

Galatians 4:4-7

To be "born of a woman," as every human being is, is *ipso facto* to be "born under the law." For "the law" means, not as certain translators overtranslate, "the *Jewish law*" (much less merely "the Jewish *ceremonial law*"!); it means, rather, the social and cultural norms, whatever they may be, under which any human being is born simply in being born human.

This is not to say that "the law" in *this* sense is the only law under which any human being is born simply in being born human. In Paul's view, gentiles who do not have the law nonetheless can do, and do do, "by nature" "the work of the law," or "what the law requires," thereby being a law to themselves and showing that what the law requires is written on their hearts and attested by their own conscience (Rom 2:14 ff.). Nor is it to say that the plurality of laws under which human beings are born are equally valid when judged by reference to the law written on every human heart. On the contrary, those born under the Jewish law have a definite advantage in that "the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God," their law being "the embodiment of knowledge and truth," or, if you will, the decisive re-presentation of the law written on every human heart (Rom 2:20; 3:1 f.).

Even so, the purpose of God in sending his Son "when the fullness of time had come" was to redeem those who were "born under the law," *whatever the law under which they happened to have been born*. This emphatically included those who had been born under the Jewish law. For although it was not just one of the many laws of human societies and cultures, but the very embodiment of knowledge and truth, it, too, was open to the misuse of all law by human sinfulness as the way of salvation. In fact, it, above all, was open to such misuse precisely because it was nothing other or less than the decisive re-presentation of the law of God written on every human heart. It, more than any other law, lent itself to the fundamental sin of "boasting," of trying to secure oneself before God and over against one's fellow human beings by one's obedience to the law, by doing "the work of the law," by doing "what the law requires." Thus to live under the law, even the law of God itself, was to live in the bondage of a slave instead of in the glorious

freedom of the children of God. By the same token, to be redeemed from such bondage was no longer to be a slave but to be a child of God and therefore also an heir of God through Christ.

So if we are to heed the words of the Wexford Carol, "Consider well and bear in mind/ What our good God for us has done,/ In sending his beloved Son," we cannot stop short of saying that, through Jesus Christ, we are freed to live under the law, i.e., the norms of our own society and culture, without living in bondage to the law, as slaves to the law, as a way of salvation. Not only are all laws subject to correction and improvement, but none of them has ultimate significance as a way of salvation. The only way of salvation is the way of love: of God's prevenient love for us and for all, and, in the power of God's love, our obedient faith in God's love and our own returning love for God and for all whom God loves. For "love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom 13:10).

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