

# The Right Hand of Fellowship

*Galatians 2:6-10*

*With Study Questions*

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What we have observed so far is the Apostle Paul spending a great deal of time arguing that his message is **“not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead” (1:1)**. Arguably, the resurrection of Christ is mentioned because the power of the gospel itself is under attack.

Paul desires the recipients of his letter also be the recipients of **“Grace... and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3)**. This grace and peace is ours when we come to realize and embrace the fact that He **“gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age” (1:4)**. This deliverance we have is not according to the will or power of man but **“according to the will of our God and Father” (1:4)**. It is not the power, or will of self, or man, who receives the glory but it is God **“to whom be glory forever and ever” (1:5)**.

Paul marveled that these churches were **“turning away so soon from Him who called [them] in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel” (1:6)**. There is a tendency for churches to be swayed from their appointed task, which is preaching a true biblical gospel.

This **“other gospel”** was **“not another” (1:7)** gospel at all but was a perversion of **“the gospel of Christ” (1:7)**. Those who pervert the message of the gospel are not to be taken lightly but are to be **“accursed” (1:8, 9)**.

The message Paul brings is not designed to please men or to redefine God. Paul is not an inventor of Christ but rather **“a bondservant of Christ” (1:10)**. The message of deliverance he brings is **“not according to man” (1:11)** but rather a message which comes **“through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12)**. It is this message which lies on the pages before us.

Seeking to destroy the weight of the argument of his Jewish detractors, Paul conveys that he was the quintessential Jew. He had **“advanced in Judaism beyond many of [his] contemporaries in [his] own nation” (1:14)** But that would all end since God had **“separated [Paul] from [his] mother’s womb and called [him] through His grace” (1:16)**. It was God’s will to **“reveal His Son” (1:16)** through Paul. Paul did not look to human instruction for his ministry but had very limited contact with the other apostles (1:17). After a period of **“three years [he] went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him [only] fifteen days” (1:18)**. The churches of Judea didn’t know Paul by face at all (1:22) but as a result of the faith that he preached (1:23) **“they glorified God in [him]” (1:24)**.

When Paul finally did spend a significant amount of time with the other apostles, his message was found to be in complete harmony with them. There were people then, as there are today, seeking to **“bring us into bondage” (2:4)**.

Paul, and the other apostles wouldn't put up with that "even for an hour...that the truth of the gospel might continue with [them]" (2:5).

We will read now of a more detailed account of Paul's interaction with the other apostles.

**But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man – for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me. <sup>7</sup> But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised *was* to Peter <sup>8</sup> (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), <sup>9</sup> and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. <sup>10</sup> They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do (Galatians 2:6-10).**

What we see in these five verses is the full affirmation and encouragement of the apostles given to Paul as a result of the message and power God worked through him. We will read in these verses that the other apostles gave Paul the right hand of fellowship. This means they supported and endorsed the ministry of Paul. What is the basis of the right hand of fellowship? We will seek to answer this question this morning.

**But from those who seemed to be something – whatever they were, it makes no difference to me (Galatians 2:6a).**

As Paul gives an account of his interaction with the other apostles, he almost sounds disrespectful. But we must understand the context of the statement. The context is the subject of the word of God itself. If the context were the mere relationships people have with one another, Paul would be arrogant and in sin.

Certainly the president, the policeman, the pastor, elder, teacher, father, mother, husband, wife, employer, employee, child, etc., all deserve their due respect. And to say that they make no difference to me would be to place myself on a false pedestal of arrogant and sinful superiority. But when the word of God is the context, we are all simply dust.

Man's best efforts at understanding the nature of reality have been – millennia after millennia – an exercise in futility. The natural man is no closer

to understanding truth now, than when Socrates or the sophists who existed before the birth of Christ pondered their own existence.

### **God shows personal favoritism to no man (Galatians 2:6b)**

Literally this means that God does not receive the face of man. It is a principle of deity that God accepts no man's person. We read in Leviticus "**Thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the dignity of the mighty**" (Leviticus 19:15). God is no respecter of persons as Paul has elsewhere testified (Romans 2:11, Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 3:25).

Man is God's supreme creation. The creation account in Genesis emphasizes the making of man as the apex of the entire created order – passing over the entire stellar universe with the simple phrase, "He made the stars also." But though he is the image of God, he is not God. And though God may, in a certain sense, respect man (as with Job), when it comes to the fountain of eternal and holy wisdom, man's best efforts are pathetic drivel.

### **...for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me (Galatians 2:6c).**

As illustrious as the apostles might have seemed to those in churches that received their message, they were simply the horn of God and didn't, by virtue of their own personal prestige, add anything to what God had already revealed to Paul. Paul's disparaging words regarding the other apostles might be better understood if we understand man's tendency to worship God's messengers rather than God Himself (which may have been happening in Galatia at some level). The brass serpent in the wilderness that God used to heal the deadly sting of the vipers was later worshiped (Numbers 21:10; 2 Kings 18:4). What a great tendency there would be to worship Peter, James, and John.

I remember going on a men's retreat where the speaker was the head of a major "Christian movement" in Southern California which eventually reached out all over the country. One of the men who joined us watched the speaker and commented on how he "glowed." I've come to believe this particular teacher to be in error in a great many categories. Be that as it may, if we are tempted to canonize errant human teachers and assign a sort of shekinah to them, how much more would that temptation be with true apostles. Paul wouldn't have it. The messenger must be de-emphasized while the message (which is the representation of God Himself) must be magnified.

**But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised *was* to Peter <sup>8</sup> (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles) (Galatians 2:7, 8).**

Briefly, in these verses, is an observation by the other apostles of the hand of God in Paul's ministry to the Gentiles; Peter to the Jews. An interesting sub-point is made here by Calvin.

**But if Peter's apostleship had a peculiar reference to the Jews, let the Romanists see on what ground they derive from him their succession to the primacy. If the Pope of Rome claims the primacy because he is Peter's successor, he ought to exercise it over the Jews!**<sup>1</sup>

But the main point here is the recognition, by the other apostles, that Paul's message was God's message. The "effective working" spoken of here may be the signs and wonders performed by Paul; it may also be his effective ability to convert people to Christ. But the main point of Paul in these chapters is not that he could do miracles or convert huge numbers. The main point of Paul was the confirmation of the message itself; the message was under attack.

And in case we have forgotten the issue of the entire epistle, it was this: the old covenant ceremonial law (mainly circumcision), though dead with Christ, was not yet buried. And the attempted resurrection of this ceremonial law included a perversion of it. Rather than it merely pointing to the cross, it was supplanting the cross. Paul's message is that man is not saved by keeping the law (any law); that justification (acquittal) before God was by faith alone.

**...and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars (Galatians 2:9).**

Paul is not denying that these men are the pillars of the church. The twelve foundations of the wall of the city in Revelation 21:14 has on it the names of the twelve apostles. Paul elsewhere states that the apostles and the prophets are the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). What we will see here is that the foundation, or pillars, of the church do not form an uneven platform. They are in unquestionable concert.

**...perceived the grace that had been given to me,**

So what was being perceived by James, Peter, and John? They had perceived the grace given to Paul. As we have already established, the primary issue on the table was the message. It wouldn't take long for the other apostles to recognize the truth when they heard Paul.

**they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should* go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.**

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, J. 1998. *Calvin's Commentaries: Galatians* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ga 2:7). Ages Software: Albany, OR

Paul was given the right hand of fellowship. The right hand here means complete support and endorsement. The other apostles were in hearty agreement with Paul. And although their ministries might have differed in terms of the target audience (although Paul had much ministry with the Jews and Peter with the Gentiles), the message was the same.

### **Modern Methods of Unity**

Since I think this the main point of Paul's argument—the unity and support of the apostles—I would like to pause here and see how well the mold of Paul's philosophy of ministry fits over the form of modern western evangelicalism—modern popular Christianity as we perceive it today.

Let us operate with Psalm 133:1 as our theme verse. **"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"** What is the basis of this unity?

### **A Unified Marriage**

I often dialogue with people who are pondering marriage to someone with whom they have significant philosophical and theological differences. But they are in the midst of a romance that is so full that the love will overflow and quench out religious and theoretical difficulties; love will conquer all (so the movies suggest). At a certain level this may be true, unfortunately they often cannot agree on what love actually is. And instead of the love overflowing and drowning the difficulties the cup is quickly emptied and balancing on a tightrope.

### **Unified Christian Community**

I was invited to a National Day of Prayer pastoral banquet and found myself an unwilling participant in heretical prayers. When the director called me to evaluate and brainstorm for the next event I warned him that my evaluation would consist of the pursuit of theological unity. This man's desire is to form a bond of fellowship among pastors and Christians in our community. Certainly this is a noble effort. But what is the basis of the unity? Would Paul sing and pray with the Judaizers for the sake of fellowship?

### **Unified Ministry**

Something I find very sad and disappointing is a Christian teacher who refuses to argue. This may sound odd, but I don't mean to be unnecessarily argumentative. What I do mean is that he who feeds the sheep must also be willing to attack the wolves. He must be willing to seek to answer the tough

questions without clouding up and raining all over. The pastor who refuses to seek to dialogue on the tough issues is looking for people who will receive his opinion as unquestioned law. There may come a time when the pastor believes he's said all he could say and "enough said." There may come a time when the person asking the question has to realize his question has been answered. But those in the ministry who seek to foster a unity which rests upon smarmy music and some purposely undefined sentimental love of God and man are like the engaged couple that are ignoring the real issues.

## **Missionaries**

In the past we have supported missionaries who were doing very good things. But when they would come to share what they were doing the idea of evangelizing a community was seldom spoken of. And those who were doing evangelism were doing a sort of evangelism that contained, what we believed to be, a faulty gospel. We came to realize that our own missionaries wouldn't qualify to be elders or deacons in our own church; in fact, they wouldn't even desire to attend our church if they lived in the area. A missionary is an evangelist. He gives good news—a good message. If this is absent the mission is for naught.

## **Biblical Unity**

Unity in the Scriptures is never at the expense of the truth and doctrines of the Christ, but quite the opposite. Our unity is based upon what we believe. And this is not some psychological image of Jesus but a biblical definition of Jesus. Let us read some of the more common passages which contain a call to unity.

### **Ephesians 4:11-16**

**And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,<sup>12</sup> for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ (4:11, 12).**

Notice that all the offices of edification are offices of instruction.

**Till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (4:13).**

The unity has as its mortar the knowledge of the Son of the God.

**that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting (4:14).**

That which knocks us from wall to wall is false knowledge.

**but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (4:15, 16).**

It is the speaking of the truth that grows or matures us in Christ. It is in the environment of Christian truth that genuine love is nurtured and the body grows in this love. We will see these same themes given by Paul in Philippians 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 4:6-7; Colossians 2:1-3, and elsewhere.

### **Emphasizing Doctrine**

How is this accomplished? It is accomplished by churches that are willing to have more than a mere one-page statement of faith. What the church believes must be its emphasis. It is accomplished by the studying of the Scriptures, the confessions of history, the creeds and catechisms.

It is amazing how much more unity I have with Christians who study and believe catechisms and confessions that our church doesn't hold than with those who reject confessions altogether. This is for a few reasons: most confessions ever penned are in general agreement. People who are willing to take the time to honestly, and in humility, be students of the Scriptures will seldom stray from what the history of the church has found the Scriptures to teach. Those who reject confessions are generally eclectic and contradictory in their thinking.

The apostle Paul did not shy away from a theological controversy in the name of unity. Jesus did not come to bring peace but a sword; and a sword divides. The only way to be sure that the church is not merely becoming a tepid reflection of a fallen society is to continually be willing to swing that sword on the gangrenous limb, lest the infection reach the heart.

## Questions for Study

1. Review Galatians 1:1 through 2:5. What seems to be the theme of the epistle so far (pages 2, 3)?
2. Why does it appear that Paul is using negative tones in describing the other apostles (pages 3, 4)?
3. In what respect does God have no respect for man (page 4)?
4. What did the other apostles recognize about Paul (page 5)?
5. What does it mean that the apostles are the pillars of the church (page 5)?
6. Discuss some modern/popular concepts on the promotion of unity (pages 6, 7).
7. What is the biblical basis of unity (pages 6-8)?
8. How is this type of unity to be accomplished (page 8)?