

POINT LOMA NAZARENE UNIVERSITY

UNITY IN THE CHURCH
AND THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE UTILIZATION OF GALATIANS 3:28

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
HON4099 HONORS PROJECT

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2 APRIL 2022

1. Galatians 3:28 Exegesis and Reception Histories

1.1. Abstract

This paper aims to address the topics of unity and diversity in Christian communities while emphasizing how various traditions of hermeneutics shape congregational practices. We will begin by looking at the reception histories of Galatians 3:28 by ancient Christian thinkers, modern leading interpreters, African American and Black Christian interpreters from the 16th century forward, feminist scholars, and womanist scholars. The study's focus will emphasize the voices of the excluded, oppressed, and those on the margins, in order to persuade Christian communities to look to these individuals as sources of leadership and unique insight.

Additionally, we will also review and analyze responses received from an online survey given to two Wesleyan congregations. Insight from the survey responses will be combined with findings from each reception history formerly mentioned, as well as a deeper look into womanist scholarship, with the goal of introducing a revised framework for future Christian interpretation of Galatians 3:28 and practices within Christian communities. The hope of this work is to spark further dialogue as well as challenge members of local Christian congregations to live more fully into their God-given calling and role as the Church.

1.2. The Pauline Context and Galatians 3:28 Exegesis

Before we begin to peer into the various interpretations of Galatians 3:28, it is important to look first at the very world in which Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians. Paul's letter to the Galatians is not addressed to one specific church in Galatia, but instead the whole region of Galatia. Ultimately, the epistle was circulated by multiple communities of believers in the area of

Galatia, although the specific region within Galatia which Paul intended is still debated.¹ Galatia was a Roman province that is located in Anatolia, which is today the country of Turkey.² There has been wide speculation by scholars on when exactly Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians, based on both Paul's lack of naming specific locations within the letter, as well as material in Acts that might align with Paul's journey.³ Most likely, Paul may have written the letter around 50 C.E., but scholars have ranged their estimates from 49-56 C.E., depending on which piece of evidence they emphasize more.⁴

The major consensus of Paul's timeline was that Paul took a first missionary trip for the purpose of evangelizing certain districts in Galatia, as well as establishing churches.⁵ Paul then returned to Antioch, and while he was in Antioch, he heard about the problems back in Galatia.⁶ The problem, Paul concludes, is that the Galatian believers were essentially "deserting their confidence in his preaching and turning to what he caustically calls a 'different gospel.'" ⁷ This gospel, which Paul calls "no gospel at all" (Gal 1:7), is being proclaimed by a group of outside Christian missionaries who are teaching the Galatian gentiles to move towards Law observance.⁸ Paul is adamant that this different teaching is not only an entirely separate gospel than the one he taught to the Galatians previously, but that this teaching is also *dangerous* to the gospel of Christ

¹ Marion L. Soards and Matthew L. Skinner both make remarks in their works about the debate of whether Paul intended to write to Northern or Southern Galatia, and thus the differing paths of biblical interpretation that follow each theory (Marion L. Soards, "Galatians," NIDB 2:509 and Matthew L. Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament: Paul and the Pauline Letters* [Waco: Baylor University, 2018], 136).

² Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 136.

³ Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 137 and Soards, "Galatians," 509.

⁴ Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 137; Soards, "Galatians," 509; Richard B. Hays, "Galatians," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015). 9:1028.

⁵ Scot McKnight, "Galatians" *The NIV Application Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995). 9:21.

⁶ McKnight, "Galatians," 21.

⁷ Soards, "Galatians," 2:509.

⁸ Soards, "Galatians," 2:509.

in which he preached.⁹ Paul then urges the Galatian believers to resist the teaching that they must be circumcised and thus follow the entire Mosaic Law, and instead reminds the Galatians that “God alone, not the law, has the power to set people free from their spiritual captivity and make them God’s children and thus full sharers in God’s righteousness.”¹⁰ The group of outsiders who are preaching this “false gospel” do have an especially “Jewish cast,” as Marion L. Soards notes. Soards continues to emphasize that, although these outsiders are pushing for Law observance, “these are *not* Jewish missionaries who are simply trying to convert Christians to Judaism. Both they and Paul refer to their message as the gospel, albeit a different gospel, so that we should understand the preachers to be Christian Jews.”¹¹ Again, Matthew L. Skinner offers additional, helpful insight in this area. Skinner emphasizes the necessity to resist an anti-Jewish reading of the text by stating that “Paul speaks about his opponents—the teachers—as people who identify with Christ.”¹² New Testament scholar Scot McKnight adds further commentary on the nature of Paul’s opponents, saying that “[f]or two millennia we have referred to these intruders as ‘Judaizers.’ This term will be used throughout this commentary to refer, not to Jews in general, but to a specific movement in early Christianity that believed conversion to Christ also involved a further conversion to their (Pharisaic) form of Judaism.”¹³ This distinction is important to make, especially in light of the ways in which Galatians has been misinterpreted in the past. Richard B. Hays argues the importance of understanding the conflict in Paul’s letter as an “*intra-Christian* dispute.”¹⁴

⁹ McKnight, “Galatians,” 21.

¹⁰ Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 135.

¹¹ Soards, “Galatians,” 2:510. Italics mine.

¹² Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 138.

¹³ McKnight, “Galatians,” 21.

¹⁴ Hays, “Galatians,” 9:1022.

Even though Paul does adamantly advise Galatians not to listen to these outside preachers, Skinner claims that Paul urges Galatians in this way because “[i]f the gentile Christ-followers in Galatia rely on the law to make them full members of God’s family, they risk forfeiting the justification they have already received in full.”¹⁵ Paul sees this as crucial to their understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Hays notes that Paul’s four biggest critiques of these outsiders have to do with their Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.¹⁷ As to Christology, Paul’s opponents emphasis upon “circumcision and Law observance as the *conditional* grounds for covenant membership negates the sufficiency of God’s grace” through the cross.¹⁸ Not only that, but in terms of pneumatology and ecclesiology, respectively, they misinterpret the power of the Holy Spirit to transform and guide believers, as well as misunderstand unity between Jews and Gentiles.¹⁹ Finally, the outsiders are guided by an eschatology which underestimates the ultimate, transformative act of Jesus’ death which utterly declares God’s apocalyptic action.²⁰ At all of these points, Paul instead points believers back towards the grace and justification that Christ has already gifted them all with. A misunderstanding of any of these issues is a tragic misconstrual of the gospel that Paul preached to them on his first visit.

Galatians 3:28 is a verse that comes up almost exactly in the middle of the letter. There are four ‘parts’ to Galatians 3:28, three of which name pairings of inequalities in the first century, while the fourth is a summative statement that concludes each pairing is *one* (Gr. *heis*), in Christ:

¹⁵ Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 136.

¹⁶ Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 135.

¹⁷ Hays “Galatians,” 1023.

¹⁸ Hays “Galatians,” 1023.

¹⁹ Hays “Galatians,” 1023.

²⁰ Hays “Galatians,” 1024.

- a* *There is neither Jew nor Greek,*
- b* *neither slave nor free,*
- c* *nor is there male and female,*
- d* *for you are all one in Christ Jesus*

Galatians 3:28a addresses the parties involved in Paul’s main argument in the epistle, Jews and Greeks. By Paul using the word *Hellēn* to mean Greek, which is shifted in some translations to be *ethnē*, Gentile, he may be intentionally neglecting the possible negative overtones of *ethnē*.²¹ The following two pairs might have only been stated by Paul in order to finish the baptismal formula which Galatians 3:28 references.²² However, both pairings have had significant impact in the social livelihoods of Christian communities that were to come.

Galatians 3:28b is formatted similarly to Galatians 3:28a, in which Paul uses the word *oude* for “nor.” In Galatians 3:28c, however, Paul uses the word *kai*, meaning “and,” instead of *oude*. The major consensus by multiple scholars is that Paul’s usage of *kai* in Galatians 3:28c is in reference to the creation narrative in Genesis 1:27.²³ Galatians 3:28d concludes the pairings by

²¹ The term *ethnē* (“nation”), from the Jewish perspective, is used to refer to the many diverse people groups that qualify as non-Jewish. This term would not have been recognizable to non-Jews as a precise identity (functioning generally as an “us” versus “them” designation). Paul utilizes a more precise, while still broad, term of *Hellēn* (“Greek”) instead. George Lyons argues that Paul is avoiding the umbrella-term *ethnē*’s “pejorative overtones... while acknowledging the Jewish division of humanity into Jews and non-Jews” (George Lyons, *Galatians: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* [Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 2012], 230-231). Additionally, it is important to note that although Paul uses the term *Hellēn* (“Greek”) as a designation for what is elsewhere in the New Testament referred to as “gentile,” I will most often use the term “gentile” because of my purposes in this paper of addressing the usual *Jew/Gentile* pairing.

²² Richard N. Longenecker claims that Galatians 3:28b and 3:28c have “no relevance for Paul’s immediate argument” and “were only stated by Paul “to complete the confession in which they are found” (Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015], 41: 157).

²³ Douglas J. Moo argues that Paul’s “choice of distinctive gender words... (in contrast to... man/husband and... woman/wife... which connote marital roles) suggests an allusion to Gen. 1-2: the other places where these terms are contrasted in the NT are allusions to the creation account (Matt. 19:4; Mark 10:6; cf. Rom. 1:26-27)” (Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013], 254). Both J. Louis Martyn and Richard N. Longenecker agree that Paul drew specifically on Genesis 1:27 in this section, which Martyn claims is “thereby saying that in baptism the structure of the original creation has been set aside” (J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004], 376-377; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 157). However, Longenecker argues that the use of *kai* instead of *oude* here “implies no real change in meaning” (Longenecker, *Galatians*, 157). Yet, other scholars like George Lyons believe that Paul’s usage of *kai* means that Paul is “[denying] the relevance of the

naming them all as one, *heis*, in Christ Jesus. All of the relationships are thus made into a new “oneness” in Christ. In the subsequent sections of this paper, evidence will be shown to support the argument that Galatians 3:28d is not arguing for the destruction of all distinctions, but instead proclaims a new unity *in Christ* that “breaks down all former divisions and heals injustices.”²⁴ Skinner insightfully adds that Galatians 3:28 is a hopeful source of “liberating news and a powerful theological resource to many who have suffered under and resisted slavery, patriarchies, bigotry, and other forms of dehumanization and oppression.”²⁵

1.3. Leading Interpretations

The preceding contextual evidence remains relevant for our present explanations in this section. From our exegesis above, we know that Paul is writing to a community of people in hopes of persuading them to stand firm in their reliance on God alone to justify believers, set them free from sin, and include them fully as God’s children.²⁶ N.T. Wright offers his understanding of Paul’s starting point, which is that Paul is attempting to persuade his readers by arguing who the children of Abraham really are. By the time we arrive at 3:28, the letter is already deep into an argument regarding Abraham’s family and the blessing to come upon the gentiles.²⁷ Therefore, Wright concludes that Galatians 3:28 is actually a statement that confirms

gender distinction the Creator instituted in the beginning” (Lyons, *Galatians*, 232). Beverly Roberts Gaventa also notes that Paul’s proclamation is meaning the destruction of gender itself; she says, “being ‘in Christ’ brings life in the identity-conferring realm of ‘male and female’ to an end... not simply that the gospel brings these privileges to an end, but that the pairs no longer exist” (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007], 72). Gaventa claims Galatians 3:28d is no longer simply about gender equality, but a radical statement about the restructuring of the creation narrative.

²⁴ Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, 158.

²⁵ Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 146.

²⁶ Skinner, *A Companion to the New Testament*, 135.

²⁷ N.T. Wright goes through each section of Galatians 3 in order to show how they still relate to Abraham: “[in] Galatians 3:9: those of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. Galatians 3:24: so that the blessing of Abraham might (after all!) come upon the Gentiles. Galatians 3:18: the inheritance was given to Abraham by promise. Galatians 3:22: no explicit mention of Abraham, but the same point: the promise belongs to believers. Then, finally, Galatians 3:29: if you are the Messiah’s, you are Abraham’s seed, heroes in accordance with the promise” (N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009], 123).

Jesus is the Messiah “*in whom God’s true people are summed up.*”²⁸ Thus, if one is in the Messiah or *in Christ*, “[they’ve] left behind those old ethnic solidarities along with every other aspect of the ‘present evil age’!”²⁹ Brigitte Kahl also addresses this Abrahamic theme in Galatians, noting that “Paul presents the transformation of Jews and Greeks, slaves and free, male and female into the messianic *one* in Christ. This new Abrahamic identity embodies the *one* messianic sperm of 3:16 and thus Abraham’s (true) offspring and lineage entitled to inherit (3:28-29), that is, to obtain the blessing to the nations promised in Gen 12:3... it translates God’s radical singularity into messianic-Abrahamic *oneness* and solidarity of Jews and non-Jews alike.”³⁰

Both Wright’s and Kahl’s work are focused on the *Jew/Gentile* pairing of Galatians 3:28. However, we must not forget there are two other pairs. Wright argues that ultimately, Paul was “insisting on the central importance of the breaking down of barriers between Jew and Gentile, to people who were eager to erect them.”³¹ Therefore, Paul’s energies were not spent so much on the other two pairings.³² Wright is not alone in his stress particularly on the *Jew/Gentile* tension. In his commentary on Galatians, J. Louis Martyn also notes that Paul may not have been as concerned with the *slave nor free* and *male and female* as he was with the first pair.³³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the leading feminist theologians of the 20th century, noted in her work

²⁸ Wright, *Justification*, 125. Italics original.

²⁹ Wright, *Justification*, 130.

³⁰ Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished: Paul in Critical Contexts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 282. Italics original.

³¹ Wright, *Justification*, 112.

³² Abraham Smith contends that Paul’s “energies manifestly were directed more toward race/ethnicity; and his references to class/status and sex/gender reveal the lack of a ‘practical program’ on both of these fronts” (Abraham Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* [Blount, Brian K., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 33-34).

³³ J. Louis Martyn even goes as far as to say that Paul has “*no genuine interest* in either the second pair of opposites, slave/free (on the social level), or the third, male/female” (Martyn, *Galatians*, 380).

Women and Redemption that Paul was interested only in the *Jew/Gentile* pairing and additionally did not have any concern for women and slaves being liberated from subordination.³⁴ These scholars continue to point out an important thematic characteristic about Paul's letter to the Galatians; the content in the rest of the letter does seem to be solely regarding the issues that surround gentile inclusion. The debate over whether gentiles should be circumcised is in itself a *Jew/Gentile* topic. Women and slaves would not have had the opportunity to even be a part of this conversation.³⁵ Ultimately, Paul is insisting on reliance on God's Spirit to transform and justify believers, which is not ushered in by works, but instead through grace. In his letter, Paul works hard to make sure the Galatian believers firmly understand that all are welcome into this new community of believers and that all have access to God's grace in Christ. In order to make this point abundantly clear, Paul turns to the ritual language that marks initiation into this very community: baptism.

The major consensus among scholars is that Galatians 3:28 is an adaptation of an early baptismal formula that dates back before Paul.³⁶ There is other evidence in Scripture (see Col

³⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether makes the interesting claim that Paul did not choose this baptismal language because he desired equality between the pairings, but instead because he was only interested in the *Jew/Gentile* pairing. John Riches quotes Ruether's understanding that "[i]t was only when he encountered a community in Corinth that did take the theology of the baptismal formula seriously that Paul had to take note of 'these gender implications'. This led him to reformulate 'the baptismal formula itself so that it lost both its... gender implications and its social implications for both women and slaves in the patriarchal household' (Ruether 1998: 31)" (John Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries* [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2010], 212).

³⁵ Multiple scholars have pressed that the debates about circumcision effectively exclude women from the conversation. N.T. Wright claims that "circumcision itself not only divides Jew from Greek, it also puts a wall between male and female, with only the male proudly bearing the covenant sign" (Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*, 131). Douglas J. Moo claims that Paul himself argued against gentile circumcision so that women might be included into a community "in which neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything" (Gal. 6:15). Moo notes that "by putting so much stress on circumcision, Paul suggests, the agitators are effectively marginalizing women" (Moo, *Galatians*, 254). Witherington agrees with Moo in this; Witherington writes that "for the Galatians to take up the Law would, in Paul's eyes, make Christian women second-class citizens" (Ben Witherington III., *Grace in Galatia* [MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 279).

³⁶ J. Louis Martyn is one of the scholars who argues that Galatians 3:28 was "not drawn from scripture, but rather from early Christian tradition. It is in fact part of a baptismal liturgy" (Martyn, *Galatians*, 378). Ben Witherinton also agrees that "Verses 27-28 [of Galatians] have been widely regarded as part of a pre-Pauline baptismal formula" (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 270). Richard N. Longenecker notes the implications of this baptismal language when he writes, "Taking Gal 3:27-28 to be a pre-Pauline Christian confession, either in whole or in part, we may

3:10-11 and 1 Cor 12:13) that parallels the format we find in Paul's letter to the Galatians.³⁷ This might have been spoken over early believers during their baptism as an initiation into the community of believers. The language used at baptism during Paul's time, and arguably for centuries to come, was highly significant. In fact, baptism was a sacrament that was deeply formative and determinative for early believers.³⁸ Hays notes that the language in Galatians 3:28 "anchor[s] Paul's arguments in a deep layer of Christian tradition that would have been acknowledged not only by the Galatians but also by the rival Missionaries as authoritative."³⁹ If Galatians 3:28 was indeed a baptismal formula like many scholars believe, then the words spoken over them would have had *profound* significance. For these words were most likely spoken performatively, meaning the words performed what they announced.⁴⁰ This is confirmed by the late second-century thinker, Tertullian. Tertullian understood that "When God is invoked... water acquires the mysterious power of conveying sanctity."⁴¹ Even then, the words and action of baptism were so profound, that this later turned into a debate regarding

say, then, that when early Christians spoke of being 'baptized into Christ' they also spoke of old divisions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female having come to an end" (Longenecker, *Galatians*, 157).

³⁷ Ben Witherington talks about the "close parallels in form and in thought in Col. 3.10-11 and 1 Cor. 12.13, and in Galatians itself we see this sort of contrasting of opposites in 5.6 and 6.15" (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 270). Witherington notes that "what all these texts have in common is that they all refer to rites of passage" (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 270). Douglas J. Moo also discusses that in the "two other texts [1 Cor. 13:13 and Col. 3:11], we find a similar claim that common religious, social, or gender oppositions have been relativized in Christ, in whom a new unity is to be found" (Moo, *Galatians*, 252).

³⁸ Dr. Michael Lodahl suggests that ritual acts in Paul's time had determinative and shaping implications for the lives of early believers in community. For example, Paul's language of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 10 suggests that "[b]ecause there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17, italics mine). This would suggest that the elements in this ritual meal hold more-than-symbolic connotations for their lives together. (Wording and insight from Dr. Michael Lodahl, who greatly aided in this discussion by offering his expertise on early baptism.)

³⁹ Hays "Galatians," 1027.

⁴⁰ Examples of performative language would be a benediction or perhaps the words spoken during transubstantiation. There was a more Protestant discussion regarding whether this sounds too much like magic, although Dr. Michael Lodahl contends that "we can't miss the richness of Christian liturgy."

⁴¹ Cited in Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University, 2005), 40.

post-baptismal sin.⁴² For Paul to choose to employ these words in Galatians 3:28 is crucial to our understanding of how the Galatian audiences might have received his words. If these are, as many scholars adduce, recognizable baptismal formulae, then Paul's Galatian audience would have recognized these words as baptismal language and thus recognized the authority and significance of such a phrase. Along with the other language Paul uses about baptism, it is clear that Paul is proclaiming what an entrance into this new community might mean for all believers.

Martyn describes Christian baptism as a transformative event in which believers stood “in the waters of death (Rom 6:3-4) and stripped of their old identity, they became God's own sons, putting on Christ, God's Son (Gal 2:20),⁴³ as though he were their clothing, thus acquiring a new identity that lies beyond ethnic, social, and sexual distinctions. In a word, the Galatians became one new person by being united in Christ himself.”⁴⁴ It is important to notice Martyn's emphasis on a believer entering into their new identity, or as scholar Ben Witherington would call it, “not creation but the *new creation*.”⁴⁵ A believer's new identity and entrance into the Christian community, however, does not completely destroy all the social distinctions about a

⁴² The debate regarding post-baptismal sin has been greatly touched on by early Christian thinkers, such as Augustine of Hippo whose mother did not baptize him until his 30s out of fear of post-baptismal sin. Even the Emperor Constantine was baptized right before he died in order to not sin after baptism. This is also perhaps what early Christian interpreters may have thought Hebrews 6:6 was referring to, but instead Hebrews was writing about the temptation to leave the faith. However, the Pauline letters and the Gospels address issues of sin within Christian communities, so there is not much Scriptural evidence for believers not being able to sin after baptism, especially because believers were baptized immediately on acceptance of Christ. This was most likely a later Christian debate that did not affect the Pauline community. (Adapted from the insights of both Dr. Michael Lodahl and Dr. Kara Lyons-Pardue).

⁴³ The solely masculine language utilized by some scholarly commentaries should not go unaddressed. Although this is some of the language found in biblical sources, the majority consensus is that both female and male are included in statements regarding ecclesiology and soteriology. Although some early understandings of Galatians 3:28 clearly suggested the destruction of the female identity entirely at the eschaton, it is abundantly clear today that this language is harmful to the value of women and is completely contrary to Christian understanding of the *Imago Dei*. The language regarding being *in Christ*, although Jesus is male, should in no way be understood as believers needing to assume masculinity in order to be *in Christ*. Rather, *all* people are invited to the Messianic banquet (Isaiah 25:6, Luke 22:16, Matt 26:29) and do not need to remove their differences in order to do so (Rev 7:9).

⁴⁴ Martyn, *Galatians*, 374.

⁴⁵ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 271. Italics added for emphasis. See also 2 Cor 5:17.

person. Instead, this is a *transformation* of an old identity into a new one.⁴⁶ According to Witherington, “these ethnic, social, and sexual distinctions continue to exist but in Christ they are not to determine one’s soteriological or spiritual or social standing in the body of Christ.”⁴⁷

Witherington, therefore, claims that the language of baptism represents the “spiritual transformation” that takes place in Christ.⁴⁸ However, we should not so readily dismiss the earthly implications of baptism. Early believers understood baptism as a truly transformative event, so much so that they later thought believers could not even sin after baptism.⁴⁹ Surely their understanding of this spiritual transformation carried with it implications for their lives as a part of this new community. Witherington calls these the “social consequences” which are stated in Galatians 3:28.⁵⁰ George Lyons comments very similarly in his work, noting that although “differences continued to exist in the old order, but they did not matter in Christ Jesus.”⁵¹ Lyons follows up by radically stating that a person’s “faith in Christ... [their] baptism into Christ, and [their] Christ clothing... has transformed [their] diversity into unity. [Their] differences do not define [them]; Christ does.”⁵² Lyons contends that Paul was outright denying the “continuing relevance of three widely assumed human distinctions- ethnic, socioeconomic, and gender.”⁵³

It is not reasonable to assume that these distinctions did not and would not continue to exist in the social world, for the point of the pairings in Galatians 3:28 is that the Galatian

⁴⁶ Ben Witherington argues against an interpretation that would suggest Paul is declaring an “obliteration of the distinctions he mentions in this verse,” but instead the pairings’ “redemption and transformation in Christ. The new creation is the old one transformed and transfigured” (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 280-281).

⁴⁷ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 280-281.

⁴⁸ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 276.

⁴⁹ See footnote 42.

⁵⁰ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 277.

⁵¹ Lyons, *Galatians*, 231.

⁵² Lyons, *Galatians*, 233.

⁵³ Lyons, *Galatians*, 230.

audience would instantly notice how unequal they were! Yet, the claim is still that the power structures attached to these pairings and the and the cultural distinctions held between them are ultimately destroyed and, at the very least, made secondary to believers' identity in Christ. Martin contends that "[w]hat has been erased in Christ is not the sexed body... but some important culturally coded norms attached to sexed bodies."⁵⁴ In light of all of the cultural distinctions and tensions that were present in the *Jew/Gentile* divide, the structural and social hierarchies of *slave/free* and *male/female*, Paul was adamant in proclaiming a new, unified identity of believers. The new community in which they entered into through their baptism was one that did not continue to practice in the old way of wielding power at the cost of others, but instead saw each hierarchy as undone upon the equal footing under the cross. These are the powerful words that were spoken over each believer at their baptism and continued to hold authoritative weight in their communities much afterward.

1.4. Traditional Interpretations

Galatians 3:28 has been a cornerstone of Christian thought for centuries, and thus a historical understanding of this verse in its ancient context is a crucial beginning point. Up until the latter half of the twentieth century, many readers either believed that Paul's *no male and female* meant a "restoration of the original, androgynous human being," or that sexual difference is destroyed altogether by the female fully becoming male.⁵⁵ These interpretations of Galatians 3:28 are difficult to reconcile with modern notions of sex. It does not require a feminist methodological approach to see the problematic implications of these ancient gendered interpretations. Interestingly enough, J. Louis Martyn adds onto this thought by concluding that

⁵⁴ Martin, Dale B., *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 81.

⁵⁵ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 83 and 84, respectively. Dale B. Martin also discusses how various ancient readers and early church leaders have interpreted Galatians 3:28 in later pages of his work (Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 80-87).

Christian believers are *one in Christ* by the way of being “taken into the corpus of the One New Man.”⁵⁶ Here, J. Louis Martyn refers to Christ; however, the masculine language is again startling.⁵⁷ Dale B. Martin (*Sex and the Single Savior*) argues that this was truly what the ancient authors and readers of Galatians 3:28 would have understood it to mean, which is vastly different from the modern usage of the text as a piece of evidence in the fight for gender equality. Indeed, Galatians 3:28 has been called the “Magna Carta” of Christian unity and equality.⁵⁸ Yet, Dale B. Martin holds firm that using Galatians 3:28 in this way, although in no way bad,⁵⁹ is however unfaithful to the historical context. Jeremy Punt, whose work focuses on the Greco-Roman understanding of gender and sexuality as a continuum, confirms this idea through his instance that Galatians 3:28 should be read to mean that “women in their mystical union with Christ became empowered as males, growing toward the male end of the spectrum. Being fully female in Christ, would have meant being or becoming as male as possible.”⁶⁰ While such a view strikes modern readers as insulting to women, within Greco-Roman thought the possibility of females

⁵⁶ Martyn, *Galatians*, 377.

⁵⁷ See footnote 43.

⁵⁸ Galatians 3:28 is called the “Magna Carta” in both Ben Witherington (*Witherington, Grace in Galatia*, 280) and Beverly Roberts Gaventa’s work (*Gaventa, Our Mother Saint Paul*, 63).

⁵⁹This is confirmed through Dale B. Martin’s later call to interpret Galatians 3:28 through the lens of queer theology (Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 90). Martin is not arguing that using Galatians 3:28 to call for gender equality is a bad thing, but he is saying that it is not what the verse historically meant to the Galatian audience. Martin clarifies that he is “*not* suggesting that we will end up with the ‘true,’ ‘only,’ or ‘best’ reading of the text by constructing the most ‘historical’ reading of the text. There is no necessary reason why the Christian interpretation of Galatians 3:28 should be ruled by the norms of historical criticism... I see no compelling theological reason to allow Christian readings to be constrained or controlled by historical criticism, even if people wish, for whatever purpose, to be informed by it or to use it for their own ends” (Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 87-88, italics mine).

⁶⁰ Jeremy Punt, “Pauline Bodies and South African Bodies: Body, Power, and Biblical Hermeneutics” in *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations* (Edited by Musa Dube, Andrew Mbuvi, Dora Mbuwayesango. Society of Biblical Literature, 2013) 475.

achieving masculinity was perceived as a compliment: true humanity was understood to be masculine, while females were defined as deficient, lacking in maleness.⁶¹

Modern day biblical scholars have a distinctly hard time accepting that this is actually what Paul meant in his context. Douglas Moo, in his *Galatians* commentary, notes that “of course Paul recognizes the continuing reality of the male/female distinction among human beings; ‘androgyny,’ the creation of a new being neither male nor female, is far from Paul’s idea.”⁶² Additionally, Witherington also believes that “What Paul is *not* doing is offering up the idea of an androgynous Christ, or body of Christ, or androgynous individuals within that body as ought to be especially clear from the fact that Paul says there is no male *and* female combination in Christ for all are one person... in Christ.”⁶³

We will now turn to early Church Fathers John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo who held similar beliefs regarding this passage during their time in the 4th and 5th centuries. For John Chrysostom, the focus was that all of humanity have become “sons of God” by “putting on Christ in baptism.”⁶⁴ Chrysostom similarly focuses on believers’ unity *in Christ* rather than “the unity that there is *among Christians*.”⁶⁵ Dale B. Martin makes the claim that Chrysostom was so “embedded in [his own] ancient notions of gender” that he understood Galatians 3:28 as teaching the “obsolescence of the female, not its elevation. [Chrysostom’s] message is unity in masculinity, not equality between the sexes”⁶⁶ Augustine of Hippo held a similar perspective; he

⁶¹ Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008), 16-18.

⁶² Moo, *Galatians*, 254.

⁶³ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 271; italics original. Additionally, see section 1.2 and footnote 7 for full discussion on Paul’s usage of “male *and* female.”

⁶⁴ Riches (cited NPNF 13.30), *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 204.

⁶⁵ Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 204.

⁶⁶ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*; 85 and 86, respectively.

claimed that social distinctions, including those of gender, remain because “For now, although we have the first-fruits of the Spirit... the body is still dead on account of sin, [so] that *difference, whether of peoples or of legal status or of sex, while indeed removed in the unity of the faith, remains in this mortal life.*”⁶⁷ Clearly, the urge for the early church leaders was to stop the transformative power that Galatians 3:28 may be proclaiming at the very doors of the church, not allowing it to trickle into homes and society. Or, even to stop this understanding at the very perspective of God and thus not allow it to trickle into the roles in the church or relations between believers.

Later medieval Christian thinkers, such as Thomas Aquinas, continued in this train of thought. Aquinas believed that “diversity plays no part in and provides no obstacle to the unity of believers with Christ. The point is not that such divisions are set aside, but that they have no bearing on a person’s ability to receive the effect of baptism.”⁶⁸ However, Aquinas was not able to fully touch on matters of sacraments or ordination before his death, which ultimately “raises questions about the way in which social status and gender have been allowed to determine roles within the church.”⁶⁹ During the 16th century Martin Luther faced this conflict, stating very clearly in his work:

But this setting aside, this considering as nothing, does not indicate that the states themselves are abolished. Servants and masters, husbands governing families and ‘living decently towards all men’, wives living chastely, obeying their husbands, doing the housework and bringing up the children in a godly manner, are still very much part of his world. However, none of these things makes a person righteous, delivers them from death. In the world the differences between persons must be diligently observed. In

⁶⁷ Riches (cited Augustine 2003:175), *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 204. Italics added for emphasis.

⁶⁸ Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 205.

⁶⁹ Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 205.

Christ, all such differences are overcome, and all are equal in receiving the promise of eternal life. Insofar as we have faith, we are joined to Christ.⁷⁰

Although Luther seemed to understand the equality proclaimed in Galatians 3:28, nevertheless he insisted on societal roles to remain intact at the same time.

However unfortunate it is that this interpretation of Galatians 3:28, which sought to maintain the very social order that Galatians 3:28 was in fact challenging, persisted throughout centuries, it is ultimately the legacy of interpretation that has been imprinted on the Church for history and something that Christian communities today must come to terms with. Modern congregations who are willing to acknowledge the lasting influence this interpretation has had on the Church will have the opportunity to decide for themselves if they agree with the early and medieval thinkers' understanding of social norms remaining intact, or instead decide that they wish to resist the perpetuation of such an ethic.

1.5. Interpretations in Dialogue with Gender and Sexuality

One does not need to look far to find a recent interpretation of Galatians 3:28 that is utilized for the liberation of women.⁷¹ In the 1970s, scholars such as Robin Scroggs “identified Paul as the ‘one clear voice in the New Testament asserting the freedom and equality of women in the eschatological community.’”⁷² The verse has been utilized by activist groups who pushed for the ordination of women, as well as to abolish slavery and segregation.⁷³ The interpretation

⁷⁰ John Riches (cited Luther *non speculative, sed realiter, praesentissime et efficacissime*), *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 206.

⁷¹ Dale B. Martin suggests that a “current egalitarian reading is recent and reflects the politics and ideology of modern democratism and feminism” (Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 82).

⁷² Cited in Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Gendered Bodies and the Body of Christ,” in *Practicing with Paul: Reflections on Paul and the Practices of Ministry in Honor of Susan G. Eastman* (Edited by Presian R. Burroughs. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2018), 45. Additionally, Gaventa quotes Scroggs’s argument that in order to separate the “‘establishment Paul’ from the ‘historical’ Paul,” one must set aside “passages from Ephesians, Colossians, and the Pastorals, as well as 1 Cor 14:33b-36, and bringing forward 1 Cor 11:12-16 and Gal 3:28” (Gaventa, *Practicing with Paul*, 45).

⁷³ John Riches discusses the various utilizations of Galatians 3:28 in “debates about slavery and racial discrimination (Smith 1998; Williams 2003), the ordination of women (Hayter 1987; Swartley 1983), and gay and lesbian matters

and utilization of this verse which sought the equality of women in the home, church, and society was directly contrasted with a tradition of patriarchy and classism that is most clearly shown through preserved writings. These traditional works include sayings from such ancient figures as Thales and Socrates, as well as traditional Jewish prayers. Socrates's saying, for example, expresses thankfulness that one "was born a human being and not a beast, next a man and not a woman, thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian."⁷⁴ A later Jewish prayer thanked God in a similar way, saying, "Blessed be He that He did not make me a Gentile; blessed be He that He did not make me a slave (or ignorant peasant); blessed be He that He did not make me a woman."⁷⁵ According to Witherington, the *Gentile, enslaved, and female* persons in these sayings, and similarly in Galatians 3:28, were those who were believed to be destined, according to their birth, to a lower status in society.⁷⁶ Therefore, both Greek and Jewish people could be thankful that they were not born a barbarian/gentile, respectively, a slave, or a woman.⁷⁷

Directly in contrast with these traditions of hierarchy is a radical understanding of Paul that pushes against the status quo; in this reading, Paul's intentional pairing of *Jew/gentile, slave/free, and man/woman* was used instead to proclaim a new unity in Christ that did not allow for the perpetuation of power structures nor the subordination of the Gentile, enslaved person, or

(Williams 2003: 57). One of the striking features of the abolitionist debate is that Paul was cited only with great reservation by abolitionists, precisely because of the use made by antiabolitionists of Pauline and deutero-Pauline texts" (Riches, *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 209).

⁷⁴ Witherington cited (*Vit. Phil.* 1.33), *Grace in Galatia*, 270.

⁷⁵ Cited in Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 270-271.

⁷⁶ Ben Witherington explains that from both a Greek and Jewish perspective, it is assumed that "birth to a large extent determines one's destiny or roles and status in society" (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 271). George Lyons takes Witherington's point a step further by arguing that Paul knows this about his audience and thus Paul strengthens his argument by claiming that the Galatian believers are "defined by their 'faith in Christ Jesus'... [and having] shared experience of being 'clothed with Christ'... [means that] individual differences based on the circumstances of their births [are] inconsequential" (Lyons, *Galatians*, 230).

⁷⁷ Ben Witherington notes that the Jewish prayers also assume that birth determines status "within the people of God, and so one can praise God that God did not make a person, a Gentile, a slave, or a woman" (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 271).

woman. This would, indeed, be a radical interpretation of the verse based on the patriarchal society in which Paul's letter to the Galatians was composed. However, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, a Pauline scholar and theologian, contends that "[t]he presence of Gal 3:28 does not overturn [the masculine] characterization of the letter."⁷⁸ Moreover, Gaventa is pointing out the blatant fact of the Galatian letter: Paul refers to "no women among the Galatians, their Teachers, or the Jerusalem church," and even if we do "imagine that women are listening," the women will hear "direct address to people who contemplate circumcision, not to themselves."⁷⁹ The Galatian letter was consumed with the question of male circumcision and thus was written in a way that reflects this masculine character. However, the atmosphere of patriarchy has not stopped believers from continuing to use Galatians 3:28 in an edifying way for women.

The preceding train of thought, which was held by early and medieval Christian thinkers and which argued that the societal roles in Galatians 3:28 should remain intact in everyday practice, continued to be the common perspective up until the 1970's.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, until this time, many did not allow their understanding to transform the gender roles present in their homes, churches, or greater society.⁸¹ In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the "first wave" of feminism broke out and sparked readers interest in the implications that Galatians 3:28 held for the roles of women.⁸² However, at this time, the majority interpretation contained gender equality

⁷⁸ Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 64.

⁷⁹ Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 64.

⁸⁰ See section 1.4.

⁸¹ Dale B. Martin explains that "Up until the 1970s, the majority of scholars insisted that the passage taught the equality of men and women 'in Christ'... But they usually denied that this mandated or even allowed complete equality for women in society, the church, and the home" (Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 79).

⁸² Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 88.

only to the boundaries of being *in Christ*, instead of flowing into societal, home, and church spaces.⁸³

Later, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, during the “second wave” of feminism, Galatians 3:28 was read again with gender equality in mind, yet this time with possible implications for women in society.⁸⁴ Galatians 3:28 was interpreted in a way that claimed gender equality both *in Christ* and in society.⁸⁵ During this second wave of feminism, debates arose regarding the roles of women in positions of Christian leadership. Many turned to Galatians 3:28 as the verse that held historical significance and weight for their cause.⁸⁶ Scholars such as Mary Hayter and Stanley Porter agree that by the late 1980’s, Galatians 3:28 had indeed become the “*locus classicus* of the debate about gender equality.”⁸⁷ Even 20th-century theologian Schussler Fiorenza noted “equality” as “the basic issue addressed by Paul’s ‘no male and female.’”⁸⁸

Queer theologians and scholars have also joined the task of grappling with the gendered statement in Galatians 3:28 in unique ways. According to Martin, Galatians 3:28 should actually be working to “challenge heterosexuality itself.”⁸⁹ Of course, Martin notes that how Galatians 3:28 has been used in advocating for male/female equality is “notable,” but Martin critiques how “[i]n most modern assumptions, one must be either male or female. A Christian cannot be both...

⁸³ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 88.

⁸⁴ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 88. Additionally, Dale B. Martin suggests that a “current egalitarian reading is recent and reflects the politics and ideology of modern democraticism and feminism” (Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 82).

⁸⁵ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 88.

⁸⁶ Beverly Roberts Gaventa claims that Galatians 3:28 was used in response to discussions that arose surrounding the ordination of women, whose opponents cited the other Pauline letters (most likely the pastoral letters) as their evidence (Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 64-65).

⁸⁷ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 78.

⁸⁸ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 78.

⁸⁹ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 90.

No Christian is allowed to refuse to align him/her/self on either both or neither of the two mutually exclusive sides of the dichotomy.”⁹⁰ This, to Martin, is a “bizarre interpretation of a verse that rejects the ‘male and female’ dichotomy” He suggests that Christian interpretation would benefit from a recognition of “just how queer a text Galatians 3:28 is.”⁹¹ This is just an example of the wide variety of ways in which diverse traditions of hermeneutics have attempted to interpret Galatians 3:28 faithfully, not only to the text, but also to the movement of the Holy Spirit and where the Spirit might be leading in hopes of liberation for the oppressed.

1.6. African American Uses of Paul in 19th-20th Century Reception

In turning to interpretations of Galatians 3:28 by selected African American voices, we celebrate the value of listening to and learning from the testimonies of those who have clung to Scripture despite Scripture being wielded as a weapon against them. In subsequent sections, we will discuss the value of learning from those who have been placed in the margins of society and those who have been oppressed. These groups hold unique perspectives that can lead all people towards restoration. Representatives of those who have been placed on the disadvantaged side of the pairs in which Paul mentions, those who have been put in places of subordination and yet clung to the transformative power of Christ, are the very stories which expand the perspectives of those in positions of greater privilege or access to power.

In the time of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade from the 16th to 19th centuries, a distorted use of Scripture was used by slaveowners particularly in the United States in order to perpetuate slavery. Many times, the New Testament instructions of “Slaves, obey your masters” (Eph 6:5, Col 3:22, 1 Pet 2:18) were used to justify the horrific treatment of enslaved people.⁹² Lisa M.

⁹⁰ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 90.

⁹¹ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 90.

⁹² Lisa M. Bowens writes, “Slave masters and white ministers often used Paul’s words to justify the cruel practice of slavery. In their misappropriation, Scripture tied the existence and identity of an entire people to slavery” (Lisa M. Bowens, “Liberating Paul: African Americans’ Use of Paul in Resistance and Protest.” in *Practicing with Paul*:

Bowens, in her contribution to *Practicing with Paul*, notes that the African American pursuit of “interpreting Paul on their own terms was an act of resistance and protest.”⁹³ She continues on to say that African Americans seized “‘hermeneutical control’ of Pauline Scripture” by beginning the task where they desired “and not where their white enslavers chose to begin.”⁹⁴ However, Bowens acknowledges that during that time and afterwards, many enslaved people had a variety of responses to this manipulation of Scripture. For some, like Howard Thurman’s grandmother, the Pauline letters (except for 1 Cor 13) were rejected. For others, the entire biblical canon was rejected. Albert Cleage, in his work *The Black Messiah*, lays “the corruption of Christianity squarely upon the shoulders of Paul.”⁹⁵ For those who instead decided to cling to Scripture may have utilized the Pauline letters in a variety of ways. One of these ways is Reverential Appropriation, according to Abraham Smith in his work “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation.” Leaders such as Fredrick Douglass, Henry Highland Garnet, and Charles H. Mason utilized this strategy. Here, they appropriated the Pauline letters in order to “provide suasion, encouragement, and insight in the face of black struggles.”⁹⁶ African American readers could also have utilized the letters in a way of correcting or critiquing Paul by pointing to other parts of the Bible.⁹⁷ This, Smith calls Intra-canonical Correction. Extra-canonical correction, on the other hand, is when African Americans seek an “extra-biblical authority as a basis for their critique of Paul or corrections of interpretations of Paul.”⁹⁸ Smith notes Lemuel Haynes, a

Reflections on Paul and the Practices of Ministry in Honor of Susan G. Eastman [Edited by Presian R. Burroughs. Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2018], 59).

⁹³ Bowens, *Practicing with Paul*, 63.

⁹⁴ Bowens, *Practicing with Paul*, 63.

⁹⁵ Cited in Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 35.

⁹⁶ Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 35.

⁹⁷ Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 36.

⁹⁸ Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 37.

minister in the 18th-century, “appealed to the ‘unchangeable Laws of God,’ laws he deemed to be against slavery, for his critique of pro-slavery interpretations that found support for their cause in 1 Cor 7:21.”⁹⁹ Finally, African American interpreters have used Typological Correlation, which Smith describes as a linking between Paul and the experiences of African Americans.¹⁰⁰ Smith records that John Jea, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. utilized this type of approach.

All of these types of interpretations were attempts to reclaim the scriptural texts that had been used against them. Not only that, but they were also used to “rescue... Paul from the hands of white slaveholders and [employ Paul] in the liberation fight.”¹⁰¹ However, it was not only scholars who were involved in reinterpretations of Scripture. According to Justin S. Ukpong, during the 1990s, African American biblical scholars “recognized the *ordinary African readers* (that is, non-biblical scholars) as important partners in academic Bible reading, and [sought] to integrate their perspectives in the process of academic interpretation of the Bible.”¹⁰² Together, both everyday readers and academic scholars continued the tradition of what their ancestors started by “creatively seiz[ing] and reappropriat[ing] some of the very tools the master used against them.”¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 37.

¹⁰⁰ Abraham Smith cites examples of leaders who have used typological correlation, such as John Marrant, James Gronniosaw, Maria Stewart, John Jea, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. (Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 37). Smith also describes Paul was one of the figures that African Americans “ironically” are able to connect with, “given the miseries and harsh lived realities that African Americans have faced in the rural, urban, and suburban settings of their country.” Smith continues that “perhaps many can empathize with Paul’s ‘outsider status’” (Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 38).

¹⁰¹ Bowens, *Practicing with Paul*, 61.

¹⁰² Justin S. Ukpong, “Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions” in *Voices From The Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 53-54. Italics original.

¹⁰³ Mitzi J. Smith “Slavery in the early church” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Edited by Blount, Brian K. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 19.

It is important to recognize here the profound impact that many Black women, specifically, have had through their unique interpretations of Scripture. This type of hermeneutic, called *Womanism*, is significant and therefore warrants an entire section for their pursuits in scholarship alone.¹⁰⁴ In the struggle for liberation, scholars have concluded that African American women specifically have been most “constrained to use Scripture against Scripture” in order to “overcome the Pauline mandates that served as gag rules against their witness to the truth of the Gospel.”¹⁰⁵ Their continual fight for equality and equity in society, church, and home brings us to our main discussion of Black interpretations of Galatians 3:28. Of course, this verse in Galatians is a part of broader Pauline corpus, so it is important to note that some African Americans would have chosen not to (and may still continue not to) interact with this section of Scripture, as explained in Abraham Smith’s theories of interpretation above. However, those who did choose to take on the task of interpreting the verse found many of the themes similarly found in the leading interpretations (section 1.3) above.¹⁰⁶

Mitzi J. Smith, a womanist biblical scholar, describes Galatians 3:28 as a confirmation that “God stands firmly on the side of the oppressed.”¹⁰⁷ She argues that the *slave/freeperson* pairing in the Galatians 3:28 holds more than just an “emancipatory” meaning, but means that African Americans are “more than ‘freedpersons.’” Smith challenges African Americans not to

¹⁰⁴ Some female Black interpreters and theologians have rejected the title “Feminist” and have identified as “Womanist.” This shift is addressed more fully in section 1.7, which includes a more detailed discussion of womanist biblical scholarship.

¹⁰⁵ Mitzi J. Smith cited Allen Callahan, “Slavery in the early church,” 16.

¹⁰⁶ Mitzi J. Smith observed that “many Pauline texts are ostensibly antithetical to the claims of Gal 3:28 and have been used to oppress women and others” (Smith, “Slavery in the early church,” 16). Additionally, similarly to what is stated in section 1.3, Abraham Smith observed that Paul focused his efforts mainly on the *Jew/Gentile* pairing, while “his references to class/status and sex/gender reveal the lack of a ‘practical program’ on both of these fronts” (Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 33-34). Abraham Smith claims that this failure of practice actually led to even more “accommodationist readings of Paul that appeared in the disputed Pauline texts, especially in the Pastorals (1-2 Tim and Titus)” (Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 34). This claim will be an important one to consider as we later explore, in section 4.2, how Paul’s statements impacted his own church practices.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, “Slavery in the early church,” 18.

“erase the history of [their] ancestors,” but instead be “challenged and ignited by that history,” while “embrac[ing] the present possibility of full emancipation in Jesus Christ without the stigma of color prejudice, biases, and shackles of the past.”¹⁰⁸ Living without the *stigma* that surrounds people of color is part of what Paul is describing in this new community of believers; that baptism is the entrance into a new humanity, a new unity of people who no longer perpetuate systems of violence and oppression. However, physical and cultural distinctions of the people are not dissolved in this pursuit. Brad R. Baxton, in his commentary on Galatians in *True to Our Native Land*, urges his readers to “correct the misconception that Christian unity entails the absence of social distinctions.”¹⁰⁹ Baxton argues, “If Paul advocated for the erasure of social distinction in 3:28, he would have undercut his own argument. Paul designed his evangelistic campaign to bring Gentiles into the church as Gentiles, thereby ensuring ethnic diversity in the church. *Why, then, would he erase the very ethnic diversity for which he had toiled?*”¹¹⁰

Baxton is clear that in Galatians 3:28, “Paul pleads for the eradication of dominance, not the erasure of difference.”¹¹¹ We will return to Baxton’s work in subsequent sections and analyze his descriptions of the implications that Galatians 3:28 has for congregations today.

During the time of American chattel slavery, Galatians 3:28 was used in “ecclesiastical debates about slavery and racial discrimination.”¹¹² Later, during the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the ethos of Galatians 3:28 was affirmed in African American churches

¹⁰⁸ Smith, “Slavery in the early church,” 18-19.

¹⁰⁹ Brad R. Braxton, “Galatians” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Edited by Blount, Brian K., Cain Hope Felder, Clarice Jannette Martin, and Emerson B. Powery. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 340.

¹¹⁰ Braxton, “Galatians,” 340. Italics mine.

¹¹¹ Braxton, “Galatians,” 340.

¹¹² Riches cited (Smith 1998; Williams 2003), *Galatians Through the Centuries*, 209.

who believed that the Christian gospel “transcends color.”¹¹³ According to James H. Cone, in his work *Martin & Malcolm & America*, African American churches that agreed with Martin Luther King Jr.’s ideas about integration also believed that “[i]n Christ, ‘there is no east or west,’ ‘no north or south.’ ‘There is,’ as Paul said, ‘neither Jew nor Greek,’ ‘slave nor free,’ ‘male nor female.’ It follows, therefore, that there is neither ‘Negro nor white.’ We are ‘all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:28).”¹¹⁴ Cone’s expansion upon the traditional three pairings in Galatians 3:28 displays an understanding that African Americans had of this verse being utterly transformative; not only for the *Jew/Gentile* divide during Paul’s time, but also for the current racial tensions they experienced in their own lifetime (and for many people of color who continue to experience racism today). Their understanding of Galatians 3:28 was something they could hold on to and they continued to fight for freedom in light of it. Although each community had their own motivations, the African American communities referenced by Cone continued to struggle for liberation from their oppressors through holding onto the hope proclaimed in Galatians 3:28. Thus, this is an example of a community whose hermeneutics directly shaped their everyday practices, both within local African American congregations and individually.

1.7. A More Extensive Look at Womanist Interpretations

Before I begin discussing the womanist biblical hermeneutic and interpretation of Galatians 3:28, it is important to note that my personal frame of reference is as a white woman. The following discussion represents the underlying themes of, and interpretations by, womanist scholars, as I understood them. I aim to learn from the wisdom and faithful study that womanist scholars have offered in pursuit of a more *whole* society. These findings, of course, are not a full nor final say on any matter; for further readings and discussions on womanist hermeneutics I

¹¹³ James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 31.

¹¹⁴ Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 31.

implore you to listen to and read the works of womanist scholars such as Raquel St. Clair, Renita J. Weems, and Mitzi J. Smith.

Womanist biblical scholarship is made up of Black women who originally were left out of conversations because of their identity as women of color. Historically, Black women have been left out of conversations on race because of their gender, and conversations on gender because of their race.¹¹⁵ The feminist movement was overwhelmingly white and some Black women understood even the term *feminist* to mean white feminism.¹¹⁶ There did not seem to be room for Black women to connect theology with their life experiences. Thus, womanism emerged out of this need.¹¹⁷ The *womanist* label was coined originally by Alice Walker, who defined womanism as a “description of the unique social, cultural, historical, and theological experiences and understandings of African American women.”¹¹⁸ As Nyasha Junior wrote in her work, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, womanist scholars “brought their lived experiences as African American women with them as they engaged biblical texts to address their unique situation as both women and as African Americans.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Raquel St. Clair writes about how African American women “had to deny a part of themselves to participate” in the civil rights movement, even though both the civil rights movement and the feminist movement “included and benefitted African American women” (Raquel St. Clair, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation” in *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* [Edited by Blount, Brian K. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007] 56). Since the civil rights movement “sought to liberate African Americans from the racial oppression experienced in a racist society,” the “emphasis on race [meant] gender issues were ignored” (St. Clair 56). The feminist movement also excluded African American women in some ways because feminism “addressed sexist separate from racism, as its constituents were overwhelmingly white women” (St. Clair 56).

¹¹⁶ Nyasha Junior explains how “[s]ome African American women and others choose not to identify themselves as feminists because they regard the term feminism as implying a type of white feminism” (Junior, *Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, xiv).

¹¹⁷ Raquel St. Clair describes womanist theology as “[expanding] Walker’s definition in order to create a space in which Christian theology and the experiences of African American women could connect... Womanist biblical interpretation... is the result of the interplay between African American women’s experience and scripture” (St. Clair, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation,” 56 and 57, respectively).

¹¹⁸ Raquel St. Clair cited Alice Walker’s 1983 definition of *womanist* (St. Clair, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation,” 55).

¹¹⁹ Junior, *Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, 41.

An important theme in womanist scholarship is the effort to pursue a wholeness of all creation and liberation from oppression in all areas. Black women in the United States have been named, by some scholars, as experiencing a “‘tridimensional reality’ of racism, sexism, and classism.”¹²⁰ It should not go without noticing that the three power structures set up to oppress women of color today, through this “tridimensional reality,” are the exact same three structures present in Galatians 3:28: Race/ethnicity (*Jew/Gentile*), class (*slave/free*), and gender (*male/female*). Not only do womanist scholars offer a deeper comprehension of the passage because of their own situational context, but womanist theology also offers a hopeful voice to the healing of all parts of creation.

Raquel St. Clair writes about the womanist pursuit of wholeness in her work, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation.” St. Clair begins by pointing towards the foundation of Christology that centers this pursuit, saying, “A womanist hermeneutics of wholeness asserts that Jesus's significance is his life and ministry without excluding his suffering and death.”¹²¹ St. Clair then explains how this pursuit of wholeness does not only strive to flourish African American women, but looks to others as well:

A womanist hermeneutics of wholeness must promote the wholeness of African American women without prohibiting the wholeness of others... Womanists recognize the interrelatedness of all people... This commitment transcends the boundaries of racism, sexism, classism, and heretosexism. In this way, womanists will reflect the nature of Jesus, whom we describe as ‘inclusive, relational, particular, and, yet, universal.’¹²²

Even Alice Walker, in her definition of *womanist*, said that a womanist is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.”¹²³ Renita J. Weems notes in her own work,

¹²⁰ Junior, *Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, 108.

¹²¹ St. Clair, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation,” 60.

¹²² St. Clair, “Womanist Biblical Interpretation,” 59.

¹²³ Cited in Junior, *Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, 103.

“Reading Her Way Through the Struggle,” that African American women “have sought to be sensitive to oppression wherever it exists, whether in society or in narrative plots.”¹²⁴ Thus, Weems brings to light the importance of womanist interpretation of Scripture, as this type of hermeneutic gives voice to what any marginalized, oppressed, and excluded character in Scripture might have to say.

We should pause before continuing to talk about some Black women’s interpretations of Scripture before stating the complex history that African American women, specifically, have with Scripture. As stated by Abraham Smith’s theories of interpretation in section 1.6 above, African American women have been subjected to the weaponized use of Scripture against them by white enslavers. This produced a need for reinterpreting sacred texts. The womanist pursuit is not only one of wholeness, but also a way to re-envision the Bible and “[uncover] whose voice they identify with in the Bible- female as opposed to male, the African as opposed to the non-African, the marginalized as opposed to the dominant.”¹²⁵ Clarice J. Martin claims that the four tasks of womanist biblical scholarship are to “[recover] the texts and their worlds, [reclaim] texts related to Africans and ‘blackness,’ [challenge] feminist theologians and biblical scholars regarding issues of race, and [address] the effects of biblical interpretation on African and African diasporic peoples.”¹²⁶ Reclaiming the Bible is a crucial step for African American women specifically, because of the horrific ways in which the Bible has been wielded both against women and against African Americans, especially during times of enslavement.

Nevertheless, some African American women have continued to hold strong to a belief that the

¹²⁴ Renita J. Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Edited by Felder, Cain Hope. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 69.

¹²⁵ Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible,” 59.

¹²⁶ Cited in Junior, *Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*, 104.

Bible has power for their lives.¹²⁷ For the women who continued to cling to Scripture and thus began the taxing work of reclaiming the Bible for themselves, the fruit which their labor has produced can stand on its own. Womanists' struggle for wholeness and their commitment to standing up against injustice in all forms has transformed not only the realm of biblical scholarship, but also how groups orient themselves around pursuing justice. This is one of the reasons why women of color are perhaps some of the most crucial candidates for leaders that might help guide Christian communities into deeper reconciliation with one another and all of creation.

Brenda Salter McNeil, an author and Christian leader for reconciliation, insists that women of color dwell within a unique situation for leadership. "Women," McNeil writes, "especially women of color, have a more acute understanding of the interlocking structures of oppression. [Women of color's] lived experiences inform [their] imagination and [their] methodology for leading in a more communal and equitable way."¹²⁸ Women of color, according to McNeil, should be the first place we look for leadership: "Our experience of oppression has given us clarity into how things must change. If we really are looking for reconciliation leaders, we must look among the marginalized, disenfranchised, and vulnerable in any society and culture because they are the ones who push, prod, and poke people to move toward equality and freedom."¹²⁹ Womanist scholarship has existed to edify, encourage, and heal the community of Black women. Yet, their insights into wholeness that emerge from their own life experiences

¹²⁷ Raquel St. Clair claims that "African American women have accessed meaning in the text that contradicts the racist, sexist, and classist interpretations of their oppressors" (St. Clair, "Womanist Biblical Interpretation," 57-58). She cites Renita J. Weems, as Weems understands that "although the Bible has been used to subjugate African Americans, it is 'still extremely influential in the African American religious life.' One reason for the Bible's continued influence is that for African American women 'the Bible still has some power of its own.' In other words, African American women view the Bible as authoritative for their lives." (St. Clair 57-58).

¹²⁸ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Becoming Brave: Finding the Courage to Pursue Racial Justice Now* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 140.

¹²⁹ McNeil, *Becoming Brave*, 149.

offer something very unique to the outside world and other readers of Scripture.¹³⁰ Learning from those who have experienced the harsh realities of structural oppression in this world might allow us to move forward into areas that foster belonging and equity for all.

1.8. Conclusion of Reception Histories

The trends of interpretation touched on in these sections represent only a mere fraction of the vast amount of interpretive work produced by scholars over the past centuries. The sheer variety of interpretations, let alone the gravity they hold within their respective communities, is a testament to the significance Galatians 3:28 has had within Christian communities. Some of these perspectives offer an insight into the conclusions that believers have made and the practical implications their understandings have had, both within their own communities and upon surrounding ones. Other times, it is clear that interpreters have failed to allow their understanding to transform their lives beyond a spiritual ideal and, thus, stifle the potential for fullness in their community.

Whether or not a practical program based on their interpretation of Galatians 3:28 is implemented in a community has real effects on each congregant involved. Not only that, but it affects the overall witness of the congregation, either positively or negatively. We have seen interpretations of Scripture yield both good fruit and bad fruit, depending on whether or not the interpretation itself stands on healthy soil. Even choosing not to implement a practical program of unity and equality is in itself a choice that bears consequences. When the early Christian leaders refused to allow their understanding of gender equality in Galatians 3:28 to change

¹³⁰ The Wesleyan tradition, in which the churches I have chosen to survey reside, values the role of experience during the interpretation of Scripture, in order to apply and examine interpretations in everyday life. Womanist scholars have brought their life experiences into their interpretations of Scripture and thus their interpretations are formed by their lived experiences. The Wesleyan tradition similarly values bringing life experiences to interpretations and thus living out these interpretations in order to see if they bear fruit in the midst of complex situations.

gender roles in their churches, homes, and society, they effectively perpetuated the subordination of women in these spaces. The North American church's construction of vocational barriers, as well as the perpetuation of gender-based roles in the home and society, relied in part on a reading of Scripture that upheld a hierarchical notion of gender. An even more horrific example of the consequences that come through unhealthy interpretations of Scripture is when white enslavers taught that Black people were the descendants of Ham and thus cursed.¹³¹ These enslavers wielded their interpretations of Scripture into a weapon that sought to justify their brutal and racist practices against the enslaved people. However, the consequential implications of a specific hermeneutic have not always been so negative. What emerged from spaces of oppression and violence were the rising voices of black women, who through Womanist scholarship gave voice to those who have been left out of black and feminist frameworks. Womanist biblical scholarship has borne much fruit by way of affirming, encouraging, and building up communities of black women.¹³²

Biblical interpretations can and do have positive effects on Christian communities; it is, however, crucial to attempt to fully understand the ecclesial implications that a certain interpretation has. Galatians 3:28 is a text that can have deeply positive or negative implications for a local church community, depending on how a community receives it. In the subsequent sections, I will attempt to uncover the interpretation of this verse used by both church leadership and congregants within two current congregations in the Wesleyan theological tradition. The

¹³¹ Lisa M. Bowens explains that a “common belief during this time was that the story of Ham in Genesis 9:18-27 sanctioned slavery as well. Proponents of slavery proclaimed that Ham was the originator of the black race and that the curse Noah pronounced upon Canaan referred to God's ordination of black's enslavement” (Lisa M. Bowens, Emerson B. Powery, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020], 16).

¹³² Nyasha Junior cites Renita J. Weems's claim that “the primary work of womanist scholars is to empower African American women” (Nyasha Junior, *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* [Westminster: John Knox Press, 2015], 101).

interpretive tendencies identified will aid in continuing our discussion of beneficial or harmful church practices that directly stem from each interpretation, either consciously or not. Finally, a new framework will be offered in hopes of shifting each hermeneutic so that the practices of the church will be more beneficial to the whole life of the congregation, in accordance with the affirmation of the role and calling of the Church.

2. Study of Local Churches

2.1. Introduction to Congregations¹³³

For this church study, three churches were initially chosen to participate in a brief, seven-question online survey. All people in the church were invited to participate, including pastoral leadership, attending members and non-members, as well as church staff and volunteers. The selected churches are all congregations within the Wesleyan theological tradition. This aspect was chosen intentionally for the purposes of firstly, a control in the study, and secondly, because of my personal connections to Wesleyan church leaders via the denominational affiliation of my university. Unfortunately, only two of the three churches were able to be included in this project. The names and identifying characteristics of individuals and congregations have been changed entirely in order to protect the privacy of the participants.

The first church to participate in this study will be named under the pseudonym “Oceanside Church.” Oceanside Church is located within the highest socioeconomic range in the city. The majority of congregants in this church are mostly older (65+); however, there is a wide range of ages from children, young students and couples, as well as older residents from the surrounding neighborhood. Those who participated in the online survey were aged from 32-79 years old. Roughly 57% of respondents were male, while 43% were female. One-hundred percent of the participants in the online survey from Oceanside Church were Caucasian; this is

¹³³ See Appendix 1 and 2 for full, anonymized results of the questionnaire portion of the survey.

representative of the majority of congregants in Oceanside church, although not all. Participants from this survey included those who are regular attending members, regular attending non-members, volunteers, board members, Sunday school teachers, and church staff.

The second church that participated in the survey will be named under the pseudonym “City Church.” This congregation is located in a middle class neighborhood that resides in a more urban area of the city. Their location incorporates various socioeconomic and demographic statuses within the neighborhood. The congregation itself is majority Caucasian, but also includes a small population of diverse races and ethnicities. Only one survey participant did not identify as Caucasian. City Church’s congregants are younger in age, mostly young adults, who describe themselves in a variety of gender identities and sexualities. Those who participated in the church survey were aged 21-83. Seventy-three percent of participants were cis female, while eighteen percent were cis male. There was one transgender female and one transgender male participant. City Church is an outwardly affirming congregation that welcomes and celebrates LGBTQ+ members. Participants from this survey included a higher percentage of pastoral leadership and church staff, as well as including those who are regular attending members, regular attending non-members, volunteers, board members, and Sunday school teachers.

2.2. Pastoral Interviews

A portion of the survey given to the two congregations included a one-on-one interview with the head pastor at each church. The purpose of these interviews was to learn about the mission of each church from the side of pastoral leadership, as well as learn more about their pastoral understandings of unity and diversity in the church.

At Oceanside Church, the head pastor is a Caucasian male who has been a staple in the Oceanside community for over 15 years. The pastor at Oceanside will be named under the

pseudonym “Pastor Thomas.” Pastor Thomas has earned several graduate degrees. Thomas began talking about those who comprise his congregation as a mixture of people from the neighborhood in which Oceanside Church is located, as well as a population of young college students. “Sadly,” Pastor Thomas noted that the congregation at Oceanside was not very ethnically or racially diverse, as the majority of attendees are Caucasian. However, there is a wide diversity of ages present in the congregation, ranging from children and those in their 20s to those who are well above their 70s. Economically, Thomas noted that the church has been a host to those experiencing housing insecurity, all the way to those who have large homes, and many people in between.

Most adamantly, however, Pastor Thomas named the political and ideological differences in the congregation as the biggest diversity that is present. When asked about how Thomas leads a congregation that is composed of individuals who hold very different political identities, Thomas noted that he has hoped for his congregation to be a place in which people choose to stay, even when there is an evident tension in the space. This is possibly the place in which his understanding of psychology was evident, as Thomas continued on to explain how emotional and spiritual development tend to lead to maturity, which is what is required in holding a tension in a congregation. Pastor Thomas does not believe that Christian spaces are supposed to be where each person feels “better” because their beliefs are affirmed, but instead Christian community is supposed to be a safe space where believers can push one another past their comfort zones. The mission of Oceanside Church is to be a congregation that is guided by prayer and motivated by love. Therefore, the underlying ethic of any decision making process on the side of pastoral leadership is deciding how they might be expressing love in that situation. Oceanside’s ethic of love does not stray far from Pastor Thomas’s own hopes for the

congregation; he aims to foster safe spaces for congregants to wrestle with some of the tough questions of faith in a way that leads to inclusion for all. This requires, he noted, living within the “messiness” of uncertainty, but continuing to dwell in a community where the conversations are at least taking place.

Jumping over to City Church, the pastor of the congregation will be named under the pseudonym “Pastor Pete.” Pastor Pete is also a Caucasian male. Pete holds a seminary degree and has been a pastor for almost 20 years. When asked about City Church’s mission, Pastor Pete began by speaking about how City Church hopes to be a neighborhood church with a progressive theology. Pete admitted that although the demographics are mostly homogeneous with the majority of regular attenders consisting of Caucasian young adults, the congregation has made it a priority to work for justice, including racial justice, by taking social action. While on the topic of diversity at City Church, Pete noted that some ideological diversity could actually be harmful to their community. For instance, he noted that since City Church is an openly affirming congregation, it would be harmful to welcome opinions that would question the salvation of individuals within the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, Pete insisted that *forced unity* is actually not unity at all. He explained how pastors need to be able to call for justice from the pulpit, without being censored due to fear of congregants leaving the church. For many, City Church is actually the place in which they feel the sense of belonging in a Christian community, possibly due to a past of feeling rejected and excluded because of others’ prejudice against their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Pastor Pete’s urge to protect the congregation from further harm is thus not without cause; he knows that City Church is the “last stop at trying to be a Christian” for many. Pastor Pete has taken up the Christ-centered mission of welcoming the lost and wandering, which has shaped the congregation in a similar way. This was confirmed in

the responses from the online survey; many noted that unity was practiced very well at City Church precisely because of the emphasis on love and inclusion that Pete has preached from the pulpit.

3. Analyzing Responses from Church Surveys

3.1. Survey Responses from Oceanside Church

The conversation pertaining to collective experience of the world provides an apt transition into the discussion of the survey results from both congregations. At Oceanside Church, all of the participants in this survey reported that they were of Caucasian descent. Oceanside Church is not overtly affirming of the LGBTQ+ community,¹³⁴ so it may be fair to assume that a smaller percentage of participants would identify with a sexuality that they would not describe as “straight,” and/or a gender orientation that would not be described as fitting into the binary “male” and “female.”

Multiple repeated phrases occurred when participants were asked, *What is meant by the verse “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”?* Here, it is noteworthy that approximately 57% of respondents used the language of *equality*. However, within the percentage of those who used the term, 50% of them directly linked *equality* with being *in the eyes of God* (this was the language used by multiple participants, but in this paper we will discuss this concept by using language of *the perspective of God*). From their responses, it would seem as though Oceanside Church has a firm conviction that all humans are *created equal in God’s perspective*. However, understanding equality as *only* in the realm of God’s perspective holds implications of its own; this might be a

¹³⁴ Oceanside Church is a congregation that has connections to a denomination which does not affirm marriage by LGBTQ+ individuals, allow ordination of LGBTQ+ individuals, and thus does not “advertise” themselves as LGBTQ+ affirming in the same way that other congregations, who have the institutional freedom to do so, choose to.

slightly different concept than understanding God has created all humans equally in God's perspective and thus the people of the Church must treat one another in the same way. This is a concept that we will return to as we analyze City Church's somewhat different understanding of equality.

Additionally, throughout the responses, Oceanside Church tended to use language of diversity having *nothing to do with* believers' standing before God. On the one hand, this statement is not problematic in itself; many would agree that God loves everybody equally, regardless of particularities. Might this statement infer, however, that differences must be dissolved in hopes of unity or that God somehow does not love someone *including* all of their particularities? Throughout the survey, participants noted that "race, class, and gender have *nothing to do* with my standing in the eyes of God... [and may mean that] ideally, race, class, and gender should *mean nothing* in Christian community," as well as noting that "Everyone can be one in Christ—*does not matter* who you are or what you do."¹³⁵ Regarding questions about Christian unity, participants answered that unity has "nothing to do with social status, gender, or race," but "transcend[s] the idea of black or white, male or female, straight or not straight," because we must "focus... on how we are the same rather than our differences." One response even said that Christian unity is "refusing to be offended by others." These replies beg the question of whether there needs to be a removal of differences, either ideological or physical, in order to be unified. Is this truly what Galatians 3:28 was proclaiming as believers were baptized into the waters of this new community? I believe these were the same questions that plagued early Christian interpreters as well, who sought to understand if something like gender (or, rather, femaleness) would be washed away in Christ.

¹³⁵ Italics added for emphasis.

The ethic that ignores diversity under the pretext of seeking unity might easily transform into a different, more harmful concept of *color-blindness*. In Montague Williams's work on the dynamics of race and racism in multiracial and multiethnic youth ministry settings, Williams uncovered that seeking "intentional blindness toward skin color" also ends up "foster[ing] blindness toward systemic realities of race and racism."¹³⁶ His findings are published in the book, *Church in Color*, which addresses how color-blindness in local congregations, specifically youth ministries in Williams's case, "demands that young people do the impossible task of leaving their bodies at the church door and pick it back up on their way home."¹³⁷ The practice of color-blindness "does not make room for the many stories, questions, and experiences regarding race, racism, and racial identity that youth and young adults are longing to engage amidst discipleship."¹³⁸ Although Williams's work was focused on contexts of youth and young adults, it is logical to extend the harsh consequences of fostering color-blindness in all areas of a local congregation. It is not beneficial to individuals within a community to have an overarching ethic of washing away differences in favor of sameness. In fact, Williams illustrates how this can be harmful. Instead, Christian congregations ought to endeavor to be safe spaces where people can bring with them the entire context of who they are and trust that they are loved by God and others. Congregants should be able to bring the fullness of their humanity to the table, for the community they are entering into is not simply a social club; it is the temple of the Living God, the same God who pitched a tent and dwelt among humanity in all of its fullness (i.e., John 1:14). To reflect this Living God, fully revealed in Jesus Christ, is the goal of Christian community.

¹³⁶ Montague R. Williams, *Church in Color: Youth Ministry, Race, and the Theology of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2020), 50.

¹³⁷ Williams, *Church in Color*, 59.

¹³⁸ Williams, *Church in Color*, 59.

In Eleazar S. Fernandez's contribution to *Voices in the Margins*, he discusses the tension Filipino Americans experience when they suffer "because of their color and yet encounter a God who affirms their ethnicity."¹³⁹ This, to Fernandez, is the foundation of their belief in a God who "is neither colorless nor colorblind; indeed, it is only in a white dominant society that God can be looked upon as colorless and colorblind (read: white). A God who is not cognizant of color is a God who is not cognizant of the pain of those who suffer because of color."¹⁴⁰ Fernandez names an important danger of color-blindness: it can sometimes manifest in practice as whitewashing. A color-blind church could infer a color-blind God, but this, Fernandez claims, should never be the case. Even though God transcends color, Fernandez notes that "God is colorful and cognizant of the beauty of each color. Such a colorful and color-loving God would be 'pissed off,' to use the expression of Alice Walker, 'if [we] pass by the color purple in the field somewhere and don't notice it.'"¹⁴¹ Douglas J. Moo affirms that Galatians 3:28 has sometimes been "prized as a far-reaching and fundamental claim about the way in which the distinctions that 'matter' in the world we live in are to be left at the door of the church."¹⁴² Thus, some groups feel excluded, ostracized, and unwelcome in Christian communities based on others' prejudice against their particularities (race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, political ideologies, socioeconomic status, etc.). Pastor Thomas was not shy in his discussion of what he hopes Oceanside Church to be: a community that lives out the "admonition to love." This is precisely the ethic that seeks to bring together those who are wrestling with their own tough questions. Pastor Thomas understands all to be welcome to this place.

¹³⁹ Eleazar S. Fernandez, "Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans' Struggle to Realize the Promised Land in America" in *Voices From The Margins: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Ed., R.S. Sugirtharajah; Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 304.

¹⁴⁰ Fernandez, "Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans' Struggle," 304.

¹⁴¹ Fernandez, "Exodus-toward-Egypt: Filipino-Americans' Struggle," 304.

¹⁴² Moo, *Galatians*, 255.

A few of the participants did indeed respond in a resistant way to the notion of uniformity.¹⁴³ Pastor Thomas has been clear in his discussion of Christian community as a place where the tensions of difference should be held safely and lovingly.¹⁴⁴ Pastor Thomas works hard to foster an ethic of love and unity amidst ideological tension at Oceanside Church. Brad R. Braxton describes this as the very work that Galatians 3:28 calls us to do. Braxton states that Galatians 3:28 “can motivate congregations to strive for more equitable relationships across ethnic, economic, and gender lines. From a Pauline perspective, ethnic unity implies the maintenance of ethnic distinctions. Genuine unity will require deliberate, consistent, and ruggedly honest dialogue and fellowship among distinct groups.”¹⁴⁵ This is precisely the work that Pastor Thomas is committed to as a pastoral responsibility at Oceanside Church; this work is one that resists the temptation to dismiss diverse identities and instead makes room for all the particularities of a person to enter into the community and be held in love.

3.2. Survey Responses from City Church

At City Church, approximately five percent of survey respondents identified themselves as a race or ethnicity other than Caucasian. Although participants were not asked to share their sexual orientation in the survey, the mission statement and demographics of City Church does indicate that a large percentage of these participants may identify themselves on the LGBTQ+ spectrum.¹⁴⁶ Roughly nine percent of the participants identified as transgender.

Several notable phrases were mentioned repeatedly throughout the responses in the survey.¹⁴⁷ When asked, *What is meant by the verse “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither*

¹⁴³ See full results in Appendix 1.

¹⁴⁴ See section 2.2 for a full description of Pastor Thomas’s interview.

¹⁴⁵ Braxton, “Galatians,” 340.

¹⁴⁶ See section 2.1 of the description of City Church, as well as section 2.2 with Pastor Pete’s interview.

¹⁴⁷ For full survey results, see Appendix 2.

slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”?, nearly one-third (32%) of the responses included the language of *children of God*. Fifty percent of the responses referenced *all* being included. Additionally, language of being *equal* was present; however, the majority of the time, *equality* in the perspective of God was paired with equality in the perspective of one another. A participant noted: “All are regarded as equally beloved by God and *there is an implicit mandate here to view all as equal to each other.*” In something of a contrast to Oceanside Church’s understanding of equality, the respondents at City Church seemed to be naming an important characteristic of the people of God, to live as reflections of God. If we understand that all of humanity was created equally in the perspective of God, these congregants made explicit connections to the calling and role of the Church to reflect God’s love for one another in this same way.

In each of the survey questions asked, respondents offered their ideas of difference and identity in community. The participants at City Church thought about diversity in a particular way: they claimed and celebrated it. The majority of congregants saw their diversity as good and their differences as things that should be held on to.¹⁴⁸ They did *not* interpret the verse as meaning that their differences should be washed away in the name of Christ; in the words of one participant, “Our unity does not dissolve our uniqueness in ethnicity, gender or sexuality.” It seems as though, at City Church, their differences matter deeply to them. Their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and anything else, make up who they are. Galatians 3:28 was interpreted in light of this. This follows an interpretation of the verse that suggests the only things being utterly destroyed in Galatians 3:28 are the hierarchies of power that are attached to individuals and the stifling of life that follows those crushing power struggles. To be welcomed into this new community does not mean a destruction of difference, but a destruction of worldly power.

¹⁴⁸ See Appendix 2 for full survey results.

Many of the participants at City Church may not hold positions of privileges in regard to gender or sexual orientation, especially within most Christian circles. City Church's study brings up important questions of what the broader Church community can learn about inclusion from those who have felt ostracized and excluded from Christian communities.

From the results of this survey, it is clear that one of the centerpieces of solving the problem of exclusion in Christian communities is directly related to the understanding of God's love for all individuals. Not only that, but also an understanding that human beings have been made in the *Imago Dei* and thus are tasked with the creational mandate to reflect God in all the finite ways one can. If God's love for an individual fully includes all of their particularities, then Christian believers must also extend their God-given love to others in the same way. City Church seems to place a strong emphasis on everybody's inclusion in the Kingdom of God and everybody's access to salvation and relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ. *All* have *equal* access to become *children of God*, invited by the cosmic, transformative, work of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This truth, anchored in the work of Jesus Christ, may have unique and valuable insights to teach and challenge the Church with, as we continue to ponder the ideas of unity and diversity in Christian community. A return to the ways in which communities have received Galatians 3:28 and allowed their interpretations to inform their communal practices will be a beneficial place to begin our conversation on a solution.

4. A Discussion on the Need for Unity

4.1. The Purpose of Unity

The interview with Pastor Pete disrupted an easy definition of unity and its place in the Church. There are many passages in the New Testament that talk about the unity of believers, including Jesus's very own prayer to his Father in John 17 (see also 1 Cor 1:10, Phil 2:2, Eph 4:3,

etc.). The ethos behind Galatians 3:28 urges believers to understand that we *already are* “one in Christ Jesus.” How can the Body of Christ truly be unified if there is so much diversity in thought and opinion (*especially* if some of those perspectives are deemed harmful to others)?

Including the entirety of the Body of Christ, together with each differing opinion and the baggage we and our neighbors hold, may only be possible if we truly understand the meaning of what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ accomplished for humanity, confirmed through the proclamations of Galatians 3:28. What Christ has done on the cross and through the empty grave is flip power and death on its end. All structures of power and hierarchies based on difference are completely and utterly destroyed in light of the God who dwelt with and ate among the sinners. Jesus died on the cross *as* one of the lowest of lows, and only through this was Christ exalted to the highest place (Phil 2:9). In this very Christ, no longer does the *Jew*, the *free person*, or the *male* need to feel the obligation of power on their hands, but instead can choose to lay down their positions at the foot of the One who did the same. No longer is the *Gentile*, the *enslaved*, or the *female* automatically placed at the bottom of the line, at the places of oppression and subordination. No, all of these identities are under Christ. These were the roles in Paul’s time that would have stung the ears of those who heard them with an instant recognition of just how unequal these pairs really were. Yet, today, there are still those who perpetuate their own gain and glory at the expense of others. There are those who are welcome in spaces of honor and those who are not. The terms of Galatians 3:28 are not limited to us today, but by the power of the Holy Spirit we are enabled to see the hierarchical pairs all around us. And yet, we are called into a community that refuses to perpetuate these power structures, and instead lays down their lives for one another, just as their Savior did for them. Gaventa understands this to be the central point of Galatians 3:28, that “Those who find themselves ‘in Christ’ also are not ‘in’ the

power arena that makes questions of equality necessary...¹⁴⁹ The new creation that Christ has called believers into separates the activity of wielding power so far from them that a question regarding equality *would not even be deemed necessary*. This is precisely the type of radical new living that Galatians 3:28 might be calling us to.

Gaventa makes an important point: the pairings noted by Paul “reflect not simply spheres of identity but also the privilege assigned to one member of each pair: the Jew, the free person, the male. Yet what Paul declares is not simply that the gospel brings these privileges to an end, but that the pairs no longer exist.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, the structures of power that have upheld the privilege of one pair while oppressing the other are completely destroyed in Christ. It is here that we find a deep understanding of what Christ’s work on the cross and through an empty grave accomplished salvifically, which ultimately transforms the way that humans live together in society. This is the truth of what being *in Christ* really means; it is not merely a cover-up of old social distinctions but a complete transformation of them into something new. This is precisely the community in which believers are invited into.¹⁵¹ The words of Galatians 3:28 were spoken over early Christians during their baptism as important proclamations of what new life they were entering.

Today, Christian communities have the ability to hold well the tension of differences and still pursue unity, if only we acknowledge the transformative and life-renewing power of the Holy Spirit that is in our midst. By the Holy Spirit’s outpouring on believers at Pentecost, we have been gifted with the equipment and accessibility to live out the ideal. Christians have been given the power to live and love in radically new ways. The hope is that Christian communities would be able to dwell as spaces of diversity, who hold well the tension of difference and

¹⁴⁹ Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 72.

¹⁵⁰ Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul*, 72.

¹⁵¹ Paul utilizes the term *en* (meaning “in”) and *eis* (meaning “into”) in strongly directional/geographical ways, which references believers entering into and existing within the sphere of Christ’s rule. There is also reference to this in Lyons, *Galatians*, 233.

encourage the fullness of life and purpose in one another. Ephesians 4:3 urges believers to “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (NRSV). This is the work of uniting love, that continually makes the effort to *strive* towards unity. Will we choose to lean into this miraculous and continual work of God in every area of community life, or will we ignore the invitation to live in this radical new way?

It is an honest and humble act to look around at the seemingly broken world that surrounds us and be discouraged even at the thought of unity. Even institutionally, the Church finds itself existing as local churches and denominations that group together believers separately. Yet, we must also recognize that these congregations are filled with individuals *striving* for unity. Or, at least they could be. Many external and internal factors, some beyond our control, influence our surroundings and diminish our potentials. Some of these may even be longstanding traditions of scriptural interpretation, which stirred the urge for this very paper.

Our Christian communities, cracked and finite as they may be, are always in need of healing, of living a more full and fruitful life than the one they did yesterday. All of human existence is like this. We constantly seek to live better, fuller, and healthier than the day before. Christians identify the source of this healing as God, who alone has the power to bring new life from death. In fact, this is the very God that defeated death and offers life to those who are in the darkest, most hopeless places of this world. This is the God of the outsider, the ostracized, the one who does not feel invited. With the Holy Spirit stirring within believers and within the Church, individuals and Christian congregations can be the ones to invite and pour out love on the very ones that Christ holds close. Unity is not so hard to strive for when we understand the love of God for ourselves and for others. Will we lean into this?¹⁵²

¹⁵² Dr. Michael Lodahl’s insights are significant here, especially surrounding the ideas of Paul Tillich’s “conditions of existence” and Eph 4:3.

4.2. An Appeal to Paul

Putting Paul's words in Galatians 3:28 into practice, even if we have all the courage in the world, is still a challenging ask. Even looking to the author of the letter himself, our hopes are not drawn very high. In some ways, we do unfortunately see that Paul did not always allow his understanding of the new unity proclaimed in Galatians 3:28 to affect the way his congregations operated. During Paul's time, placing women in positions of Christian leadership was still unevenly enacted. Various New Testament texts, including the disputed Pauline letters, include language that would be considered harmful to modern understandings of female autonomy. George Lyons observes that "if [Paul] claimed that culturally defined gender stereotypes no longer operated within the church, his differing advice to men and women in 1 Cor. 11-14 indicated that even he had difficulty consistently putting this into practice."¹⁵³ On the other hand, Paul's own letters also testify to women as leaders, such as Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia, who were clearly influential in the Christian tradition and who held leadership roles in the early church (see Romans 16:1, 3, 7). Witherington writes optimistically about Paul:

Paul [is] attempting to implement this social transformation in various places and ways, whether we reflect on Philemon where he argues that a slave is actually or brother or sister in Christ, should be treated as such, and even requests Philemon to set him free, or on 1 Cor. 7 where Paul argues for equality in the marriage relationship, or on this passage in Galatians where he strives to make clear to his gentile converts that they already have in and through Christ all the benefits Jews or Jewish Christians were offering them through observance of the Mosaic Law.¹⁵⁴

However optimistic the evidence we have for females assuming positions of leadership in the early church or an enslaved man being welcomed as a brother, the tradition of hierarchies still remain stubbornly stuck in the forefront of society's mind. Smith is convinced that Paul's vision

¹⁵³ Lyons, *Galatians*, 233.

¹⁵⁴ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 279.

in Galatians 3:28 completely “fall[s] apart when one looks for a social program” that would align with his understanding.¹⁵⁵

If Smith is correct, it begs the question of *why it was* that Paul’s own revelation did not overflow immediately into his church practices? And *why*, if we do understand Paul’s letters as having influence in the communities he sent them to, as well as the authoritative baptismal language of Galatians 3:28, did Paul’s inheritors and surrounding Christian circles not interpret this statement in ways that made *them* live an ultimately transformed existence in all areas of life? Yet, it is possible that many early believers *did* understand Paul’s statement this way. There is even evidence in Paul’s other writings that women, enslaved peoples, and gentiles were treated in more compassionate and humane ways within Christian communities, as is stated in Witherington’s quote above. This, however, has just not been the broader scope of Christian thought since Paul’s time. Perhaps even Paul could not fully imagine the implications of what he was proclaiming. And perhaps we do the same. Since the 1970s, it was widely interpreted that Galatians 3:28 was calling for the equality of male and female.¹⁵⁶ Yet, that conviction did not trickle down into church practices on a widespread basis. Many leaders would not allow it to (read: those with the power wanted to continue to self-sustain by perpetuating their own privilege while dismissing the autonomy of others). Many women have still experienced societal bondage to submissive gender roles. Until nearly the 20th century, humans were still being enslaved by wealthy landowners. Christians, for centuries, have had access to scriptural resources that challenged the practice of enslavement, but neglected to implement them. I perceive that

¹⁵⁵ Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 34.

Additionally, Abraham Smith presses that Paul only spent his energy on the *Jew/Gentile* pairing and neglected to put into practice a program that addressed the *slave/free* and *male/female* pairings of the verse (Smith, “Paul and African American Biblical Interpretation,” 33-34).

¹⁵⁶ Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior*, 79.

Christian churches have built up barriers that stifled the fullness that could have been and neglected to allow the power of the Holy Spirit to truly transform in all of the ways God wishes.

We must continue to pursue this truth and be sensitive to the Spirit. Recognizing how believers have failed to fully understand in the past can shed light on our current misunderstandings and ways in which we can lean on the grace of God to show us paths anew. Christian believers must take up the difficult task of looking deeply at what their interpretation might bear: whether that is good fruit that is full and tastes of sweetness, or faulty fruit that is rotten and tastes of the perpetuation of oppression and the extinguishing of potential. Once we find out what type of fruit our interpretations bear, we must finally and ultimately act in ways that are most edifying for the Body. This action might require a change in soil or a shift in technique, but these changes are worth it. For the fullness of the life of the church depends on our willingness to love one another adequately. We must begin this work of love by first listening to those who have been excluded, oppressed, and hurt by power structures similar to those listed in Galatians 3:28. These are the voices that have been subjected to silence and unjust treatment, but now must be amplified. For the entirety of the Body of Christ is not truly an entirety if some voices are lost in the shuffle. As a participant in City Church's survey beautifully said, "Without willingness to reach out to those most ostracized and bring them into the full fold of a Christian community, you can't actually have full unity."

5. New Frameworks

5.1. Summary of Reception Histories

I hope it is obvious that interpreters during the early church era interpreted this piece of Scripture with all of their own contextual particularities fully intact. On the one hand, it is

impossible to read Scripture without the interpreter's own personal context shining through.¹⁵⁷ However, on the other hand, the ancient understanding does not necessarily convince modern readers in the same way. An ancient interpretation that the *no longer male and female* section of Galatians 3:28 could function as an eschatological foretelling of women becoming androgynous or fully male beings at the end of time may seem not only ridiculous, but also reflects a harmful view of the value of women. What ancient interpreters can teach us, however, is a more accurate understanding of Paul's global context during which he wrote the letter and therefore the political, social, and socioeconomic factors that were at play during that time. Moreover, this expertise also helps us to learn the purpose of Galatians 3:28, or at least the foundation of it, as a baptismal formula before Christian believers participated in this sacrament. Early believers during Paul's time would have attached significant value to baptism and the words spoken over them during their baptism held authoritative weight. These were the words that signified a new community, performatively spoken to those who would now be considered *in Christ*. As such, the ancient readers and hearers of Galatians 3:28 would have likely recognized its baptismal language and perhaps understood its weightiness. Baptism was the ritual that initiated a believer into this new community in Christ, and thus the unequal pairings they recognized all around them were challenged by the invitation to no longer live with one another in ways that perpetuated power struggles. The consensus that Galatians 3:28 was a baptismal formula aids our learning in what it meant to believers then and what it can similarly mean to us now. Brad R. Braxton perfectly sums it up in this comment:

When people enter the Christian community through belief in Christ and baptism, they do not lose the social distinctions that have characterized their lives... Yet Christ abolishes the dominance of one over the other based on these differences! Jews should not

¹⁵⁷ The Wesleyan tradition affirms this through the "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," which places Tradition, Reason, and Experience as pillars in the task of interpreting Scripture.

dominate Gentiles; free persons should not dominate slaves; men should not dominate women. Christians should foster harmonious relationships characterized by mutuality and respect for social difference... Christian unity emerges only when the social distinctions that define us are present and acknowledged but never used as a means of domination.¹⁵⁸

Contemporary interpretations such as those offered by N.T. Wright and Brigitte Kahl help us to understand the dynamic situation between Jews and gentiles during Paul's time of writing the letter and serve as a helpful guide of just how radical Paul's rejection of gentile believers' circumcision really was. All of this informs and strengthens our argument that Paul was proclaiming a radical truth for his time period, one that not only challenged believers then, but also continues to challenge the Church today.

Christian communities evidence the fact that Galatians 3:28 has not always been taken at its word. Christian scholars and church leaders did not allow themselves to put this verse fully into practice. Even though many understood Paul's words as proclaiming a new unity in Christ that would destroy structures of power and hierarchies between the pairs, they did not allow this new unity in Christ to trickle down into their everyday practices.¹⁵⁹ For many years, many "Christians" approved of slavery and subjugated women in society, churches, and homes. Looking back at this story throughout history does confront Christian communities today with an urgent question: *Will we allow ourselves to fall into the same trap, or will we live into this radical transformation of power, present through the redemptive and almighty work of Jesus Christ on the cross?* This is not only a question for Christian leaders and scholars, but also for participants in every Christian community to wrestle with. Looking back on how believers have historically interpreted this verse and implemented its truth into their communities—or not—grants us the very same invitation to ponder our own role in striving for unity.

¹⁵⁸ Baxton, "Galatians," 340.

¹⁵⁹ See section 1.5 and 4.2.

5.2. New Framework Offered from Church Surveys + Womanist Scholarship

We will turn now to the online survey given to Oceanside and City Church. The responses from both of these congregations presented difficult and pressing questions to wrestle with, both for the sake of the institutions they are a part of and for the sake of the Church's witnessing role in the world.

From both congregations, language of *equality* arose, and attached to it are important theological concepts. Both congregations understood all people to be created equal in the perspective of God. However, participants at City Church took their understanding a step further and identified the connection of God's perspective and our own. They pointed out a crucial characteristic of the Church: to be those who reflect Christ in the world. If Christian communities are really striving to know their identity as the *Imago Dei* and then live into this truth in their pursuit of becoming more like Jesus, then it is a logical and loving step to move from a simple understanding of God's love for others and a choice to reflect that love for others.

Loving others in this way includes their many particularities. Language in both congregations' responses brought up the question of celebrating differences or suppressing them. City Church discussed their differences in a way that was ultimately tied to their individual identities and thus did not think they should be washed away. Oceanside Church responded in this area, particularly through their pastor, that diverse ideological opinions were not a bad thing in their congregation if only they were held in loving tension. Further insights from Montague Williams's work on the harmful effects of color-blindness in Christian congregations press toward loving and including *every part* of a person's story, including their diversity. Ultimately, from these discussions it is clear that diversity, whether physical or ideological, has a place in Christian communities and should not be suppressed in hopes for unity. Ultimately, the

suppression of difference is not unity; it is uniform sameness, which is unhealthy to the lives of those in Christian congregations.

It is perhaps most unfortunate that our discussions of unity take place without many who might have valuable things to say. This tragic injustice occurs because some have been excluded from the conversation, due to their experience of exclusion from a community. Regardless of whether they have been excluded institutionally or due to prejudice, there are believers who feel as though they have not been loved by some Christian communities. For many, this provokes feelings of not being loved by God. This begs the questions: What changes must Christian individuals and groups make to ensure that not only do believers love *everybody* because of God's own love, but also ensure that those who are feeling excluded instead feel genuinely included and loved? As Pastor Thomas said in his interview, "Love cares how it comes across." We must be careful to love in a way that trusts first and foremost in the powerful work and presence of God, but also understands that believers have the opportunity to be vessels of God's love in relational ways.

I cannot simply write this section and refuse to name those in which I have seen feel excluded and unloved from Christian communities. There are undoubtedly groups who feel the effects of exclusion that will unfortunately go unnamed here; however, I believe it is important to testify to how I have been shown some of the most painful stories of those in the LGBTQ+ community. Through my time spent at and responses read from City Church, an openly affirming Wesleyan congregation, I can tell that many have felt welcomed in a local church for perhaps the first time in their lives. My personal frame of reference also includes deep relationships with those within the LGBTQ+ community. I have heard only fractions of their stories, but it was enough to make me wonder what our role is as believers in light of our differences. Of course, I

hope and believe that the majority of Christian congregations today would not turn someone away from their doors. However, some have not *felt* truly welcomed and loved in these spaces, and *love cares about how it comes across*. What would it look like to fully include these groups into a community where God's love was tantamount? I believe the faithful first step is always to look to God and be attentive to where the Holy Spirit might be leading. It is possible that God could lead us towards greater unity and inclusion through the very voices of those who have been marginalized. The ones who have been excluded from community might be able to teach us what it looks like to *be included*. Looking to leaders who understand the dynamics of oppression and thus can effectively and empathetically lead others in unifying work is not only a discussion with the LGBTQ+ community, but also includes the work of leaders of color.

Womanist scholarship has done and continues to do valuable work in the field of biblical studies and theology.¹⁶⁰ Their work has the purpose of edifying communities of Black women. Womanists have identified crucial truths that can inform broader communities with wisdom and skillful leadership. Listening to voices that have experienced oppression and marginalization is a critical step in becoming a more healed and whole society. Braxton states, "If churches desire to bring to life genuine unity, those who have typically held power (for example, white people, the economically advantaged, and men) will have to experience the 'labor pains' of sharing power with, or even relinquishing power to, those on the margins."¹⁶¹ Womanist scholars have something valuable to share in this arena. We can all learn from the womanist pursuit of wholeness that focuses not just on the flourishing of their own, but all of creation. Women of

¹⁶⁰ Insight from a conversation with M'Lynn Martin proposes that *Womanism* is a theory and movement of Black women who are focused on the specific concerns of Black women in everyday life as well as the wholeness of all creation. *Womanism*, much like *feminism*, is not confined to the realm of Christian scholarship; rather, it is utilized in secular spaces as well. Womanist theology, therefore, is an area of Christian scholarship where thematic claims and observations are made by womanist scholars as they interpret the Bible.

¹⁶¹ Braxton, "Galatians," 341.

color are situated in a context that allows them to be more aware of oppression in all contexts. These are the voices we need; these are the leaders we are yearning for. Those who understand the dynamics of oppression and injustice can wisely see the complexities of the task of unity in spite of this. Communities must amplify the voices in their own groups and surrounding groups that have been silenced in the past. Listening to these testimonies and trusting their instincts to lead can allow us also to pursue wholeness for ourselves and all of creation. Life is celebrated in this space. Particularities are celebrated, not only because they are given by God, but also because of the valuable role that each person can uniquely bring to the table. Seeing one another fully means seeing their hurts, their pains, their desires, and their giftings, which each have a space in Christian community. This is how we might most fully live out our calling as the Church in fruitful and prosperous ways: to uplift every voice, to seek justice in every space, and to value every person equally and with equity. The work that Christ has done and is doing in the Church has allowed for this.

6. Why This Matters Theologically for the Church

So here we arrive at our conclusions and thus have the pressing question in mind of *why any of this matters*. Yet, if we understand our role as the Body of Christ, then we must know that the very nature of the *one Body* (Eph 2:16) brings those who are distinct, together. If the current frameworks we operate in do not include the entirety of the Body of Christ, then they are incomplete and in desperate need of revision. It is not true unity if all voices are not heard. Those voices that have been crushed, silenced, and shunned are speaking out elsewhere. However, what Christian congregations are missing by this deficit in their midst is an invitation to fullness and an opportunity for wholeness. Not only do each of these people have a place in Christian

community and at the Messianic table, but the words they speak are valuable and needed in this crucial work of striving towards unity.

If the Church's role is to reflect Christ, then we must love the outsider as Christ did (e.g., Luke 15:1-2). Loving others includes inviting them in. For Christ has already given them a seat at the banquet table and continues to call them in. Christ beckons us all in. For those who do not feel safe in institutional churches, the job of believers is to foster comfort. For those who feel silenced by the privileged voices in a room, the job is to invite and amplify. For those who have been refused jobs or forced into societal roles, the job is to remind one another of the transformative work of Christ. Galatians 3:28 is not only a verse about equality, it is a verse that gives us a slight glimpse into the fullness of what the Kingdom of God might be. It is a passage that shows Christ's complete and utter decimation of hierarchies and power structures that exist in all parts of life, whether that is in society, local churches, vocationally, or homes. This is the passage that was used to radically proclaim God's grace in the midst of gentile inclusion during the time of Paul. Although our discussions are different now, the Holy Spirit is proclaiming the very same truth of unity. All of these hierarchical pairs have been leveled at the foot of the cross. Those with privilege are now in Christ and thus should not wield their power in ways that oppress others, but work for the *wholeness* of all creation. Those in positions of subordination have been acknowledged to their true place of respect and dignity, signified by their voices being heard and their differences being valued. This is a radical calling for the Church. Scripture testifies that in the Pauline community, people deeply struggled with this calling in their context. The early church did not always follow through. *Will we?*

God has delivered us from sin and death into eternal life. God's redemption is not just for the eschaton, but also for today. Christ offers *abundant, full* life. Choosing to lean into our

calling as the Church, by the power of the Holy Spirit and through our understanding of Christ's work on the cross, can mean more fullness and prosperity in Christian congregations. Every moment, we must continue to discuss and strive towards this unity, for this is how we live more fully and abundantly into our role as God's people. May God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. May we be courageous enough to seek it.

Appendix 1. Oceanside Church

The following are the full results from the questionnaire portion of the survey given to Oceanside Church. Responses have been randomized and anonymized in order to protect privacy. All grammatical idiosyncrasies are retained from the original survey responses.

1. *What is meant by the verse “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”?* (Galatians 3:28, NIV).
 - a. Everyone is equal. We are all special.
 - b. As Christians, we should treat one another equally - without distinction.
 - c. I think it means we are all equal in the body of Christ. There is no one who is better than another.
 - d. Everyone can be one in Christ—does not matter who you are or what you do, etc.
 - e. To me it means, at least, that race, class, and gender have nothing to do with my standing in the eyes of God. It may also mean that, ideally, race, class, and gender should mean nothing in Christian community. That’s a tricky idea because race, class, and gender determine so much in human societies.
 - f. Christ does not look at human divisions and boxes we have created to establish hierarchies. Christ's kingdom is for everyone.
 - g. It means our cause for unity is not in ethnic, economic or gender identities but in shared unity through Christ’s saving love and shared calling.
 - h. God is inclusive of all humanity of his grace and love regardless of status
 - i. We are all equal in Christ.
 - j. All are equal in the eyes of the Lord
 - k. We are all equal in the eyes of God
 - l. None of these groups has special status over the others in the body of Christ
 - m. Salvation is not limited to a group of people (such those groups listed), but is open equally to all and people from all of these groups have equal standing before God in a salvific sense.
 - n. That we all are created equal in God's sight
2. *What do you think may have influenced your interpretation of this Bible verse?*
 - a. My background.
 - b. Long years of study and a commitment to women in ministry.
 - c. Life time of worship in church and as a psychotherapist this past 45 years I have found that many are included in the community of faith even outside of my traditional doctrinal teachings It is God's grace plus nothing that he includes us as part of his family in response to his invitation. Prior to my 45 years as a psychotherapist, I was a youth pastor and campus life staff trainer for almost ten years. Most of all my own times of desperation, divorce, and intense personal crises god met there. His world was not flat and I found that I did not sail off the

edge of his universe (Columbus) he met me and I felt embarrassed in spite of very conservative upbringing that for example divorce was just not acceptable.

- d. It seems like there were divisions regarding practices of Jews (e.g. circumcision) that made some feel like they were better than the Gentiles. This and other scriptures reminds us that separation does not need to occur.
 - e. My academic study, I'm sure, has influenced me. I hope my desire to learn to set aside privilege also plays a role.
 - f. The overall mention in scripture of God not playing favorites
 - g. Jesus welcomed all, and all played a part in the beginnings of the christian communities.
 - h. Bible studies, personal devotion time, sermons, Bible classes in college
 - i. Church teaching, other Bible passages
 - j. I've been influenced by the Bible that I've read and sermons that I have heard
 - k. Life long involvement in church.
 - l. Knowledge of the Bible
 - m. My study of the scriptures over the years and my attendance in church.
 - n. Knowing Jesus's life modeled inclusivity despite social expectations. I assume my Nazarene upbringing too.
3. *To the best of your ability, please express what you believe is meant by the idea of "Christian unity."*
- a. I probably have- it is a very familiar verse but I don't remember anything about it.
 - b. That there should be unity in the church even when we don't see it in the world
 - c. I'm sure I've heard many but I don't remember a specific sermon.
 - d. That all are equal in the eyes of the Lord
 - e. Yes
 - f. Yes, I have heard this passage preached on many times over the course of my life. I do not recall all of the specific times. I think the context is typically the gospel and the position of different people under the gospel. That there is no longer a chosen people (i.e., Israel) that have a special relationship to God, but all come equally.
 - g. I don't remember if I have heard a sermon or lesson, but over the years I probably have.
 - h. I cannot recall one.
 - i. Yes. In church and conferences supporting unity and inclusion of many kinds. I understand that external physical and social differences do not determine calling, commitment or value. All are called to participate in one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one mission.
 - j. Yes at [University] by Pastor [Thomas]
 - k. No

- l. [Pastor Thomas] has preached on god's unconditional grace and love Only we can reject his calling. And even then it is not by ignorance or human frailty
 - m. Possibly, but I can't remember.
 - n. I'm sure I've heard sermons, but I don't recall any specific experiences at the moment.
4. *Have you heard a sermon or lesson on Galatians 3:28 before? If yes, in what context and what message did you take away from it?*
- a. All sects of Christianity are one (only the dogma of individual sects diff between them)
 - b. We are all in the same boat, we all fall under the blood of Christ. No one matters more than anyone else.
 - c. Focusing on what unites us opposed to our differences, while keeping each other accountable to prioritize and live out that we are all created in God's image and called to love and serve each other.
 - d. Christian unity is exhibiting shared purpose to love and act with care for others based in Christian faith rather than personal affinity or common opinions.
 - e. Experiencing oneness; believing others in the body of Christ, whatever their economic, ethnic or female-male status are equal.
 - f. We are all one in Christ-Christian Unity helps us feel connected to one another. It also transcend the idea of black or white, male or female, straight or not straight, etc. In God's eyes-we are all one.
 - g. Not uniformity for we are all different. We are all one in Christ and his purpose becomes our purpose.
 - h. Focusing on how we are the same rather than our differences.
 - i. We are united in our belief in the saving grace of Jesus.
 - j. I believe this refers to the fact that all Christians are under one Gospel message. We are all saved through faith in the same Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and rose again. We all serve the same God and seek to do His will in our lives in order to live into His Kingdom. We still have different preferences, backgrounds, experiences, and ways of worship. These are all normal and good. We do not need to all look the same or worship the same way in order to be one in "Christian unity." The idea of Christian unity is that despite our different preferences, we can still work together and love each other as we live in God's Kingdom.
 - k. I believe that it means we are united over the basic beliefs of our faith. It has nothing to do with social status, gender or race. It also doesn't depend on how long we have been believers.
 - l. Christian unity to me means all the congregation having the same goal
 - m. Unity calls for Christians to accept the truth that all who call on God are saved regardless of what ideas they might have about other issues.

- n. One in spirit of love; refusing to be offended by others; not sameness in thought or even on every doctrinal point.... But universal love for other believers as they are just as Christ accepted me as I am.
5. *Please try to explain the connection(s) or distinction(s) you see between unity and diversity.*
- a. Unity is inclusion in all things. Diversity is an emphasis on individual differences (race, color, religion) that, in my opinion, is covered by the word “unity”.
 - b. Unity is we are all one family, we all serve the same God. Diversity is that we all do it in our own way because God made us all individuals.
 - c. We must be able to recognize our diversity and still be united in Christ. It means we must learn to disagree agreeably.
 - d. Diversity reflects difference in gifts, background, culture; traditions but though these may lead to disagreement or to personal change.... I remain united in love as we struggle to follow Christ.
 - e. Diversity doesn't mean divisive. We can be united in our faith but diverse in the way we live out our faith.
 - f. “Diversity” describes the differences in our lived experiences. “Unity” is the call of Christ on our lives.
 - g. Diverse thought and experience promotes a better representation of Christ's kingdom because it allows for everyone to feel welcome as Christ did to all he encountered. There's no need to deny or hide your identity in order to fit in. If being a certain way is required, it is a facade of unity.
 - h. Christians should be unified in the core tenants of the Bible. There are teachings that are unambiguous and we need to accept those and be unified in them. There are other things which are gray areas or which the Bible does not give clear directives or allows for personal preference. This is where diversity can enter in and we need to be accepting of others' choices in these matters. Our individual experiences, families, tastes, giftings, etc. will influence our choices with regards to aspects of the faith that do not have a clear right and wrong way of doing them, which contributes to the diversity of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12). However, we need to all accept the core teachings on the Gospel, morality, etc. that the Bible teaches and we can't let our own desires or experiences affect our views on these things which the Bible gives clear instruction about.
 - i. I think we can be diverse in many areas but come together in our common belief in the saving grace of Jesus.
 - j. Unity is having the same Christian goal, diversity is the community have come from different walks of life perhaps and expressing those lessons and attitudes within the community.

- k. The diversity described in Gal. 3:28 can and should be celebrated; we don't ignore these designations...we are blessed by them and claim oneness in these designations. Would we need to talk about oneness if we were all identical?
 - l. I think I just did above.
 - m. It's like "both-and" rather than "either-or." We can be diverse and unified. We know we are by nature a diverse group but through Christ we can have unity.
 - n. Diversity is the uniqueness individuals have and unity is the shared purposes and callings that unique individuals enact together out of love with charity toward others
6. *How have you seen unity practiced, or not practiced, in your local church setting? If willing, please share any experience that did not emphasize unity within a Christian context.*
- a. [Oceanside Church] has worked very hard to maintain unity. Dissension or conflict goes underground and unhappy folks leave quietly. I have not witnessed disunity but do sense a long standing disconnection between a number of age groups in the church.
 - b. I see unity in our church in following [Pastor Thomas'] leadership and loving the church body. But there is not unity in our preference in style of worship. Many don't want to give up their music preference in order to be in one service.
 - c. I feel we are currently struggling with unity in our church. The main reason in my opinion, is that we do not have enough natural opportunities to interact and get to know one another. Thus, small groups form with similar opinions (we get "siloed") then we argue more about non-essentials like musical styles. It bums me out because the essentials are living the Gospel out in church and in the world and inviting non-believers to accept Christ and instead we spend our energy about musical preferences.
 - d. Purity culture tried to seem like a unity approach by saying girls should be looking out for the boys- we're all in this together but it really just excused most male behavior and put the blame on females. I have a couple female friends who were asked at their district licensing interview about their marital status prioritizing that as an indicator of their pastoral call/leadership.
 - e. We have been encouraged to be united together in ways that are supportive, compassionate, loving, etc. that we might be witnesses to the world, making a difference, and following Jesus's example.
 - f. I have seen unity practiced within [Oceanside Church] in terms of having 2 different services where we can worship in different ways, yet be a part of one church body. We all contribute to the same mission, pastoral staff, ministries, and facilities, despite having different preferences. I think this is a good example of the body of Christ embracing its differences and accepting those things in others while remaining unified in overall purpose and community.

- g. My church [oceanside church] represents a diverse community on covid vaccination, what is justice; whether it my journey to walk in love in spite of unfairness and discrimination, wealth, giftedness; worship preferences; thoughts about sexual orientation.... Being insistent on being right is the road to hell; understanding and love of the other is the road to peace, joy and love.
- h. We are in the midst of moving to one service; the diversity of opinions, especially over music, create a challenge to oneness. Can we apply Gal 3:28...there is neither traditional music(ian) nor contemporary music(ian), but we are all one in the body of Christ? I pray so.
- i. I have seen people leave the church over what I consider to be petty differences.
- j. In the past, I've been in congregations where unity on political questions was assumed. Holding, often, a minority opinion in the group, I had to decide to either hold my tongue, or be an unsettling voice. Unity was assumed only because some voices were silent.
- k. In our local church-the pattern of this church has been "accepting" no matter who you are. There probably have been instances of non accepting but I have not seen it.
- l. All are welcome. That is unity.
- m. Unity has been expressed in many areas of the church. However, when it comes to the types of service where they are held and what music and liturgy is demonstrated , There hasn't been as much unity as we would like.
- n. Yes. The simple way people have responded to the type of music in a worship service or even the use of masks.

Appendix 2. City Church

The following are the full results from the questionnaire portion of the survey given to City Church. Responses have been randomized and anonymized in order to protect privacy. All grammatical idiosyncrasies are retained from the original survey responses.

1. *What is meant by the verse “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”?* (Galatians 3:28, NIV)
 - a. That in the kingdom of God, division based on race/ethnicity/gender/hierarchical status does not exist. That embedded into the fabric of Christianity is the idea of inclusivity.
 - b. I think this verse is emphasizing the inclusiveness of the kingdom of God. I think it is emphasizing that there is room for all in God's restorative plan for the world. It is not saying that diversity is unimportant, but rather that all are equal and equally welcome in the kingdom. It is showcasing God's love across ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability, occupation, etc.
 - c. All are regarded as equally beloved by God and there is an implicit mandate here to view all as equal to each other
 - d. Christ is within us all who accept him as our Savior.
 - e. Context is everything! The passage talks about everyone's equal access to become children of God. None of the previous barriers (being Gentile, a slave, female etc) can get in the way any more. Paul wrote this letter precisely to set them straight on this bc Peter had been bowing to Jewish peer pressure to exclude the Gentiles based on their own rules of who God accepts into Her family. It does NOT erase that there are differences among groups or persons. We are not boring homogenous clones. God made us with uniqueness on purpose. Reference the many passages on the body of Christ and how differences are essential to healthy functioning: eyes, ears, feet, hands; teachers, prophets, pastors, etc. However we are exactly blessedly the same in our identity as God's offspring and heirs.
 - f. The distinctions that we use to categorize ourselves into different groups and elevate some of those groups over others create power dynamics which we are called to break down and abolish as followers of Christ.
 - g. It means that in actuality we are all one in Christ, unseparated by the things on Earth that we allow to act as divisions or categories which keep us removed from the true sense of togetherness we should have as children of God
 - h. We are all equally God's children regardless of our identities.
 - i. That the radical and singular act of Christ's death washed away the justification for oppressive systems on the basis of sex, race, religion etc. Therefore, those who

are saved and adopted into this new Kingdom and this new family are made one, are made equal in their brother Jesus Christ.

- j. I think that it means that there is both unity in Christ and the church, but also that that our unity does not dissolve our uniqueness in ethnicity, gender or sexuality.
 - k. This verse means that all are on equal footing and should not be favored or disfavored under religious structure.
 - l. God created us all. We are all His children, thus brothers and sisters.
 - m. This means that Christ is telling us that there is no hierarchy in connection with who he is. There is distinction and difference as noted in other parts of the Bible but no distinction between "worse" or "better" as noted in each of these pairings.
 - n. The gift of connection to God, through Christ, is open to all - no exceptions
 - o. God includes all in God's love and regardless of gender, race, socioeconomic background, etc., we are all loved and included by God.
 - p. That the social constructions that distinguish people from one another are incongruent with the kingdom of God. Not a dismissal of differences but rather a clarification that the power they hold in mainstream culture isn't held the same with Christ, who welcomes everyone
 - q. We are ALL God's children, we are ALL valuable to God. Not one people group, religion, gender, station, is above another. We are ALL a part of the body of Christ.
 - r. That we are equal in Jesus. That former distinctions that dictated who was included and who was excluded, who was subordinate no longer apply.
 - s. The body of Christ (the Church) is one, in unity and equality, with one another, and demographic differences are irrelevant when it comes to participation and leadership in the church.
 - t. We are all equal in the eyes of God
 - u. I think it means that categories or labels that seem really important in human society do not hold weight with God. Any pre-consumptions or qualms or biases that we hold when we encounter another person, simply aren't a thing when we encounter God. Ideally, as Christians we can recognize and appreciate each other's differences, but they are never a source of discrimination or anything. As "children of God", we recognize that we are all people.
 - v. This verse means it does not matter who you are, what church or gender or race you belong to, everyone is a child of God.
2. *What do you think may have influenced your interpretation of this Bible verse?*
 - a. Definitely encountering increasingly diverse Christian spaces and deliberate learning
 - b. I think I interpret it in light of the concrete church community of which I am a part of here at [City Church]. Because of this place I have a lens to interpret this Scripture.

- c. I think the teaching of churches I have attended as well as theology classes I have taken.
- d. Certainly my Pentecostal heritage but also my study of scripture and the early pentecostals. Moreover, neighboring in [a city] among refugees and muslims radically changed me.
- e. My transition from Conservative to Liberal has influenced how I used to think about it and how I think about it now.
- f. Good sermons, common sense, personal experience, seminary courses, seeing bad interpretations, and maybe the Holy Spirit ;)
- g. I think my experience growing up in a Pentecostal church with teachings I interpreted as very exclusive if one did not belong to a Pentecostal church, one was not truly a Christian and thus, wouldn't go to heaven.
- h. It's context in the greater messages of the NT & purpose of Jesus life.
- i. Teaching by my parents and pastors
- j. Being raised in the Church of the Nazarene, being raised in the United States and also on the west coast, my theological training
- k. Many different people and years of experiences
- l. My interpretation is based on an evolving faith. I have been deconstructing for a few years. My interpretation is based on the assumptions about an open and affirming God who embodies diversity. My deconstruction journey, openness to question, and fidelity to the idea of Love over all is influencing my interpretation of this verse.
- m. Well I'm a feminist, LGBTQ+, disabled woman. Without that interpretation it gets judgy and self hating.
- n. Sermons and conversations at places like [City Church], my christian studies background, and my hope for disability justice
- o. Preaching on it a few years ago meant that I had to spend a lot more time thinking about it and studying it than other passages. I also preached on it only days after the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, which definitely influenced my conviction that this passage is crucial not just to our theology, but to people's survival.
- p. My theology & philosophy classes at [University]
- q. My background in the Unitarian church. I believe all living things were created by God. We sentient beings are all God's children. The best way for me to follow God is through the teachings and life example of Jesus and through giving and receiving Unconditional Love.
- r. My parents taught me & lived that belief.
- s. Going to [City Church] and hearing our pastor, [Pastor Pete] speak to scripture in ways that are life giving

- t. The longer I have lived the more I can't understand how one person is valued over another nor do I know how that value system may be interpreted and I'm not going to start figuring it out! I'm not sure what influenced me, just thousands of interactions with thousands of different people who are all worthy to be one with Christ no matter what their background is.
 - u. My upbringing, [University], [City Church], conversations with friends and general maturity
 - v. I've had a very dynamic shift in my interpretation of Christian unity and acceptance, especially since coming out as trans and queer from a formerly conservative and exclusionist background.
3. *To the best of your ability, please express what you believe is meant by the idea of "Christian unity."*
- a. I do not have strong recollection of this sermon as a child but definitely have as an adult. When I began attending [City Church], I experienced what it felt like to be accepted and to grant this same acceptance to others which can be difficult to practice as a flawed human being.
 - b. I have come across this verse several times but I can't remember one specific situation that stuck out--sermon or lesson, song or devotional.
 - c. Not that I recall that verse specifically.
 - d. I can't recall
 - e. I have heard this preached in the past (growing up) at Nazarene churches. Generally from a Judeo-Christian worldview. I didn't think about it much at the time but I do sense a preference for Judeo-Christian (due to the specificity of the words in the verse) as opposed to a global application. Furthermore I do recall it being pointed out that Jews must follow Christ to be saved (but could still be considered Jewish).
 - f. Yes; In youth group growing up and in several sermons since - my takeaway was the same as what is listed above (that all are equally valued)
 - g. Yes. Sermons. Class Lectures. Certainly this was emphasized almost as a sister passage to Acts 2 which is like THE passage for Pentecostals. I was certainly challenged because most of my upbringing and practice up to that point was much more informed by the NEA than this scripture. I was very uncomfortable with that. But then it sort of started crumbling that junk theology for a rather robust and missional practice seeing Christ in the neighborhood and in my neighbor. (This took over a decade or so.)
 - h. Bunches of sermons and lessons, in church settings. My takeaways have evolved from "yay there are no differences! women can be seen as equal to men as church leaders!" to a more nuanced appreciation of good exegesis and of understanding the whole of Scripture, including its own evolution.

- i. There is not a specific sermon or lesson that immediately comes to mind, but I believe I have before. My interpretation is more based on broader teachings from sermons and lessons on other verses/topics.
 - j. I am sure I have, but no specific sermon comes to mind
 - k. Not that I can recall...
 - l. In an evangelical Bible Church context it was preached as inclusive, but treated the gender aspect as a binary and indelible, and did not include those of differing interpretations, genders, and sexualities; in a historical-critical academic context in a theology class it was more inclusive and expressly so rather than just implicit in nature, recognizing both the historical challenges of Paul and the fact that biblical binaries are often meant as two ends of a spectrum even by the original authors.
 - m. Not a positive association. Came from a close family member who dictated that I was damned for all eternity unless I joined together with her church and their understanding of Christ Jesus and the Holy Trinity.
 - n. Probably but nothing specific comes to mind
 - o. I have heard from queer Christian organizations where the lesson talks about how we do not have to be ashamed of or hold tight to the line between man and woman because those separations are arbitrary and temporary
 - p. Yes, although honestly, I don't remember
 - q. Yes, in seminary one of my trans classmates preached a sermon that talked about the use of the word "and" instead of "nor" in the last couplet, "male and female." I remember them teaching that this was an intentional choice due to a long tradition of that kind of "and" meaning, "and everything in between," which opens the passage to include all genders. It was a beautiful way of understanding the depth of the passage in that we can all find ourselves in the categories listed.
 - r. I am sure I have but do not remember one specifically
 - s. I'm not sure. But my church frequently preaches on ALL people no matter what being loved by God.
 - t. Yes. Mostly I've heard it in connection to unity in the church but in places other than [City Church] that has meant the denial of difference not the denial of hierarchy that embraces diversity without saying one is better than the other
 - u. Not that I recall...
 - v. Most sermons in many of the evangelical churches I grew up in only emphasize the first aspect that there is neither Jew nor Gentile. It's only been through intentional participation on my part in churches that have a broader acceptance of people's diversity that I have heard a greater call to unity.
4. *Have you heard a sermon or lesson on Galatians 3:28 before? If yes, in what context and what message did you take away from it?*

- a. Christian unity means ALL people who identify as Christian, regardless of who they are, regardless of their sexuality, gender identity, abilities, race, gender etc., coming together with love, compassion and non-judgement to hold up the true values of Jesus. It also mean, in my opinion, not using one's identity as Christian to berate, belittle, judge and oppress others, even of other religions.
- b. I'm really unsure. Since there is so much infighting and ideological difference between denominations.
- c. "It means unity of believers. I believe unity of all."
- d. That there is an essential commitment to love God with one's whole self and love one's neighbor as oneself - and that this binds all Christians together as our common mission
- e. I think Christian unity is the concept that people from diverse backgrounds and walks of life are united in the fact that they believe in God and other key similar themes that transcend Christian denominations.
- f. We are unified in Christ for God's work, but not in the way of sameness or homogeneity.
- g. A community approach that sees and honors everyone's worth and value and strives to be supportive of one another
- h. We may each have different gifts and experiences, but we are all interconnected as one body. We need each other
- i. Christian unity in this case would mean that diversity is embraced but every part is valued and needed for WHO they are not what they can do or what role they play in a hierarchy
- j. Idealistically, I believe it means that all believers in God/Jesus should be as one without the divisions caused by organized religion, race, socioeconomic status, etc.
- k. What comes to mind is John 10 where Jesus describes unity with God the father. My understanding is that closeness does not require sameness. That intimacy and relationship do not require conformity. That individuality is part of authentic connection. An example would be my understanding of the trinity. Each person is unique and individual, yet one. Christian unity cannot mean sameness. I used to think that sameness of belief described Christian unity. Belief is no longer a foundation of Christian unity to me.
- l. Johannine thought largely informs this for me--that we are bound by love and known by this love. This can feel mystical and perhaps too ethereal--so the skin for me then would be the fruits of the Spirit given, received, and shared amongst a people.
- m. In many evangelical congregations "Christian Unity" is a call towards those preferred doctrines that set them apart from others and has come to fuel an exclusivity that has ignited culture & political wars.

- n. Such a huge complex topic! Best summary: "They will know you are disciples of mine by your love for one another." Unity is a primary trait of following Jesus and expressed as love. We can disagree on things but not to the point of not showing love to each other, or acting like the other is not part of God's family too. Unity = belonging.
 - o. Everyone is able to be a part of the body of Christ if they want to. Probably are even a part of it if they don't want to....
 - p. I believe that Christian unity intends to describe the notion that all who believe in Christ are united by their mission to love their neighbor. Despite other differences of opinion and background, we worship the same Savior and are called to follow Him and love as He loved.
 - q. Christian unity to me means shared love of God and one another across a congregation and among Christians.
 - r. Hard question to answer. I am politically aware and all I see is disunity. Hopefully what unites us is the desire to give and receive love on a daily basis. To show other people, animals and our planet the love of Christ. To know that we are loved unconditionally without ridicule or shame. To feel God's everlasting Grace and forgiveness when we mess up. To extend Grace to one another in spite of our differences.
 - s. I feel like Christian unity is the idea that we all have the ability to show up for one another in ways that represent the fullness of God and God's love for humanity in ways that are embodied and compassionate
 - t. No matter our differences we can come together under the belief that we are one in Christ
 - u. I believe God desires that all the Church is unified at least in spirit, dedicated to lives of faith and in loving each other and the community outside the church, showing genuine love to those around them.
 - v. Unity can have such a strong connotation of sameness, or oneness in thought and theology. I don't think that's our call, but I do think we are called to be **together** as Christians. We are called to worship together, to share each other's burdens and joys, to work together as we express our faith in action, and to experience the mundane and the sacred moments of life together (of which there is not much distinction between the two). Togetherness is not without its challenges, and will have its conflicts. That is inevitable. But we are called to it all the same.
5. *Please try to explain the connection(s) or distinction(s) you see between unity and diversity.*
- a. I see, as Jesus said and did, unity in diversity.
 - b. Unity must be held in tension with diversity - the goal of unity is not to erase the diverse backgrounds and contexts that make people unique, but to celebrate and uplift them as we also celebrate that we are united in our mission to serve Christ.

- c. Unity brings people together, diversity celebrates the distinctions of individuals. Unity is the tending of a garden and diversity is celebration and acknowledgement that there are different plants present
- d. Connection: True unity requires diversity. If there is no diversity than it is not unity it is uniformity or homogenous. Unity requires the hard work of peacemaking, compassion, empathy, fruits of the spirit. Through these there can be a practice of unity but it doesn't really exist if everyone looks, acts, thinks the same to begin with.
- e. We are unified in purpose but not in identity. Our identities can be diverse, but our purposes united.
- f. They are both essential healthy elements of faith, relationships, and life. Unity does not equal sameness, but acceptance and celebration of both sameness and differences. In fact, I don't really know that you accept ME until I know that you accept the ways you and I are not alike; otherwise how do I know your "acceptance" isn't really just narcissism? Ie, you like me because you like yourself. So diversity strengthens unity, and unity provides a safe container for diversity to grow and mature.
- g. Unity matters in important core values and diversity is encouraged for variety's sake in less crucial matters.
- h. Diversity and unity are so intertwined, I feel they are one and the same. Diversity includes everyone on this planet and to be unified, it should include everyone not just a particular set or subset of what one believes in.
- i. I think real unity is found when we are able to express and accept diversity in our coming together
- j. I think unity includes and celebrates the fullness of how diverse and wonderfully made all of God's people are. Unity takes a lot of work to fully represent and compassionately include folks who have been harmed or excluded from spaces talking about God's love but it is not truly inviting of diversity if it settles on what is comfortable or most easy.
- k. Unity is belonging to one group, usually with a common belief. Diversity is the wide variety of backgrounds people bring to that group to share different nuances and flavors and perspectives on how that belief can be lived out.
- l. 1 Corinthians 12. "Unity does not mean uniformity".
- m. God created us all. That is my core bedrock belief. Humankind is diverse, but we are united as one species created by God. I know a lot of Christians don't believe this, but I do.
- n. Unity is the sense and experience that we are traveling together and have shared values based in the life and ministry of Christ; diversity is the honoring of the particularities that make up our human identities and how those uniquely and beautifully influence the way we see and emulate Christ's life

- o. Unity, or togetherness as I prefer to call it above, does not require sameness--in any of the distinctions or categories that make us who we are--our gender, race, age, theological views, etc. In fact, I think our unity is made stronger when we have diversity in all these ways.
 - p. To have actual unity you have to have diversity because if not, parts of people's identities are left out and then it's not unity because people or parts of people are not part of that unity and thus it's not true unity. True unity would accept the fullness of every person.
 - q. I believe diversity explains the many ways that we are all different and unity is the intention to see each other as fellow human beings and children of God. We're called to respect each others diversity while working to love, understand, support and encourage.
 - r. Good question. I think you can have diversity without unity but not unity without diversity. So a church can have diversity in many areas but without actually growing to understand those who have been oppressed in general and specifically by people and churches that call themselves "Christian", who have chosen to use Christianity as a weapon (for example towards LGBTQ+ people, women and disabled people), without a willingness to reach out to those most ostracized and bring them into the full fold of a Christian community, you can't actually have full Unity.
 - s. True unity is only possible when diversity is embodied. Unity has no meaning when there is no diversity. It's almost like I can't define one without the other.
 - t. To my mind, in an ideal world, the church would be unified in its acceptance and celebration of diversity - the tapestry of global existence is richer for it. Unity can mean trying to bring all together under a single way of being, but I think it is better held as unified in the concept of love and grace first and foremost.
 - u. "Diversity acknowledges genetics, ethnicity, life experiences, gender identity, sexual orientation, educational background, political views, culture, family history, etc. Unity is diverse people entering into loving, validating, accepting, respectful relationship with each other with a humble, curious appreciation for each other's differences."
 - v. I think unity and diversity should be connected and intertwined. I think unity implies togetherness, but this does not mean togetherness based on shared race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc. It means togetherness based on shared love for God and one another. It means togetherness that includes diversity and looks to guiding ideological principles as opposed to physical ones.
6. *How have you seen unity practiced, or not practiced, in your local church setting? If willing, please share any experience that did not emphasize unity within a Christian context.*

- a. I think that [City Church] does a great job of promoting unity and inviting everyone equally to join events and service opportunities. I think it's a core value of [City Church] to encourage folks to ask questions, which is a value that invites and celebrates differences of opinion
- b. [City Church] has funds to support people's needs, publicly acknowledges changes in their lives, and advocates for participation of community and minority events. I think COVID has made it harder to feel unified but that's more of a congregation thing of owning the responsibility of being a unifying place. I think as people get more comfortable again at church they will begin to feel more connected and able to engage
- c. I've seen so many moments of unity, or togetherness, expressed in my community through the ways people support one another when going through difficult times, in challenging one another to be more inclusive and kind, in celebrating the joys of each other's lives, and in meeting one another's tangible needs again and again.
- d. "At [City Church] they freaking excel at thoughtful unity with a massive dose of grace and compassion. There are many different people from all sorts of spaces at [City Church] and they work hard to make space for the other with dignity and care. One thing I heard, but was not a part of, was a man upset about refugees seeking asylum living at the church. He mentioned this to a leader expecting to be backed up or maybe coddled. Instead the leader was firm in solidarity WITH these people. I guess he perhaps would not feel unified. I got the impression he left [City Church]. "
- e. [City Church]'s common belief is to love God and love others--everything else is fair game to believe or not believe in. I guess the only way unity is not shown is through severing ties from non-affirming or welcoming churches or entities or canceling people or groups who don't love ALL others.
- f. [City Church] practices unity with its strong emphasis on reaching out to and supporting LGBTQ people, as well as, striving to be a good neighbor to the diverse community it is situated in. Many evangelical churches though are strongly opposed to LGBT people and also many are oppose to true racial equality.
- g. I have seen unity in the sense that we all believe we have a call beyond ourselves to mission in the world and for love of the world. We set aside our individual needs/desires for the sake of our church's work in the neighborhood.
- h. My church setting is open and affirming to all; all genders, all sexual orientations, all people. We have low barriers for participation and leadership. One of the core values we hold and that is lived out is inclusion in the life of the community. For example, the act of serving and receiving communion. It's open to all, we have an OPEN Table.

- i. I think phrases like "love the sinner, hate the sin" are discrimination masquerading as compassionate tolerance, which does not promote any sort of healthy unity within Christian spaces. I think those types of phrases disregard the person and their experience with immediate judgment instead of humble curiosity about getting to know the PERSON who is created and loved by God.
- j. My church I feel is fully inclusive and welcoming of LGBTQ+ people. This is done by highlighting LGBTQ+ people on the website and by including us in the order of service and by often acknowledging the harm that has been done to this community by "Christian" churches. It is also more inclusive of the feminine divine than any other Christian church I've ever been to by referring to God as She/Her at times. On the other hand, I think it still has far to go for full inclusion of disabled people. But they are working on this. For example, building an ADA compliant bathroom last year. And by creating a network of rides for people who can not drive themselves places. But, the Zoom part of in person services are lacking greatly. I do not feel part of the community since COVID when things go in person. I can not safely go as I'm immunocompromised. When everyone is on Zoom (no in person service) it feels like community. But when it's in person and Zoom is just streaming in, it is like watching other people get to participate from afar. There is no feeling of community then. So, no unity for disabled people who can not risk COVID, even when COVID vaccines are up to date.
- k. I have seen unity practiced very well at [City Church]. Unity is emphasized while diversity is respected and valued. There is a sense of unity that is based on everyone respecting and loving one another, regardless of their personal characteristics.
- l. This church is the place I have experienced unity the most in all of my church experience
- m. There are far too many examples of how unity has been shattered in the name of God across the church world. Frankly our in-fighting is why the world is so divided. It breaks my heart, and God's heart. In my local church [City Church] we try hard to be inclusive; our banners read "All are welcome" and we intentionally live that out through LGBTQ+ celebration, housing an asylum-seeking family in the church building, a number of services offered via our Community Hub. Pre-Covid there were regular homeless attendees. It does grieve me that the UMC is dividing over LGBTQ issues, and my church is splitting from the UMC along with many other congregations. I grieve that unity cannot be preserved somehow while honoring differences in this issue.
- n. "I have been part of many churches that seem to think that unity means uniformity - that everyone must think/believe in the exact same "right" way. There is a strong emphasis on "us" vs "them" and considering anyone who doesn't think like "us" as an outsider. Very thankful that [City Church] does not see things that way.

Diversity of thought and experience is celebrated and encouraged and not used to exclude.”

- o. My church, [City Church], practices what they preach and creates unity by inviting all people to actively participate in services (along with leading elements of worship like children's ministry or communion). They allow for discussions to take place about big questions without needing to jump on an answer, they simply bring us all together so we can be a part of a community unified in the seeking.
- p. I am a former Catholic. At a funeral Mass & other occasions, the priest told non-Catholics not to come to Communion.
- q. In terms of it being practiced, I sense a strong unity around grand themes of justice, hospitality, LGBTQ full inclusion, and worship. In terms of it being not practiced here, I have struggled here with an attitude that seems to dismiss those of other Christian streams of thought/practice. There is a particular disdain for more charismatic and evangelical traditions.
- r. I've seen unity practiced in our church setting by promoting our affirming and inclusive values that truly include and invite everyone to participate fully in the life of the church.
- s. In the evangelical context, unity was conducted through assimilation - differences were left behind or abandoned rather than celebrated. In churches like [City Church], unity is practiced by being unified in love and celebration of differences in how they express different aspects of God through lived experience..
- t. I have seen the unity in [City Church] continue to grow and become a place where hopefully everyone feels welcome and accepted when they enter.
- u. My local church setting is amazing. I love the way the leadership and members are very welcoming and inclusive.
- v. In most church spaces I have not seen it practiced because identities like BIPOC, Disabled, Queer, and poor people are not included in the space either physically, emotionally, verbally, or socially. When a church chooses to embrace diversity even if and maybe especially when it makes it weird or different, then true unity is present and I've experienced this very few times but enough to know it's possible.

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