

A History of Interpretation of Galatians 3:28

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

(Gal 3:28)

Introduction

‘If this passage does not teach that in the privileges, duties, and responsibilities of Christ’s Kingdom, all differences of nation, caste, and sex are abolished, we should like to know what it does teach, and wherefore it was written.’¹

So wrote early feminist and Salvation Army co-founder, Catherine Booth of Galatians 3:28 in 1859. With this statement, Booth both captures and pre-empts much of the modern debate on this passage.

Since then scholars have argued over what Gal. 3:28 does teach and the extent of its application. On one hand egalitarians use this text to ‘prove’ that the New Testament abolishes all gender-based distinctions and treat it as a ‘control text’ for interpreting other texts. On the other, complementarians argue that Gal. 3:28 states that race, status and gender do not provide any barriers to salvation, but this doesn’t silence other Biblical passages that teach differences in responsibilities based on these distinctions.

This essay will start with a brief exegetical interpretation of this verse, before examining its place in egalitarian and complementarian understandings of gender responsibilities within the church and the family. The questions raised by this examination will provide the basis for analysing the history of interpretation of Gal.

¹ Catherine Booth, *Female Ministry, or, Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (New York: Salvation Army Supplies Print. and Pub. Dept., 1975), 17.

3:28. This historical review will climax with an assessment of the impact of the current climate on recent interpretations.

An Exegetical Interpretation

In order to exegetically determine what Paul means in Gal. 3:28, this verse must be examined within its immediate context, within the context of the epistle and within the New Testament.

Within the context of the letter, Gal. 3:28 sits at the centre of the second main section. In the first section (ch 1-2) Paul indicates his purpose in writing to the Galatians in 1:6 where he rebukes their turning away from the true gospel. He then mounts a defence of his apostleship before turning in the second section (ch 3-4) to expounding the heart of the gospel. The primary theme of both this section and the entire letter then becomes explaining the true gospel in terms of justification by faith in Christ apart from works of the law.

Within the immediate context of Gal. 3:26-29 Paul changes to the second person pronoun 'you'. He tells the Galatian believers that they are all sons of God (3:26) because they are all in Christ. This union with Christ is expressed in a number of different ways: 'in Christ Jesus' (3:26, 28); 'baptised into Christ' (3:27), 'clothed ... with Christ' (3:27) and 'belong to Christ' (3:29).² Further, verse 29 makes the connection between being in Christ and being a Jew in Abraham, clarifying that belonging to Christ makes one a true heir of the promise to Abraham. Hence, the

² Richard Hove, *Equality in Christ?: Galatians 3:28 and the Gender Dispute* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999), 46.

context of Gal. 3:28 is about all believers, without distinction, being sons of God and heirs of the promise.

The meaning of the verse is even clearer when we look at its structure. Gal. 3:28 is made up of a statement involving three negated couplets and an explanatory clause. Each couplets sits within the formula ‘there is neither X nor Y’, although the final couplet contains a slight variation: ‘there is neither male *and* female’. The initial Jew/Greek pairing fits neatly within the context of the passage, where Paul has been arguing that Gentiles do not need to become Jews and obey the Jewish law in order to become Christians. The historic division of Jew and Gentile does not now exist for salvation in Christ. Likewise, from a legal perspective the division of slave/free is also not relevant, nor are male/female gender distinctions. The change in conjunction for the third pair has been convincingly argued by Hove to be a deliberate reference to Genesis 1:27³, where ‘God created mankind “male and female” prior to the fall, and this was good (Gen. 1:27, 31).’⁴

While there is some debate over why Paul chose these particular couplets, the context of the following verses make a strong connection with the idea of inheritance (3:29-4:7). Under the Old Testament law only Jewish, free males inherited land left by their fathers (Deut. 21:15-17; Gal 4:1-7). Yet salvation, the promise to Abraham, does not

³ Hove, *Equality in Christ?*, 67.

⁴ Hove, *Equality in Christ?*, 68.

have these restrictions.⁵ Through faith in Christ Jesus anyone may become a rightful heir (Gal 3:26).⁶

The explanatory clause in the second half of Gal 3:28 gives the reason each distinction is removed. In summarising his significant lexical study on the meaning of “you are all one”, Hove says the expression

‘simply states that diverse parts share something in common; they are united in some respect, in contrast to their diversity. Lexically the word *one* can be used many ways, but not to denote equality.’⁷

So in using these couplets, instead of denying the distinctions of race, status and gender, Paul is actually maintaining their diversity. The revolutionary fact is their unity with Christ, or oneness in him.

The context and content of this verse reveal that Paul is concerned to demonstrate salvation as being available to all, without racial, legal or gender distinction, through being united in Christ. Modern interpretations of this passage generally agree that this is Paul’s basic meaning. They disagree, however, on the social implications of this spiritual truth.

Complementarian Interpretation

Given this exegesis of the passage, complementarians argue that Gal. 3:28 affirms that all humans have equal access to salvation in Christ. They do not believe,

⁵ This is convincingly argued by Jack Cottrell, *Gender roles and the Bible : Creation, the Fall, and Redemption : a critique of feminist Biblical interpretation* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co., 1994), 272-283.

⁶ Peter R. Schemm, Jr. ‘Galatians 3:28 – Proof-text or Context?’ in *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 8/1 (Spring 2003): 27.

⁷ Hove, *Equality in Christ?*, 71.

however, that the passage refers to a person's roles within society. 'In short, Gal 3:28 is a soteriological statement, not a gender-role statement.'⁸

This is not to deny that the passage will have some social implications, but as Schreiner argues: 'we must read the rest of what Paul says to explain accurately what these social implications are.'⁹ Gal. 3:28 cannot be used in isolation for this purpose, nor can it be used to silence texts that do deal specifically with male/female relationships.

In assessing the hermeneutical method of complementarians, Snodgrass states: 'This approach often takes a rather ironhanded view that Scripture cannot contradict Scripture and quickly excludes any option that would allow even a surface contradiction with other texts.'¹⁰ By contrast, Schreiner, a complementarian, claims 'Both Galatians 3:28 and texts that limit women in ministry yield a clear and noncontradictory message [...] The texts strike us as polar because a modern notion of equality is often imported into Galatians 3:28.'¹¹

Modern Egalitarian Interpretations

Some egalitarians claim that Gal. 3:28 is 'The Magna Carta of Humanity'¹²; the most important text that supports biblical equality¹³ and 'the most socially explosive

⁸ Schemm, 28.

⁹ Thomas Schreiner, 'Women in ministry', in *Two Views on Women in Ministry* eds. Beck and Blomberg; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 187.

¹⁰ Klyne Snodgrass, 'Galatians 3:28: Conundrum or Solution?' in *Women, Authority and the Bible* (ed Alvera Mickelsen; Downers Grove, IVP, 1986), 164.

¹¹ Schreiner, 'Women in Ministry', 181.

¹² Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female : a study in sexual relationships from a theological point of view* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 142.

statement in the New Testament.¹⁴ Their interpretation of this passage makes it not only the key to their arguments for gender equality within the church, but also the interpretive key to the rest of scripture.¹⁵ For example, F.F. Bruce writes:

Paul states the basic principle here; if restrictions on it are found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, as in 1 Cor. 14:34f. or 1 Tim. 2:11f., they are to be understood in relation to Gal. 3:28, and not *vice versa*.¹⁶

For egalitarians, Gal. 3:28 speaks of an equality that goes beyond equal access to salvation, claiming that the passage has major social implications such as the removal of gender distinctions for roles within church and family life. So, for the egalitarian, equality in *being* must entail equality in *function*. Goothuis typifies this position in her statement:

‘...the clear teaching in Galatians 3:26-28 and elsewhere [is] that women and men relate to God [equality in being] and participate in the worship of God [equality in function] in the same way, with no difference in spiritual status or role.’¹⁷

Complementarians argue that egalitarians have made a number of presuppositions here. First, the presupposition of a Galatians 3:28 priority; second, that ‘one in Christ’ means ‘equality’ and third, that equality implies an interchangeability of roles and responsibilities.

¹³ Rebecca M. Goothuis, *Good News for Women : a Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 25.

¹⁴ Snodgrass, ‘Galatians 3:28: Conundrum or Solution?’, 161.

¹⁵ eg Osborne who identifies Gal 3:28 as the ‘*crux interpretum*’ of equality for feminists. Grant Osborne, ‘Hermeneutics and Women in the Church’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20/4 (1977): 348.

¹⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians : a commentary on the Greek text* (Exeter [England] Grand Rapids, Mich.: Paternoster Press ;W.B. Eerdmans, 1982), 190.

¹⁷ Goothuis, *Good News for Women*, 37. Brackets mine.

A History of Interpretation

From the analysis above, the main questions to be asked are: ‘is oneness the same as equality?’ and ‘does the oneness in Christ that Paul refers to mean sameness in the responsibilities of these groups within the church and the family?’. Finally, the question of how Gal. 3:28 is understood in light of passages advocating different responsibilities within the church and family based on racial, status and gender distinctions must be asked. It is on the basis of the answers to these questions that a history of the interpretation of this passage will now be conducted.

Patristic Interpretation

Rather than commenting on Gal. 3:28 directly, the early church fathers tended to use this verse within their arguments on other topics. It is through this use that their interpretation of its meaning can be determined.

Clement of Alexandria (c155-c.220) alludes to it in *Exhortation to the Heathen* xi, where he comments that the ‘whole of Christ is not divided’ but is a ‘new man’ without any divisions. The key idea is transformation by the Holy Spirit, with the verse being applied to believers only.¹⁸

Gregory of Nyssa (330-c.395) in *On Virginit*y says that women have the same calling as men with regards to a spiritual union/marriage with Christ.¹⁹ Additionally he uses this verse in *On the Making of Man* as proof that God making male and female ‘is a

¹⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, xi. Cited 2 October 2007.
Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/020811.htm>

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginit*y, 20. Cited 2 October 2007
Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2907.htm>

departure from the prototype', Christ, in whom there is 'neither male nor female'.²⁰ In neither case does he apply the passage to gender responsibilities within church or family life.

Both Athanasius (c. 295-373) and Hilary of Poitiers (c. 315-367) used Gal. 3:28 in their defence against the Arians. Athanasius's allusion to it is only minor, making the point that once united with God, and no longer 'abiding on earth', there will no longer be disunity between men and women.²¹ His reference is spiritual, speaking of the new creation and refers to unity rather than equality.

Hilary of Poitiers quotes Gal. 3:27-28 in his refutation of the Arian idea that the Father and Jesus are 'one' in will only and not in nature.²² His interpretation of the passage is that oneness in Christ speaks of the unity of the faithful brought about by the sacrament of baptism. This means that believers are united in nature in a way that is only possible if Christ is also of the same nature as God. He sees this oneness as ontological and again makes no reference to equality or gender responsibilities.

John Chrysostom (c. 344/354-407) stands alone in this period in that his work is exegetically based. In his homily on Galatians, he interprets this verse as meaning 'you all have one form and one mould, even Christ's. [...] He that was a Greek, or Jew, or bond-man yesterday, carries about with him the form [...] of the Lord of all,

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16-17. Cited 2 October 2007
online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2914.htm>

²¹ Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, II.69 Cited 7 October 2007
online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2816.htm>

²² Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, VIII.8 Cited 7 October 2007
online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/330208.htm>

yea displays in his own person the Christ'.²³ Chrysostom does not spell out any social implications of having the form of Christ, but it is interesting, as Johnson also notes, that he makes no reference to the clause "male nor female".²⁴ Apparently this distinction had less significance then than it does in the modern debate.

Augustine (354-430) clearly did not believe Gal. 3:28 to be a statement removing functional differences when he penned the following comments on this passage:

Difference of race or condition or sex is indeed taken away by the unity of faith, but it remains embedded in our mortal interactions, and in the journey of this life the apostles themselves teach that it is to be respected [...] For we observe in the unity of faith that there are no such distinctions. Yet within the orders of this life they persist.²⁵

This is the first reference to social implications found within early church history and it is by way of negation. Augustine believed Gal. 3:28 was a statement of faith that did not remove distinctions in this earthly life. It was about unity rather than equality.

After his own analysis of the Orthodox church fathers' interpretation of Gal. 3:28, Hopko concludes:

'Nowhere in Orthodox Church history is Galatians 3:28 used as a "woman's text" or as "the Magna Carta of humanity." It is not applied to those outside the Church's faith and life since it speaks specifically about baptized believers who have died in Christ.'²⁶

²³ John Chrysostom, *Homily 3 on Galatians*, Cited 7 October 2007

Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/230120.htm>

²⁴ S.Lewis Johnson. 'Role distinctions in the church : Galatians 3:28', in *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood* eds. Piper and Grudem, 1991), 156.

²⁵ Augustine, Minge PL 35:2125, cited in Mark Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 51.

²⁶ Thomas Hopko, 'Galatians 3:28: an Orthodox interpretation', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 35/2-3 (1991): 185.

Our analysis of Patristic interpretation supports this conclusion given that only one reference to social implications was found. Even this reference argued that the removal of difference in race, condition or sex was *not* applied to earthly life.

The middle ages (Aquinas)

Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) understood this verse as relating to faith in Christ. He writes: ‘... there is nothing in man that would exclude anyone from the sacrament of the faith of Christ and of baptism. And [Paul] mentions three differences among men to show that no one is excluded from faith in Christ by any of them...’²⁷ Aquinas continues by expounding each of the distinctions, but is careful to state at each point that there is no difference ‘so far as receiving the effect of baptism is concerned.’ This same interpretation is found in his *Treatise on the Incarnation* where he uses Gal. 3:28 to prove ‘Salvation, which was to be accomplished by Christ, concerns all sorts and conditions of men.’²⁸

In *Treatise on the Sacraments* he asserts that unity in faith does not remove gender distinctions from every area of life. In Article 4 on ‘Whether a Woman can Baptise’, Aquinas uses Gal. 3:28 to say that she can, but then refers to other Pauline Epistles to show that there is still a male/female distinction that means ‘a woman should not baptise if a man be available for the purpose’.²⁹

As with the Patristic interpretation, so here with Aquinas in the middle ages, Gal. 3:28 was interpreted to be about all believers having the same access to salvation.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, (trans. F.R. Larcher: Albany, N.Y.: Magi Books, 1866), 105-106.

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Incarnation*, Summa Theologica TP.36.3 Cited 1 October 2007 online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.toc.html>

²⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on the Sacraments*, Summa Theologica TP.67.4 Cited 1 October 2007 online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.toc.html>

The Reformation (Luther, Balduin, Calvin & Henry)

Even within Luther's own lifetime (1483-1546) his interpretation of Gal. 3:28 changed. In fact, this change is said to be one of the major contrasts between his two commentaries on this epistle.³⁰

In his 1519 commentary, Luther quotes and expands upon Augustine's view that distinctions remain in our mortal interactions that are removed in the spirit through the unity of faith. He adds '... the apostles command slaves to obey their masters, wives to be subject to their husbands, but all to obey the magistrates.'³¹ Prior to this, however, he says that a person is made righteous because of Christ and not because of any status. All forms of earthly status, for example Minorite or Augustinian, 'are of such a nature that they do not make a Christian if they are present or an unbeliever if they are lacking'.³² Therefore, Luther held that this verse is about salvation and not social order.

In his 1535 edition, Luther moves to using the concept of 'equality' for 'oneness', but very clearly states this to be equality with distinction. He specifies that Gal. 3:28 refers to equality only 'in the sight of God, where all men are equal'.³³ He goes on to add, 'In the world and according to the flesh there is a very great difference and inequality among persons, and this must be observed very carefully. For if a woman wanted to be a man [...] there would be a disturbance and confusion of all stations and of everything.'³⁴ The impact of Luther's own historical climate on this statement is noteworthy. This second commentary, while not differing in *substance* so much as

³⁰ Arland Hultgren, 'Luther on Galatians', *Word & World* 20/3 (2000): 237.

³¹ Luther, et al., *Luther's works*, Vol. 27 (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), 281.

³² Luther, et al. *Luther's Works*, (vol 27), 281.

³³ Luther, et al. *Luther's Works*, (vol 26), 355.

³⁴ Luther, et al. *Luther's Works*, (vol 26), 356.

emphasis regarding social implications, was written after the Peasants Revolt of 1525. It can be surmised that, because of this overturning of order, Luther saw the need to spell out that Gal. 3:28 is not referring to equality in every area of life, but only in regards to salvation. Similarly, in a chastisement to farmers and other subordinates for their rebellion, he states ‘[...] for a worldly kingdom cannot exist where there is no class distinction, where some are free, some are prisoners, some are masters and some are vassals, etc. As St. Paul says in Gal. 3:28, that in Christ both master and vassal are one.’³⁵ So, Luther clearly interprets ‘one in Christ’ as referring to equality in relationship before God, and so how Christians ought to treat one another, without removing social distinctions.

A later professor in Wittenberg, Friedrich Balduin (d. 1627), writing concerning Paul’s admonition to Christian slaves in 1 Tim 6:1-2, states: ‘The relation through Christ refers to the soul, the faith, word and sacrament, and salvation itself, where there is no difference between slave and freedman (Gal. 3:28). However, concerning their vocation and social position, they are different. Therefore, they ought to be even more willing to serve those masters whom they know to be believers.’³⁶ Here is an understanding of Gal. 3:28 in light of one New Testament passage that assumes differences in social position. The two passages are not seen as contradictory, but rather as referring to different aspects of life: Gal. 3:28 to salvation and 1 Tim 6:1-2 to behaviour in this earthly life.

³⁵ Luther ‘Admonishment to Peace on the 12 Articles of the Swabian Farmers’ cited in C.F.W. Walther ‘Slavery, Humanism & the Bible’ (trans. Erika Bullman Flores) n.p. cited 7 October 2007
Online: <http://www.reclaimingwalther.org/articles/cfw00002.htm>

³⁶ Balduin, F. Commentar in Epp. Pauli Francof, 1664, pp 1367-1369. Cited in Walther, ‘Slavery, Humanism & the Bible’ n.p.

John Calvin's (1509-64) commentary is quite explicit in its denial of an equality of function being implied in 3:28

‘Paul does not mean here that there are no differences of status with regard to the society of this world. For as we know, there are servants and masters, rulers and subjects; in the home, the husband is the head, and the wife must be in subjection. We know this economy to be inviolable, and that our Lord Jesus Christ did not come into this world to confuse everything by overturning what God the Father had established.’³⁷

Calvin makes it clear that the verse does not have social implications that extend to removing distinctions within the earthly economy.

Nonconformist Matthew Henry (1662-1714), like other reformers, focuses on the *acceptance* into salvation without distinction given by baptism:

The law indeed made a difference between Jew and Greek [...] But it is not so now; they all stand on the same level, and are all one in Christ Jesus; as the one is not accepted on the account of any national or personal advantages he may enjoy above the other, so neither is the other rejected for the want of them; but all who sincerely believe on Christ, of what nation, or sex, or condition, soever they be, are accepted of him ...³⁸

Although Henry doesn't articulate any social implications within his interpretation, he does indicate that those distinctions are still 'enjoyed' and they don't impact a person's acceptance into Christ.

Gal. 3:28 continued to be interpreted in the Reformation and post-Reformation period as referring to a removal of differences for salvation, without the removal of these

³⁷ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Galatians* (trans. Kathy Childress; Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1997 [1563]), 352.

³⁸ Matthew Henry *Commentary on the Whole Bible Volume VI (Acts to Revelation)* 1706-1721 online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/henry/mhc6.Gal.iv.html>

distinctions from church and family life. This understanding was seen in harmony with the passages that advocate different responsibilities based on race, status or gender.

Early Evangelicalism, Slavery and The Enlightenment

In his 'Explanatory notes on the Bible' early evangelical, John Wesley (1703-91), comments on Gal. 3:28 only briefly, focusing especially on the Jew/Gentile distinction. The male/female couplet he explains in relation to the first, connecting both 'males' and 'Jews' with circumcision and stating the difference it was designed to create has been done away with in the new dispensation of the gospel. He further states that the couplets are 'equally accepted through faith.'³⁹ Galatians 3:28 was taken purely in the context of having received Christ and being sons of God through him (v27). Implications outside the context of salvation were not examined. Additionally, Wesley occasionally allowed women to 'exhort' a mixed congregation, but his interpretation of 1 Tim 2:11-12 meant he maintained a distinctiveness in responsibilities between the genders.⁴⁰ He clearly did not think Gal. 3:28 contradicted this passage.

Perhaps the most significant impact on the interpretation of Gal. 3:28 occurred in the slavery debates of the nineteenth century. Anti-slavery campaigners often struggled to

³⁹ John Wesley *Note's on the Bible; Galatians III* Cited 20 September 2007
online: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/Wesley/notes.i.x.iv.html>

⁴⁰ Daniel Doriani. 'Appendix 1: history of the interpretation of 1 Timothy 2', in *Women in the Church : a fresh analysis of I Timothy 2:9-15* (ed. Kèostenberger, Schreiner and Baldwin; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books: 1995), 247-8.

find Biblical support for their case through a plain reading of Scripture⁴¹ and so adopted new hermeneutics from the era such as employing an immutable principle (e.g. equality of all humanity) and the idea of a ‘seed growing secretly’.⁴² With the first hermeneutic, ‘the less radical abolitionists granted [...] that the equality of the early church was only a religious equality’⁴³ while others saw Gal 3:28 as implying a comprehensive equality. The second hermeneutical principle says that history is moving towards universal human progress, so even though Paul didn’t abolish slavery in the first century, it was now time to employ the seed of Gal 3:28 and do so. Interestingly, abolitionists often joined forces with the women’s suffrage movement of this era and both employed Gal. 3:28 with these hermeneutics for their defences.⁴⁴

Catherine Booth’s quotation at the start of this essay exemplifies the use of this verse in the nineteenth century to claim rights for women to preach and fulfil clerical offices. She assumes a principle of equality, where distinctions are removed from all settings, in her interpretation and she reasons: ‘We think the above is the only fair and common sense interpretation of this passage.’⁴⁵

The origin of this new ‘principle of equality’, that is also used in many modern interpretations must be questioned. Davis suggests that ‘our contemporary understanding of equality derives more from the ideals of the Enlightenment of the

⁴¹ See for example: Caroline Shanks, 'The Biblical Anti-Slavery Argument of the Decade 1830-1840', *The Journal of Negro History* 16/2 (Apr. 1931). Or Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a theological crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 31-50.

⁴² J. Albert Harrill, 'The Use of the New Testament in the American Slave Controversy : A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate', *Religion and American Culture* 10/2 (2000): 154.

⁴³ Shanks, 154.

⁴⁴ Harill, f/n 82.

⁴⁵ Booth, *Female Ministry*, 7.

eighteenth century [...] than it does from Scripture.’⁴⁶ For example Groothuis’ argues that ‘According to the classical liberal thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the equality of the individual entails equal rights under the law. In a society of equals in this sense, there is no legal basis for granting or denying social status on the basis of race, class or gender.’⁴⁷ So, from the nineteenth century onward egalitarians, like Groothuis, have smuggled in assumptions on the meaning of equality from eighteenth century liberal thought rather than from the Bible. These presuppositions have then been misapplied to the text so that to say Jew/Gentile, slave/free and male/female are equal in Christ, is to say that they also have identical social responsibilities.

To overcome the problem of explaining why Paul would advocate a sameness here that seemingly contradicts other Pauline passages regarding differences, two approaches are employed by egalitarian interpreters drawing on the historical-critical methods that also arose in the nineteenth century.

France employs a method similar to ‘seed growing secretly’ hermeneutic of the nineteenth century abolitionists:

‘Perhaps the most we can safely say is that Paul here expresses the end-point of the historical trajectory [...] At all points within the period of biblical history the working out of the fundamental equality expressed in Galatians 3:28 remained constrained by the realities of the time, and yet there was the basis, indeed the imperative, for the

⁴⁶ John Jefferson Davis, 'Some reflections on Galatians 3:28, sexual roles, and biblical hermeneutics', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 19/3 (1976), 202.

⁴⁷ Groothuis, *Good News For Women*, 46.

dismantling of the sexual discrimination which had prevailed since the fall.⁴⁸

This historical-critical interpretation gives culture a higher authority than scripture. It does this by making Gal. 3:28 a present/future aim constrained by culture, rather than an authoritative text, which if interpreted as France does, should have immediately changed the culture.

On the other hand, Jewett appeals to Paul's Jewish background to justify verses regarding subordination and his Christian faith to explain his 'new insight' of equality.⁴⁹ This overemphasises the human authorship of the Bible and undermines the analogy of faith that says, because of its divine authorship, Scripture cannot contradict Scripture.

So in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, significant moves were made in hermeneutical methods that have changed the way interpreters from that time forward have understood and applied Gal. 3:28. The result of which is the modern, somewhat polarised, interpretations of contemporary commentators as either egalitarian or complementarian as noted earlier in this paper.

The Twentieth Century

The two different modern interpretations have made it almost impossible for contemporary scholars to interpret this verse without commenting on the alternative. For example Stott states: 'This remarkable assertion of the equality of the sexes was

⁴⁸ R.T. France, *Women in the church's ministry : a test-case for biblical hermeneutics* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 91. A similar argument is found in Groothuis, 25.

⁴⁹ Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, 112-113

made centuries in advance of the times [...] But here the assertion is made that in Christ male and female are one and equal[...]’ This part of Stott’s interpretation picks up the egalitarian argument, however he continues along the complementarian line: ‘A word of caution must be added. This great statement of verse 28 does not mean that racial, social and sexual distinctions have been obliterated. [...] When we say that Christ has abolished these distinctions, we mean not that they do not exist, but that they do not matter. They are still there, but they no longer create any barriers to fellowship.’⁵⁰

Modern Feminist Interpretations

One final area to be examined in this history of the interpretation of Gal. 3:28 is modern feminist interpretations. This is most clearly demonstrated through Fiorenza’s work ‘In Memory of Her’. She writes:

‘Sexual dimorphism and strictly defined gender roles are products of a patriarchal culture, which maintain and legitimise structures of control and domination – the exploitation of women by men. Gal. 3:28 not only advocates the abolition of religious-cultural divisions and of the domination and exploitation wrought by institutional slavery but also of domination based on sexual divisions. It repeats with different categories and words that within the Christian community no structures of dominance can be tolerated. Gal. 3:28 is therefore best understood as a communal self-definition rather than a statement about the baptized individual.’⁵¹

⁵⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians*. (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 100.

⁵¹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (London: SCM, 1995).

Fiorenza's conclusion is not only based upon a perceived problem in culture that needs to be changed, but also denies the very basic meaning of the passage accepted by egalitarians and complementarians alike – that is that Gal 3:28 is primarily about the Christian. Even more strongly than egalitarian interpretations, the feminist interpretation completely subordinates the Bible to its own agenda.

While historical climate significantly impacts anyone's reading of Scripture, it would be uncharitable to assume with Fiorenza's feminist reading that men throughout the centuries have hidden the truth of Gal. 3:28 in order to maintain their dominance over women. This would be to say that no man has ever sufficiently accepted the authority of Scripture to do as it says. Rather, reading Gal. 3:28 as she does is significantly affected by modern militant feminist culture.

Conclusions

'There ought to be some concern about viewing Gal 3:28 as egalitarians do since there is little, if any, precedence in the history of interpretation to do so.'⁵² This conclusion, based on Johnson's research that extended to the Reformation, has been proven true in this essay. By going beyond the Reformation, this history of interpretation has also found that a significant shift in understanding occurred in the nineteenth century, where Enlightenment concepts of equality began to be imported into the text. The apparent contradiction between Gal 3:28 and other Pauline passages on gender roles were also addressed in this period using historical-critical methods. Finally, modern feminist interpretations have been shown to be a further step away from the traditional Biblical understanding due to their imposition of feminist culture on their hermeneutic.

⁵² Schemm, 24.

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