

# God's Inclusive Story

By Sean Winter

Pauline theology is rooted in a story. The story's opening scenes consist of a re-telling of an inherited narrative of creation and covenant making: God's purposes for the world and for Israel respectively. The central and controlling episodes describe God's dramatic and revelatory intervention in human history in Jesus the Messiah. Christ's obedient faithfulness in crucifixion and resurrection are the very means by which human beings are to understand the nature of God's purposes for the world and the covenant people. The final 'chapters' of the story offer guidance for God's people, called now to live in the reality of God's action in Jesus Christ. In Paul's letters we see him, in ways adapted and suited for each context, telling this overarching story using language and imagery that has, rightly, become decisive for all future Christian attempts to do likewise.<sup>1</sup>

The underlying shape and direction of this story is clear in Galatians. The complex argument of the letter, as well as its passionate tone, find their roots in the basic conviction that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has 'set us free from the present evil age' (1:4). The letter is shot through with the rhetoric, idiom and stark dualism of apocalyptic discourse. In the words of Lou Martyn, Galatians is about 'the death of one world and the advent of another'.<sup>2</sup> Paul knows for himself that through the cross 'the world has been crucified to me and I to the world' (6:14). Life in the new world requires a reassessment of the old story and so now 'neither circumcision or uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything' (6:15) for those now called 'the Israel of God' (6:16). And, crucially, life in the new world has a certain shape, a certain direction that must be consistent with its central act. The world is being remade 'in Christ' but this recreation begins in the community of those who have become God's true children, through faith (3:26).

Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of saying that 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice'.<sup>3</sup> If we were to sum up the argument of Galatians 3 one might adapt King's words: the arc of salvation history is long, but it bends towards inclusion. God's story leans towards the welcome, inclusion and incorporation of those who would otherwise be excluded. Of course the main focus of the chapter (with its focus on retelling the story of God's promise to Abraham) is on the inclusion of the Gentiles. The new thing that God has done in Jesus Christ is actually the fulfilment (as well as the disruption) of all that God has been doing since the time of Abraham. The only basis for inclusion is now faith. This faith is first and foremost

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<sup>1</sup> For the idea that Paul's theology has its roots in the story of God's action in Christ see Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11* (2nd edn., Biblical Resource Series; Grand Rapids, Cambridge / Deaborn: Eerdmans / Dove, 2002) and Bruce W. Longenecker (ed.), *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment* (Louisville / London: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Studies in the New Testament and its World; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 117. Martyn's commentary on the letter is the definitive interpretation of its apocalyptic dimensions: J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> See King's last Sunday sermon 'Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution' in Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), 272. Sometimes King referred to the 'arch of history' and bending towards 'freedom'. The line has recently been taken up by Senator Barack Obama in his Presidential campaign.

the faithful obedience of the Messiah (this is what Paul means in 3:20 when he speaks of the 'faith of Jesus Christ' which is given to 'all who have faith'). It is this faith that 'has come' so that we are 'no longer under the power of a disciplinarian' (3:25). For Paul, Gentiles are now included in the story of God's purposes because of Jesus Christ and their believing response, and *on no other basis*.

It is crucial to note, however, that God's inclusive story is not limited to issues of ethnic identity. In his famous, but often misunderstood, closing argument in Galatians 3, Paul suggests strongly that the story also reorientates and thus re-creates social distinction and gender difference. The key is baptism. 3P:27-28 are very likely a baptismal formula, recited over or by the candidate at the moment of baptism as a way of reminding them that they were about to leave the old world behind and enter into the reality of God's new world (see also 1 Corinthians 12:13 and Colossians 3:9-11). In baptism they enter into that great story of God's gracious, inclusive love, which makes them (and us) righteous through Christ's faithfulness and our response of faith, through baptism. *And if the story of God's salvation bends towards inclusivity, then the life of a baptized Christian and of the community in Christ, must lean in the same direction.*

These verses, which in so many ways sum up the main tenets of Paul's theology as a whole, offer us a new vision of human identity, Christian community and transformed society. We must remember that in Galatia the issues of slave-free person or male-female relationships was not at issue. Yet, in including them, Paul is reminding the Galatians and us that God's inclusive story moves beyond the focal issue of Jews and Gentiles in the Church. The story is about how we handle difference and diversity in every aspect of human life and community.

These verses describe the new creation that God is making (see also 2 Corinthians 5:17), of which the church is the visible expression. And it is in the whole area of gender difference that this aspect comes to the fore. As Paul mentions the third 'pair' in 3:28 he shifts language from 'neither ... nor' to 'neither ... and'. The phrase 'male and female' is a deliberate allusion to the creation story itself, picking up the language of the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1:27. Of course Paul does not mean that gender difference is obliterated (any more than he thinks that ethnic or social distinctions are erased) through baptism. Christians are not androgynous (new) creatures. But our common baptism in Christ, as male and female, does constitute the obliteration of dominance of one gender over another. In God's inclusive story, gender is not a decisive issue.

Now Paul does not go on to draw the implications of all this out in detail. In fact there is evidence from elsewhere in his letters that (in the cases of male-female and slave-free relations) he struggled himself to follow the logic of his own argument. But in the end, the thing that should shape our handling of the whole question of the relationship between male and female in the church is not Paul's 'answer' but God's story. It is this story that enabled the church to see that, on the subject of slavery, Paul's answer and God's 'story' stood in some tension, and the story of God's inclusion won out. Women and men are children of God by faith, baptized into Christ, jointly heirs of the promise given to Abraham. Embodying this vision, living out this story in the church is not easy. But if we take Galatians 3 seriously, there is about as much justification for excluding women from ministry within the church as there is for excluding Gentiles or refusing to 'sit under the ministry' of descendants of slavery. As we are reminded elsewhere in this issue: we ordain women because we baptize girls. This is the direction in which the inclusive story of God unavoidably leads us. It commits us to working, praying and campaigning and to changing our language, our

assumptions, our expectations - so that women come to their full equality with men in Christ.

And we should bear in mind that, if and when women achieve full equality within the church and in the world that is the ultimate object of God's gracious love, there will be more work to do, as we continue to work out its implications for church and world. What would it mean for the inexorable logic of God's inclusive story to work itself out in us, among us and through us? Where will God lead us next?

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