

**A New Definition  
October 19, 2008**

**Galatians 3:23-29:**

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.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

Bill Leslie, the pastor of a Chicago congregation that Phillip Yancey attended, helped his congregation understand just the differences between the ways we worship God today and how the Jews in the Old Testament, with their focus on the law, worshipped the Almighty. Pastor Leslie divided the sanctuary so it would resemble the temple in Jerusalem. Gentiles were only allowed to sit in the balcony, designated the Court of the Gentiles. They were prevented from entering the main floor of the sanctuary. The Jewish women could sit in the back of the sanctuary, kept away from the men in the women's zone. Jewish men had lots of room near the front, but even they could not enter the chancel area, reserved for priests alone.

In the front of the chancel, imagine by our communion table, Pastor Leslie put up a curtain that was a foot-thick walling it off from the rest of the sanctuary, signifying the most Holy Place, the location the Jews believed they could come into God's presence. Only one day each year, on Yom Kipper, one priest could go inside that area and even he had to wear a rope around his ankle. If he did something wrong or died inside, the other priests were not even allowed to go inside and bring him back: they had to pull him out with the rope. The very architecture reminded Israelites that God was set apart, holy, and very difficult to access on a personal level.<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament focused on a God who was holy and distant, while Jesus showed us that the Lord is accessible. Jesus called God Abba, "Father," and taught us that we could pray directly to God. Another key difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is the Old Testament focused on law, while the New Testament is centered on grace.

The members of the church in Galatia fought about law and grace as they were divided over the issue of circumcision. In Galatia, the Christian community was made up of Jews and Gentiles. Of course, Christianity began as a Jewish movement; Jesus himself was a Jew. Torah, or the law, was central to the Jewish faith. Many Jews, especially Pharisees, were proud of the law, which God gave to them as a gift. There were over six

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace?, p. 150.

hundred laws in the Torah for Jews to follow. Jesus, who ate with sinners and tax collectors, ministered to Gentiles, offered redemption to a Samaritan woman at the well, and healed on the Sabbath, seemed to disobey these laws, which the Jews valued. Jesus knew that being faithful to God requires more than being able to literally follow a set of legal requirements. Instead Jesus focused on grace that included all people.

One of the most important laws was for all Jewish males to be circumcised. The Gentiles who were joining the first-century church in Galatia did not want to be circumcised. This was unacceptable to the Jews, who wanted to exclude the Gentiles from their faith community.

Like the church in Galatia, we are really good at dividing ourselves into groups, such as: men and women, black and white, Democrats and Republicans, American citizens and illegal immigrants, Main Street and Wall Street, Christians and Muslims, and rich and poor. It is tempting to identify only with the people who look like us and blame those who are not a part of our group for the problems we observe. We also divide ourselves over the small stuff: the way we dress, the neighborhood we live in, whether we prefer Pepsi or Coke, who our friends are, what kind of music we prefer to listen to, and much more.

It troubles me when we feel either superior to another human being or others try to make us feel inferior because of how we are different. Paul tells us to pay attention to our uniqueness, but all our social status, ethnic backgrounds, and personal preferences take a back seat to our bond in Christ. It is healthy that we have differences, but he Paul hopes that Christians living in community together will work to remove the barriers between us, the hostility, chauvinism, and sense of inferiority and superiority based on our differences.<sup>2</sup> In the church, of all places, we should seek to respect each other and find creative ways to live together amidst our diversity.

In first century Palestine, Jewish men would begin each day with their morning prayers. They would thank God “who has not made me a Gentile, who has not made me a slave, and who has not made me a woman.” Most first century Jews bought into the flawed logic that it was more blessed to be a Jew than a Gentile, more blessed to be a free person than a slave, and more blessed to be a man rather than a woman. In Paul’s day the three biggest divisions were between Jews and Greeks, slaves and free people, and males and females. Those distinctions decided who you were allowed to socialize with: Jews and Greeks were not supposed to eat together. Jews even believed it was offensive to enter the home of a Gentile. Slaves were supposed to serve and were seen as less than their masters. Women unfortunately were viewed as dependent upon and seen as less than their male counterparts.

Galatians 3:28 is the climax of the entire book of Galatians. Paul firmly believes, “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 explains that Christ’s salvation and love is for all, no matter where we were born, no matter where we work, no matter

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<sup>2</sup> Charlie Cousar, Commentary on Galatians, p. 86.

who we are. This is a key verse that has helped us, as Presbyterians, realize that God calls women and men to all ministries of the church.

For centuries, women were not allowed to have leadership certain positions in the church, which mirrored how they have often been treated as second-class citizens in society. I am proud of our faith tradition for recognizing the gifts that women bring to ministry. Many of my pastoral colleagues are gifted women. In today's congregational meeting, we are electing a number of women to serve our church as elders and I am grateful for the gifts and perspective that these women and men we elect will bring.

Paul writes his letter to the Galatians to help them find a way forward by moving beyond relying upon the law. In translation I read from the New Revised Standard Version, it states that now that Christ Jesus has come we are no longer subject to the disciplinarian. The Greek word that is translated as disciplinarian is "paidagogos," which is the name for a particular kind of household slave who would be responsible for overseeing the behavior of children when they are home from school and traveling to and from school. The paidagogos' services were used temporarily and were no longer needed when the child reached adulthood. For a time, the paidagogos offers a valuable service, but it is healthy for children to grow up and be able to handle those responsibilities on their own.<sup>3</sup> Paul argues that the law is helpful when we are young in the faith, but as we mature, we find more vitality in a grace-filled relationship with Christ.

This week, I thought of the image of training wheels for a bicycle. Paul argues that for Christians who are growing in the faith, the law functions like training wheels. When a child first learns how to pedal her bike, she needs the training wheels to keep her from losing her balance. But the ultimate goal is to become proficient enough with the training wheels that she can take them off. She finds a new level of joy by experiencing the freedom of riding her bike without training wheels.

Paul is saying that the Christian faith is about much more than rules. Sure, rules are helpful. The church should continue to teach people to not cheat, not lie, not steal, not gossip, not express sexuality in unhealthy, demeaning ways, but faith is so much more exciting and vibrant than focusing on what we should not do. As individual Christians and as a community of faith, I would rather be defined positively by who we are, what we do, and what we stand for, instead of focusing on what we are not and judging those who are not like us. I would prefer being known, not for the rules we keep, but for the dynamic relationship we are in. God calls us to a life well-lived as disciples who seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.<sup>4</sup>

Since Christians, as a whole, are so diverse, how do we figure out how to live together in peace? Paul explains two principles that should guide our common life together: our unity in Christ and mutual respect for one another. First, we are unified in Christ Jesus. Loyalty to our Lord is more important than all of our differences. After all, we share so much in common, including our belief that God calls us into a life-long relationship where we continue to grow and rely on God's grace. Second, while

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<sup>3</sup> Cousar, Gaventa, McCann, & Newsome, Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year C, p. 396.

<sup>4</sup> This sentence makes an allusion to Micah 6:8.

acknowledging our differences, we need to discover ways to respect and live in community with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In the same church service that Bill Leslie had divided the church to make it look like the Jewish temple, members of the congregation acted out a skit. Several petitioners went up to the platform to deliver their message to the priest that would then be passed onto God. Of course, the women had to get men to bring up their concern, since they were not allowed to speak. Some brought sacrifices for the priests to give to God; others had specific prayer requests. Each time the “priest” would go behind the curtain and submit the request to God. Suddenly in the midst of the ceremony, a young woman ran down the aisle, disregarding the restrictions on her gender, while opening the Bible to the book of Hebrews. “Hey, any of us can talk to God directly!” she proclaimed. “Listen to this, ‘Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to the Lord.’ “Any of us can enter the Most Holy Place!” she said before running offstage. “Any of us can come to God directly!”<sup>5</sup>

Karl Barth, perhaps the most significant theologian of the twentieth century, was asked when he visited the University of Chicago what is the most profound theological truth he had learned. Barth, who wrote thousands and thousands of pages of complicated theological arguments replied, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” If we know that Jesus loves us, why do we make it so complicated? Why do we treat some people like they deserve less of our love or God’s love?

Sure, God made us all different, but that is no reason for us to feel either a sense of superiority or a sense of shame. It is hard to focus on what unifies us. Paul tells us, whether we are young or old, rich or poor, male or female, there is a place for us at God’s table. May we, as the church, seek to live out Christ’s inclusive vision where all of us can come as we are, know that we are loved, and find common ground in Christ. Thanks be to God! Amen!

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<sup>5</sup> Yancey, p.156.