

The True Believer's Declaration of Independence

By Tom and Alberta Ecker via Michael Milton

Leviticus 25:10; Galatians 2:15-21

From our Declaration of Independence these famous words are read: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

For the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance upon the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other, our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor."

And the Liberty Bell will be rung. But did you know that on that Bell are the words of Scripture, which planted a divine idea of freedom in the hearts of so many of those who devised those words? Inscribed on the Liberty Bell are the words of **Leviticus 25:10**: *And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan (Leviticus 25:10).*

The year of Jubilee was just one of the many ways God went about telling us that what our hearts intuitively long for is what He has prepared for us: freedom! We should always be vigilant to protect that freedom. And that is what is happening with Paul in Galatians 1. The year of Jubilee is here for Paul. Jubilee and Liberty are Jesus. And nothing should cause us to go back; nothing should shake our resolve to stand up for that freedom. The blood of Jesus Christ won our freedom. And it belongs to everyone who calls on the name of the Lord, regardless of race or past sin.

Galatians 2:15-21

We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified. But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again those things that I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son

of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

Let us ring out the truth about God's grace as we read and consider these words in Galatians, which are "The True Believer's Declaration of Independence."

A Freedom to Die For

Before any battle is won on the field, a battle must be won in the minds and hearts of the people, freedom must first be worth dying for.

On **March 23, 1775** the battle had to be won in the Virginia House of Burgesses in Williamsburg, Virginia. The man who would become known as the Voice of the Revolution, Patrick Henry, called on his own people to see the choice they had before them. We've all read his famous last words, but today we want to give you the last paragraph. Here is the choice Patrick Henry asked his people to consider.

"Gentlemen may cry, 'Peace, Peace' but there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"

The remarkable thrust of that speech was to stir his fellow countrymen to see what was at stake: did they want peace so much that they would become slaves (would they continue to be slaves to the British Empire). Before there could be freedom in America there had to be a willingness to die for freedom in the hearts of Americans. (They needed to see the true state of their lives, they were slaves, held captive by an Empire who was taxing and using them to fill their own bank accounts).

The churches of Galatia were not there yet. They could not see the danger of compromising.

Perhaps the Galatian pastors at that time thought, *"Can't we just live in peace? Let's just go along with what others are saying about converts being forced to keep Jewish law to be saved."* That had been the idea for a long time. But that was not the Gospel and it was not the freedom that God had planned for His people, in this new way of life. It was even a distortion of the Law and a misuse of it. Law was never given without love. But that had been

compromised as well. Sadly, even Peter and Barnabas became apathetic and did not stand up for the freedom of faith in Jesus Christ.

Before the enemy of freedom could be addressed, as it were, the Church had to be corrected. All future disciple making and world missions, all future evangelism, all future understanding of the Christian faith depended on the outcome of this debate.

But one man, a Patrick Henry of his day, stood up. Paul recounts this climactic moment in Church History in Galatians chapter two. It was a struggle for freedom. The Apostle Paul relates how this struggle for freedom in Christ brought him to Jerusalem where he fought for grace. He tells about how this struggle for grace even caused him to have to take on Peter face to face; how even Barnabas, his companion in the ministry, had given in to the demands of the false teachers who demanded religious ritual as a condition for earning God's favor and salvation. Paul withstood false teachers without any wavering in order to establish the Gospel: that a man is justified before God ONLY through faith in Jesus Christ. And this story of how he defended grace builds until at last it becomes very personal and Paul delivered his climactic and divinely inspired oratory:

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose.

This is more compelling than even Patrick Henry facing his fainting friends and proclaiming: "Give me liberty or give me death!" This is more convicting than Winston Churchill challenging the spirit of appeasement lurking in the British nation and announcing: "*I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.*" This is more critical than Ronald Reagan's face-off with an "*Evil Empire*" and a West who said we would have to learn to live with Communism, as he demanded: "*Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!*"

The gripping words in **Galatians 2:20-21** are inspired by the Holy Spirit and spoken through Paul to the Church in all ages. These words must be likened to the words of Joshua:

*Choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD (**Joshua 24:15**).*

These words are like the words of the prophet Elijah, who in **I Kings 18:21** went before the people and said, *How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.* **Galatians 2:20-21** is the song of an unshackled soul. This is the sacred flame of a man on fire for Christ. This is what the great Australian scholar Leon Morris called Paul's "*Charter of Freedom.*" Today we want to call it the true believer's Declaration of Independence.

There are three articles of this Declaration vital to every person. We want to put it in the simplest form possible and then look at each one.

First of all, Paul is declaring in verse 20: *His Death Saves Me.*

I have been crucified with Christ

Before we unpack this passage, we need to think about something. We need to think about the fact that when Paul burst forth in this declaration there were common assumptions in this debate that may be lost today and which need clarification. At that time, both Paul and the false teachers understood that there is a holy God who requires perfection and there is sinful mankind who has rebelled against God, mankind is born in sin and is separated from having a personal relationship with God.

Man needed to be justified before God he needed to somehow be declared holy before God. Now, the false teachers were saying that justification, getting right with God, is accomplished through obedience to the Law. Paul said that it is based on faith in Jesus and obedience to the Gospel only. It is not what we do but what God has done in Christ.

Now the problem is this: modern man, we are told, does not necessarily think in these categories (he doesn't think about God and his need for reconciliation). Robert Bellah in his *Habits of the Human Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, page 76), writes: "In the absence of any objectifiable criteria of right and wrong, good or evil, the self and its feelings become our only moral guide."

In other words, if it feels good, it must be right if it feels bad it must be wrong. You can see how problematic this becomes for thinking in terms of moral absolutes. Every decision a person makes becomes relative. This subjectivism, this moral relativity, this "*every man does what is right in his own eyes*" we are told, is the current situation in the human mind in the postmodern west.

Justification, the **defining doctrine** of Christianity, is lost if there is no right or wrong, if there is no God who is holy and whose holy wrath stands against sin. Without this basic understanding, the question becomes "*what is the use of even dealing with this passage?*" If we have no common understanding of sin and God and the need to be justified before God, then what are we to do? Why have I been crucified with Christ if there is no need for Justification before God?

The Bible is relevant at this point? It is the inerrant and infallible Word of God. It speaks into the very soul of Man and destroys his presuppositions and establishes the truth: man is alienated from God his creator and savior. We don't need more criticism of culture; we need straight preaching from the Bible! We don't need more psychoanalysis of society; we need more study of Scripture.

Christians need to be like Patrick Henry and call on our generation to see their true state of living before God. We need a theology that emphasizes the **plight of man** as well as the **power of God**. And all of that comes from the Bible. We need to know and declare that the *word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Hebrews 4:12, NIV).*

Well, if we admit the power of God's Word over man and assume that men are sinners and need to be put right with God, the question becomes "How can we get right with the one true and holy God?" And that takes us back to the context of this passage.

Paul understood that Christianity was a fulfillment of the ancient promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Christians were now moving out to the entire earth, the question from the false teachers was, "*In the past if a foreigner had to undergo circumcision to be included among the people of God, doesn't this still stand?*" Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews, one schooled in the finest tradition of Judaic law, but one who had been touched by the grace of God in Christ, said, "*No.*" Man was *never justified by the work of the Law*. Now Paul was not throwing away the law and introducing antinomianism, moral anarchy. That is the point of **verse 17**; we know that Christ does not promote sin. Paul is not talking about the role of the moral law, the Ten Commandments in a person's life, he is simply asserting that the Moral Law, the Ceremonial Law or any tradition based on those laws cannot justify a person before God.

What does justify a person before God?

ONLY THE CROSS: Only the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ can atone for sin. And Paul here makes it very personal. "*I have been crucified with Christ.*" Now Paul did not mean, of course, that Paul went to Calvary to die. Paul is saying that at Calvary Christ died to save sinners vicariously. He went for Paul. What happened on the Cross was done for Paul and thus Paul was there.

This is what **Isaiah 53** was talking about when that great chapter of the Bible pictures Jesus on the cross: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him.*

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors

Paul is declaring that on the cross, his sins were put to death in Christ. The great Puritan expositor, John Owen called it "*the death of death in the death of Christ.*" In a book of the same title, John Owen wrote: "*... the death and blood-shedding of Jesus Christ hath wrought, and doth effectually procure... grace here and glory hereafter.*"

But there is more to what Paul is saying. He is getting at what Jesus was telling Nicodemus: *I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again (John 3:3).*

And this new birth begins with death. Thus Bonheoffer was exactly right when he said in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*: "**Jesus bids men to come and die.**"

Saul of Tarsus was crucified in the death of Jesus positionally but he was also born again personally when Christ came to him on the road to Damascus and he accepted the Lord as his savior. This is what is meant when he says, "*I have been crucified with Christ.*" His death saved Paul. Paul understood that he came to be justified, through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

We've seen people, usually famous people, who have had cosmetic surgery done to give them a new look. The surgeon nips this and tucks that, and smoothes some wrinkles here and there. And in the end you have this person who looks different than before the surgery. But in reality, of course the person is the same person, they have not changed inwardly.

Now religious works are like that. Through a change of habits and a commitment to a new way of life, your doing becomes different. You used to smoke, but now you don't. You used to lie around on Sunday morning, and spend the day pursuing whatever pleases you. But now you are up on Sunday morning, you put on your Sunday face; you go to church, carry a big Bible and smile a lot. But that is not what Paul is talking about. That is what the false teachers wanted. Observe the law and you will get rid of sin. Change what you are doing, based on the law and you will get rid of sin.

But Paul is more like Patrick Henry in his reply, Paul says, "*No. You must die. You must recognize your sin and obediently follow Jesus Christ all the way to the cross. You must vicariously follow him to His death on the cross, and then you are free. That is the only way that the old person is dead.*"

I hope we realize that this is altogether a work of the Spirit. This invitation to die to yourself, to repent and see that your only hope is in the sacrificial death of Christ is powerful. This is the will of God for us, God asks us to die in Christ that we may be born again.

The second article of the true believer's declaration of independence is this: *His Life Empowers Me.*

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

Paul, having admitted that he is no longer the same man, also admits that he is not under his own control. It is Christ who is alive in Paul, leading him and guiding him. This man is under the authority and loving guidance of another power.

We now move from considering the doctrine of justification to the doctrine of union with Christ. This is a beautiful doctrine of the Bible which says that when we are justified, declared holy before God, based solely on our faith in the Cross of Christ, and by faith we mean a transfer of trust from self to total reliance on the life of the resurrected Jesus and obedience to His Gospel, when that happens, we are united to Jesus Christ. He lives in us.

Our union in Christ was taught by Jesus:

I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you (John 14:20).

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (John 15:5).

I pray that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me (John 17:21).

This is what Paul taught and told the Corinthians: *You are not your own; you were bought at a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).*

The life of my wife has empowered me. I am different because we have walked together these many years. We live in an unbreakable union and that is comforting and empowering.

In infinitely more supernatural and transforming way, I can no longer imagine living without the power of Jesus Christ flowing through me. The life of our Lord fills and leads those who are His. We cease to live to ourselves when His death saves us, but we truly begin to live again through His life in us. He comes into a person's life and takes control and empowers us in every area of our existence: our relationships, our attitudes, our decisions, our responses to sorrows, our understanding of tragedy, and even our awareness of joy in the midst of it all.

Is Christ alive in you, that is the most important question in life?

The third article of the true believer's declaration of independence is this: His Love Compels Me.

And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This last article of Paul's declaration of independence catches us off guard. In the midst of a theological reflection on his struggles for justification by faith, in his talk so filled with the doctrine of union in Christ, the giant theologian caps his Freedom Speech off with this tender statement: **He loves me.**

What religion could not do, love did. What a life of hard training in rigorous legal and religious devotion could not do, the love of Christ did.

And this is enormously important to us. When we speak of doctrine, say justification by faith, we are not toying with language. We are not tickling our intellectual fancy. We are not exercising our theological muscles. We are dealing in love. This is the love of God who gave His only begotten Son. And we can each say on a personal basis, "The Son who loves me."

This story has been told a thousand times but it bears repeating. When Dr. Karl Barth, arguably the most influential theological figure of the twentieth century, came to the United States in 1961 he gave a lecture at Princeton Seminary. Afterwards Barth took questions. A reporter from the New York Times asked the eminent theologian: "*Dr. Barth, can you tell us the theological concept that has had the most profound influence on your thinking?*" And the man who wrote a "*closely reasoned*" systematic theology that took up over 10,000 pages replied: "*Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.*"

You know in your heart of hearts that is what you want. You know that most of all you want to be loved. And in Jesus of Nazareth, the question of God's love is answered in an unequivocal "Yes!" When you know His love, when you know the Lord who is Love, you will never be the same. And what turning over a new leaf could not do, what trying really hard to be good could not do, the love of Jesus does in us, for us and with us.

"I will not go back"

The **summary of this declaration** and of the whole argument is found in **verse 21:**

I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose. This can all be summed up in the words: "*I will not go back.*" The question is settled once and for all. God is pleased only with His Son and because I am in His Son I am free.

For we are in Christ, and this is our Declaration of Independence: "*His death saves me. His life empowers me. His love compels me.*"

The Declaration of Independence created a free people. And I have seen how a true believer's declaration of independence, how trusting in Christ alone, can create a free man or woman, boy or girl.

I remember the last few times that I spent with Mary Koehler. Everyone was praying for her but we knew she would not be returning to fellowship with us here. We knew we would no longer enjoy her bouncy lively personality here at church. The last time I saw her at the hospital, she talked with enthusiasm, but with a weak voice, about how church attendance was one of her greatest desires. In fact, she said, "If I can't go to church anymore, I would just as soon die." Her love and devotion to God truly transformed that sterile hospital room into a sanctuary of the living God. Ron was there with me; we prayed with her before we left. I was

fighting to hold back tears, tears that come from standing in awe of a faith that is out of this world. The very last time Alberta and I saw her she was mostly unconscious and groggy from pain medication. Yet, it seemed, as we saw her laying there and laboring for each breath that nothing could destroy her. No circumstance could deny her. Not even death would diminish her.

I am so grateful for our understanding of our true eternal life in Christ Jesus. Because seeing Mary for the last time I knew that this was a life filled woman, a woman free from guilt, free from fear, a woman who had already died years ago and who was alive with a power not her own, a power that brought her peace that this world could never give, a power that brought her a life that will never end.

And this same power is available to anyone ... a power available to you and me

In Jesus Christ every year is a year of jubilee. Through His grace, all of us may declare, "*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live because truly it is Christ who lives in me.*" That's why we say again on this Independence Day weekend:

For we are in Christ, and this is our Declaration of Independence: "*His death saves me. His life empowers me. His love compels me.*"

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