Evangelical Christianity stands at a crossroads. The claim itself may portend nothing revolutionary: the movement regularly faces such conditions as a by-product of its drive to reform Christianity and its sense of urgency in so doing. But at the moment, the specific choices confronting the community complicate the narrative it has long cherished concerning the scope and promise of its Bible- and cross-centric, conversionist, actively evangelizing faith—sometimes called the evangelical quadrilateral.1 In place of the cross, a significant number of American evangelicals take political power and control as their guiding motive. In denial of the need to be ever more converted to the Christ disclosed on that cross, demeaning and converting others by force often takes center stage. Meanwhile, the deeply rooted social holiness animating earlier evangelicals appears substantially rotted away by hypocrisy.

One way to situate the neglect of three sides of the quadrilateral is to consider how they interplay with the fourth leg—the ostensible commitment to a high theology of Scripture in which biblical texts form the basis for the other three legs. But the ongoing crises of evangelicalism evince a long-running and deeply-situated problem for the movement: many of its adherents do not, in fact, know how to read the very texts they claim establish their distinctive identity. A refreshed approach to biblical interpretation represents a non-negotiable plank without which evangelicalism surely will continue to destroy itself.

Evangelicalism can find a foothold in renewed practices of reading Scripture. This article first illustrates the larger problems haunting evangelical patterns of reading Scripture by analyzing as a test case two prevalent evangelical interpretations of Gal 3:26–29.2 One of these interpretations arises from within the evangelical communities; the other represents a cluster of interpretations adapted by evangelicals. Both approaches, by attempting to find in the text a rubber-stamp justification of gender roles, fail the evangelical quadrilateral.

Next, I offer a better interpretive method and spell out how it treats this passage. We will see that, far from viewing the biblical texts too reverently, with a proposed correction of qualifying textual authority—an approach some evangelicals who struggle with difficult elements of Scripture have adopted—both of the earlier approaches may fail to respect the text enough. A more faithful, and indeed more just, approach does not denigrate Scripture, but understands original context and contemporary applications alike as crucial to a high view of biblical inspiration and appropriation.

Finally, I briefly address some questions as well as the potential pitfalls of a reinvigorated evangelical biblicism. Perhaps most pressing are concerns that this way of reading remains impossible for evangelicalism or that those most likely to identify the need to re-read have already adopted it, with little effect on the whole of the movement. In essence, does this article merely preach to the choir, and if so, how could the preacher speak to her congregation as a whole?

**Evangelical Test Case: Interpretations of Galatians 3**

**Framing the Question**

How should evangelical Christians understand Gal 3:26–29, particularly given the ways this passage continues to be pressed to define gender roles in the church? Does this selection convey Paul's egalitarian viewpoints that have since been sadly lost in the codification of ecclesial structures?3 Does it promote an androgynous humanity in preparation for an eschatological cessation of gender?4 Is it a claim of spiritual equality applicable only to a person's entrance into the Christian community?5 Or does it entail nothing at all for gender roles?6

Both revisionist arguments for egalitarianism and attempts to distinguish between spiritual status and spiritual function misuse Galatians because they fail to grapple with the way the letter describes baptism's ongoing and public incorporation of persons into Christ's death and resurrection.7 Representative of revisionist approaches, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's interpretation requires a canon within the canon that ignores textual and historical complexities and thus key evangelical priorities.8 To address the second approach, which separates status and function, I analyze Peter Schemm's interpretation and its echo in Wayne Walden's reticence to apply the text to gender roles. Any focus on spiritual status as the only equality intended by Paul divorces justification from the rest of the believer's life. By failing to read this section in relation to the letter as a whole or alongside its historical function, they too risk manipulating the passage to serve preconceived notions.

Another way to situate the problem is to plot these two competing modes of reading Galatians on the Diagram of Biblical Interpretation created by Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen. Their visual representation of different interpretive methods locates concerns with the historical origins of a text in a left column, answering questions regarding the world behind the text. Methods concerned with the text itself cluster in the center column. The right column contains interpretive approaches focused on readers' concerns. Finally, a row for theological and allegorical interpretation runs through all three columns at the bottom of the chart; such approaches look for the character of God in the text as well as in its background and its interpretation. Evangelical biblicism, concerned with Scripture's inerrancy, has for the past century and a half focused on reading the Bible literally, and has recently accepted various criticisms represented...
by the center column (the text), left column (the world of the text), and bottom row (theological interpretation) of the Soulsen’s diagram. But the column on the right (the world of the interpreter) proves trickier. Thus Walden and Schemm delve into word studies, rhetorical analysis, and comparison of manuscripts (center and left columns), but they are suspicious of approaches rooted elsewhere. Schüssler Fiorenza, by contrast, adopts a feminist critique derived from the right column’s question of how the text may be adapted for its readers’ needs.

By ignoring how Gal 3:26–29 fits within the entire epistle, and by treating the history of the text’s interpretation separately from its composition, both approaches—revisionist and status vs. function—construct distorted readings. They offer evangelical biblicism only a myopic focus on the text’s details (Schemm and Walden) or a critique of how it has poorly functioned (Schüssler Fiorenza) that either has to posit a mysterious positive origin behind later misuses or break from the text entirely in order to seek justice. Both readings fail to work across all three columns to develop an interpretation that bridges the text’s original context with current situations on the basis of the bottom row, the character of Christ. In so doing, they neglect roots of the evangelical quadrilateral in this very epistle: the new identities Galatians proclaims arise from believers’ unions with Christ through baptism—identities centered on the cross, enacted publicly and socially, and oriented towards the ongoing conversion of self and community.

**Does Baptism Only Effect a Static Spiritual Equality?**

I will begin with the approach that presents Gal 3 as describing the status of being justified in Christ that is offered equally to all people but does not create or connote equality of spiritual, ecclesial, or social function. Roots of this distinction can be found at least as far back as Martin Luther’s commentary on Galatians. Various evangelical commentaries from the last one hundred years assert similarly that: baptism does not erase distinctions within “temporal matters”; the gospel “changes nothing in the domain of this world and this natural life”; “in the dimension of spiritual possessions and privilege there is absolutely no difference” between women and men, but the opposite is true “in matters of rule in the home and in the church.”

Schemm, advocating for this position, argues that, according to the “traditional” interpretation of the text, “Paul simply has in mind that all believers, no matter what their racial, social, or gender status, share the same spiritual status in their union with Christ.” He states that the three pairs of vv. 26–29 describe how these various identities receive access to Christ’s inheritance as their salvation. For Schemm, such salvation has “little

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Event of Communication</th>
<th>The World Behind the Text</th>
<th>The World of the Text</th>
<th>The World In Front of the Text</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Oral and written traditions, author, editor, compiler, etc.</td>
<td>Implied author, implied receiver, manuscripts, etc.</td>
<td>Historical receiver, interpreter, etc.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

| B. Interpretive Approaches | Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism, etc. | Textual Criticism, Rhetorical Analysis, Narrative Criticism, etc. | Feminist Interpretation, Womanist Interpretation, etc. |

| C. So what? | Theological Interpretation |

church. He tries valiantly to deny this stance, but his conclusions nevertheless perform it. He does grant that for Paul, the believer’s status entails union with God. He states, “whether Paul is speaking of the baptism of the Spirit into the body of Christ (Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 12:13) or water immersion as a testimony of regeneration, or both, since both are in fact biblical realities, the result is that believers find themselves in Christ and ‘have put on Christ.’”

As Schemm admits, the assumption that no social consequences follow from union with Christ cannot hold for the other two pairs: Gentiles and slaves. With regard to these identities, many evangelicals now believe that because of the equality of justified status granted to believers in baptism, roles based on such distinctions violate the gospel and the gospel requires abolishing such discrimination.

Yet Schemm denies that this passage establishes that equality (one wonders where else he would biblically source this important development). Instead, he reads Galatians to conflate the retention of gender-based ecclesial roles with the retention of gender, racial, and social distinctions. Note how quickly he makes these two elements interchangeable: “As Christians,” he says, “we retain racial, social, and gender distinctions. In what sense, then, is it true that in Christ there is neither male nor female?” In other words, the status-function distinction Schemm relies on to maintain restricted ecclesial roles for women has to separate the person’s incorporation into Christ from her continuing life of representation of Christ. Should not her full identity be marked by being clothed with Christ in baptism, as Gal 3 describes? Does not this reading, coupled with Walden’s conclusions, smuggle assumptions into the text?

Schemm does not take adequate stock of the significance of Paul’s declaration that believers have put off not merely old beliefs, but also an old way of life. As we will see, the remainder of Galatians does in fact concern itself with how putting on Christ holds consequences, not just for a spiritual status or an entrance into the family of God, but for the whole of a person’s life. Moreover, classical evangelicalism demands such methods of reading when it prioritizes ongoing socially engaged conversion rooted in the cross of Christ, into whom each Christian is baptized. Therefore, Schemm and Walden’s interpretive approaches fail the evangelical quadrilateral, which, in fact, finds its roots in Galatians.

Was an Original Baptismal Egalitarianism Lost?

Since at least the 1960s, some have argued that Gal 3 provides a cut-and-dried egalitarian framework. A well-developed example can be found in Schüssler Fiorenza’s In Memory of Her, which proposes the elimination of gender hierarchies based on reconstructionist readings of the NT. For Schüssler Fiorenza, the patriarchy enshrined in the biblical texts means that even a “neo-orthodox” feminist reading focusing on the presence of some ethical principles of egalitarianism runs the risk of “reducing the ambiguity of historical struggle to theological essences and abstract, timeless principles.” For her, the impact created by the androcentrism of scriptural texts and their sexist interpretations throughout history should be reclaimed as women’s true lived
experience, the actual reality of Christianity. This reclamation reveals the need to develop a feminist approach to interpretation that exposes androcentric language, texts, contexts, and interpretations, rather than merely creating an alternative perspective relegated to the fringes of the church. Therefore, “the revelatory canon for theological evaluation of biblical androcentric traditions and their subsequent interpretations cannot be derived from the Bible itself but can only be formulated in and through women's struggle for liberation from all patriarchal oppression.” 

Nevertheless, Schüssler Fiorenza interprets Gal 3:26–29 by appealing to authorial intent as a reliable source of egalitarian value—dispelling the “neo-orthodoxy” she criticizes. She recognizes the passage as a Pauline twist on an earlier baptismal formula that “advocates the abolition of religious-cultural divisions and of the domination and exploitation wrought by institutional slavery but also of domination based on sexual divisions.”

She notes that the formula does not entail the eradication of biological differences, but rather the understanding that “in the Christian community all distinctions of religion, race, class, nationality, and gender are insignificant.”

For Schüssler Fiorenza, Gal 3:28 “does not assert that there are no longer men and women in Christ, but that patriarchal marriage . . . is no longer constitutive of the new community in Christ.” However, she finds in Paul's high value of the unmarried a tendency to devalue the contributions of Christian wives.

Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the text's conclusions are sufficiently strong to affirm the equality of women in spiritual leadership.

For Schüssler Fiorenza, Gal 3:28 “does not assert that there are no longer men and women in Christ, but that patriarchal marriage . . . is no longer constitutive of the new community in Christ.”

Both types of readings surveyed above are incomplete. Each correctly cries foul when their opponents disproportionately weigh certain passages and fail to take context into account; yet when they propose their solutions, each evinces similar tendencies. A complementarian reading keeps the text's conclusions out of service. A quick appeal to Gal 3 serves as justification for gender equality, with no explanations or careful interpretation provided. This method for promoting egalitarianism does not represent the best model for evangelicals.

Another Way?

Both types of readings surveyed above are incomplete. Each correctly cries foul when their opponents disproportionately weigh certain passages and fail to take context into account; yet when they propose their solutions, each evinces similar tendencies.

A complementarian reading keeps the text's conclusions out of daily living and thus fails the evangelical standard of being cross-centered, socially active, and committed to continuing conversion. It also commits the sin of reading bodies and cultures out of Scripture in favor of a supposedly universal "spiritual" application. The revisionist interpretations surveyed, which are adopted in whole or in part by some egalitarians, yield just as spiritualized a reading when they press abstract and thin ideals of “equality” upon the text without connecting such standards with the text itself.

Because both interpretations constrict the oneness in Christ that is the subject of the passage and the entire letter into a vague, spiritualized state, neither does the passage justice. Because both readings separate Gal 3's discussion of baptism into Christ from Paul's concern to shape the baptized community into an ongoing state of being converted to unity in Christ Jesus, neither can sustain the biblicalism leg of the evangelical quadrilateral. For both of my interlocutors, a healthy dose of historical context is prescribed:
connecting the contemporary reader to the original text by examining its original context, how it has been read throughout history, and how it speaks today. Both the roots and the offshoots of Gal 3 are more complicated than either of these perspectives allows. With this in mind, we turn to developing an interpretive approach that can uphold the full evangelical quadrilateral.

The Permanent and Public Application of Baptismal Identity

A better interpretation starts with wider view of the letter as a whole, moves beyond analysis of individual words to framing them in their historical context, and learns to read the text in the way it was written—a churchly endeavor creating an all-encompassing, holistic identity that will connect Christ’s followers to one another above other social, economic, or political constructs.57

In other words, a crucial step of interpreting the passage for the community who reads it as sacred, authoritative, and trustworthy demands paying attention to the way this text has functioned in that community in the past, which lays groundwork for how it can function today. This approach includes all three of the Soulens’ columns and adds the stabilizing requirement of the bottom row’s theological interpretation: aligning with the character of Christ.

Understanding these aspects requires closer attention to the context of Galatians, which discloses the communal concerns of those baptized into Christ but struggling to relate to one another given the mismatches between their politically-defined identities and their baptisms. The baptism in Gal 3:27 constitutes not only a public announcement of a private one-time decision but also the individual’s acceptance of a continually developing communally-shaped life that upends other identities. The character of this unfolding life must match that of its initiation and vice versa. Paul’s words establish an equality of baptismal entrance into the body of Christ, which necessitates a continuing equality of ecclesial existence.

The Centrality of Baptism into Christ

Paul presents Christ as the true heir who fulfills the law and thus breaks its power (3:16–18, 4:4–7). Christ alone realizes the promise that all nations will be blessed through Abraham. Belonging to Christ, the singular seed of Abraham (3:29), makes the believer able to sustain Christ’s identity against persecution? One is able to submit oneself to any other authority and then suffering in the manner that Christ did once those structures exact a penalty.46 Incorporation into the body of Christ entails refusing to submit oneself to any other authority and then suffering in the manner that Christ did once those structures exact a penalty.46

How is one incorporated into Christ and made a new creation able to sustain Christ’s identity against persecution? One is baptized, as Gal 3:27 states, and then one lives out that baptismal identity, as 28–29 describe. Whether one considers 26–29 an early baptismal liturgy,47 themes of belonging to Christ and to the family of Christ as the result of baptism permeate the passage. What Schemm and Schüssler Fiorenza both overlook, then, is the significance of baptism’s creation of a new identity for believers.

This line of argument does not require a discussion of how baptism should be conducted, but about what it does—its purpose and effects. Debates about how baptism should be marked by the church are important, but they are not the focus here; indeed, one way to evaluate these various formats for baptism is to ask how well each one fulfills what Gal 3 describes as the measure of the gospel.

Baptism’s Fruits

One discussion of how baptism effects the union of Gal 3 draws from the work of Michael Gorman. Gorman notes, “For Paul, this intimate identification with Christ symbolized in baptism is not merely a one-time event but an experience of ongoing death, of ongoing crucifixion.”48 For Gorman, baptism in Pauline theology does not require merely a cognitive affirmation of dogmatic statements about Jesus but a participation in Jesus’s way of living, an inauguration into an ongoing way of life, a commitment to a reliance upon Christ, and an intention to daily imitate him.49 Such a commitment brings with it a way of antilegalistic “justification by faith,” but rather as part of the inner working of the gospel itself.40

This gospel calls Christians to form a new family free from all powers of evil, including social solidarities based in any other identity than that of belonging to Christ.41

Indeed, the social identities of Paul’s day did threaten the gospel. Justin Hardin’s book, Galatians and the Imperial Cult, depicts the holistically-demanding nature of the religions the Galatians were leaving for the sake of Christ.42 Brigitte Kahl’s Galatians Re-Imagined draws similar conclusions; her mapping of power relations within the Roman Empire, within Torah-following Judaism, and within Paul’s other writings makes clear why Paul believed that to return to either the Jewish or Roman status distinctions negated the gospel. Just as the empire’s politics counted conformation to the rule of Rome an essential marker of a person’s worth and sought to entrench those beliefs in all aspects of a person’s life, first-century Jewish senses of covenant enacted the same principle over a different group, looking down upon and excluding non-Jews.49 Kahl argues that the gospel Paul preaches upends all such dynamics in its discussion of the family of God created in the person of Christ.44 This explains why Paul writes to the Galatians with such urgency: their social exclusion of another, far from belonging to a secondary arena, creates idols of these other identities. Hardin adds that, to the Galatian Christians, caught between these two arenas of acceptable religious expression, Paul presents his own marks of persecution as the model of sharing in Christ’s life.45 Incorporation into the body of Christ entails refusing to submit oneself to any other authority and then suffering in the manner that Christ did once those structures exact a penalty.46

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living in companionship with others who are also committed to Jesus. This community’s only foundation and guiding shape is the life and death of Christ. The Christian community, both its individuals and the shape of the church as a whole, continually re-actualizes Christ’s death. Baptism, then, is not about a person’s acceptance of justification at a point in time but about an ongoing intention to be clothed with Christ-likeness within the community of believers.

Gorman goes on to suggest that this conformity to Christ given in baptism becomes the new mode of human existence. Humanity is meant to be marked by mutual solidarity born out of a common death that imitates Christ’s death to competition, success, and worldly powers. “It is for this reason,” Gorman concludes, “that Paul’s communities transcend gender, class, and racial barriers (Gal. 3:28): life in Christ is grounded in a power that makes somebodies out of nobodies and renders so-called somebodies no more or less significant than their ‘inferiors.’” The status markers of the world are reversed such that, “while social distinctions remain in the Pauline communities . . . the strongest forces experienced in these communities are not those that distinguish the socially inferior from the socially superior. Rather, these communities experience a power that transcends and reverses social status, a power known only in the cross and in communities shaped by it.”

Galatians 3 shows that, by putting on Christ through baptism, the believer becomes an heir of God for an ongoing life of equal inheritance alongside all other believers. Paul undoes exclusions of anyone from entering into direct covenant relationship with God because they are not free, male, circumcised Jews. Being right with God no longer rests upon the power dynamics associated with these three identity markers. Because being in Christ is now open to all, baptism breaks the power of the law’s gender exclusions, destroys pagan enslavement to political might, and elevates the oppressed into equality.

The point is not that ethnicity, gender, or social distinctions are obliterated in the baptism of the justified. These dichotomies are totalizing: one is either circumcised or not, male or not, purchased by someone or not. Trying to remove signs of these polarities means that one side of the identity opposition will still be considered the better, desirable identity, and from there can become a false marker of power within Christ’s household. Instead, Paul’s point is that a new status belongs to all the justified in Christ, right within their current social identities.

Such distinctions remain but have lost their ability to stratify the church as they sway the world. And since the effects of the baptism that enjoins this new status are not restricted to a one-time event, they structure the ongoing life of the church, including its leadership roles. Thus, through baptism into Christ, women as well as men, slaves as well as free, Gentiles as well as Jews, receive both equal entrance and equal standing within the community of Christ. No one can progress beyond this equalizing state, no one can claim any social markers as normative for Christian identity, no one can hold special offices on the basis of any of these distinctions: all have become one with Christ and unified with diverse others also included in Christ. All identities with their derivative practices now stand deprived of their power to structure the church.

Moreover, as Christians embrace an ecclesial unity built around a Christiformity to which they are asked to continually convert the entirety of their lives, they must carry this subversion of socio-political hierarchies into the world. All that remains to be noted in this section is that this explanation of Galatians matches the classic evangelical quadrilateral—with one addition to be explained below.

**Returning to the Larger Frame: How Should Evangelicals Read?**

I have suggested that standard evangelical ways of prioritizing Scripture tend to lean in one of two directions: a shallow literal reading that uses a minimum of scholarship in an attempt to preserve the text’s divine inspiration and authority or a thin revisionist reading that does not connect the text to its historical context or acknowledge its complex usages within ecclesial communities. Both of these interpretations fail the evangelical quadrilateral and therefore cannot be used to proof-text Gal 3:26–29 for or against women’s full equality in ministry. Such readings abuse the text and obscure its meanings from the community who wishes to look to it for divine guidance.

Instead, the passage should be read across all modes of interpretation. Deeper engagement with historical criticism as well as greater facility with liberation reading methods can redirect evangelical biblicism. This more responsible engagement with the text’s own particularities highlights how authentic, Christ-like living may be enacted by readers of the text—first in Paul’s day and now in our own. My investigation of Galatians has lifted up ways this section of the letter contributes to the argument of the whole, has uncovered what its claims meant in its original setting, and has clarified how its claims ought to be understood today.

One clarification immediately arises. This reading should not be cast as contradicting a careful reading of 1 Tim 2:8–15. Neither of the two trajectories explored can successfully discharge the duty to read biblical texts as part of one authoritative canon, because the one flattens out Galatians in favor of a (shallow) literal reading of 1 Timothy, while the other weights a spiritualized reading of Galatians over 1 Timothy. Both set Galatians and 1 Timothy in opposition to each other. The view of Galatians offered here suggests that a less restrictive approach to 1 Timothy based on the same historical-critical and liberative methods is the only way to hold both texts together so they can be interpreted along the lines of the quadrilateral.

Attending to details of the text’s original setting as well as to its grammar and vocabulary should strengthen a high view of Scripture, not lessen it. Similarly, taking into account responses to the text from the lived experiences of its readers today adds to a renewed biblicism. Finally, seeking conformity to Christ’s own life as the Soulens’ bottom row’s interpretive standard heightens respect for the Scriptures. The history of evangelical Protestantism predicts that new challenges to received interpretations may in fact more reliably uncover the divine intent behind the text. As Daniel Castelo points out in his discussion of the Holy Spirit’s role in the Bible’s reliability, restricting textual authority to inspiration and authorial intent keeps the text’s trustworthiness tethered to whatever we may understand of its historical process. Understanding the difference between our interpretations and
the truth of Scripture requires an openness to the ways the Spirit guides the community as it seeks conformity to Christ in reading and appropriating the text. In this sense, neither the Schemm-Walden nor the Schüssler Fiorenza trajectory goes far enough in establishing a high view of Scripture.

Galatians 3 appears to constitute a problem because of its dramatic claims concerning those who follow Christ. Understanding these claims, directed towards the earliest Christian communities, prioritizes reading with an eye toward how that community functions, now as much then. This explanation yields a more holistic, reliable interpretation that fulfills the community’s needs.

Expanding the Quadrilateral

These findings create a fifth leg for the evangelical quadrilateral, one which would change the movement: a prioritization of a sense of church that proves necessary for correct scriptural interpretation. The life of the church is not only primary for properly understanding the content of Scripture but also for generating the right methods for handling Scripture. The biblicism that establishes Christ-imaging, continually-converting, and socially-active evangelism leads to a deeper ecclesial sensibility, which in turn informs the other four legs. Can evangelicalism sustain such an addition, or will a more robust sense of the importance of the church cause it to lose its distinctives? Given the current turning point facing the movement, acquiring a sense of the importance of church as the community of the baptized and inseparable from biblical interpretation offers the movement its only way forward.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, this article may only preach to the choir. But tensions around gender are growing, increasing the need to continually place ourselves in those choir stalls. The interpretation supplied here offers more than an academic exercise. Since unity in Christ does not equal uniformity, baptism creates the one body of many parts described in 1 Cor 12. Following Gerd Theißen, Judith Gundry-Volf suggests that for Paul, the oneness of the family of God can be compared to the oneness of a married couple. If this obtains, then unity in the one body of Christ does not erase differences but consists of cleaving together in and through differences. This cleaving in the midst of difference requires both the baptismal posture of conversion to Christ by forming union with one another and public accountability for interpretations, even where we disagree.

Christians can expect the process of building one body out of different identities for the sake of Christ to entail struggle. An understanding of tradition chastens both Schüssler Fiorenza and Schemm and enlivens Gal 3 at a new level: acknowledging the baptismal identities of those who have come before us and those to whom we are currently opposed reminds us that the body of Christ, in every generation, argues with and misunderstands each other. It should come as no surprise that in barely 100 years after women in the United States were given the right to vote, and on the heels of changes that allow women to pursue education, work, and own property, gender still unsettles the church. There is nothing wrong with such disagreement in and of itself; on the contrary, it has been the de facto state of Christians during Paul’s life and throughout the ages as people grapple with how to relate Christ’s baptism to socio-political identities. Discernment of where such distinctions subvert the baptismal identities of believers takes time, and it takes the Christ-formed church’s wrestling together. The church currently stands squarely within this process as it grapples with gender, and we cannot forget that this process demands Christ-conformed accountability from all members, on this topic as well as with so many others.

On the one hand, complementarians are asked to lay down their arms, to step into the pain of their brothers and sisters who believe the gospel requires such movement, and to patiently weigh the arguments. They are also asked to query their assumptions of what justification is, to examine how their arguments separate baptism from ongoing ecclesial and public life, and to listen to others who believe they enshrine sinful patterns of power within the church.

On the other hand, egalitarians are also asked to bear Christ. If, as many egalitarians argue should be the case, church offices are no longer a function of sex, they must be changed for the sake of forming community gathered around Christ to upend wrongful power structures. Doing so should follow Paul’s guidelines in Rom 14: acknowledging that even where one believes brothers and sisters are sorely mistaken, glee over their stumbling should be set aside. Finally, such change should also create a non-negotiable solidarity with others similarly oppressed in church and society so that the churches may read more deeply with an ever-widening circle.

For all parties, Galatians reminds us that living out our baptismal identity is a contemporary mandate and has immediate relevance for how we carry out our debates, not only their content. Can evangelicalism live up to this task?

Notes

1. Atonement, biblicism, evangelism, and personal conversion make up the four components of the evangelical quadrilateral. See David Bebbington’s description in Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (Unwin Hyman, 1989) 2–17, now undergoing revision in such offerings as Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge University Press, 2007) 1–14. “Biblicism” should not be confused with bibliolatry; Bebbington describes the former as “devotion to the Bible” and the “belief that all spiritual truth is to be found and interpreted in the Bible.”

2. This choice of test case is not unintentional. At the heart of contemporary American evangelical failure lies a profound and unexamined oppression of, for example, women, people of color, those in poverty, those on the carceral spectrum, members of other religions, immigrants, and refugees.


7. Throughout this article, I use language of “conformity to Christ” in both death and resurrection as a slight corrective to “cross-centered,” because all too often those in power protect their own lives at the cost of others.
of the death of those who suffer and do not seek the latter's resurrection.

8. Meeks and Scroggs articulate other revisionist approaches; see n. 4 above.


18. Note how Schemm stops his reading of the context of this passage by devoting one paragraph to the letter as a whole and then simply appealing to Gal 3–4, rather than digging more deeply into the full letter and its historical context (see “Galatians 3:28,” 25).

21. At least, American evangelical communities have in the past made such social equity their driving concern. They may now be simply paying lip service to these ideals without the inclination to practice them afresh.

22. Schemm, “Galatians 3:28,” 26. In addition, Schemm's analysis of Galatians as unconnected to contemporary discussions of gender ignores that this text has played a significant role in the history of Christian theology. Many attempts to delineate an eschatological androgyny, built as they were upon suppositions of female inferiority derived from Aristotelian biology, focused on turning women into men, or upon removing feminine characteristics from both women and men. Such opinions fail to suitably acknowledge equality in gendered flesh before the eschaton. See Pauline Nigh Hogan, "No Longer Male and Female": Interpreting Galatians 3:28 in Early Christianity, LNTS 380 (T&T Clark, 2008). Consider as well the story of the early 300s martyr Perpetua for an adequate account of complex factors in early Christianity. In fact, students of the New Testament have long recognized the role of the Roman Empire and the Church in shaping women's experiences in the early centuries. See, for example, J. B. Lightfoot, The Epistle to the Hebrews (TS 69/3, 1899), and the writings of Hogan and others for a comprehensive treatment of the subject.

23. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 27.
24. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 32.
25. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 34.
27. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 213.
28. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 211.
29. Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 236.
31. Schüssler Fiorenza is not alone in positing such a dichotomy. See also Paul K. Jewett, Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View (Eerdmans, 1975) 111–28: “The apostle Paul was the heir of this contrast between the old and the new. To understand his thought about the relations of the woman to the man, one must appreciate that he was both a Jew and a Christian. And his thinking about women—their place in life generally and in the church specifically—reflects both his Jewish and his Christian experience. . . . So far as he thought in terms of his Jewish background, he thought of the woman as subordinate to the man for whose sake she was created (1 Cor. 11:9). But so far as he thought in terms of the new insight he had gained through the revelation of God in Christ, he thought of the woman as equal to the man in all things, the two having been made one in Christ, in whom there is neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28)” (112).

33. See Kraemer, “In Memory of Her,” 724–25 for a helpful examination of the problematic nature of the building blocks Schüssler Fiorenza must assume as foundational for her argument.

35. Otherwise, this reading merely represents a deconstructionist response similar to Daphne Hampson's conclusion in Swallowing a Fishbone? Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity (SPCK, 1996) 1–16: as Christianity represents a heteronomous authority over a woman by virtue of claiming God's authority over persons, by considering God's definitive revelation to occur at a certain patriarchal point of history, and by building ecclesial structures, "for a feminist to be a Christian is indeed for her to swallow a fishbone. It must stick in her throat. . . . It should not be swallowed” (1, 16).

36. For a reconstructed letter to Phoebe that perfectly illustrates this problem, see Schüssler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her, 61–64, cf. 118ff. Here, Schüssler Fiorenza falls into the same trap that she believes besets feminist neo-orthodox scholars. For, despite how her analysis of Paul acknowledges historical nuance, she also makes prescriptive statements grounded in universal claims! Though she earlier grants that Paul appears to hold both more open and more restrictive views on women, eventually she cannot avoid advancing universally-applicable principles in a manner similar to those who ignore strict Pauline regulations in order to seize upon his more permissive statements as the truly Pauline material. Schüssler Fiorenza attempts to ground an inauguration of gender equality in Jesus' purported acceptance of a normative status of the book of Judith and of the Sophia tradition as well as by claiming that the early Christian churches modeled egalitarian Greco-Roman voluntary religious associations. In addition to remaining unsubstantiated, such claims risk positing monolithic structures of gender and religious practice, in direct negation of her stated goal to take adequate account of complex factors in early Christianity. In fact, later Christian interpretations of Galatians include both proposals for eschatological gender androgyny as well as proposals for gender-based hierarchies, sometimes even advocating for a present hierarchy that will at some tipping point turn into androgyny. See Rowan Williams, "Macrina's Deathbed Revisited: Gregory of Nyssa on Mind and Passion," pp. 227–46 in Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy: Essays in Tribute to George Christopher Stead (Brill, 1993) and the writings of Hogan and Harrison cited above in n. 22.

37. One resource that can help push evangelical hermeneutics in the direction I am proposing is Michael J. Gorman, ed., Scripture and Its Interpretation: A Global, Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible (Baker, 2017).

40. Wright, “Letter to the Galatians,” 220. See also Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 2001) 219. What is at issue in Galatians is “not the presence or meaning of faith itself, but the credibility of his [Paul’s] Law-free gospel, and thus of the sufficiency of the spirit of the faithful Messiah, as a means to embodying the will of God in daily life.”


43. Its role as pedagogue to the chosen people until the true heir arrives now over (3:6–25). Judaism becomes an ethnic allegiance that must be submitted to Christ. As John Barclay summarizes: “Paul renounces law-observant Judaism not because it is legalistic but because it is nationalistic—bound by its own history and culture to the extent that God’s saving activity is envisaged in racial and cultural terms” (Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul’s Ethics in Galatians*, ed. John Riches [T&T Clark, 1988] 240).

44. Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished*, Paul in Critical Contexts (Fortress, 2010), esp. ch. 6. My positive review of her conclusions here does not extend to a wholesale agreement with all of her methods and statements.


46. Hardin, *Imperial Cult*, 151. Hardin’s proposals offer an intriguing view into the dilemma Paul’s readers were facing, but his attention to the reasons for denying the teachers’ solutions seems a bit thin and centered on individual choice. He does not broach the communal or familial dimensions of denying the imperial cult, nor does he include a treatment of the communal or familial *rationale* for denying the imperial cult.


51. The churches become living commentaries on the master story of Christ, shunning allegiance to any other master. The church as an entity is not a supplement to a private spirituality but “is what God is up to in the world: re-creating a people whose corporate life tells the world what the death and resurrection of the Messiah is all about” (Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 367).


53. For Paul, God chooses the opposite of power so that those who are chosen know that the source of [their] life—the power of their existence and the reason for their privileged status—has absolutely nothing to do with their ‘power’ measured in human terms. . . . All other claims or attempts at power are thereby rendered impotent” (Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 300).


55. See Martyn, *Galatians*, 570–71, and Robert M. Grant, “Neither Male nor Female,” *BR* 37 (1992) 5–14, especially 5–11. Paul’s actual phrase in v. 28 best translates to “there is neither Jew nor Greek, bondservant nor free, no longer any male and female.” The NRSV or ESV translations are thus to be preferred to the 1984 NIV or NET, which render the phrase, “neither male nor female” in order to create continuity with the “neither Jew nor Greek, neither bondservant nor free” phrases; although see now the 2011 NIV, which translates the passage “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female.”

56. At the same time, this undoing is not justification for the long history of anti-Semitic readings that have plagued Christian theology.


61. My thanks to Dr. Joseph K. Gordon for the phrasing of this sentence, as well as for helpful comments on an early draft of this article.


63. Thanks again to Joe Gordon for this phrasing.


67. The church should have been leading the way for these changes, rather than dragging far behind them.


69. Refusing to rejoice means something quite different from setting appropriate boundaries in both conduct and theology. Galatians’ teaching does not provide a warm and fuzzy sense of ecclesial union that papers over the very serious and harmful repercussions that ensue from failures to enact this baptismal identity, including ecclesial breaks. Yet even here, Christians can mourn the disunity that plagues Christ’s body.