
Neither male nor female.

Author(s): Bystrom, Raymond O.

Source: *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy: Women in Ministry in the Church* (1992), pp. 89-103.

Published by: Kindred Productions

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/765>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the [Fresno Pacific University](#) community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the web and assures their preservation for the future.

NEITHER MALE NOR FEMALE 7

Raymond O. Bystrom

Galatians 3:28 and Pauline Practice

A little church in a remote area had been without a pastor for some time. Eventually, a daughter of the congregation, who had prepared for the ministry, came to serve the church as pastor. After seven years of ministry, she left for a larger church. Following her departure, a young man was invited to candidate for the vacant pastoral position by preaching a trial sermon. While the people were filing out of church after the service, a little girl was heard to say to her mother, "I didn't know that men could be pastors, too!"

This quieting, or disquieting, tale makes it sound as if it's no longer a man's world. The fact, however, is that most contemporary Christian congregations are in favor of keeping men dominant in church leadership roles. But is male dominance in church leadership and ministry really Christian?

Long ago, in a letter to the Christians of Galatia, Paul proclaimed that “in Christ Jesus” there is “neither . . . *male nor female*” (3:28). This is the most forthright statement in the New Testament on the equality of women with men before God. We read it and wish Paul had paused to explain it. But he offers no further comment at this point. Everyone, however, who takes God’s Word seriously must ponder the meaning and implications of Paul’s statement for congregational life. How is it related to the corporate life of the church? What implications does it have for women in ministry?

The crucial issue in this text in relation to the role of women in church leadership is whether equality in Christ refers to spiritual status before God only or also to ministerial function in the body of Christ.

YOU ARE ALL ONE IN CHRIST JESUS

Paul’s “neither male nor female” is located at the conclusion of an argument about the sole condition for full inclusion in the Christian community (2:15—3:25). By faith in Christ Jesus both Jews and Gentiles are justified before God. By faith in Christ Jesus both Jews and Gentiles receive the promised Holy Spirit and are incorporated into Christ’s community.

Beginning with 3:26 Paul spells out the consequences of his argument for the Galatian Christians by defining their status before God. He addresses them directly. The shift is from “we” to “you,” from law to Christ, from exclusiveness to inclusiveness. Unity in Christ is the dominant motif: “You are all sons of God” and “you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Jews and Gentiles together constitute the people of God. Jewish Christians no longer point to the law as the sign of their identity,

but to Christ. All Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, belong to Christ.

To make sure there is no misunderstanding, Paul highlights several basic realities concerning the believers' status before God in Christ.

1. All believers are sons and daughters of God through faith and through incorporation into Christ's body (v. 26).

2. All believers are incorporated into Christ's body by personal faith in Christ. Baptism is the outward and visible sign of admission to God's new community (v. 27a).

3. All believers have undergone a spiritual transformation that makes them Christians. They have "clothed themselves with Christ" (v. 27b).

Then in three parallel statements in the present tense, Paul announces the consequences of "putting on Christ": "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." In the third couplet, Paul asserts that male and female have become one in Christ. The statement declares that this unity is already a reality in God's sight. Next Paul invites the Galatians to express this new reality in the church and in society through a new set of attitudes and reactions. When Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, have "clothed themselves with Christ," they are liberated from the divisions that separate them from one another.

Paul's statement here is widely regarded as the Magna Carta of the New Humanity because it defines, in a revolutionary manner, the nature of the Christian's new relationship of oneness with other believers in Christ's body. Ethnic, social and sexual relations have been turned upside down in Christ. Old distinctions, old divisions, old separations, have been canceled in Christ.

And since oneness in Christ is already a reality in the sight of God, Christians must seek to express their equality both inside and outside the church.

GREEK AND JEWISH THANKSGIVING FORMULA

The revolutionary nature of Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 can only be appreciated against the backdrop of the status of women in the ancient world. It is important to recall that Paul's threefold affirmation corresponds to both Jewish and Greek formulas where the distinctions are retained.

In the Greco-Roman world the status of women is reflected in the popular prayer of Greek men. They thanked the gods that they were born "a human being and not a beast, next a man and not a woman, thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian." Admittedly, Greek literature often affirms the equality of women and men in principle, but Greek society rarely achieved it in practice.

In Jewish circles a similar thanksgiving formula was commonly used. At the beginning of morning prayers, the male Jew prayed: "Blessed be God that he did not make me a Gentile; blessed be God that he did not make me an ignorant peasant or slave; blessed be God that he did not make me a woman."

The reason for this threefold thanksgiving by male Jews was not blatant demeaning of Gentiles, slaves, or women, but rather that these persons were restricted from many religious privileges open to free Jewish males. For example, a screen separated women from men in the synagogues, symbolizing woman's restricted role. Indeed, women were not normally allowed to par-

ticipate in the actual service. Also, the study of the Law was off-limits for women. A married woman's role was essentially limited to homemaking. While exceptions can be cited, nowhere in ancient Judaism was any real effort made to practice, or even to propose, the social and religious equality of the sexes.

In contrast to such statements that accent male superiority, Paul writes that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." Quite likely Paul himself was raised to thank God that he was not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. If so, he knew that Galatians 3:28 deliberately contradicted each phrase of his former prayer. Yet he unabashedly announces that in God's sight and in God's community national, social, and sexual privileges are abolished, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

BAPTISMAL CONFESSION OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Some of Paul's interpreters maintain that we should not over-emphasize the third couplet of Galatians 3:28 ("neither . . . male nor female"). After all, there are no parallels to it elsewhere in the New Testament. Jesus himself never said anything quite so explicit about the equality of the sexes. Hence, these interpreters argue that these words were merely a peculiar idea of Paul's, not shared by others in the early church.

It is significant that in the larger passage under discussion (Gal. 3:26-29), we find Paul's only explicit reference to baptism in the entire letter. Galatians 3:28 is part of an early Christian baptismal confession. Both the structure and the content of the entire passage indicate that these verses contain a fragment of a bap-

tismal confession of the early church that Paul uses to support his argument in Galatians 3:1-25. One can leap-frog from verse 26 to verse 29, omitting verses 27-28, without sensing any break in Paul's logic or grammar.

It is also significant that the last clause of verse 28 ("for you are all one in Christ Jesus") clearly parallels verse 26 ("for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus"), except for the Pauline phrase "through faith." Thus, the "for" of verse 27 introduces an explanatory statement in support of the affirmation of verse 26. In other words, Paul is quoting verses 27-28 to undergird his argument.

Note that only the first couplet in verse 28 ("there is neither Jew nor Greek") is directly related to Paul's argument in Galatians. Paul has not mentioned the relation of the sexes in arguing with the Judaizers at Galatia. Yet in these verses he makes the strange statement that in Christ there is "neither . . . male nor female."

Notice too that the pairings of Galatians 3:28 are found elsewhere in Paul's letters. "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor. 12:13). "Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Col. 3:11).

The pairings occur in either abbreviated (Corinthians) or expanded forms (Colossians) but in the same order (cf. 1 Cor. 7:17-20, 21-24, 25-28), suggesting a degree of fixity in Paul's mind. Furthermore, the pairings of Galatians 3:28 and 1 Corinthians 12:13 appear explicitly in connection with baptism and those of Colossians 3:11 are indirectly associated with baptism

(2:12; 3:9-10). Yet baptism as a subject is not being discussed in either passage.

All of this suggests that these pairings were originally formulated in a baptismal setting in the early church. At some point in the baptismal ceremony, perhaps as the newly-baptized Christians were extended the right-hand of fellowship, an elder informed them of their status as "sons and daughters of God through faith in Jesus Christ." Then he explained how their oneness in Christ made the difference between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, irrelevant before God. In this way, the early Christians celebrated in their baptismal ceremony the marvelous truth that in Christ Jesus the old racial, social, and sexual divisions had been healed.

When first-century Christians spoke of being "sons and daughters of God," "baptized into Christ," and "clothed with Christ" (3:26-27) they simultaneously spoke of their faith in terms of a new social dynamic within the faith community in which there was "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." They saw that the gospel called them to treat all people impartially and to express in daily life those attitudes and actions that would eliminate barriers of prejudice and inequality.

In short, Paul has "lifted" Galatians 3:27-28 from a baptismal liturgy of the early church and used it to remind the Galatians of words they had undoubtedly heard before in the context of their own baptism and incorporation into the church. Indeed, on the occasion of their baptism they agreed to live with one another in community on the basis of their oneness in Christ. They were now being reminded by Paul that in the redemption provided through Christ, God had eliminated the divisions and inequalities between Jew and Greek,

slave and free, male and female. Thus, Paul asks the Galatians, and by extension, the twentieth-century church, "where is the evidence of your equality in Christ in your corporate life?"

SEXUAL UNITY OR UNIFORMITY IN CHRIST?

After Paul states that "there is neither . . . male nor female," he speaks of the fact that all who are in Christ are "one." What sort of oneness or unity does Paul contemplate? What kind of inequality is abolished in Christ?

Although the three groupings Paul mentions are not exactly parallel in construction, they are to be interpreted in the same way. There is a change of construction in the third couplet. Most versions retain the "neither . . . male nor female" translation for the sake of symmetry. Literally, however, Paul says: "no male and female." The change is a reflection of the language of the Greek translation of Genesis 1:27. However, the change in construction does not change the meaning of the third couplet in the series. Paul makes no distinction between the three pairings.

So what happens to the racial, social, and sexual differences between people? Paul does not mean that the differences between race, rank, and sex no longer exist in Christ. If Paul himself is taken as a model, one must say that the differences between the categories remain. Paul continues to reflect a Jewish identity and self-awareness (Gal. 2:15; 2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:5; Rom. 11:14), to treat Jews and Gentiles as distinct ethnic units (Rom. 9-11), to address slaves, slave-owners, men and women, as distinct groups. Therefore, the unity which he declares is not one in which ethnic, social, and

sexual distinctions disappear. Rather, it is a unity in which the barriers and hostility between the three categories are destroyed. Unity does not require uniformity; male and female remain what they are. Sexually specific differences are not denied for the sake of some abstract equality. Indeed, Paul himself is not really concerned with such abstractions; he is concerned with the practical and everyday affairs of church life in which men and women, like Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free persons, are here and now sons and daughters in God's community.

SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL UNITY IN CHRIST

In the history of the Christian church there has been a tendency to limit the degree to which "there is no male and female." Many Christians have framed the new reality and the new relations of Galatians 3:28 only in spiritual terms. For example, it has been argued that the words "no male and female" relate only to the common way men and women join the Christian community through baptism.

There is little doubt that in all three pairings of Galatians 3:28 Paul thought first in terms of the relationship between God and humanity. When it comes to the grounds of entry into the Christian community, all are on equal footing before God. Fellowship between God and humanity is no longer limited along national, social, or sexual lines.

But Paul's proclamation is a message of equality that has both spiritual and social dimensions. Indeed it speaks with meaning to all three areas of life where the Gospel had a particular social impact on first-century Christians—national, social, and sexual.

Paul speaks without qualification or reservations in Galatians 3:28. He asserts that sexual differences that divide and alienate male and female are suspended. They are both nullified as conditions for salvation and as social barriers between human beings. Not only are religious advantages before God based on sexual distinctions eliminated, but sexually determined religious roles within the Christian community are also broken. Male dominance and preference is at an end.

Thus, when spelling out the new relationships which are meant by God to exist in the church, Paul explicitly says that in the same way that Jews are to have no exclusive privileges over Gentiles and free persons to have no exclusive advantages over slaves, so men are to have no exclusive prerogatives over women.

According to the gospel which had seized the life and mind of Paul, the status of Gentiles, slaves, and women has been equalized with that of Jews, masters and males within the Christian community. For Paul, all three groups have equal standing before God spiritually and within the church socially when "in Christ." It is evident from Paul's confrontation with Peter at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21) that Paul saw the social implications of the equalizing of Jew and Gentile in Christ. Paul did not say that Jews and Greeks are one in personal salvation, but that in other respects, such as eating at social gatherings, things remain as they always have been with Jews eating separately. To the contrary, he defended the right of Gentiles to be present with Jews at social gatherings and on an equal basis. He insisted on complete social equality, for he believed that the new unity in Christ is intended to shape the new life in the church.

It is also evident from Paul's dealing with Onesimus, the runaway slave, that he had begun to grapple with

the social implications of the equalizing of slave and free person in Christ. Paul reluctantly returns Onesimus, who has become a Christian, to his master Philemon. Although Paul politely hints to Philemon that he should set his slave free ("I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do," v. 8), he did not confront Philemon on the slave issue like he did Peter on the issue of Jews and Gentiles eating together. Instead, he appeals to Philemon by writing a moving letter on the equality that binds all persons who have been clothed in Christ. Onesimus is "no longer a slave, but better than a slave, a dear brother." Within the organic unity of the church, slaves and owners are now brothers. Philemon is to welcome Onesimus as if he were the apostle Paul himself (v. 17). Thus, in his dealings with Onesimus, Paul provides us with important clues to what the practice of the Christian community ought to be on the slave/free person distinction.

In short, if the Jew/Gentile and slave/free person distinction is considered irrelevant within the church, then the male/female distinction should also be considered irrelevant.

PAUL'S APPLICATION OF SEXUAL EQUALITY IN CHRIST

Paul's talk about sexual equality in Christ did not simply remain a theory. Women played a significant role in Paul's churches. He acted out the gospel principle of sexual equality in Christ in a remarkable way for a former rabbi.

Paul's greetings to his fellow workers in Romans 16 indicates something of his attitude toward women in the church. The apostle greets by name no fewer than six

women, and all six are spoken of as having participated in some form of Christian ministry. (See also Chapters 2, 10, 13.)

He begins the chapter by commending Phoebe (vv. 1-2), who is described as “our sister,” that is, a member of the Christian community. Also, she is called both a deacon (*diakonos*) and a helper/patron (*prostatis*). The word *diakonos* was an official title of church leadership. It is used in 1 Corinthians 3:5 and 2 Corinthians 3:6, 6:4, 11:15, and 23 to refer to missionaries, including Paul himself. A deacon was a missionary entrusted with preaching and tending churches. Phoebe clearly functioned as a leader of the local churches in Cenchreae. The second title associated with Phoebe confirms this impression. She was also a “protectoress,” or “patroness.” Recent research has shown that patronesses were persons of high social standing and means with a house large enough for the church to gather. Such women were responsible for the ordering of the congregation in their home and presiding over the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Phoebe was such a significant person that Paul instructed the Roman churches “to receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you.” Such hosting instructions are common in ancient literature. They ask people to “roll out the red carpet” for important people. In other words, Phoebe is to be received with the honor appropriate to her position as a congregational leader.

After his commendation of Phoebe, Paul greets a number of persons by name. Five are women, and all five are spoken of as having participated in Christian ministry. Prisca, or Priscilla, together with her husband Aquila, is greeted first and identified as Paul's “fellow workers in Christ Jesus.” In the New Testament

Prisca's name is more often than not placed before her husband's. Perhaps she came from a higher social class (a Jewess with Roman citizenship) than her husband or maybe she was a more prominent worker in the church.

In addition to Prisca, Paul greets Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis. Each woman is commended for having worked hard in the Lord. The emphasis on working is characteristic of Paul's remarks about each woman whom he greets.

Paul considered women to be full members of the Christian community. He does not speak of women in a condescending or patronizing fashion. Indeed, one gets the impression that he happily worked side by side with a number of women in his various missionary travels and saw them as partners and not subordinates.

Further evidence of Paul's practice of the principle of no male and female in Christ may be seen in his appreciation of the Philippian women who labored side by side with him in the gospel (Phil. 4:2-3). Euodia and Syntyche are described as "women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life." Quite likely we will never know what these women actually did to merit Paul's commendation. But it is self-evident from these references that women worked alongside men in the Pauline churches and did so with Paul's unqualified approval.

As one student of Paul explains, "No more restriction is implied in Paul's equalizing of the status of male and female in Christ than in his equalizing of the status of Jew and Gentile, or slave and free person. . . . If a Gentile may exercise spiritual leadership in church as freely as a Jew, or a slave as freely as a citizen, why not a woman as freely as a man?"

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY TODAY

Paul deserves an accolade for his efforts to apply the gospel principles of freedom and equality to the situations of his day. He set a pattern and marked out a path for subsequent Christian generations to follow both in thought and action.

No one doubts that the lifestyle of the church must be consistent with the gospel of the church. Proclamation must lead to demonstration of the gospel principles in the here and now. And since Paul intends his message of male and female equality in Christ to be understood both spiritually and socially, how can we welcome women to the ministry but restrict their functions? Isn't the issue one of either keeping women from the ministry entirely or opening all its functions to them?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING

Betz, H.D. Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia. Fortress, 1979.

Bruce, F.F. Commentary on Galatians. NIGTC. Eerdmans, 1982.

Hurley, J.B. Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective. Academie Books, 1981.

Longenecker, R.N. New Testament Social Ethics for Today. Eerdmans, 1984.

-
- Snodgrass, K. "Galatians 3:28 — Connundrum or Solution?" Women, Authority and the Bible. A. Michelsen, ed. InterVarsity Press, 1986: 161-180.
- Terrien, S. Till the Heart Sings: A Biblical Theology of Manhood and Womanhood. Fortress, 1985: 159-174.
- Witherington, B. "Rite and Rights for Women." New Testament Studies 27 (1981): 593-604.