

Coming of Age
 Pastor Sam Richards
 Lenten Season—27 March 2022
 Texts: Galatians 4:3-6

“Coming of age” is a phrase that works metaphorically on several levels all at once and that is problematic. First, “coming of age” is something that happens biologically, and socially to us individually. It is a matter of individual history, of one’s life journey. Surely it is a most natural symbol of maturation. Secondly, “coming of age” happens on a cohort level, it happens to a group of people (a high school, or college reunion group, veterans of certain wars), who form an age set, who may be remarked on as a generation. In both of these instances, “coming of age” is a stage on a life journey. It quickens us to the fact that we are on a journey, a one-way pilgrimage. Organisms have life cycles in common; but “coming of age” smacks of linearity—of a beginning and an end. People mature, hopefully, and when they are stalled, or when natural development is interrupted; the sense that this is an anomaly, or that something’s wrong is typically near at hand.

However, Paul is introducing the idea here that “coming of age” is related to the advent of Christ, meaning a “once for all occurrence” in salvation history. His point is that we, believers, at the beginning of church history were, regardless of individual age and generational spread, all *as it were* children in the eyes of the Lord. Collectively we were spiritually immature. **Held in bondage under the elemental things of the world.** Just what were these elemental things? Basic things? Rudimentary things? Could basic spiritual forces (like demons, fallen angels and spiritual principalities?) be in view? Or is Paul speaking of “things mundane, terrestrial, earthy and material?” Were we in bondage to the sensory level of physical life, basically incapable of higher thoughts and excluded from the spiritual realm? This latter makes sense. For we are quite aware that children mature mentally—that for the first decade or so of human life, abstract reasoning skills are, with few exceptions (childhood geniuses perhaps), out of reach. The brain has not developed its more adult capabilities. There is “wisdom” behind arithmetic being introduced by stages: addition and subtraction giving way to multiplication and division, algebra one before algebra two, plane geometry before analytic geometry and trigonometry. It’s not merely tradition, or dated textbooks that are in play here. When shaping the curriculum of a grammar school versus a high school, the stages of cognitive development must be in play. Furthermore, schools are very aware that the cohort group of eighth graders, “coming up” as it were to ninth grade may vary in verbal and mathematical aptitude from year to year. To further complicate things, the range of aptitude in any given grade may be exceedingly wide and a large proportion of the incoming class may not have attained academic readiness for the advanced curriculum! Entry level and advanced level classes function to address this reality. Not every child of the same age has passed the same threshold simultaneously! Testing helps the school deal with these “realities” administratively. As complicated as this sounds, screening and placing students is, again, of a different order from what Paul means by “coming of age” in Galatians 4. And yet there is this similarity: children, generally, below a certain age simply do not get things that older children can mentally handle.

I would cite one thing before moving on. I am unaware of any instruction necessary in lying. Other than by example, parents don’t tend to teach their children how to lie as

they plainly teach them how to walk and talk. I think this applies to sinning. It doesn't appear that we need to read the manual before we start out on a life of sinning. It appears to be hardwired in, or, it comes naturally. We are born with a sinful nature; therefore we sin. I think we can agree so far. But what about primal emotions? Emotions like fear, insecurity, rage, envy, possessiveness? Are they built in, or are they absorbed from the environment? A child throwing a temper tantrum does not need instruction in rage! No, reprimand, perhaps, or discipline is called for—the excessive emotion needs to be checked, or reigned in and self-control needs to be inculcated/trained because while the emotions are in place, the capacity to manage them, typically, follows. Irrational behavior, destructive emotions, like sin, need to be remediated. Spiritual maturity is acquired; it does not come already installed.

When we come to “coming of age,” the elephant in the living room is the sexual connotations. Yes, we do use the term to describe our development sexually. It means that an individual has arrived at the point where reproduction is possible. It usually coincides with the development of secondary sexual characteristics. Children do not reproduce, adults do. The cultivation of sexual interest is something that occurs naturally, but, in what I find an alarming overreach, educationally speaking, the Maine State Department, particularly the Attorney General's office, is pushing gender identification as a civil rights concern on children who are not ready socially, emotionally and/or sexually for learning about that. Certain landmark studies (the Kinsey Report, and the findings of the Masters and Johnson Institute) have foisted on us the notion that sexuality is life-long and includes early childhood. I disagree. And my position is informed by educational theory and moral considerations. Where sex education ignores the cognitive readiness of the intended students, it is not only inept, it is inappropriate. A child who is “concrete operational” cannot, repeat, cannot function abstractly and “identity” is, I think by definition, an abstract concept.

Paul is not suggesting on any level that “coming of age” sexually is involved in Galatians 4. We introduce that elephant because of our cultural setting. But as I often consult with Lynne about controversial points in my sermons, I can report that we both came to considerations of the Samaritan woman at the well independently. I, in my jail ministry had occasion to preach on the incident, and Lynne in her bible study for women, were both addressing that passage. I have a striking observation to make, but not before I shut down any speculation that Jesus' encounter with the woman was “sexual.” True, the woman had sexual issues (adultery—four husbands and the man she was living with was not her husband and she was probably a wounded individual). But Jesus leads her into a truer sense of personal identity. Yes, he helps her transcend her sexuality to discover that who she essentially was is a “worshipper.” She was a person who sought to worship God **in Spirit and in truth**. She was **God sought** in addition to being a God seeker. ***Her true calling was that of an evangelist.*** She was an evangelist above being a serial wife, or, less nobly a sexual addict caught in a vicious cycle of self-abuse and exploitation. *And in a moment, out of her encounter with Jesus, she was transformed; she became capable of spiritual reproduction.* By her testimony, by her word, saving faith was replicated in the hearts of other Samaritan villagers. She said, **Could this be the Messiah?** Which they heard, came to investigate and then discovered her testimony to be true for themselves, they were converted! So spiritual reproduction is pertinent to Galatians 4 in that through the advent of Jesus Christ, **received by faith**: we have matured to where **replication is possible**. We have become “the good seed” that produces an abundant harvest:

Mark 4:20 **And those are the ones on whom seed was sown on the good soil; and they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."**

"The seed on good ground, the fertile soil, grows and yields abundant fruit. Bear in mind that an especially good crop in Jesus 'time would produce a tenfold harvest; thus, anything more is an abundant increase, a bumper crop, whether it yields a hundred- or sixty- or thirty-fold. Indeed as the Responsorial Psalm (Ps. 65:10-12) notes: "The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest."
<https://mb.com.ph/2020/07/11/the-parable-of-the-sower/>

Reproduction is the point! Christians reproduce; that is what we do.

Collectively, we were once spiritually immature: non-reproductive. **Held in bondage under the elemental things of the world . . . were in bondage** means—in a state of servitude. Treated as servants or slaves, or as John Gill explains: **Under the elements of the world**¹ which means we "**were in bondage under the elements of the world.**" Now, I should introduce you all to the deep end of the pool. You can all swim, so here goes: firstly, the bondage Paul is alluding to is "bondage under the institutes of the Mosaic religion." This bondage is particular to the Jewish people and yet, the rest of the world was also in bondage to idolatry and pagan religion. The most direct relation of Galatians 4 is to our Old Testament heritage. Secondly, in a derivative manner, our bondage relates to the Law of Moses which, under the fear of judgment and penalty of death, binds God's people with penalties for transgressions and imposes sanctions (positive and negative—ie rewards, or punishments) according to that Law. There are many issues involved, but this is the essence of the matter, and we will leave it there.

¹ Different opinions have been held as to the reason why the Jewish institutions are here called "the elements of the world." Rosenmuller supposes it was because many of those rites were common to the Jews and to the pagan - as they also had altars, sacrifices, temples, libations, etc. Doddridge supposes it was because those rites were adapted to the low conceptions of children, who were most affected with sensible objects, and have no taste for spiritual and heavenly things. Locke supposes it was because those institutions led them not beyond this world, or into the possession and taste of their heavenly inheritance. It is probable that there is allusion to the Jewish manner of speaking, so common in the Scriptures, where this world is opposed to the kingdom of God, and where it is spoken of as transient and worthless compared with the future glory. The world is fading, unsatisfactory, temporary. In allusion to this common use of the word, the Jewish institutions are called the wordly rudiments. It is not that they were in themselves evil - for that is not true; it is not that they were adapted to foster a worldly spirit - for that is not true; it is not that they had their origin from this world - for that is not true; nor is it from the fact that they resembled the institutions of the pagan world - for that is a little true; but it is, that, *like the things of the world, they were transient, temporary, and of little value*. They were unsatisfactory in their nature, and were soon to pass away, and to give place to a better system - as the things of this world are soon to give place to heaven.

[Here is a breakdown of some of those issues by John Gill:

- not the four elements
- not the angels thought to rule over fire, water, earth and air
- not the sun, the stars and the moon
- BUT the institutes of the Mosaic religion
- not their historical bondage in Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon
- not the bondage of sin and Satan
- BUT bondage which the Law naturally engenders, induced on them, and kept them in by sanctions and penalties and by fear of death

“(Elemental things) by which are meant, 1. not the four elements of fire, water, earth, and air; 2. nor the angels, who by some are thought to preside over them; 3. nor the sun and moon, according to whose revolutions the festivals of the Jews were regulated; ***but the several institutions of the Mosaic economy***, which were to the Jews what an A B C, or an alphabet of letters, is to one that is beginning to learn to read; or what a dictionary and grammar are to such who are learning any language, and which contain the rudiments of language; as the physical elements are the first principles of nature, and the general rules of speech and language are the rudiments thereof, ***so the Mosaic institutions were the elements, rudiments, or first principles of the Jewish religion***, taught them by the law, as their schoolmaster, and by which they were used as children: these are called "elements", in allusion to the first principles of nature and learning; and the elements "of the world", because they lay in outward worldly and earthly things, as in meats, drinks, divers washings, etc. and because that hereby God instructed the world, at least a part of it, the world of the Jews: or as the word may be rendered "beauty", or "elegancy", these were elegant elements, *which in a most beautiful manner taught the people of the Jews the first principles of the doctrine of Christ*: but nevertheless, whilst they were under the instructions and discipline of the law as a schoolmaster, ***they were in bondage***"; referring not to their bondage in Egypt, nor in the several captivities into which they were carried by their neighbors; nor to the bondage of sin and Satan, common to all men in a state of nature; ***but to the bondage which the law naturally engendered***, led them to, induced upon them, and kept them in, through its sanctions and penalties; for, through fear of death, they were under a servile disposition, and were all their lifetime subject to bondage; they carried a yoke of bondage upon their necks, and were under a spirit of *bondage unto fear*; they were like children closely kept to school to learn their letters, say their lessons, and perform their tasks; and, if not, receive due correction, which kept them in continual fear and bondage.” -John Gill] To be shared in the draft—not preached.

That we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

This portion of Galatians represents one huge “so that.” We were kept in bondage, so that, subsequently, we might receive **adoption as sons**. It is as if the preceding ages of spiritual incubation have come to an end. And faith in Jesus as the Christ brings this about. It is rather like the birthing process. Of course. That is why “born again” is such

an apt metaphor for this spiritual transition. God's plan was to send His Son, redeem lost sinners and bless them with the Spirit so that they are adopted as His. **Amen.**