

One in Christ Jesus

The surmounting of divisions

In the order of service for morning prayer prescribed for orthodox Jews, is this threefold benediction:

"Blessed art thou, O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
who hast not made me a Gentile.
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
who hast not made me a slave.
Blessed art thou, O Lord our God,
King of the universe,
who hast not made me a woman."

(When women recite this prayer, the final clause of the third benediction takes the form: "who hast made me according to thy will.")

This threefold benediction is ancient: it has been traced back to a rabbi in the mid-second century A.D. Indeed, it seems to be derived from a formula of even greater antiquity: Thales, the philosopher of Miletus in the sixth century B.C., is said to have expressed his gratitude that he was born a human being and not a beast, a man and not a woman, a Greek and not a barbarian. Essentially the same saying is reproduced in Socrates and Plato, and a similar utterance has been found in a Zoroastrian source.

So far as the Jewish wording is concerned, it implies no disparagement of Gentiles, slaves or women: it recognises the fact that in traditional Judaism Jews enjoyed religious privileges denied to Gentiles (cf. Rom. 3:2; 9:4 f.; Eph. 2:11 f.), free persons enjoyed religious privileges denied to slaves, men enjoyed religious privileges denied to women. The free male Jew might therefore feel truly thankful for the privileges to which, by the providence of God, he was admitted.

It is highly probable that the threefold benediction was something

which Paul himself had been taught to recite regularly. If so, he affirms that now, in the Christian fellowship, all three bases of privilege have been superseded: there are no religious privileges open to Jews which are not also open to Gentiles, none open to free persons which are not also open to slaves, none open to men which are not also open to women.

At this stage in the argument of Galatians Paul has raised the question of the true offspring of Abraham. The agitators who had influenced the churches of Galatia maintained (rightly) that God's special blessing belonged to Abraham's offspring. They argued further that, to be entitled to the blessing of Abraham's offspring, it was necessary for men to be circumcised, to bear the seal of God's covenant with Abraham. Scripture was quite unambiguous on this point (Gen. 17:9-14); who was Paul, the agitators asked, that he should encourage the ignoring of such a clear command of God? If Gentile believers in Christ were to enjoy the covenant blessing, they must not only be baptised into Christ but enter the Abrahamic covenant in God's prescribed way: only so would they be "blessed with faithful Abraham".

To this Paul replies that, since it was Abraham's faith that was reckoned to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6), it is men and women of faith, those who believe God as he did, who share the blessing pronounced on him by God. This blessing was not only pronounced on him by God; through him and his offspring God's blessing is extended to many others, to all nations (Gentiles) in fact. In Gal. 3:8 Paul quotes Gen. 12:3, but for "all the families of the earth" in that verse he substitutes "all the nations of the earth" from Gen. 22:18 (since "nations" or "Gentiles" is more apposite to his present argument). Moreover, in

Gen. 22:18 it is in Abraham's offspring that they are to be blessed, whereas in Gen. 12:3 it is in Abraham himself. Who, then, should be understood as Abraham's offspring? The word "offspring" is singular, and therefore can refer to one person as readily as to many; indeed, its primary reference here is to Christ. Because Christ is the offspring of Abraham in whom all the nations are to be blessed, the blessing pronounced in God's promise to Abraham belongs secondarily to all who are "in Christ": those who are Christ's are Abraham's offspring (Gal. 3:29). It is they who by faith receive the blessing of Abraham, that is "the promise of the Spirit" (Gal. 3:14).

In these Genesis texts about Abraham's being justified by faith and becoming the channel of divine blessing to all the nations, nothing is said about circumcision. Circumcision had no place in the gospel which was "preached ... beforehand to Abraham" (Gal. 3:8), and that was the gospel which Paul was commissioned to preach, the good news of God's justifying the Gentiles by faith. To insist on circumcision for Gentile believers, as the agitators did, was not only to introduce an irrelevancy: it was to nullify the gospel by demanding an additional condition to God's one condition of faith in Christ.

Circumcision was an "identity marker", it was a sign of division. The circumcised were marked off from the uncircumcised, not only within human society but also (it was believed) in the matter of acceptance before God. The gospel was a message of reconciliation, not of division: by the grace of God, accepted in faith, formerly separated groups of human beings were united. They had been "baptised into Christ" and were henceforth "in Christ", one in him, no matter what grounds of cleavage had kept them apart before.

Neither Jew nor Greek

Both Paul and Luke use "Greek" as a synonym of "Gentile" – not unnaturally so, since most of the Gentiles they knew were Greeks, in the sense that Greek was their first language. (Many Jews also spoke Greek as their first language, but they are called not "Greeks" but "Grecians", as in Acts 6:1 – not Hellenes but Hellenists). The gospel, says Paul, is brought "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16), and as he goes on to show, to the Greek (or Gentile) on equal terms with the Jew. The saving work of Christ, he declares elsewhere, has broken down "the middle wall of partition" and made the two opposed groups which it kept apart into one new humanity (Eph. 2:14, 15). Circumcision, the outward and visible sign which distinguished the Jew from the Gentile, was henceforth an irrelevancy (Gal. 5:6: 6:15). For Paul the apostle of Christ what had formerly been the most fundamental division within the human family had no longer any place.

If it is asked whether the distinction between "Jew" and "Greek" was racial or religious, the answer is that it was both. For Jews the religious division was more important: a Gentile could become a proselyte and be admitted to membership of the covenant community; but the dividing wall remained – the proselyte had simply crossed from one side of it to the other.

In the secularised West today, religion plays a minor part in public life. That may be why so many in Britain were bewildered by the intensity of Muslim reaction to Salman Rushdie's book *The Satanic Verses*. But the situation is different in the Near East. The conflict in Lebanon was essentially religious, between the Christian and Muslim communities. In 1923, when the large-scale exchange of populations was carried out between Greece and Turkey, the final criterion of discrimination was religious: Greek-speaking Muslims were counted as Turks and Turkish-speaking Christians were counted as Greeks.

But where the cleavage is religious, it can be surmounted by conversion: where it is racial it is less tractable. There was no way out for anyone who was certified to be a Jew under Hitlerism, and only (and exceptionally) by a legal fiction is it possible to cross from one side to the other of a colour bar. "In Christ Jesus", however, such barriers disappear, says the apostle; at least they should. But in practice it is clear from Paul's own letters that they did not disappear very easily. It may be gathered from Rom. 11:13-24 that some Gentile members of the Roman church were inclined to look down on their fellow-believers of Jewish stock – a change from the time when even an apostle could be charged with compelling Gentile believers "to live like Jews" (Gal. 2:14). In fact, says Paul, believers in Christ are no longer Gentiles, no longer Jews; they constitute a new order of humanity.

How is it today? When distinctions which are current in the world are admitted to the church, that can be a virulent form of what the New Testament deprecates as worldliness. Some years ago a church in an African city (not in South Africa) tried to restrict its membership to whites only. Their policy was understandable in the light of their social environment, but the most pathetic feature of a sorry business was a letter sent out by the elders in which an attempt was made to present a scriptural justification for their policy.

It may be convenient to meet in distinct groups for practical purposes: I think of a city in Central Europe in which there used to be separate meetings for Slovak, German and Hungarian speakers. But they were parts of a united church, and from time to time they held united conferences in which various languages were spoken and interpretation was freely used. This was a sensible arrangement in a multilingual society. Again, immigrants from the West Indies in Britain have largely formed "black" churches in which the style of worship is more congenial than the more staid and reserved liturgy of

the traditional "white" churches. But membership in those "black" churches is not constitutionally restricted to "blacks", any more than membership in "white" churches is restricted to "whites". (It seems absurd to distinguish churches in terms of colour: Paul has no need to say that in Christ "there is neither black nor white", for in the first century no one evidently imagined human beings could plumb such a depth of folly as to employ pigmentation as a criterion of social standing).

To take a further example: if a movement like "Jews for Jesus" proves to be useful evangelistic instrument, well and good; it would be comparable to a group of Turkish Christians banding themselves together to evangelise their compatriots who are living in Germany as "guest-workers". But if it were to foster the ideas of a distinct church of Jewish Christians (or messianic Jews), such an idea would be difficult to reconcile with Paul's language.

Neither slave nor freeman

The social inferiority of slaves was marked enough in Jewish society, but still more so in Mediterranean society generally and most of all in Roman law. While the existence of many household slaves was comfortable enough, and warm personal affection might develop between them and their owners, nevertheless in theory a slave was a "living tool" (in Aristotle's definition), a thing rather than a person, and in law he was the owner's absolute property. Thinking people recognised that to be a slave might be an accident of birth or fortune, and that a slave might be inwardly free, just as a free person might be inwardly enslaved. "Are they slaves?" asked Seneca; "no, rather they are friends of lowly estate, ... fellow slaves, indeed." In Stoic thought (represented by Seneca among others) the personhood of slaves was recognised; indeed, a slave by birth like Epictetus might be a distinguished Stoic philosopher. Such insights might be translated

into action, as in a religious society established in Philadelphia in the first or second century B.C., which was explicitly open to "men and women, free persons and household slaves".

This was so in the Christian fellowship. What was theologically true "in Christ Jesus" did not remain a matter of theory; it was translated into practical reality in the day-to-day life of a local church. In a local church a slave, because of his spiritual qualities, might be acknowledged as an elder and his guidance would be gladly accepted by his master. In church they would be related not as master and slave but as brothers (or sisters) in Christ. Paul had no authority to change Onesimus's public status, but he sent him to Philemon "no longer as a slave, but ... as a beloved brother" (Philem. 17). Evidence is not lacking in the first three centuries A.D. for bishops of city churches who were slaves or ex slaves. Among Christians, marriages might be contracted between slaves and free persons which might not be valid by Roman law but certainly qualified for the "honourable estate, instituted of God in the time of man's innocency".

No "male and female"

In civic law and in social life the distinction between slave and free continued to be maintained, as did the distinction between Jew and Gentile, but the distinction disappeared "in Christ Jesus" – that is, in concrete terms, in the local church. So with the distinction between male and female: unlike the distinctions between Jew and Gentile, and between slave and free, this distinction belongs to the order of creation and is rightly maintained in many spheres, especially in family life. But, like the two preceding distinctions, this one also disappears "in Christ Jesus" – that is, in concrete terms, in the local church.

Now here is a strange thing. When that is said of the two preceding distinctions, it commands ready agreement: when it is said of the distinction between male and female,

it is apt to elicit a "Yes, but ...".

Paul does not say "neither male nor female" (as he has said "neither slave nor free" and "neither Jew nor Greek"); he says "no 'male and female'". This does not affect the essence of his argument; it suggests that he is quoting the record of the old creation, where God "created them 'male and female'" (Gen. 1:27), and implying that in the new creation this distinction is superseded. The Genesis narrative does not say that God created them slave and free, or Jew and Gentile; but these distinctions do not belong to the order of creation, as the male/female distinction does. At present the old creation and the new creation overlap. We belong to both orders simultaneously, as young Edmund Gosse discovered when, on the point of being baptized and admitted to church fellowship at the age of ten, he asked his father, "When I have been admitted to fellowship, Papa, shall I be allowed to call you 'beloved Brother'?" His father laughed and said, "That, my love, though strictly correct, would hardly, I fear, be thought judicious!" The proprieties of the old creation are not obliterated by the reality of the new creation, but when the old creation passes, its relationships will disappear with it, including the marriage relationship and the very distinction between male and female (Luke 20:34-36).

But where the male/female relation is concerned, it is not only the old and new creation that come into the picture, but the entail of the fall. The woman's subjugation by the man, pronounced in Gen. 3:16, is a symptom of man's fallen nature and has no place "in Christ Jesus".

Some who wish to restrict the scope of the phrase "no 'male and female'" have argued that it relates only to men and women's common access to baptism, with its introduction to their new existence in Christ. (They do not, for the most part, argue in this restrictive way with regard to the two preceding phrases.) Paul may very well have had in mind that circumcision involved a form of discrimination

between men and women which was removed when circumcision was demoted from its position in sacral law. The "seal" of the new covenant, the reception of the Spirit, is enjoyed by both men and women in Christ. Baptism into Christ is open to both sexes indiscriminately, but the denial of discrimination which is affirmed in baptism holds good for the whole of one's new existence in Christ.

In other spheres the distinctions which had ceased to be relevant in Christ continued to be observed. In Roman law the distinction between slave and free person retained its validity. In natural law the co-operation of husband and wife (or of father and mother) in the family depended (as it still does) on the difference between the two sexes. But the logic of Paul's argument insists that, in the Christian fellowship, no discrimination or inferiority in status or function can be admitted on the ground of sex any more than on the ground of race or class. Paul's own practice shows how he put the logic of his argument into effect, as in his appreciation of the Philippian women who "contended side by side" with him in the gospel (Phil. 4:3) or in his recognition of the right of Christian women to pray or prophesy in church – the veil being the symbol of their authority to do so (1 Cor. 11:10). **In acting out the implications of Christian unity and Christian liberty the church has always found difficulty in keeping up with Paul.** ■■

F. F. Bruce

Professor F. F. Bruce was well known as an elder statesman of biblical scholarship in Britain, with a multitude of publications to his name, including numerous commentaries and works on biblical history. After nearly 20 years as professor at Manchester University he became Professor Emeritus in 1978. He said that some of his best students in biblical studies were women.

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