Freedom from the law is the central theme of Paul’s letter to the Galatians (5.1). As such, it resonates powerfully with queer Christians who have been oppressed by numerous laws, both religious and secular, that have tried to restrict our sexualities and relationships. In particular, Galatians is a declaration of independence from those modern-day ‘false believers’ (2.4) – namely, right-wing fundamentalists – who try to impose their own legalistic code of sexual conduct upon LGBT people, instead of proclaiming the true gospel of Jesus Christ – a gospel that is grounded in faith, and not the law.

In this commentary, I read Galatians from the perspective of an openly gay Christian man who understands the epistle to be a critique of those ‘false believers’ who persecute LGBT people today in the name of God’s ‘law’. In addition, I also read Galatians from my social location as a queer person of Asian descent – that is, someone who exists as a minority within a minority. For me, Galatians can also be read as a critique of the dominant white queer culture to the extent that it imposes its own implicit code of conduct or ‘law’ upon those of us who are also from minority ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

Commissioned for Queer Ministry

Paul begins his letter to the Galatians with a clear statement of the authority by which he proclaims the gospel. He notes that he was commissioned directly through Jesus Christ and God the Creator (1.1), and that he received his gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ (1.12). In other words, Paul was not commissioned by human sources, nor did he receive his gospel from other humans. Paul’s special calling was to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles – that is, the ‘uncircumcised’ (2.7) – as opposed to the ministry of James, Peter and John, who were entrusted with proclaiming the gospel to the Jewish people.

The question of authority is particularly important for those of us who are queer Christians. Because we remain at the margins of the mainline Christian denominations – most of which refuse to marry us or to ordain us – we, like Paul, must look directly to Jesus Christ and God the Creator for our commissions. As Chris Glaser tells us, we do not need the mainline churches to confirm our ministries. Rather, we are called by God to share in Paul’s ‘boldness in asserting God’s call of us’ (Glaser 1994: 9/23). Just as Paul was called to minister to the Gentiles, we are called to proclaim the gospel to our own communities, just as Tromsø Churches in 1968.

Some of us, like Paul, feel that our own coming out is a revelation of God’s presence, not just to us personally, but to the wider church. Conversely, we may feel that our ‘enemy’ and therefore our special challenge is to bring ourselves up for this risk for the sake of our spiritual growth. As Paul says, ‘we live by faith, not by sight’ (2.5). The Galatians was written to ‘all of you who are believing in the Lord Jesus’ (1.2), and to witness our own journey of ‘believing’.

No Compulsory Hierarchy

Paul then turns to those who would undermine his ministry by calling him to be responsible for the ‘believers’ – false teachers who were insisting that Christians were following the Jewish law.

By contrast, Paul was a genuine follower of Jesus Christ, whose gospel to the Gentiles included Peter, who would in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Paul, who would break the law to break bread publicly (2.12), even though he was ‘a Jew’ (2.14). Paul uses the compelling imagery of these false teachers as a ‘bewitched’ (3.1) by the spirit of the world.

This problem of hierarchy over whether one can renounce our sexual identity and identity on circumcision under discussion to renounce our sexual identity and identity on circumcision under discussion.

As Tom Bohache writes, Paul does not have to give up his Jewish identity and renounce his identity as a Jew. The good news for many of us is not dependent on the idea of a ‘Jew’ or a ‘Gentile’ – the idea of a ‘believer’ (bohache 2008) transcends the idea of ‘believers’ and ‘conforming to the image of God’s people’.

As a result, those of us who do not believe in compulsory circumcision...
munities, just as Troy Perry did by founding the Metropolitan Community Churches in 1968.

Some of us, like Paul, may even have persecuted the LGBT community prior to our own coming out of the closet (1.13; Acts 9.1–19; Spong 2005: 137–9). Or, conversely, we may have been out of the closet, but seen Christianity as the ‘enemy’ and therefore persecuted the Christian community prior to fully integrating our Christian identities with our queer identities. We should not beat ourselves up for this persecution, but rather rejoice in the fact that we cannot grow spiritually unless we recognize our own ‘complicity in the sacred forms of the past, with all their violence and victims’ (Alison 2001: 34). It is God’s direct revelation of the gospel to us that allows us to overcome our prejudices and to witness our vocational callings as queer Christians (1.23).

No Compulsory Heterosexuality

Paul then turns to the central problem that was facing the church at Galatia – false teachers who were insisting that the converts must be circumcised in order to become followers of Jesus Christ. In other words, the false teachers were insisting that one could not become a follower of Jesus Christ without also following the Jewish law, which mandated the circumcision of converts.

By contrast, Paul insisted that circumcision was not necessary to become a follower of Jesus Christ. Paul recalls his specific commission to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles, who were uncircumcised (2.9). He criticizes those, like Peter, who would insist otherwise. Paul recalls Peter’s hypocrisy in refusing to break bread publicly with the Gentiles out of fear of the ‘circumcision faction’ (2.12), even though Peter himself had ‘live[d] like a Gentile and not like a Jew’ (2.14). Paul uses very strong language against the false teachers. Paul sees these false teachers as proclaiming a ‘different gospel’ that ‘perverts’ the gospel of Christ (1.6–7). He also accuses the Galatians for being ‘foolish’ in being ‘bewitched’ (3.1) by the false teachers.

This problem of circumcision is analogous to the contemporary debate over whether one can engage in queer sex and be Christian. The right-wing fundamentalists who insist that queer people cannot be Christian unless we renounce our sexualities are akin to the false teachers in Galatia who insisted on circumcision under Jewish law as a requirement for following Jesus Christ. As Tom Bohache writes in his queer reading of Galatians, we LGBT Christians do not have to give up our sexualities to be acceptable to God. In his words, we ‘do not have to circumcise the foreskins of our sexual orientation in order to be acceptable to Almighty God’ (Bohache 2000: 235).

The good news for LGBT Christians is that ‘[o]ur status as children of God is not dependent on outside forces or rules or lists of sins created by human beings’ (Bohache 2000: 235). Rather, we are loved by God because of the incredible depth of God’s grace. The gospel is more than just a code of conduct – it transcends the idea of ‘goodness’ and its related notions of ‘bound consciences’ and ‘conforming dependency on group approval’ (Alison 2003: 113).

As a result, those of us who are queer Christians recognize that neither compulsory circumcision nor compulsory heterosexuality is required in order to
be a follower of Jesus Christ. Indeed, as Tom Hanks has written, homophobic individuals who impose ‘heterosexual norms on sexual minorities’ and ex-gay ‘tortures’ are in fact proclaiming ‘another gospel’ (Hanks 2000: 121–2), just like the false teachers in Galatia. Just as Paul confronted Peter over his hypocrisy over table fellowship, we are called to boldly confront the hypocrisy of so-called Christians who exclude LGBT people from full membership in the Church (Glaser 1994: 9/23). It is important for us to speak up about this because religious hypocrisy ultimately inhibits the honesty and spiritual growth of others (Truluck 2000: 286).

No Longer Male and Female

In one of the best-known verses in Galatians, Paul proclaims that: ‘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’ (3.28). In this section of the epistle, Paul warns the Galatians not to be divided over the role of the law in their lives, since they are all united in baptism in Christ Jesus.

In order to counter the divisive arguments of the false teachers about the necessity of the Mosaic law, Paul cites the scriptural example of Abraham and how he and his ‘offspring’ were blessed by God because he believed in God (3.6), long before the law was even revealed on Mount Sinai (3.17). According to Paul, the Mosaic law was merely designed to serve as a disciplinarian until Jesus Christ, who is Abraham’s ‘offspring’ (3.16), came to justify us by faith (3.24). Thus, all who are baptized in Christ Jesus – whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – are heirs to the original promise made to Abraham and his offspring (3.29). This is particularly significant for queer Christians, who are freed from the Mosaic prohibitions against male-to-male anal intercourse in Leviticus 18.22 and 20.13.

It is not surprising that the promise of radical equality in Galatians 3.28 resonates strongly with queer Christians and our allies. In other words, not only is there no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, but there is no longer straight or queer (see, for example, Jennings 2003: 166–9; McNeill 1993: 147–8; Rogers 1999: 37–66; Truluck 2000: 209–10; Tutu 1996: ix). According to Chris Glaser, for example, the promise of equality in Galatians 3.28 transcends the ‘bashing’ and ‘skirmishes’ in the mainstream churches over LGBT people (Glaser 1994: 4/19). Indeed, if there is no longer male and female in Christ Jesus, then it ‘does not matter to God which gender we love, which gender we are, or which gender we believe ourselves to be’ (Glaser 1994: 10/3). Similarly, Kathy Rudy notes that Galatians 3.28 calls us to create a world in which ‘Christian faithfulness’ – and not gender or sexual orientation – is the ‘primary and only measure’ (Rudy 1997: 100–1).

Most recently, bisexual and transgender Christians have read Galatians 3.28 as a specific affirmation of their diverse gender identities. For example, Susan Craig, a bisexual pastor, cites Galatians 3.28 in writing about how bisexuals are ‘in neither gay nor straight’ and yet ‘both gay and straight’ (Craig 2000: 198). Justin Tanis, a transgender minister, notes that Galatians 3.28 allows us to see ourselves as ‘children of God first and foremost’. For Tanis, Galatians 3.28 paints for us a ‘diverse variety of images’, and sees Galatia as affirming a ‘universal church’ (Mollenkott 1999: 330).

Freedom from Fear

Paul then turns to the fears of Jews who have freed us from fear of death. And the analogy to the fear of the experiences ‘of slave woman and concubine’ (4.28). In the Jewish person and remaining for the Gentile, the fear with the common fear is that they are full heir.

Paul’s reference to the fear, on multiple levels of fear, so the fear of the right-wing (see, for example, 1994: 7/8; see also, for example, the fear of a fear in the world of us – another level of fear, as well as community fear of the fear. May be spiritually over the fear, true diversity of this fear of Christ who will not be.

Paul’s very fear here also speak to the fear of the millions of the vocation of the Christian to our very existence and purpose of the families – and the world, and as God’s children, and they also transformed us in our outside. In the religious, this fear is the margins of the world, loving the world by the fear, and loved for who we are.

Fruits of the Spirit

Even though Paul is speaking of freedom from fear, it is also clear that we must be transformed. As we are to be transformed, and single communicators for all.
‘paints for us a vision of a world beyond gender, in which there is room for infinite variation and infinite grace’ (Tanis 2003: 83). Finally, Virginia Mollenkott sees Galatians 3.28 as ‘depolarizing’ the categories of male and female, and affirming a ‘third sex’ of intersexed people, transsexuals and transgenderists (Mollenkott 2001: 113–14).

**Freedom from Sexual Legalism**

Paul then turns to the central theme of Galatians, which is that Jesus Christ has freed us from the yoke of slavery to the law (5.1). Paul draws a scriptural analogy to the two children of Abraham: Ishmael, who was the son of the slave woman Hagar (4.25), and Isaac, who was the son of the free woman Sarah (4.28). In the past, we were more like Ishmael than Isaac. We were enslaved and remained under the authority of guardians and trustees (4.2–3). However, with the coming of Jesus Christ, we have been adopted by God and, like Isaac, are full heirs of God (4.5).

Paul’s reference to the ‘yoke of slavery’ speaks to queer people and our allies on multiple levels. On one level, the yoke of slavery is the ‘sexual legalism’ of right-wing fundamentalists that keeps LGBT people in their places (Glaser 1994: 7/8; see also Truluck 2000: 28). On another level, the yoke of slavery is the fear of association – held by many of our non-queer allies – that solidarity with us will cause their heterosexual identities to be questioned. On still another level, the yoke of slavery is the ‘ideological legalism’ within the LGBT community that defines what it means to be ‘gay, lesbian, and politically or spiritually correct’ (Glaser 1994: 7/8) and that prevents us from respecting the true diversity of bodies and perspectives within our community. It is Jesus Christ who sets us free from all of these yokes of slavery.

Paul’s various references to adoption and heirs in this section of Galatians also speak to LGBT people. For example, we are a living reminder to Christians of the vocational calling to be hospitable to outsiders. Eugene Rogers notes that our very existence – as people who turn to alternative means of creating our families – are a reminder to all Christians that we are all products of adoption as God’s children (Rogers 1999: 260). Paradoxically, our status as heirs of God also transforms us from outsiders to a place where there is neither inside nor outside. In the words of James Alison, our status as heirs of God brings us from the margins and the periphery to ‘being in on the centre of things without being the centre’ (Alison 2003: 72). In short, through God’s adoption, we are loved for who we are, period.

**Fruits of the Spirit**

Even though we have been freed from the law, however, Paul warns us that this freedom should not be seen as an opportunity for self-indulgence (5.13). Rather, we must be guided by living in accordance with the Spirit (5.16). Specifically, we are to become ‘slaves’ to one another through love (5.13) and to follow the single commandment of loving neighbour as self (5.14).
It is not surprising, therefore, that the fruits of the Spirit are acts that are focused on the neighbour or the 'other': love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5.22). The 'works of the flesh', by contrast, are the opposite of these things: acts that focus on the self, such as enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, and so on (5.19–21), and that serve as a barrier to inheriting the commonwealth of God (5.21).

For LGBT people, this means that we are called to avoid both extremes of 'legalism and licence' so that we can 'love one another' (Glaser 1994: 7/9). Chris Glaser cites a number of examples of how we can act responsibly and be 'responsible to our community,' such as respecting how individuals want to name themselves (for example, honouring phrases such as 'African-American' or 'PWA') and by honouring our commitments to our sisters and brothers in the LGBT community (for example, calling someone when we say that we will). As queer Christians, we are called to live – pun intended! – as fruits of the Spirit.

It should be noted that the 'works of the flesh' referred to by Paul in Galatians 5.19–21 – including references to fornication, impurity and licentiousness – should not be read as condemning sexual orientation or queer sexualities per se. Rather, they are referring to acts of 'hostility, anger, and hate' and the ways in which we 'use people as things' instead of respecting other people (Truluck 2000: 178). In fact, Rembert Truluck argues that the 'works of the flesh' include precisely the kind of 'legalistic, judgemental religion' that blindly condemns LGBT people and fails to respect us as children of God (Truluck 2000: 178–9; see also Glaser 1994: 8/30).

Neither Queerness nor Unqueerness

Paul concludes his letter by reminding the Galatians that ultimately what matters is not circumcision or uncircumcision, but rather a new creation in Jesus Christ (6.15). That is, one is called to live as if the world has been crucified (6.14). Such countercultural values include communal values such as bearing each others' burdens (6.2) and working for the good of all (6.10).

For queer Christians today, living as if the world has been crucified means affirming our very existence as LGBT people and responding to human needs because we are a 'new creation' and not because of the demands of the law (Truluck 2000: 63). By creating all kinds of new communities and families (including polyamorous and open relationships), we challenge the heteronormative values of the world and engage in a new creation in Jesus Christ. And, paradoxically, what matters ultimately is not queerness or unqueerness, but rather a new discovery of the richness of the commonwealth of God from being 'just as we are' (Alison 2003: xii).

A Queer Asian American Perspective

As noted in the introduction, I read Galatians from the perspective of a queer Christian. Specifically, the letter affirms how Jesus Christ sets us free from the legalistic codes of sexual conduct that are imposed on us by right-wing funda-
mentalistic Christians. These individuals are the modern-day equivalents of the false teachers who insisted upon circumcision for the Galatians.

As a queer person of Asian descent, however, I read Galatians with another lens. That is, I not only read Galatians as critiquing those right-wing fundamentalist Christians who would impose their own legalistic codes of sexual conduct on us, but I also read Galatians as critiquing the ways in which the dominant queer Christian community often imposes its own codes of conduct upon people of colour and other minorities within the community.

Many queer Asians of faith wrestle with issues that are simply not acknowledged by the dominant queer Christian community. Not only do we wrestle with the homophobia of our families and religious communities, we also wrestle with the racism of our churches and the larger LGBT community (Cheng 2002; 2004; Kim 2004; Lee 2004; Lim 1998). Like the Gentiles in Galatia who searched in vain for an affirmation of their uncut penises, those of us who are gay Asian men often search in vain for an affirmation of our penises in a world of ‘white men and white male beauty’ (Fung 1998: 118). As such, many of us are ashamed of our identities and try to conform to the dominant culture by rejecting our ethnic and cultural heritage. In our desire to be accepted, we take on the language, food, dress, spirituality and customs of the dominant community to such a degree that we sometimes ignore or fail to reach out to our LGBT Asian sisters and brothers, even when we are in the same space such as a coffee shop, dance club, bar or church.

Galatians can speak powerfully to those of us who are of queer Asian descent, as well as other queer Christians of colour. Specifically, it frees us from the yoke of slavery to the implicit codes of conduct that are imposed by the dominant white queer community. We have been commissioned by God to minister to our community (see for example, Queer Asian Spirit, www.queerasianspirit.org, dedicated to the spiritual lives of LGBT people of Asian descent). We are called to engage in the fruits of the Spirit by loving our fellow queer Asian siblings as ourselves.

A recent example of queer Asians ministering to ourselves occurred in April 2005, when the Gay Asian Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY) sponsored a ground-breaking workshop on queer Asian erotic spirituality, which was attended by around thirty gay men of Asian descent. During the course of the workshop, the participants engaged in a number of exercises relating to breathing, sharing and connecting body with spirit. By participating in this radically new creation of queer Asian community, we discovered our beauty and the richness of being loved by God, just as we are.