

One little word: Galatians 3:23-29

by [Roger Lovette](#) in the [June 15, 2010](#) issue

The Christians in Jerusalem's early church were in crisis. Should they admit gentiles into their fellowship? Could gentiles be believers? Resolution of these questions did not come easily, but finally the Jews swallowed their pride and begrudgingly allowed the gentile outsiders to come into the fold. Their guidelines seemed fair enough: all the new converts had to do was to be circumcised and follow the laws of Judaism. But it wasn't quite that simple.

Paul responded to their actions in a letter to the Galatians. He told the Jerusalem Christians that their welcome did not go far enough. The gentiles did not have to subscribe to all the Jewish regulations, he insisted. All these gentiles had to do was be baptized and proclaim Jesus as Lord. It was a new day. Even these non-Jews were children of God with no strings attached.

Sometimes Paul got carried away. In this case, he pressed his point by telling his Jewish colleagues that all the old categories they had followed all their lives were too confining. What about ethnic or religious divisions, they asked? Paul said no. Surely, they said, socioeconomic forces must be taken into consideration. Paul shook his head. The Jews persisted: don't tell us that gender differentiations don't matter. For a third time Paul said no. What followed was absolutely subversive. "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." They noted his emphasis on *all*. No wonder the Jews were outraged. Paul said their *all* was not enough?

Homiletics professor Halford Luccock read this Galatians passage and observed that the hardest words to learn in any language were never the long words but the short words. The Galatians had no trouble pronouncing the long, ponderous words: circumcision, disciplinarian or barbarians. But they stumbled and stuttered over the little words: faith, grace, baptism and especially *all*.

I can understand the Jews' frustration. When I started preaching over 40 years ago, things at my little rural church were fairly calm except for some ominously empty pews, a large heating bill and an irate member or two. I spent most of my time on

the big words like God's love and the amazing power of grace. But one day I drove down the highway and turned off onto a dirt road to a tumbledown house where I smelled and saw poverty firsthand. While I was busy trying to fill the pews with respectable people, some of those poor tenant farmers and their noisy children walked in on a Sunday morning and sat in the second row, and I found myself turning from the seemingly important words to one little word: *all*.

Finally the church settled down—until three of our kids came back to our little comfortable church as teenagers with long straggly hair. One or two even wore sandals. They stood up and asked: What are you going to do about the Vietnam War and the draft? More of those included in *all* were turning up to surprise us.

After dealing with poverty and a troublesome war, I moved on to another church. The honeymoon was scarcely over when someone stood up and asked, Why don't women serve as deacons in this church? Hmm. This issue took a lot of time and a multitude of meetings, but when it was over we ordained two women. The next day the local association got wind of this heresy and withdrew fellowship from our church. I was beginning to learn that sometimes *all* is a very hard thing for the church to say.

Meanwhile, a group of fundamentalists was working overtime in our denomination. Its members took over our literature, our seminaries and even our mission boards. People began to march down the aisle after church with their big Bibles wanting to know if I believed every word of the Bible was literally true.

I moved to another parish, and one Sunday a man with AIDS walked into my new church and sat in the second row. A few weeks later several gay men and women asked to become members. There were countless meetings and angry members. We lost our biggest givers. But eventually the church said *all* loud and clear.

When retirement came I believed that most of my battles were over. But in my first interim position, a week after the September 11 tragedy, a dark-skinned man met me at the back door after the service. He told me he was a Muslim, and he wanted to know if my God hated all his people. We're still unpacking that question in church.

I took a second interim. I scanned the group of worshipers in the pews and realized that the congregation was split right down the middle. It was presidential election time, and our ranks included Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives. I asked a friend if most of her church members were Democrats or

Republicans. She smiled and said, “Depends on which side of the altar you’re on.”

The march goes on. Paul’s words to Galatia keep upsetting every generation: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ.” We Christians might as well tighten our seat belts. When we least expect it, our settled worship will be interrupted by something. Illegal immigrants. Global warming. Health care. A war with no end. Whoever it is—I guarantee you she will sit in the second row and her name will be *all*.