

## Hands Together through Baptism Galatians 3:26-28



### Background for the leader:

Paul's letter to the Galatians is written with both emotion and intensity. Paul reminds the Galatians of their origins as Christians. He faces two crucial questions: who constitutes the people of God and what is the function of the law.

Paul tells the people of Galatia we are all one in Christ. Barriers for humans such as gender, class, and nations are not barriers for Christ. Paul cannot speak about faith without speaking about Christ. Before Christ the law was a disciplinarian. With the coming of Christ those who respond in faith are children of God. For the people of God the law is no longer the source of identification. It is now identification in Christ that assures inclusion in the promises of God. In baptism we "put on" Christ and are identified in him.

Baptism is the public act that acknowledges this new faith relationship. The baptized are clothed with Christ. Each baptized person may say, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 3:19-20). Our identity is found in Christ who lives in us.

Baptism is not something we humans do. It is something God does. In his book *"The Covenant of Grace"* Cumberland Presbyterian theologian Hubert Morrow says, "It (baptism) is a gift of God through the ministry of the church. Baptism is a gift of God because it is a sign of God's covenant of grace...The meaning of the baptism of infants is the same as that for adults. It is a sign of God's initiative to claim persons in Christ."

Christ becomes the identity of each person. Old identities are submerged in a new identity. "There is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (vs 28). When we are clothed in Christ we are no longer clothed in old identities of ethnicity, social class or gender. Clothed in Christ the sense of superiority and inferiority between the old identities are destroyed.

Jesus coming to earth as a human was not an isolated historical event. It was the climax of a history that breaks down all human barriers and creates a new unified community of God's grace. This is not a community achieved by rule keeping. It is a community achieved by faith in a resurrected Christ that loved and gave himself for everyone.

**Things to gather:** the scripture passage typed on paper for each participant; newsprint, markers, on one sheet of newsprint write in large letters "One in Christ"; magazines and/or newspapers; scissors; masking tape; white cloth; white candle; lighter; bowl with water; white towel; four Bibles if you choose Option 2. The printed resources you will need based on the options you choose to use in leading the Bible Study.

**Arrival:** As the women arrive invite them to find pictures that represent diversity. Ask them to cut out pictures that show as many different kinds of people as they can find. To make a collage use the masking tape to form loops to put on the back of the pictures. Place the picture on the newsprint with the words "One in Christ".

**Opening:** After everyone has arrived gather in the round with a small round table in the center. Light a white candle to represent Christ's presence among you. Invite one group member to stand next to you. Cup your hands, scoop some water, and pour it into her hands, saying: "Child of God you are clothed in God's transforming love." Dry her hand with a white hand towel. Ask the group to continue around the circle sharing the blessing.

**Read the scripture:** Read aloud Galatians 3:26-28 pausing after each verse. Share a printed copy of the scripture with each participant. Invite each person to underline important ideas that shimmer or grab their attention. Read the scripture aloud slowly a second time. Working from the words participants have underlined discuss: What would you say is the thrust or intent of this passage? Paul speaks of children of God as one in Christ Jesus. What is significant about this concept? What does this passage say about our identity? What contrasts or separations strike you in these verses? What stands out as reversals from the prevailing attitudes of contemporary culture?

**Background information.** Share the background information with the group using your own words.

**Remembering:** Recall the story of your baptism or the baptism of a family member? Invite a few participants to share their stories. Is there a common theme in the stories that have been shared?

**Option 1:**

You may choose to read aloud part of the children's book, "*Water, Came Down! The Day You Were Baptized*".

In the sacrament of baptism in the Cumberland Presbyterian Church members of the congregation are asked a question such as, "Do you, the people of God, member's of Christ's church, promise to share with this new member the good news of the gospel, to surround (him/her) with love and compassion, and to support (him/her) through prayer, fellowship and direction?" (from Directory of Worship)

*Note to leader: In the Cumberland Presbyterian Church infants and children who are baptized are entered on a role of child members. When the child decides to make a public profession of faith they then affiliate with a congregation.*

At baptism we are clothed in Christ. In your congregation what happens with children in the in between time? What ministry happens in that time between baptism and church membership? How do you support parents as they make the decision to have their child baptized? You might consider making use of the Cumberland Presbyterian resource "I Have Been Baptized". Have a copy available. Women from your group may decide to visit with a family after a child is baptized to talk about baptism and how the family might be involved in the ministries of the congregation. These are ways the parents and the congregation can work together to live out the promises made at baptism. Discuss ways the women of your group may support families as they live out their baptismal promises to their children.

Recall your childhood. What faith questions were important to you? Who was there to listen or respond to those questions?

List the barriers that children encounter in contemporary society. How do you nurture

the faith of children as they encounter barriers and divisions in the world?

Invite the women to close their eyes and recall an event they have witnessed or experienced because of racial, ethnic or gender barriers? After a few moments of silence ask them to replay the incident in their mind as if all participants recognized that we are all one in Christ.

**Some ideas for discussion:**

What barriers or divisions existed in the incident you just recalled? On newsprint make a list of the barriers that are shared. As a baptized Christian who is clothed and identified in Christ how can you participate in breaking down these barriers? On the newsprint list the solutions next to the barriers. What can you do this week to be more open to people who are different from you? Your life is a model to the children in your church. How will you teach them by your actions to face these barriers and divisions as a Christian?

**Option 2:**

A. Consider the following with the group: List the barriers between people that are evident to you in this passage. How was the barrier broken by Christ Jesus? How are the barriers you listed still present in the world today?

B. If the size of your group allows divide into four groups. Give each group one of the following passages of scripture. Mark 10:13-16 (Jesus and the children); John 4:1-15, 27 (Samaritan woman at the well); Luke 10:29-37 (Parable of the good neighbor); Luke 7:1-10 (Healing of the Roman centurion's slave). Ask each group to read the passage they are given and discuss the three questions above. Provide newsprint and markers for them to briefly record their answers. After twenty minutes invite each group to share with the total group a brief summary of their discussion. Tape the newsprint on the walls (or display in an appropriate place).

Title a sheet of newsprint "What Christians Can Do". Invite learners to share their ideas about what we as Christians can do to break down the barriers participants listed from the four passages of scripture.

Tell the group that as followers of Christ we are obliged to work at breaking down the barriers that separate us from one another. Clothed and identified in Christ we are to be barrier breakers. Ask learners to select one or two suggestions from the newsprint lists that they will focus on in the coming weeks. If more than one person selects the same thing they might work together to support each other in this ministry.

**Closing:**

In silence, invite each learner to take a picture from the "One in Christ" collage that represents someone different from themselves. Invite the learners to place the picture in a prominent place in their home where it will be seen every day during the coming week. Let the picture remind them that we are all one in Christ. We find our identity in Christ. Make a time each day for silent prayer to commit to acting to tear down barriers. We break down barriers in order to create a new unified community in God's grace. Remind

the women that in their baptism they are clothed in Christ. While holding the picture that symbolizes a barrier to be faced invite each women to touch the water and remember her baptism. You might also want to close by either singing or reading together the hymn, *Baptized in Water*, found in many of the newer hymnals.

**Prayer:**

God of mercy, it is a hard thing for us to loosen our grip on self-preserving rules. Holding on to the law can keep our differences defined. Separate and apart we have no need to fear the alien and strange. Forgive our need to hide from what we fear. We have clung to reasons to exclude. Forgive us for continuing to use our hands to build walls that divide. We offer our lives to be clothed in Christ. Wearing Christ we have a new intent to reach out our hands to others in unity. We accept the cloak of Christ which breaks down barriers and binds us as your children. We reach our hands out beyond ourselves. We reach past what is comfortable and familiar. We reach our hands across the barriers that divide to walk together in servant love. May all who see us see Christ. Amen.

**Resources:**

Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith Nurturing the Spiritual Life of Your Children* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

Charles B. Cousar, *Galatians: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1982).

Hubert Morrow, *The Covenant of Grace* (Memphis, Tn: Board of Christian Education, Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1996). To order: from Cumberland Resource Distribution [resources@cumberland.org](mailto:resources@cumberland.org); 901-276-4572 x 252.

DeVere Ramsay and Jim McGuire, *I Have Been Baptized* (Memphis, TN: Board of Christian Education, Cumberland Presbyterian Church, ?). To order: from Cumberland Resource Distribution [resources@cumberland.org](mailto:resources@cumberland.org); 901-276-4572 x252.

Walter Wangerin, Jr., *Water Came Down! The Day You Were Baptized* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999).

*Word Among Us A Worship-centered Lectionary -based Curriculum for Congregations* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1994).

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