SOME REMARKS ON THE ORIGIN AND FUNCTION OF GALATIANS 3:28

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In the course of the long history of the interpretation of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, the programmatic statement in 3:28 has always attracted considerable attention¹ and has been discussed in such diverse contexts as baptism, human sexuality, creation and equality.² In his new commentary on Galatians, Martinus de Boer devotes a separate excursus to this passage.³ As a personal tribute to his contribution as New Testament scholar and to honor his invaluable service to the discipline as Secretary of the Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas over many years, it is fitting to return briefly to this remarkable statement. I would like to do this in the spirit that characterizes the regular New Testament colloquia he conducts at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, namely that of critical and collegial conversation.

According to de Boer, Paul is citing a pre-Pauline baptismal formula in Gal 3:26–28. In doing so, de Boer follows a venerable tradition, in which parallels or assumed parallels from a wide variety of sources are collected as proof of the baptismal context of the passage: Firstly, parallels from Pauline (1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11) and other Christian literature (Matt 23:8) including the Nag Hammadi Codices (NHC 1, 4,132), and secondly, parallels from the Old Testament, Judaism, Hellenistic mystery religions, diatribe literature and Gnosticism.⁴

As far as Gal 3:28 itself is concerned, de Boer advances strong arguments to support his view of a baptismal context: The verb βαπτίζω occurs in v. 27; the sudden change from the first-person plural (“we”) in vv. 23–25 to the second-person plural (“you”) in vv. 26–28; the identification of believers not as “sons of Abraham” (the topic of 3:7), but as “sons of God”; the

¹ See for example Martin Meiser, Galater (NTP 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 2007); John Riches, Galatians through the Centuries (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).
awkward juxtaposition of the phrases “through this faith” and “in Christ Jesus” causing a redundancy in thought; the fact that, of the three pairs in v. 28 (Jew/Greek, slave/free, man/woman), only the first is directly related to the issue of circumcision and the observance of the law by Gentile believers in Galatia; the use of the term “Greek” instead of “Gentile” in the first pair; and the near parallels in 1 Cor 12:13 and Col 3:9–11 where the same baptismal terminology is used.5

The cumulative effect of these reasons is impressive, but on closer examination the argument becomes more tenuous. There is little doubt that Paul closely associates the new status of the believer with baptism (as v. 27 makes clear), but the claim that he refers to an already existing and widely accepted liturgical formula is all but convincing. What is remarkable about the statement in Galatians is exactly the lack of any sacramental terminology or appeal to communal memory—in contrast to 1 Cor 11:23 where he makes explicit use of the liturgical introduction of the Eucharist: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread ...” As Betz6 reminds us, Gal 3:26 is the only explicit reference to baptism in the entire letter and even in Paul’s argument the sacrament of baptism is never adduced except here. If the whole composition were lifted from the baptismal liturgy, the ritual of baptism would assume a quite distinctive role in Paul’s argument, for which there is no specific indication. The real importance lies in the connection between the Spirit and baptism.7 The focus on the ritual of baptism may be a false trail that keeps us from discovering the full impact of Paul’s statement.

The change from the first person in verses 23–25 (“we”) to the second person plural in verses 26–28 (“you”) is also not a conclusive argument. In his letters, Paul alternates personal pronouns for a variety of reasons as part of a more complex rhetorical system. Among other rhetorical moves, the apostle uses personal pronouns as a strategic device to indicate either proximity or distance from the position that he considers to be the preferred state.8 Furthermore, in 1 Cor 11 Paul uses the first person to introduce the sacramental formula, so the change to the second person here in Gal 3:26 does not necessarily signal the beginning of a quotation from liturgy.

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5 De Boer, *Galatians*, 245.
6 Betz, *Galatians*, 181.
7 Betz, *Galatians*, 181.