

Is Gal. 3:28 Germane to the Question of Office-Holding?

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Without doubt, one of the most demanding theological challenges facing the church today is the challenge of addressing the role of women in the church, and in the ordained ministry. For those who consider themselves in agreement with the Protestant principle of the sole authority of scripture, the theological question must be biblically answered. To give a biblical answer to this or any other question involves not merely the interpretation of particular texts of scripture, but also the more fundamental question of which biblical passages are germane to the matter being considered. In what follows, we will consider whether Galatians 3:28 addresses the question of women holding office in the church.

Galatians 3:28 in Context

The Old Testament Context. There are three pairs of categories of persons in Gal. 3:28: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Granting the interchangeability of “Greek” and “Gentile”, these three pairs are reflected in legislation in the covenant code of the Old Testament.

The OT legislation distinguishes Jew from Gentile, and declares that the Gentiles are unclean. Israel is required to be free from the nations around her, and ritual cleansings are required when one has contact with them. Further, when a non-Israelite wishes to become part of the community of the covenant, such an individual must be purified prior to entrance.

Similarly, the holiness code distinguishes males from females. Certain ritual cleansings are required of women which are not required of men. Further, if a man has contact with a woman who is ritually unclean, he must undergo ritual cleansing as well.¹

In the same manner, the OT makes a distinction between slaves and free people. The Torah provides protections and privileges for those who are free which it does not provide for those who are *not* free.² Further, Israelites are not permitted to enslave their own people (voluntary indentureship is permitted for the destitute), because this would violate their having already been liberated from Pharaoh to be God's servants.³

¹Lev. 12:2,4,8: "If a woman conceives, and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days;. . .she shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed. . .and the priest shall make atonement for her, and she shall be clean."

²Lev. 19:20: "If a man lies carnally with a woman who is a slave, betrothed to another man and not yet ransomed or given her freedom, an inquiry shall be held. They shall not be put to death, because she was not free;"

³Lev. 25:39: "And if your brother becomes poor beside you, and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired servant and a sojourner."

Ex. 21:2: "When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him." Contrast this with the *non*-Hebrew slave, in vv. 20, 21: "When a man strikes his slave. . .with a rod and the slave dies. . .he shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be punished, for the slave is his money."

In each of these three cases, the Sinai covenant distinguishes those who are members of the covenant community from those who either are *not* members at all, or who must undergo a special ceremony to be considered an accepted part of the community.⁴

Provisionally, one might conclude that, on the basis of the Sinai covenant, Paul's three pairs reflect categories of people who are fully identified with and protected by the Sinai covenant, and those who are not so identified, or do not enjoy such protection. His arguing that there "is not" one or the other within this category would not be a denial that such *people* in fact exist, but a denial that it is appropriate to continue to *consider* one member of each pair as enjoying special covenantal status.

The Context in Galatians. The general context of Galatians suggests that the congregations at Galatia had been requiring Gentile converts to undergo the initiation rite of circumcision. Just as the OT had required special initiatory rites of the god-fearers from outside of Israel, so also did the Galatians.

The more immediate context of chapter three begins with Paul declaring that the Galatians have turned from an initial Christian faith which was centered around faith in Christ to one centered around Torah-observance (v. 5). In verses 6-9, Abraham is cited to prove the point that those who have faith in Christ, such as the Galatians initially did, are those who are his children. Abraham demonstrates how God would justify the Gentiles, namely by their trusting in

⁴Thus it is not a *misunderstanding* of Torah which leads to making a distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, or slave and free. Rather, Torah properly understood distinguishes these three pairs. Paul is thus not condemning a *misuse* of Torah, but Torah *itself* as binding upon the church.

God just as Abraham had (vv. 8,9). In verses 10-14, Paul argues that those who are “under Torah,” namely the Jews, are in fact under a curse, until Christ removes the curse by becoming a substitutionary cursed one. And the *purpose* (v. 14) of Christ becoming a curse is that “to the Gentiles the blessing of Abraham might come.” In verses 15-18 Paul argues that the Torah, which comes 430 years after the promise, cannot annul the promise previously made, specifically, the means of *inheriting* the promise. Thus, Torah is not necessary as a means of inheriting the Abrahamic promise. In verses 19-21a Paul asks, in a variety of ways, what the purpose of Torah *is*, if it is not germane to inheriting the Abrahamic promise. This question is answered in verses 21b-29 (note that the close of 29 is: ἄρα τοῦ Ἀβραὰμ σπέρμα ἐστέ, κατ’ ἐπαγγελίαν κληρονόμοι). Having said that Torah is unable to make alive, and that righteousness is not available by means of the Torah (21), Paul then (22f.) argues that Torah must be understood in terms of its role in salvation history.

There was a time when all things (τὰ πάντα) were confined under sin. This “all things” includes humanity under the period when Torah reigned. In verses 23 and 25, Paul indicates that redemptive history can be divided into two periods: the period prior to the arrival of the Messiah, and faith in Him, and the period after this arrival (πρὸ τοῦ δὲ ἐλθεῖν τὴν πίστιν, ἐλθούσης δὲ τῆς πίστεως). Paul argues here that we *were* under the Torah prior to this arrival, and that we are *not* under it after this arrival. A result of our no longer being under Torah is, obviously enough, that “you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,” (26), which is further explained in verses 27-29.

Never, in these verses, has Paul lost sight of two concerns: that the promise to Abraham included the Gentiles, and that Torah placed a temporary restriction upon God’s people that ceremonially excluded the Gentiles. Torah could never bring to fruition the promise to Abraham. It could not make alive; it could not make righteous; it could not bring inheritance to the Gentiles. Christ, by contrast, has done all of these things.

In 3:28, however, Paul extends the general principle of the inclusion of the Gentiles to embrace *other* categories of people whom the Torah excluded from the privileges of membership in the covenant community: slaves and women. In so doing, Paul refutes the very notion of “clean” and “unclean” in *this* period of redemptive history. “If you are of Christ, *you* are Abraham’s seed.” Whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, in Christ one is an inheritor of the promises made to Abraham. Of course, the promises to Abraham do not explicitly make reference to offices in the Church. They do not explicitly *exclude* them either; they are general “blessings,” until the NT provides more specific detail.

Is Galatians 3:28 Germane to the Question of Candidacy for Ordination?

The three pairs of peoples described by Paul in Galatians 3:28 are categories of people to which the Torah did not extend the protections and privileges normally associated with membership in the covenant community. They were ritually distinguished (at least at times) from other members, who were required to treat them differently than they would other members of the community. Paul denies that these categories of people are to be treated this way any longer. Whatever normal protections, privileges, and responsibilities are extended to other members of the covenant community are to be extended to these peoples, provided that they have faith in and are baptized into Christ.

This is contrary to three other interpretations of this passage, that the three pairs are derived from Paul's society⁵, that the pairs are derived from a misunderstanding of the Torah,⁶

⁵So, e.g., A. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, pp. 66-67; J. Keir Howard, “Neither Male nor Female: An Examination of the Status of Women in the New Testament,” *EvQ* 55, no. 1 (1983), p. 31;

and that the final of the three pairs is a reference to the creation distinctions of Genesis 1:27.⁷ The first of these is wrong, not because it misrepresents Paul's society⁸, but because it misrepresents the connection between 3:28 and the preceding argument. The preceding argument, as we have demonstrated above, asserts that what the *Torah* (not the society) required is no longer required. It is the claims of Torah which concern Paul, not the claims of his society. The second of these options is far better, because it does bring Torah into the picture. Regrettably, it also misunderstands the nature of Paul's previous argument, which is not that Torah has been *misunderstood*, but that Torah *properly understood* excludes the Gentiles.⁹ The

Daniel P. Fuller, "Paul and Galatians 3:28," *TSTB* 9, no. 2 (1985), p. 9; Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 143.

⁶B. Witherington, "Paul is arguing against the religious abuse, not the use, of these distinctions," in "Rite and Rights for Women--Galatians 3.28," *NTS* 27 (1981), p. 600.

⁷So Witherington, *op. cit.*, pp. 597-98, and Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p. 32. Stendahl and Witherington are probably correct in arguing that the *language* of the LXX of Genesis 1:27 accounts for the presence of the *καὶ* between the third pair, as opposed to the *οὐδέ* between the other two pairs.

⁸In fact, for our limited purpose, historical reconstruction of the practices of first century Greco-Roman or Jewish culture is unnecessary, since Paul is not addressing the practice of the *culture*, but the specific practice of requiring Torah-observance in the church.

⁹Here the bias of generations of Protestant interpretation probably accounts for this bizarre interpretation. Assuming that the Jews legalistically misinterpreted their Torah, interpreters conclude that they misunderstood it here. The problem (in addition to the assumption itself) is

third, while cogently accounting for the language of the third pair, fails to appreciate the preceding argument, which is not addressed toward any problem or limitation in the created order, but to a problem or limitation in the specific provisions of the Sinai covenant.

Since the predominant argument of Galatians deals with the Gentiles, and since women and slaves are treated in Gal. 3:28 in a parallel fashion to the Gentiles, it is appropriate to restrict Paul's comments no more nor less regarding women and slaves than the comments about Gentiles. Specifically, we must ask if there is any indication elsewhere in Galatians that Gentiles were excluded from holding any particular offices in the Church. Of course, the answer to such an inquiry is negative. There is no indication that the Gentiles were excluded from holding office, and, more importantly, there is no indication from the text of the epistle that the question of Gentile office-holding had even arisen.

The issue in Galatians is whether or not the Gentiles are still unclean, whether or not they must undergo some preparatory initiation rite *prior* to or *in addition* to baptism. The issue, to state it differently, is whether the Torah's categories of clean and unclean are still germane in the Messianic era. The issue does not expressly involve the question of office-holding in the Church.

Few dispute this, however. Many people recognize that the issue at Galatia is more directly related to what we would call *membership* in the Church than to what we would call

that any fair interpretation of the Sinai covenant must concede that it excludes Gentiles, and marks Israel off as a distinct nation and people. Thus, it is no misinterpretation of the Torah which leads to excluding Gentiles; rather, it is precisely fidelity to the Torah which requires their exclusion.

office-holding in the Church. Yet they still believe that Gal. 3:28 is germane to the question of holding office, because they believe that being a *full* member of any group *implies* at least the potential of office-holding. In fact, such an implication seems obvious to many people, particularly to those who live in egalitarian societies. What needs to be evaluated, then, is the belief that membership in a particular group implies at least the potential for office-holding.

If Israel is an example, the belief is clearly wrong. The Levites, and the Levites alone, were permitted to be priests.¹⁰ Benjamites could wage war (and very well, according to the biblical record); they could not be priests. One could argue that the New Testament says we are *all* priests, which point would be conceded. The Old Testament says the same thing,¹¹ yet this does not change the fact that the Levites alone were *officially* priests. Nor does this point invalidate the observation that Benjamites (and other tribes as well) were full members of the covenant community, yet they were *not* allowed to hold the office of priest.¹²

In the New Testament, “recent converts” are not allowed to hold particular offices. Does this mean that recent converts are not full members of the community of faith, entitled to all of the privileges and responsibilities commensurate with such membership?

¹⁰Num. 3:12.

¹¹Ex. 19:5,6: “. . .you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

¹²R. Abba, *IDB*, 3, p. 877: “Since, moreover, the covenant is made with the whole nation, the existence of an official priesthood does not exclude the rest of the people from their special relationship with God.”

Some have suggested that our society is different from the societies reflected in scripture. Perhaps in *those* societies, membership was not so closely tied with holding office, but in *our* day, in *our* society, restriction from office is perceived as making one a second-class citizen. I sympathize with this cultural observation. In our culture, many people *do* believe that every distinction is a value-distinction. If any distinctions are made between people, our culture believes, this reflects a distinction in *value*, and implies that one individual is of greater or lesser value than another.

This belief, however culturally prevalent, does not appear supportable from the scriptures. The Bible very clearly teaches that God distributes gifts variably, not giving everyone every gift, but giving everyone some gift (or gifts). That is, God gives people differing gifts, and in so doing, *makes* them distinct from one another. Yet, in the very passages which speak of this distribution of gifts (Romans 12; Ephesians 4; 1 Corinthians 12-14), there is no indication of a distinction in rank or intrinsic value. To the contrary, it is precisely in 1 Corinthians that Paul argues that the seemingly *less* precious members of the body are in fact the *most* necessary.

Far from endorsing our society's contention that distinctions imply differing value, the scriptures teach that God *makes* people different. God is the one who has made each of us different from others in the Church, and who has distributed gifts to us differently. Further, the scriptures *challenge* the notion that public office and public prominence are to be accepted as statements of value, explicitly teaching that the less visible members are the more vital ones (1 Cor. 12.22-26). Therefore, if it is true that our culture assigns value in accordance with public prominence and position, our responsibility is to *challenge* such an approach to human value, not to adopt and function within it.

As a final, lexicographic consideration, our egalitarian *Zeitgeist* reveals itself by the frequency with which one hears “equality” spoken of with regard to Gal. 3:28.¹³ Paul's point here is *unity*, not equality. You are “one” in Jesus Christ. In both Greek and English, there is a distinction (both lexicographic and semantic) between “unity” and “equality.” On other occasions, Paul employs the terms ἴσος and ἰσότης, when he wishes to speak of equality. This demonstrates his awareness of the terms, lexically (Phil. 2:6; 2 Cor. 8:13,14; Col. 4:1). Thus, Paul knew how to use the ordinary Greek words for “equal” and “equality,” and did indeed use them when he wished to speak about such matters. By contrast, Paul employs the term, “one” to indicate unity, as in Ephesians 2:14-16, where he affirms that God has made “one new human” out of the formerly divided and separated Jew and Gentile. Whether redemption establishes equality of function is a separate question, which is simply not addressed by the employment of the term, “one.” Indeed, there are official/functional distinctions within the Godhead (the Father sends the Son, but the Son does not send the Father), yet they are “one” in the Johannine literature. Further argument could conceivably demonstrate a relationship between unity and equality that I do not believe exists. But the very fact that people do not consider it necessary to *argue* the point reveals our egalitarian bias. In an egalitarian culture, when one says “one”, people hear “equal,” even though they are different words, ordinarily employed to signify different concepts.

There is no biblically endorsed principle that allows us to generalize Paul’s specific comments about membership in such a way as to make them germane to the question of office-

¹³Witherington, p. 600, “an affirmation of the ontological *equality* of these pairs”; Howard, p. 31, “*equality* of status is given to all”; Jewett, p. 112, “he thought of the woman as *equal* to the man in all things, “ p. 142, “in Galatians 3:28, when speaking of her *equality* with the man”; Spencer, p. 67, “justification by faith creates an *equality* between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female...”

holding. The principles normally presented to support such generalizing are not only extra-biblical, but, perhaps, un-biblical.

This does not mean that Gal. 3:28 can be properly employed to endorse the “traditional” views of ordination. Nothing could be further from the truth. If the understanding of Gal. 3:28 espoused here is adopted, the text simply cannot be properly drawn into the discussion at all. Other biblical passages will have to be consulted. In my judgment, Galatians 3:28 neither expressly nor implicitly addresses the question of the candidates for office in the Church. Thus, the only relation this text has to the question of office-holding is negative (it says nothing about it). At the same time, however, a proper understanding of this passage does remove from the discussion of office-holding two false arguments that often clutter the discussion: it removes the false argument that Paul was here reforming some Greco-Roman cultural practice (when he was in fact addressing the illegitimacy of Torah’s laws for defining the New Covenant people); and it removes the false belief that Paul here affirms equality (when he was in fact affirming unity).