

No Longer!
**Galatians 3:26-29 as a Foundation for an Emancipatory Ecclesiology and
Religious Education with and for Working Class Girls of Color**

Abstract

Galatians 3:28 argues that within the people of God, “there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one with Jesus Christ.” This verse serves as a liberating ecclesiology—a body of Christ that is no longer distinguished by race, class, or gender. Arguing alongside Brad Braxton that this verse is not calling for the removal of difference, but the removal of dominance, this paper will explore the theological implications of this liberating verse and its relation to religious education and the formation of a group that falls under the entirety of the formula—working class adolescent girls of color. I will also seek to argue that another pair may be able to be added to the conversation—no longer young or old—and present practical applications for living into this liberating ecclesiology.

Sitting in as many Christian Education classes, as I have been doing these days, I often hear the phrase, it is an entire congregation that teaches—the most important teacher within the congregation is the congregation itself. Agreeing with this statement, I conclude that one’s ecclesiology directly impacts one’s methodology of religious education. This paper explores the connections between ecclesiology and religious education—particularly faith formation and transformation—and argues that Galatians 3:26-29 can be used as a liberating ecclesiology that will empower the faith formation of working class girls of color.

Galatians 3:26 – 29 states, “for in Christ you are all children of God. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (NRSV). This passage has been viewed as: a text that is not a valid pericope unto itself; as the epitome of Paul’s understanding of what it means to be the people of God; and as everything in between. I view this pericope as essential to understanding Paul’s presentation of a liberating Church.

For me, this text functions as a foundation for an emancipatory ecclesiology—a theological underpinning that is based on the removal of oppression and dominance and argues that among the people of God, there is no place for hierarchy based on race, class, or gender (just to name a few). Paul’s ecclesiastical teaching, as expressed through this verse, serves as my foundation for youth ministry with poor and working class girls of color. This paper will explore the text and its theological implications, paying particular attention to 3:28. I then place it into a larger conversation on ecclesiology and the need for an emancipatory ecclesiology. As a practical theologian, I conclude within the field of

youth ministry as I briefly consider how an ecclesiology built upon this pericope can affect poor and working class girls of color.

My notion of emancipatory ecclesiology is drawn from Evelyn Parker's concept of emancipatory hope. "Emancipatory hope is expectation that the forms of hegemonic relations—race, class, and gender dominance—will be toppled, and to have emancipatory hope is to acknowledge one's personal agency in God's vision for human equality."¹ Building upon and borrowing from this definition, emancipatory ecclesiology is the notion that the people of God collectively work towards freedom from oppression and dominance in this day and age. This concept of church would fall within a diaconal model of church, which views the Church as existing to be a servant of the servant Lord. Daniel Migliore states, "According to this model, the church serves God by serving the world in its struggle for emancipation, justice, and peace."² As the Church, we begin by engaging the struggle within our own congregations. We need to not only fight for emancipation of others in the world, but we ought to be emancipatory within our own ecclesial lives and seek to collectively work towards freedom from oppression and dominance within the visible church. Galatians 3: 26 – 29, serves as a biblical foundation for this emancipatory ecclesiology.

¹ Evelyn Parker, *Trouble Don't Last Always: Emancipatory Hope Among African American Adolescents*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 11

² Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 259.

A Brief Exploration of the Pericope and its Relation to Ecclesiology

The ultimate foundation of emancipatory ecclesiology is the unifying work of Christ. Verse 26 states, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

All of those that are in Christ operate equally as children of God. Reflecting on the significance of “in Christ” in relation to the Gal 3:26 - 29, Christine Lienemann-Perrin

notes:

We have here a summary of guidelines for the Christian life and theological basis: all previous distinctions between human beings, whether in reference to God’s plan of salvation, their place in society or anthropological characteristics, are eliminated through baptism. This is a sign of reorientation for the life of each individual, and a sign of their unity with one another ‘in Christ.’”³

Regardless of all dichotomies that separate us in the society, “in Christ,” we are unified.

While distinctions are not removed, the social importance attached to distinctions is removed in baptism. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). When we are initiated into the Church, societal privileges ought to carry no importance.

Paul’s mention of baptism before stating, “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 in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28), have caused some scholars to view verse 28 as a baptismal

³ Christine Lienemann-Perrin, “The Biblical Foundations for a Feminist and Participatory Theology of Mission” (*International Review of Mission* 93, 2004),

formula. J. Louis Martyn argues, “Paul names three of these elemental opposites because he is quoting the formula. In writing to the Galatians, however, he is interested only in the first pair.”⁴ There is neither time nor space within this paper to delve in depth into the argument as to whether or not this is a baptismal formula. However, I will note that those that argue alongside Martyn seek to explain why these three pairs are mentioned—as if there were no other connection. Yet, Brad Braxton notes another connection and states, “the three distinctions found within this verse were and are notorious hotbeds of social strife: ethnic relationships, social class, and gender relationships.”⁵ It is difficult to truly argue against one form of discrimination without raising others. To argue that these three pairing ought not to be central to Paul’s ecclesiology because he was simply reciting a memorized right negates the connectivity of injustices and allows us to fight against one without addressing another.

Additionally, if it was a baptismal formula, that would not allow us to disregard the powerful vision of the Church that lies in this verse. In fact, understood as a baptismal formula, this passage gives us a deeper understanding of Paul’s ecclesiology.

Imagine a congregation that initiates every new member by reminding them what is

⁴ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 376.

⁵ Brad R. Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/The Liturgical Press, 2002), 93

important in *this place* is that we are united in Christ and not divided by particular distinctions. This congregation would be asked to live into the understanding that “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28). Each member of the congregation would be charged to make sure that every other member was treated as an equal heir regardless of race, class, or gender. That would be a congregation practicing emancipatory ecclesiology!

A Closer Look at Galatians 3: 27: No Longer!

Foundational to emancipatory ecclesiology is the work towards ending oppression in this day and age. Yet, some have argued alongside Augustine of Hippo, that the declaration of Galatians 3:27 denotes an eschatological ideal that will be accomplished upon Christ’s return. Indeed, Paul’s eschatology was ever present as he anticipated Christ’s imminent return. Grammatically, however, it is important to note the use of the present tense. “There *is* neither Jew nor Greek, there *is* neither slave nor free, there *is* neither male and female.” Additionally, Brad Braxton notes, “With the defection of his converts looking on the horizon it is unlikely that Paul would resort to speculation about the eschatological harmony that Christ would establish. Paul’s concern in Galatians 3 is

for *present* harmony.”⁶ The concern of an emancipatory ecclesiology is also for present harmony. To argue that we can only reach apocalyptic harmony works against our role as Christians to work towards the end of injustices now. It will not suffice to tell suffering Christians that oppression will end when the world ends. It will not suffice to ignore our responsibility of making sure others under our care do not feel less than or less capable to serve God because of their God-given particularities. It will not suffice for particular Christians to feel like there is no place for them in the present kingdom.

As we strive for present harmony and Christian equality, Galatians 3:27 must be examined closely. The first question that must be answered: what exactly must “no longer” exist? This creates a quandary because gender and racial differences still exist among the baptized—they can’t *not* exist. If this verse speaks of the removal of difference, then the verse must be read symbolically. However, along with Brad Braxton, I believe that through Paul’s pairings, “he is not asserting the obliteration of difference, but rather the obliteration of *dominance*.”⁷ One should not be forced to give up distinctions that make one uniquely oneself. Instead, it is a church’s responsibility to obliterate any indications that people should be less because of their cultural or social

⁶ *Ibid*, 93.

⁷ *Ibid*, 94.

identity. This still presents a quandary. These pairs are interrelated, but they are of different types that must be unpacked as we walk through each pairing.

The first of three pairs refers to racial dominance. “There is no longer Jew or Greek,” is the one that many note as fitting most within the context of the letter to the Galatians, for the bulk of the letter speaks to not being coerced by racial domination.

Braxton argues:

By proclaiming a gospel of uncircumcision Paul was helping in some limited way to establish a Gentile Christian identity. The Gentile believer was a Christian, but was not a Jewish Christian. Paul was thus encouraging the Gentile believers to say ‘no’ to the dominant ideology of the Judiazers, but he does not appear to be encouraging them to say ‘yes’ to Gentile culture *per se*.⁸

Paul is encouraging them to find their own identity, an identity that is uniquely their own.

They were not Jewish, so they could not be Jewish Christians. Yet, because they were

Christians, they could not completely embrace a Gentile culture that was not Christian.

They then had to explore to create something new in order to be both Gentile and

Christian.

Understanding that this creed does not call for an eradication of difference allows us to further investigate how an emancipatory ecclesiology with its foundation partly based in the eradication of racial dominance may function within US American society.

In the “Obama Era” many argue that we are in a “post-racial” society. To borrow a

⁸ *Ibid*, 70.

saying from some of my feminist sisters that claim, “I will be post-feminist in the post-patriarchy.” I argue that we can only be post-racial in a post-racist society. “If an ideology of a ‘raceless’ society were to emerge after more than three hundred years of white domination it would be tantamount to the maintenance of white domination, but just under a new name.”⁹ Emancipatory ecclesiology does not call for those of the non-dominant culture to relinquish, ignore, or downplay their cultural heritage in order to take on the dominant culture. Those of the dominant culture, however, ought to seek to relinquish the privileges that accompany that culture and make it dominant. “Christ has freed the African American to say, ‘yes’ to blackness.”¹⁰ The Church ought to free our brothers and sisters of all ethnicities and cultures to say “yes” to the way God made them.

The idea of a cookie cutter Christianity impedes one’s ability to grow into one’s God-destined self. As Paul sought to assist the Gentile converts to work within an expression of Christianity that was uniquely their own, congregations ought to do the same thing with youth of color. The goal ought not to be a form a student to look like everything that has come before it. Both the culture of heritage and youth culture ought to be embraced.

⁹ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 95.

The second of three pairs refers to the removal of economic oppression. “There is neither slave or free.” Because they are written as three parallel pairs, one may be tempted to view them all in the same way. However, while there are certainly parallels, these pairs point to important differences. Paul’s argument is founded on the idea that Greek and Jew can exist and partake in the table of Christ together without one having to become the other. “By contrast, in the case of the slave/free distinction, ‘in Christ’ the difference is abolished, because the slave knows freedom in Christ.”¹¹ An emancipatory ecclesiology does not simply accept the poverty of others and ask them to accept their poverty and simply worship Christ through it. An emancipatory ecclesiology seeks to not only eradicate economic oppression, but poverty itself. “Actually, Paul’s entire argument is based on the possibility of moving from a state of slavery to freedom; those who were once slaves can be set free.”¹² Certainly, there is a freedom within Christ.

“While it is true that Paul emphasizes his metaphorical usage here, one cannot ignore that, again the backdrop of a Roman society and economy based on slavery, the social and legal implications of this language would resonate loudly.”¹³ This language resonates loudly within United States’ society as well. Within many congregations, the answer to post-slavery economic oppression is to create a group that “get a piece of the

¹¹ Néstor Oscar Míguez, “Galatians” in: Daniel Patte (general ed.), *Global Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 468

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

pie” and become economically privileged. So often, this transfers the power players within economic oppression, but does not eliminate it. An emancipatory ecclesiology would not be satisfied simply with teaching congregants how to gain economic prosperity in a way that they too may become oppressors. My contention is not with removing individuals from poverty. My contention is with the idea that that is enough.

Emancipatory congregations would seek to fight against institutions that create the slave/free dichotomy in any form. Often, the argument against removing economic oppression lies in the sharing of the economic prosperity of the privileged. Many do not disagree with raising the wealth of others as long as it does result in decreasing their own wealth. An emancipatory ecclesiology recognizes that,

“It is also a matter of discovering freedom as an opportunity to serve. Our neighbor, according to Paul’s logic, is not the boundary of my freedom, but rather the opportunity of my freedom. My freedom begins when my real neighbor—especially the poor, weak, the needy—becomes the motive of my actions, when individualism is overcome by community.”¹⁴

Emancipatory ecclesiology can only exist within community—a community where people bear each other’s burdens. This is the community Paul sought to cultivate through his letter to the Galatians. An emancipatory ecclesiology, therefore, also falls within

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

another model articulated by Daniel Migliorie-- the church as intimate community. As an intimate community, a congregation tries to develop a strong sense of belonging and mutual support among its members.¹⁵

Yet, as we continue to exist within the distinction, if we work with youth that are poor or working class, it is imperative that we strive to remove the sense of dominance. As an urban youth worker, I repeatedly got calls from people wanting to give me things or bring their students in to help with my students. Working with a ministry that had to raise their own budget, it was difficult to say no, but it got easier. The congregation had to decide to no longer be in relationships with groups that would not partner with us. No longer would we work with groups that didn't believe we had anything to give. And while we gladly received donations, we knew we need to turn down junk in such horrible condition that it could not be salvaged. It was important that kids knew that they did not have to accept whatever was thrown at them.

For those of us on the other side of the equation of class dominance, the challenge is also to not confuse distinction with dominance. As we prepare for missions trips and community service we must be sure that we are not teaching dominance nor allow "less fortunate" (if we choose to use this term at all) to be code for "less than."

The final pair seeks to remove gender dominance. Unlike the other pairings, this pairing does not state there is no longer male or female. Instead, it states, "there is no longer male *and* female." "This is in order to take over the exact wording of Gen 1:27

¹⁵ Daniel Migliorie, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 256

from its formulation in the Septuagint, thus emphasizing the “new creation” which has taken shape in Christ.”¹⁶ With this third pair, Paul reminds us that God created both male and female. Both male and female have been created in the image of God. Thinking about ongoing struggles with the ordination of women, particular positions that seem elusive for ordained women, and the constant struggle for women seeking their place in the church, women need to be reminded that they too, reflect the image of Christ. “For women this meant that in principle, participation in everything which happened in the community was open to them.”¹⁷ An emancipatory ecclesiology welcomes women in whatever capacity God calls them to serve.

It is, however, difficult to leave the gender argument without paying some attention to how this could be seen as more difficult than the other pairs. Certainly, this is not the only passage within the New Testament that mentions women and their role in the body of Christ. Although I seek not to ignore those that faithfully struggle with those passages, this paper cannot discuss in depth the various pericopes that discuss the role of women. However, what we do know is that God calls and we ought to be faithful to that call. Whether we are like Mary being asked not to serve in the kitchen as is traditional, but to sit up front at the feet of Jesus with the men or like the many other examples within

¹⁶ Christine Lienemann-Perrin, “The Biblical Foundations for a Feminist and Participatory Theology of Mission” in: *International Review of Mission* 93 (2004)

¹⁷ *Ibid*

the Biblical text that shows God calls whom God wills for whatever position God desires.

A congregation practicing emancipatory ecclesiology will not stand in the way of that call.

No longer young nor old?

Reflecting on his cultural context, Martin Luther suggests that to this passage, “might be added many more names of persons and offices which are ordained of God, as these: there is neither magistrate nor subject, neither teacher nor hearer...”¹⁸ As a practical theologian within the field of Christian Education to youth, I’d like to briefly explore another pairing, no longer young nor old. There are congregations that view youth as junior members or future members of the Church, but not current members of the body of Christ that can access the same potent Holy Spirit as the adults. An emancipatory ecclesiology acknowledges all members of God’s church as equal members. This is a powerful notion when extended to youth.

Congregations that treat youth as full members of a congregation where they sit on committees, church councils, board of trustees, etc and participation in decision making processes are congregations that are empowering youth to live into their calling

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Erasmus Middleton (Kregel Reprint Library Series, 1979), 222

in the here and now. Those congregations open an ecclesiastical life for youth that arms them with unending power.

As I think about the pairings, I think about people that do not exist within the dominant group of any of these pairs. Poor and working class girls of color are in desperate need for churches living into an ecclesiology that will encourage them to accept and celebrate their culture, work in community with them to reverse economic oppression, and affirm that their gendered identity does not bar them from participating in any aspect of the God's Church. These girls are in need of emancipatory ecclesiology.

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