

Genesis 12:1–3 (CEB)

The LORD said to Abram, “Leave your land, your family, and your father’s household for the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation and will bless you. I will make your name respected, and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you,
those who curse you I will curse;
all the families of the earth
will be blessed because of you.”

Galatians 3:26–29 (CEB)

²⁶You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

Ephesians 2:14–16 (CEB)

¹⁴Christ is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles into one group. With his body, he broke down the barrier of hatred that divided us. ¹⁵He canceled the detailed rules of the Law so that he could create one new person out of the two groups, making peace. ¹⁶He reconciled them both as one body to God by the cross, which ended the hostility to God.

In Christ, all means all.

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.

Who am I?

In preparing for this study, I did a bit of reading on personal identity. Though lots of questions swirl around the topic of personal identity, we’ll just keep it simple: How would you or I answer the simple question: “Who am I?” Take me for example. I am a man, a husband, a father, a son, a brother. I am white, 66 years old, heterosexual, an Air Force pilot, and a Harvard MBA. . . . I could keep going, the list of choices seems endless and 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.

Paul saved his appeal to baptism for the climactic place in the argument of Gal 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. . . .

Paul’s passionate rejection of . . . ethnic/religious “identity politics” should lead us to reflect carefully on the ground of our own identity. To what extent is our sense of who we are grounded in the gospel of Christ, and to what extent is it determined by other factors? 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 so passionately fought. Against all such determinations of identity, Paul reminds us that we are one with Christ through baptism. . . .

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 darkness that lurks in every human heart. We should never underestimate the hold that sin has 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 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 whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even 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 us all, 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 genuinely embrace the truth that “all means all.”

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.

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 Louisiana of my childhood and youth 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 their content of their character not the color of their sin. 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. . . .

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.²

May "all" mean all!

When I look over my own life, see how far we have come and admit how far we haven't, it is tempting to say that we will just have to live with it. But that is not God's way and certainly isn't what Paul taught the congregations he started. 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 and the power of God's Spirit and our own unrelenting efforts all things are possible.

Perhaps the best way to close the study is with a brief portion of the speech Rev. King delivered in front of the Lincoln Memorial in August, 1963. I was a 12-year old boy living in Shreveport at the time. I can remember seeing the speech while over at a friend's house. It didn't mean much to me then. It does now.

I have a *dream* today!

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together."

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our

² From *First Things* journal, February 2011.

nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

*My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.
Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,
From every mountainside, let freedom ring!*

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Conversations about race are hard for us all. But we like stories and most of us like to talk about ourselves. Try to share some stories of your own experiences with race. Have you seen anything that looked like progress to you? If so, what do you think holds us back? What part can we all play in one day becoming a color-blind society and church?
2. It has been said that there is no more segregated time in America than on Sunday mornings. Do you agree with this? What has been your own experience? What was the most racially diverse church you ever intended? What can we do to make our churches more racially diverse? Should we try?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, John 17:11-23 Jesus prays for his disciples to be one

Tuesday, Acts 4:32-37 The first Christians community lived as one

Wednesday, Romans 12:3-21 A call to live as one, in love and peace with one another

Thursday, 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 Paul urges these believers to set aside their differences

Friday, Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul urges the believes towards unity in the Spirit

Saturday, Colossians 3:1-17 Paul urges another community of believers toward oneness in Christ.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

A new series started Jan 8: *Simply Good News: Reading the gospels with N. T. Wright*