

During the Reformation, the Lutherans in Germany under Frederick the Wise identified themselves with the symbol VDMA. It was sewn onto the right sleeves of the clothing that the servants and officials wore. They are the initials for four Latin words, "Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum." It means "the Word of the Lord stands forever."

When the Muslims wanted to identify Christians and target them for imprisonment and death in Syria and Iraq, they branded their houses with an Arabic "n." In defiance to the Muslims, many Christians then put the Arabic "n" on their Facebook pages. It wasn't as bold a thing to do in America; nonetheless it was a good thing to do - to show solidarity with their fellow Christians who have been going through persecution and death.

Paul's fellow Jews put great importance on their circumcision. God established this covenant in Genesis 17 when Abraham was 99 years old. He was about to have a baby through Sarah - a miraculously born baby boy - through whom the Savior would come eventually down the line. So God wanted the Israelites to remember this promise of the seed or the offspring to come through this ritual called circumcision; the cutting of flesh from the male organ of the baby boy. Any Jew who had the hope of the Savior to come and believed in God's promise was to have this done to remember God's promise to Abraham. This is how Jews grew to identify themselves as God's special people and connect themselves with Abraham in the Old Testament. Therefore, when the Savior finally did come and the promise was fulfilled, many had a hard time letting go of circumcision. They felt that they couldn't be saved without it. It was an integral part of their identity.

There was a group of teachers who infiltrated the Galatia churches and said, "Paul doesn't know what he's talking about. He is just mimicking what Peter and the others said. He's right that you are saved by Christ, and you don't need to keep all of the Old Testament law, but you still at least need to be circumcised if you really want to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and be saved. The only reason Paul said to get rid of circumcision was in order to be a people pleaser! He wants everyone to like him! But the Old Testament said circumcision was supposed to last forever!"

Notice how the devil attacks. He attacks right at the head; tries to discredit the teacher through pious sounding people. This is a silly example, but it reminds me of the movie Batman, where the Joker tried his hardest to get Harvey Dent to change sides, because he was their best and their brightest. The devil wants to attack the leaders in order to get the others to fall as well.

Paul had to answer some questions that were being raised and he had to answer them boldly. What is it that saves us? Are there any laws that we need to keep to be forgiven and be God's real children? He also had to defend himself as a bona fide apostle - sent directly by the Lord Jesus Christ. He looked at this as of the utmost importance. It wasn't just a small little argument about whether to cut off some skin or not. Eternal heaven and hell were at stake over that seemingly simple and small piece of skin. And wouldn't that make the devil happy - to get us into hell over a piece of skin? So Paul came out with some strong statements - his spiritual fists were flailing.

- he said that those who taught circumcision should be eternally condemned
- he called them false brothers who came in to spy on them and deceive them

- he called the Galatians “foolish” for being quickly “bewitched” by the false teachers
- he said those who demanded to obey Old Testament laws such as circumcision were under a curse
- he called them slaves and not sons
- he said that anyone who followed them would be alienated from Christ
- he said they were preaching circumcision to avoid persecution for the cross
- he wished they would just go the whole way and emasculate themselves - cut the whole thing off

Notice how Paul did about everything that is politically incorrect to do in our society. He called names. He condemned. He threatened. He attacked.

I know it doesn't sound nice and loving to attack, but sometimes it needs to be done. People take niceness for granted and use the extra space to become all the more evil. The devil wants us to be afraid of attacking by quickly using Christian terms against you - calling you “unloving” and “intolerant” and “judgmental.” There is room for patience and kindness. But in the same sense we also can't forget the simple truth is that God is intolerant of evil. He hates it and condemns it. Like it or not - it needs to be condemned. So Paul did just that. He came out swinging. Sometimes the gloves need to come off.

Paul especially came out swinging because he believed and preached a simple principle. At the end of the letter Paul wrote in Galatians 6:14, “**May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**” The cross was more than a symbol to Paul. It was more than a tattoo or a piece of jewelry that you put on your flesh or hang around your neck. The cross is where God publicly exposed sin for what it is; an ugly and damnable thing; as His own Son was left hanging there being blamed for the sins of the world. The cross shows us how much God hated what we'd done. Yet it also shows us what lengths God was willing to go through to pay for our sins. The Son willingly went there and stayed there! It was the only place Paul could find forgiveness and shelter from God's wrath on Judgment Day. If anything got in the way of the cross or distracted from the cross and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul would not budge one inch - not even over a simple piece of flesh.

Paul wanted all people to be dependent on the cross and to cling to the cross in faith. He wrote in Galatians 3:26–29, “**You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,<sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.<sup>29</sup> If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.** In your baptism - which bathes you in the cross - you lose your identity as a male or female, a Jew or a Gentile, divorced or single, rich or poor. Through faith in the cross and in your baptism we all have one identity - Jesus Christ.

This baptism was the way that Jesus commanded after His resurrection in order to bring the cross to the people. **Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them.** Anyone who wanted to redirect Christians back to the Old Covenant were trying to wipe out what Christ had done - to focus on your own blood and flesh instead of Jesus' blood and flesh. Note the contrast! Many Jews wanted to be identified with Abraham through circumcision and bloodline - but Paul wanted them and us to be identified with Abraham through baptism and faith in Jesus.

This is what we need to keep clear in our own minds and in our own theology and practice. Identifying with God isn't a matter of what you do for Him; it's in what He did for you; how He identifies with you. In the cross of

Christ; which is given to you in your baptism, through faith; God identifies with you. He puts His clothes all over you and covers you from head to toe.

Here's another simple illustration. Imagine a Lions fan that puts on the Lions hat, sweatshirt, gloves, pants and shoes. He's covered in baby blue and Lions from head to toe. You can't see him without seeing the Lions. It's not hard to see he's a Lions fan. When I lived in Topeka I grew to like the Chiefs. So when I went to a Chief's game years ago I decided to wear my Packer gloves. My friend demanded that I take those gloves off at the Chiefs game. They weren't even playing the Packers. He wanted me to be covered in all Chiefs gear. It's what he expected of me at the game.

Well, that's how God wants us to look in Christ. Jesus told a parable of a man who made it into a wedding banquet, but he refused to wear the wedding clothes he was given to wear. When they found the man without the clothes, they tossed him out on his ear; into the eternal fires of hell. Jesus was sending a clear message to all people of all time. When you stand before Christ you don't want to have any part of YOU showing - only Christ. That's what baptism is meant to do for us; to cover us from head to toe with the blood and righteousness of Christ.

Isn't that why we also take the Lord's Supper; because we find the cross right here; the same body and blood that Jesus shed for our forgiveness and poured on us? In a simple and yet profound way our identity is found right here; at the same place all the time. This is all we need. This is all we believe. Christ crucified for us.

The devil wants to attack this cross with pietistic sounding arguments. The attack is the same as the attack of the circumcision group. "Yes, it's nice that you worship Jesus. But that's not enough. You don't immerse in baptism - you NEED to do that. You don't need the Lord's Supper so much. That's just superstitious to believe such things. Honestly, you don't have enough Spirit here. You shouldn't be so negative and talk about sin and forgiveness so much. True spirit led people talk about doing miracles and how God can give you success." Or he might say, "You need to separate yourself from the world by not using electricity. That's the sign of a Christian." It might be by refraining from blood transfusions or coffee. It might be by joining a monastery. You need to do something to distinguish yourself and prove yourself to really be a Christian!" So we start to wonder to ourselves. Maybe this isn't enough?

The danger comes when you tell yourself, "If you were really a Christian you would go on mission trips. If I really had the Spirit I wouldn't think such thoughts. If I really had faith I wouldn't be afraid of witnessing. I wouldn't get so worked up when I lose a game or miss a basket." The danger comes when you think that what you do is what makes you Christian - instead of what Christ did for you. In the cross God already clearly defined you and all your works as sinful; as a sinner who needed Christ's death. In the cross Jesus said that your salvation is finished for you; not with you or because of you; but because of Him.

True Christian faith can't be measured by a simple circumcision of the flesh; or in whether you forward an email or whether you put a tattoo on your skin or pray in public. What is the true and genuine mark of Christianity? It is those who cling to the cross - what Christ did there for us. When you really see what Christ went through there for you - to pay for your sins - it opens your eyes. Sin is really ugly. Death is real. Hell is real. My sins caused Him to go there. He went through that for you and for me. The cross shows me that life under the cross is a cross in itself. It isn't a license to sin. It's a license to suffer and fight against sin; so that we aren't recaptured by Satan.

Think about what the cross did for the Christians in Paul's day. They stopped being circumcised because their fellow Jews were demanding it for salvation. The Jewish religion was tolerated under the Roman government. If you were circumcised it would have been easier to associate with the Jews. Christianity wasn't doing that. They were saying, "The cross of Christ is where my salvation is." Instead of bringing peace, the rejection of circumcision brought war. It brought suffering. It brought pain and - the cross. They gave up their sins of adultery and homosexuality and greed and so much more. They gave up their homes and even died for what they believed in; they were torn in two and fed to the lions; not in order to be Christian; but because they had the cross.

So what defines a true and real Christian? Christians are sinners who do not condone their sins. They confess them. They bring them to Jesus. They see Jesus die under them; and they cling to His cross all the more. When they cling to Christ, they are saved through faith - not by how well they obey the law. This is the principle of salvation. Christ alone.

Anything that attacks this principle; anyone that says that there is no cross in baptism or the Lord's Supper; anyone that says that there are those who are saved without the cross; that babies don't need the cross; that God will save you just because your parents were Christian or because your name was on the membership roll at church; all of that thought process needs to be condemned and cut off. It needs to be attacked and exposed and cursed and damned. Anything that takes the cross away from us and tries to focus anywhere else; even if it comes from an angel of heaven; let it be damned.

So our sermon series for the month starts with a fight for freedom in the book of Galatians. We live in a world where our freedoms are under attack. Muslims want us to be put under the Shariah law. They want us to bow our heads to Allah at the threat of death. On the home front we have pacifists who want us to buy into the lie that all paths lead to heaven. Others want us to think that Jesus died so we could sin all the more and become enslaved to our own passions. It is scary to think about where Christianity seems to be headed - right back to slavery.

But now is not the time to fear. We have another law at work - the law of salvation by faith in Christ and His cross alone. This salvation by grace in Christ is what sets us free from fear of failure, death and hell itself. This is a freedom worth fighting for. I think of the words that the writer to the Hebrews wrote just prior to chapter 11, the Hall of Fame for those in the Faith. In it he wrote words we would do all well to listen to -

<sup>35</sup> **Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.** <sup>36</sup> **You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.** <sup>37</sup> **For in just a very little while,**

**"He who is coming will come and will not delay.**

<sup>38</sup> **But my righteous one will live by faith.**

**And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."**

<sup>39</sup> **But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.**

As Paul stood up for the Gospel, so now is not the time to shrink back or worry about upsetting people. Now is the time to pull out the sword of the Word and speak up and fight for the truth of the Gospel; for the freedom that we have in Christ and the cross. Amen.