

# Is Galatians 3:28 an 'equality text'?

## THE CLAIM

'If we understand what he says in accordance with the context, **Paul approves of equal service by sisters and by brothers.** Life and service within the ecclesia, according to Paul, **are not divided up by reference to whether male or female, nor whether slave or free, nor whether Jew or Gentile.** Society might still impose restrictions, and it did. **But as far as life and service in the ecclesia was concerned, in Christ you are all one.**'<sup>1</sup>

## THE FACTS

This is a text relied on heavily by Ian and Averil, yet it says absolutely nothing about the role of women in the ecclesia. To refer to this even as a non-explicit statement concerning the role of women in the ecclesia is generous. Yet Ian and Averil take this text and generalise from it.

## SCHOLARLY COMMENTARY

A point raised by those egalitarians who do not see Galatians 3:28 as an 'equality text' is the subject is unity, 'all **one**', not equality, 'all **equal**'. Richard Hove notes that there are two key reasons why the 'all one' phrase does not mean 'all equal'. One is the fact that the Greek word for 'one' here simply does not

mean 'equal'.<sup>2</sup> The other is the fact that uses in other Greek literature of this same 'all one' phrase,<sup>3</sup> indicate that it was not used to refer to equality, but unity.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Francis Watson argues Paul is not addressing hierarchy and equality in this passage, but unity in Christ.<sup>5</sup> Watson argues against an egalitarian reading of Galatians 3:28 on the

<sup>2</sup> 'As noted in the previous chapter, **there are two critical reasons why "you are all one" does not mean "you are all equal."** I will review these two reasons briefly. The first reason is the **lexical range** of the word one.<sup>43</sup> **Lexically this word cannot mean "equal."** Our overview of BAGD confirmed this, as we found that **there is no known example of one being used this way.**' , Hove (complementarian), 'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute', p. 108 (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Searching Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (a collection of thousands of Greek texts), I found only one use of the phrase 'all one' used in Galatians 3:28 (Greek εἷς ἐστε, *eis este*), between 200 BC and 100AD (Hove lists 16 analogous phrases in Greek literature during the same time frame, pp. 73-74), and it is used to speak of two nearby cities as 'one community'; 'you are almost **one community**, one city only slightly divided' ('καὶ σχεδὸν εἷς ἐστε δῆμος καὶ μία πόλις ἐν οὐ πολλῷ διαστήματι.'). 'Orationes' 41.10.7, Dio Chrysostom (Greek orator 40-120 AD), Cohoon (trans.), 'Dio Chrysostom IV', Loeb Classical Library, p. 159 (1946).

<sup>4</sup> 'The second reason "you are all one" does not mean "you are all equal" **is that the phrase was not used in that way in the era of the New Testament.** As we have seen, a study of **every parallel use of the phrase "we/you/they are one" in the 300 years surrounding the New Testament** reveals that this expression **fails to express the concept of unqualified equality.** In fact, "you are all one" is used of **diverse** objects to denote **one element they share in common**; it is not used of similar objects to denote that **they are the same.**' , Hove, 'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute', p. 108 (1999).

<sup>5</sup> 'In baptism, Jew, Greek, slave, free, male, female receive a new identity as they 'put on Christ' (3.27): **the emphasis lies not on their 'equality' but on their belonging together** as they participate in the new identity and the new practices and modes of interaction that this will entail. Paul could have assumed that the three distinctions he mentions were hierarchical ones, and that in Christ these are replaced by an egalitarian oneness, **but there is nothing in the wording of his statement** (or in the hypothetical baptismal formula supposed to underlie it) **to suggest that he actually did so.**' , Watson (egalitarian), 'The Authority of the Voice: A Theological Reading of 1 Cor 11.2-16', New Testament Studies (46.521), (2000).

basis that none of the three relationships referred to by Paul are hierarchical, so the passage cannot be arguing for their abolition on the basis of equality.<sup>6</sup>

Egalitarian scholar NT Wright says the same.<sup>7</sup> Wright insists that Galatians 3:28 is being misread by other egalitarians, that it is not about the position women have in 'church ministry', nor does it speak about the relationship of brothers and sisters within the ecclesia. He objects to misuse of this passage by his fellow egalitarians in strong terms.<sup>8</sup> Wright also identifies a common egalitarian

<sup>6</sup> 'In Gal 3.28, for example, the three distinctions (Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female) **do not straightforwardly represent a series of hierarchical relationships.** The distinction between Jew and Greek **does not constitute a hierarchical relationship**, since each party regards itself **as superior to the other.**' , Watson, 'The Authority of the Voice: A Theological Reading of 1 Cor 11.2-16', New Testament Studies (46.521), (2000).

<sup>7</sup> 'The point Paul is making overall in this passage **is that God has one family, not two, and that this family consists of all those who believe in Jesus**; that this is the family God promised to Abraham, and that nothing in the Torah can stand in the way of this unity which is now revealed through the faithfulness of the Messiah. **This is not at all about how we relate to one another within this single family**; it is about the fact, as we often say, that the ground is even at the foot of the cross.' , Wright, 'Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis. A conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church'', (4 September, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> 'The first thing to say is fairly obvious but needs saying anyway. **Galatians 3 is not about ministry.** Nor is it the **only** word Paul says about being male and female, **and instead of taking texts in a vacuum and then arranging them in a hierarchy, for instance by quoting this verse and then saying that it trumps every other verse in a kind of fight to be the senior bull in the herd** (what a very masculine way of approaching exegesis, by the way!), we need to do justice to what Paul is actually saying at this point.' , Wright, 'Women's Service in the Church: The Biblical Basis. A conference paper for the Symposium, 'Men, Women and the Church'', (4 September, 2004).

<sup>1</sup> 'All One', p. 50 (March 2009).

straw man,<sup>9</sup> and notes a mistranslation of the verse used commonly by egalitarians.<sup>10</sup> Witherington is another egalitarian who does not consider the egalitarian interpretation of this verse to be valid.<sup>11</sup> In a book review, Andrew Pitts points out that egalitarian Craig Blomberg makes the same argument.<sup>12</sup> Miller, another egalitarian, affirms that the passage teaches a union with Christ which is available to all without distinction,<sup>13</sup> but points out that

---

<sup>9</sup> 'I am surprised to see, in some of your literature, the insistence that women and men are equally saved and justified; **that is, I'm surprised because I've never heard anyone denying it.** Of course, there may well be some who do, but I just haven't met them.', *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> 'First, a note about translation and exegesis. I **notice that on one of your leaflets you adopt what is actually a mistranslation of this verse:** neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female. That is precisely what Paul does *not* say; and as it's what we expect he's going to say, we should note quite carefully what he has said instead, since he presumably means to make a point by doing so, a point which is missed when the translation is flattened out as in that version. What he says is that there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no *'male and female'*.' *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> 'Many recent interpreters have seen in Gal 3:28 the Magna Carta of human equality (Stendahl 1966). **However, closer attention to both the baptismal context of this saying** (which suggests that it is about entrance requirements for being "in Christ"), **and the specific wording of the text** (which reads "no male and female" not "no male or female"), **suggests a different interpretation** (Witherington 1981: 593–604.). Paul says that neither one's racial nor social nor marital status should determine whether or not one can be in Christ. **In Christ such distinctions as Jew and gentile, or married and unmarried, still exist** (Romans 9–11; 1 Corinthians 7), **but they have no inherent salvific value**, nor do they determine whether or not one can be in Christ.', Witherington, 'Women', Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 959 (1996).

<sup>12</sup> 'I must agree with **Blomberg's assertion** that Gal. 3.28 **should have no significant place** in the discussion since **gender roles are not under consideration in the context.**', Pitts, 'Review: PORTER *Paul and his Theology*', Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism (5.133.2008).

<sup>13</sup> 'The good news is that this passage does indeed teach that at some level and in some sense such distinctions as Jew/Greek, bond/free, male/female, fall away and prove irrelevant from the standpoint of Christian faith. At this level, **the**

the distinctions referred to by Paul are not eliminated, but reinforced.<sup>14</sup> Miller recognizes that this conclusion will not be viewed favourably by other egalitarians,<sup>15</sup> but insists that this reading of the passage is in agreement with its context, and with Paul's overall teaching.<sup>16</sup> Miller acknowledges it is possible to apply the passage in an egalitarian manner, but maintains that is not its aim.<sup>17</sup>

While observing that arguments should not be based on what **was not** written,<sup>18</sup> Hove notes that it was entirely possible for Paul to have written such a passage which spoke of brothers and sisters as 'equal' in some way if that was the point of the passage, and provides a relevant 1<sup>st</sup> century parallel,<sup>19 20</sup>

---

**soteriological level**, all believers enjoy **a salvific union with Christ.**', Miller, 'Is Galatians 3:28 the Great Egalitarian Text?', The Expository Times (114.9.9), (2002).

<sup>14</sup> 'The bad news is that there is another level presupposed by the passage, and it turns out that at this other level **such distinctions, far from being abrogated, are actually reinforced.**', *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> 'This may be a disappointing interpretation of this **celebrated 'egalitarian' passage**, for it turns out at one level to be only another proof-text for those very elements in Paul that many are struggling to get rid of - sexism and patriarchy, for example.', *ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>16</sup> 'It must be admitted, though, for better or for worse, **that this view of Galatians 3:28 coheres both with its immediate context and with the rest of what we know of Paul.** This includes his notion of the priority of the true Israel over Gentile Christians who are merely grafted on to it, his implicit condoning of slavery, **and his hierarchical view of husband-wife relations.**', *ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>17</sup> 'That is not to say that we today, as others before us, cannot work that out and draw the implication on Paul's behalf. But it seems **not to have been done** in the Pauline texts themselves, and **certainly not the one before us. We have to try to be honest about that.**', *ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>18</sup> Hove, 'Equality in Christ? Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute', p. 110 (1999).

<sup>19</sup> 'Philo, **writing at about the same time as Paul**, uses the phrase ("you are **all entitled to equal honor**"), which is **almost**

though noting that even such a term as this would not necessarily mean that those referred to by it would have identical roles.<sup>21</sup>

Reading Paul's use of this 'all one' language in the three passages in which it appears, readers may decide for themselves if Paul is saying no distinctions in ecclesial roles are to be made between men and women.<sup>22</sup>

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

---

**directly parallel to Galatians 3:28** πάντες εἰς ἓστε ("you are all one").', *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> 'Moses' argument here is much like Galatians 3:28. The parts (Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female) **have inheritance only because of the whole** (being in Christ).', *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> 'But notice, while each tribe has equal *honor*, and each is treated the same way when it comes to fighting battles or settling land, **not all the tribes have the same roles** (e.g., Gen. 49:10, "the scepter will not depart from Judah," and Numbers 3, which details the unique role of the tribe of Levi). Thus, even if Paul had used an ("equal") word in Galatians 3:28, **it would not follow that Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female have the same roles.** In addition, the fact that Paul did not use an root word, when it was available, **is evidence, though admittedly not weighty**, that his intent was **not to emphasize the equality of Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female.**', *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> Romans 10:11-13, 'For the scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." **For there is no distinction between the Jew and the Greek**, for the same Lord is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him. **For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**', 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 'For just as **the body is one and yet has many members**, and all the members of the body – though many – **are one body, so too is Christ.** For in one Spirit **we were all baptized into one body.** Whether **Jews or Greeks or slaves or free**, we were all made to drink of **the one Spirit.**', Galatians 3:27-29, 'For **all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female** – for all of you are **one in Christ Jesus.** And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, **heirs according to the promise.**'; 'male and female' occurs only once in these passages, showing Paul's point was not about gendered role distinctions.