



## *“One Little Word”*

Galatians 3:23-29

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The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

When I went to seminary, I learned a new language: the language of theology. Like all fields of study, theology has a special language used by its practitioners. The language of theology has been developing for two thousand years – nearly five hundred years of special development in our Reformed tradition. Theological language uses large words to clothe larger, complicated ideas.

I fell in love with theology and its big ideas. I learned the language of theological discourse with joy. My teachers taught me that Christian theology is a thing of intellectual beauty and moral power. Theology rearranged the furniture of my mind. It became a way of seeing and knowing and living. I’ve continued on that theological journey ever since, always learning, relearning and changing. I am grateful.

When I graduated from seminary and became the pastor of a small town church in rural America, it didn’t take me long to discover that I needed to translate all that theological knowledge into plain English.

I also discovered that small words are more difficult to master than those large words I learned in seminary. Some small words bear enormous power, power that can transform lives and communities.

One of those small words lies hidden in the Epistle text: Galatians 3:23-39. The word is ALL.

From the beginning of the Christian movement, Christians have had difficulty with the word “all.” No sooner than the church was born that it began to divide between us and them. The Greek-speaking widows heard that the Hebrew-speaking widows received larger portions of food from the food pantry down at the church. They objected. Neither side understood that the word all means there is no us or them in the church.

Not much later a larger issue arose. Should non-Jews be accepted into the Christian movement and under what terms? After all, the Bible, history and geography strongly suggested the Kingdom of God would be Jewish in character and be established on Jewish soil. After a long and bitter struggle a compromise was reached. Gentiles would be accepted; ALL were accepted into the church. BUT, strings were attached. All male Gentile Christians were required to be circumcised and Gentile Christians had to keep partial kosher.

Meanwhile, Paul the Apostle had a more radical ideal. No strings are attached to Christian faith. Who is a Christian is determined by faith alone. And there are no distinctions between groups in the church. Christianity is a class-free faith.

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In Galatians, Paul lays out his case and applies the consequences. The letter to the Galatian churches is a passionate argument that men, women and children are made right with God by faith alone, no strings attached.

Faith forms a new community of people who receive a new identity at their baptism. They are “in Christ.” At baptism, we symbolically put off the old garments that characterize the old life, a world of divisions, strife and distinctions. We put on Christ. The image intends to say that that putting on Christ is like putting on his clothes and taking on his character. That, argues the apostle, is bedrock Christianity.

The reason for Paul’s letter is that missionaries had come to the Galatian Christians with a set of strings to attach to their faith. Paul declares that such strings violate the very nature of Christianity. We live by faith alone. We are saved by faith alone. Faith alone secures our forgiveness. By faith we are accepted by God. Period.

The consequences are large. Note verse 26, “ALL are children of God through faith.” Nothing more is necessary. We who believe receive a new identity, and that identity supersedes all other human identities. All social or spiritual distinctions and identities are null and void in the new community.

In Christ, Paul declares, “there is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is no male and female.” Those are identities that marked people off from others in the first century. The racial/cultural separation so important then and now is no longer in force — at least not in the church. ALL are one in Christ. The Galatian churches knew some of the big words of theology like justification and circumcision, but the stumbled over the little word “all.”

That little word “all” is bigger than it seems.

In Christ there is neither slave nor free. The social hierarchies and class-consciousness that divide people are null and void in the community of faith. In Galatia, or anywhere else, slaves and owners should sit together in the pew, share the hymnal, and pray the prayers of the church in unison.

We divide the world more cleverly. We are always conscious of status, class, privilege and income. We divide ourselves by neighborhoods, social clubs and cliques. Our churches are zones of class and privilege or its lack. We are uncomfortable when we are out of our zone of comfort.

I grew up in blue-collar Dayton, Ohio. My childhood Baptist church had a definite blue collar style. Most of you would be uncomfortable there — and most of them would not appreciate our high Reformed style of worship. Yet, in Christ such distinctions and identities are superseded by our new identity, and we are one in Christ. ALL is not an easy word, is it?

In Christ, Paul continues, male and female lose their usual distinction. All are one and equal at the table of the Lord and in the house of God. The early church lived out that egalitarian vision most of the time. But after that flash of gospel equality, the church lapsed back into a world of male privilege that took two thousand years to overcome and the battle isn’t over yet. We are still catching up with the first century.

To be sure, all the social and spiritual distinctions above continue to be real, but in Christ they are no longer determinative. Our new identity “in Christ” overrides them all. We leave them at the front door of the church.

ALL continues to be a small but very large word that is difficult to live with. We live in a world of multiple distinctions, divisions and exclusivity. This is very much a “members only” world. The human tendency to exclude, judge, divide, and often despise those excluded is always with us. There is more work to be done.

We progressive Christians take great pride in our inclusiveness. We have overcome some of the large barriers that divide. But it seems we are blind to our own biases and exclusivity. We still wrestle with the power and consequences of ALL.

Back in my first congregation, there was a woman who had been the church clerk for nearly half a century. Before I arrived the congregation decided to give the job to another person. The old church clerk, in a snit, quit the church and put the church records in her attic and refused to give them back. She came to church only when we had a business meeting and would rise to criticize everyone and everything about the church, including me.

I had little difficulty loving the loveable people in the congregation, but that woman was a challenge. I struggled with that word ALL. We all did.

I made it my business to befriend her. Over time she entered my world of ALL and to my surprise, one day she gave me the church books. I look back on it as one of the great successes of my early ministry. Not just getting the books back but learning that little word ALL.

To bring ALL closer to home, I've heard the word ALL denied recently. Several people over the years have said to me, "I don't see how a person can be a Democrat and be a Christian." On the other hand someone recently said to me, "I don't see how a person can be a Republican and be a Christian." The church in our time is contributing to the distinction between blue states and red states and often rudely.

Well, I have one thing to say. "ALL are children of God through faith."

The church has divided between theological liberals and conservatives for more than a century. The divisions are often bitter and hostile, and accusing words are thrown back and forth across the divide.

The last issue of our denominational paper, *The Congregationalist*, featured an article by the former Executive Secretary of the association. He asked a very good question, "Why should the National Association of Congregation Christian Churches exist?" It's a question that should and must be asked.

One of his suggestions was that the conservative churches in the association affiliate with a conservative denomination and the progressive/liberal church affiliate with a more liberal association.

I have one word to say in response: ALL.

The real issue is larger than we might recognize. What in us creates the tendency to exclude, judge and despise others? Why do we seem to need others to exclude, judge and despise?

That tendency, part of original sin, is addressed by the Christian gospel. "ALL are children of God through faith." Each one of us is beloved by God regardless of our other lesser identities. Every Christian is included in the family of God, also called the Body of Christ. Therefore, each person in Christ must be treated accordingly – as God's beloved and someone "in Christ."

Now it must be said at this point that neither God nor Jesus has a problem correcting the behavior of their beloved children. We, too, should tell the truth to one another. The issue is how we treat one another in Christ. As Paul puts it elsewhere, we are to "tell the truth in love."

All identities lie behind our new identity which, in turn, allows us the freedom to accept, affirm, and tell the truth to each other — in love.

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In fact, later in this letter to the Galatian churches, Paul sums up the gospel this way, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (5:6). That, my friends, is good news.

Amen.

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