

# We Are Heirs

sermon digest

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Galatians 3:27-4:7

larry dipboye

Baptism has become one of the most divisive practices in the Christian faith. Churches have separated over the quantity and the quality of the water, the age of the candidate, immersion or sprinkling or the number of immersions, the qualification of the minister, the words of liturgy, and the basic theology. For Paul, baptism is a boundary line, a mark of identity with Christ that distinguishes the children of God from all others. The baptized should stand apart by their behavior. Repeatedly Paul insists that baptized people live up to the standard exemplified in Christ. We are buried with Christ by baptism into death and raised to walk in newness of life (Romans 6:4).

However, in the defense of Gentile acceptance in his Galatian letter, Paul takes a unique turn. He moves beyond the baptismal line of distinction to a door of acceptance and inclusion. For the baptized, the dividing lines between people breaks down: "all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

A few years ago, I stopped at an intersection behind a rather impressive motor home. Because of my personal interest in RV's, I was admiring the monster when my eye fell on the bumper sticker: "We are spending our children's inheritance." My first thought was, "Good for you; go ahead and enjoy the luxuries in life you have earned." My thinking disclosed my age. There was a time when I would have immediately taken the side of the children and decried the attitude of these self-indulged elders. Within weeks I was in a stewardship committee discussion of the need to raise giving and encountered the other side of that bumper sticker. A fiftyish member commented that the Social Security crowd has "more disposable income" than anyone else in the congregation; let the seniors cover the giving gap.

***Inheritance has long been a divisive religious and cultural issue.*** In addition to the social struggle over race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, this is the age of generation wars. Aging parents sit around clicking their tongues about the absence of delayed gratification, the big houses and new cars of their irresponsible children and grandchildren. Young adults complain about the deductions for Social Security and Medicare from their pay checks.

Lest we think that generation wars belong only to our era, take another look at the Bible. The laws of inheritance favored the oldest son and excluded daughters. Brothers came to Jesus to judge the family feud over Dad's estate; he refused to get involved. The parable of the two sons and the loving father, sometimes called "the prodigal son," is a story reflecting a family struggle over inheritance reflecting the rift between Jews and Gentiles in the church.

The generation wars seemed to have begun with the Abrahamic Covenant—the Jewish claim that God promised the Land of Canaan to the family of Abraham. Heirs became quite possessive. During the time of Jesus, Jews strongly resented the Roman encroachment on their inheritance; the resentment remained. Tensions in the Mideast today are based on Israel's claim of divine right to the Land of Promise. This time a three-way dispute also involves Muslim and Christian claims on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

The ancient Jewish struggle spilled over into the church. Jewish Christians resented the encroachment of Gentiles on their sacred inheritance, and Paul took them on in his correspondence to the Galatians.

Yale Divinity School professor David Bartlett recalls the era when world-class theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr both taught at Union Theological Seminary. Both were given to writing angry letters to their critics, and both practiced laying aside the letter overnight before deciding to release their venom to the mailbox. Tillich tended to deposit his letters in the wastebasket, while Niebuhr usually proceeded to mail his anger, often with later regret. Bartlett comments that perhaps Paul should have been more like Tillich and less like Niebuhr over releasing the Galatian letter.

(*Interpretation*, Vol 54, No. 3, July 2000, p.280) Paul vents a lot of anger, especially on the Apostle Peter.

Galatians is sometimes mistakenly characterized as anti-Jewish. On the contrary, Paul takes the high road of arguing for an inclusive Judaism, big enough to extend the open arms of divine grace to Gentile Christians, but Paul does manage to get into the inheritance wars. In an intense moment, he soars with an unprecedented statement of inclusion: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ

have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.” Evidently this is the same Paul who later instructed Corinthian women to be silent in church and ordered wives in Ephesians to be submissive to their husbands. Did he slip, or was this a high moment of inspiration where Paul transcended his own thinking? I suspect the latter. A side benefit of Paul’s highly emotional speech in Galatians is the leap he takes out of the cultural trap of his age. Paul argues that baptism is the line that takes out all of our divisions—race wars, religion wars, gender wars, generation wars—you name it. Abraham’s children, the children of God, are heirs through baptism even if they are adopted Gentile children.

***We have inherited a debt.*** While the fight over inheritance goes on, let us acknowledge that we come together not as creditors but as debtors. The ledger is out of balance. All of us carry far more liabilities than assets. We are not in any sense of the word, “self-made.” Remembering our forebears is an exercise in responsibility and a worthy ritual of gratitude. We are reminded that the freedom we enjoy was fought and won by others long before we came on the scene. While we contemplate our inheritance, we are reminded that it is not automatic or by virtue of birth. Christianity is always one generation from extinction. Someone has said that God has no grandchildren. Heirs of promise must claim and preserve the promise in every generation.

The Jews stood apart because they had learned to remember. Unlike the gods of their neighbors, Jahweh was known through events in history. Statements of Jewish faith were seldom philosophical. Revelation was anecdotal. The power and love of God were illustrated by the remembered experience of the Jewish family. They told stories about people, heroes and villains; and the patterns of divine purpose which unfolded in the life of the family-nation were vehicles to carry the Word of God. God was evident in the collective experience of Israel. People of God shared a family identity.

*Heritage reaches beyond the boundaries of birth and death.* Like trees, people grow from roots. Not a one of us is here solely by personal effort or initiative. We are the offspring of our biological and spiritual forebears. We could spend hours together sharing stories about the people who have influenced our decision to follow Christ. Like the infants in the nursery, we have been carried into church. Thus, Paul refused to discount the importance of the foundation which was laid by the children of Abraham or to burn the bridge between Christ and the Jews when addressing the late entrance of Gentiles into the inheritance of faith. We are derived from others. A significant part of personal identity is in biological and spiritual ancestors who lived and died long before we were born. I suspect that is why we develop an interest in history and genealogy as we turn toward the senior years of life.

*History is a wonderful servant, but a poor master.* Heirs of God do not prefer remembering to doing. History serves those who are willing to learn from the past before deciding the future. Just as we do not create ourselves from nothing, we do not live out our existence from zero. Every generation is indebted to history and free to follow the calling of God to reach beyond the bounds of memory. The wheel does not have to be reinvented by every generation. The Covenant with Abraham was big enough to bless all of the nations of every generation implied in his name. From the beginning, it was inclusive of all of God’s children.

A few years ago Virginia Baptists retrieved from U.S. history a form of communication called a “memorial.” A memorial was an anchor in time, an appeal to the memory and the value of history. The family name loses meaning for people who have thrown away the substance of their faith. The modern “Memorial” was addressed to Baptists who had forgotten the role their forebears had played in the battle for religious liberty. They were reminded that true children ought to be faithful to their heritage. We have a debt to live up to our name.

We have received more than land, privilege, and freedom from our ancestors. We have inherited a responsibility for the future. We are the ancestors to whom future generations will look for a pathway to promise; thus, we are reminded that every gift carries a responsibility. While we are blessed beyond measure, we are also burdened beyond comprehension. As heirs of promise, we are laying the foundations on which our children will build tomorrow. We owe our children an inheritance which money cannot buy. The issue is not dollars; it is values. With the phenomenal shift of population

toward seniors, we cannot afford to draw an artificial line which says, "I am no longer responsible." The most productive years of our Christian lives can be our retirement years when we are free to invest in our children.

Every time we pray together the Lord's Prayer, or celebrate Communion, or witness the baptism of one of our children I get a sense of the larger family we share both in time and space. We are family with other children of God around the globe, and we join hands with ancestors in every generation deep into Jewish history. We are not alone. We are heirs of the promise of God from all who have gone before us, and we are present in all of the generations who will continue to keep the faith.

On second thought, sitting behind that big motor home, I would suggest a better bumper sticker: "We are sharing an inheritance of faith with all who have gone before us and with all who follow after us."