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# Unity in the Gospel

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## Overview

“Freedom and community are two great yearnings of the human heart. Neither longing is ultimately satisfied by any worldview or religion that is based on ‘earn-your-salvation’ tenets. These will divide people on cultural lines, and enslave them emotionally. It is ‘in Christ Jesus’ that we can enjoy the freedom of acceptance by God regardless of our performance; and that we can enjoy a unity which pays no attention to countries’ borders or cultural boundaries.” (Keller, 48).

## Unity, Liberty & Charity

- Concerning the Essentials – Unity
- Concerning the Peripherals – Liberty
- Concerning all things - Charity

## Consider this...

Division can be considered a ‘dirty’ word in today’s culture, especially when it refers to the activity of math class. However, division is the natural result of clarity and truth. The question before you is not “Will you divide or separate yourself from this idea or that group,” but “What will you divide over?” What is important enough for you to take a stand, make an investment, or put yourself on the line?

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Passage: Galatians 2:9-10

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## Application

- Humans are earthen vessels, either containing the precious Gospel or the rubbish of anything else
- Unity is essentially found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ alone
- The Gospel produces selfless change in those who are saved by it

## Ephesians 4:1-2

*“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

*There is only one body and one Spirit..”*

**Intro:** At first glance, there may not seem to be much in this short passage for use in our lives today. An ancient group of outcasts welcomes in and joins forces with another ancient messenger and outcast, and all promise to keep some poor people in mind as they proceed in their task. This seems hardly noteworthy. However, in this small passage we find a marvelous pattern for every Christian community. We see the basis for unity, the fellowship of genuine and lasting bonds, and the proper progression of communal Christian growth. A society of Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century may indeed learn much from this seemingly obscure account.

*9 and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*

▪ **The Jerusalem Council welcomed Paul and Barnabas as brothers in Christ.**

○ *“James and Cephas and John... perceived the grace that was given to me”*

▪ Paul lists these three ‘pillars’ of the faith as witnesses of the ‘grace that was given to’ him.

• *“James and Cephas and John”* – “he calls them as witnesses...” because “their doctrine was interchangeable.”<sup>1</sup>

• *“perceived”* – *gnontes / ginóskó* – It was not merely that they had heard his message, but they *came to know* and *experience* God’s grace at work in and through Paul.

• *“the grace that was given to me”*

○ This is most likely referring to the special calling upon Paul to be an Apostle

▪ He talks about this same idea, “grace given to him” for the sake of apostolic ministry, in Rom. 15:15-17.

▪ Paul speaks with authority over the household of God because of “the grace given to him” in Rom. 12:3.

▪ And in 1 Cor. 3:10 Paul speaks of himself as a “skilled master builder” because of the “grace of God given to him.”

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<sup>1</sup> Chrysostom, 40

- However, we may also understand that the grace given to Paul was not unique in the sense that all Christians are recipients of God’s grace; and such is made evident among the family of faith.
  - Peter and Paul both proclaim that salvation is by grace, and we have been brought into this glorious reality because of God’s gracious grace (Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Pet. 5:10).
  - Peter says that all Christians are given “gifts” by God’s “grace” to be used as good stewards among a local church family (1 Peter 4:10); and Paul talks about the possession and stewardship of gracious gifts throughout 1 Cor. 12-14.
- *“when James and Cephas and John... perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship”*
  - Paul and Barnabas were accepted as brothers and fellow heirs of the Great Commission.
    - We know that they perceived their shared role in the Commission given by Christ because of what follows.
- *“we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised”*
  - Three possible views of this division of labor:
    - 1) “Some understand this division **ethnographically**: Paul and Barnabas would preach to Gentiles, Peter and the others would preach to Jews, whether outside or within the regions where Paul preached to the Gentiles...”
    - 2) “Others take this division to be strictly **geographical**... but in this case no less than the other, defining the boundaries of the two mission fields must have been a difficult task...”
    - 3) “A third option seems preferable: to regard the division as neither strictly geographical nor strictly ethnic, but as simply a **general recognition of the [privilege] of God** which had so far prevailed and the general agreement giving the primary direction in which each side was to apply its respective missionary efforts and ensuring that there should be no rivalry and competition between the two sides.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Fee, Gordon D., ed. *NICNT: The Epistle to the Galatians*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1988.

- Note also the assumed responsibility of ‘going.’
  - There was not merely a *welcoming in*, there was also a *sending out*; and the two are inseparably linked.

**10 Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.**

- Paul was asked only one thing, and he was already doing it well.
  - “remember the poor”
    - Who were the poor of whom they spoke?
      - “Many of the believing Jews in Palestine had been deprived of all their goods, and scattered over the world...”<sup>3</sup>
        - Many Jewish Christians “joyfully accepted the plundering of [their] property” at the hands of fellow Jews (Heb. 10:34).
        - The “churches of Judea” had “suffered from the Jews” who were “hostile to everyone” who proclaimed Christ as Lord (1 Thess. 2:14-15).
  - “the very thing I was eager to do” or better yet, “the very thing I had made it my business to do already”
    - Not only was he “eager to do” it, but he had been hard at work doing it already (see Acts 11:29-30).
      - This further demonstrates that Paul was complimented and affirmed by the Jerusalem Council and not endowed or commissioned by them in any way.

**In this passage we can see the pattern for Gospel-centered Community in the context of the local church.**

*“when James and Cephas and John... perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship”*

- **Their unity was in the Gospel message and their mutual gratitude for it.**
  - Paul he had a distinct background from that of Peter.
    - Paul was once Saul and was raised as an exemplary Jewish boy; he

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<sup>3</sup> Chrysostom, 41

studied under the best Jewish scholarship, he was a Pharisee of Pharisees, his zeal for the traditions of his fathers was unmatched, he persecuted Christians as far as he could find them, and he participated in violent acts towards many Christians.

- Peter was a Jewish fisherman; he was uneducated, he was a Galilean (which meant that his pedigree was despised), he had spent three years at odds with the Pharisees while he literally walked with the Savior during His earthly ministry, and the only prestige that Peter enjoyed was the clout he had among the most hated societal group of the first, second, third, and most of the fourth centuries.
- Even though their backgrounds and personal histories were so divergent from one another, their Gospel bond transcended all others.
- **Their unity in the Gospel produced genuine Community.**
  - Community - (1) a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common; (2) a feeling of fellowship with others, as a result of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals; (3) [in Ecology, a certain branch of Biology] a group of interdependent organisms of different species growing or living together in a specified habitat.
    - Paul, Barnabas, and (particularly) Titus were accepted, given *the right hand of fellowship*, into the community of believers because of the common bond of the Gospel.
- **Genuine Gospel unity includes division.**
  - Gentile believers were added or united with Jewish Christians without any conditional requirement other than faith in Christ.
  - However, the Judaizers were excluded from fellowship with Christians from all ethnic decent.
    - Paul called them “false brothers” (Gal. 2:4)
    - Paul says that these false brothers will “bear a penalty” for their troublesome teaching (Gal. 5:10)
    - Paul calls down furious cursing upon these false brothers (Gal. 5:12)
    - Paul excludes these false brothers from the peace and mercy of God (Gal. 6:16)
  - Therefore, genuine community is not a gathering of *laissez faire* individuals,

but a group of individuals who are unified by a common bond, idea, or belief. The act of including Paul, Barnabas and Titus was simultaneously an act of excluding the Judaizers.

## My Prayers

- 1) May God grant us unity at FBC Diana.
- 2) May God grant us true unity in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and in mutual submission to His commands.
- 3) May God grant us the strength and humility necessary to fight for unity in the Gospel rather than in anything else.

## Bibliography

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