

Reading Paul through Paul (Galatians 3:23-29)

Galatians 3 does not sound like something that could be constrained by pragmatism elsewhere.

by [Evan D. Garner](#)

June 21, 2019

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Sometimes I wonder whether Paul understood the implications of what he was writing.

Of course, I freely admit that I cannot help but read his letters from a 21st-century perspective, and that it's not realistic to expect a church planter from the first century to reflect contemporary thinking on race and gender identity. Still, I wonder. How can the apostle who wrote, "There is no longer slave or free," be the same person who wrote, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling...as slaves of Christ?" How can the one who foresaw the elimination of traditional gender roles, writing, "There is no longer male and female," also order wives, "Be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord?"

Surely the one who understood that Christ had dissolved those bonds of subjugation would not refashion them in Christ's name.

I'm familiar with the arguments. Many think Galatians and Ephesians were authored by different people, but what about the other letters? Perhaps Paul was a pragmatist who set out different expectations for communities in different contexts—but the expansive language of Galatians 3 does not sound like something that could be constrained by a regionally adaptive methodology.

Some claim that Paul was being culturally accommodating when necessary, placing limits on the freedoms associated with the reign of Christ in order to propagate the good news among certain men who would have expected submission from their spouses and slaves. But has Paul ever seemed like one to mince words or hold back from the truth of his convictions?

Maybe Paul, even back in the first century, struggled with the same two-kingdom identity that still trips us up today. Paul believed that, in the eschatological, kingdom-complete sense embodied by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is no such thing as ethnic, gender, or economic distinction. Yet Paul lived in a world where prescribed roles and societal hierarchies were unavoidable realities. How can we maintain our focus on the egalitarian relationships mandated by the reign of God without completely losing touch with our place in a “not-yet” world? How can we proclaim, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of [us] are one in Christ Jesus,” and not ignore the sometimes deadly disparities that persist?

On the whole, Paul leaves us a mixed legacy. We want the apostle to the Gentiles to say things that, for whatever reason, he cannot or will not say. We want him to live more fully, if not completely, in the finished reign of Christ—because we, too, want to live in that reality that has not yet fully come. Like it or not, we cannot live there yet either.

How, then, might we read Paul?

Understandably, some remain angry at Paul because his words have been used as a weapon against them or those they love. But might we read Paul primarily through the eschatological lens that pervades his work? Could the freedom of Galatians 3 be the standard by which we interpret the rest of his writings? Could we take Paul and, where his words seem to pull us backward into relationships that conform to the power structures of this world, reject such a retrograde movement as anachronistic and unnecessary, leaving only those parts of the Pauline corpus that press us more completely into the reign of Christ?

A reading of Paul that becomes unequivocally liberating is both attractive and, well, thoroughly Pauline.