

**Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander on Galatians 3:23-29: An Appeal for Christian Unity**

I went back in time many years this week and thought about how and when I first became a believer. I was just ready to enter high school.

Thinking back on it now, I realize that once I became a Christian and placed my faith in Jesus, I was taught in subtle (and not so subtle!) ways to be wary of other Christians. There were numerous other churches in the small Midwestern farm town where I grew up, and I was taught (directly and indirectly) to be suspicious of Christians in all of them.

For instance, we had to be careful of the Pentecostals and Charismatics, because they spoke in tongues, wore their religion on their sleeve, went off the deep end about divine healing, and embraced a "name it and claim it" Christianity.

We had to be on guard against the Baptists, because they believed in eternal security, that one could not lose one's salvation, and because they believed that Christians could not help but to sin in thought, word, and deed every day.

We had to watch out for the United Methodists, because they had grown cold and were in danger of apostasy and leaving the true faith. (I used to hear a great deal that John Wesley would turn over in his grave because of the developments in the Methodist church.)

We had to steer clear of Lutherans, because they believed in justification, but had little use for sanctification.

We were on guard against the Roman Catholics, because their faith was too ritualistic, and after they went to church and confessed to the priest and performed their ritual they went out during the week and lived like the devil anyway.

From the time I became a Christian, I was taught in subtle and not so subtle ways that other Christians were my enemies. Perhaps your experience was similar.

So I have come to a conclusion. (A conclusion is a place where you get tired of thinking!) I have concluded that a great "culture of isolationism" has been perpetrated on the Church, and this culture of isolationism has been perpetuated for centuries by Christians (like us) who have been well-intentioned but misinformed, and a little bit insecure. *For we have been taught to see each other as the enemy, when in reality we are family.*

Let's look at Paul's discussion of how we become God's children. Paul reminds his readers that we become God's children through entering a relationship with Jesus Christ, not through obeying the Law given to Moses. The Law is good and served a good purpose, namely, to show us that only through faith in Christ can we be saved.

Paul then says that in our baptism we are united with Christ and made like him. The old life of sin is put to death and drowned in the baptismal waters. We are crucified with Christ. Nevertheless we live, yet not us, but Christ lives within us.

But something else is also occurring. Baptism is not merely a death to sin and the grace to lead a new life in Christ. Baptism makes us members of a whole new created "entity," and binds us to a single identity. Paul says it like this: "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. *For you are all Christians—you are one in Christ Jesus.*"

The NEB translates this phrase, "you are one person" in Christ, emphasizing the collective whole of the Church.

And Paul says that in this new collective entity which is the body of Christ, there is no longer any place for the traditional distinctions that divide us, whether they be cultural, linguistic, religious, or gender.

Imagine how radical this must have sounded to Jewish male Christians, who prayed in their liturgy and gave thanks to God that they were not born Gentiles or women! Imagine how this must have sounded to some who were wealthy and privileged, and who believed that their wealth made them superior to others. Imagine how this must have sounded to men who treated women like property rather than life partners.

Paul says that in our baptism we become part of a "new humanity," where the dividing walls that we grow accustomed to or even applaud are no longer real. And this term "Christian" now becomes our social and cultural identity.

I have thought a lot about Paul's statement in verse 28 this week, and I've been thinking, "What would the truth of this verse look like wearing street clothes?" Here's what I've come up with. I thought first of Wesley's sermons, "Catholic Spirit," and "A Caution Against Bigotry." In those sermons Wesley makes it clear that we don't need to seek some kind of "forced uniformity" among Christians in doctrine and worship. (p.2→)

**(Sermon, cont'd.)** But what we do need to do is to weaken and reverse this "culture of isolationism" which has infected the Church for centuries. And how do we do this? Well, for starters, we can choose not to "unchristianize" other believers who are different from us. We can recognize them as *family members* whom we need to know better and not enemies against whom we need to fight.

I wonder what would have happened, and how I might have been different, if when I became a new Christian the people responsible for nurturing me in my faith would have sat me down and said: "Brook, you've just been adopted into a big, wonderful family. In your journey you're going to meet some family members who are vastly different from you. They will live and express their faith somewhat differently (from how) you do. Some beliefs that they hold dear, you may not. And some beliefs that you hold dear, they may not. But remember this, Brook. They are your family. And in those times when you don't understand why you are so different, don't try to kick them out of the family. Instead, ask God to help you to get to know them better."

Brothers and sisters of Epworth, if Paul's words in verse 28 are true, then this vicious cycle of viewing other Christians as our enemies must stop. By God's grace it must stop. The question for us is: how will it stop?

It will stop when Christians, one believer at a time, affirm that in their baptism they are baptized into Christ and made *Christians*—not Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, Pentecostals, Baptists, Quakers or Adventists. It will stop when we decide that it is our love for Christ, our faith in him (though lived and expressed differently) that makes us one body. Ultimately it will stop, I believe, when Christians come together as one at the Lord's Table.

As you come to the Lord's Table this morning, I remind you that you are coming to the place where the truth of Paul's words is embodied in its fullness. As we leave this table today, may this truth so possess us that we take it with us when we go.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.