

Unqualified Christians: Galatians 3:23-29

by [Rodney S. Sadler Jr.](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

You may find it strange that I, an African American, do not believe in interracial marriage. I do not believe in interracial dating or even in having friends of other races. I do not espouse trying to understand racial differences or promoting awareness of other races. I can say all of this unabashedly because *I do not believe in race!*

Race is a relatively recent construction conveniently created at precisely the moment when nations from the European continent were setting out to colonize the world. The construction is a precursor to an economic policy, not a result of scientific study. It came from the desire of some people to legitimate the taking of land from others. Because of perceived “racial” differences, people could be set on a hierarchical ladder of superior and inferior types; those declared “superior” then had an “obligation” to tend to the interests (natural resources and labor) of the “inferiors.” With this thinking, the “enlightened” peoples of Europe colonized the “primitive” peoples of Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas. Such scripture passages as Genesis 9 (the “curse of Ham/Canaan”) and Genesis 10 (the “table of nations”) gave theological significance to theories of subspecies variation and to a God-ordained system of enslaved peoples and a “master race.” Because the genesis of the word is spurious, I suggest that the concept of race is problematic. Even the most innocuous use of the concept perpetuates the notion that perceived differences in appearance relate to actual differences in intellect, criminality potential and sexuality. Hence, to suggest that the theory of race is legitimate is a racist proposition, one that leads many to conclude that perceived differences in appearance are consequential for human valuation.

I have always loved the Galatians 3 text. It demonstrates the invalidity of this brand of human differentiation and presents the ideal of reconciliation in the Christian community. Verse 28’s promise of transformed humanity is a vision of the fruition of our faith and shows a world in which neither race nor social status nor gender is a determinant of our potential, for all of us are one in Christ. This notion of oneness suggests that all instances of privilege, power-over and prominence are trumped by

a new identity, one that makes us all part of the body of Christ.

It is in this context that I have come to understand Paul's emphasis on reorienting the Christian community from law to grace. One of the most significant reasons that Paul engaged in the dialogue about no longer being subject to the law (5:18) was that the law separated the Jew from the non-Jew. Paul was convinced that in order for Jews and gentiles to come together at a common table, the matter of the law needed to be resolved once and for all.

The law enforced the code of difference that kept these two groups apart; it provided a system of ethnic boundary markers that separated "clean" from "unclean" human types. Like racism, the law established Jews as a "genos" or race of people fundamentally distinct from others because of their covenantal relationship with God, their descent from Abraham and their sense of chosenness. To posit the reconciliation of Jew and gentile was no less implausible than positing the union of the polar "racial" opposites of black and white in our context. In order for these two groups to come together, either gentiles had to convert—which entailed adult male circumcision and the adoption of an entirely alien system of beliefs (i.e., adopting the law)—or Jews had to put aside the system of beliefs that makes others untenable (i.e., transcending the law). Paul had thought it was the law that determined who was acceptable; but now, he says, this aspect of the law is no longer in effect. That which separated Christian from Jew, that which bifurcated presumed different types of humanity, had been overcome by the work of Jesus on the cross.

I often wonder if we Christians have missed this point. We tend to think that Paul's emphasis on grace over law was simply a spiritual matter, and we overlook the law as the primary impediment of Jewish and gentile fellowship. Consider the reading of the law in Peter's vision in Acts 10; "clean" and "unclean" are problematic categories when they relate to people in Christ. Only by overcoming such a powerful line of demarcation could Paul imagine true reconciliation in Christ.

In the church we are too often isolated in segregated communities as "qualified Christians." We are "black" Christians, "white" Christians, "Korean" Christians and "Latino" Christians worshiping in separate sanctuaries. The Galatians passage reminds us that one of the principal concerns of the faith was to overcome these barriers to fellowship.

One can only imagine what would happen if we recognized the impact of Paul's words. Christ's death has radically altered the nature of our identities so that who we are from the world's point of view is now irrelevant as a determinant of power. Paul's words should also lead us to question persistent inequalities in our nation that are often seen but rarely examined. Why is it acceptable, for example, that poor African Americans and Latinos live in substandard housing and dangerous neighborhoods with failing education systems that most of us would never tolerate? Why is it acceptable that when people from all backgrounds are hired for the same jobs, women, African Americans and immigrants are consistently undercompensated in relation to their white male counterparts? Why is it that persistent inequities make life on earth hell for some with darker skin and thicker accents, while others feel entitled to heaven? Paul's account of our common membership in the family of Abraham reminds us that, in God's eyes, our interests and our identities are intertwined.