"The Great Debate"

Genesis 12:1–3; Galatians 3:23-29; Ephesians 2:14–16

It is that simple. We are one in Christ.

Some words are much easier spoken than lived. In our nation's Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote that "all men are created equal." God made a sweeping promise to Abraham that "all the families of the earth would be blessed because of you." Yet, so rarely does "all" actually mean "all." We divide and separate. We chunk people into groups and are always on the lookout for the "others." It seems to me that this is getting worse in our society rather than better. But nothing could be further from God's way.

Sadly, even the earliest Christians were not exempt from this dividing and separating as they brought their old prejudices to their new life in Christ. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians wouldn't even eat together. These divisions underlie Paul's letter to the Galatians, in which he doesn't even try to hold back his anger over the divisions in the body.

Big Problems in Galatia

In the mid-50s AD, some of the churches that Paul founded in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) were under attack from false teachers. Paul pulled no punches in responding. One of the most significant issues facing the early church was the struggle between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians (non-Jewish Christians). Because Christianity originated as a movement within first-century Judaism, many Jewish Christians believed that to become a Christian, a Gentile had to live under the law of Israel. For male converts, this would mean circumcision. For all converts, this would mean keeping the Sabbath, obeying the Jewish dietary laws, and so on.

In all his writings, Paul is clear that Christians are distinguished by their faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 4). Paul taught that even the Old Testament heroes, such as Abraham, were reconciled to God by their faith – not by the works of the law. Further, Paul taught that this faith is received by God's grace alone and that it eliminates all traditional distinctions before God – "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSV). In the early church, Paul's teachings prevailed and were endorsed in approximately 50 AD by a vital council of Christian leaders in Jerusalem. Christians could observe the Jewish law if they wished, but it was not required.

Evidently, false teachers had come to Galatia preaching that both faith in Jesus Christ and adherence to the law of Moses are needed to be reconciled with God. Paul is profoundly disappointed that these churches have succumbed to false teaching (yes, heresy!), and he is very combative in this letter. In contrast to Paul's letters to other churches, there is no general word of thanksgiving for the churches in Galatia. Instead, Paul quickly sets the stage for the rest of the letter – "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." (Gal 1:6-7, NRSV)

It is straightforward, according to Paul—we Christians are all one in Christ Jesus. Distinctions such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, etc., are washed away by baptism and our rebirth by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are new creations, and we are one. This is intellectually simple for us to grasp, but emotionally demanding. We invest so much in these distinctions.

Who am I?

In preparing for this study, I conducted some research on personal identity and had conversations with friends about the topic. Though lots of questions swirl around the topic, we'll keep it simple: How would you or I answer the simple question: "Who am I?" Take me for example. I am a man, a son, a husband, a father, a brother, an uncle. I am white, fifty-five years old, heterosexual, a firefighter, a pastor, and a Duke M.Div….I could keep going as the list of choices seems endless. I'm sure my family and friends could add a few I wouldn't have thought of. So out of all that, what defines me? Who am I? Could it really be that my defining characteristic is my skin pigmentation, or my age, or my sexual orientation? Really!!?? If so, how sad.

No, I pray that my answer to the question, "Who am I?" is that above all else and before all else, I belong to Jesus, that I find my identity in him. This is one of the key points in today's passage from Galatians, with the emphasis in the very first few words falling very much on the "all." What Paul has to say in these few sentences is for the body of Christ.

Richard Hays, one of the foremost scholars on Paul in our lifetime, provides the following thoughts on the question of identity in these verses:

> Our identity is given to us fundamentally through our union with Christ. Paul saw this union as figured forth and enacted in baptism. In baptism, we "put on" Christ; we enter into union with him in such a way that all other markers of status and identity fall away into insignificance (3:27–29). Centuries of the practice of infant baptism in the culture of Christendom have obscured the dramatic symbolism that the early Christians saw in baptismal initiation. In baptism, the person being baptized confessed the lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation, disrobed to signify the putting off of an entire way of life, was immersed below the water as if undergoing burial (Rom 6:3–5), was raised to a new life, and was clothed in new garments symbolizing the transformation that had occurred. Baptism was a symbolic participation in Christ's death and resurrection, and no one could undergo it without realizing that one life had ended and a new one had begun.
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> Paul saved his appeal to baptism for the climactic point in the argument of Galatians 3:6-29 because it so powerfully embodied what he wanted to say to the Galatians: They were to find their identity in Jesus Christ alone.
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> Paul's passionate rejection of . . . ethnic/religious "identity politics should lead us to reflect carefully on the grounds of our own identity. To what extent is our sense of who we are grounded in the gospel of Christ, and to what extent do other factors determine it? Such questions may lead us to uncomfortable conclusions. In our time, there are many movements, even within the church, that seek to define an identity based on race, on national origin, on gender, or on sexual orientation. Such movements are the contemporary analogues of the "circumcision party" within the early church, against which Paul fought passionately. Against all such determinations of identity, Paul reminds us that we are one with Christ through baptism. . . .
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> Identity derived from faith is different from all others if and only if the death and resurrection of Jesus really are—as Paul proclaimed—the singular event through which God has chosen to redeem the world. Otherwise, the gospel is merely one more religious system that will serve human pride and ambition. The character of our faith is determined by that decisive event to which it looks.[1]

So why is it so hard, even for us self-professed Christians, to find our identity in Jesus and look past all the superficialities that drive so much division? In the end, there is only one answer—sin. Our commitment to the divisions of the day and our blindness to such injustice is evidence of the sin that afflicts us all, this deep, ineradicable[2] darkness that lurks in every human heart. We should never underestimate the hold that sin has

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[1] Hays, R. B. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Galatians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter's Bible* (Vol. 11, pp. 274–275). Nashville: Abingdon Press.

[2] *Ineradicable* is one of those ACT words that I never use. But here, it just seemed to fit. It means incapable of being eradicated or unable to be destroyed. WE cannot eradicate our sin—only God in Christ Jesus, through the Holy Spirit can do that!

on us. Indeed, Christians above all others should be able to see clearly the darkness in the hearts of us all. That is why it is so seldom that "all means all."

Sin is real, and its presence explains a great deal about ourselves and our world. Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is anything that prevents us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind even to know it. Sin is what pushes us to see skin color before we see the person.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we refuse to see bigotry and injustice in all its manifestations, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather than God's way. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity. It is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God. It is this flaw, shared by all of us, that we can call Sin. That's why it can only be in Christ and by the power of his Spirit that any of us can hope to embrace the truth that "all means all genuinely."

Still, sadly, a long way to go

We like to think of America as a success story, and in so many ways, we have been. But not when it comes to matters of race. I'll admit to being somewhat adrift on this. I look at the world I grew up in, and the world I live in, and the changes are so vast they leave me breathless. It is hard for me to believe that the world of my childhood existed; that there were two water fountains at every grocery store, one marked "white" and the other "colored." Three restrooms: "men, "women, and "colored." Two waiting rooms at the doctor's office. That world existed, and I once thought that we were well along in Dr. King's project to judge people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin. But I've come to see that James Nuechterlein got it at least partly right when he wrote in 2011:

> It also gradually became evident that the achievement of black progress was not so uncomplicated an affair as it had first seemed. The nation could more or less decree the end of segregation and the acquisition of legal rights: Laws and court orders, stimulated by an organized program of protest, did the trick. Movement from poverty to prosperity was altogether more difficult. Long-established patterns of discriminatory custom and habit were hard to get around. In addition, it turned out to be the case that some black Americans, especially those on the lower social rungs, were unable to take full advantage of the opportunities that now were open to them. Analysts gingerly pointed out that there existed within the black community elements of social pathology -- family decay, welfare dependency, soaring crime rates, educational failure -- that, whatever their historical origins, had taken on a life of their own independent of white prejudice and that would have to be fought and overcome by efforts within the community itself. . . .
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> For decades the arguments about civil rights have languished in political and moral deadlock. The terms change -- we speak now of diversity, not quotas -- but the frustrations, misunderstandings, and animosities behind them do not. Passions have cooled somewhat out of weariness, but there's not much sign of the "common ground" we invoke in our hopeful moments.[3]

When I look back over my own life and see how far we have come, and yet how far we haven't, it is tempting to say that we will have to live with it. However, that is not God's way, and certainly not what Paul taught the congregations he founded. Instead, Paul and the other New Testament writers call us to unity, to overcome the divisions that plague our world and even our churches. By prayer, the power of God's Spirit, and our own unrelenting efforts, all things are possible.

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[3] From *First Things* journal, February 2011.