

## Gal 3:28—"Neither Male and Female"

There's a great text in Galatians,  
Once you trip on it, entails  
Twenty-nine damnations,  
One sure, if another fails.

Robert Browning, *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*

Snodgrass<sup>1</sup> calls Gal 3:28 "the most socially explosive statement in the New Testament," and with good reason.

## 1. Gal 3:28—An Evangelical Feminist "Magna Carta"

Jewett<sup>2</sup> terms Gal 3:28 the "Magna Carta of Humanity," and sees in Gal 3:28 a restoration of the original relationship of man and woman before the Fall (Gen 1:27). Many view it as "the necessary theological starting place for any discussion on the role of women in the church."<sup>3</sup> One should read restrictions placed on women elsewhere in the Bible in terms of Gal 3:28, and not vice-versa. Hence, some evangelicals dismiss 1 Cor 14:34-35 as a non-Pauline interpolation.<sup>4</sup> Others believe Paul's thought on the matter changed over time. Thus Paul's earlier letters are

<sup>1</sup>Klyne Snodgrass, "Galatians 3:28: Conundrum or Solution?" *Women, Authority & the Bible* (ed. A Mickelsen; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986): 161.

<sup>2</sup>Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, 142.

<sup>3</sup>W. Ward Gasque, "Response," *Women, Authority & the Bible*, 189.

<sup>4</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987): 699-708.

inconsistent in theory and practice with his later letters.<sup>5</sup> Still others view Paul as more concerned with the success of the mission than on radical social change, so he set out his principle, but made accommodations to the social culture of the day.<sup>6</sup> Gasque<sup>7</sup> concludes, "It is hermeneutically illegitimate to set up as theologically normative passages such as 1 Cor 14:34-35 and 1 Tim 2:11-12 where Paul is dealing with concrete local situations."

Snodgrass<sup>8</sup> argues the impossibility of interpreting Gal 3:28 with reference only to salvation, unrelated to social issues. Rather, Paul is focusing on the new social reality created by baptism into Christ—namely, the practical implications of the new social reality of interrelationships of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free persons, and men and women. Although pressing the Jewish-Gentile relations, the radical implications of the other two parallel pairs mentioned in this text are clear. Snodgrass also argues Gal 3:28 to be at the heart of Paul's theological concern and certainly not peripheral. He rejects Jewett's view that Paul speaks inconsistently. Rather, he says (180),

I view 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 as statements necessitated by specific problems in Corinth and Ephesus, respectively, and as shaped by an ancient culture. These texts do not become less important than Galatians 3:28, but they are less direct in their application.

So in evangelical feminist circles Gal 3:28 is viewed as having meaning beyond the topic of salvation, especially with regard to new social interrelationships in Christian thought.

<sup>5</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984): 26, 68.

<sup>6</sup>See James G. Sigountos and Myron Shank, "Public Roles for Women in the Pauline Church: A Reappraisal of the Evidence," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 26 (1983): 293.

<sup>7</sup>Gasque, "Response," *Women, Authority & the Bible*, 189.

<sup>8</sup>Snodgrass, "Gal 3:28," *Women, Authority & the Bible*, 161-188.

## 2. Galatians 3:28 in Complementarian Thought

Concerning Gal 3:28, Johnson,<sup>9</sup> minister at Believer's Chapel in Dallas, says, "the vigorous debate over sex roles has, in effect, lifted it from its exegetical under-pinnings and set it as a lonely text, a kind of proof-text, in the midst of swirling theological debate." Complementarians argue that here Paul is only addressing salvation<sup>10</sup> and that to go beyond this violates the text. They underscore that inerrancy precludes interpolation or any development in Paul's thinking that might result in textual inconsistency. House<sup>11</sup> says, "The Bible is inspired—infallible, entirely true and without error in original manuscripts. The women's issue touches the believability and applicability of portions of God's word." Hurley<sup>12</sup> says, "The authority of Scripture is the issue which is finally under debate." So, in stressing their theological presuppositions, complementarians view Gal 3:28 in terms of their "order of creation" argument. In harmonizing fashion, Gal. 3:28 is not understood in terms of Galatians, but is reinterpreted to fit their presuppositions.

Actually the history of Christian interpretation buttresses the basic complementarian argument on Gal 3:28 rather than appeal to the biblical text.<sup>13</sup> They stress that distinctions in role function do not indicate lesser value and that submission does not make inferiority necessary. Even so, complementarians have not responded convincingly to the argument that, "it is nonsense to insist on female subordination while simultaneously insisting that subordination does not imply inferiority."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup>S. Lewis Johnson, "Role Distinctions in the Church: Galatians 3:28," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 154.

<sup>10</sup>Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, 126.

<sup>11</sup>House, *The Role of Women in Ministry Today*, 106.

<sup>12</sup>Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, 204.

<sup>13</sup>Johnson, "Role Distinctions in the Church: Galatians 3:28," *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 163-164. See also Knight, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women*, 5.

<sup>14</sup>Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "Evangelicalism: A Feminist Perspective," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 (1977): 97.

## 3. Summary and Critique

Why would Paul make such a bold statement about "the oneness" of Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, and (dare he add) male and female? At issue is whether Gal 3:28 treats only salvation or the broader topic of social relationships: To resolve this issue, we must understand how this text fits within Paul's developing argument in Galatians.

The epistle makes clear that the opponents think 1) Paul is not one of the original apostles but is dependent upon Jerusalem, and 2) Christians must become part of the historic "Israel of God," including "taking on the yoke of Torah" (5:1) and circumcision.<sup>15</sup> In Gal 1-2, Paul insists that his apostleship and message came from God, not from the Jerusalem church. Attempts by "false brethren" (2:4, 12) to alter that message are unacceptable. Christ must remain the defining point in life.

In 2:15-21, Paul raises the issue of "righteousness" in terms of Christ versus "law." This both concludes his point in chaps 1-2 and introduces the problem of legalism beginning in chap 3. Three elements are at work: 1) the pagan worldview from which the Galatian Christians had come, 2) the principal identifying marks of Judaism, and 3) Paul's view of Christ as the center of Christian identity.

The Galatian readers were formerly pagans. However, as new Christians, they had not concentrated upon Christ for their new identity, but had incorporated aspects of Jewish legalism. Paul notes that they had done well to abandon pagan elements of identity, but were wrong to substitute Jewish elements for those. Instead of being syncretistic, Paul argues that they should concentrate upon Christ for their new definition as Christians. This is the point in 3:1-5.

<sup>15</sup>See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986): 302-14. Gal. 3:1-4:1 is properly viewed as a *probatio*, giving the central argument against the opponents. See Bernard H. Brinsmead, *Galatians—Dialogical Response to Opponents* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982): 52.

Paul begins chapter 3 by asserting that the Galatian Christians did not receive the Spirit through observing the "works of law" (3:2).<sup>16</sup> Rather, they received the Spirit through "hearing in faith" (3:5).<sup>17</sup> In 3:6-20, Paul supports this contention with appeals to Scripture. Paul's use of the OT may seem strange to modern readers not acquainted with ancient Jewish ways of argumentation. Certain arguments may not persuade modern readers unless they keep in mind Paul's emphasis on the centrality of Christ. Paul's arguments carried weight in his day, even though they may not necessarily be convincing by today's standards.

Paul constructs three arguments from Scripture.<sup>18</sup> First, in 3:6-9 Paul identifies Abraham as a man who was declared righteous through *faith* (Gen 15:6). He concludes that Christians (including former pagans) are likewise declared righteous through their own faith.

Second, in 3:10-14, Paul presents an elaborate argument based upon several OT texts. In typical Jewish fashion, he cites two texts that appear to contradict one another. Deut 27:26 puts a curse on one who does not keep the commandments of the Law. On the other hand, Hab 2:4 says that, "the righteous will live by faith." In 3:12 Paul restates this contradiction, saying that "the Law is not based on faith," but Lev 18:5 still says that life comes from obeying the decrees and laws. Paul appeals to Deut 21:23, which reads curiously, "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse." In crucifixion Jesus was cursed, but instead of death, life was the result. Paul's point is that Jesus' death on the cross nullified Deut 27:26, leaving Hab 2:4 as still commanding attention. "The righteous will live by faith."

<sup>16</sup>Brinsmead, *Galatians*, 78-82, notes that 2:15-21 is a *propositio*, which sets the stage for chaps 3-4 by discussing "justification." 3:1-5, then, is an *interrogatio*, or main argument against the opponents. It is directly related to the *propositio* (2:15-21). The bulk of chaps 3-4 is the *probatio*, or central argument.

<sup>17</sup>"believe what you heard" NIV; "hearing with faith" RSV.

<sup>18</sup>See Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, 310-12.

Third, in 3:15-20 Paul returns to the promise made to Abraham, the father of all who have been justified by faith. God made a promise to Abraham and his "offspring" (Gen 12:3-7; 17:7). Paul takes "offspring" not to mean "Abraham's descendants," but to mean Christ. Further, he extends the term to cover Christ's followers. Paul stresses that Christ continues the promise, not the Mosaic covenant. So, God's promise is still in effect (3:17).

These three arguments, then, raise a major question. If the Law was unable to fulfill the promise, how is one to view the Law? Well, the *intent* of the Law is not at all problematic, but the Law was incapable of leading to life (3:21). While the Law made clear morality and sin, it lacked power to transform. As such, the Law could not fulfill the promise (3:21-22; 3:23 simply restates the sense of v. 22). To provide an answer for the question of how one should view the Law, Paul uses the analogy of a "schoolmaster" (*paidagogos* Gk). Rather than referring merely to a "teacher" (*didaskalos* Gk), the Greek term *paidagogos* implies not only educational and instructional functions, but also discipline and supervision. So, the point of Paul's analogy is not that the Mosaic Law was a positive preparation for Christ, but rather that it was supervisory.<sup>19</sup> The point is that the coming of Christ and "sonship" displaces the reign of the Law and subordination.

Whereas the preceding discussion states negatively why the Law could not justify, 3:26-29 states positively what it means to live apart from legalism as a Christian. All who come into the new spiritual experience in Christ are "one in Christ," i.e., Christ-centered. Gal 3:26 states succinctly that the true "children of Abraham" are those who through Christ are "children of God." Verses 27-28, then, comment on and confirm v. 26. Baptism is a symbol of the unity of Christians with Christ. In this context, the first part of v. 28 states that social, cultural, and gender distinctions

<sup>19</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word, 1990): 146-48. See also F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (NIC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982): 182.

do not affect unity with Christ. The second part of v. 28, "all one in Christ," states the central point of the discussion. Verse 29 is the conclusion, i.e., the relationship of all Christians to Abraham and God's promise in Gen 12:3-7 (17:7).

In 4:1-7, Paul compares slavery to old pagan ways with "sonship" in Christ, and in vv. 8-11 he evidences concern for the Galatians' reversion to old ways. The "fundamental principles" (*stoicheia* Gk; v. 9) of paganism have been replaced, not with Christ, but with external rites (v. 10). The term for mixing a little Christianity with a little of the past is "syncretism." Paul agonizes in v. 11 that he might have wasted his efforts. This frustration continues in 4:12-20 as Paul makes an unusually strong emotional plea for them to avoid syncretism. He follows this plea in 4:21-5:1 with an allegory in which Hagar represents return to slavery and Sarah represents freedom. Paul concludes this part of the epistle in 4:31-5:1 with an emphasis upon "freedom in Christ" and a stern warning against any return to old ways, which would be slavery.

Now, regarding this developing point in Galatians, it seems clear that 3:28 serves as a comment on 3:26, which emphasizes what it means to be "in Christ." The three groups in v. 28 underscore that social, cultural, and gender distinctions do not affect unity with Christ.

Many of the meanings attributed to this verse in current discussion do not seem appropriate to this context. A question does arise concerning the extent to which the evident meaning of v. 28 can be properly extended.

All three pairs in the verse signify an unequal relationship with potential for oppression. Each involves a stronger and weaker partner in terms of power, and there are distinctions within each pair that lead either to social or

religious consequences, or both.<sup>20</sup> The question of salvation for women and slaves seems not to have been an issue. So, Paul's use of the slave-free and male-female examples was to strengthen his arguments for Gentile salvation. Christ is the defining point of life. All united in Christ are of equal value. As part of a unified diversity, unnecessary barriers and distinctions should give way to reconciliation and mutual responsibility.

Complementarians, as mentioned above, stress that 3:28 treats only the matter of salvation. Evangelical feminists, on the other hand, view this text as saying that in Christ all distinctions between male and female are removed. While it is theoretically possible to extend the text, there are problems with both views above. For instance, while in Philemon Paul stresses that both Philemon and Onesimus are "one in Christ," the cultural categories of master and slave continue. Obviously, "in Christ" did not do away with those cultural categories. Similarly, male and female roles are viewed differently in various places and times, but this should not affect "oneness in Christ." "In Christ" does not mandate doing away with cultural categories of gender. This precludes using Gal 3:28 as a "magna carta" of feminism.

At the same time, limiting Gal 3:28 to salvation does not make necessary a hierarchical view of gender relationships. That would be to impose a view that is not inherent within the text and might, in fact, militate against Paul's emphasis upon "oneness in Christ."

Even when gender distinctions remain, unity with Christ can and must still play out in practical ways.

<sup>20</sup>See Jan Faver Hailey, "'Neither Male and Female' (Gal 3:28)," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity* (ed. Carroll D. Osburn; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1993): 1.130-66.