no aristocracy, no special privileged class, each person having the same rights before the law
- separation of church and state, which began with Jesus saying, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”, carried on by Christian bishops under the Roman Church and furthered by the framers of the First Amendment in America.

One of the greatest accomplishments of Christianity in regards to the rights and freedoms of the individual is the fight to abolish slavery, a fight which lasted for centuries and which cost many thousands of lives.

In the time of Jesus, slaves made up 75% of the population of Athens and well over half of the Roman population. It was being practiced by first nations peoples long

before Columbus crossed the Atlantic. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher, saw it as natural, expedient and just. All the work of the Roman Empire, the roads, the aqueducts, the sculptures, the wonders of the ancient world -- all were the work of slaves. And slavery continued into the last century as a legal right: in Ethiopia until 1942, Saudi Arabia until 1962, Peru until 1964 and India until 1976. It still exists in Sudan where, in the past couple of decades, more than 3 million Christians and animists, mostly slaves, have been executed. There are also 27 million people in the world today who are illegally held in slavery, especially in the Asian houses of prostitution, but also in rock quarries and brick kilns in India and elsewhere.

In the early centuries of the Christian church thousands upon thousands of slaves were purchased and set free by Christians who had the means to do so, even though the Romans had laws against freeing slaves until the sixth century! Although some early Christians kept slaves and a 16th century pope said it was okay to own other people, the worst offense, in my mind, was the so-called Christian nations embracing slavery again in the seventeenth century - most of them shipped from Africa to the Americas.

It was men of Christian courage and determination who turned the tide against slavery, none more important to the cause than William Wilberforce in England. He was a committed Christian and during his over twenty years in the British Parliament made many speeches appealing to the Christian consciences of Englishmen. You can see his story in the film "Amazing Grace" which I recommend to you. Through his efforts, slavery came to a complete end in all the British Empire's possessions by 1840, making it the first modern nation to outlaw slavery.

Although there were many Christians who supported slavery in the U.S., there were many more who opposed it. Among them were Elijah Lovejoy, who wrote in the newspaper he published, "I shall come out, openly, fear-lessly, and as I hope, in such a manner as becomes a servant of Jesus Christ, when defending His cause." Two years later he was brutally murdered by pro-slavery rioters in his printing office in Illinois.

A later martyr for the cause was a clergyman named Charles T. Torrey, known as the "Father of the Underground Railroad", whose efforts are credited with helping 100,000 fugitive slaves escape to the north, and who died in a Maryland jail while serving time for helping escaped slaves.

In the south, anti-slavery ministers were commonly muzzled, many were fired, some even imprisoned for speaking out for the freedom of slaves. And there were many others, clergy and laypeople, who made immense contributions to the cause and who ultimately succeeded in ending slavery in the U.S. For the slaves themselves, it was their Christian faith that gave them hope and allowed them to survive the dehumanizing circumstances which they were forced to endure. And black churches in the north supplied former slaves with hope and help in many ways.

When you look around at the world today, at which nations have enshrined individual

rights and freedoms into their laws, at which nations have been on the front lines in the fight against slavery, at which nations have worked hard to remove class distinctions, it is always where Christianity has been most influential. There's a reason for this and you can read it from the lips of Jesus, from the pen of Paul, from the life of the early church and throughout its history.

Yes, there have been terrible failures along the way, but not because people were being careful to observe the teaching of the Bible, but because they were finding ways to skirt around the truth in its pages.

How should we respond to these lessons from the history of the church applying to itself and its culture the truths of God's word?

1. As the opportunity arises, tell people their history. Some aren't interested, some have heard all kinds of distortions but everyone should have the chance to know the truth.
2. Notice that this area of giving freedom and rights to other people has been a challenge for the church. There was a great beginning and then some fall back. Slavery was outlawed and then brought back again. There's a warning there for us to heed; when something looks like it's great for us, but maybe not so great for others, take a close look to make sure we're not reducing their freedom or treating them as less important than ourselves.
3. Think about what allows for freedom among people and I think you have to include trust in that equation. If you don't trust the population you govern, you don't give them room to make a mess. That's why there are multiple more government regulations every year -- people from federal, provincial, regional and municipal governments think they need to control people. That was true to an extreme under Stalin, too. Christianity builds trust and out of trust comes the freedom that makes life so enjoyable. We need to be very grateful for whatever freedoms we have.