Perhaps, in our times, we would be a little less sure about 'Christian order' or about anything being 'complete'. But there are those priests and that bishop, with the cup and the baptism of James and John; rulers that are not rulers. And there are those learned ones—who, in the present time, include our educated and skilled pastors and priests—caring for the book full of the very content of the altar and the door opened for gathering and sending, not for excluding; scribes who are not scribes. And there with them is that congregation. May this reform from the gospels go on.

In the first days after I was ordained, I came to the small town of my first parish. On my first Sunday in that town, I learned that a man of the congregation call him Charlie—had suffered a heart attack and was in intensive care in a large hospital in a city some fifty miles distant, with his wife of more than fifty years—call her Helen—anxiously by his side. After church, I took my Bible and my portable communion set, with the holy food of this Sunday’s celebration, and drove those fifty miles. It was my first hospital call as a pastor and I was more than a little nervous. But we will never forget this as I came into the room, Helen looked up and, seeing my collar, said, ‘O Pastor, you’re come. Thank God! I am so grateful.’ Of course, Helen did not know me. But she was welcoming me, without any further ceremony or introduction, into the very heart of her life, the very center of her grief. It was astonishing to me. It was as if my call and ordination were being once again enacted in small. She trusted that with me came the church I served and of which she was part and the gospel I was to represent, the living Word and the assisting bread and cup she and Charlie needed. It was an amazing trust, one I have seen enacted again and again, in many situations of need. Of course, it was a trust that could be and has been powerfully misused. But they were not looking for my opinion or my power, not even for my skill. They needed neither scripture nor rules. They needed the gospel of the crucified Jesus Christ, already presented in every place of need, and they trusted that gospel with authority. I stumbled through the ritual of this first visit, bringing the things they hoped for, things in my hands but larger than me. Still, it became clear that they were also welcoming me, in and under welcoming the pastor. It became clear, indeed, that I was the pastor, and that whatever weaknesses or strengths I had, whatever knowledge or skill I possessed, could be turned to the work of that office. Charlie did get better, to live more good days with Helen and finally to die, with Helen and the congregation and me carrying him to his grave. I will not forget him. But I will especially never forget that welcome: ‘O Pastor, you’re come.’

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Interpreting Galatians 3:27–28 in the Uniting Church: A relational and contextual perspective

John T. Squires

This paper had its origins in an ecumenical seminar arranged by the NSW Ecumenical Council to commemorate 'The Year of Paul'—a Jubilee Year of Celebration, proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI, for the period July 2008 to June 2009.1 The participants in the seminar were asked to make a presentation in which they explained how Paul was understood from within their particular denominational perspective. I assumed that, as a member of the Uniting Church in Australia, I was expected to provide a distinctively Reformed contribution that would stand alongside the Roman Catholic perspective and the Anglican point of view that were also represented at that seminar.

Logic would seem to dictate, then, that a discourse based upon justification by grace, through faith, would be most apposite, with due reference to texts in the letters to the Romans and the Galatians. The thoughts flitted briefly through my mind, before I turned to another concept—in particular, another Pauline text—which had greater attraction and which exercised a greater pull upon my thinking processes.

My choice has been influenced by various conversations that I have had over the past decade or so with the Editor of this journal. In these conversations, William Emlyn has pondered what result would emerge, if one was to undertake a survey of key texts which have been most favoured, or most employed in debate, or most frequently cited in official church documents, or most regularly preached on, by Uniting Church ministers. My response has been that, if any text could best represent what the Uniting Church believed and how it acted, then it would be two verses from the third chapter of Paul's letter to the believers in Galatia:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:27–28)

This is, of course, a purely anecdotal claim, with no careful research or hard evidence to support it; but it is one which, I suspect, would be difficult to overturn. This text, I believe, would be near to the top of such a survey. In my view, it well expresses how the Uniting Church views its role; and so, it may serve well to illuminate a Uniting Church understanding of Paul. Indeed, we may venture to suggest that it has become the Uniting Church's 'purple Pauline passage'.

To begin, some preliminary comments are required about my particular understanding of the process.
of interpreting scripture from within the Uniting Church in Australia. I teach within a School of Theology in an Australian University, and therefore engage with the range of scholarly views in the area of biblical studies—Reformed, Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Jewish, atheist, and whatever else. Alongside of that, I am an ordained minister within the Uniting Church, and am both committed to, and responsible to, approaching this task in the light of my church's clear commitment to responsible scholarly and confessional interpretation of the Bible.

Thus, the way that I engage in interpretation is governed by the ethos of my denomination and by the decisions made by the church, as it gathers in council. Indeed, the distinctive emphasis on the inter-conciliar nature of the Uniting Church, clearly expressed in the Basis of Union of the church, means that this approach to scripture takes place from within the community of faith, with awareness of contemporary scholarship, under the guidance of key decisions of the church—with particular responsibility entrusted to the National Assembly for matters of doctrine (which is where I assume that issues of biblical interpretation are located in our ecclesial structure).

The key document is therefore the 1971 Basis of Union (revoked by inclusive language in 1992), for this sets out the self-understanding of the denomination to which I belong. Various National Assemblies have addressed specific issues over time since that document was created and adopted, some other resolutions and statements are referred to in this paper.

The Basis of Union sets out some programmatic statements regarding the interpretation of scripture; in my consideration of Galatians 3:27–28, I intend to focus on two of these.

In Paragraph 5, the third sentence affirms: "The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church." I understand this to mean that interpretation is relational; it takes place within the human relationships that exist within the community of faith, as we interact with one another; and it also takes place within the relationship that we have to the biblical text, as we engage with the text of scripture, as we read it, meditate on it, explore it, puzzle over it, read commentaries about it, debate with it, pray it, sing it, paint it, and write about it.  

In Paragraph 11, the second sentence declares: 'In particular the Uniting Church enters into the inheritance of literary, historical and scientific enquiry which has characterised recent centuries, and gives thanks for the knowledge of God's ways with humanity which are open to an informed faith.' I understand this to mean that interpretation is contextual; it takes place within the context of our own time, our own place—with due regard to who we are as we sit to read, hear, and respond to scripture. As a white male, educated in the tertiary Western system of education, the context for my interpretation of scripture differs from that of others whose life experience does not include those factors, and whose experience brings multiple other factors into play. I need to know and acknowledge precisely who I am, as I interpret the Bible. I am also enabled (indeed encouraged) by the Basis of Union to draw on the resources of contemporary scholarship for this interpretive process. They are important in my immediate context.

These two statements lead me, therefore, to offer a relational and contextual reading of Galatians 3:27–28, in the setting of an ecumenical discussion about how Paul is to be understood. And, of course, all of this must be set within the hermeneutical circle, which indicates that interpretation is a process that moves from text to context, and back again; and within the central Reformed affirmation that the belief of the church must be grounded on scripture, and scripture alone—and so, the statements of the church about how scripture is to be interpreted, are themselves drawn from our understanding of what scripture says. So the process is intricate and complex.

Some initial observations regarding Galatians 3:27–28

Our attention is focused on two verses from the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians. There are three main reasons for this. First, it is short in length and enables more detailed discussion of the key points in the text. Second, it is broad in scope, as it throws our connections into three areas of theology and activity which were crucial in Paul's own practice of ministry. Third, as already noted, it enables me to highlight some of the distinctive understandings brought by the Uniting Church into this ecumenical dialogue.

As we ponder the passage, there are three immediate observations to make of this short text. There is an immediate reference to baptism, which in context relates to the issue of belonging to the community of faith, 'in Christ Jesus' (3:26, 28). In Paul's view, it was the act of baptism which functioned as a 'key identity marker,' marking out those who 'belong to Christ' (3:29). This association sets what Paul has to say here, within the context of considering those distinctive features which mark out what it

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1 See sections 4.7 and 4.8 of The Understanding and Use of the Bible, in Theology for Pilgrims, pp. 407–71.
3 This language has made its way into biblical studies through the increasing interaction that has taken place between biblical scholars, on the one hand, and sociologists and anthropologists, on the other. The phrase is now regularly used to describe the function of circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath, in referring to 1st century Judaism. This work was initially prepared by James Dunn, for instance, in 'The New Perspective on Paul', Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 50 (1968), pp. 95–122, republished in Dunn, Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians, London: SPCK, 1990, pp. 183–214. For more recent discussion, see Dunn, The New Perspective on Paul; Collected Essays, WUNT 189, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005.
means to belong to this community of faith. So we may venture our first assumption: this affirmation is foundational to belonging within the Christian community. It has the quality of a ‘statement of principle’ about our identity as people of faith.

Secondly, there is a specific rhetorical construction employed by Paul. We note the formulaic pattern of three negated pairs which are employed: ‘no longer a or b, no longer p or q, no longer x and y’. We should also note the interesting variation of the conjunctive used in the third negated pair—it provides a set of comparisons between related but different categories. So the second assumption is: the affirmation deals with the juxtaposition, the relationship, between states or categories; it has to do with how human relationships are worked out within that community of faith.

A third observation relates to the nature of these three negated pairs (‘no longer a or b’). They point to three significant areas in which these relationships appear to be overcome. The claim inherent in the phrase ‘no longer’ sets up a tension, with an expectation that the tension will be resolved by a clause beginning, ‘but now…’. This resolution is provided in the text by the affirmation, ‘all of you are one in Christ Jesus’. Here we find a statement of the unity that is foundational to that community of faith.

These observations lead me to pose a series of questions regarding the scope and nature of this text. The issues can be articulated as follows: In what sphere does each negated pair operate? What aspect of life is this affirmation intended to guide? Does it convey the hope embedded in faith? Is it a pointer to a spiritual, or heavenly, or eschatological goal, to which the people of faith are journeying? Is it a future hope? Or does it relate to the life of the church, within the community faith—the sphere within which God’s promises to people of faith are realised now, in the present, as a foretaste of the future that is still to come? Is it a guide to life in the faith community? Or does it point to the work that must be undertaken by believers in the here-and-now, within the society in which we are living? Is it a promise to all of God’s people which must be sought and erected now, for all people? Is it a blueprint for life in society? Such questions will run throughout the detailed discussion to follow.

The first negated pair: ‘no longer Jew or Greek’

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles (or, as they are often called, Greeks), is a central issue in Galatians; and it appears to have been a constant concern for Paul throughout his ministry. The Reformation highlighted the insight that ‘justification by faith’ is central for belief; more recent scholarship has identified and explained that the way that Paul worked this out was in terms of the Jew/Gentile distinctions, drawn so clearly by some of his Jewish contemporaries.  

Paul’s letter to the Galatians demonstrates that δικαιοσύνη (translated as ‘justification’ or ‘righteousness’) was a key issue (2:16); Paul wanted to affirm its centrality even while he disputed the interpretation of those who believed that justification depended on, and was integrally related to, the observation of legal factors (kosher food rules, circumcision of males, Sabbath observance, and so on). His longer letter to the Romans expands this insight; δικαιοσύνη is a key term in the biblical text on which this letter is founded (Habakkuk 2:4, quoted at Rom 1:17) and it features prominently in the argument of many subsequent chapters in Romans (3:21–31; 4:3–5; 5:15–21; 6:17–19; 8:28–30).

Crucial to the argument are Romans 9–11, for it is here that Paul sets out the key case study for demonstrating how righteousness or justification works within the community of faith: the inclusion of Gentiles does not mean the rejection of the Jews, for both are integral to the people of God (11:11–12, 25–32). This new community is the manifestation of righteousness or justification in clear terms, in a concrete community of faith.

This becomes the foundation for Paul’s missionary activity within the communities of faith; but also within the society of his day. The fact that this affirmation is repeated in the similar baptismal formulae in 1 Cor 12:12–13 and Col 3:19–11 (and the fact that it stands at the head of the negated pairs in all three such statements) underlines its strategic importance for Paul.

What is the realm in which this claim operates? My reading of it is that it is not simply a heavenly hope: Paul devoted too much attention and energy to implementing this matter in specific, practical ways, for this to be the case. It is certainly an issue to be worked out within the community of faith. It formed the basis for Paul’s letters to Romans and Galatians and undergirded the collection which he took amongst Gentile churches, to support the Jewish believers in Jerusalem (a tangible sign of the commitment he had to this belief).

However, it is also an integral part of the witness of faith to the society of which those people were a part. A distinctive characteristic of the early Christian community was that it comprised a mixed fellowship of Jews and gentiles, in contrast to many groups in society where separation was the rule. The argument which is outlined in Gal 2:11–15 supports this understanding of the matter. Thus, I believe that the first negated pair of Gal 3:27–28 was understood by Paul as applying within society, in the here-and-now, as a specific, measurable manifestation of the grace of God.

In this light, the Uniting Church affirms 'we are a multicultural church'. The Statement to the Nation issued at its Inauguration in 1977 pledged the church to seek reconciliation ... for the whole human race and particularly acknowledged our immediate context, our responsibilities as one branch of the Christian church within the region of South-East Asia and the Pacific.10 In 1985 the National Assembly adopted a statement, as a resolution of the Assembly, which began the task of working out this theological issue in the practical matters of life.11 This statement declared the Uniting Church to be a multicultural Church, seeking a biblical vision of inclusion and of equal humanity and culture created by a loving and living God, encouraging worship in native languages as well as in bilingual services, planning for ministry from leaders of various ethnic origins, developing educational programmes to equip ministers for such a context, and envisaging the establishment of multicultural parishes. All of this can be seen as implementing the first negated pair of Gal 3:28 in the life of the church.

In parallel to this movement, the Uniting Church has sought to recognize the pre-eminent place within Australian history and society of the Indigenous peoples of the continent and nearby islands. This desire was clearly articulated in the Statement made by the President at the 1988 Assembly, in the course of sealing a Covenant with the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress.12 The Statement seeks to recognize past wrongs in the relationship between Aboriginal and Islander peoples and non-Aboriginal peoples and includes the explicit phrase that this covenant will unite us all in a multi-racial bond of fellowship which will be a witness to God's love for us all and a constant challenge to the continuing racism which oppresses you and separates us in this land. Again, the echoes of Gal 3:28 are clear.

The 1977 Statement to the Nation also pledged the church to oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms and the 1985 statement on multiculturalism welcomed the progress that has been made in the last twenty years towards the formation of a society in Australia in which people of many races and cultures live together. The President's prayer which ended the 1988 Covenant Statement sought to move towards a united Australia which respects this land in which we live, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all. These exents indicate that the church clearly envisages that declaration about 'Jew or Greek', when it is contextualized within the Australian setting, has to do with the nature of society as a whole. This commitment is both informed by the declaration of Paul in Gal 3:28, and shapes the way that the Uniting Church understands this scripture passage.

The second negated pair: 'no longer slave or free'

The visionary quality of Paul's statement about social status is clear; ultimately, in God's eyes, our social status determines nothing. Can we go further than this, into ecclesial or even societal domains? For Paul, the issue of slavery was integral to the way that society operated. It is clear that slaves belonged to the early communities of faith, and that society was dependent on this form of labour to provide for the essentials of life for those engaged in trade and business.

On the one hand, Paul exhorts Philemon to receive back the runaway slave, Onesimus, to 'welcome him as you would welcome me' (Phm 17). Although he initially issues this as a command (Phm 8), he swiftly modifies this to be an exhortation based on love (Phm 9). It seems that, within the community of faith, the status differential between slave and master ought to be put aside; if not permanently, at least for the time that the community is gathered. The context of the community of faith means that the societal relationships are to be modified, at least within that community.

Yet on the other hand, Paul muses in 1 Corinthians 7 about the need not to upset the status quo, by remaining in whatever state it is that a person finds themselves to be in. We might paraphrase: 'If you are a slave, stay as a slave. If you are a freed person, stay free.' Although the Greek is ambiguous and the usual translation has been contested,13 Paul's practice in other situations supports the notion that he was not looking to overturn the master-slave relationship in society. He was not a proponent of freeing all slaves.

It was only later—much later—that the church moved to overturn the system of slavery (as we celebrated just two years ago, the two hundredth anniversary of this). For a long period of time, this negated pair ('no longer slave or free') was considered to operate as a vision for the future, which could be overthrown in part within the community of faith. Only in recent times has the impact of this message on society been clearly understood.

Within the Uniting Church, the issue of slavery is not a live one, at least in the same way that it was in eighteenth-century British and North American society. However, the principle underlying the challenge to slavery is one of human rights—the dignity of the person—and this principle is clearly upheld by the Uniting Church. The First Assembly of the Uniting Church issued a Statement to the Nation in which it committed the church to be a sign of the reconciliation we seek for the whole human race, and to work to oppose all forms of discrimination which infringe basic rights and freedoms.

Numerous statements adopted by the Assembly in the decades since attest to the church's ongoing commitment to seeking justice in the structures of society. In the Australian Bicentennial year (1988), a Statement to the Nation14 addressed specific issues of justice—relating particularly to Aboriginal people, but also noting a widening gap between the rich and the poor, the ongoing tensions and conflicts in the

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9 Statement to the Nation 1977, in Theology for Pilgrims, pp. 517–18. The same regional reference, to Asia and the Pacific, had been included in paragraph 2 of the Bicentennial Union.
10 'The Uniting Church As a Multicultural Church', in Theology for Pilgrims, pp. 622–25.
world, and practices threatening the destruction of creation. The Statement included a strong general
assertion on the matter: 'In co-operation with all fellow Australians of goodwill, we are committed to work
for justice and peace, calling for honesty and integrity, encouraging tolerance and compassion, challenging
acquisitiveness and greed, opposing discrimination and prejudice, condemning violence and oppression and
creating a loving and caring community. Ongoing expressions of this commitment are regularly articulated in
Assembly resolutions and statements relating to justice.' It is clear that one of the biblical passages
which lies behind this commitment is Gal 3:28, and particularly the negated pair which affirms that
there is 'no longer slave or free'.

What is the realm in which this operates? Once again, whilst it can be understood to point towards a
heavily hope, this is not the end of the matter. Whilst it was not an issue to be worked out within the
community of faith in Paul's time, later wisdom within the church saw the importance of pursuing this
principle and enacting it within the church. Ultimately, it became a key issue, 200 years ago, for some
church leaders, to work out in the structures of the society of which they were a part.

In this instance, the post-biblical developments in understanding have contributed to a renewed
appreciation of what was already expressed in one form within the biblical text. Paul signalled something
which he did not actively seek to implement in his lifetime. Within the ancient world, it offered a vision
of hope for humanity. With hindsight, his words provide a rallying point for activity which seeks to
implement this vision in the society of the modern world.

We note, then, that it has been through the activity of later figures in the church, at work in society,
that the implementation of this second negated pair has come to be seen in full consistency with the first
negated pair. The two claims, 'no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free', apply in equal measure, in
the same way, in the same place, without differentiation. This is an important hermeneutical observation
in its consequence will be further noted at a later point in our considerations.

The third negated pair: 'no longer male and female'

The third negated pair, 'no longer male and female', is found only in this letter, to the church in Galatia.
The parallel occurrences, at 1 Cor 12 and Col 3, do not include this claim. Scholarly speculations as to the
reason for this are many. Is the claim omitted in 1 Cor 12 because of the unruly and difficult behaviour
of females within the Corinthian assembly? Is the claim absent from the letter to Colossae because of
what is said later in Col 3 regarding the duty of wives to obey their husbands, in the manner of adherence
to the norms and customs of the household tables of Greco-Roman society? Or is it perhaps that the
claim is included in Gal 3, because in Galatia, the key issue is circumcision, which has been used to set
apart 'true' believers from others, and if the community is to be a truly inclusive community of faith,
then a male-only ritual cannot be the sole arbiter of membership? Here, the gender-based distinctions
are to be set aside; so the point must be made clearly and unequivocally.

The wording of this negated pair is different from the earlier two pairs. The conjunction was 'in' in the
first two instances, but in this particular pairing, it is 'and'. We are encouraged to see the two opposites,
male, and female, as belonging together. The precise wording refers us back to Gen 1:27—'so God created
humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them: male and female he created them'. The
Galatian negation invokes the Genesis explanation; God is imaged in the existence and inter-relationship of
both genders. The change in wording appears to carry an inference that this claim is about the order of
creation. It is not a mere pragmatic or in-house arrangement; it goes to the heart of the created order,
the intention and purpose of God, as the Hebraic storytellers had long ago conceived of this.

At this point, we note an important question of method, having to do with how we proceed in our
interpretation of this passage. As we have established that each of the previous negated pairs offers a
vision which is to be applied, not only within the community of faith, but also within the realm of the
social order as a whole—what then do we make of this negated pair? Is it to be held to the heavenly hope
of male-and-female equality only in the spiritual realm? Or is it something which can be implemented
within the community of faith, but no wider? Or does it speak to society as a whole?

Here, I want to make a particular claim about the quality, or the ethos, of this claim. It seems to me
that it is a matter of principle. It is not a pragmatic statement, nor is it a visionary hope; it articulates the
essential principle by which Paul worked, and in which we are to exist. 'For freedom, Christ has set us
free', is what Paul declares, later in this letter (Gal 5:1). 15

We can see, alongside this statement of principle, many instances of how Paul worked this claim out
in practice. He accepted, and co-operated, with females who undertook leadership activities within the
church: Prisca, a teacher (Ac 18:24–26); Euodia and Syntyche, fellow workers in the Gospel (Phil 4:3); then there is Phoebe, both a benefactor, or house church host (a presbuterion in the Greek of Rom
16:1–2) and a didaskalos, which I take to mean a leader and preacher in the church—in the same way
that Paul and Apollos are labelled as didaskaloiv in 1 Cor 3:5. And finally, despite centuries of patriarchal
church insinuation that Junia was a male, we have Junia, a female, who with Andronicus was 'prominent
amongst the apostles' (Rom 16:7). And there are other examples of female leaders in Paul's letters and in
Aces. This practice of Paul's must be seen to be consistent with the claim which is affirmed in Gal
3:28: there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus'. In ministry, there is


The original context of this paper— an homiletical sermon on Paul—made it imperative for me to emphasize that this is used by the
Uniting Church as a matter of principle. My fellow speakers in that service—a Catholic priest and a parish minister from within the
Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church—both starkly witnessed to the way in which this issue has been dealt with in other denominations.

The Uniting Church differs from them in this matter of practice, not simply because it seeks to be orthodox, but because it believes this is
a matter of the principle of the Gospel.
an equality amongst genders, reaching back to the equality of genders in the created order of God. 17

In addition, alongside the practical examples, we find Paul dealing with various problems which arise, especially when his message of freedom and liberation is taken hold of with such fervour and vigour, as we find in Corinth, and perhaps also in the situation addressed by the first letter to Timothy. The problems and the interpretation of Paul's instructions and guidelines regarding them, requires far more space than is available. Suffice it is for me to say that when I teach these passages—1 Cor 7, 1 Cor 11, 1 Cor 14, Col 3, Eph 5, and 1 Tim 2— I teach them with due regard to understanding them in the light of (a) the principle enunciated in Gal 3; (b) the many practical examples of how Paul worked with women in leadership roles; and (c) the specific contextual factors at work in the situations addressed in those letters, inssofar as we can be sure of them. All of which points to the way that Paul sought, regularly if not with absolute consistency, to ensure that the Christian community of faith bore witness to the reality that in Christ 'there is no longer male and female'.

So what is the realm in which this negated pair operates? Once again, it is clear that Paul articulates a heavenly hope; and some denominations continue to affirm that this is what it is, and this is all that it is. Yet the practices of Paul indicate that this matter became an issue to be worked out within the community of faith. In the contemporary church, it has likewise become a major issue for many within that community—for many women, and indeed for a significant number of men. However, it is evident that this is also an integral part of the witness of faith to the society of which the churches are a part; the declaration of Gal 3 is felt to be exhorting the churches to work for gender equality within society.

The Uniting Church expresses this understanding in various paragraphs throughout its Basis of Union. The fundamental claim about ministry is articulated in paragraph 13, that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servants. Implicit here is the recognition that all people, regardless of gender, can be gifted for ministry; this has always been the understanding with regard to lay people, not only within the Uniting Church, but across many denominations. In paragraph 15 of the Basis of Union, a quite explicit statement is made that men and women play an equal part in the administration and governance of the church (as, indeed, do lay and ordained); this begins to stake out a distinctive style of governance for the Uniting Church, which can well be seen to be in accord with Paul's statement of Gal 3:27–28.

There are a number of explicit statements about the participation of both genders within the ministry of the church in paragraph 14, beginning with the affirmation that the Uniting Church, from inception, will seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to recognise amongst its members women and men called of God to preach the Gospel, to lead the people in worship, to care for the flock, to share in government and to serve those in need in the world. Here is the clear declaration that men and women can be ordained; and that the structuring of ministry is a pointer to the structuring of society, a gift from the church to the world (even though the church may take a long time to learn the realities of this gift which it has received from the world!). Paragraph 14 later contains the direct assertion that, in the act of ordination the Church prays the ascended Christ for conferring gifts upon men and women. A lengthy discussion providing a rationale for this was produced in the 1990 statement, 'Why the Uniting Church Ordains Women to the Ministry of the Word', and in March that year the Assembly Standing Committee approved this statement "as expressing the biblical and theological reasoning which leads the Uniting Church to ordain both men and women to the ministry of the Word." 18

Paragraph 14 also contains the note that at the time of union many seek a renewal of the diacoretic in which women and men offer their time and talents, representatively and on behalf of God's people, in the service of humanity in the face of changing needs. The Basis of Union thus states that the Church will seek to ensure that it remains open to the possibility that God may call men and women into such a renewed diacoretic; a decision to bring this possibility into reality was ultimately taken by the 1991 Assembly, and both men and women have been subsequently ordained as Deacons, as well as Ministers of the Word.

There have been various strategies employed within the Uniting Church, to address not only the structures of the denomination, but also seek to implement the commitment of the church to gender equality within society as a whole. Participation in the 'Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women' (1988 to 1998), a project sponsored by the World Council of Churches, for instance, as well as local initiatives and movements, testify to this ongoing commitment. Once again, in considering this negated pair, we can see how the Uniting Church grasps hold of this heavenly vision in the realities of the present, in the way that the church is ordered, and then pushes this claim into the society of which we are a part, seeking equality and justice amongst people whatever their gender.

A further development in relation to this area of church life might be seen in the way the discussion has developed during the life of the Uniting Church, with regard to sexual orientation. This discussion has had various flashpoints, not the least being the debate of 'Proposal 84' at the 10th Assembly, the consequences of the resolution adopted by that Assembly, and the later clarification issued by the Assembly Standing Committee. 19 One element of the controversy related to this issue has to do with the realm in which this third negated pair of Gal 3:27–28 operates. If the principle stands, that the gender of an individual does not prescribe whether that person may or may not be ordained, then might the same apply with regard to sexual orientation?

The debate over sexual orientation has claimed the attention of the Uniting Church from its early years. In 1982, when the Assembly Standing Committee received a submission relating to the ordination

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17 An exhaustive examination of the key passage is provided by Dennis H. MacDonald, There is No Male and Female: The Fate of a Dominical Saying in Paul and Gnosticism, HRL 21; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.

18 'Why the Uniting Church Ordains Women to the Ministry of the Word', in Theology for Alphagia, pp. 562–584; the relevant minute, Minute 10/32, is reproduced in full in Theology for Alphagia, pp. 614–15. Of course, the same rationale applies to the ministry of Deacon, which was introduced at an Assembly subsequent to the decision.

19 The proposal, when adopted, became known as Resolution 84; it was reviewed as Assembly minute 03/1204. Subsequent discussion at the next Assembly Standing Committee meeting led to the adoption of a number of clarifications, which were published as ASC minute 03/86.
of homosexual persons, it referred in passing to Galatians when it noted that *The Gospel of Jesus Christ is all-inclusive. You are all one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians, Ephesians) and the Uniting Church declares in the Basis of Union, Para. 2, the belief 'that Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ'. The explicit reference to Galatians strengthens the sense that this key passage has been one of the biblical factors which has been at work in this extended debate. The current position within the Uniting Church, that ordination is a matter for the Presbytery to determine on a case-by-case basis, reflects an openness to diversity and a resolve not to allow pre-existing factors (such as sexual orientation) to override a consideration of the gifts and calling of the individual candidates. In this regard, it is akin to the earlier resolve of the church, not to allow a person's gender to determine, in principle, whether ordination is possible or not. Each commitment is, in part, informed by the declaration of Paul in Gal 3:28.

**Conclusions**

The exploration of Galatians 3:27–28 undertaken above leads to the conclusion that it is the eschatological vision of being 'in Christ', as it is articulated in these verses, which shapes and drives the understanding of faith and the practicalities of how that faith is lived out in community. This ought not to be an unexpected conclusion; much of contemporary biblical scholarship which is focussed on the letters of Paul would maintain that Paul's eschatological vision shapes and determines his theology, his ethics, and his view of the church.

However, the particular ways in which we have explored this passage provides us with a distinctive Uniting Church understanding, which is distinct from (even, at times, at odds with) other denominational approaches to the issues raised in this passage. The vision of being 'in Christ' is, for Paul, more than a hope awaiting its realisation in the future; it is a present reality, evident within the relationships and ways of being within the community of faith. Whether it is a matter of ethnic identity (a Jew or a Gentile), or a situation of social status (an enslaved person or a freed person), or a case of gender role (a male or a female), the perceived differentiations and distinctions are divisions which are 'no longer'. They have been relativised, modified, or removed, because of the presence of the state of being 'in Christ'.

For Paul, however, as we have seen, this situation is not one which applies exclusively and solely within the community of faith. In each of these categories, he indicated in one way or another that the different way of relating ought to bring about changes in society. The changed relationships within the community of faith had implications out into society as a whole. In the case of ethnicity, Paul worked vigorously and consistently to effect change. In the case of gender identity, his actions indicated some commitment to making space for modified relationships and different roles within the wider societal setting. In the case of social status, Paul was conservative in advice and restrained in action. Nevertheless, the principle that he articulated in Gal 3:27–28, and the way that he went about implementing it, indicated that all areas of human life were encompassed within the transformations envisaged 'in Christ'.

It is not only the ecclesial implications of these verses which have been worked out by the Uniting Church, in key documents as well as in practice. It is also the societal implications of each 'negated pair' that has been on the agenda for the Uniting Church throughout its existence. It is because of this, that these particular verses from Paul's letter to the believers in Galatia can be seen as a touchstone for the Uniting Church; a succinct statement of those matters which are as central and important for this particular denomination.

Our final observation, then, is to recall our initial discussion of the hermeneutical task. Such a reading of scripture is both relational, and contextual. It is *relational* in that it takes place within the human relationships that exist within the community of faith, and within the relationship that we have as we dialogue with the biblical text. It is *contextual* in that it takes place within the context of our own time, our own place—with due regard to who we are as we sit to read, hear, and respond to scripture. Each of these factors well exemplify the approach to scripture and the way of being in society that the Uniting Church has undertaken throughout its short history.