

## Joint Heirs of Christ's Kingdom

*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Gal. 3: 26-29, TNIV).*

In the recent *Baptist News*, Dr. Ken Massey, a Baptist pastor from North Carolina, notes the radical transformation at a Christian school deeply steeped in cultural prejudice. Dr. Massey wrote:

Ethicsdaily.com has reported a social shift that may represent a larger leap than our recent election of an African-American president. Bob Jones University, perhaps the most fundamentalist and segregated Baptist school in the world, has issued an apology for its practices and policies of racial segregation.

In 1986, a member of the Bible department [at Bob Jones] had articulated the school's position. Separation of the races, this faculty member wrote, was God's design. The school was submitting to the authority of Scripture in its policies, it said.

Now the school says something other than "biblical obedience" shaped its racial practices. The statement reports that policies were "characterized by the segregationist ethos of American Culture. Consequently, for far too long, we allowed institutional policies regarding race to be shaped more directly by that ethos than by the principles and precepts of the Scriptures. We conformed to the culture rather than provide a clear Christian counterpoint to it. In so doing, we failed to accurately represent the Lord and to fulfill the commandments to love others as ourselves. For these failures we are profoundly sorry."

Massey goes on to say, that "The most important shift may not be the one away from segregation...The greater good may be that a very traditional school came to a new spiritual self awareness...Their [former] actions weren't Christian. They were Jim Crow Southern."

The power of God continually brings spiritual renewal in our lives! Just consider the life of the apostle Paul whose inner transformation in Christ so altered his worldview, it compelled him to abandon and resist the ethnic and gender segregation of the Jewish priesthood in which he grew up. In its place he promoted the priesthood of all believers, developing a social structure of spiritual leadership that would eventually undermined centuries of slavery and subjugation of women. If there was ever evidence of God's redemptive presence along the horizon of the patriarchy within Bible culture, it is keenly noted in the life of Paul.

Like the life of Jesus, Paul's life proved shattering to the sexism of the ancient world. Jesus ate with sinners and prostitutes. He engaged women theologically, expecting them to respond not as a distinct class, but as people, as disciples, and as heirs of God's kingdom. Jesus broke social and religious taboos related to gender, and Paul did

the same. As with Jesus, women were among Paul's closest co-workers, those who laboured beside him in the gospel (Rom. 16). Jesus treated women as he did the male disciples, allowing them to learn at his feet, refusing to exclude them as disciples because of their gender. Jesus' leadership was extraordinary in its inclusion of women.

This is exactly what we observe at Pentecost—the birthday of the church (Acts 2:1-18). Access to God is no longer mediated through an elite group of Jewish males, but through God's Spirit poured out on many tribes and nations, on both men and women. This is the fulfillment of the words spoken by the prophet Joel who said: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18, TNIV).

The tradition of the Pharisees silenced and excluded women from priestly roles even going so far as to prohibit them from reading Torah. Yet Paul realized that, like women, slaves, and gentiles, he too was grafted into Christ and made part of the new covenant. He, like all believers, received power and gifts of service dependent not upon gender, birth order, or tribe, but upon God's pleasure.

Thus, Paul boldly suggests in Galatians 3:28 that Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female are all one in Christ. He offered these words to a world in which nearly half of the population were slaves, and/or women. In a profound way, Galatians 3:28 is one of the most radical statements ever made, certainly, in the first century where one's identity, dignity, and sphere of influence was determined by one's ethnicity, gender, and class. Paul tells Christians that to be clothed in Christ is to be heirs of Christ's kingdom. What we inherit through our earthly parents (class, ethnicity, or gender) cannot compare to our spiritual heritage in Jesus.

This is part of the new wine vividly lived out in Paul's service to the church as he builds Christ's kingdom alongside slaves, gentiles, and women who served as evangelists, apostles, teachers, prophets. Together they spread the gospel, building and leading house churches in cities like Ephesus, Philippi, Cenchrea, Colossae, Corinth, and Rome.

Paul was certain that God was building a new covenant people, with Jesus as head, and you and me as joint members of Christ's body. That is why Paul did not hesitate to celebrate the woman Junia as an apostle. Nor was he reluctant to require respect for Phoebe as a deacon, or shy from celebrating the leadership of Lydia, Priscilla, Chloe, Nympha, Apphia, and the elect lady. The new wine would require a new wine skin where these slaves and women could fit in and accomplish the purposes for which God gifted them.

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