

Galatians 6:7-16
July 3, 2022

New Creation

Of the books I have been reading this summer, one stands out because it has helped me learn about an era of American religious history. History seems to be appropriate on this Sunday before Independence Day when our country's history is on our minds.

The book is a biography of Henry Ward Beecher, a well-known 19th century preacher who was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of a novel entitled, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which was a part of the mix of things in the time just before the American Civil War.

Beecher was considered by some to be not just the most well-known preacher in America during that period, but before radio and television and movies and big-time sports entertainment, perhaps even the *most famous person* in America. It is hard to believe. Even though his life was controversial and in the end marked by scandal, he remains an interesting person.

It was the 2nd Great Awakening, as they called it, revival was in the air, and around here in Ohio, it involved the rise of the Methodist movement, characterized not so much by doctrinaire theology as lively music and spontaneous religious experience.

Beecher, who was a mix of Congregationalist and Presbyterian, found himself competing with Baptists and Methodists. The New England puritan-style

Calvinism of his upbringing brought him into disagreement with them on several points. He had to make some adjustments to compete. One of the adjustments involved baptism, he was willing to baptize people in any way meaningful to them.

Though he was a very successful evangelist in the 1830s and 40s, he was also an advocate of the social gospel before it was called by that name. He believed that Christians should work for the transformation of the world, and that meant two things for him: temperance and the abolition of slavery. Nowadays these two emphases, evangelism and social change, have largely gone their separate ways, those advocating the one largely neglect the other.

Many Christians objected to the politicization of religion, a sentiment to which I can relate, so not only was his evangelistic preaching controversial, but his social preaching as well.

I have enjoyed learning more about life in that period. I have to admit that I have not been familiar with how rough it was 175 years ago in America. There was filth everywhere, malaria was a constant threat, and there was little medicine, or even soap.

It is hard for me to imagine riding a horse to a revival meeting somewhere, having to ford streams along the way, sometimes nearly being drowned, and then returning home after a week or two, never having changed clothing.

And here we are on Independence Day weekend, with our minds drawn backwards to the founding of this country for which we are thankful. And thankful for the freedoms we take for granted, tempted, perhaps to equate them too closely to our brand of politics and religion, whatever that may be to us, and it may not mean exactly the same thing for all of us.

The reason I mention him is not just for the history, but because he did not like doctrinal disputes and disagreements about rituals, though there were some things he was willing to argue about. What he cared about was how people are treated, which brings me to Paul.

When it comes to disputes over doctrines and rituals, not only Beecher, but also Paul, was not interested. The issue for Paul was not baptism but circumcision, and dietary rules. Along the way in his explanations for *why*, he would sometimes wax eloquent, I guess one could say, soar to the heavens of theological thought, or at least rhetorical expression.

Our text today is one of those places in Paul's writings where the nail is hit on the head in just that particular way, that compels us to do our best thinking, think our best thoughts.

“For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters, but a new creation.”

Another way of saying this is that neither religion, with its doctrines and rituals, nor un-religion, with its

denials of doctrines and secular ideas, matters, but only a “new creation.” Whatever Paul meant by “new creation,” is a matter for continued reflection on the part of every believer throughout their lives and throughout history. It is best that we don't become settled or absolutist about *our* interpretation, because that absolutism is precisely what Paul is arguing against.

It might be hard to relate to the ecclesiastical debates in which Henry Ward Beecher wasn't interested, but not to the idea of being drawn into such questions. One might be surprised how often I am asked a question that is very important to the person asking it but that I haven't really considered because it isn't important to me; all of us trying to figure out the paradoxes of our faith and solve its mysteries.

But the, “new creation?” That is *very* interesting to me, and worthy of the time we spend thinking about it. And while I can't solve all its implications, I *am* sure of some things. One way of thinking about what “new creation” means is that it produces in the believer a mature faith that is capable of crossing the boundaries that seem to be so important to us, like gender, race, religion, culture, but which really run only a little more than skin deep, do not plumb the depths of our humanity.

The New Creation means a greater love that we have been able to achieve, a better understanding of each other and others than generally we have known; it a graciousness towards everyone, or in Paul's words:

“Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to *all people*, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”

“Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.” Amen.

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