

Confronting Legalism

Remember Olga Korbut, the “darling” of the 1972 Munich Olympics? The tiny Soviet gymnast won three gold medals and a silver in individual competition, and a silver medal in team competition. She also stole the hearts of the world.

Olga also competed in the 1976 Olympics, but was overshadowed by a pint-size Romanian named Nadia Comaneci. Olga won a gold medal on the balance beam, then retired from competition and became a gymnastics coach.

After the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident near her home in Minsk, she moved with her family to the United States, settling in Atlanta, Georgia.

In 2002 a network TV magazine did an expose on her coaching techniques, and suggested that her training methods were harsh—even cruel: the same techniques she learned in the Soviet Union—from the same coach that produced Nadia Comaneci’s “perfect 10.0” in the Montreal Olympics in 1984. But some parents and others said they were harsh and cruel—that she had become what she fled.

Setting someone free is not always doing him a favor. Prison inmates, freed after long incarceration, frequently are unable to adjust to freedom; and many revert to a life of crime and are returned to prison relatively soon. Some even do it *intentionally*, simply because they can’t cope with freedom.

When Israel fled Egyptian bondage, their newfound freedom soon seemed more of a burden than a blessing. Over and over the children of Israel said to Moses, “Were there no graves in Egypt? Did you have to bring us out into the desert to die? And at the border of the Promised Land, upon hearing the report of the twelve spies Moses had sent into Canaan, the people said, “Let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.”

The American revolution proved that “freedom isn’t free.” And 243 years of American history have proven that maintaining freedom isn’t easy, either. The American folk song is right:

*“Freedom isn’t free! Freedom isn’t free!
You’ve got to pay the price; You’ve got to sacrifice
For your liberty!”*

And so, like the children of Israel, many people choose “comfort and ease” over “accomplishment and purpose”; they prefer a “caretaker” to a “leader” and opt for “security” over “freedom”; even in the church. It was true in the churches in the province of Galatia—today’s Turkey—when Paul wrote his letter to them.

Religion was “big business” in Galatia when Paul arrived on his first missionary journey. Two hundred miles due west of Antioch was the metropolitan center of Ephesus. One of the *Seven Wonders of the Ancient World* was there: a magnificent building covering two acres; its roof supported by 100 columns, each six feet

in diameter. And inside, in a little shrine, a piece of a meteorite—a stone fallen from heaven. People went there to worship the goddess, Diana.

A hundred miles south of Ephesus, on the Island of Rhodes, was another of the *Seven Wonders of the Ancient World*: a statue of Apollo, god of the sun: 105 feet tall, straddling the entrance to the harbor; ships passed between its legs as they entered the harbor.

And perhaps most directly effecting the Galatian churches were the spectacular parades in honor of Cybele, goddess of nature, goddess of fertility, and mother of the Olympian gods. These parades depicted debauchery that would make the Mardi Gras look like a children's Easter parade.

Oh, religion was "big business" in Galatia; but, it brought no joy or peace. It was religion in which vindictive, fickle gods and goddesses toyed with people like pieces on a chessboard; and used them for their own amusement; it was religion in which fears and superstitions ran rampant without check or restraint.

Into that context Paul went and preached the Gospel. His message was about salvation; and the Galatians were interested. They needed deliverance from pain and suffering and evil. They needed to be free from their fears and their superstitions. So here came Paul. The story is recorded in the 13th and 14th chapters of Acts. Paul preached the Gospel, and it was "Good News!" to those people: a God who was trustworthy and loving.

And so they responded to Paul's preaching. Then Paul moved on, and right behind him came a sect of Christians from Jerusalem, called Judaizers. They said Paul preached an incomplete salvation. They convinced the Galatians that in order fully to live in a saving relationship with God one had to submit to Jewish rules—specifically, the ritual of circumcision. It was very legalistic; but it made sense.

As pagans they had been the victim of evil influences introduced into the world by very human-like gods. Under Paul's teachings they saw themselves as the beneficiaries of God's love. Both teachings cast them in passive roles. But here was a teaching that put them in the driver's seat: "Do this and you can be guaranteed of God's love, and you call the shots. You'll be in control." And, like children enchanted by a Pied Piper, the Galatians followed.

So, Paul writes them and asks, "*You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?*" Paul is beside himself! He begins his letter saying, "*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all*" (1:6 NIV).

It would be like rearing your children in a healthy environment. They grow up secure and stable; they communicate openly and freely; they learn to confront and

handle problems creatively and effectively; in short, they learn the basics of real living, which includes knowing Christ and loving and walking with God and relating well to one another—all those things that represent integrity and authenticity.

Then they grow up and move away. After several years you go to visit them and you find them living cramped, closed, dirty, emotionally crippled lives. You're amazed to find them struggling with the simplest of problems, demonstrating negative attitudes.

Naturally, you ask, "Who got to you? Who twisted your mind? What happened to you?" It's with that same passion that Paul writes to his Galatian friends.

(GALATIANS 5:1, 16-18 NRSV) *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. ... ¹⁶Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit,* *and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law.*

It's not that the law is bad; Jesus said, "I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it." But Paul insists, no one is "saved" by the law, because no one can keep the totality of the law. He wrote to the church in Philippi and said, "I was a Pharisee; and even as a Pharisee, I could not keep the law."

But here go these Galatians, lining up to follow the law. One commentary I read says that in following the Judaizers, the Galatians "epitomized a general human tendency to grasp for cheap and easy salvation." I don't think most people want cheap salvation. They want a *guarantee*. They want to feel in control of their own destinies. They're willing to pay for it, but they want to set the price. And so they start to bargain with God—horse trade: "God, I'll be good, and I'll go to church; now you do your part." And then they cherry-pick biblical texts to tell God what God's part is. Control is what it's all about.

And it is in this bid for control that we become most vulnerable to those in the church who anticipate the market and offer whatever is selling this week. There are always preachers who will dangle you out over the fires of hell, and then sell you "Fire Insurance." The Galatians were bewitched into turning over their freedom to those who peddled "law as the means to salvation."

Our baptism was our declaration of independence from Sin. But there always will be those who attempt to exploit our fears and our need for security and control, as well as our desires for comfort and ease.

On this "Freedom and Democracy Sunday", it is appropriate to remind ourselves that our call as those who have been set free in Christ is to work so others can be set free—so others can be awakened to the joys and privileges of the personal freedom found in God's amazing grace.

I'm so glad to be called a *Christian*,
To be named with the ransomed and whole;
As the statue liberates the citizen,
So the cross liberates the soul.

Oh the cross is my Statue of Liberty,
It was there that my soul was set free;
Unashamed I'll proclaim that a rugged cross
Is my Statue of Liberty!

Prayer Slide