“FOR YOU ARE ALL ONE IN CHRIST”
AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF GALATIANS 3:23-29

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1. Translation

(3:23) But before faith came, we were guarded under the law, being held prisoner, until the faith coming to be revealed. (3:24) Therefore, the law had become our disciplinarian towards Christ, in order that from faith we might be put into a right relationship with God, (3:25) but faith has come, and we are no longer under the disciplinarian. (3:26) For all are sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. (3:27) For as many of you as were baptized in Christ were also clothed in Christ. (3:28) There is not Jew nor Greek, there is not slave nor free, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ.¹ (3:29) And if you are of Christ, you are seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise.

2. Introduction

This section from the third chapter of the epistle to the Galatians comprises an important hinge in the overall argument that Paul makes throughout the document. Notably, it contains the surprising and dramatic claim that the dividing lines between Jews, Greeks, slaves, free people, males and females do not exist in this community of Christ-followers (3:28), but before building up to this statement, Paul draws on several important concepts he introduces earlier in the letter. First, the concept of faith appears throughout the letter, and the fact that one is justified before God by faith, not by works (2:15-21). Following this, Paul introduces Abraham as an example of righteousness through faith (3:6-9) as well as Christ’s role as the Messiah in redeeming his people from the curse of the law (3:10-14), before finally asking the rhetorical question, “Why

¹ According to the UBS4, not all ancient witnesses include the phrase ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ. A few manuscripts, including ℵ 147 and ℵ 603 omit the word ἐστε, which would meaningfully impact the reading, though these witnesses are so few that the change was not considered viable. Many patristic writings, and manuscripts like F G and 33, use the word ἐν instead of ἐστε to read “one”. Additionally, P46 simply reads ἐστε Χριστοῦ and Ξ reads ἔστε ἐν (scholars are unsure if this is the preposition ἐν or the adjective ἐν) Χριστοῦ. Overall, the weight of the ancient witnesses, including Ξ, B, C, 075, and 6, supports the full reading of ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ, and with the exception of P46, the only viable change among these witnesses is the use of the adjective ἐστε or ἐν, which both are translated “one”. This change does not ultimately impact the meaning of the passage. The Txt is preferred with a confidence rating of B. See Appendix A.
the law?” (3:19). Each of these concepts: faith, law, Abraham, and Christ are important theological elements within the section of Galatians that is the focus of this piece.

Several notable words and phrases are employed throughout verses 23 to 29. Though there are no direct Old Testament quotations, Paul explicitly references both Abraham and the law, rooting his argument in foundational concepts from the Hebrew Scriptures. Verses 23 and 24 employ specific words and unique grammar. The verbs here, as well as Paul’s use of the rare word παιδαγωγος to demonstrate the purpose of the law demands further exploration, especially as it contrasts with the role of Christ.

The following discussion will explore the words and phrases noted above, as well as a brief background of the letter itself, a discussion of the purpose of the law, faith in Christ, and the emphasis of unity within the church body, concluding with a brief exploration of the implications of this passage for the modern context.

3. Commentary

The letter to the Galatians is one of the few biblical documents about which scholars almost unanimously agree on authorship. The opening verse clearly states that Paul authored the letter himself, and with few exceptions, both tradition and scholarship have upheld this view. Nevertheless, determining the date of the letter’s composition has undergone rigorous, unsettled debate. The struggle to definitively date the letter is intrinsically related to attempts to harmonize events in Galatians with events told in the book of Acts, specifically the well-known Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and the ensuing discussion regarding the importance of circumcision for

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2 Richard Longenecker, Galatians, Word Biblical Commentary 41 (Word Books: Dallas, 1990) lxvii – lix. In the nineteenth century, dissenting scholarly views on the authorship of Galatians were raised by Bruno Bauer and followed by others, however, these views are not taken seriously by any consensus of historical or modern scholarship. See also Moises Silva, Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, 1996); Samuel Ngewa, Galatians, Africa Bible Commentary Series (WordAlive Publishers: Nairobi, 2010).
Gentile converts.\(^3\) It may be concluded that the events Paul writes about in Galatians 2 are actually referring to the same Jerusalem council in Acts 15, which would date the letter after this event, in the mid-to-late fifties; however, if this were the case, the conclusion reached in the Jerusalem council does not line up well with the portrayed attitudes of Paul’s opponents as recorded in Galatians 2. According to Longenecker, “to use [the Jerusalem council] in support of his polemic after the decision of the council, and without reference to that decision, casts considerable doubt on Paul’s logical powers.”\(^4\) Therefore, a pre-council date for the letter of Galatians is more logically coherent, possibly 49 AD, and is relevant for the current discussion. The pressing question for the new churches in the region of Galatia was, “is it necessary to circumcise Gentile converts?” Though it may seem culturally irrelevant to a modern, Western Christian, circumcision was a major source of debate during the first century, and attempts to modify or restrict the practice of circumcision led to all-out revolts.\(^5\) This controversy is referred to explicitly in the second chapter of Galatians, and it becomes Paul’s primary rhetorical tool for launching into a polemic explanation of the role of the Jewish law in the life of a new Christian, a prominent element of the passage in question.

By the last 7 verses of chapter 3, Paul redirects the narrow question of circumcision, seen early in chapter 2, towards a broader look at the law, or Torah, a Jewish person would have lived under. The law was both a temporary prison and a guide, which ultimately found fulfillment in Christ and pointed to placing saving faith in Him. In fact, this very faith removes the need for a disciplinarian such as the law. Furthermore, this faith is freely accessed by all, which becomes

\(^3\) Longenecker, *Galatians*, lxiii.
\(^4\) Ibid, lxx.
the basis for a community without social divisions, as well as the replacement for circumcision as the outward indication of one’s connection to the tribe of Abraham.\(^6\)

3:23 Grammatically, this is the most complex verse of the entire selection.\(^7\) The central verb is the passive imperfect ἐφροινομέθο, meaning to be guarded or imprisoned. This is a rare verb in the New Testament, occurring a total of only 4 times. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul uses it to describe the military action by the governor of Damascus, who placed guards around the perimeter to keep him in the city.\(^8\) Additionally, the participle συγκλειομένοι evokes a similar image, of being enclosed or trapped. Another rare word, it only occurs twice in the New Testament outside of Galatians 3:22 and 23. In Luke 5, it is used to describe the action taken by Simon and the other fishermen when they enclosed the fish in their nets after the miraculous catch initiated by Jesus.\(^9\) The pairing of these two verbs specifically describes what the law had accomplished: to enclose, or surround, the people of God. Paul includes himself on the receiving end of this, by using the plural, first-person “we” in ἐφροινομέθο.\(^10\) Like fish enclosed in a net, people were powerless to escape the guardianship of the law on their own. Alternatively, the role of this close confinement can also be understood as God’s way of preventing His people from wandering too far astray.\(^11\)

Nevertheless, the imperfect tense indicates the completed nature of this action. This imprisonment is only temporarilily necessary, and it will no longer exist when the coming faith has been revealed! The verse opens with the preposition πρὸ, paired with the infinitive verb ελθεῖν, which is usually translated as “before”. This denotes a circumstance, a reality with a

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\(^6\) See Appendix B for a semantic structure analysis of the passage.
\(^7\) See Appendix C for a grammar diagram of verses 23-24
\(^8\) 2 Corinthians 11:32
\(^9\) Luke 5:6
\(^10\) So also Longenecker, *Galatians*, 145.
deadline, and therefore that this confinement existed for a time and purpose. This deadline was
marked by a coming faith, which held the keys to unlock the law’s guarded prison.

3:24 Before explaining and defining this coming faith, however, Paul employs another
analogy to round out the definition of the law’s purpose. This analogy is that of the παιδαγωγός,
a word with cultural implications that requires specific discussion. A survey of translations
highlights the lexical range of this term in English: “put in charge” (NIV), “tutor” (NASB),
“guardian” (ESV and NLT), “schoolmaster” (KJV), and “disciplinarian” (NRSV). The only time
παιδαγωγός occurs in the New Testament, outside of Galatians chapter 3, is Paul’s first letter to
the Corinthian church.12 With such a limited use of the term in Biblical text, it is necessary to
look to external ancient literature for hints of meaning. The Middle-Liddell Greek Lexicon
defines the παιδαγωγός as “the slave who went with a boy from home to school and back again,
a kind of tutor.”13 This person had a specific role, and social stigma, that is not directly
analogous to anything in modern, Western culture. In the writing of Plutarch, the character
Fabius is derisively labeled a παιδαγωγός, indicating at least some negative socio-cultural
connotations to the term.14 It was likely controversial for Paul to label the sacred law this way,
setting him apart from other Jewish teachers.15 Additionally, this type of tutor would have likely
been seen as a strict disciplinarian who was responsible for the manners and conduct of the
young boy, rather than a gentle instructor, or teacher.16

12 1 Corinthians 4:15. The argument Paul makes here is that the Corinthian Christians may have had many
παιδαγωγοί, but only one true Father. This notion contrasts the disciplinarian connotation of the Greek tutor with
the loving nature of God the Father. So also John Stott, The Message of Galatians: Only One Way, The Bible Speaks
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?q=paidagwgo%2Fs&la=greek&can=paidagwgo%2Fs0&prior=
paidagw gh/somai#lexicon
14 Crane, “Greek Word Study Tool.”
15 Keener, “Galatians”, 528.
Similar to the law as a source of imprisonment, indicated in verse 23, this disciplinarian was a constant companion, impossible to escape from. The important difference, however, implied by the use of παιδαγωγος is that the law also guided and conducted the behavior of the one it accompanied. Someone who was subject to the tutelage of the law did not misbehave, but this tutelage was also temporary. Its very purpose, as indicated by the ἵνα clause, was to direct God’s people towards a right standing before God, justification, which would be available only through faith.

3:25 The contrasting conjunction δέ indicates here that the tutelage provided by the law is no longer needed. The coming faith, alluded to in verse 23, has arrived, and the παιδαγωγος is no longer required. With the 1st-person, plural “we”, ἐσμεν, Paul once again includes himself as a recipient of the message he is bringing to Galatia. The clear logic of this verse is a straightforward dismantling of the argument Paul has encountered in the Galatian churches: that new Christians must maintain a lifestyle marked by the Jewish law. Circumcision and dietary laws, as prominent examples of distinctive Jewish practices, could no longer be required to be part of God’s people, for to maintain these practices would be to voluntarily submit to the guidance of a παιδαγωγος that is no longer needed. This would be regressive, and possibly seen as immature. This decisive claim moves Paul’s argument forward, and serves as an important launching point into his explanation of what it functionally looks like for a community to live in Christ.

3:26 Continuing to build the argument, Paul shifts from describing what has happened to those under the law to describing what begins to happen to those who live in faith, dramatically

17 Ngewa explains that a certain maturity has been reached, in which the student has outgrown the need of a tutor and the young boy can now internalize the lessons of the law without a disciplinarian. While this conclusion can be logically connected to Paul’s use of the παιδαγωγος analogy, I disagree with the emphasis on reaching maturity and putting the morality of the law into action, as it could easily distract from the central message of Christ’s freeing work and the necessity of faith in Him. Ngewa, Galatians, 116.
declaring that all who have faith in Jesus Christ are actually sons of God! The language here is reminiscent of Israel’s historical claim to be the family of God.\textsuperscript{18} To include everyone on equal footing, especially Gentiles, in the family of God was a radical statement, one that continued to point back to the fundamental divide between Jews and Gentiles in the Galatian church. This conclusion is the logical counterpoint to the conditions of imprisonment under the Jewish law laid out in verse 23. While the reality of that imprisonment limited covenant membership to legal rites like circumcision, thereby excluding members of other ethnic groups that did not practice these rites, this is no longer the reality of God’s family. Through faith, son-ship is available to all. This claim is also an important semantic move in the passage, as it rhetorically connects the explanation of life under the law to the following extrapolation of life in Christ.

3:27 The postpositive γὰρ, usually translated as “for”, logically links the following statement to the previous one, that all are sons of God. For the first and only time in the entire epistle, Paul brings up the matter of water baptism.\textsuperscript{19} Stepping carefully through his argument, Paul is careful to not suggest baptism as a ritual substitute for the circumcision of the old law, Rather, it provides a helpful, visible action that one undergoes to demonstrate membership in the new community. The logical purpose of bringing up the subject of baptism at this point in the paragraph is to further clarify the shocking statement that all are sons of God through faith. If you were baptized, you have covered yourself in Christ. Just like wearing matching sets of clothing, you and Christ are now marked by the same attributes, much like closely related family members would be. Both the explanation of water baptism and the metaphor of being clothed support and explain what it looks like to be sons of God together. Interestingly, the noun for faith, πίστις, has already been mentioned three times in this selection, compared to the meager

\textsuperscript{18} Keener, “Galatians”, 528.
\textsuperscript{19} Longenecker argues that this is a clear reference to the water ritual, and not a metaphor for “spiritual baptism”. Longenecker, \textit{Galatians}, 155.
single instance of βαπτιζω, reminding the reader that the entire argument still hinges on the subject of faith.20

3:28 Not relenting in his dramatic rhetoric, Paul then dismantles the primary division in the Galatian fellowship that has created the ensuing debate, emphatically stating that there is no longer Jew nor Greek in the family of God. Though one might expect him to end there, having dealt with the issue at hand, he proceeds to undermine two additional social divisions: class and gender. This is all a logical extension of previous claims. If all who have faith truly are one in Christ, and if these individuals are equally marked by baptism, then upholding ethnic divisions, distinctions of social class (slave or free), and even distinctions between male and female would be evidence that all are not actually one in Christ, and that the community is therefore still functioning under the law. The presence of each pairing (Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female) is important for the comprehensiveness of the argument, as all social inequalities can be categorized under ethnicity, status, or gender. There is evidence that some progressive Roman cults declared similar radical equality between genders and ethnicities, but these would have been exclusively available to wealthy patrons and members.21 The radical distinctiveness of this social ethic definitively sets apart the Christian community, and through it Paul provides a clear example for how the newly-formed community should look.

Though verse 28 is arguably even more dramatic than the declaration of universal sonship in verse 26, this is still the goal of Paul’s argument. To remind the reader of this, the second half of verse 28 is essentially a restatement of verse 26, beginning with the same adjective, παντες. Though the plural “you” is implied in the verb εστε, Paul includes the separate pronoun

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20 Stott asserts that Paul was not making baptism a new method of salvation, and the clear emphasis, based on sheer word occurrence, is instead on faith. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, 99.
21 Keener, *Galatians*, 528.
3:29 The conjunction εἰ introduces the final sentence, indicating that a conditional statement is about to unfold. Here Paul revisits and dismantles the final argument from those who wished to circumcise the Gentile converts. Though circumcision was the mark of God’s original covenant with Abraham, and an external indication that one was of his tribe and seed, all that is required to be Abraham’s seed now is to be of Christ.²² This powerful claim ties together the entirety of Paul’s rhetorical argument up to this point, as well as placing events surrounding Christ in the grand unfolding narrative of God’s plan for his people. Not only are God’s people seed of Abraham, but also heirs of the promise originally given to him.²³

Summary: In a rhetorically brilliant fashion, Paul directly addresses the controversy of circumcision without simply giving the Galatians a new rule to follow, or another religious ritual. Rather, he eloquently demonstrates how the unfolding plan of God through history, and specifically Christ’s role within that plan, affect how the Galatian church should conduct itself. The bitter division was outward evidence that the members of the community who were calling for the circumcision of converts simply did not grasp the enormity of what was accomplished in Christ, nor the ability for all people to freely access it through faith. The law was not an arbitrary construct, but it had a specific purpose which was fulfilled in Christ. Something wholly new had been accomplished, and the Galatians had not yet realized the deep implications of this. Now that faith has come, all are one in Christ, and all people have access to the promises given to Abraham so long ago.

4. Theological Reflection

²² Genesis 17:9-14.
²³ Genesis 15:5
Although the dispute over circumcision is quite culturally removed from the context of the modern, Western church, the theological and practical implications of the argument are still extremely relevant. For centuries, the Jewish people had been distinctively set apart by the law they followed, which was evidence of their unique connection to their God, who was Himself set apart from the gods of the world around them. Suddenly Gentiles, who had never submitted to these laws, were worshipping and praying alongside them, and anticipating all the same benefits the Jews gained from membership in God’s family. The way Paul shepherded the Galatian church through this massive disruption bears two major implications for us today.

First, Christ’s role in God’s plan is a unique, decisive, historical event, and the church exists because of this reality. Jesus Christ is the summation of God’s plan for humanity, marking the fulfillment and purpose of everything that had come before. God’s family is forever changed because of Him, and to continue to function under the law is to fail to recognize this forward movement in God’s redemptive plan.

Second, the church must always recognize that the only requirement for membership is faith in Christ. The temptation to add additional requirements, such as political affiliation, level of education, ethnic identity, or economic status, is ever-present in the modern context. Nevertheless, faith in Christ is primary and singular. No other requirement is necessary, and to add additional conditions is to perpetuate divisions that should no longer exist among the very people who are clothed in Christ. God’s original promise to Abraham was to bless all people, and now all people finally do have access to this blessing through exercising faith in Christ. Faith is how we are put into a right relationship with God, and faith is how we are made one.
APPENDIX A: Textual Criticism Chart for Galatians 3:28

Biblical Reference: Galatians 3:28

Key and Other Notes: 

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APPENDIX B: Semantic Structure Analysis for 3.23-29

But before faith came, we were guarded under the law. While being held prisoner, we were under the law, as mediators between God and the people, that the law might be our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. Therefore, the law had become our guide to Christ. In order that from faith we might be put into a right relationship with God, but faith has come, so that we are no longer under the guide. For all are sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ. For as much as you were baptized in Christ, you were clothed in Christ. For you are all one in Jesus Christ. And if you are of Christ, you are seed of Abraham, heirs according to the promise.
Δένομεν εὐφροσύνην, συγκλείομενοι εἰς πίστιν ἀποκαλυφθαναί τὴν μελλούσαν ῥόην, εἰς Χριστόν ἡμῶν δικαίωσον ἐκ πίστεως.