

Shaped to Be Welcoming

Heeding Christ's radical call to be one | KARL HELVIG

I have an especially vivid memory from middle school. I was at Swedish camp. (Yep, you read that right—and it was awesome!) As an eighth-grade boy I had decided to bring my brown stuffed dog along with me to camp that summer. The dog's name was Brownie. (I was a particularly clever eighth-grade boy.)

In case you missed that, I was an eighth-grade boy who brought a stuffed animal to camp with me.

Being middle-school boys, we often went to pee off the back deck of our cabin. I'm not saying this was a great plan. (If any of the middle-school boys in our youth ministry read this and think that I am in some way condoning such behavior, let me be clear: I am not condoning such behavior. If you are a middle-school boy reading this, go look up the word "condone." It's a great word.) Anyway, I'm just telling the story as I remember it.

If you haven't already guessed, some of the other boys in the cabin took it upon themselves to tease me about my stuffed dog. It was rough. One afternoon I was using the back-deck bathroom and I had Brownie with me. I'm not sure why—it was, in retrospect, clearly a bad plan. One of the boys came up behind me, called me something nasty, and pushed me off the deck. It wasn't far to the ground, but it still hurt. I ran into the woods crying.

Have you ever felt excluded? Have you ever felt like the people around you don't want you there? I have.

In 1 Corinthians we see evidence that the church in Corinth was going through a rough patch. Paul starts off his letter saying, "My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that

there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'" (1:11-12, TNIV).

Here's my summary of the events: Paul went to Corinth and preached the good news of Christ's death and resurrection. Lots of people became Christ followers. Then Apollos came along and also Peter (Cephas). Each of them also preached the good news of Christ and, again, lots of people became Christ followers. But they were arguing about it.

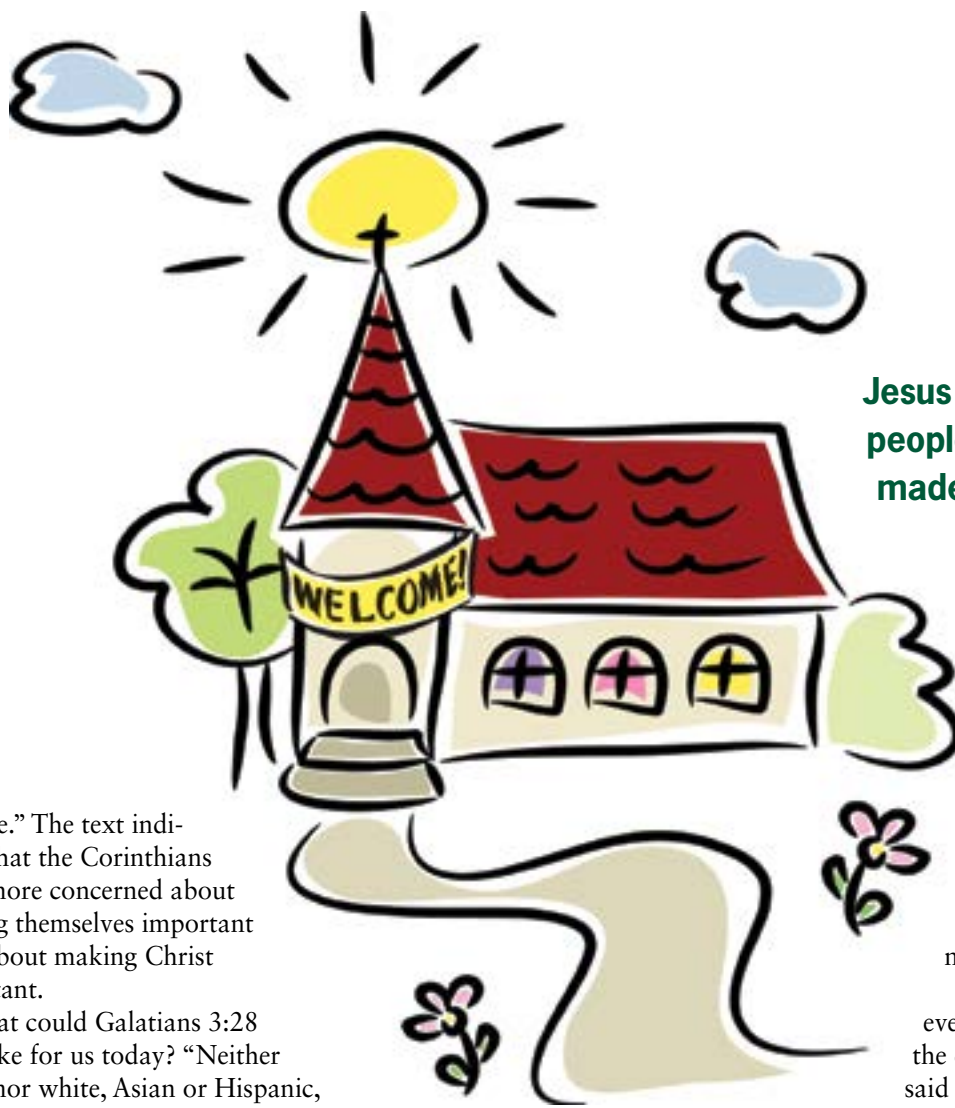
When people decide to follow Christ, their lives are changed. They learn entirely new ways of living. Here is one of the new ways of living that Paul regularly taught: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

We are all *one* in Christ Jesus. Radical. Equality.

The apostle makes the same plea in 1 Corinthians: "I appeal to you... that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1:10).

Apparently the new Christ followers in Corinth didn't take this part of Paul's teaching to heart. Instead of unity, there was division. Instead of oneness, they created factions. Instead of harmony, there was strife.

Instead of looking around and seeing their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, the believers in Corinth were sizing each other up and casting each other out because of pedigree and spiritual biography. I can almost hear them saying, "Apollos? He doesn't know what it means to follow Christ." Then, haughtily, "I was converted by Peter, and he was Jesus's favorite



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disciple.” The text indicates that the Corinthians were more concerned about making themselves important than about making Christ important.

What could Galatians 3:28 look like for us today? “Neither black nor white, Asian or Hispanic, corporate executive or undocumented worker, young in faith or old in faith—we are all one in Christ Jesus.” Could we possibly pull off something this radical and fresh? In Christ, I believe we can.

I experienced the pain of division at camp as a middle-school student. Too often people experience similar realities. Yes, the church has a long struggle with sin, but let us receive this invitation from Christ to re-open our eyes and be united.

It is too easy for us to look down on others and subtly consider them different or lower than ourselves. It’s easy to treat others as outsiders. Our attempts at growing faith and discipleship can easily be perverted into litmus tests and entry requirements into exclusivity. As Christians, we are called to turn from these breaks in fellowship and instead to follow the example of Christ.

Because, in the kingdom of God

there are no outsiders.

When we ask ourselves, “Who is part of the community of Christ?” the details of conversion, the sin from one’s past, struggles of the present, or the shape of one’s spiritual formation practices have no place in the answer. All that matters is that we are following Christ. Everyone who follows Christ is part of one body, in Christ we are all one. Jesus himself welcomed people long before they made any decisions to follow him.

This doesn’t mean there are no disagreements or struggles, it doesn’t mean everyone is fast friends all the time. It also doesn’t mean that we never lovingly confront our brothers and sisters about sin. What it does mean is that in the deepest places of our lives, we find ourselves more and more shaped to be people who look at everyone and see persons made and loved and given infinite worth

by our Creator. When we see with those eyes, it becomes natural to include any sinner in our community.

What would it take so that everyone who walked through the doors of our community said to themselves, “Wow, I am truly wanted here. People welcome me.” What would it take not just to welcome but to celebrate the presence of everyone at our church?

Let us look for opportunities to include people. Let us look for the person we wouldn’t normally talk to—and talk to them. Let us be aware of any groups we subconsciously try to avoid—and engage them. With the spirit of Christ, let us embrace the people in our communities whom we haven’t yet embraced. Together we can continue to build God’s kingdom where there are no outsiders.

Pagan astrologers greeted toddler Jesus in his home, dishonest swindlers became favored hosts to our Lord, women of ill repute gained his focused attention, and pestilent exiles were embraced by him.

Is there anyone Jesus wouldn’t welcome? ■

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