

**GALATIANS 3:28,29—ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE ROLE  
OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH**

**A Study Prepared for the Role of Women Commission**

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**Fall, 1987**

"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 if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."--Gal. 3:28,29, RSV.

What shall we make of this passage--a classic statement of the spiritual equality of all who believe in Jesus Christ, or a ringing summons for the Church to break down every barrier, including the one of gender that prevents women from being ordained to the gospel ministry?

That is the issue with which this paper seeks to grapple. Note: no one (at least to my knowledge) suggests that these verses suggest arguments that oppose women's ordination. Those who personally hold this view argue that Galatians 3:28,29 essentially is irrelevant to the discussion. They do so in the face of proponents of women's ordination who often look to the passage as one of the strongest props for their position, seeing here the summit of Paul's thinking, his inspired vision of the Church as it would unfold in time, his portrayal of the ideal community.

I will approach discussion of the topic from two sides--exegesis and theological interpretation. The two methods in fact belong together: exegesis is more than a study of an ancient text that attempts to determine what the passage meant to those who first read it. Since the Word of God is living, contemporary, the task of exegesis is only completed when we show the bearing of the text on Christian life today.

The letter of assignment for this paper requested me to limit the end result to 10-12 pages! Galatians 3 has presented a hornet's nest to

Christian expositors, Adventists included--E. J. Waggoner's controversial studies on the meaning or law in Galatians at the 1888 General Conference Session centered in this chapter. The assignment looks impossible to fulfill within the stated length.

However, the vexed questions of exegesis in the chapter do not affect the discussion of verses 28-29. We will be able to pass quickly over many of the areas so fruitful of argument in the past and zero in on Galatians 3:28-29, not cluttering the paper with footnotes. Instead of compiling lists of scholars who support each point we wish to make, we intend to wrestle with the text itself. Thereby we shall give greater focus to the more difficult question on which Adventists today differ: what does Paul's meaning infer and imply for the ordination of women?

#### I. Exegesis of Galatians 3:28,29

##### A. The Larger Context

The passage we are considering comes as the conclusion and high point of a discussion concerning the relationship between law and faith in Christ which runs throughout chapter 3. But Paul's line of thought commences much earlier and in order to catch the full meaning of Gal. 3:28,29 we need to trace, albeit briefly, the earlier development. We shall see that chapter 2 records an incident that impacts significantly on our understanding of Gal. 3:28,29.

As Paul commences his letter to the Galatians, he casts aside his customary words of praise and thanksgiving, and launches almost immediately into his concerns (1:6). He is "astonished" that the Galatians have turned so quickly aside from the gospel he had preached to them, for there is no other gospel (1:6-9). That gospel, he reminds them, was not something man

made up (1:10-12). Nor did Paul receive it from any person--Jesus gave it by revelation (1:13-24). The apostles recognized the legitimacy of Paul's preaching (2:1-5), and gave their blessing to his special calling as an apostle to the Gentiles (2:6-10).

Now we come to four verses (2:11-14) whose meaning separately is clear but whose place in Paul's logic is not immediately clear. They relate Paul's public rebuke of Peter because, out of fear of believers who belonged to the circumcision group, he withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentile believers.

Paul's reasoning up to these verses is easy to follow. So is his subsequent discussion: verses 15-21 set out justification by faith alone, without works of the law. If righteousness could be gained through the law, he argues, Christ died in vain! (verse 21).

These subsequent verses flow from verses 11-14. Somehow Paul sees the two matters--his rebuke of Peter and justification by faith--as tied together. How can this be? The clue is in verse 14--Peter and the others who joined him in refusing to eat with the Gentiles "were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel." Their actions denied what they professed to believe: that Christ alone provided justification for both Jew and Gentile. That one means of justification constituted Jew and Gentile alike as one person in Christ; so denial of that oneness denied the very gospel.

In chapter 3, Paul develops further this discussion of justification by faith or by observance of law. He points his readers to their beginnings as Christians--they received the Spirit through faith, not law (verses 1-5). Then he reminds them of Abraham, who was counted righteous because of

faith (verses 6-9). He shows that the law brings a curse upon the person who does not obey it completely, so no one can hope to be justified by law. However, Christ became that "curse" on our behalf, thus redeeming us and opening up the blessing given to Abraham to all the Gentiles who accept Christ by faith (verses 10-14). Paul next (verses 15-18) argues that the law, given on Sinai 430 years after God spoke His promises to Abraham, cannot annul those promises. At the heart of those promises is one particular "seed" (descendant) of Abraham--Christ. The issue here is: law or promise? Promise means grace; and that is God's way. Why then the law? Paul answers this question in verses 19-25. It was "added because of transgressions," he says (v. 19); it served a constraining function with a view to Christ, the promised Seed (vs 19,23); it was a "schoolmaster" with a view to Christ (v. 24)--Paul uses the illustration of the paidagōgos, the slave who guided the minor to and from school.

While the outline of Paul's thought in this chapter is reasonably clear, certain "hard nuts" of exegesis present themselves. I will merely list these problems and give, without elaboration since these matters do not change our interpretation of verses 28-29, the interpretation that I consider to be justified from the text itself:

v. 15: diathēkē, covenant or will? Covenant, in my judgment.

Whole chapter: "law," moral or ceremonial? Both, especially the moral law.

The time frame in vs. 19-25: Does it refer historically, to the role of law in Israel, or does it have an existential sense, as the law points out sin today and thus leads us to Christ? I think Paul's argument here is couched in historical terms.

The final four verses of the chapter (vs. 26-29) belong together. They conclude and climax Paul's thought in chapter 3 under the thought "You are all one in Christ Jesus" (v. 28).

Following this chapter, Paul points to the Galatians' privileges as sons of God (4:1-7), chides them for turning back to enslavement (4:8-11), poignantly reminds them of their former love for him (4:12-20), and plays on the motifs of son/slave and bond/free by drawing on the illustration of the two sons of Abraham, Isaac (son of the promise) and Ishmael (son of works)--(4:21-31).

#### B. Outline of Paul's Argument

1. The Gospel According to Paul (1:6-2:10)
  - a. Only genuine gospel (1:6-9)
  - b. His source--God, not man (1:10-23)
  - c. Acknowledged by other apostles (2:1-10)
2. Gospel and Law (2:11-3:29)
  - a. Peter's denial of the gospel (2:11-14)
  - b. Justification by faith, not law (2:15-21)
  - c. The Spirit--through faith, not law (3:1-5)
  - d. Abraham--justified by faith (3:6-9)
  - e. The curse of the law (3:10-14)
  - f. Law and promise (3:15-18)
  - g. The purpose of the law (3:19-25)
  - h. Summary and conclusion (3:26-29)
3. Freedom vs Slavery (4:1-31)
  - a. Sons, not slaves (4:1-7)
  - b. Appeal from the Galatians' past (4:8-20)

c. Illustration from Abraham's two sons (4:21-31)

C. A Detailed Examination of Galatians 3:28,29

These verses are part of a paragraph that commences at v. 26: "For you are all God's sons through faith in Christ Jesus. For so many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free; there is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring [and so] heirs according to the promise" [my translation].

That verses 26-29 constitute a discrete unit is shown by Paul's change from the first to the second person. Thus he signals a change in viewpoint from Israel to the Gentiles. In chapter 4 he reverts to the first person.

The ancient manuscripts of this passage contains no textual variants of sufficient importance to warrant our consideration.

Verse 28 is the key verse for our attention. We notice that it comes in the midst of five great affirmations:

"You are all God's sons" - v. 26

"You have put on (have clothed yourself with) Christ" - v. 27

"You are all one in Christ Jesus" - v. 28

"You are Christ's (you belong to Christ) - v. 29

"You are Abraham's offspring" - v. 29

With these statements Paul underscores the high privileges, the new status of believers in Christ. We note three points in his argument:

1. For the first and only time in this epistle we encounter baptism. Paul has been expounding the priority of faith in justification. By putting the two statements in tandem in vv. 26 and 27--"faith in Jesus Christ" and "baptized into Christ"--he makes clear the indissoluble link in

his thinking between faith and baptism. That is, faith in Christ inexorably leads to baptism into Christ.

2. The inclusiveness of God's provision emerges, reiterated by:

"you all" (pantes) - v. 26

"so many" (hosoi) - v. 27

"you all" (pantes) - v. 28

"neither, nor . . . neither, nor. . . no . . . and" - v. 28

Paul could hardly emphasize more strongly this idea that he has hammered since chapter 2: God has only one way for all people to be justified in His sight.

3. The vertical (God-man) dimension is prominent:

"You are God's sons" - v. 26

"You have put on Christ" - v. 27

"You are Christ's" - v. 29

"You are Abraham's offspring" (and thus heirs of God's promises) - v. 29

The crucial question for this paper is: Is the vertical dimension the only intent of Paul in this passage? The God-man relationship dominates in verses 26, 27, and 29; but what about verse 28? Does the "you are all one" in this verse point to a horizontal (man-man) dimension also? These remarks lead us to take a closer look at verse 28.

The first two phrases form a chiasm with the terms exactly matched in the Greek:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek;

There is neither bond nor free."

The third phrase introduces another set of distinctions, but breaks the pattern:

"There is no male or female."

Then comes the concluding phrase, introduced by the gar ("for) which gives the reason for the preceding three phrases in the verse: "For you are all one in Jesus Christ."

It seems undeniable that with this final phrase Paul goes beyond his previous emphasis on the vertical dimension. That is, he is doing more than stating that through faith, manifested by baptism, we all have the same status before God. "You are all one in Jesus Christ" points horizontally: it shows the unity of believers, regardless of Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female, in Jesus Christ. Other expositors of the New Testament have understood the phrase in this sense, e.g., Stauffer, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. 2, p. 439.

The change in person (from first to second) in verses 26-29 is surely significant. Throughout chapter 3 Paul uses the first person, but for just these four verses he switches to the second person, resuming the first person at 4:1. He clearly intends to drive home, by direct address to his Gentile readers, the privileges that have come to them in Christ. As believers, baptized into Christ, they now are sons of God and children of Abraham; they also are one (unified) with all baptized believers--Jews as well as other Gentiles, bond and free, male and female.

Now we understand better why Paul was so upset with Peter (2:11-14). The latter's withdrawal from table fellowship with the Gentiles denied Gal. 3:28--"You are all one in Jesus Christ." Regardless of the assent Peter may have given to the gospel, his practice denied it; he wasn't "acting straight concerning the truth of the gospel" (2:14).

In concluding this brief exegesis of Galatians of 3:28,29 I will simply

note two other points frequently mentioned by interpreters: (1) In Gal. 3:28 Paul uses the rare New Testament terms "male" and "female" (arsen and thēlu) rather than "husband" and "wife" (aner and gune). These rare terms link his argument with the creation story in Gen. 1:27; (2) In Gal. 3:28 Paul turns on its head the Jewish morning prayer that thanked God that "Thou hast not made me a Gentile, a slave or a woman."

#### D. Conclusions

In context Gal. 3:28,29 argues two main ideas important to Paul's gospel:

1. The equal status before God of all baptized believers; and
2. The unity in Christ of all baptized believers.

But what does this unity imply? What does it mean for all believers--Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female--to be "one in Christ Jesus"? This leads us now to the second, and more problematic, section of this study. If problematic, it is nonetheless vital, for exegesis is incomplete until we have struggled to see how the text, God's Word, touches our situation today.

#### II. Implications of Galatians 3:28,29

Galatians 3:28,29 does not address the question of the ordination of women to the gospel ministry. Thereby many Adventists dismiss it from further consideration. They are wrong in so doing: the passage may, or may not, inform our discussion of the topic. Only after we have explored its implications can we set it aside.

Often those who examine Gal. 3:28,29 discern--rightly--its ringing affirmation of equality of status of all believers before God. They conclude: "This text is talking about salvation and so has no bearing on the issue of the role of women."

I think Paul would rebuke publicly that sort of reasoning. Why was he so upset with Peter? To be sure, the Gentiles had equal status with the Jews before God; wasn't it enough to preach this?

Not for Paul! The gospel preached could not be separated from the gospel lived. Actions that don't square with the gospel deny the finest theological presentation. Genuine theology never denies morality.

For Paul, as for Jesus, the gospel changes horizontal relationships (person to person) as well as the vertical one (person to God). Specifically, when Jewish Christians refused to sit at the table with Gentile Christians they denied that they were "all one in Christ Jesus."

Paul's confrontation with Peter took place 1900 years ago, but some Adventists have yet to grasp, under the pricks of the Spirit, Paul's point. Sharing table fellowship is personal, intimate; and some of us still put up barriers. Some expatriates, godly and hard-working though they are, make sure that "the natives" eat in the kitchen, never in the dining-room; some expatriate "potlucks" are strictly "whites only."

Hear me carefully: I am speaking about good men and women, workers who have given their lives to the Cause. I seek not to cause offence; these words may cut--but so did Paul's.

I am not one of the wise old men among us, but I have served the Lord and His people now for nearly 30 years, with more than 15 years as an expatriate worker. Reflection over many years on the strengths and flaws of this marvelous Advent movement, especially on some incidents that I was part of and of which I now am ashamed, leads me to conclude that one of our greatest needs is to educate our people in the manner in which the gospel confronts and judges society. Long ago we missionaries in some respects

took the easy route of the colonial powers and segregated ourselves from the national believers; is it any wonder that they in turn have often fallen prey to casteism, tribalism, and racism?

Because of this background I get impatient with interpretations that dismiss Galatians 3:28,29 as "only talking about salvation."

"There is neither Jew nor Greek": did this phrase imply more than status before God? Unless we are prepared to tear up the first two chapters of Galatians, it surely did. Does it imply more for Adventists today also? It must imply at least what it implied for first-century Christians--table fellowship.

"There is neither bond nor free": did this phrase also imply more than status before God? Paul does not take up this matter in Galatians; his focus in this book is on the Jewish-Gentile issue. Nowhere does he condemn slavery per se, but he encourages Christian slaves to take their freedom if they can (1 Cor. 7:21) and shows the Christian slave-owner Philemon the difference Christianity should make in his treatment of his runaway slave, Onesimus, now converted (Philem. 8-21). More than this, his unequivocal affirmation in Gal. 3:28,29 laid down a principle that in time would sound the deathknell of slavery: If God made no distinction between bond and free, how could Christians? Rationalizations like "separate but equal," preaching "salvation" for the Black but segregating him in worship--yes, even in Adventist congregations until recent times--simply had to go. It's a pity they took so long in going!

"There is no male or female": does this phrase imply more than status before God? Surely Paul's reasoning concerning Jews and Gentiles tells us that whenever we erect barriers against women in the church, whenever we

denigrate women, we are not walking straight according to the truth of the gospel.

Galatians 3:28,29 was so understood among our pioneers. I know of only one editorial that appeared twice in the Review and Herald of last century --"Woman's Relation to the Cause of Christ" (May 24, 1892; June 5, 1894) by G. C. Tenney. The editorial dealt, not with salvation for women, but with their place in the church in light of 1 Cor. 14:34,35 and 1 Tim. 2:12. In the course of his remarks Tenney wrote:

"Considering the question from a broader standing, it will be seen at a glance that while it has ever been the work of the powers of darkness to degrade woman, the work of the Bible has been to elevate her. The Bible and its religion is the great civilizing agent in this world, where the natural tendency is downward to destruction. Under Christianity, multitudes of women have been raised from the degradation of slavery to their rightful place by the side of him for whom she was created a help meet for him (not help-meet), that is, a fit companion. It was the work of the gospel to remove distinctions among men in race, nationality, sex, or condition. Paul declares that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.' Gal. 3:28. This text has a generic application; it is of universal force wherever the gospel reaches. In the light of such a statement, how can women be excluded from the privileges of the gospel?"

Tenney here did not argue on behalf of ordination of women. He was advocating, however, women's "laboring in the gospel," which included speaking in public and teaching.

I disagree with Tenney's wording but not with his ideas. The gospel does

not, I think, remove "distinctions among men in race, nationality, sex, or condition." What it does is to attack those human barriers thrown up by society, history, and prejudice that deny our oneness as baptized believers in Jesus Christ.

What then of women's ordination? Is the prohibition against it of divine or of human origin? Here Adventists of good conscience may differ.

Some, based on their interpretation of Genesis 1 and 2, hold that the order of creation mandates roles for women that exclude them from ruling over men. In my judgment that view misreads Genesis 1 and 2 and flies in the face of SDA history and practice. We have never excluded women from public office or from teaching men; Ellen White's calling and work would be a scandal under this interpretation. She herself had to meet such objections last century.

On the other hand, the Bible teaches that the calling to pastoral ministry is a charisma, a gift of the Spirit (Eph. 4:11). The Scriptures also predict, in a passage especially dear to Adventists, that in the last days the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh--young and old, women as well as men (Joel 2:27,28). We long ago acknowledged that work of the Spirit in enduing a young woman, Ellen Harmon [White] with one of His gifts--prophecy. Can we not acknowledge that He may give any other of the promised gifts, including that of pastor, to a woman? If God calls a Gentile, a slave, or a woman, who are we to resist?