

Essay 7: Galatians 3:28 and Ordination

Stephen Bauer, Ph.D.

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“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). This text is heavily disputed in the ordination debate. While all parties agree that the text applies to equality before God in the arena of eternal life and salvation, those advocating a Gender Exclusive (GE) view of ordination tend to assert that this text applies only to matters of salvation. The text is thought to have no bearing on matters of church leadership. By contrast, Gender Inclusive (GI) advocates contend that this text goes beyond the mere question of personal salvation, having significant implications for social structures and relationships. The question thus centers on whether equality in matters of salvation should also impact other areas of church and personal life. I would suggest this question is addressed by two lines of textual evidence. The first is Paul's development of theological themes in Galatians and the second is in a parallel passage using the same phrasing found in Gal 3:28. We will first investigate Paul's line of argument in Galatians.

Paul opens Galatians with a minimalist introduction immediately followed by an intervention designed to reclaim the Galatians from a false Gospel (1:6-10). The true-versus-false Gospel theme is bolstered by Paul's claims that he received the Gospel directly from Christ (and not from men), and that he and main apostolic leaders all agreed on the nature of this true Gospel (1:11-2:10). Even Peter supported Paul's Gospel (2:9). Paul continues by using the public rebuke he leveled at Peter in Galatia (2:11-16) to reinforce the contrast between the false Judaizer-gospel and the truth of the true Gospel he preached.

This story with Peter focuses the theological thrust of Galatians because Paul publicly challenged Peter over how he was treating the Gentiles. Peter, along with Barnabas, had reverted to the Jewish practice of avoiding close fellowship with Gentiles, as if they were inferior or second-class humans (Gal 2:11-14). For Paul, basing one's treatment of others on their ethnicity (an ontological quality) was contrary to the essence of the Gospel. Thus, he publicly rebuked Peter. Why, then, was Peter's action contrary to the Gospel?

In the verses following this dark incident (Gal 2:15-18), Paul briefly lays out the theological rationale for why Peter was wrong. First, the Gospel, and thus salvation, is not restricted to Jews. This meant that a person did not need to first become Jewish – signified by circumcision – in order to be justified by faith. A man is not justified by "works of the law" but through faith in Christ. For Paul, since both Jew and Gentile are justified the same way, this means that ethnicity is to be rejected as a significant factor in Christian fellowship. Hence, Peter had forsaken the principles of justification by faith

when he rebuilt the things once torn down (v18), namely allowing the ontological differences between Gentile and Jew to regress to a pre-conversion level of spiritual significance. This makes it clear that for Paul, righteousness by faith should fundamentally change our view of others from an ontological focus to some kind of superior spiritual perspective. Because of the Gospel, Paul had no tolerance for a theology that made Gentiles equal in access to salvation while being unequal in basic church life.

Paul continues in Gal 3:13-14, by asserting that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.” The promise of God to Abraham is not to be restricted by ontological qualities, and through the cross, it is brought to every human. Paul further explicates this principle in verses 26-29, declaring that “in Christ, you *all* are *sons* of God through faith” (v. 26). Paul is addressing all members of the Galatian churches—“you all.” This “all” is next defined as “those who have been baptized into Christ (v. 27), which includes both men and women (see Acts 8:12). Thus, both women and men who are believers are “sons” of God. Paul expresses no concept of women as “daughters of God” in his writings. For Paul, *ALL* believers, male and female, are *sons* of God and thus heirs.

Having established that all believers are “sons of God,” Paul now explicitly expresses the implications of his argument: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Paul clinches the point by declaring that if “you”—in Greek this is plural, as in “you all”—are Christ’s, then “you all” are Abraham’s descendants and heirs of that promise. In short, shunning the Gentiles as if they are inferior to Jews was incompatible with the nature of the Gospel, for such shunning implied the Gentiles were not fellow sons and joint heirs with Jewish believers. Thus, we can see that even in Galatians, what Paul says in 3:28 is more expansive in scope than mere access to salvation. It fundamentally addresses how the Christian should view and treat others.

The second evidence that Gal 3:28 is broader in scope than mere access to salvation is to compare Paul’s use of nearly identical language in Col 3:11. In contrast with Galatians, the thematic context for Col 3 is clearly that of ethical exhortation. Paul is urging the Colossians to “put away” a list of immoral behaviors, many of which involve how we treat others (v. 5-8). Continuing in the same thematic vein, Paul instructs the Colossians that they are not to lie to one another because they have put off the old self and put on the new one (vs. 9-10). Paul then continues justifying these ethical exhortations (vs 11) on the basis that “here”—that is, in the new-man existence of renewed knowledge of the Creator (v. 10)—there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Col 3:11). Paul’s point is that in the “old man” experience, the pre-converted person is likely to see ontological qualities as a basis to justify mistreatment (such as lying) of those believed to be ontologically different. By contrast, when we become a “new man” in Christ, ontology no longer influences our ethical outlook. Thus, Paul takes the biblical principle that ontology is not morally or spiritually significant and applies it more broadly to

ethics, that is, to how we treat others. Col 3:11 clearly shows us that Gal 3:28 is broader in scope than mere access to salvation.

At this point I can sense the GE advocate desiring to jump in and point out that all these passages that I have examined relate to salvation and that GE advocates would certainly agree that we are all equal in matters of salvation and fellowship. The GE advocate would likely further contend that holding office and participation in fellowship are different matters, and that I am confusing or conflating the two issues. I would reply there are two evidences that I am not confusing or conflating unrelated issues.

First, as seen in Essay 6¹, Paul's list of qualifications for being an elder are based on character, not ontology. I have already shown that the phrase "husband of one wife" is focused on sexual morality – a character issue – not on ontology (gender). This focus on character-qualifications for church office mirrors the Gospel's view of people as united in Christ in a way that no longer sees ontology as spiritually significant. Thus, Paul's list of qualifications for elder follows the same pattern as the Gospel, presenting qualifications for both the offices of elder and deacon through the lens of Godly character and not through ontological characteristics.²

Second, it is interesting that in Gal 3:28 and Col 3:11, Paul not only mentions ontological qualities, such as gender and ethnicity, but also the societal offices of slave and freeman. In Christ, our fundamental attitude for treating people is no longer to be grounded in their socio-economic standing. Hence, slaves were not to be treated as inferior to freemen and masters were to be careful how they treated their slaves (Eph 6:9; Col 4:1). Slaves were not to be treated as of less value than the master precisely because both have become "sons of God" through faith in Christ. And there is nothing in 1 Timothy or Titus to suggest that a slave was excluded from being a church elder. It is entirely possible a slave could be qualified to be an elder in the church while his master wasn't qualified.³

To restrict the application of Gal 3:28 only to access to salvation easily fosters an unhealthy dualism to our view of human life between the "spiritual" realm of salvation and the "practical" reality of daily relationships. Once such a dualism between access to salvation and how we treat others is accepted, many forms of discrimination and

¹Essay 6: <http://webpages.charter.net/stephenbauer/6-Husband of One Wife-Plain Reading of 1 Tim 3.pdf>

²I remind the reader that in [Essay 6](#) I address the issue of gender-specific language in the phrase, "husband of one wife," and how the ontological element is not part of the qualifications of being an elder. Thus, I see no need to reopen arguing that point here.

³Imagine for a moment, a local church electing a slave as church elder while his master, also a member, is not elected to be an elder in the church. According to Heb 13:17, this slave master would be called to "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls," even though the elder was his slave.

oppression can be falsely justified as Scriptural. For example, such a dualism could have been used to support 19th century American slavery practices. One can easily imagine the slavery advocate arguing that "while Blacks and Whites are ontologically equal in matters of salvation, God has ordained Blacks to a subservient role." This advocate would, of course, loudly deny that their view implies any fundamental inequality between the races.⁴ It is precisely such dualism between the spiritual and practical that Paul is rejecting when he proclaims, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," and "Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all." We should take care not to inculcate such a dualism in the body of Christ.

⁴*Christianity Today* reports that female subjection was paralleled to slavery in pro-slavery arguments. "Just as women are called to play a subordinate role (Eph. 5:22; 1 Tim. 2:11–15), so slaves are stationed by God in their place." See <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/1992/issue33/3324.html>.