

God's Plan for Human Equality

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March 14, 2010

Galatians: Free At Last Series

Galatians 3:26-29

Three key church documents about equality

In January 1933 Hitler came to power in Germany. Initially, his election was supported by the vast majority of Christians in Germany because he offered people a hope of economic recovery and a restoration of social order. He immediately instituted a plan to take control over every significant institution in Germany – government, business, universities, and the church.

One of the things that Hitler did was to institute the infamous Aryan Paragraph which required churches to dismiss pastors who came from a Jewish background and to dismiss pastors who were married to Jews. So in Hitler's Germany, I, as a Jew, would no longer be able to serve as Pastor of Vineyard Columbus. He also moved to take over all of the denominational leadership positions and make sure that all the denominational leaders were thoroughly pro-Nazi.

Immediately pastors began to organize under the leadership of Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to protest the removal of Jewish Christians from the clergy and to argue that Jews, who came to Christ, were as much Christian as anyone else and were full members of the Body of Christ. Out of their protest came a church movement called "The Confessing Church." And an important document, "The Barman Declaration of Faith," which argued against state takeover of the church. That was 1934.

Well, in 1982 there was another major document that dealt with racism of a different sort. In 1982 the World Alliance of Reformed Churches met in Ottawa, Canada to pass a resolution condemning the racism of the Reformed Church in South Africa. The white Afrikaans Reformed Churches of South Africa over the years worked out in considerable detail the theological justification of apartheid. Apartheid simply meant separate development. And what the Afrikaans Reformed Church did was to separate people in the church on the basis of race, to separate people out at the Lord's Table, to separate out people in marriage and business and in schools.

So this World Association of Reformed Churches confronted one of its member churches over the issue of racism in the church and they began this 1982 "Ottawa Resolution" quoting one of the fathers of the Protestant Reformation, John Calvin, who back in the 1500's said this:

We feel duty bound by the gospel to raise our voice and stand by the oppressed. None of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way

offended by us, without at the same time despising and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do...We cannot love Christ without loving Him in the brethren.

So what the "Ottawa Resolution" declared was that apartheid was a heresy and travesty to the gospel and it contradicted all that Christ came to do and obscured the gospel witness before the world. So they dis-fellowshipped. In other words, they kicked out the Afrikaans Reformed Church and this church was dis-fellowshipped until such time as it made concrete steps of repentance by including black Christians fully in the life of the church especially in communion. And until they offered concrete support in word and deed to those who suffered under the system of apartheid.

A few weeks ago I talked with you about a third important 20th century Christian document and that was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," where King makes a Christian argument regarding why he was leading non-violent Christian protests against racism in the city of Birmingham and challenging churches about the sin of racism in their midst.

Now, listen, here are three of the most important documents written by Christians in the 20th century: "The Barman Declaration" in 1934, the "Ottawa Resolution" in 1982, and the "Letter From a Birmingham" Jail in 1963. All three documents dealt with the same issue: The sin of racism that had infected the Christian church.

Now, you know that in America the church is still divided along racial lines. It is still the case in America that the vast, vast majority of churches are mono-racial. According to research 92.5% of Roman Catholic and Protestant churches would be classified as mono-racial. The term mono-racial describes a church in which 80% or more of the individuals who attend are of the same race, or ethnicity. So, if you are in a church in which 85% or 90% or 95% of the people are of the same race; everyone is white; everyone is Korean; everyone is African-American; that would be mono-racial. Only 7.5% of churches in America can be described as multi-racial. Only 5% of evangelical churches (1 out of 20), and 2.5% of Mainline Protestant churches (1 out of 40) would be considered multi-racial.

So here we are proclaiming a gospel in which we say that Christ has come to break down walls of division, to create one new human family out of the multitude of races, and yet, week by week the Christian church in America betrays the gospel by its lack of intentionality and repentance regarding all of the divisions around the communion table. Week by week the Christian church in America, by and large, betrays the gospel by the people's insistence that everyone who joins our church look like us, like our style of worship music, think like us, vote like us, act like us.

But God in the gospel has a way forward. And in the hinge passage in the book of Galatians, Paul's argument about the breaking down of dividing walls reaches a crescendo. We are going to read about "God's Plan for Human Equality." That's my title for this message from the book of Galatians. Let's pray.

Galatians 3:26-29

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Now right off the bat when we talk about breaking down dividing walls and working for equality, we need to be incredibly careful because the gospel is not a human creation of human plans for equality can go dangerously awry.

Human plans for equality

Kurt Vonnegut published a story back in the early 1960's called *Harrison Bergeron*. *Harrison Bergeron* is a story that takes place sometime in the future in the United States. And in the story social equality is achieved by handicapping people who are more intelligent, more athletic, or more beautiful. So, for example, strong people are handicapped by having to carry weight. And beautiful people are handicapped by having to wear a mask. Harrison Bergeron, who is the central figure in this story, has exceptional strength and beauty and intelligence. And so he has to bear enormous handicaps which include things like having to wear headphones that made distracting noise. He had to carry 300 pounds of weight strapped to his body; and 40 pounds of buckshot around his neck. He had to wear eyeglasses that gave him headaches and a rubber ball on his nose and black caps on his teeth. He had to shave his eyebrows. And despite all of these handicaps, he eventually invades a TV station, declares himself the emperor, strips off the handicaps and dances with a ballerina, who also discarded her handicaps.

Humanly created equality often goes terribly awry. We saw that in China under the Cultural Revolution where farmers were brought off the fields to create steel, and doctors were forced to labor in rice paddies; professors were removed from colleges and forced to do manual labor. This human plan to make everyone equal practically destroyed China. The same thing, of course, happened in the Soviet Union with the forced collectivization under Stalin in the 1930's.

What the gospel offers is not a rejection of the goal of breaking down humanly created divisions, or of the desire that all of our distinctions not be used against us to handicap us from being full members of the church. The gospel offers us God's plan for equality.

God's plan for equality

Now, let's read verses 26-29 again:

Galatians 3:26-29

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither

Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

I want you to notice the word "all." All! All! All received the same gift in the gospel. There is not one who receives and another doesn't. All! I want you to see this. Let me break this down for you. The gospel is God's plan for human equality because the gospel announces that salvation is by grace alone. Salvation is not by performance. It is not by human merit, or human striving. "Well, I produce more, so I deserve more." "I have a better background than you; I've got a leg up, so I get to be closer to God than you." "You are more intelligent; you're a harder worker; you have more natural capacity; so, you get into the kingdom of God, but I don't."

See, we all differ in terms of merit. We have different talents, different skills, and different abilities. But the gospel says God is not grading us by merit.

Because the gospel is the announcement of God's plan for salvation that comes by grace alone, it eliminates all the basis upon which we distinguish ourselves from each other. There is no basis for comparison. There is no basis for performance. There is no basis for boasting. The gospel comes and says, first of all, all of us are in need – all are in need, not just the uneducated, but the educated. Not just the poor, but the rich. Not just the unintelligent, but the intelligent, the high capacity people. All – rich, poor, black, white, Asian, Latino, men, women – all are in need. And all are saved on the same basis by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

And the gospel tells us something else. Jesus came not just to be our example. If Jesus was just our example, then the really committed people, the people who came from healthy family backgrounds, and who were mentally and emotionally whole, would get near to the model of Jesus and feel good about themselves. And those who were lazier, or who had unhealthy family backgrounds, or were mentally or emotionally unstable would feel terrible about themselves. Christ did not come merely to be our example and to urge us all forward.

Christ came to be our substitute. We read that last week in Galatians 3:13:

Galatians 3:13

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole."

He came to become a curse for us; to legally be treated as if he were us. And in a great exchange, we were legally treated before God as if we were as holy and clean and kind as Jesus Christ.

So, how does God knock down all of our human divisions and all of our distinctions through the gospel in a way that is so utterly different than our humanly constructed,

humanly engineered plans that often have devastating results and horrible unintended consequences?

First of all, Paul says:

Everyone who has faith receives full rights as sons

Now, you miss some of this in the TNIV. I want you to see this. In verse 26 in the TNIV we read:

Galatians 3:26

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith

Now that is a terrible translation. It ought to read and we found this in the old NIV version:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus

Not “children” of God, but “sons” of God. All! I will talk about that in just a moment. The same thing is the case in 4:5. In the TNIV we read this:

Galatians 4:5

to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

It is better here, but the better translation is in the NIV which reads:

To redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons

Now, in our day it is incredibly insensitive to say to a woman that you are a son of God. That’s why the TNIV retranslates it “child of God.” Many women in the 21st century would say, “I just can’t identify with the phrase ‘son of God,’ I’m a daughter of God. I’m a woman.” But the reason that we need to insist on the language “son of God” is because Paul is communicating something out of the 1st century regarding what God has done for you women and you men and you children – whether a girl or a boy – through the gospel. Paul is saying that through the gospel you folks, all of you, have received the full rights of 1st century sons.

You see, back then there was a legal transaction in the Greco-Roman world in which a wealthy person, who had no son and who was getting up in years, could adopt an heir. Once the legal papers were drawn up in an instant that person, even if they were completely unrelated, became the wealthy person’s heir. The adoptee was taken out of their old status and pulled into a new relationship of son to father. All of the adoptee’s debts were instantly cancelled through the adoption. And the adoptee started an entirely new life as part of this new family. Paul says that’s what happened to all of you the moment you placed your faith in Christ. You Gentile Christians are part of the family. You don’t need to try to get in; you are already in.

So what Paul is saying is that when you become a Christian, it is so much more than what most people realize. When you become a Christian through faith in Jesus Christ, it is not just having your sins forgiven; God won't hold you liable on the Day of Judgment for your sins. When you become a Christian, Paul says, you receive full rights as sons. You've been adopted into the family of God. God is now your Father. Whatever your earthly father was on the scene or not, you have a Father in heaven. And your Father in heaven has made you an heir. You have complete access to God. And next week we'll talk about this. But you inherit all of the promises, including the promise of the Spirit. All of us! Not just the accomplished, but the unaccomplished.

Paul goes on in talking about God's plan for equality. He says:

Everyone who has faith is baptized into Christ

Galatians 3:27

for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Baptism is an incredible picture. There are lots of biblical images going on when a person is water baptized. We could talk about washing, we could talk about being overwhelmed – you are drowned, you're overwhelmed as you go under the water. Baptism is an image, a picture, of death and resurrection.

But Paul uses one particular image and that is the image of clothing.

We are clothed with Christ

Paul says in verse 27:

Galatians 3:27

for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

What's he talking about here? Well, in New Testament times when a person was baptized we have some evidence that they would literally strip off all of their old clothes. Sometimes people were baptized naked. And they would put on as they came up out of the water, a new clean, white robe.

What's going on in baptism? There is an end of life without Christ and the beginning of life with Christ. We are stripping off our independent life, our old life without Christ where we dated without Christ and we worked without Christ. Now, in baptism we are saying that we are now going to begin doing all of life with Christ; we're putting on a whole new life in the place of an independent life. In baptism I am adopting a Christ-dependent life.

So, before you were joined to Christ by faith, what baptism is intended to signify – you are joining with Christ. Before your faith in Christ and your baptism, the way you

responded to hurt was to respond to that hurt without Christ. So maybe you would lash back at a person who hurt you, or you just held a grudge. You secretly punished your husband or your wife by withholding some kind of privilege or withholding conversation or withholding sex. Before you put your faith in Christ, before your baptism, the way you responded to hurt was to get even; to write an angry email; to post something nasty on your Facebook page. But now because you've placed your faith in Christ, because of baptism, you are now clothed with Christ everything in your life including the way you respond to hurt is done with Christ.

So now when you are hurt you bring your hurt to Christ. And you ask for Christ to heal you. You turn the person who hurt you over to Christ. You ask Christ to empower you to forgive. You bring all of your thoughts of revenge and getting even under Christ. You challenge and confront a person with the confidence that Christ is with you. And you speak the truth in love according to Christ's commands.

In baptism you are ending your old life without Christ and you are beginning a new life with Christ in everything.

And Paul says we are not only clothed with Christ, but:

We are in new relations with each other

Galatians 3:27-28

for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Why does Paul speak about baptism when he is talking about eliminating distinctions between people?

Well, it is real clear because in baptism we find nothing less than a radical ending and a radical new beginning that can only be described stripping down and putting on totally new clothes. Christian baptism is a picture not only of your new connection with Christ and your ending of your old independence from Christ and you are starting life with Christ. But Christian baptism is a picture of entering the Christian church where all the old human divisions and all the old human distinctions and all the old hostilities are put to death and a totally new way of valuing people is put on.

This text, Galatians 3:26-29, is absolutely explosive:

Galatians 3:26-29

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Because what Paul is saying to us is through baptism into the Christian church God is beginning a new thing that is a foretaste of the new creation that is one day fully coming to us in Jesus Christ. God is not just giving us spiritual equality before him, so that we all who have faith in Christ have access to God, or all who have faith in Christ get forgiven, or all who have faith in Christ get eternal salvation. Galatians 3:26-29 has incredible social implications for the way that we relate to each other.

You say, “Where do you get that, Rich?” Paul was dealing with a concrete problem – Jewish Christians in the church in Galatia would no longer eat with their Gentile brothers and sisters. There was a social problem in which Jewish Christians said, “You are Gentile Christians not equal with us. You do not have equal value and equal worth. For you to become equal with us Jewish Christians to have full rights in the family of God, you Gentile Christians must be circumcised, you must celebrate the Sabbath, and you must keep the Jewish laws of kashrut.” And Paul says, “You Gentile Christians already have full rights as sons. You don’t need to do any of those things.”

And this has social implications in that Jews and Gentiles must eat together. The way that you formally made distinctions between one another is now broken down.

Or let me put it in a more nuanced way. Yes, there are distinctions between people. We see them all of the time. Some people are smart and some people aren’t. Some people are hard workers and some people aren’t. Some people are white and some people are black or Asian or Latino. Some people are women; some are men. Yes, distinctions still exist. But what Paul is arguing here is that these distinctions are no longer relevant in the way that we value people. He says these old structures, these old distinctions you shouldn’t give significance to them for they no longer matter in the way that you treat other people especially in the Christian church.

Now, note that there are three distinctions that Paul speaks to here.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

He speaks about the distinction of race and ethnicity.

There is neither “Jew nor Gentile.” He speaks about the issue of class and social status. He says there is “neither slave nor free.” And he speaks about the distinction of gender when he says “neither male nor female.” Paul’s statement here is absolutely revolutionary in the 21st century, but even more so in the 1st century. Eliminating distinctions in value and role based on race and ethnicity? Eliminating distinctions in value and role based on social class and economics? Eliminating distinctions in value and role based on gender? Not valuing people higher or lower in the church based on race, class or gender and not assigning roles in the church based on these things? How explosive is this text? How radical is it?

Back in the 1st century a Jewish rabbi wrote a prayer that became used in Jewish synagogues and could still be found in 20th century Jewish prayer books. As part of the morning prayer, this rabbi said that Jews should pray:

Blessed be He [God] that He did not make me a Gentile; blessed be He that He did not make me a peasant [or a slave]; blessed be He that He did not make me a woman.

The Greeks said something similar. It is reported that Socrates offered thanks because:

I was born a human being and not a beast, I was born a man and not a woman and I was born a Greek and not a barbarian.

You can find similar kinds of statements from the Persians and in other cultures. Every society makes distinctions in valuing other human beings whether it is a caste system in India or West Africa, or the Arabian Peninsula, or the racial classification that has been part of American history. Every society makes distinctions in which we value people higher or lower and assign roles based upon race, or class, or gender. Paul says, “But not in Christ!” Let’s look at this.

First of all, let’s look at:

God’s plan for racial equality

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In the 1st century there was a huge division between Jews and Gentiles. And that division could only be characterized by extreme hostility. We read in Ephesians 2:14-16:

Ephesians 2:14-16

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, 15 by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.

One Roman writer by the name of Tacitus claimed that the Jews:

“Regarded the rest of mankind with all the hatred of enemies.”

Now, what Paul says in Ephesians 16 is that through the cross Christ eliminated the hostility between the races. You see, the picture is of Christ. He is spread-eagled on

the cross. With one outstretched arm he grasps believing Jews and with the other arm he grasps believing Gentiles and he brings Jews and Gentiles together in one body, the church. We often think about the cross as removing the wrath of God from us. It does do that. The cross reconciles us to God. But the cross also removes the hostility of human beings towards each other and creates a new reconciled people.

The cross reconciles us with God. The cross reconciles us with each other. Christ's death eliminates all of the distinctions between Jew and Gentile with all of its potential for pride and for competitiveness.

And this bringing together of people across races and breaking down the way we humanly value each other – you are more important because you look like me; you are less important because you don't look like me – Jesus prayed for a multi-ethnic church on the night before he went to the cross. Here is what we read in John 17:21-23:

John 17:21-23

that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Now, I want you to note two things in this text. First of all, Jesus prayed for just one thing. What was the one thing he prayed for? He prayed that the church would be one; that we would be united. He prayed that in verse 21.

So unity, oneness, was the one thing Jesus prayed for on the night before he was crucified. But I want you to notice a second thing in Jesus' prayer.

There was a reason Jesus prayed for racial unity. He tells us that the reason he prayed in verse 21.

John 17:21

that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

And in verse 23:

SLIDE Jn 17:23

23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

There are two reasons why Jesus wants to eliminate racial distinctions: First, so that men and women throughout the world will recognize that Jesus is God's Messiah. And

second, that women and men throughout the world would recognize that we are God's people.

Here's the deal. When people walk into a church and they spot obvious diversity, they look around and see men and women from different races and backgrounds and ethnicities worshipping together, Jesus says that people will have two reactions: First, they will say there must be something to this Christianity deal because only God could have pulled this off. Jesus is in fact the Prince of Peace because nobody could bring this collection of people together other than someone who had power to make peace. So the first thing they'll say is, "There must be something to Christianity."

The second thing they will say as they look around and see great diversity is, "These people must have a relationship with God that I don't know anything about."

Unity in the church points people to Christ and it points people to the reality of our own Christian profession.

And you know something? Virtually every Christian church that the Apostle Paul planted and was part of was multiethnic and multicultural? In fact, the church that sent Paul out to plant was a multiracial, multiethnic church. It was the church in Antioch. We haven't the time to look there, but if we did in Acts 13, the church in Antioch was a church who had on its leadership team black Africans, North Africans, European Jews and Gentiles, wealthy people, and poor people. And you know what it says of the very diverse church in Antioch? In Acts 11:26 it says:

Acts 11:26

...The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

First time that the word Christian was used was in Antioch. A Christian is someone who follows Christ in breaking down dividing walls between people.

In the 2nd century there was a famous letter to Diognetus. He claimed to be a disciple of the apostles. And this letter refers to Christians as being a third race. It is not that Gentiles became Jews, or that Jews became Gentiles. But when Jews and Gentiles come to Christ, they form a third race – a whole new race.

You know, one of the things that we ought to give most thanks for regarding what God has done at Vineyard Columbus is bringing people together from every corner of the world. A few weeks ago we asked you to fill out cards, if you were born outside of the United States. How many different nations are represented here at our weekend services? How many different nations? What do you think? Try 75!

Paul says, "Neither Jew nor Gentile." And then he goes on in verse 28 and says neither slave nor free:

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

We're reading here about:

God's plan for social equality

It is amazing that Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit adds these two last categories – slave and free; male and female. The controversy was about race. It was about Jews and Gentiles eating together. Paul says the gospel is so radical that it eliminates all the other ways that we value people, and assign church roles based on these valuations. We are constantly valuing the wealthy more than the poor. The Apostle James tells us that that is a sin. When we value someone and given them a church role because they are professional rather than being a non-professional, or because they have a big house instead of living in a simple apartment, or that they've got a great education instead of dropping out of high school. Listen to James in James 2.

James 2:1-9

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. 2 Suppose someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor person in filthy old clothes also comes in. 3 If you show special attention to the one wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the one who is poor, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," 4 have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? 5 Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? 6 But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? 7 Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of him to whom you belong? 8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

James says, "If you are going to value anyone based upon some human distinction (which is always wrong), then value the poor over the wealthy."

Let me tell you a story. Back in the early 200's a terrible persecution broke out against Christians. And in the city of Carthage which was in North Africa, some Christians were rounded up. The officials demanded that these Christians renounce their faith in Christ and offer sacrifices to the emperor.

There was one wealthy woman name Perpetua and she had been led to Christ by her slave named Felicitas. And Perpetua wrote a detailed account of the efforts made to have her renounce her faith. In fact, in one unbelievably heart-rendering scene,

Perpetua's father held Perpetua's infant son in front of her and begged her to renounce Christ and to offer a sacrifice to the emperor so that her baby son would live. "He needs you. Please, if not for my sake as your father, for the sake of your baby. Please, don't be a martyr. Give in. Your baby needs you."

Perpetua weeps as she says, "Why are you doing this? I can't turn my back on Christ. I can't!"

And so in the last scene Perpetua walks into the coliseum in Carthage not by herself, but arm-in-arm with her slave, Felicitas. All social distinctions have broken down as they both walk arm in arm to their deaths. That was the beginning of the end of slavery in the Roman Empire.

It doesn't matter in the church. It shouldn't matter how much money you have or what you own.

Finally, Paul says, "Neither male nor female." Verse 28:

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

God's plan for gender equality

There are few things that are more relevant in the 21st century than gender equality. Nicholas Kristof, who is one of my favorite editorial writers, said this a few months ago:

In the 19th century, the paramount moral challenge was slavery. In the 20th century, it was totalitarianism. In this century, it is the brutality inflicted on so many women and girls around the globe: sex-trafficking, acid attacks, bride burnings and mass rape. There is a growing recognition among everyone from the World Bank to the US Military's Joint Chief of Staff to aid organizations like CARE that focusing on women and girls is the most effective way to fight global poverty and extremism. That's why foreign aid is increasing directed toward women. The world is awakening to a powerful truth: women and girls aren't the problem; they are the solution.

You ask, "How bad is it for women and girls around the world?" Let me just give you a few examples.

Since the Taliban became a military force in 1994 women and girls have become practically invisible in Taliban controlled areas of Afghanistan. Here are some of the rules that the Taliban has enforced.

- Women should not appear in the streets without a blood relative or without wearing a Burqa.

- Women should not wear high-heeled shoes as no man should hear a woman's footsteps lest it excites him.
- Women must not speak loudly in public as no stranger should hear a woman's voice.
- All ground and first-floor residential windows should be painted over or screened to prevent women from being visible from the streets.
- The photographing or filming of women was banned as was displaying pictures of women in newspapers, books, shops or the home.
- The modification of many place names that included the word "women". For example, "Women's Garden" was renamed "Spring Garden."
- Women were banned from being present on radio, television, or in public gatherings of any kind.

Taliban militia metes out punishment for violation of these rules on the spot. For example, women are beaten on the street if an inch of ankle shows under the burqa.

According to one report, a woman struggling with two small children and groceries in her arms was reportedly beaten by the Taliban with a car antenna because she had let her face covering slip a fraction.

Now, I've written extensively on women in leadership here at Vineyard Columbus. Read what I've written online especially regarding difficult texts such as 1 Timothy 2. But one of the things that you see in the Bible is that the Holy Spirit is non-discriminatory when it comes to gender. For example in Acts 2:18 we read this:

Acts 2:18

Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

When we study Paul's teaching about spiritual gifts, we see that spiritual gifts aren't given to due to human merit, or ethnic origin, or social status, or gender, but simply as the result of the will of the Holy Spirit. There is no text in the Bible that limits the endowment of leadership or teaching gifts simply to men. The question we ask here at Vineyard Columbus is has the Holy Spirit sovereignly given a person gifts that enable them to perform a certain role?

So, if I see teaching gifts, or leadership gifts in a woman, I'm going to say what the Apostle Peter said when he saw the Holy Spirit fall on Gentiles, "Who am I that I should oppose God? If God is gifting a woman to teach or to lead, then who am I to stand in God's way?"

I would note just a couple of things here in closing. Galatians 3:28 has been used repeatedly in history to advance the rights of women, slaves and minorities in the church and in society.

It was used before the Civil War by the abolitionists to oppose slavery. It was used during the Civil Rights Movement to fight racism. And it has been the text used over and over to fight gender discrimination.

Galatians 3:28

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

In fact, Galatians 3:28 was preached back in 1853 at the ordination of the first ordained woman in America. And it is interesting to me that back in the 19th century evangelical leaders believed in ordaining women to pastoral ministry. A.B. Simpson, who is the father of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Division in 1883 encouraged women to lead and to participate in every part of Christian Missionary Alliance life. Women were employed by AB Simpson to be professors at the new college that he established. He supported female evangelists. He supported women preachers. Women served on the executive committee.

D.L. Moody trained women to openly serve as pastors and evangelists and preachers and Bible teachers way back in the 19th century.

Holiness churches, particularly the Church of the Nazarene, and the Free Methodist Church and Wesleyan churches, and Pentecostal denominations in the 19th and early 20th centuries were all ordaining women and had women preachers and leaders.

But then at the beginning of the 20th century there was a Fundamentalist backlash. The Fundamentalists were reacting to the liberals throwing the Bible out. And one of the unfortunate overreactions was that in conservative and evangelical denominations, denominations that used to let women preach and used to let women lead started to create restrictions and barriers saying, “Women, you can’t do this and you can’t do that.” Women were restricted to childcare and to the nursery. There was only one place that women were allowed to serve freely and that was on the mission field.

J. Herbert Kane, who is a great historian of Christian missions, said this:

If there is any one generalization that can be made about single women missionaries and their ministries, it is perhaps their bent for difficult pioneer work. The more difficult and dangerous the work, the higher the ration of women to men.

In the gospel, God breaks down distinctions that every society makes. Distinctions in the ways that we value people, and welcome people, and give roles, opportunities for people based upon their gifts and calling.

So what does all of this mean for us in the church? Let me offer some simple points in closing.

Almost everyone in the 21st century says that they want to build an inclusive church that welcomes people across races, has different ethnicities, is open to folks to be used according to their gifts and not based on their gender, or their class. But once we read about God's plan, we need to intentionally put it into practice.

Most of the time, what I observe in people is that what they mean by welcoming is that other folks are welcome to join their church as long as they do things their way. You can come, but don't bring your culture. Don't try to change us. We have a certain way of doing things here. You can come and worship with us; you can even come and join our groups, be part of our leadership, so long as you don't make us change.

But you see, brothers and sisters, Vineyard Columbus doesn't belong to us! It doesn't belong to the first folks, who started this church 35 years ago. It doesn't belong to the people, who have been here for fifteen years, ten years, or five years. Our vision statement is really simple:

We seek to be a relevant church that does not exist for ourselves, but for Christ and for the world.

And we understand that our way of doing things is not necessarily God's way. The question we need to ask is not, "How have we always done everything in the past?" which is a question about our personal comfort. The question we need to ask is, "What is God's way for our church?" I believe that a church that is committed to do things God's way and follow God's plan for equality must become comfortable being made uncomfortable. Comfortable being made uncomfortable.

When we sing a song in Spanish, when we sing along with the gospel choir, when we have someone doing announcements who speaks with an accent that is not American, when we are led, or preached to by a woman, when someone's approach is different than the one we grew up with, when we embrace the discomfort and to some degree celebrate it, we say, "We're on the right track. We're stretching and we're growing. We love the changes that God is working in our midst."

And those changes need to be found in our friendships, in our closest relationships, who we have to dinner, who we go to movies with, who is in our small groups.

We want to be a church that can not be explained humanly. When people look around we want people to say two things: Jesus is God's Messiah. Only Jesus could have pulled this off. And, these people know something about Jesus Christ that I don't know and I want to know Christ the way they do. Then in this church Jesus' prayer for unity will be answered. Let's pray.

God's Plan for Human Equality

Rich Nathan
March 14, 2010
Galatians: Free At Last Series
Galatians 3:26-29

- I. **Three key church documents about equality**
- II. **Human plans for equality**
- III. **God's plan for equality**
 - A. Everyone who has faith receives the full rights as sons
 - B. Everyone who has faith is baptized into Christ
 - C. Everyone who has faith is valued equally in the church
- IV. **God's plan for racial equality**
- V. **God's plan for social equality**
- VI. **God's plan for gender equality**