

A Theology of Gender

I. Creation: God creates male and female in God's image.

II. New Creation in Christ: Three Backgrounds for Galatians 3:28

A. Worship Context

It is likely that the language of Galatians 3:26-28 reflects the words said at a baptism. Notice that baptism is explicitly mentioned in Galatians 3:27 ("as many of you as were baptized into Christ"). In addition, the two parallel passages to Gal 3:28 either mention baptism explicitly (1 Cor 12:13) or imply it ("put on the new self" in Col 3:9-11). If this claim about Gal 3:28 is true, then this statement would shape the identity of early Christians in a powerful way; at the formative moment of baptism, these are the words they would have heard about their identity.

- So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:26-28).
- For just as there is one body and it has many members—now all the parts of the body, though many, are one body—so also it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink (1 Cor 12:13).
- Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (Col 2:9-11).

B. Old Testament Context

It is unfortunate that no translation that I know of makes clear the Old Testament quotation in Gal 3:28. The text reads, "there is not Jew nor Greek, there is not slave nor free, there is not male and female." It's easy to see the break in the parallelism. It's also clear that the words "male and female" are a quotation from Genesis 1:27. In fact, the phrase "male and female" occurs only three times in the New Testament, and all three times it occurs as a quotation from the creation account (Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6; Gal 3:28). Paul's quotation from the creation account makes Gal 3:28 a foundational statement of sweeping proportions. Paul is saying that the divisions of gender from creation are set aside "in Christ Jesus;" that the "male and female" of the creation account is no more "in Christ Jesus."

C. Theological Context: Theologically, the church finds its identity "in Christ Jesus." Ethnicity (Jew or Greek), class (slave or free), and gender (male and female) do not matter. How should we understand our new identity "in Christ"? Elsewhere, both in Galatians itself (6:15) and in 2 Corinthians (5:17), Paul describes this new reality as a "new creation," which makes a whole lot of sense now that we're aware of his allusion to the creation account in Gal 3:28. This theological context connects gender, our identity as the church, and Christ's work of salvation, which makes Gal 3:28 an ideal place to stand as we consider what male and female mean in the life of the church.

D. Summary: In this passage, Paul says that God does not see Christians as the world sees them. God does not think of Christians as "Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female" because "we are all one in Christ Jesus." Notice that Paul's stress in this last phrase is on unity ("one in Christ")—not salvation ("saved in Christ"), not equality ("equal in Christ"). Nevertheless, I recognize that the implications of being "one in Christ" do include salvation and equality. Ethnicity, class, and gender do not matter in relationship to identity within the church. As a test case, notice how Paul describes circumcision as a matter of indifference elsewhere in Galatians:

- For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but faith working through love (5:6).
- For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation (6:15).

- **Excursus: Does Paul think inclusively about gender?**

1. It is probably noteworthy that Paul is comfortable describing his own ministry with female images; he does so in three passages. Paul tells how he was “gentle” among the Thessalonian Christians “like a nurse taking care of her own children” (1 Thessalonians 2:7); he describes how he, like a nursing mother, nourished the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 3:1-2); to the Galatians, he uses the image of a mother giving birth (Galatians 4:19). Paul clearly thinks that ministry can be described with female imagery.
2. See 1 Cor 7:12-24 where a statement like Gal 3:28 seems to provide the structure for Paul's discussion. In 1 Cor 7, Paul treats some male/female issues (e.g., marriage, divorce) and uses circumcision/uncircumcision (Jew/Greek) and slavery/freedom as examples in his argument. So, the way in which Paul structures his argument in 1 Cor 7:12-24 seems shaped by his theological commitments found explicitly in Galatians 3:28.
3. Is there any other place in Paul's writings where Paul *clearly* thinks inclusively about gender? Notice Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 6:18a (below). Paul is quoting from 2 Samuel 7:14. What is different? He adds “and daughters” to his quotation from the Old Testament! He translates the words of Scripture in light of his inclusive vision of God's people.

2 Samuel 7:14	2 Corinthians 6:18a
"I will be his father, and he shall be my son."	"And I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons <u>and daughters</u> ,' says the Lord Almighty."

E. The Broader Theological Context of Galatians 3:28

The statement in Gal 3:28 likely has its antecedent in the Old Testament. The prophet Joel looks forward to a time when God will pour out both physical (2:18-27) and spiritual blessings (28-32). Joel 2:28-32 reads as follows:

And afterward I will pour out my Spirit on all people.
Your sons and daughters will prophesy,
Your old men will dream dreams,
Your young men will see visions.
Even on my servants, both men and women,
I will pour out my Spirit in those days.
I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth,
Blood and fire and billows of smoke.
The sun will be turned to darkness
And the moon to blood
Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.
And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved;
For on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem
There will be deliverance, as the Lord has said,
Among the survivors whom the Lord calls.

The spiritual blessings include the pouring out of God's Spirit (vv. 28-29) on all people, whether they are male or female, young or old, slave or free. The apocalyptic language in the following verses (vv. 30-31) points to a cosmic event. Because of the magnitude of this event, deliverance is available to everyone who “calls on the name of the Lord” (v. 32).

Does Paul know this passage in Joel? In fact, Paul quotes Joel 2:32 in Romans 10:12-13 to show that “there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.” So, not only does Romans 10:12-13 show that Paul is aware of this passage in Joel, it also shows Paul extending the application of Joel beyond gender, age, and class to ethnicity. Furthermore, the influence of the language from Joel 2:32 (i.e., “call on the name of the Lord”) extends far beyond Paul's text in Romans (Acts 2:21; 9:14, 21; 22:16; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Tim 2:22). Given Paul's quotation of Joel 2:32, his explicit application of this passage to ethnicity, and the gender and slave language in Joel, it seems likely that this passage in Joel shaped Paul's

formulation in Galatians 3:28.¹ In summary, Paul sees the prophecy in Joel fulfilled in Christ and points to the implications of it for the identity of God's people. Paul, however, is not the only one to make this connection; Luke does so even more explicitly.

In Acts 2, the Spirit is poured out, the apostles speak, and the crowd wonders, "What does this mean?" (2:12). Peter answers, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel" (2:16) and proceeds to quote all of Joel 2:28-32. Since Joel depicts both "sons and daughters" prophesying, it is not surprising to find female prophets later in the book of Acts (21:9). For Luke it is the "last days" when God's Spirit is poured out on all, and it is time for men and women to prophesy. Paul's reflection on the Spirit goes even further than Luke's.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul affirms, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (12:7). Even though there is the same Spirit (12:4, 11), the gifts vary widely.

To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. (TNIV)

Throughout this passage, there is no indication that the gifts of the Spirit are distributed based on gender.

All these passages, from Joel to 1 Corinthians, paint a picture of the church, which embodies God's new creation. This picture is the fulfillment of God's promises; it is a place where God's Spirit fills everyone—regardless of ethnicity, age, gender, or class; it is a place where that same Spirit gifts everyone for the common good of all. In these passages, we have a remarkable constellation of texts that connect identity, eschatology, the Spirit, Christ's work of salvation, and the church all in relationship to gender—and all under the broader concepts of creation and new creation.

Seven Claims about Gender

Even though Scripture records cultural expectations about gender, I'm arguing that creation and new creation offer vantage points, from which we can construct a theology of gender.

1. Creation argues for the inherent value of both male and female, since both are created in God's image (see Gen 9:6; James 3:9).
2. Creation argues for the interdependence and mutuality of male and female; both are *under* God, *over* creation, and called to the same functions. Paul's affirmation about interdependence (1 Cor 11:11) functions to negate claims of precedence based on gender and to argue for mutuality.
3. Creation affirms a procreative aspect for male and female, one that is shared by flora and fauna.
4. New creation makes gender an matter of indifference in terms of our identity in Christ and in the church; in fact, identity claims based on gender, ethnicity, class, and age reveal more about the specific culture than the essence of the person, and identity claims on those bases are empty in a spiritual context.
5. The Spirit gives gifts irrespective of gender.
6. Any ideals of male and female are based upon our identity in Christ; that is, the ideal man or woman is the ideal Christian.
7. Identity in Christ does not eliminate biology—humans remain male and female; neither does identity in Christ place one outside cultural expectations of gender (see 1 Corinthians 11:2-16); Christians are called to create a community composed of males and females, sensitive to but not defined by the social constructs of their context.

¹ Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 99 n. 18.