

He was writing to a group of Greek-speaking converts to Christianity, who wondered if they needed to add Jewish religious practices to their new faith in Jesus. After receiving Paul's letter, they realized that there was *no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female*. Instead, all are one in Christ Jesus (3:28).

Letters to Charles Schulz, President McKinley, and Ian Fleming re-shaped human history in small ways; but Paul's letter to the Galatians totally transformed humanity. Before Paul put pen to papyrus, people were *imprisoned and guarded under the law* (v. 23). The religious laws of the Bible restrained and protected people, preventing them from hurting themselves and others. *The law was our disciplinarian*, says Paul (v. 24). A "disciplinarian" (*paidagogos*) was a slave who supervised and guarded children, taking them to school and back while keeping them safe, and overseeing their behavior. A nanny, as it were.

The protective custody of the slave/nanny was important but temporary since the slave's services would no longer be needed once the children grew up. In terms of the history of faith, Paul says that we were guarded under the law *until faith would be revealed* (v. 23) - in particular, until the faith *of Jesus Christ* would be revealed. People certainly had faith in Almighty God for many hundreds of years, but history really changed when Christ faithfully suffered death and then rose to new life.

That's why Paul wrote his letter when he did. He insists that *the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith* (v. 24). The law kept us safe for a time, but could not fully achieve our salvation. Then Christ came, and we no longer needed the law. In fact, with Christ's death and resurrection, no human action is required for salvation, except our complete trust in Jesus.

We are "justified by faith," says Paul, made right with God by faith. The *faith of Christ* is critically important here because it is Christ's faithful death and resurrection that bring God's love into the very center of human life. But *our own faith* has a role to play as well, as we say 'yes' to what God has done by putting our trust in Jesus. Earlier in Galatians, Paul says, *I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself*

for me (2:20). Paul has put his trust in Jesus, as he certainly should. But this line can also be translated, "I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Faith in Christ - personal faith. Faith of Christ - Christ's faith. Together, they form the Christian faith. And now that we're in a state of faith, we no longer live in a nanny state. *Faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian* (3:25), says Paul in his history-changing letter.

So what does it mean to be justified by faith? For Paul, it means that all followers of Christ are now *children of God* (v. 26). Until he wrote to the Galatians, the term "children of God" had been reserved for God's chosen people, the Jews, and it naturally applied also to the first Jewish followers of Jesus. These disciples continued to practice circumcision and follow many of the religious laws of the Old Testament.

But now, says Paul, *in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith* (v. 26). The circumcised as well as the uncircumcised. The keepers of the law as well as those who know nothing of the law. The Jews as well as the Greeks. All are children of God through faith.

For Christians today, this letter speaks of the power of faith to create a new family called the "children of God." It doesn't matter who your parents are; it doesn't matter if you are from a good neighborhood or the other side of the tracks; it doesn't matter if you are a U.S. citizen or a resident alien; it doesn't matter what language you speak; it doesn't matter if you have a police record; it doesn't matter if you have a college education; it doesn't matter if you have a job or a spouse or a car or a house or a 401(k). All that matters is faith. The faith of Christ, and faith in Christ. Faith makes us children of God.

Paul's letter changes our lives by giving us a whole new identity. He wrote: *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ* (v. 27). When we clothe ourselves with Christ, we take on his characteristics and do our best to present him to the world. This means showing his grace and his love, speaking his truth, and serving others with his generosity and compassion. We are bound to

Christ in faith, Paul writes, and when we're clothed in Christ-like ways we cannot fail to have a positive impact on the world.

When we clothe ourselves with Christ, we might look crazy to some; but we understand, that through our faith we *are one in Christ Jesus* (v. 28). Says Frank Matera, professor of New Testament at Catholic University, "God has destroyed the barriers that divide Gentile and Jew, slave and free, male and female, from each other" (3:28).

Thanks to Paul's letter, our greatest contribution to history might be the creation of a community in which barriers fall and people are no longer separated by religion, culture, nationality, economics, or gender. If we are truly "one in Christ Jesus," we should be able to overcome the divisions that have fractured our community and driven us apart. Paul reminds us that there is more to unite us than to divide us if we "belong to Christ."

Paul's letter changes our history by giving us a new identity as children of God, one that is based on being one in Jesus and one in faith. As Christians, we can show the world a new kind of unity, one that includes people everyone. From Paul, we have each received a history-changing letter. How will we respond?

Prayer: Almighty God, we come before you to magnify and glorify your name. Help us all to find our unity in Christ, to work together and pray together as a faith family. May we be a blessing to others, as we strive to be more like Jesus: kind, caring, compassionate, loving, giving, forgiving and humble. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Sources:

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- Hays, Richard B. "The Letter to the Galatians." *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000, 269-79.
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A Letter That Changed History

Sunday, July 10, 2016

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Galatians 3:19-29

Once upon a time, people wrote letters. Not text messages, tweets or e-mails, but true epistles. Pens were actually put to paper. And some of these letters changed history, in ways both big and small.

A letter killed Charlotte Braun. Charlotte Braun was a pushy version of Charlie Brown, the classic *Peanuts* character created by Charles Schulz. A fan of the comic strip wrote to Schulz complaining about the obnoxious character. So, Schulz killed off Charlotte Braun and wrote a response to the fan which included a drawing of Charlotte Braun with an ax in her head. No more Charlotte Braun.

A letter from Annie Oakley paved the way for women in the military. Moved by patriotism, the famous sharpshooter Annie Oakley wrote a letter to President William McKinley offering her services in the Spanish-American War. She also wrote that she was "ready to place a company of fifty lady sharpshooters" at the President's disposal, and the ladies would furnish their own arms and ammunition, so they would be of little expense to the government. As far as we know McKinley never responded, but Oakley's epistle may have started the conversation about women serving in the military.

A letter rearmed James Bond. In 1956, a fan named Geoffrey Boothroyd wrote Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond. Boothroyd criticized Fleming for putting "a lady's gun" in Bond's hands: the .25-caliber Beretta. Fleming responded by rearming Bond with the Walther PPK, and then he hired Boothroyd as an arms advisor. Fleming also created a new character named Major Boothroyd. Bond fans know him as "Q."

A letter made us all children of God through faith. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul changed history by arguing that we are made right with God through the faith of Jesus, and not through religious law.