Some Bible passages don’t seem to be true. This one, for instance. **There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.** Look around—of course there is. Admittedly, this campus community is not the most ethnically diverse grouping in Milwaukee County, yet there are among us differences of ethnic background, culture, race, language. Obviously, there is male and female. And though we no longer are slave or free, there are still economic differences. Some of us have more money than others. Some of us still get to tell people what to do, and others of us still have to do it.

There are differences among us, and it is not simply that we find these differences interesting or amusing. Our differences can be profoundly unsettling. I am a white American male—as are many of us here. I suppose we seldom think about the enormous advantages we enjoy because we are white American males.

Just this last Sunday an editorial writer in *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* remarked on the disadvantages that black Americans endure: “Of course the color line shows up on death row. After all, the line traverses all facets of American life: banking, employment, entertainment, religion, medicine, housing, education.” After making his case about the disadvantages African Americans experience in America’s judicial system, the author—one of the most famous speeches of his short term as president, John F. Kennedy stood before the Berlin wall and said, “We know America is not perfect, but American never had to build a wall to keep its citizens in.”

And I am a white American male. There is a member of my extended relation with whom I know well enough from personal experience never to allow the subject of gender differences to arise. “It’s a man’s world,” I can hear her saying. “Men always get promoted. Men make more money than women for doing the same work. Women broadcasters and news anchors are quietly bumped from their positions because they ‘skewed old’ while men like Walter Cronkite can go on reading the news till he’s 90 if he chose to—wrinkles, bags under his eyes, gray hair and all!”

So how can Paul say **there is no Jew or Greek, slave nor free, male nor female**?

Read the whole passage: **There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.** Paul did not say, “You are all the same in Christ Jesus, or that you are all identical, but that you are all one. One of the great pictures Paul uses to illustrate the church is that the church is God’s temple, and each of us is a living stone in that temple. Those stones are not all the same size nor do they serve the same purposes, but together they rise into the Lord’s temple. Another of Paul’s great pictures is that the church is a body, one...
body, though it is made up of many different parts. We couldn’t all be the same part—even the part we might consider most important—because then where would the body be? What would the body be if we were all one gigantic nose? And then we caught a cold? It is even true that the parts of the body look out for one another. The stronger parts defend those more vulnerable. Those parts that would be immodest to be exposed other parts cover.

Our differences are real, but our differences do not stand as a barrier to our relationship to God. God so loved the world (John 3:16). “My Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life,” Jesus said (John 6:40). “You are all sons [and daughters!] of God through faith in Christ, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:26–27). All of you. The same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on his name. For everyone that calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:12–13).

You don’t think that’s revolutionary? Do you know anything about Hinduism? about the Hindu caste system? The four castes, from the lowest of the Shudras working with leather and street garbage to the highest caste, the Brahmins, who are priests and teachers? And how through progressive lifetimes men are to work their way up through the castes, achieving good karma, until they slip into nirvana? Do you know those four castes are only for men? Only men can achieve moksha? The only hope a woman has to achieve moksha—release—is to be reincarnated as a man! (Some women might think that step might not represent progress!)

Jesus died for all. He forgave the sins of all people. Jesus loves all the little children of the world. They are yellow, black, and white. They are precious in his sight.

Paul knew there were differences, and he knew those differences remained in the infant churches he served around the Mediterranean. But he addressed those differences. He wrote that Christ has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility that stood between Jew and Gentile. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body reconcile both of them to God through the cross (Ephesians 2:15–16). Paul understood that racial and cultural characteristics long ago learned and deeply held would not simply disappear. But Paul said, in the truest sense possible, that the differences don’t matter anymore. One man considers one day more sacred than another—probably a Jewish member of the church at Rome. Another man—most likely a Gentile—considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind (Romans 14:5).

Paul knew there would still be male and female. He praised God for it! He said, Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. He said, Wives submit to your husbands out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:25, 22). Paul knew there would still be slaves and masters, yet he reminded masters that they still had a Master in heaven, and he reminded slaves that though they had a master here, in Christ they were truly free.

So the Gospel does not ignore differences, nor does it seek to undo them. It transforms those differences. It teaches us to live as new people within those differences. So long as this life endures we will still be Jew and Greek, still be male and female. Some will be labor and others management. But in Christ we are one and in Christ we can be different.

Karl Barth once called the church “God’s provisional demonstration of his intention for all humanity.” In other words, if people want to see how God would like all society to be, the most reliable place they should be able to look is at the community of God’s church. Things may never change out there, but how can we expect them to change unless they see the change in us?