PREACHING EQUALITY: GALATIANS 3:28

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Preach the Gospel and Equality Shall be Added Unto You

If only this was true. If we look at Galatians 3:28 as central to “the truth of the gospel” that Paul proclaimed to his Galatian congregations, then we would expect to have witnessed equality in the church for the last 2000 years. In our baptism into Christ, Paul proclaimed, there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ Jesus. This is a profound statement in the least. Such a proclamation sounds like equality to our contemporary ears. Yet we know that racial, social, and gender equality in the church has been far from a realized fact. The church that was called into being in Christ Jesus has itself failed to live out the truth of the gospel: freedom—freedom from all that would separate us in the body of Christ.

The Power of the Gospel Read, Preached, and Heard: Gal. 3:28

When I was in seminary, I took a course on Paul’s letters taught by the Rev. Dr. Donald Juel, a Lutheran pastor and professor of New Testament. There were only six students in the class: four women, two men. Donald Juel told us a story of when, in a similar class years before, the class members found themselves confronted with the proclamation of Gal. 3:28. One female student read and heard Paul’s words, “In Christ there is no longer . . . male and female, for all are one.” This student’s very life was turned upside down by these words. She knew she was called to ministry, called to preach the word of God, yet because of her tradition, as a life-long Roman Catholic, she had never imagined that her calling could be fulfilled. The gospel, though, leapt from the pages of Scripture, its truth grasping hold of her and radically re-orienting her life. She left her tradition and sought out a denomination that would honor her call to preach and administer the sacraments. Professor Juel admitted to us that, at the time, this woman’s response to Gal. 3:28 made him very nervous. What would her family think we’re teaching here at seminary? He had thought. Dr. Juel learned that the power of the gospel read, proclaimed, and heard, should make us all tremble. The truth of the gospel is not under our control nor does it play nice with our traditions, social systems, or our beliefs about gender roles. The truth of the gospel has the power to change our lives, and it should do just that.

The Context of Gal 3:28 within Paul’s Letter

What sparked Paul to make his radical claim that in Christ Jesus all are one? Among the Galatians (who were descendants of
central-European Celts living in Asia Minor) Paul had preached the gospel of “Christ crucified” (3:1) and the liberation God had achieved for the entire cosmos through Christ’s faithful death upon the cross. Paul knew that this message had had an impact on the Galatians, for, as he reminds them, he had seen evidence of the Spirit’s work in the midst of their congregations (3:2-5). Nevertheless, after Paul left the Galatians to continue his work of preaching the gospel, something went wrong in the midst of their congregations. Other teachers started preaching to the Galatians, informing them that Paul had not told them the whole story of God’s action on their behalf. For them to be fully part of God’s act of deliverance from the oppression of sin, the Galatian believers were told they needed to come under the sphere of the Law’s power: the power of the Law to keep the Galatians hemmed in, protected from sin’s power. For the men in the congregations, adhering to the Law meant undergoing circumcision. For men and women alike, this new teaching meant that Christ’s faith was not sufficient for their being made right with God (dikaiosyne, “making right”). All alike were compelled to submit to the Law; they were not fully free unless their daily lives were regimented by the Law and its multiple strictures. Many of the Galatians began to doubt their relationship to God, through Christ, and to doubt their freedom in Christ.

When Paul heard of this new development, he was outraged. For him, there was no other gospel than that of God’s liberation of humanity and the entire cosmos from the grasp of “the present evil age” by way of Christ’s faithful death (1:3-4). Anything else was a false gospel, that is, no gospel at all (1: 6-7). In his adamant response, Paul declares to his Galatian hearers that there were no requirements put on them when they were claimed by the gospel, made right with God through Christ’s faithful death on their behalf, and received true inheritance: the Spirit, who made that gospel message efficacious in their communities.

The Gospel of Liberation has Very Tangible Implications

In his letter Paul reminded the Galatians that the truth of the gospel had very tangible implications for their life in community. When the gospel invaded the lives of both Jews and Gentiles alike, in Antioch, thereby declaring them one body in Christ, there was nothing that prevented the two communities from worshipping together or sitting down at a table together. What was once forbidden under the oppression of the old cosmos was now possible in Christ: the two, separated communities could now sit down together and share in fellowship and common meals. But, when messengers from the Jerusalem church came and told the Antiochenes that what they were doing was wrong, the two groups began to separate out again. Even church leaders whom Paul trusted, Simon Peter and Barnabas, joined in what Paul diagnosed as hypocrisy in relation to the gospel. Paul condemned such ill-treatment of the community that God had called into existence in Jesus Christ. Those whom the gospel has claimed and joined together, let no men put asunder!

The Founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church

In the late 1780’s, at St. George’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, white and black members of the congregation did not sit together. White leadership of the church had grown uncomfortable with the rise in the number of black worshippers, both slave and free. The white leaders of the church forced the black members to sit in the gallery (even toward the back of the gallery)
during the main worship service. This meant that black congregants could only come down to the altar railing to pray or to receive communion after the whites had finished their worship and left the sanctuary. Richard Allen, a former slave who had bought his own freedom and had been licensed to preach to the growing number of black congregants, felt deeply the hypocrisy of this forced separation. Allen himself was converted to faith in Christ through the proclamation of the very gospel which he saw now in jeopardy. Faced with this denial of access to the full body of Christ, Allen, along with other black leaders of the congregation, led a mass exodus of the black members of the congregation to found a congregation of their own. Denied table fellowship, they knew that the truth of the gospel was threatened. Denied the equality that is the result of the proclamation of the gospel, Allen and his followers founded the congregation that would eventually become the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Our Equality is Shaped by Co-Crucifixion With Christ

Paul admonished the Antioch church members as he proclaimed to them, “We were all under the oppression of sin, Jews and Gentiles alike. In Christ we have been delivered out of the hand of that oppression. We were all enslaved under the old cosmos, and what God has done in Christ is to emancipate us from that slavery. God has bought us off the slave market, redeemed us, and set us right. We are all alike in this.” Paul speaks of himself as the exemplar of what God has done, “I have been co-crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ now lives in me” (2:19-20). What Paul says of himself is true for all the Antiochenes and the Galatians, “Each has been crucified with Christ. Each has suffered the humiliating death of the old cosmos in his or her own body. Sin and the flesh have both suffered this death. The new life we all live together is one marked by this crucifixion through which God has affected for us a new freedom, a new unity, a new equality, as it were.” Paul tells the Galatians specifically that they had already known this new life to be true for them, because they had all seen evidence that the Spirit had made claim on their lives. They had seen works of power (dunamis; 3:5) in their midst, they had been baptized, and in their baptism they had clothed themselves with Christ (3:27). Through this baptism they had received the Spirit poured into their hearts and that Spirit had cried out through them, “Abba,” to their heavenly Parent, who was making them one family (4:6-7).

A Paradoxical Equality

How are Jews and Gentiles equal in Christ? Each has suffered co-crucifixion with Christ. Both Jewish believers and Gentiles believers have been clothed in the same Christ. All have been made one in this Christ, adopted into one family. All are heirs of the same Spirit, the same promise, the same inheritance. Their equality is paradoxical: they have all suffered the same death of the old cosmos with its separating distinctions. Each is the first-born child who receives an equal portion of the inheritance God has to offer. Each has been emancipated, set free to be . . . a slave.

A slave? Yes, here is the greatest paradox: in God’s setting all things right, the old dualisms are obliterated. No longer are there Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. All are one in Christ, emancipated to be slaves to one another! If we have read biblical translations that have used the word “servants” for the Greek douloi we miss that radical paradox of the life in Christ that Paul proclaims. Paul, in effect, says, “We were all once enslaved. All of us. God,
through Jesus Christ, has set us free. Now you are free to be slaves to one another.” With our former racial status and our former social standing obliterated, our new equality is transformed by the radically offensive status of being a slave. Such a categorization is not to be romanticized or overly spiritualized, lest we forget the horrors that human beings have perpetrated against each other throughout history in various forms of slavery. Physical, economic, and sexual slavery are brutal realities that testify to the oppressive capacity human beings exert over one another. Nevertheless, despite the offensiveness of being called to be slaves, Paul proclaims this to be our new status in the family which God has enacted in Jesus: slaves of one another.

How Can an Equality Marked by Co-Crucifixion and Slavery be Good News?

Paul, the preacher, proclaimed to the church members in Philippi, “Jesus Christ did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave. . .humbling himself, obedient even to death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8). Paul continues in this proclamation, “Let this same mind be in you...be in full accord and of one mind” (2:2). This was the Good News Paul proclaimed. What was good for the Philippians and the Galatians is good for us as well. First of all, this news is good because it is about God. Paul proclaims what God was up to in Jesus Christ. The message is about God and God’s initiative. God desired to set right what has gone wrong in the cosmos and God has achieved this in Jesus Christ. Second, this news is good because it affects all of us. No one is left untouched by what God has done and is doing. Third, lest we forget, this is all about God. We are mutually affected by what God has done. No one has higher status in God’s economy (oikonome). All have the same status as siblings, adopted children of one parent. Each is the inheritor of the fullness of what God has bestowed in Jesus Christ. Each has received an equal portion of God’s Spirit, each being clothed in the same garment: Christ himself. And the garment Christ himself wears is that of the humblest; a servant, a slave. In human flesh Christ was servant of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. As we take on the mantle of Christ, we are called into the radically offensive, yet godly, role of the co-crucified—slaves to one another. At the root (radix) of our relationship to one another before God is an equality marked by deep mutuality: a radical paradox of freedom in being yoked to one another in . . . love.

The Love of God is the Standard of the New Creation

If being called to be slaves to one another sounds offensive, and it should, then hear what Paul proclaims to be the reality of the New Creation, “Your new-found equality, where the old categories of race, social status, and gender no longer apply, is now grounded in a freedom wherein God sets the terms of that freedom. The new standard (kanon; 6:16) for life in the New Creation that God has enacted is love.” This is good news for us. By sending forth the Spirit into the hearts of believers, God empowers this new family where birth order is no longer relevant, where each is equally-inheriting, and all are mutual slaves to one another in love. Without God’s help we could not live up to this standard. In the old cosmos, our relationship to God and one another was marked by alienation, separation, disobedience, and oppression. In the New Creation, the community (koinonia) is now constituted by Spirit-inspired love.
When Love is Not Equal the Truth of the Gospel is Threatened

Paul reminded the Galatians how he had admonished the Antiochene church members for their lack of mutuality (2:11-14). When some members withdrew from mutual table fellowship, retreating, as it were, to the old cosmos, Paul said that the truth of the gospel was threatened. Paul exhorted his Galatian hearers to recognize when the truth of the gospel is threatened in their midst. They would see the evidence of the “works of the Flesh”: enmity, strife, divisions, quarrels, factions, riotous living, that is, anything that severs the ties of the community God has made” (5:16-21). However, when the truth of the gospel is alive and well in their communities, they would know this by the evidence of the “fruits of the Spirit”: love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control (5:22-23). That is, the old divisions would be obliterated. Paradoxically, in God’s New Creation, everyone in the community would be like a first-born child, all-inheriting, and, at the same time, a humble slave to all. Paul’s message is the same to us today: God’s love is the power that enables us faithfully to live out the truth of the gospel, loving our neighbors as ourselves (5:6, 14).

Preaching Equality

Paul preached the good news of Christ crucified. In this message of God’s act of deliverance, God’s love is known: Christ gave himself up to free all humanity from the grasp of oppression and to set right all that has gone wrong. Those claimed by this gospel message are placed within God’s new order: all are one in the New Creation. All have been crucified with Christ, suffering death to the old cosmos. All who have been claimed by the Spirit in baptism, have clothed themselves with mutuality in Christ. All are equal offspring, co-inheritors of God’s promised Spirit, empowered to love one another. Wherever Paul saw that the truth of this community-forming gospel message was threatened, he preached the good news, again. Paul re-preached the gospel to the church in Antioch when he saw their table fellowship threatened. Paul re-preached the gospel when he saw that the equality God had won for Jew and Gentile alike was threatened in the Galatian churches. Paul re-preached the gospel so that the Spirit of God might be active in the community, conforming all to one standard: love.

Whenever we are faced with situations in the church and the world, where the mutuality, equality, and unity won by God in Jesus Christ is threatened, we are called to proclaim the gospel. We are to preach the gospel, not so that some will be humble and some will lord it over others. We are to heed this call: Preach the gospel and equality shall be added unto you. Preach the gospel and love, peace, and joy shall be added unto you. Preach the gospel and men of all races, ethnicities, and social standing will know themselves equal before God: sisters and brothers of one another, each equally claimed, each equally and lovingly equipped to serve in the New Creation. “And for those who will follow this standard . . . grace, peace and mercy be upon them. Amen” (Gal 6:16, 18).

For Further Study:

For further study on Galatians and the theological perspectives advocated in this article, see J. Louis Martyn, Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday: New York, 1997); see also Beverly Gaventa, “Is Galatians Just a ‘Guy Thing’?: A Theological Reflection”
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