

# Remembering the “Oldest Creed,” Overcoming the Age-Old Anomaly

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## Abstract

This article is an exploration of the insights of Stephen Patterson in his 2018 book, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity’s Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery and Sexism*. He calls value distinctions on the grounds of ethnicity, class and gender “the clichés of ancient bigotries” and makes a case for Galatians 3:28 being “the oldest Christian creed.” This creed turns the human mentality of division into the confession that “we are all one.” The article traces the development of a credo in the process of institutionalisation. The question is whether the love patriarchy of early Christianity, which went hand in hand with institutionalisation, was the reason for the oldest creed being forgotten. This is an anomaly that continues today. If Christianity today remembered the oldest creed, the church could become a “third space” where the freedom of all is celebrated.

## Key Terms

Galatians 3:28; Christianity; creed; race; class; gender; patriarchy; solidarity

## 1 The Anomaly

For those who seek guidance for their faith and lives in the Christian Bible as source document, it is an unequivocal point of departure that all human beings, created by God, have equal value before God. It is also indisputable that what Christians believe should guide their attitude, relationships and practices in life. Jesus remains the example to be emulated in attitude, word and deed. Christian Scriptures are, however, also realistic about the human condition and the struggle of real people in real life to make what they believe real in their world. Throughout human history, differences with regard to culture, social class, sex, language and race have influenced social

interaction. But it would be an anomaly if these cultural discourses speak more loudly than the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Philosophers have indicated how paradigms shift over time. Sociologists have shown how paradigm shifts lead to changes in social roles. Geographical movement, technological developments and industrial revolutions have led to changes in social roles that were good for some, but not for those with lesser status in the social hierarchy. In history, people of vanquished nations and “inferior” races were captured and sold as slaves. Females as (non-)persons of the “inferior” sex were exploited by those who regarded themselves as “superior” and therefore entitled to power and dominance. Much of this is the reality of many (or even most) people even today. Oppression, slavery and exploitation have only taken on different forms and acquired different names. Old behaviour, so ingrained in culture, continues in new situations for no apparent or logical reason. This has been the course of history.

Change for the better followed in the wake of the French Revolution with its ideas of freedom and equality. Slaves were emancipated and previously colonised people began to speak out against “empire” power. Human rights manifests addressed issues of race and gender equality. Christianity played a rather minimal role in these changes. Often, it even opposed transformation. Wars were fought in the name of Christianity to retain old systems of dominance and injustice. “Christian” empires resisted the liberation of slaves and the ethical consequences of the idea that all human beings have equal value before God. It is an anomaly that the custodians of the “good news” of Jesus Christ were and are not more active for the common good and well-being of all of God’s creation.

This anomaly has been discussed in anti-empire studies, feminist studies, systematic theology and biblical studies. Feminist theology has shown that the ways of ancient cultures with regard to race and gender were perpetuated in spite of changes in cultures over time. Theological questions remain. Why was that which was obvious in the ethos of Jesus not equally obvious in Christian practice? Why were movements for gender equality, anti-racism and the liberation of slaves resisted by Christians with political power? Trends such as a turn to fundamentalism in religion and populism in politics and culture reflect a return to racism, sexism, heteronormativity and homophobia. In predominantly “Christian” South Africa, with its exemplary constitution that aims to protect human rights, violence-against-women and rape statistics are some of the highest in the world. This is an anomaly.

## 2 Back to the Roots

Since time immemorial, people have constructed their identity, sense of worth and value by comparing themselves to others. These others are deemed “worth less,” and the self is seen as “superior,” worth more, and therefore also entitled to more. In his 2018 book, *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity’s Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery and Sexism*, NT scholar Stephen Patterson calls value distinctions on the grounds of ethnicity, class and gender “the clichés of ancient bigotries.” He makes a case for Gal 3:28 being “the oldest Christian creed,” which expressly turns the mentality of division and domination into the confession that “we are all one.” This confession is about who we are *because* we believe. It is about how we live and relate *because* we believe. This creed is not about the attributes of God. It is about being human with others before God. It is about the ancient Christian struggle between the oldest clichés of their time and the oldest creed of their faith.

On the back cover of Patterson’s book, NT scholar John Dominic Crossan describes the contribution of the work and the consequences for Christianity, should this “oldest creed” be forgotten:

This book is an elegy for Christianity’s earliest baptismal creed which promised that Roman distinctions would not become Christian discriminations and that the basic differences of race, class, and gender would not become hierarchies of oppression. When that inaugural creed is forgotten, Christians are born again, not into a transformed world, but simply into the same one as before.

This book is, according to Crossan, not just about past Christian history, but is a present Christian challenge. It is the challenge to overcome the anomaly between *good gospel* and *bad practice* within the same religion.

The question is whether progress has been made since the origins of Christianity, or whether “Christian discriminations” have indeed become “hierarchies of oppression.” After 2000 years, the ancient clichés of bigotry seem to live on in our day—often in a different guise, but often simply unchanged. The clichés of bigotry with regard to *ethnicity* (including race and religious conviction) have acquired names such as “xenophobia” and “holy war.” The clichés of *class* have gone underground. Of all the “-isms,” classism is the least recognised and remains insidious. The “rich and famous” not only live their flashy lives for all to see, but are admired and

even revered for it, slavishly emulated by many. Slavery, which was perpetrated on a large scale also by “Christian” nations, was abolished only after much resistance. It is now called “human trafficking” and “sex trafficking.” It has also gone underground, invisible to most as people go about their daily lives. The cliché of *sexism* dresses differently today, but under the guise of “change” and “progress” much remains the same. Some women in some cultures from some parts of the globe are *allowed* to work, earn money, even run countries, officiate in churches and live independent and (mostly) dignified lives. However, they are a rare breed and still face many obstacles. Women are still put or kept “in their place” in age-old tried and trusted ways—their bodies being the target. Often, even the church, the “body of Christ,” is not a safe space for women’s bodies. “The body” is the central metaphor that Paul uses to bring his message of “diversity, but no hierarchy” (Strijdom 2015, 2). However, wherever the female half of the body of Christ go, they are treated as body, sex object, body parts, walking womb and house slave. In practice, diversity does mean hierarchy. The ancient bigotries live on in society.

From his North-American context, Patterson (2018, 2–3) illustrates that, in spite of its oldest creed, the ancient bigotries live on in the Christian church. With regard to *race*, he calls Sunday worship “the most segregated hour in the United States” and “the last truly segregated public space in America.” This is no different in South Africa. With regard to *class*, Patterson points out that the prosperity gospel is in fact “all about class.” The message of the obviously prosperous preacher implies that those who are not also prosperous have insufficient faith. For John Milbank (2010, 29), prosperity theology makes of the church a place where “excessive accumulated capital can be redirected toward the recruitment of new souls for heaven in the world to come.”

When it comes to *sexism*, Patterson calls the church “the last, great bastion of gender bias.” Many churches still do not ordain women. Those that do have no or very few women in leadership positions. My own church passed the resolution to ordain women forty years ago in 1979. Even today, when it comes to leadership and decision-making, it is a male voice that emanates from this *one-eyed, half-hearted* representation of the body of Christ. In his context, Patterson (2018, 3) puts it as follows: “The church is the last institution in America where it is still legal to discriminate on the basis of gender.” The same can be said of the church in South Africa.

It is an anomaly that discrimination on the grounds of gender is often more pronounced in Christian churches than in society at large. This is the

case in spite of the “ancient Christian credo” that declares “solidarity across ethnic lines, class division, and gender difference” (Patterson 2018, 3). Patterson (2018, 7) wryly points out that throughout history it seems to have been easier for people to believe in miracles, a virgin birth, a body resurrected from the dead and heaven as final destination “than something so simple and basic as human solidarity.”

When I studied theology forty years ago, Gal 3:28 was already widely regarded in NT scholarship as a pre-Pauline baptismal formula. This is what we were taught; this is what we learnt; but never did we stop to think through the ethical implications for Christian practice. Patterson (2018, 4) attributes the lack of attention to this formula in the course of history (see Hurtado 2003; Ferguson 2009) to the church being “a citadel of patriarchy.” In *The Forgotten Creed*, he does stop to think through the significance and implications of these ancient words.

If the formula predates Paul, whose writings are the oldest that we have in Christianity, it is per implication the closest to Jesus that we have. The core of Bultmann’s understanding of the historical Jesus is his inclusivity. This includes women. Jesus called disciples “and assembled about himself a small company of followers—men and women” (Bultmann [1929] 1969, 220; cf. Painter 1987, 102). Therefore, even closer to Jesus than Paul, is the formula in Gal 3:28:

There is no Jew or Greek;  
there is no slave or free;  
there is no male and female;  
for you are all one.<sup>1</sup>

Patterson takes it one step further: more than a formula, he sees it as a confession—the oldest Christian *credo*.

### 3 On Becoming a Credo

The trajectory from *religious formula* to *credo* to *dogma*, as traced by South African NT scholar, Andries van Aarde (1999), will be briefly discussed in dialogue with Patterson’s claim that Gal 3:28 can be regarded as a confession.

Human beings express their experience through language. Religious experience is expressed through religious language. Early in the 20th century, linguist Ferdinand de Saussure ([1916] 1983) discussed the

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s translation.

complexity and multi-layered nature of language. It is not just about speaking and being understood. The broad human ability to communicate he calls *langage*, language systems *langue*, and what humans express through the use of language *parole*. People's capability to communicate, *langage*, incorporates their underlying beliefs, attitudes and social customs (see Johnson 1976, 282). Religious language is, therefore, the expression of a mixture of communal and individual beliefs, attitudes and experiences of God. Factors such as people's humanity, history and social-cultural milieu influence their experience and how they express it.

Because God is not an object that can be captured, named or described in language, metaphor is utilised to express the human experience of God. The metaphors and imagery necessarily come from the concrete world, which is the only frame of reference that human beings have. Cultural meanings are therefore inescapably part of how they experience and articulate their environment.

If religious experience articulated in language is repeated over and over again, it becomes a confessional formula. This, in turn, can develop into a credo. A credo takes on a more universal meaning. It supersedes culture, including also the culture of its origin. A credo can become reified in doctrine that functions in a timeless and context-less manner as universal "truth." Paul Ricoeur (1974, 26) points out that there is a significant distance of time, place, experience, culture, language and frame of reference between the initial existential experience, the expression of it and the later cognitive acceptance of doctrine. Van Aarde (1999, 437–470) traces the trajectory as follows: (1) the original religious experience; (2) its expression in language; (3) the formation and repetition of a confessional formula; (4) the reification of the confession into doctrine or dogma. From the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion, Van Aarde (1999, 462–464) poses the question: who has the power to, at best, steer people towards accepting this "truth" or, at worst, force them to comply?

On the one hand, Jesus followers experienced his *inclusivity* and the *egalitarian* way in which he treated people, irrespective of ethnicity, gender or class. This would have been foreign to the everyday experience of their world. The "gospel values" and "kingdom ethics" (see Cahill 1990, 383–395) of Jesus were about all people having equal access to God and being equal recipients of God's grace (see DeSilva 2000, 133–141). In their world of empire, on the other hand, it was about "power over" those deemed inferior in a fixed hierarchy of privilege. Similarly, in their religious environment the "politics of holiness" dictated who were acceptable and

worthy of inclusion—the top of the hierarchy. Those seen as unholy or unacceptable were excluded. Their place was at the bottom of the hierarchy.

With regard to gender, maleness, with its higher value, was acceptable and therefore at the top of the hierarchy. Femaleness, with its lower value and cultic uncleanness, was at the bottom. In her article, “Questioning the ‘Perfect Male Body’: A Critical Reading of Ephesians 4:13,” Lilly Nortjé-Meyer (2005, 731–739), from a reader-response criticism point of view, emphasises that metaphors are rooted in the culture and politics that created them. She argues that the high value attributed to the “perfect male body” is the product of a culture and politics that are gender-biased. This male body can therefore not serve as a “true” image of the relationship of God and the church (Nortjé-Meyer 2005, 731).

The baptismal formula that Paul cites in Gal 3:26–28 would therefore have been the expression of an experience directly opposed to what Jesus followers experienced in their cultural context. The formula repudiated all inequality. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1983, 213) calls it a “communal Christian self-definition,” which means that “within the Christian community no structures of domination can be tolerated.”

What happened to this early Christian self-definition is that it remained largely obscure, was forgotten and became “part of a hidden history” (Patterson 2018, 5). The tide of history attests to the overriding power of the social and cultural realities in which people live their lives. Ancient clichés of bias and bigotry were perpetuated and have indeed become “Christian discriminations” and “hierarchies of oppression.” This is the anomaly of Christianity today.

#### 4 The First Creed

In Gal 3, the topic is faith and the law. Ethnicity should not get in the way of people living together in harmony and unity as a faith community. Paul discusses the situation of Christian believers of Judean origin. This ends in v. 25. Ernest Burton ([1921] 1948, 206) indicates a grammatical break from this section to the next. With regard to vv. 26–29, Cilliers Breytenbach (1996, 135–137) describes Paul as being an *Unruhestifter* (“unrest maker”) in Galatia. Andrie du Toit (2007, 150) argues that Paul created unrest between the Judaizers and the Galatians when he emphasised his loyalty to the “gospel of Jesus Christ.” According to Joachim Rhode (1988, 164–165), the form that this loyalty takes (v. 28) is that there is no difference between categories of people. It is simply *a given* in the faith community. Though Rhode does not comment on the possibility that Gal 3:28 could be a pre-

Pauline formula, I concur with the scholarship that does accept it as such. My methodological interest is in the reception history of this formula (see Du Toit 2007, 150): how the idea of the formula was understood by following generations (see Gadamer 1990, 13–14, 305–312; Oeming 2007, 31–62). The question is why this loyalty to the gospel of Jesus that is indifferent to human differentiations, as articulated by Paul, was and is “forgotten.” It is an anomaly clearly pointed out by NT scholar, Stephen Patterson.

Only the first part of the old baptismal formula, “there is no Jew or Greek,” is really pertinent to Paul’s argument on faith and the law (see Betz 1979, 181–182). However, he quotes the entire formula, which leads Patterson (2018, 4–5) to believe that the formula could have been a creed. If this formula predates Paul and is quoted by him, it could well be “the first Christian creed,” the earliest expression of what Christianity has to say about race, class and gender. It has something to say about political and social ideals and practices. It articulates the religious, cultural and social consequences of having been baptised into the community of Jesus followers. This means that the old status is left behind. They enter into a new life. The new life is not about utopian ideals, but is a simple *fact of being*: “you are” (see Betz 1979, 189). Through the ritual of baptism, the group “distinguished itself from the ordinary ‘world’ of the larger society” (Meeks 1974, 182) in a “revolutionary” way, presenting a political alternative to the system to which it was opposed (see Ehrhardt 1959, 19). It is about *identity*: who Christians *are* because they *believe*. Although human beings tend to define identity in terms of difference, which is judged to be “superior” or “inferior,” according to this creed, there is no us, no them. We are all one. We are all children of God. Paul added “through the faith in Christ” (see Betz 1979, 181; Patterson 2018, 5). This is Pauline theology and was not part of the original credo.

The formulations “no Jew or Greek,” “no slave or free” and “no male and female” are, according to Patterson (2018, 6), not about “distinctions of religion and culture, but of power and privilege.” The categories “other,” “slave” and “female” indicate those people who had no freedom or agency—the inferior ones. The superior ones, those who enjoyed the advantages of culture and cultural systems, were grateful not to be these “others” without privileges. This gratitude is articulated in the Hebrew morning prayer from the Talmud that Jewish men have recited through the centuries: “Thank God for not making me a woman.” A similar sentiment is expressed in a variety of cultures and religions (see Jochnowitz 1981, 63).



At this point in the prayer, the women of Judaism would then thank God “who made me according to His will.”

The triad of class, ethnicity and gender is found in the 14th or 15th century Roth Manuscript 32, a translation of the Morning Benedictions (*Birkhot ha-Shahar*) into the language of the Jews of southern France, which attempted to achieve greater dignity for women. However, the attempt was executed in the same form as the male version, namely gratitude for not being the “inferior other” (see Jochnowitz 1981):

Blessed art Thou Lord our God king of eternity who did not make me a slave (feminine form).

Blessed art Thou . . . who did not make me a Gentile (feminine form).

Blessed art Thou . . . who made me a woman. (p. 63)

Other than this single example in a translated prayer book, Jochnowitz (1981, 63) could find no other attempts to establish greater dignity or equality for Jewish women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. This is an illustration of the course that history has taken repeatedly, not only in the social and political sphere, but also in the religious sphere: the self-designated “superior” reinforcing their superiority by comparing themselves to those designated as “inferior.”

Very early on in Christian history, the oldest creed not only attempted to, but succeeded in overcoming the “us-them,” “superior-inferior” distinction. The focus was on *solidarity*, what Strijdom (2015, 2) calls “the collaboration of diverse talents to empower and build a community of justice for which the familial terms of ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ are appropriated.” Solidarity is not an attempt to do away with cultural or other differences (Patterson 2018, 6). It does away with the value judgements of superior and inferior. The formulaic and poetic quality of the verse and its rhythm attest to a well thought out structure:

there is no Jew or Greek,  
there is no slave or free,  
there is no man and woman  
for you are all one.

The binaries summarise the three major social categories that divide people: *ethnicity* (Jew or Greek), *class* (slave or free) and *gender* (male and female). Patterson calls this a “fairly complete list of the ways by which human

beings divide themselves one from another.” He points out the subtle and easily overlooked difference between the “or” in the first two binaries and the “and” in the third: “male *and* female” (see Patterson 2018, 17). This echoes the creation story in Gen 1, where in v. 27 God created human beings in God’s image, *male and female* (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1983, 211). This verse is usually associated with marriage and family, procreation and fertility. However, the baptismal formula turns it around. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor (1984, 291) puts it as follows: “Roles in the Christian community are no longer conditioned by procreative capacities and their associated traditional social roles.”

Scholars generally agree that the formulaic quality, compact wording and tight structure suggest a creedal formula (Patterson 2018, 17). Galatians 3:27 indicates that the context is baptism. Though Paul is not discussing baptism as such, he mentions it because of its connection with the formula, which was probably taken from an early baptismal liturgy (see Betz 1979, 184).

Some translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version and the Scholars Version (Dewey et al. 2010), translate the “no” as “no longer,” as though it were baptism into the Christian faith that would make the difference between what used to be and what was “no longer” the case. However, Patterson (2018, 23) points out that this is not in the Greek. Paul does argue that believers are “no longer” under the law. However, the baptismal formula he cites simply states: “there is no Jew or Greek.” It is not that these distinctions “no longer exist” because Christ has come. They simply *do not exist* (Patterson 2018, 24). They never existed and never will. They were and still are cultural constructs, created by human beings who seek power, domination and superiority. They are false distinctions. Patterson (2018, 24) states unequivocally: “Gender is a construct; class is a conceit; race is not real.”

To be baptised “into Christ” or being “in Christ” (Rom 8:1) are typical expressions of Pauline theology (see Sanders 1977, 453–463). A similar expression was added in Gal 3:28 “to make the creed work better in the context of the letter” (Patterson 2018, 26). Patterson (2018) sees the original creed as something like:

For you are all children of God in the Spirit.  
There is no Jew or Greek,  
there is no slave or free,  
there is no male and female,  
for you are all one in the Spirit. (p. 29)

Baptism exposes the folly of a construction of identity in terms of who you *are not*. Though people are not the same, all are children of God. Patterson (2018, 29) calls the creed “a statement about the convictions of the Jesus people,” about “who they are, really.” Through baptism they adopted a new identity and relinquished their old false identities to become “children of God.”

Viewed from the perspective of a hermeneutics of suspicion, the statement “you are all one” does have some pitfalls, warns Patterson (2018, 155–158). It can mean that there is no difference or that difference does not matter. Both the idea of sameness and that of difference can have dire consequences if taken to the extreme. People are the same in the sense that all have their origin in God, created by God in God’s image. In their bodies, cultures, customs and language, however, they are not the same. Each individual is unique. If “all are one,” what then becomes of uniqueness and difference? Another concern with oneness is that one identity can be imposed by the powerful onto the powerless (Patterson 2018, 156). Those with power, who intentionally eradicate the identity and uniqueness, culture and language of others, aim to create docile bodies that exhibit standardised docile behaviour (see Foucault 1991). These were the processes introduced by, among others, those responsible for the apartheid system in South Africa. For Patterson (2018, 156), “oneness and sameness is worth worrying about.” *You are all one* is not about “overcoming difference for the sake of sameness,” but it is about *solidarity* (Patterson 2018, 158).

Solidarity can overcome the human tendency to denigrate and dehumanise those who are different. Solidarity can dissolve the glaring anomalies regarding bias and bigotry, sexism, classism and racism in Christian faith communities. The earliest articulation of Jesus followers’ understanding of his ethos and ethics and what this meant for their identity and relations was the expression of solidarity.

## **5 Why Then Forgotten**

As to why this creed has been largely forgotten, was never actively adopted as a creed, and did not reify into dogma, Patterson (2018) muses that it seems to be easier for people to believe in a higher power who saves them from sins than to think that human beings are capable of solidarity,

. . . of reaching out beyond one’s own interest to see the interests of another, to live with and for another in the hope only of a common redemption from the tears in the human fabric that have come from

difference. Oneness can never be achieved by eradication, and only a little by tolerance. Real oneness comes only when we realize we are all deeply connected and stand with one another in solidarity as . . . children of God. (p. 159)

Baptism can be seen as an early Christian cultural symbol, a rite of status transformation for those who first entered into the faith community. In their “new reading” of the authentic Pauline letters, Dewey et al. (2010, 57; my emphasis) translate Gal 3:27 as: “So, everyone of you who has been baptized into *solidarity* with God’s Anointed has become invested with the *status* of God’s Anointed”; and v. 28b as: “you all have the same *status* in the service of God’s Anointed, Jesus.” Those who came to be baptised did so because they were willing to make the radical transition from “how things are in the world” to dedicating their lives to God, and living in this world as children of God (see McVann 1991a, 151–157; 1991b, 333–360; Van Staden 2001, 583). It is the threshold to a new world, a new way of thinking and being, a new ethics (Theissen 1999, 128; see Groenewald and Van Aarde 2002, 292–293). This symbol is characterised by liminality. The new community is demarcated over against society as a “liminality-communitas” (Turner 1967, 99–103; see Groenewald 2003, 376), which represents a radical levelling of direct opposites in the value systems of the day.

Wedderburn (1987, 368–371; see Meeks 1993, 94–95) points out that Paul did not identify baptism with death, but with burial. Just as “burial is the public confirmation of someone’s death, so baptism is the confirmation of the death of the old life and the transition to a new life in Christ” (Theissen 1999, 134). In that culture, a grave was regarded as unclean and could not be touched. In the new community, a grave was now the place where the old person was left behind and the new person embraced the new life of redemption (Groenewald and Van Aarde 2002, 296). The baptismal formula cited by Paul in Gal 3:28 served to delineate the radically new values of a radically different life. Paul himself never stopped being a Jew, but “moved beyond his Pharisaic self-understanding” to become a prophet to the nations. Dewey et al. (2010, 46) explain it as follows: “What actually changed was Paul’s vision of God.” God had accepted the impure, the morally inferior, the lesser, the shamed and shameful. Entrenched social differences were to be overcome; taboos were to be broken (Theissen 1999, 134–135).

The formula expressed radical *solidarity* with all other children of God, irrespective of who they were. It emphasised that there were no categories of difference in the new dispensation. Before God, all stood as

one. Baptism overcame the destructive tendencies associated with difference, but did not aim to negate difference. For Patterson (2018, 159), the solidarity expressed in and through baptism “meant an end to otherness and othering, estrangement, and contempt for difference.” Groenewald (2003, 379) points out that the meaning of the baptism of early Christian believers was “the appropriation of new *values* and a changed lifestyle,” which not only made a difference to their own lives, but also gave meaning to the lives of others.

It is then ironic that this ritual of solidarity, “the signal rite of initiation” (Patterson 2018, 159) into the faith community, would itself in history often become the dividing factor between who was “in” and who was “out” (see 1 Cor 1:14–17), who baptised “right” and who baptised “wrong.” Soon in Christian history, the formula of solidarity disappeared completely from the baptismal rite. Where the rite of baptism told the story of how the “hidden anti-social nature of human beings” is motivated to turn into a “pro-social order” (Theissen 1999, 135), the radical socially equalising baptismal formula disappeared to become part of a “hidden history.” Phyllis Trible (1978, 202) calls such counter-voices in Scripture a “remnant theology” in the midst of the more dominant religious justifications of hierarchy and patriarchalism (see Maddox 1987, 208). Of the not-so-hidden “anti-social nature of human beings” and its body of theology there is an abundance of evidence in the history of the Christian church.

In the face of the typical divisive and destructive human tendency to denigrate and dominate that has marked histories, cultures and religions throughout the ages, and that has taken on new forms today, not much progress seems to have been made, also not in the Christian church. Remembering the forgotten creed and allowing it to steer Christian practice could serve to overcome the anomaly. Patterson (2018, 160) puts it as follows: “This forgotten creed stands on the side of solidarity, of oneness, of universal kinship. To recall it now is to recall a future once dreamt, defined by this simple claim: ‘You are all children of God.’”

## **6 Remembering the Creed, Overcoming the Anomaly**

According to what witness we have to the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, he “ungendered” and “re-socialised” his followers by departing from the cultural codes of his day (Dreyer 2018, 67; see Jacobs-Malina 1993, 70). Throughout history, the ideal of those who chose to follow him has been to appropriate his outlook on life and humanity, and to follow his ethics.

History has shown to what extent they have succeeded in bringing his good news and way of life to *all* people.

If the witness to Jesus's life is traced from the oldest writings to the later ones, a trend becomes visible. When *Paul* quotes the ancient baptismal creed in the letter to the Galatians, he displays a non-ethnic, ungendering, anti-classist disposition. However, Betz (1979, 200) points out that Paul does not repeat this "doctrine of an androgynous nature" elsewhere in his letters (see also Jervell 1960, 293–310). Though Gal 3:28 is evoked in 1 Cor 12:13, the "male and female" component is omitted there (see Murphy O'Connor 1984, 291). Betz (1979, 200) speculates whether the emancipation of women on the grounds of Gal 3:28 presented problems in the context, and that Paul may have "retracted the Galatian position." In 1 Corinthians, he "may still use similar words, but in fact Paul argues in the opposite direction compared to Gal 3:28c." According to Betz (1979, 200), Paul admits the radical implications in Galatians, but in 1 Corinthians he has changed his position, and "it may not be accidental that the whole matter is dropped in Romans."

Paul Jewett (1976, 111) and Virginia Mollenkott (1977, 90–106) explain the contradictions in Paul's writings as a struggle between his rabbinical training and the freedom and equality that he got to know in Christ, which he articulated in Gal 3:28. According to Maddox (1982, 211), Paul was *usually* able to apply his new understanding of the ethos of Jesus consistently to his social and religious world. With regard to the passages on women, however, he would sometimes slip back into his earlier mindset. In this case, the clash between the Jesus ethos and the social and religious world of his day took place in the individual author. Arguments can be seen across the spectrum of biblical scholarship: for some, there is no clash between the authentic Paul and the Galatians formula; for others, there are contradictions in his writings; and, for yet others, Paul really struggled with the implications of the baptismal formula he quoted.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1982, 144) calls the followers of Jesus in *Mark* a "discipleship of equals." This has replaced the natural social kinship ties of the patriarchal family.

Matthew and Luke seem somewhat ambiguous. In *Matthew*, women are included as equal recipients of God's grace and gifts, but do not function as equal participants in the faith community or in society. Matthew displays a double standard with regard to male and female (see Dreyer 2018, 68). According to Anthony Saldarini (2010, 168–169), Matthew does not exclude women, but also does not envision a different space for them in the

culture of the day, akin to the space that Jesus created for them throughout his life.

On the *Gospel of Luke*, the interpretations of scholarship have been divergent. On the positive side, William Barclay (1956) finds that the Gospel prioritises women. Plummer (1981, xlii–xliii) even calls it “a gospel for women.” Less optimistic is Jane Shaberg (1998, 363), who famously called Luke a “dangerous text for women.” For Christy Cobb (2019, 24), the Gospel of Luke can be seen as both dangerous and liberating for oppressed groups such as women and slaves, with characters that “simultaneously speak and are silenced. Yet their words remain.” In *Acts*, too, the women are active and participate in the story. However, their roles in the faith community and in society remain limited (see Matthews 2013, 193). Cobb (2019, 84) catches glimpses of women with agency in the book of Acts.

According to Horrell (1999, 330), “the reciprocity evident in Colossians and Ephesians” disappears in the *Pastoral Epistles* and the works of the patristic fathers, where the “focus shifts away from the household to a more hierarchical and church-based model” (see also BurrIDGE 2007, 137; Van Aarde 2017, 8). By the end of the first century, Strijdom (2015, 8) points out, the Pastoral Letters reverted back to the systemic hierarchies of the Roman Empire, and household codes were written in Paul’s name. Horrell (1999, 323) calls the household codes the “legitimation and naturalization of the dominant social order.” He explains the power struggle in early Christianity. The aim was “to establish a leadership pattern in which the household codes play a part, conferring power upon the male heads of household and providing theological legitimation for the subordination of those who are to be excluded from positions of power and leadership” (Horrell 1999, 335–336). Those who differed from this view of the faith and how it was to be embodied in social structures and interaction were labelled “deviant.”

The social stratification among members of the early Christian communities and the way in which they did or did not adhere to the radically inclusive ethos of Jesus have been much discussed in NT scholarship. Over against what Justin Meggitt (1998) calls the “new consensus,” namely that early Christian communities consisted of people of all social strata and that social differences caused tension among them (see Theissen 1982, 1992, 2001), he argues that they were a more homogenous group from the lower classes who supported one another. He calls their social ethos “mutualism.”

Because of the antagonism of their social environment and their exclusion from the social elite, early Christian faith communities did indeed develop a strong social cohesion. Theissen (2001) describes it as follows:

Although they were despised by others, they had strong self-esteem, according to which they formed a privileged group which was directly subordinated to the Lord of the World. Their social community thus transcended all social categories. (p. 73)

However, Jesus's radical ethos was not retained completely, but was transformed into what Theissen (2001, 67) calls a moderate "love patriarchy" (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1982, 149–150). This term can be traced back to the work of Ernst Troeltsch (1912, 67–83) and describes the social relations in early Christianity as a kind of religious patriarchy with ideals of love, a hierarchical church structure and a certain understanding of family that he calls "moderate conservatism." Social differences were accepted as a given. Those who were "socially stronger" had the obligation to love and respect the others (Theissen 1982, 107–108). According to Kari Syreeni (2003), though, this idea of love patriarchy has been criticised, especially in feminist circles; it does raise the question as to whether and how Paul contributed to the "softening" of Jesus's radical ethos to become more compatible with the social world of his day. This movement away from Jesus and towards conformism reified as a "hierarchical ecclesial structure" (Van Aarde 2017, 8).

Theissen agrees with Meggitt that early Christians certainly did strive for mutualism, but in practice there was a dissonance between their Jesus-ethos and the social realities of their world. Theissen (2001, 83) describes it as the egalitarian ideas of Gal 3:28 colliding with non-egalitarian social reality. The faith community was pulled in both directions. Their ambition of mutualism softened their social reality and resulted in greater equality. This "virtual reality" was expressed and perpetuated in the sacraments. In baptism and communion, all were equal. However, through the pull of social reality their initial mutualism was watered down to become a love patriarchy. Theissen (2001, 84) describes the process as the "adaptation of the radical early Christian ethos to the social reality," and as "the impact of social reality and dynamics on an ethos that contradicts this reality." Sociologist Max Weber (1946, 330) remarks: "Religious brotherliness has always clashed with the orders and values of this world, and the more its consequences have been realized, the sharper the clash has been."



## 7 “Thirdspace,” Remembrance and Liturgical Celebration

The question today is whether Christian believers and faith communities can live with this anomaly caused by the seemingly endless perpetuation of ancient bigotries. What can be regarded as “progress” in societies of antiquity is “regression” today. If one goes with the views of Troeltsch and Theissen, the new form of patriarchy—that is, “love patriarchalism”—represented progress in the societies of the Bible. The faith community’s ideal of “mutual love”—because they form the body of Christ, who lives among them, and because of their “new communal organization and mission” (Maier 2013, 85)—was a great improvement on the overt dominance of privileged males over all others. Harry Maier (2013, 89) applies Edward Soja’s notion of “thirdspace” to the body of Christ—where a specific space in a specific time with its specific practices is “upset in often deviant, innovative and unpredictable ways.” Soja’s (1996) “thirdspace” is about envisioning a different space with different practices, challenging and deconstructing conventional ways of thinking. This vision should have been taken further and should have made progress through the centuries. But it did not. If in today’s world, where bias, bigotry, prejudice, dominance and supremacy are generally regarded in a negative light, faith communities are not capable of more than love patriarchalism, this can be regarded as regression.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1982, 132) reminds us that “the moral authority of the Bible is grounded in a community that is capable of sustaining scriptural authority in faithful remembrance, liturgical celebration, ecclesial governance and continual reinterpretation of its own Biblical roots and traditions.” In simply accepting the anomaly of, on the one hand, confessing the ethos of Jesus and, on the other hand, practising an ethos that contradicts it, the faith community not only loses credibility in the world that is its mission, but loses its very reason for being, namely its prophetic critique of the existing social order (see Ruether 1982, 55–56). Maddox (1987, 204) describes the consequences as follows: “God never intended human society to be patriarchal; we made it that way ourselves in our sinful attempts to play God and now we suffer at our own hands (of course, some suffer much more than others).”

It is to this human culture that the liberating word of God should be addressed clearly, honestly and authentically. In order for Christianity to be capable of that, it should return to its very oldest roots. If the Bible does not function as a timeless archetype, but as a historical prototype, the first and

oldest creed should be revisited and given the attention it deserves. Then it can be welcomed back to the centre of Christianity as its “formative root-model” (see Schüssler Fiorenza 1982, 161–165). The direction that history took when turning the ethos of Jesus into a “patriarchal household of God” should be reversed. The new direction should be back to the future: back to being what it was originally supposed to be, namely “a kinship community of solidarity,” so that it can have a future.

Bohemian-Austrian poet and philosopher, Rainer Maria Rilke (1923), says in the seventh of his ten *Duino Elegies*: “*Unser leben geht hin mit Verwandlung*” (translation: “as our life passes, transformation/change takes place”). May this change then be for the better: transformation more and more in the image of Jesus Christ.

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