

A Letter That Changed History
Galatians 3:23-29

Once upon a time, people wrote letters. Not text messages, tweets or e-mails, but true epistles. Pens were actually put to paper. And these letters changed history, in ways both big and small.

First, the small changes.

A letter killed Charlotte Braun. Charlotte who? Charlotte Braun was a pushy version of Charlie Brown, the classic Peanuts character created by Charles Schulz. According to *mental_floss* magazine, Charlotte Braun was introduced to the comic strip in November 1954, prompting a fan to write a letter to Schulz complaining about the obnoxious character.

Schulz killed the character -- literally! He wrote a response to the fan which included a drawing of Charlotte Braun with an ax in her head. So much for the sweetness of comic strips.

A letter connected Annie Oakley to the President of the United States. The famous sharpshooter amazed crowds by shooting holes in playing cards tossed in the air, so she thought she could be of service to her country. Moved by patriotism, she wrote a letter to President William McKinley and offered her services in the Spanish-American War. In addition, she said that she was "ready to place a company of fifty lady sharpshooters" at his disposal.

That's right: Not one, but 50 female sharpshooters! And they were even prepared to furnish their own arms and ammunition, so they would be of little expense to the government. Although McKinley never responded, Annie Oakley's epistle may have helped to open the door for women in military service.

A letter rearmed James Bond. In 1956, a fan named Geoffrey Boothroyd wrote Ian Fleming, the creator of James Bond, and criticized him for putting "a lady's gun" in Bond's hands, a .25-caliber Beretta. Fleming responded by rearming Bond with a Walther PPK, and he took on Boothroyd as an arms advisor.

He also created a new character named Major Boothroyd. Bond fans know him as "Q."

A letter made us all children of God through faith. In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul changed history by arguing that we are made right with God through the faith of Jesus, not through religious law. He was writing to a group of Greek-speaking converts to Christianity, who wondered if they needed to add Jewish religious practices to their new faith in Jesus. After receiving Paul's letter, they realized that there was "no longer Jew or Greek ... slave or free ... male and female." Instead, all were one in Christ Jesus.

History was shaped in very small ways by letters to Charles Schulz, President McKinley, and Ian Fleming. But it was changed big -- totally transformed -- by Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Before Paul put pen to papyrus, people were “imprisoned and guarded under the law.” The religious laws of the Bible restrained and protected people, preventing them from hurting themselves and others. “The law was our disciplinarian,” says Paul, using a word that had a very specific meaning in the first-century Greco-Roman world, one that the Galatians would have known. The disciplinarian was a slave who supervised and guarded children, taking them to school and back while keeping them safe, and overseeing their behavior. A nanny, as it were.

The protective custody of the slave/nanny was important but temporary since the slave’s services would no longer be needed once the children grew up. In terms of the history of faith, Paul says that we were guarded under the law “until faith would be revealed” -- in particular, until the faith of Jesus Christ would be revealed. People certainly had faith in Almighty God for many hundreds of years, but history really changed when Christ faithfully suffered death and then rose to new life.

That’s why Paul wrote his letter when he did. He insists that “the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.” Once Christ came, no more nanny. Once Christ died and rose from the tomb, no human action is required except that we put our complete trust in him.

We are “justified by faith,” says Paul, made right with God by faith. The faith of Christ is critically important here because it is Christ’s faithful death and resurrection that bring God’s love into the very center of human life. But our own faith has a role to play as well, as we say yes to what God has done by putting our trust in Jesus.

Earlier in Galatians, Paul says, “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Paul has put his trust in Jesus, as he certainly should. But this line can also be translated, “I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Personal faith. Christ’s faith. Together, they form the Christian faith. And now that we’re in a state of faith, we no longer live in a nanny state. “Faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.” That’s what Paul says to the Galatians in his history-changing letter.

So what is the result of being justified by faith? For Paul, it means that all followers of Christ are now “children of God.” Until he wrote to the Galatians, the term “children of God” had been reserved for God’s chosen people, the Jews, and it naturally applied also to the first Jewish followers of Jesus. These disciples continued to practice circumcision and follow many of the religious laws of the Old Testament.

But now, says Paul, “in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” The circumcised as well as the uncircumcised. The keepers of the law as well as those who know nothing of the law. The Jews as well as the Greeks -- all children of God through faith.

For Christians today, this letter speaks of the power of faith to create a new family called “children of God.” It doesn’t matter if you have both a mother and a father. It doesn’t matter if

you are from a good neighborhood. It doesn't matter if you are a U.S. citizen. It doesn't matter if English is your first language. It doesn't matter if you have a police record. It doesn't matter if you have a high school diploma or a college education. It doesn't matter if you have a job or a spouse or a car or a house or a 401(k).

What matters is faith. The faith of Christ, and our faith as well.

That's what makes us children of God.

Paul's letter changes the world by giving us a whole new identity. He writes, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." When we clothe ourselves with Christ, we take on his characteristics and do our best to present him to the world. This means showing his grace and his love, speaking his truth, and serving others with his generosity and compassion. Although we may look odd when we go out into the world wearing the clothes of Christ, we cannot help but have an impact.

In the late 1860s, a young poet wrote a letter to an editor named Thomas Higginson and asked if she could meet with him. She wanted to thank him personally for some encouragement he had offered her. When Higginson went to her house, he saw a plain woman with reddish hair, and she greeted him by putting two day lilies into his hand "in a sort of childlike way."

When he got home, Higginson's wife said, "Oh, why do the insane so cling to you?"

This plain young woman was none other than Emily Dickinson, one of the greatest poets in American history. She refused to be published during her lifetime, but after her death, Thomas Higginson was able to guide her insightful poems into print.

When we clothe ourselves with Christ, we might look insane to some. But we understand, along with the apostle Paul, that through our faith all of us "are one in Christ Jesus." God has destroyed the barriers that divide Gentile and Jew, slave and free, male and female, from each other.

Our greatest contribution to history might be the creation of a community in which barriers fall and people are no longer separated by religion, culture, nationality, economics, or gender. If we are truly "one in Christ Jesus," we should be able to overcome the divisions that have fractured our community and driven us apart. There is more to unite us than divide us if we "belong to Christ" and "are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

Paul's letter changes our history by giving us a new identity as children of God, one that is based on being one in Jesus and one in faith. In God's eyes, unity does not mean uniformity. As Christians, we can show the world a new kind of unity, one that includes people of diverse backgrounds, conditions, and genders.

We have received a history-changing letter. Now, let's respond.