

St. Pius V/ St. Vincent DePaul
December 2024
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The Baptismal Call to Justice

“In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:13)

“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.” (Galatians 3:28)

In these verses Paul is making a critical point about the meaning of Baptism. By affirming the equality of all believers, Paul is saying that one of the primary effects of baptism is the call to justice. Our common status as baptized Christians makes us all equals before God and under God - and therefore entitled to the same rights and responsibilities.

In other parts of his letters Paul explains in greater depth the meaning of radical equality in Christianity, and its implications for justice.

The Letter to Philemon deals with a situation in which one of Philemon’s slaves, a young man names Onesimus, had fled from him. Onesimus has come to Paul seeking asylum, having been converted by him to Christianity. Paul might have asked Philemon to take Onesimus back as a forgiven slave. Or he could have asked Philemon to give Onesimus to him as his slave. But Paul chose neither of these options. Instead, he sends the young man back to his owner so that Philemon can fulfill his “duty” and voluntarily set him free. Paul tells Philemon he must free Onesimus because they are equals – both as Christians and as human beings. Paul sees a contradiction in a Christian master owning a Christian slave. Persons cannot be equal in Christ, but unequal in society. Equality is not spiritual only, according to Paul – it is physical as well. It is a matter of justice.

In chapter 7 of the first letter to the Corinthians Paul makes it clear that husbands and wives have mutual obligations to each other - that they are equals. In discussing the question of sexual abstinence in marriage, he says: “The husband must give his wife what she has a right to expect, and so too the wife to the husband.” On the issue of divorce, Paul says, “A wife must not leave her husband . . . nor must a husband send his wife away.” The main point here is not sexual abstinence or divorce - it is the mutuality and equality of man and woman in marriage.

Paul affirms the equality of men and women in Christian worship in 1 Corinthians 11: “For a man to pray or prophesy with his head covered is a sign of disrespect to his head.

For a woman, however, it is a sign of disrespect to her head if she prays or prophesies unveiled . . .” The primary point in this passage, which often goes unnoticed, is that both men and women were playing a leadership role in public worship - leadership of prayer and prophecy were both recognized as official ministries of the Christian movement.

In Romans chapter 16 Paul mentions several men and women by name whom he calls “apostles” - ones who are commissioned to preach the Gospel and to establish new Christian communities. Apostleship was the highest status a Christian could have in the early days of Christianity - and it was assigned to both women and men.

Later in 1 Corinthians Paul is critical of the inequality between the rich and poor in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:17-29). And he criticizes those who claimed superiority on the basis of their spiritual charisms (1 Corinthians 12:4-7; 13:1-13). For Paul, the love that shows itself in equality is greater than the charisms - “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” (1 Corinthians 13:1).

For Paul, love must include equality, and equality is the foundation of God’s justice. As noted Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan points out: “Love is the heart of justice, and justice is the social form of love.”