

Some Reflections On Galatians 3:28, Sexual Roles, And Biblical Hermeneutics

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There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free,
there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

In the Greco-Roman world that formed the environment of the Galatian churches to which Paul wrote, there was an increasing degree of confusion about the role identities of men and women. The economic rights of women in cases of divorce and inheritance were improving, and in Greece even professional athletics were opened to women in the first century B.C.¹ The confusing variety of opinion in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament concerning the roles of men and women ran the entire gamut from the misogyny of Philo, the Hellenistic Jew, who felt that the husband's relationship to his wife should be like that of a master to his slave, to the full-fledged egalitarianism in theory and practice of the Epicureans, in whose philosophical sect women were accepted as equals in every respect.²

In our own contemporary situation we are likewise faced with increasing confusion about our role identities as men and women. For the past two centuries the process of industrialization and urbanization has moved the populations of the West from the farms, with their relatively clear and traditional role identities, into the increasingly bureaucratized cities, where traditional identities have become eroded. The recent impact of the feminist movement, the pressure for the equal rights amendment, and the gay liberation movement have called into question traditional understandings of sexual roles as well as their Biblical and theological foundations. There is much uncertainty, both inside and outside the Church, about what it means to be a man or a woman in our contemporary situation. The proper roles of men and women in marriage and family, in the Church, and in the wider society are the subject of an ongoing debate that has touched us all.

Galatians 3:28 has been a pivotal New Testament text in much of the discussion of changing role identities. It is the purpose of this essay to critically examine some of the presuppositions involved in a number of recent interpretations of this text in an attempt to shed some light on

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certain aspects of both sexual role relationships and Biblical hermeneut...

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