

An Undivided World
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Galatians 3.23-29 (NRSV)

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. 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. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.

Introduction

Chapter 3 is one of the most technical and complicated in all of Paul's writings. Just in the thirteen or fourteen commentaries in my own library about Galatians, the discussions of chapter 3 go on for dozens upon dozens of pages and obviously we don't have time this morning to recount more than the most significant highlights.

The text today begins near the end of chapter 3 but Paul begins the chapter with inflammatory words: "You foolish Galatians!" A better translation might be, "You idiot Galatians!" and in the context of Paul's time that was a racial or ethnic slur. It reflects an ancient prejudice that ethnic Galatians were uncivilized or slowwitted.¹ Such epithets were typical in the rhetoric of that day. Actually, come to think of it, they are still typical in our own time.

But a few verses later, Paul addresses the Galatians as "brothers and sisters." (3.15) On the one hand he gets in their face and on the other hand he embraces them. As we've already seen in this sermon series, Paul was both spitting mad at them for abandoning the true gospel of Jesus Christ but he also wanted to embrace them as family and love them in order to win them back. He tries to do that by painting the biggest picture possible in verse 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." Paul's envisions that in Christ the world is undivided. Here are a couple of reflections to help us see what he meant.

ONE: Children of Abraham

In the verses of chapter 3 leading up to today's text Paul argues that all Christians are children of Abraham and could, therefore, claim the promises that God made to Abraham, a promise of an eternal covenant in which all nations would be blessed. But remember that the people who were opposing him in Galatia also argued that Christians must become children of Abraham. But they insisted that the only way to do that was to be a faithful Jew and follow the traditional Jewish laws, both the moral law and what we might call religious regulations and purity restrictions. In other words, if you were a gentile, in order to become a Christian you needed to first become a Jew

¹ PHEME PERKINS, *Abraham's Divided Children: Galatians and the Politics of Faith* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001) 63.

including, for males, receiving the rite of circumcision. And if you were already a Jew, you could remain a faithful Christian only by maintaining faithfulness to Jewish traditions.

Paul would have none of that. But he had to explain how gentiles could still be children of Abraham even though they did not adopt the patterns and regulations of being Jews. The first 22 verses of chapter 3 contain the substance of Paul's argument and the conclusion is today's text.

Here Paul's thinking takes a stunning turn. He says that before Christ came, the Jews were given the law as a "disciplinarian." The Greek word being translated here is *paidagogos*. The word *pedagogue* comes from that even though the meaning of that word in English is somewhat different than the function of a *paidagogos* in Paul's time. A *paidagogos* was usually a slave and also usually an older man — someone not worth much on the slave market. Wealthy families would assign a *paidagogos* to watch over minor children from around the age of eight until adulthood, normally considered to be age twenty. The *paidagogos* was to guide a child as he or she matured morally in the path of virtue entailing such things as self-control, honor, respect, discipline, putting one's best foot forward in public, and so forth. The *paidagogos* would also walk with children to school, watch out for their safety, and perhaps even do menial tasks such as drawing the bath water, making sure kids went to bed on time and ate the right foods.²

Paul's says that the law served a similar function for the Jews. It pointed them in the right direction. It identified their sin and pointed them to a gracious God. Obeying the law didn't save them.³ Only God's grace saves. But the law pointed to God and, even before the law, with the eyes of faith Abraham saw that God was gracious. And here's the stunning insight Paul reached. Because the gospel of Jesus Christ is pure grace, anyone who sees through the eyes of faith is also a child of Abraham. The *paidagogos* of the law is no longer necessary for anyone. A new day has come in Christ.⁴

It may be well nigh impossible for us to appreciate the significance of this. After twenty centuries we Christians tend to think of our way as just how things always have been. But Paul saw the radical difference that Jesus Christ makes. He wanted the Galatians to not fall back into old ways of thinking, behaving, and believing. So the Galatians struggled with this and, if we're honest enough to admit it, even we struggle with the new day that Christ brings.

² Ben Witherington, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 265.

³ Perkins, 72-73. "The Law cannot 'make alive,' that is, produce persons who are righteous before God. Nor had God ever intended it to do so."

⁴ Witherington, 267. "Paul's metaphor here suggests that the pedagogue was for *Jews* before the time of Christ, and now that Christ has come no one *needs* or is *required* to submit to it for getting in, staying in, or going on in the Christian life. Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts in the new era, what counts is the new creation (which is to say, neither Jewishness nor Gentleness has soteriological or social significance in Christ). In Paul's mind there is a difference between submitting to the Mosaic Law and its requirements, and so becoming a Jew, and learning from Scripture what God's Word or will is for humankind. Paul believes that God's plan or will is indeed partly revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is more fully and finally made clear in Christ, who proves to be the hermeneutical key for properly understanding both the Scriptures and the role of the Law as recorded in the Scriptures. It is no longer the Law, but Christ (and being in Christ) that defines who God's people are." (emphasis his)

TWO: A new day has come in Christ

My title reflects the new day in Christ that Paul saw. He expressed that vision in the amazing verse of 3.28. When Paul said that in Christ there was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female he was talking about the three fundamental divisions known to his world. “Jew or Greek” divided the world along ethnic-religious lines. “Slave or free” divided the world along socioeconomic lines. “Male and female” divided the world along gender lines.⁵ And all of these divisions resulted largely from how one was born. You were born a Jew or a gentile. If you were born a slave, you would likely remain a slave and the opposite was true if you were born free. You were obviously born either male or female. But Paul says, “In the sphere of Jesus Christ, even these distinctions of how we are born, how we are, have no place.” The new day in Christ means the world is no longer divided.

Of course, not even Paul always lived up to that ideal. Indeed, who among us lives up to our own ideals let alone any of the greatest ideals expressed by the human heart and mind? And certainly we do not experience the ideal. To say that the world is undivided because of Jesus Christ crashes at high speed into the reality we experience every day.

Everywhere we look the world is divided. National identities divide us. Race divides us. Gender divides us. War divides us. Wealth and poverty divide us. Politics divide us. And while we often extol the blessings of family, families are divided too, sometimes bitterly.

In a few weeks Merrie and I will head out to Bellingham, Washington for a McIvor family reunion. My mother and father, both deceased now, had six children — I’m the youngest. We six have 19 children among us. Those 19 have produced another couple of dozen kids and when you add all the spouses and partners, it’s a rather large family. A number of years ago we decided to start having family reunions after our parents died and one of our brothers and our sister’s husband. We realized that the only time we were getting together was for funerals and we wanted to be together in happier times too.

But if you stopped by our reunion, you might wonder if we liked being together that much. Perhaps because of our Scottish genes, McIvors are boisterous, loud, and frequently disagreeable. We argue a lot. We don’t think alike or act alike. We vote differently and have differing views on almost any subject you could name. I don’t know. Maybe your family is different. Certainly we McIvors would say that we love each other but that doesn’t mean we’re undivided.

Moving beyond our individual families to think about our nation’s family, it goes without saying that as a people we are divided politically. In this political season we hear a lot of talk about “blue states” and “red states” and how divided the electorate is. While for the most part I don’t know your party affiliations or how you’ll vote, I think it’s fair to say that all of us in this room don’t see eye to eye politically. And what is true in the body politic is just as true in the body ecclesiastical. We don’t see eye to eye in this church, or any church. I’m sure that had the color of this carpeting that the trustees put down a year ago been put to a vote, we would not even have agreed unanimously on that. And if we’re divided over carpeting, how much more so over moral or political issues that face us as a people and a church? Everywhere we look the world is divided. So how can we make sense of Paul’s claim that in Christ none of the divisions, not even the big ones, make any difference? How

⁵ Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, Jr., James D. Newsome, *Texts For Preaching, Year C* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 397.

can we see the new day that has come in Jesus Christ?

Conclusion

I honestly don't know how to give an answer in a compelling way, except we must hang on to Paul's vision. The world will keep showing us how divided we are. Christ came to show us a different way and Paul insists that Christ's way *is* reality. So even when we fail the vision, we need to hang on to it.

For Paul believed that when we put on Christ — he used the image of baptism — not only do the world's divisions no longer matter, but also that we are Abraham's offspring. We are children in the family of God and maybe that's the key. We are family.

Remember when, according to John's Gospel, Jesus was dying on the cross? He looked down and saw his mother and, standing next to her, the beloved disciple. And Jesus said to his mom, "Woman, here is your son." And to the disciple he said, "Here is your mother." (John 19.26-27) Even the depths of his suffering — no, *because* of the depths of his suffering, Jesus makes us family. We belong to each other. I belong to you and not just because you pay my salary. It's much deeper than that. I belong to you and you belong to me. We may not always like each other. We may not think the same. We may disagree. But such divisions no longer matter for we are one in Christ Jesus. It's a hard vision for us but it is not only Paul's vision. It is Christ's. May God help us to live it.