

“All Are One In Christ”

[Galatians 3:26-29](#)

“How much does a Gentile need to be like a Jew in order to be a Christian and be accepted into the fellowship of Jesus’ followers?” This is an odd question for us today, since we Christians are all Gentiles by the biblical definition, which defines the term as non-Jews. But, it was certainly the central moral question for Christians in the middle of the first century, as they were still trying to define their identity as followers of Christ and form a Christian faith community.

In the beginning stages of the early church, it was comprised of exclusively Jews, as Jesus himself was a Jew. So, it was very natural for the first of Jesus’ followers to reach out to other Jews, their own people. The fundamental belief was that God had made a promise to Abraham, the father of their faith, and they were his only heirs. And, so naturally, they believed that the gospel of Jesus was exclusively for them as well. In their eyes, Jesus Christ was the Messiah whom they had been awaiting for many generations, the Savior God had promised through His prophets -- the One who was sent to deliver *their* nation and *their* people.

But, this narrow view underwent dramatic change as the new Messianic faith movement began to experience persecution for their beliefs. Fearing for their lives, Jesus’ followers were forced to leave Jerusalem and scatter around, some even fleeing beyond their national boundaries. And, as these religious refugees lived among the Gentiles, they found that their new neighbors, non-Jews outside of the 12 tribes of Israel, were being attracted to the gospel of Jesus, too!

Do you think the early church willingly welcomed them into their fellowship? Unfortunately, they did not. Various scriptures in the New Testament reveal to us the struggles the first Christian communities had with the issue of opening their doors to the Gentiles. This inhospitable behavior extended all the way to the top to the apostle Peter, the head disciple of Jesus, the rock upon which the church was to be built. As recorded in the book of Acts (*see* chapters 10 and 11), it was only through the dramatic work of the Holy Spirit that he had a change of heart toward the Gentiles and ministered to them. And even then, he could not fully get over his initial prejudice. In the presence of other Jewish Christians, Peter often found himself going back to his old habits of separating himself from the Gentile Christians.

On the other side of this Jew-Gentile debate in the beginning stages of the formation of the early church was the apostle Paul who strongly felt called to minister to the Gentiles. He traveled to the cities in Asia Minor, risking his own life to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. Through his sacrificial ministry, many non-Jews were converted to the Christian faith, and many new churches were founded across the Roman Empire. Today’s scripture is from a letter he wrote to one group of those churches in Galatia, an area in the highlands of central Anatolia in modern Turkey.

Let’s hear the second half of today’s scripture reading again, this time, in the Message translation: “In Christ’s family, there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us, you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ. Also, since you are Christ’s family, then you are Abraham’s famous ‘descendant,’ heirs according to the covenant promises.”

While these words might not sound like particularly profound statements to our modern ears, they most certainly were to their first recipients. Paul's words of wisdom were revolutionary and radically inclusive statements. To help you better understand these statements, here is some brief background information about his letter to the Galatians.

While Paul was in Galatia, he had preached the gospel of Jesus. He taught people that their salvation was not earned through their obedience to the Law of Moses, but simply given through their belief in Christ. To these non-Jews, Paul believed the Law of Moses might serve as a stumbling block to their faith, which had arisen not through generation upon generation of tradition but by the Spirit, which allowed them to know God's grace and freedom through Jesus Christ. We do not know how long Paul stayed with the Galatians. But, after a while, he was confident that they were running well (5:7), so he left them to preach to spread the Gospel to Gentiles elsewhere.

Then, we find out that, in Paul's absence, some Jewish Christian missionaries came and preached a different gospel. They taught that, like Jewish Christians, the Gentile Christians would have to be circumcised to enter into a covenant relationship with God. They called for observance of Jewish holidays, as well as other practices of Jewish laws. They maintained that such obedience was necessary for the Gentile Christians to be qualified to become heirs of Abraham, to confirm their place in the family of God.

When Paul received the news of this development, he was furious. He felt betrayed by the Galatians, whom he had raised and nurtured to faith. In his letter, Paul is scolding his flock, while at the same time trying to dissuade the Galatian churches from accepting the false teaching of the Jewish Christian missionaries so that they can unleash the power of the gospel of Jesus in their midst.

Paul's arguments about the place of the Gentile Christians within God's Kingdom found in the letter are simple and straightforward:

- The law of Moses served as a guide and tutor for the people of Israel until Christ came.
- When Christ came, the purpose of the law was accomplished. God ended the work of the law, under which no one could be justified.
- Now, everyone, Gentiles and Jews alike can relate to God directly through Christ.
- The true heirs of Abraham, the true offspring of God are no longer those who keep the law, but rather those who believe in and follow Christ.
- Therefore, the uncircumcised Gentile Christians are not second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. In Christ, they are considered as equal to the Jewish Christians.

These arguments are summed up in today's scripture, especially 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."

What a radical statement about the community of Christian believers in the first century!

Paraphrasing what Paul said, in the new community God has created through Jesus Christ, there is no marker that separates the Jews from the Gentiles. These arbitrary, human-made distinctions have been invalidated: no more barriers of race, social position, or gender. They have all been broken down. In Christ's body, there are no social constructs that define who is in and who is out, who is fully in and who is somewhat in. Under the cross, we are all undeserving, yet all redeemed and graciously made clean.

However, the sad truth about Paul's vision of the oneness of all Christian believers is that it has never been fully realized. From its beginning and throughout its history, the church has always experienced divisions and exclusions based on prejudice. Even Paul himself spoke against women's leadership in the church and supported the slavery system. Churches in America struggled mightily with the slavery issue. Our church, the United Methodist Church experienced not only a split over the issue of slaveholding pastors, but continued to practice a degree of segregation even into the mid 20th century with our Central Jurisdiction, which was a jurisdiction not based on geography but on race.

Some churches still experience controversies about the full participation of women in the life of the church. We know racism lingers to divide Christians and churches, with Sunday mornings being the most segregated hour in America. (I am so grateful that it is not our story, as there is great diversity in our church.) And, as circumcision was for the early church, homosexuality is the hot-button issue that threatens to divide many mainline denominational churches.

In many ways, Church is not a reflection of the perfect, idealized community. As we have read/heard for today, it has never been perfect, even from its earliest days. Rather, perhaps Church is where broken people from our fallen world come to find their rest. For it is in our sinfulness that we experience God's mercy, grace, and love. There is a quote from a song that says, "Ring the bells that still can ring/Forget your perfect offering/There is a crack, a crack in everything/That's how the light gets in."

As we celebrate World Communion Sunday, joined by many other Christian churches around the globe, may we be a Church that recognizes the failings that lies within each and every one of us! May we be a community in which the love of God is reflected in our willingness to hold each other together in our struggles! And, may we also be found hoping and striving for the beloved community that Paul mentions, a place where the walls of separation that exist between us are no longer a reality, where there "is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female" but a oneness we share in Christ Jesus, our Lord and savior! Amen.