

One in Christ
Galatians 3:23-29

There is a story about a student minister serving a Methodist church for one summer. During the absence of the senior pastor who also was his supervisor, the young minister was asked to perform a funeral service - for a devoted Baptist – because the Baptist minister was also out of town. With some apprehension he did conduct the funeral service, but then worried wondering if he had done the correct thing. When the senior Methodist pastor returned, the young man asked if he had violated any Methodist church policy by performing a funeral service for a Baptist. “Absolutely not!” his supervisor assured him. “Bury all the Baptists you can!”

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.

When Paul wrote these words about the fundamental unity that is ours by virtue of our faith in Jesus, you can safely assume that some of his original hearers were proponents of “burying all the Baptists you can.” However, instead of Baptists, the labels used in Paul’s time would have been Judaizers or Freedmen (Jewish slaves freed by Rome) or one of any number of groups thought not to be “true believers.” From the very beginning of the church, there has always been tensions surrounding our unity, our oneness, in the church as Christians. How far do we go to be accommodating in our understandings and beliefs with those that differ in the name of Christ? How do we live and work and serve with others who share the same community but differ in some of the particulars of theology?

The letter to the Galatians addresses these questions. How? Well, first we need to understand that Galatia was a region - a province in the Roman Empire. So, when talk about the “Galatian Church”, it was not a single fellowship or congregation, rather it’s a collection of fellowships and congregations located in a number of towns and populated by a very diverse collection of believers – they are very different congregations. Paul’s

aim is to affirm their primary identity, not as churches or believers in isolation separate from one another, but as a body that is one - united in Christ Jesus.

While Paul argued that the Galatian Christians were united through their faith rather than law, the biggest opposition he faced was a faction that sought to draw church boundary lines strictly on the basis of observing the law of Moses. They argued that to be a “true Christian,” one had to keep the law of Moses just as Israel had for centuries. Otherwise, one was not truly a part of the church...However, knowing that Paul was a well-educated, strict, experienced Pharisee he didn’t outrightly dismiss the Mosaic law or its function - rather he put it in perspective, viewing that the law was put in charge as a “guardian” to lead one to faith. The term “guardian” in Paul’s time referred to a servant whose main function was to accompany children to school and keep them out of trouble. So, from age 7 through 16, the “guardian” escorted the child and supervised their conduct. But at age 16, there was a public ceremony formally recognizing the end of childhood and the acceptance into the adult community ending the term of the guardian.

Paul argued, then, that the law’s function was an interim one – for a particular period of time. While the law was once the basis of community and unity for the people of Israel, its “guardianship” ended when Christ came and faith superseded observance of the law as the means to righteousness and justification. Meeting and following the law to prove oneself worthy was replaced by trust as the basis of our identity in Jesus Christ.

We are one in Christ Jesus because of whom we trust, not because our actions or worship habits or traditions that fall into some lock-step precision with what someone believes should be true for all – not even when we are the “someone” presuming to make such judgments!

This is a critical point in understanding this scripture for today’s concern for the unity of the church, and the expression of that unity. We are every bit “one in Christ Jesus” today

as were the Galatians in theirs, even and especially when outward appearances seem to suggest the contrary. Paul's opponents sought to define that unity was determined by their defined orthodoxy - their accepted theory, doctrine, or practice - which happened to be adherence to the law of Moses.

In our time, we also have plenty of groups who want to determine for us the terms of Christian unity. The fundamentalist movement arose out of just such an effort - to boil down to a dogmatic checklist what it is that unites true orthodox Christians. There have been times when the various creeds of the church have been used – or abused - in just such an effort. In their own way, denominations sometimes add fuel to the fire by focusing, too exclusively, on their own survival and the survival of their sister congregations. And make no mistake: when individual congregations become ingrown and self-justifying, when survival and local customs become seen and used as the predominant measures for determining what is considered Christian action and belief – the unity of the church is jeopardized by parochialism – their excessive narrowness of view.

The unity of the church is not something we can choose to abide by or ignore, depending on what way the wind happens to be blowing that day or how many people we can get to agree with our point of view. The unity of the church and of Christians is a given for us. Our faith makes it a matter of fact, a foundation upon which either we build or we flounder. Our unity is not something we are charged to create – rather unity is a gift given for our use. We cannot create unity by coming up with a list of fundamentals or insisting we all practice or worship all the same way. Our unity in Christ Jesus is far more dynamic. It allows us to live and serve together in community with those who differ from us in many ways - except in relationship with Christ. After all, in the Galatian church even after the receipt of Paul's letter, Jews continued to be Jews, Greeks continued to be Greeks, slaves continued to be slaves, free ones continued to be free, males continued to

be male, females continued to be female. The outward differences remained - but these individuals and groups were bound in their diversity by unity in Christ Jesus.

Today, the unity of the church is served in the same way. I do not believe that being one in Christ requires that fundamentalists become charismatics, or that Pentecostals change into “high-church liturgical” – or that mainline churches need to be something other than who we are. Otherwise, the advice to “bury all the Baptists you can” becomes, for all practical purposes, an unending cycle of seeking unity on our terms rather than on God’s terms. What the unity of the church does call forth from us is that we affirm and live as those who are one in Christ. That doesn’t mean we have to become more like each other – the call is that we all become more like Christ.

We encounter the promise, and sadly at times the fracturing, of that truth at our worship services – or communion tables – or our baptisms. Christ does not host “separate but equal” styles for Baptists and Methodists, UCC folk and Roman Catholics, Brethren and Pentecostals. There is but one style, even as there is but one Lord. Even as we come together as individuals and as a congregation, we are joined by countless others across the world - persons and communities with differences of thought and lifestyle and understanding that would make our heads dizzy. Yet, we are joined by persons and communities with whom we are one by virtue of the One who invites us here and accepts us as we are. The church is not one because of our agreements or our covenants, not because we share the same language or live in the same political systems. The church is One because we serve - even as we were served by – one Lord, Jesus Christ. We are one here, not because of who we are, but because of whose we are. Amen.

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