

Doing what comes “naturally”

By John Halford

They call the process of becoming an American citizen “naturalization.” It’s a good name, because when you live in a country, pay its taxes, enjoy its benefits, identify with its values and do what you can to contribute to its success, it is only “natural” to want to fully belong.

America grants her citizenship generously, but not casually. Naturalization is a long process, which includes fingerprinting, an interview, and if you pass, a background check.

At the interview, you are tested on your ability to speak and understand English, and your knowledge of American history and government. So we are a nervous group of potential Americans as we sit in the waiting area of the Immigration Department. An African man is praying. An Asian couple test each other with the sample test questions. A Hispanic family is chatting nervously. And me, a Brit? I am doing what I usually do when I am trying to relax and fill in time. I am writing this article.

Every now and then a door opens and a young man calls out a name, and with a “wish me luck” look at the rest of us, someone heads off for his or her date with destiny. We who are left settle back down to our anxious wait.



Jesus announced our citizenship and broke down every barrier that could prevent us from accepting it.

The process by the U.S. Immigration Service is courteous, fair and impartial. No one is trying to intimidate us. But those responsible must be thorough.

But, I think to myself, suppose, just suppose, that door could open and the Immigration officer would say: “Relax, everyone. I have some good news for you—a message from the President. He asked me to welcome you to the United States, and he has asked us to give you citizenship. We want you, we love you, we know who you are, and we are ready to accept you. Now, who wants to be first?”

Dream on. That is not going to happen. You certainly can’t blame post 9/11 America for being cautious, because not everyone who wants to live here wishes America well.

But there is a “nation” that *can* do that: it offers,

indeed eagerly desires, to freely bestow its citizenship and all its benefits, privileges and opportunities to all who ask for it. I’m not speaking of any political entity of this world, of course. I mean God’s “nation”—the kingdom of heaven.

As Paul wrote in his epistle to the Philippians, “We’re citizens of high heaven! We’re waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He’ll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him” (Philippians 3:20-21, *The Message*).

Jesus came to open the door to that citizenship. He brought the good news that we are wanted and accepted. There is no need for fingerprinting—the hairs on our heads are already numbered. We all fail the background check miserably, for “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). But Jesus has taken care of that through his death, resurrection and ascension. You are loved, wanted and accepted.

Jesus announced our citizenship and broke down every barrier that could prevent us from accepting it. In a cautious and suspicious world, it is hard to believe that anything can be so free and so generous. It seems too good to be true. We wonder about the fine print, and wait for the “other shoe to drop.” And sadly, sometimes those of us who are called to proclaim that good news erect our own barriers, and, like the Pharisees of Jesus’ day, put unnecessary hurdles and stumbling blocks in the path of citizenship in God’s kingdom.

Going through the process of becoming an American citizen has made me think deeply about the meaning of citizenship. My family, my home and so many of my friends are here. It is only natural that I would want to fully belong. However, others, on the other side of that door, must make that decision.

Likewise, my—and your—eternal citizenship is not for us to decide; it’s already an accomplished fact. Jesus already signed all the paperwork with his own blood and opened the door wide, inviting us all to come through.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

For a God who *is* love that is only natural. **co**