

Reflections on Saint Paul: The Kingdom vs. The Empire

By Aidan Dewar

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is no male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” - Galatians 3v28

In this short verse, Paul reimagines the concept of religion in the ancient world, enters on a collision course with the Roman Empire and sets in motion what will become universal human rights.

The letter to the Galatian church is primarily a rebuke of Jewish converts [to Christianity] who insisted that gentile¹ converts first adopt Jewish ritual and practice, to demonstrate their faith. In chapter 2 of the letter, Paul pulls no punches when he recounts his scolding of Peter (Cephas), who he accused of encouraging segregation between Jew and gentile converts during meal times. But it's the challenge to the social norms and power structures beyond the church, that the lasting impact of Paul's words can be found.

Unlike our modern interpretation of belief - deeply personal and rooted in the spiritual - Roman religion (*religio*) was more political than divine. Religion acted as the cultural expression of Roman authority and reiterated the legitimacy of its complex hierarchies, through public rituals and feasts to the gods.

As you cannot separate a cake into eggs, flour, butter and sugar once baked, the Romans had no sense of *religio* as separable from the whole. By saying ALL are one in Christ Jesus, Paul suggests religion is not, nor should be, the exclusive tool of a particular world view.

Paul isn't denying the relevance of the characteristics, referenced in the verse, but is saying our relationship with Christ transcends them. To the Galatian church this meant not being restricted by a specific ethnic or cultural tradition. To the wider Roman world it meant Christ was not a political mouthpiece to reaffirm the power of man but something of greater, independent worth.

The emphasis of this verse is that our value in Christ is equal, even if our earthly status says otherwise. To the Romans with their ordained sense of class, this completely undermined the societal structures that determined their power.

As Christianity grew, Paul's message and therefore Paul himself became increasingly problematic to the Romans. What made the Christian message particularly threatening to the empire was the emphasis on love and self-sacrifice. That it was not born from a violent uprising, meant it could not be beaten down by the sword. This was a spiritual revolution with no rival. The persecution of Christians, started by the Emperor Nero (c 64AD), which included the eventual beheading of Paul, shows just how fearful the Romans became of the faith.

When the value of each human, from prince to pauper, is all one in Christ Jesus, the concept of [human] rights is founded in our standing with God, rather than the acquisition and wielding of hard power.

¹ Term used for anyone not Jewish.