

Christianity is a Maverick Religion

A sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Galatians 3:23-4:9

When you hear “Maverick,” what do you think of? Many will think of the wildly popular movie, “Top Gun: Maverick.” This movie was just released in May 2022, and it has already grossed globally over \$1.3 billion. The lead character is Pete “Maverick” Mitchell, a US Navy pilot, and he is a maverick, a person with a stubborn streak of independence. The story is loosely based on a real Navy pilot, Duke Cunningham and his accomplishments during the Vietnam War.

Older people among us may remember the TV show “Maverick,” from the early 1980’s, starring James Gardner, about a professional poker player in the Old West. This series was itself a revival of a similar Western from the 1950’s.

“Maverick” is a moniker used far beyond the movies. Ford Motor Company has a Maverick pick-up truck. There are Maverick thermometers, Maverick boats, Maverick flying cars. Maverick concerts. Maverick mountain bikes. Maverick chocolates.

When we read the letters of Paul, it becomes apparent that Paul was a maverick. He was considered an oddball by other apostles. What was the problem? He said: Not by the law. “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything” (Gal 6:15).

It’s not only that Paul was a maverick, but Christianity is a maverick religion. It’s really very different from other religions. People think that religion means there’s a certain kind of system you’ve got to follow and certain rules that must be followed in order to be good before God and your neighbor. In the minds of many, religion is about doing the right thing and following the rules.

We recall that one thing that was distinctive about Luther is that he was brutally honest. He said that we, by ourselves, end up either in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. Most of the time we comfort ourselves with spiritual pride. I do well enough. I’m a good person. At least I’m better than those people over there. But then if we are like Luther and stop to think, to be self-critical, we end up in spiritual despair. We don’t and we can’t and it’s hopeless.

What is Paul's maverick Christianity? In Gal 3:28 Paul writes that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. Some say this is the key verse in the New Testament. They claim it lays out for us the real plan, the real program of Christianity, the proper requirements. This is what you gotta do. You have to follow this new program.

Paul was a maverick but laying out a program wasn't what he was all about. Paul expected the end to come soon, in his own generation. As he writes to the Thessalonians:

"For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive; who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17; see also 1 Cor 15:51-52).

In 1 Cor 7:17-31 Paul writes about marriage and slavery. He says the time is too short. If you are married, fine; if you are not married, fine. The time is too short. The end is coming in this generation.

He said the same about slavery. If you're a slave, O.K.; if you're not, O.K.. Let's not bother with that. There's no question that for Paul Christianity is not a social program. That's not what Christianity is about.

What about the law? In Galatians 3:21 Paul writes: "Is the law against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness indeed would be by the law." But, of course, the law does not make alive.

Paul gives three examples of how the law is temporary, of this world and only for this world. First, in Romans 10:4 he writes: "Christ is the end of the law." Some have thought that means that Christ is the "goal." But the context in Romans 10:5 shows that Christ is the end as in the termination of the law.

Second, in Romans 7:1-6 he uses the picture of someone who is married. When you're married, you are bound by this contract. But when the spouse dies, you're no

longer in the contract. The law is over. There's no way of mistaking what Paul means.

Third, in Galatians 3:24 he writes: "The law was our custodian until Christ came." The original word for "custodian" here refers to a slave who guarded and took care of a young man between the ages of six and about eighteen, protecting, teaching, and disciplining him. Then their roles are more than reversed. The young man now has the power of life and death over the slave. Such a functionary no longer exists, but Paul uses this as a way of saying to the Galatians that salvation does not depend on keeping the law. They are free in Christ.

That illustration comes immediately before Galatians 3:27 where he writes: "As many of you who were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." That's what it's about. In Christ, everything is changed. Christianity is a maverick religion. In fact, Karl Barth said that we shouldn't even call Christianity a religion because in a religion there is always something you have to do, and it's up to you to do it, and that's what's important, what makes it all work.

In contrast, the Christian message does not come by human calculation: The Lord has come to us in the flesh, saved us from sin, death, and the devil, and made us his own. He's done it. He's done it to you by making you his own in baptism – outside of you, in spite of you.

And if you protest that Galatians 3:27 is just one verse, remember Romans 6:5. Paul writes: "If you have been united with him in a death like his, you will **certainly** be united with him in a resurrection like his." (The Greek idiom requires the word "certainly.")

And Colossians 3:3-4: "For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

And Philippians 3:12: "I press on to make it my own, because Christ has made me his own."

Everything has changed because he has changed it.

That's maverick religion. That's different from thinking there must be something we have to do to make salvation work. Maybe we should do good works to hedge our bets. We think: "It couldn't hurt and it may help. Maybe they count?" It goes to show

how we always end up in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. The evil one plays tricks on us.

Paul goes on in 4:1-9 to interpret himself. He basically describes what it means to be adopted and to receive a gift, a testament, as an heir. We've been adopted in spite of ourselves. When you're adopted, you become a son or daughter. He writes this in Romans 8:16-17 as well: "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ"

Many of us have a "last will and testament" which tells who is to inherit our property. Such documents for us can change according to changing circumstances. But God's will and testament doesn't change. It says: Christ has taken care of sin, death, and the devil. Baptized into his death, you are adopted sons and daughters, heirs of his kingdom. It's all very different, a maverick religion. Amen