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# Owning Up to Our Baptismal Vow

JARROD ROBINSON

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A couple of summers ago, I was in Portland, Oregon, visiting my family, and my dad asked me one afternoon if I'd be willing to baptize my younger brother Marcus. Of course I told Dad, "Yes, it would be my honor." So a few hours later, Marcus and I find ourselves wading out into the middle of a river that is made up entirely of water that comes from melting snow high up in the mountains. It is bone-chilling, teeth-chattering cold. Both of my parents, safe and warm up on the banks of the river, spend a little bit of time talking to the special friends and family members who've gathered together to share words of thanksgiving with my parents and speak words of blessing over Marcus. As this is going on, Marcus and I are standing there, bodies shivering, smiling nervously.

There's a part of me that wants everything to go as quickly as it possibly can so we can get it over with and get out and get wrapped into some nice, warm towels. But there's another part of me that doesn't want the moment to end. Because I'm standing next to my brother, in a river, and he's just decided that he wants to put Jesus on in baptism. Who wants that moment to end?

We all have moments like that, don't we? Moments when we're right on the edge of a new adventure, a new chapter, and we know that it's going to be good—it's going to be better than anything we've experienced before—but beyond that, there's a thousand things we don't know, can't know. And it's that sense of not knowing that fills us with fear and excitement and wonder and mystery. And I didn't want all of those feelings to go away as I stood there with Marcus. But my parents were done talking and the water wasn't getting any warmer.

So I put my trembling hand on my brother's shoulder, looked straight into his eyes, and asked him, "Marcus, do you believe that Jesus lived to show you how to live and died to save you from the power of sin and rose from the grave to give you the hope of everlasting life?"

Like a nervous groom on his wedding day, Marcus said, "I do." So I placed my arm on his back and I gently lowered him down into the swiftly moving ice water with a surface as clear as glass.

And as I was holding him under the water, just for a couple of seconds, I looked at his face, eyes closed, holding his breath, and I found that I was holding my own, because I couldn't help but wonder about all the things that were about to happen to him and in him and for him as he met God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit in that living water. And then I brought him up—don't worry, I didn't reflect theologically for too long—and I hugged him, both of us shaking and trembling from the cold water, and both of us laughing a kind of holy laughter, with an effervescent joy that came from knowing that Marcus was stepping into a brand new life. I know people say it all the time, but I felt sure right then that this really was the first moment of the rest of his life... a life freely given to him through the life and the love of Jesus.

I want you to think back. I want you to think about your own baptism, if you've already been baptized. Do you remember it? Do you remember what it was like to know that the rest of your life was going to be good—it was going to be better than anything that you'd experienced before—but beyond that, there were a thousand things you didn't know, couldn't know? Do you remember who stood in the water next to you? Do you remember what it was like to suddenly realize that you were now connected in an incredibly special way to every single other Christian in the world, in a way that you didn't know you were missing until it was there? Do you remember?

I hope you do, because I need you to go back to those special experiences and images you hold close to your heart. I need you to go back to that sacred space if we're really going to hear what the Apostle Paul is trying to say to us this morning.

If you've got a Bible, please open up to the book of Galatians, chapter 3. We'll start reading at verse 26. "For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Paul isn't fixated on the question of whether or not you've been baptized; instead Paul wants to ask, "When you were baptized, did you understand all that was happening to you in that moment?" And the truth is he assumes that you didn't. Paul assumes that you didn't fully understand all that it meant—because nobody fully understands all that's about to change when they step from one way of life into another. It's like your graduation day. Your wedding day. It's like your retirement day. We all have these threshold moments in our lives where we think we know what's going to happen, we think we know exactly what that moment means, but as we live past it, as we live into it, we realize that there was way more going on than we were able to grasp the first time around.

The fact that we didn't fully understand it at first doesn't cheapen it; on the contrary, it enriches that life-changing moment, giving it more power and weight in our lives as time goes on. What makes a lifelong promise truly extravagant is that we can't possibly know all that keeping that promise is going to ask of us. That's what makes any lifelong vow such a powerful act of faith. It's not just that you don't know: it's that you *can't* know the true cost. Not until you face it.

When I think back to my own baptism, I realize just how true it is that I couldn't possibly know back then what I know now, twenty-three years later. All I knew as a nervous twelve-year-old kid responding to the invitation song on a cold Wednesday night in January was that I wanted to go to heaven when I died, and baptism was my way to get there. I had some sense that I believed in Christ and that I wanted to follow him, but I had very little sense of what that actually might involve for the rest of my life. The bottom line is I was willing to promise to do just about anything if it secured my reservation in "a mansion just over the hilltop in that bright land where we'll never grow old."

I suppose you could say that I was mostly getting baptized for the benefits. I knew that I was on the hook for trying to be morally perfect and win every Sunday school attendance award from that moment on, but those requirements paled in comparison to getting to take communion every week and getting to someday take a leisurely stroll down the streets of gold along the shores of the crystal sea. True, most of the really good stuff that I thought baptism could get me was a long way off—but I was willing to wait.

And in the meantime, I expected baptism to change the way everyone else saw me. And by everyone else, I mean everyone else including God. I fully expected baptism to restore my own sense of worth. What I didn't expect, what I didn't understand, was that baptism was also supposed to restore my sense of everyone else's worth. And not just someday in the far-off future in heaven, but now. Right now. Today. I didn't, I couldn't, understand it back when I was twelve, but I'm starting to understand it more and more: baptism isn't just about how others see me—it's also about how I see them. And not just some of them . . . *all* of them.

In Paul's world, when he wrote his letter to the Galatians, the social order was established and founded on the reliability that there were constant social opposites that everyone could depend on. There were Jews and Greeks, there were enslaved people and free people, and there were males and females. These social polar opposites were like the three legs of a three-legged stool: they offered predictable, balanced, stability when it came to understanding your "proper" place in society. You were one and not the other, and everyone knew you didn't question your place or anybody else's place in society unless you wanted it all to fall apart.

There were Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female. You were one and not the other. In fact, during Paul's lifetime, there was a prayer that Jewish men prayed every morning: "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe who has created me an Israelite and not a Gentile, free and not a slave, a man and not a woman."

You were one and not the other. And if you were fortunate enough to have been born a Jewish free man, you thanked God every single morning that you were never going to have to BE the other. This was balance.

These labels felt right in that culture.

But let's be honest, these social opposites were not all created equal. It was "better" to be one thing more than the other. In a very real sense, these three sets of social categories rigidly locked into place who was at the top or the bottom, the powerful or the powerless, the important or the unimportant. And as you'd probably guess, that meant that the people who were closer to the top, the people who had greater power, the people who society deemed more important—they had a lot more invested in maintaining the prevailing social order than those who were near the bottom, those who didn't have all that much power, those deemed less important.

Can you imagine then how unsettling, how disorienting, how threatening it had to be for Paul to tell the Galatian Christians: "Look, you may not have realized it at the moment you got baptized, but your baptism into Christ means that you can no longer find your identity in the places you've always found your identity before. The faithfulness of Christ sets your identity. You may happen to be a Jew or a Greek, enslaved or free, male or female, but those social categories no longer define all of who you are or all of who you can be. Your race, your class, your gender no longer sets your value or worth. Those categories of value, those labels of worth, they may have worked in the old creation, but they have absolutely no place in the new creation of the kingdom of God. Quit clinging to them and move past them."

Can you imagine what those words must have felt like to the Galatian Christians? It was the end of the world, as they knew it.

And before you and I decide that our modern sensibilities have set us free from this kind of binary, either-or, black-and-white social thinking, you and I need to be as honest as we can possibly be about the comfort we find in our own set of social labels and categories. Some speak as if there are Americans and then there's everyone else in the world. There are those who look like they're standing on their own two feet and there are those who look like they're just not trying hard enough. There are those whose voices matter and there are those whose voices are silenced.

We still use categories of social opposites to provide us with a kind of stool to rest on, a structured stability that helps us reliably find our place in the world. And so, if together we can find the courage to let Paul speak a new word to us in our own words, he might say that whether we knew it or not at the moment we got baptized, our baptism means that there's no longer American Christians and everyone else, there's no longer successful entrepreneurs and single mothers on food stamps, there's no longer people whose voices get heard and people whose voices get silenced—we are all one in Christ Jesus.

Now I can't speak for you, but I find that truth about our baptism to be unsettling. It throws me off-balance. It's the end of the world as we know it. Because let's be honest . . . the social opposites that we behave as if we believe in, they're not created equal. It is undoubtedly "better" to be one thing more than the other. Our social categories and distinctions help us reliably locate who's at the top and who isn't, who should be entrusted with power and who probably shouldn't, who should make the important decisions and who just needs to be quiet and go along with the decisions that get made. And to the degree that we depend on this kind of polar-opposite social structure to help set our identity and everyone else's, we are refusing to depend on Christ.

Brothers and sisters, Galatians 3 means that our baptism isn't just about getting the chance to see one another in heaven someday; our baptism is just as much about how we see one another in this world today. Because how we see people shapes how we treat them and how we treat them says everything about how much we think they're worth. Christ lived and died and rose again to heal us from our racism, and our classism, and our sexism. When we were baptized, you and I, whether we knew it or not, we were supposed to find new ways to leave all of that social brokenness behind us, and yet, somewhere along the line, I'm afraid that we somehow ended up trying to baptize those systems of oppression and then call it "church." But a community where race and class and gender are still being used to measure someone's worth is a community that is, at some level, failing to be the church. For there are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God: there are only full heirs according to the promise.

I love that we are a people with a deep and abiding commitment to the word of God. I love that we try our best to ground everything we do in the Bible, but I do wonder sometimes. I wonder if we're more interested in the conclusions the Bible reaches than the conversations it opens up. I wonder if we're more interested in the

content the Bible contains than the creative vision it calls us into. The more I study Scripture, the more time I spend with it, the more I get the sense that the people God inspired to write Scripture were less interested in teaching us what to think and were far more interested in teaching us how to think.

This seems to be especially true with the Apostle Paul. He doesn't even try to answer every single question you or I could possibly ever have about what it means to be a practicing disciple of Jesus. A letter like that would be far too long for any of us to actually read—he'd still be writing it! So Paul doesn't try to do that; he doesn't try to do the impossible; he doesn't try to answer all our questions. Instead, he tries to help us learn how to reach new answers. Not by ourselves or on our own, but together in community with the help of the Holy Spirit and the logic of the gospel. There is a baptized way of thinking that Paul tries to lay out for us, time after time, in his letters. In almost every case, Paul painstakingly traces his own thought process: he models this baptized way of thinking, as he reaches his answer for a particular church in a specific moment. Why would Paul do that? Why would he show us exactly how he's reaching his decision unless he's trying to teach us how to reach our own inspired decisions about what the gospel means for us here and now?

The truth is you and I have been blessed, through the pages of Scripture, to hear the melody of the gospel time and time again. In fact, we've been blessed to hear the melody of the gospel often enough to start to faithfully improvise some new harmonies . . . new harmonies that make the song more beautifully complex than it's ever been before. Paul's goal wasn't to just perform the gospel for us: his goal was to teach us how to be performers of the gospel ourselves. Paul isn't just singing for us; he's teaching us how to sing. And while the song remains unfinished, while the song is still unfolding, it's not as if we have no idea where the song of the gospel is headed. The song of the gospel is taking us to that place where there are no longer any social distinctions among us that make some of us less important or less valuable or less worthy than others. We may not all be the same, but we all have the same worth, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

And sisters and brothers, you don't need me to tell you that we aren't there yet. We just aren't. And it's time. It's time for us to find the courage to figure out how to get from where we are right now, to that new world God is calling us towards as baptized people. The Bible can help us learn *how* to meet this moment in time, but it isn't going to give us step-by-step instructions of exactly *what* to do.

But that's okay. It's okay—because we aren't called to be proof-texters. We're called to be world-builders. Scripture not only teaches us *how* to think, it teaches us how to *dream*. And while we might accidentally sing an off-key note every now and then as we try to improvise new harmonies that fit, new harmonies that are at home alongside of the melody of the gospel, I have faith that with the help of the Spirit, we'll know. We'll know if the new notes we're trying to sing clash with the symphony of the new creation. God's grace is greater than our ability to perform the song of the gospel perfectly. God's grace is better than our understanding of God's grace. And God's grace will surely guide us as we seek to be defined, and to define others, by that same grace.

I'd like for us to spend a few moments now, exploring one of the three social distinctions that Paul says we, as baptized people, have been called to overcome. I know that I can't make this happen in this setting, but I wish that you could just pretend that I'm on one side of a coffee table and you're on the other side. Because I know that this going to be a difficult conversation for some of you, and I want you to know something before I say anything else: I love you. And I love the Churches of Christ, and I love our heritage, but we need to have this difficult conversation. Last time I checked, as baptized people, we're "death-proof" so certainly we can't be scared of talking, right?

In the vast majority of our congregations, men of any race and any class are allowed to do anything they're interested in trying to do in the church, as long as they are faithfully committed followers of Christ. Women of any race and any class are allowed to do anything they're interested in trying to do in the church, as long as they are faithfully committed followers of Christ AND as long it does not involve them either having—or appearing to have—any kind of authority over any man. And in many cases, the term *man* here is loosely defined as "any baptized boy and older." This way of socially constructing the church leans almost entirely upon the assumption that Paul's words in the New Testament that limit the roles of women were intended to be the finish line, rather than a short-term resting place along the way to us becoming the kind of church Paul hopes we can be. When we read Paul as if the current social settings of the churches he wrote to, and the limitations of those settings, are

supposed to serve as the church's finish line for all time, we take Paul's temporary setbacks and we set them in stone. We take the song of the gospel and we turn it into a new legal code.

And honestly, for years, the issue of which roles our churches made available to women never even crossed my mind. I was, after all, born a boy, which—as soon as I was baptized at twelve—made me a man according to most of the people in my home congregation. Anything I wanted to try in the life of the church was open to me . . . if not immediately, someday in the future when I got a little older. I preached and I taught and I led prayers and I led worship whenever I got the chance, which was pretty often. Every boy in my church got to try all of these roles as well, if they wanted to. Not a single girl had the same opportunities. But I never even stopped to think, to wonder if they might have wanted to or if they felt like God was calling them to. I never stopped to think if it made them feel like they mattered less to God and to God's people than I did. Occasionally, girls would get to lead a song or a prayer at a youth group devotional, but that was about it. That seemed more than good enough to me. So I never asked.

My horizons broadened as I went to college and attended classes with young women my own age who wanted to serve the church beyond speaking at ladies' days and saying prayers around their dinner tables. I encountered the written sermons of Barbara Brown Taylor, a female preacher who wrote better sermons than just about anyone else I could find. I asked one of my professors what he thought about women serving in roles like preaching and teaching and he said, "How can it be wrong for anyone to share what God has placed on their heart, with the rest of us, out of love for us?" I honestly didn't know how to respond, other than to keep thinking, studying, and praying about it.

And then, about five years ago, I took the opportunity to go and listen to a panel of five women at a conference, women who were going to share their stories about what it was like trying to do ministry in the Churches of Christ. And I've got to tell you, what I heard was heartbreaking. Each of them felt called, just as much as I feel called, to ministry of some kind—and each one of them, at one point or another, was walked out on, asked to leave, instructed to sit down and be quiet, or simply told that what they were trying to do was against the heart of God and damaging to God's church.

I'd often heard people dismiss women who felt called to any kind of role in public ministry as nothing more than power-hungry. But this wasn't about power: this was about personhood. None of the women on that panel seemed interested in the church giving them more power for power's sake. They all seemed desperate—and I mean *desperate*—for the church to treat them like a person. A real person instead of a theological problem. As I watched tears fall and the light leave their eyes as they spoke, I knew in my heart that we're better than this. We're better than this. And I wish I could tell you that I went straight home to the church I was preaching at and I immediately opened up a conversation about finding new ways to empower the girls and the women in our church family to have more opportunities to serve our church family. But I didn't. Instead I kept thinking, studying, and praying about it.

A year passed, and a friend of mine shared a story with me about a time she assisted a male song leader at her church by performing sign language of the words. One person stood up and stormed out. And then another and then another. An elder approached her the next week and said, "Look, all the people who've come to us about you want you to know that they love you, but your 'performance' on stage was crossing a line they felt shouldn't be crossed."

With tears in her eyes, she said to me, "When I found out that a bunch of people had gone to the elders about me, Jarrod, I'm telling you—I've never felt so small and ashamed in all my life."

I wish I could say that I went straight to the leaders in my church and immediately started working with them to make sure that nothing like that could ever happen at our church in the future. But I didn't. Instead, I just patted her on the shoulder and told her I was sorry. And I kept thinking and studying and praying about it.

Another year passed, and one of the fathers at my church brought his young son up with him onstage to help say the prayers for communion. After church, a girl just about that boy's age came up to me and asked, "Mr. Jarrod, when can me and my daddy say the prayers for communion at church together?"

I wish I could tell you that I gave her a good answer that instilled a sense of value and worth in her. But I didn't. Instead I just mumbled something generic about, "Someday, I'm sure you'll get a chance." And I kept thinking and studying and praying about it.

And I know this isn't fair, but it's the truth: something inside of me changed when Lauren and I had our first little girl, Rylee. I remember holding her one night, and she was restless, so I was singing songs of the church over her, songs that my mother had sung over me. And I looked into that little face, and I looked into that little heart, and suddenly I was no longer willing to just keep thinking and studying and praying. I knew I needed to say something. I needed to do something. And when we had our second daughter, Reese, I knew that I had to start doing even more. Because we're better than this. We're stronger than this. We can handle this conversation, can't we? I've walked alongside of too many heartbroken, yet hope-filled women and I just can't believe that it's okay for us to keep asking anyone to go through the pain they've had to go through for the rest of us.

Just a few months ago, a friend of mine was invited to preach at a Church of Christ, something that is already happening in some of our congregations. But it's still obviously risky and awkward, as we try to maintain unity and at the same time open ourselves up to new practices, to how to sing new harmonies alongside of the melody of the gospel. My friend did her very best to share what God had given her to say to that congregation. She did an amazing, faithful job. And it only took a day for the angry emails and phone calls to start reaching her. It only took a day for her to find out that the elders were dealing with members who were angry, furious even, that a woman had been allowed to speak about Scripture from the pulpit. And I watched what those angry voices did to her. I witnessed the pain she felt in causing the rest of us pain. I saw the embarrassment she suffered at having taken the risk to step out in faith, one more time, only to find out that people—God's people—just weren't ready yet.

And I will never forget what she said to me: "Jarrod, I am sure that I've been called to preach. I'm as sure of that as I am of anything else about me. I'm over forty years old and I've gotten to preach just about forty times in my life. And every single time someone has gotten up to walk out while I was talking, or they caught me in the lobby angry, or they sent me a nasty letter, or they called someone about me to get me to stop. If that had happened to you the first forty times you preached, would you still be a preacher?"

And the answer is no. No, I wouldn't still be a preacher. The primary reason I'm a preacher is precisely because the first forty times I preached, the church showered me with compliments and encouragements, and instilled in me a deep sense of value and worth—and it wasn't because I can preach any better than my friend. It's because I'm a man and she isn't. And that can't possibly be the kind of church our baptism calls us to be. It just can't.

I've listened to too many women in my life lead prayers that moved my heart and touched my soul in powerful ways. I've listened to too many women preach sermons in small chapels and in preaching classes and in seminars—anywhere off to the side but here on the big stage in worship on Sunday morning—and I have been challenged by them and called to a deeper commitment to Christ through them. And this isn't just about preaching and teaching. I've listened to too many godly women offer me advice that wasn't just their opinion; it was the loving and inspired insight of a shepherd.

And I'm telling you, brothers and sisters, we are all of us being robbed by not inviting our women to serve alongside of us. We're being robbed! The rich, social diversity of the church that Christ died to give us has been wallpapered over with a uniformity that is decidedly masculine. And why in the world would baptized people—people who are death-proof, people who've been called beyond the social barriers that can exist between male and female—why would we settle for that? How can we settle for that? I am not in any way suggesting that we should do less than what we believe Scripture requires of us; I'm begging us to do more.

Now I know, I know, that what I'm saying is hard for some of us to hear. I know, but I am only saying it because I love you. I am more and more convinced that in Galatians 3 Paul is confronting us with the challenging gospel truth that because we're baptized people, because we're the people who are supposed to see all people the way God sees them. . . . Every role—every servant role, every ministry role, every leadership role—ought to be open to every single person in our churches. No matter their race, their social class, or their gender. *Every* role should be open to *every* person.

It is ironic to me that I could have said *race* and *class* to any audience and got unanimous agreement to the statement I just made, but the moment we add *gender* to the conversation we don't know how to keep

talking. And yet Paul puts this all together in one statement, connected with one phrase...*no longer, no longer, no longer*.

That doesn't mean everyone is going to be gifted and called to every single role that we have in our churches; but it does mean that if they're gifted and called, we should never tell them that that role isn't open to them simply because of who they are, or who they aren't. Because the truth is when we deny roles of importance to people, we don't just make them *feel* less important, we *make* them less important in our community. And those kinds of devaluing social arrangements should not exist among us.

We are baptized people! We're better than this! We've been called beyond the culture wars of race and class and gender. It's time we started finding the courage to live up to our baptismal vows. Together. I know, brothers and sisters, there are many of you that had no idea that we were going to need to have this conversation because we got baptized, but that's exactly what you promised to do when you were baptized! It's what I promised to do when I got baptized! I didn't know it then, but I'm starting to see it now.

I can't speak for the Churches of Christ as a whole. I can't even speak for everyone in my own congregation. But I can speak as one preacher in the Churches of Christ. And I just want to say that if you are here this morning and you have ever been treated like you are somehow worth less because of the color of your skin or the sound of your accent, I am sorry. If you are here this morning and you have ever been treated like you are somehow worth less because you have less money or fewer resources than other people, I am sorry. And if you are here this morning and you have ever been treated like you are somehow worth less because you aren't a man, I am sorry. It shouldn't be this way among us.

Because whether you and I realized it or not at the time, it wasn't just our bodies and our souls that got baptized: our imaginations were baptized as well. And I can't tell you exactly what it's going to look like, or exactly how it needs to take place in your local church, but I can tell you that it's time. It's time for us to use our baptized imaginations to take each of our congregations one step closer, and one step closer, and always one step closer, to that place where there are no longer any social distinctions among us that make some of us less important or less valuable or less worthy than others.

We may not all be the same, but we do all have the same worth, for we are all one in Christ Jesus!

**JARROD ROBINSON** WAS BORN AND RAISED IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. HE IS A GRADUATE OF ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY AND IS CURRENTLY WORKING ON A DMIN FROM LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY. JARROD PREACHED FOR THE EASTSIDE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN ANTIOCH, CALIFORNIA, AND THE RIVERSIDE CHURCH OF CHRIST IN THE NORTH DALLAS SUBURB OF COPPELL, TEXAS, BEFORE COMING TO THE SOUTHERN HILLS CHURCH OF CHRIST IN ABILENE, TEXAS, IN SEPTEMBER OF THIS YEAR. HE AND HIS WIFE, LAUREN, HAVE BEEN MARRIED FOR 12 YEARS AND HAVE TWO DAUGHTERS (JARROD@SOHILLSCHURCH.ORG).

