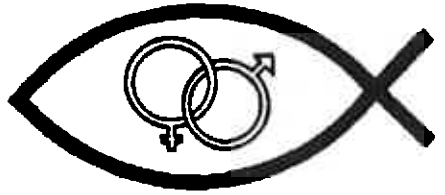


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GALATIANS 3:28

"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."

Faith McBurney Martin

Galatians 3:28 is quite clear. There is little doubt about the point Paul is making: In Christ we are all the same — we are equal with one another.

Yet for all its clarity, this verse is the source of great debate. Controversy centers on *how far* the principle of believer equality is to be applied. In other words, in what way are we the same? This question is particularly acute when men and women are under discussion.

Some say that equality is limited to the spiritual realm; men and women are "equal in Christ," however, *in the church* equality between believers "coexists" with divinely mandated hierarchy.¹

Others believe differently. They agree that equality is a spiritual truth, but being spiritual does not alter its impact for this present life. Proof is seen in the fact that Paul is offering that spiritual truth as the solution to a very down-to-earth problem.² How, these people ask, can the implementation of any spiritual truth be limited or withheld from our present life? Paul himself is quite emphatic in rejecting such a notion. Spiritual truths are for today. His entire letter to the Galatians is an eloquent rebuke to believers who are "not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel."³ Paul even calls this spiritual truth a "rule" and promises peace and mercy if they follow it!

Historical Background

Probably no other teaching of Paul has such a clear narrative leading up to its proclamation. The Book of Acts

tells how the new church was begun in Jerusalem, how the Christians loved one another and held everything in common.⁴ As the church grew, persecution began and the Christians were scattered. With their scattering the gospel was spread, eventually reaching the Gentiles. Conversion of Gentiles posed a problem for believers from the Jewish heritage. Were the promises of God for the Gentiles also?

The Book of Acts tells a fascinating story. While traveling from city to city meeting with new believers, Peter reached the city of Joppa. There he had a vision from God instructing him to receive Gentiles into the faith. The voice said, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Upon awaking, Peter was summoned to the home of some Gentile believers. As he was talking with them "the Holy Spirit fell upon them." Convinced that God was truly calling Gentiles, Peter extended New Testament baptism to them. He returned to Jerusalem, reported on his vision, defended his action and argued for the full acceptance of Gentiles into the church. "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 10-11:18).

That was not the end of the matter, however. Almost immediately the church divided into two groups — Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. The division came about because a powerful faction of Jewish Christians refused to fellowship with Gentiles. These Jewish Christians insisted that Gentiles must first be circumcised. It had reached the point where certain Jewish Christians would not eat (the symbolic act of fellowship) with uncircumcised Gentile Christians. In some cities, Jews and Gentiles began worshiping separately. In Galatia, Gentiles submitted to circumcision to satisfy the demands of

Faith Martin is Executive Director of the Reformed Presbyterian Women's Association and Co-Editor of *Cornerstones*. She is author of *Call Me Blessed* (Eerdmans, 1987) and was a founding Board member of CBE.

the Jewish Christians. Even Peter was going along with this development and had stopped eating with Gentiles.

Peter's position in this matter was critical. He was the apostle who had received the vision and convinced Jewish believers to accept Gentile believers in the first place. He had eaten with Gentiles as the Lord had commanded, but when certain men came from James teaching that he should not, he drew back and separated himself from them. Paul, upon learning of this, opposed Peter "to his face" (2:1-14) and at the same time writes a strongly worded letter to the Galatians rebuking them.

The Verse in Context

The letter is blunt. After only the briefest of greetings, Paul comes right to the point, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel" (1:6). He warns the Galatians of those who want to confuse them. He speaks of his revelation from Jesus Christ, establishing his authority to teach the truth (1:6-17). Then he narrates the history of the problem between the Jewish and Gentile Christians and why he is concerned (1:18-21). Paul's frustration with them is evident, "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1).

Paul reminds them that circumcision is a part of the Law and the Law was only a disciplinarian until the time of Christ, the time of faith (3:1-24). "But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (3:25-26). In other words, circumcision is no longer necessary.

At this point, Paul suddenly expands the scope of the issue. It is not just a question of Jews and Gentiles getting together, but it is also about slaves and freemen, and most surprising of all — men and women! All kinds of people — *all nations, all classes and both sexes*. "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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:28-29).

Paul explains how with the coming of Christ those under the Law are *set free*. Then speaking directly to the Gentiles who had not believed in God before, he said, "Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits" (4:8-9). Astoundingly,

Paul equates the conditions of the Jews under the Law with the condition of the Gentiles who had been without God! Both are now set free by Christ. Both Jew and Gentile had been in bondage! (4:1-31).

(5:1-6:10) In the next section, Paul stresses a slightly different point. Not only are believers set free, they are to assert their rights and not return to bondage. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you" (5:1-2).

Paul concludes by admonishing the Galatians to be guided by the Spirit (5:16; 25). The Spirit, not the Law, is to influence their actions. Their lives are to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit — "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

And finally, Paul says that believers are living in a new time, a new creation, and have a new rule to follow (6:11-18).

Observations

1. Paul is speaking about change, radical change. Before the coming of Christ believers were subject to the Law; enslaved is Paul's description of being under the Law. Now, believers are adopted by God. We are his children and no longer slaves.

2. This passage is not speaking about a future time when wrongs will be righted, but is calling for action in the present. "But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (3:25-26).

3. Paul is demanding change in their behavior. Their mode of worship must match their theology. The Jews and Gentiles were to worship together — as people set free from the Law. Both the Jews and Gentiles needed to begin "acting consistently with the truth of the gospel." The Jews were to worship with the Gentiles, and the Gentiles were to resist being circumcised. Paul is not calling for a synod to meet and sign a declaration of "spiritual" equality. He does not want words; he wants action.

4. Paul tells the Gentiles to stand for their own freedom in Christ and to refuse to be circumcised; even though they were born as Gentiles, they have equal rights with Jewish Christians. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

5. It is the Gentile Christians — the group which is being discriminated against — whom Paul rebukes. They should have stood firm in their freedom. "For freedom

Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1).

Traditional Exegesis

Historically, Galatians 3:28 has been interpreted as teaching that Paul is calling "only" for spiritual equality in Christ Jesus; natural differences between peoples are to be maintained as God's policy for us on our earthly pilgrimage while we await life eternal. This line of thought was established by the Reformers who, recognizing the radical implications of freedom in Christ, immediately moved to temper any application of it beyond the immediate reforms which they were sponsoring.

Much of this unfortunate rhetoric lies forgotten in collective embarrassment. But the historic reluctance of the Church to implement this doctrine of believer equality to the races is a matter of public record and needs to be taken into consideration as we take up the issue of women in the church.

The problem of racial equality in the Christian church is far from solved. A great deal of intellectual assent to the equality of races has been penned and spoken in the last century; rarely will anyone find a Christian still defending a social separation of the races. However, much remains to be done. Although agreement has been reached on paper, actions of churches and individuals are far from what they should be.

Galatians 3:28 is a part of the living and active Word of God. It is to be restudied and reapplied on a continuing basis within the context of the visible church and relationships of the various peoples whom Christ has called.

Application for Women

As Paul makes clear, the principle of believer equality was meant for other relationships besides Jew and Gentile. And it is here that the church still wrestles.

Paul's third application of believer equality has finally reached the conscience of the Church. Christians are examining the relationship of men and women and asking how women have been "subject to the elemental spirits of the world" and in what way they should be set free.

Galatians 3:26-4:7 almost explodes with implications for women. Not only are women released from the law, but they become *sons* of God *with rights*.

It is here that inclusive language translations unfortunately conceal an important truth. In the Greek, verse 3:26 reads, "You are all *sons* of God." This is no minor point. In the patriarchal society of that day, sons and daughters

had distinctly different rights — especially with regard to inheritance. Paul is making clear that in the family of God, women are not *daughters* (with the possibility of abridged rights) — but *sons*. "And because you are <sons>, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a <son>, and if a <son> then also an heir, through God" (4:6-7).

The Christian community is a new creation in Christ, and we are to live by a new rule. Therefore, it is quite appropriate to ask what change should take place in the relationship between men and women.

Christians who teach that that change already took place (in the first century) when women moved from their secondary status in Judaism to spiritual equality in Christianity are sadly mistaken. Jewish women were never considered "uncircumcised." The life of Christ as recorded in the Gospels portrays Jewish women in Palestine as relatively independent and active, enjoying dignity and the respect of others.⁵ No, Paul is speaking of something else when he says that women are now equal in Christ.

We see glimpses of what is to come in the Book of Acts where devout women, both Jewish and Greek, play leading roles in the life of the church in Asia Minor: Lydia, Paul's first and most influential convert in Asia, Priscilla, teacher of teachers, and Chloe — all having churches in their homes; Phoebe, Mary, Junia, Syntiche, and Euodias are mentioned as fellow laborers (ministers) of the gospel.

Trusting the Holy Spirit to guide us, believers must open the Word and ask how men and women are to live, work and worship together in this new creation.

¹ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. "Role Distinctions in the Church, Galatians 3:28," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, Piper and Grudem, eds., pg. 162.

² Kathryn Stegall, "The Full Rights of Sons," unpublished manuscript, pg. 167.

³ Galatians 2:14

⁴ Acts 4:32

⁵ Anna, the prophet, taught openly in the Jewish temple. Women traveled in the company of Jesus, independent of family, husbands, or sons. There was no stigma attached to them or Jesus or the disciples for being with them in public. The only rebuke of that nature comes when Jesus is anointed by the "sinful" woman. If he had been a true prophet he would have known what kind of woman was touching him. The implication was that it would have been all right if the woman had been one who had led a good life. Martha, without any mention of a husband, owns a home, even though she has a brother. Mary sat with the disciples being instructed. Her only rebuke coming from her sister who needed help. Martha did not argue that it would be shameful for Mary to be with the men.