

YOU ARE DANCING TO WHOSE BEAT?

Today's Text: Gal. 3:1-29

Extracts:

O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? This only I want to learn from you: *Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?...Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise [Gal. 3: 1-2, 7, 26-29].*

In mid- April 2014, an Islamic Jihadist group, popularly known as Boko Haram, kidnapped over 200 girls from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State in the northeastern part of Nigeria.¹ The campaign for their release has become a global movement (#BringBackOurGirls) that has attracted the American First Lady, Michelle Obama. As part of international pressures on the Nigerian Federal Government to do something, a Nigerian arm of the movement planned a rally at Abuja, the Federal Capital. But on Monday, 2 June 2014, the Commissioner of Police in charge of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) , Joseph Mbu, ordered a ban on rallies there. The following day, the Inspector- General of Police, Mohammed Abubakar, denied authorizing the ban on peaceful rallies. A Nigerian high court has since ruled that police ban on public rallies is illegal under the 1999 Constitution.

If the overall boss of the police force in Nigeria did not give the FCT police chief the mandate to ban the rally, where did he get his orders from? Whose beat was he dancing to, so to speak? That is the same question that Paul was asking of the Galatians who had received Christ through his ministry of faith but were still behaving as if they were under the Law of Moses. It is the same question that he is asking you right now. Are you a true believer? Are you dancing to Christ's beat or someone else's or even yours? Let us find out from this week's interesting study.

¹ Story is based on the following sources: "Chibok schoolgirl kidnapping," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Chibok_kidnapping ; Ikechukwu Nnochiri, et al, "Chibok Girls: We didn't ban rallies in Abuja-IG," Wed., June 4, 2014, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/06/chibok-girls-didnt-ban-rallies-abuja-ig/>; and Ikechukwu Nnochiri, "Court declares ban on protest illegal," Thurs., June 11, 2014, <http://www.vanguardngr.com/2014/06/court-declares-ban-protest-illegal/>

1. Background: You are justified by faith, not by works

John the Baptist did the audacious (by the standards of his time) when he launched his ministry by publicly proclaiming that he had come as the precursor of the Christ who was going to baptize the people “with the Holy Spirit and fire” [Lk 3: 1-23]. He boldly pointed out Jesus as the Christ, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” [Jn 1: 29]. After that, John began to wind down his ministry, saying [Jn 3:22-36]:

He must increase, but I must decrease. ...He who comes from heaven is above all... The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.

Indeed, the word of faith that John had heard and preached came from God, not from man [Lk 3: 2]. But after he had been put in prison, he sent two of his own disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?” Was John beginning to doubt or was he looking for reassurance? Jesus’ response through John’s emissaries and His eulogy of John before the multitudes around Him suggest that the problem was the *yawning gap between John’s radical view of salvation and the lukewarm reception to it by the generation of the time*. They were like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their companions, saying, “*We played the flute for you, and you did not dance*” [Matt. 11: 1-17]. So to what beat did they then dance?

That is the same question that Paul was asking believers in Galatia among whom he had been preaching the gospel of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. “O foolish Galatians!” he exclaimed, “Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth?” They had started out in Spirit but they were beginning to behave as if they would be made perfect by the flesh. What had changed that they could be responding to [Gal. 3; 1-4]? Those same questions can be asked in any congregation today. When you know the amount of worldly conduct and practices going on, you begin to wonder what people are in church for. Recently, I heard one fiery preacher say to his listeners, “You are either here for salvation or nothing else. If you want to play politics, go and join one of the political parties out there!” I agree with him! So, to whose beat are you dancing?

Paul answered that question among the Galatians by drawing their attention to the following tendencies that he had observed in their conduct:

a) *They had not divorced themselves from behaving as if justified by works*

We know that the covenant of circumcision came to the Jews through Abraham [Gen. 17: 9-10] whom they came to regard as their father [Jn 8: 53]. The general feeling among them, therefore, was to live as faithful descendants of Abraham by insisting on those who wanted to be saved to

first be circumcised. Jesus and Paul, as Jews, had themselves been circumcised at birth; so, why not the Gentiles? We saw how such show of ethnic or cultural chauvinism had led Peter and other top ranking disciples to avoid eating with Gentiles in deference to a Jewish team from Jerusalem [**Gal. 2: 11-13**]. So, to some Gentiles who were being tempted to dance to the ethnic/cultural beat so as to be accepted by the Jews, Paul wrote, “Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? Have you suffered so many things in vain- if indeed it was in vain?” [**Gal. 3; 3-4**].

Similar tendencies were also rampant in the early church. For example, the Hellenists (i.e., Greek-speaking Jews) complained against the Hebrews because their widows had been neglected in the daily distribution [**Acts 6: 1**]. At Antioch, when the Jews saw the large multitudes of Gentiles pouring into the synagogue to hear the good news through Paul and Barnabas, “they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul” [**Acts 13: 42-45**]. They danced to a different beat, so to speak.

Paul acknowledged God’s promise to Abraham to make him a great nation [**Gen. 12: 2, 7**] but the LORD also added that in Abraham, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” [**v. 3; Gal. 3;8**]. Therefore, Abraham was much more than being the father of circumcision. Years after Abraham had left his native land to come to the Promised Land, he still had no child. One night, God appeared to him in a vision and assured him that his descendants would be more than the stars that He had shown him in the sky. We are told, “[Abram] believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” [**Gen. 15: 1-6**]. Therefore, according to Paul, if all the families of the earth shall be blessed in Abraham, the Galatians should know “that *only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham*” [**Gal. 3; 5-9**].

b) Many still behaved as if justified by the Law

The Ten Commandments came through Moses, about four hundred and fifty years after God had already established the covenant of faith with Abraham [**Gal. 3: 6-7, 15-18**]. Paul reminded the Galatians that those who chose to go by the demands of the Law were under a curse which clearly stated, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” [**v. 10**].

Again, Paul demolished that position by showing that:

- In the sight of God, no one can be justified by the Law since “the just shall live by his faith” [**v. 11; Hab. 2: 4**];

- Jesus the Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the Law for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” [Gal. 3: 13; Deut. 21: 23].
- The Law could not have annulled God’s changeless promise to Abraham when God said to him, “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” [Gen. 22: 18]. God did not say, “In your seeds” but “In your seed” who, as Paul explained to the Galatians, is Christ [Gal. 3:16];
- The Law was “our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” [vv. 24-25].

In summary, Paul made it clear to the believers in the church in Galatia that they ALL were sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. Having been baptized into Christ, all of them had put on Christ. Therefore, there was neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for ALL had become one in Christ Jesus. If they were Christ’s, then they were Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise [vv. 26-29]. That is also the privilege due to modern believers, the beat to which they should dance. But is that your case?

2. Implications for the modern believer

The word of God says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; *old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new*” [2 Cor. 5: 17]. As born-again, believers are a new creation. Their old dance steps are supposed to have passed away; giving way to the new dance by Christ Jesus. But is that what we find in our various places of worship or in believers’ conduct in the present world? Here are examples of the realities that we can find in our various congregations:

a) *Ethnic/cultural cleavages*

If believers are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus [Gal. 3: 26], they should be able to worship with fellow believers of any colour or clan. They should feel welcomed in any congregation of brothers and sisters in Christ. In the early church, for example, we are told, “The multitude of those who believed were of *one heart and one soul*; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. *And great grace was upon them all*” [Acts 4: 4: 32-33]. Fast-forward that to the multitude of believers of today and it is a different story!

For example, in the United States, segregation is now more prevalent in the church than in the general society. On worship days, black people go to black churches, white to white churches, Asians to Asian churches and

Spanish to Spanish churches. Even African immigrants go to churches pastored by Africans. The pattern is hardly different in the rest of the world where ethnic congregations are widespread.

Even within churches, close family members (parents and children) lay propriety claims to the administration of the church and its funds. For example, some members believe that, by virtue of their closeness to the pastor/priest by blood or language, they have first claims to positions of privilege, including succession. Before you know it, they allow cultural practices to be reflected in the church's rules and bye-laws. You begin to hear of 'insiders' and 'outsiders.' Of course, people are free to worship where they choose and it is quite possible to have ethnic/culture-based congregations that are Spirit-filled. However, there is a tendency for worldly practices, derived from the supporting culture, to dominate the tradition of such churches. You do not need anybody to tell you that you are not welcomed if you do not fit their profile!

If you find yourself in such congregations, do a quick audit of your situation. You can leave and go elsewhere. Why should you walk in the counsel of the ungodly or stand in the path of sinners or sit in the seat of the scornful? Instead, you should join the congregation of the righteous so that you can flourish like a tree planted by the rivers of water [Ps. 1: 1-6].

But if you must leave, where do you find a truly righteous congregation? The grass that may look green elsewhere may be nothing but artificial turf! So, you can hang in there in your present place of worship without joining them in sin and mischief. For example, in the temple at Shiloh where the sons of Eli, the priest, slept with the women who assembled at the tabernacle of meeting [1 Sam. 2: 22], it was there that Samuel was raised as a prophet, and God was with him and "let none of his words fall to the ground" [1 Sam. 3: 19]. ***So, you can be in their world but not be part of it. That way, you become their conscience.***

b) *Superiority complex among denominations*

We also find a tendency among worshippers in different denominations to claim superiority over the rest. They are the only ones who are born-again. The rest will go to hell. That is superiority complex in action that can hinder sharing the love of Christ among fellow believers. ***But, if you scratch the surface, you may find that their claims to superiority are based largely on the popularity of their founders/leaders or the population of their membership.***

Jesus rebuked sectarianism even among His disciples. For example, on one occasion, John told Him that they saw someone who did not follow them casting out demons in His name. They forbade him because he did

not follow them. Jesus replied him, “Do not forbid him, for no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me. For he who is not against us is on our side” [Mk 9: 38-40]. ***We go to heaven (or hell) as individuals, not as a denomination.*** As I have heard my wife say, the rag (that is used to clean dirty surfaces) remains dirty but it makes others clean! You cannot call common what God has cleansed [Acts 10: 15]. ***The Church of Christ on earth is the aggregation of true believers, not of denominations.***

Having accepted Jesus as our Lord and Saviour, we have become born again, not of blood (family and race), nor of the will of the flesh (world view), nor of the will of man (law, culture and tradition) , but of God (by faith) [Jn 1: 12-13]. The law was given through Moses “but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” [v. 17]. ***ALL TRUE BELIEVERS are sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus [Gal. 3: 26]. To believe that Jesus came in flesh is a mere historical affirmation; but to believe that he died for you- that is salvation.² That is the beat to which you must dance and keep dancing until the day you are called home. That is Paul’s message to us in this week’s study.***

3. Conclusion: Dance only to Jesus’ beat!

No one has seen God at any time; but Jesus who is in the bosom of His Father has revealed Him [Jn 1: 18]. In other words, ***Jesus is the empirical evidence that God exists.*** He has told us that to love His Father is to obey Him and love our neighbours [Jn 14: 21,23; Jn 15; 12]. When we love Him, we show it in a relationship that is manifested by obedience that puts us in a place of privilege- God becomes our friend!

Why would you want to give up such a winning ticket to the eternal show of joy in heaven? Why should you relapse into friendship with the world that only offers the pain of hell fire? Therefore, dance only to Jesus’ beat from today-always!

² *Our Daily Bread*, 2014 Annual Gift Edition; RBC Ministries, p. 165.