

The Right Hand of Fellowship

Galatians 2:6-10

One thing that is very noticeable to me among men in our culture is the loss of significance of the handshake. A manly handshake used to be the expression of an unbreakable bond. A handshake was your promise. It was your guarantee. It was your word, and the certainty of your commitment. You didn't need to sign a contract. You didn't need to make an explicit promise. All of that was taken care of with a handshake. And a man, a godly man, a faithful man, would never go back on his word. And that is a good thing. As Jesus would put it,

Mat. 5:37 "But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' For whatever is more than these is from the evil one."

And James,

James 5:12 "But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your "Yes" be "Yes," and your "No," "No," lest you fall into judgment."

But in our culture, we have lost that sense of the honor of your word. And we have replaced the handshake with a hug. Apart from all the cultural differences, apart from all the personality differences, whether or not you are inclined to hugging naturally or by habit, a hug doesn't communicate the same things as a handshake. A hug generally expresses some measure of affection, and that's a good thing, of course. It expresses some measure of sentiment or connection, but typically it doesn't define a commitment. A hug doesn't define a promise or a vow. It might define an emotion, perhaps. A hug might define a relationship. But not a contract. Not a promise.

And so with the loss of a manly handshake, we have really lost something quite valuable. You have lost a sign of your honor,

a means by which you can express your honor in a clear and unmistakable way. In our text this morning, that honor of a handshake is made evident, and it actually expresses something a little different than all that I just mentioned. It is not so much the guarantee of a promise, but more than that, it is the expression of real, genuine fellowship. But not fellowship defined as an emotional or subjective experience. Rather, fellowship defined as a ministry held in common. The handshake is the definition of the bond of mutual labor, a promise and commitment of mutual labor and effort in which a single participant is no longer alone. He is joined together with others in a bond that is expressed by the words of verse 9 in our text, "the right hand of fellowship." Paul was given the right hand of fellowship.

When I was ordained to the gospel ministry, I remember the men who were assembled for the purpose of the laying on of hands. I had finished all my seminary studies, I had passed all my presbytery examinations, and a church had called me to be their pastor. So there I was, in the presence of many men—elders in the church of Jesus Christ. Many men whose lives were characterized and defined by their own ordination. They were ministers of the gospel and they were ruling elders. They were pastors and they were seminary professors. Some had become friends and one was related to me. And after they finished laying on of their hands, after the prayer of ordination when I stood up as a minister of the gospel myself, they gave to me the right hand of fellowship. It was an initiation ceremony of the best kind. It was a ceremonial greeting that represented and signified a very important reality. They were willing to allow me to be one of them, by God's grace and by the power of his Holy Spirit.

That is what we have in our text this morning, though far more significant an occasion than any event of my own life. The occasion was,

I. THE BEGINNING OF AN APOSTLE.

We pick up where we left off last week.

v.1

He joined the apostles as they gathered in Jerusalem. And as he does so, to continue his emphasis upon the calling and authority of God, he makes it clear that,

A. Standing among men is not important.

v.6

This, after all his emphasis of self-defense. After all his effort to note his calling from God so that he might be counted among the apostles, then it still is made clear, “God shows no partiality.” There is not man exalted above others. Being accepted by those “who seemed to be something” didn’t make Paul any more important. And what is in parenthesis is not a snide comment or a disrespectful reply, but simply a statement of the truth of the situation. “Whatever they were, it makes no difference to me.”

We could, of course, go back to,

Gal. 1:10 “For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.”

Paul is not a man-pleaser. He is not insecure in his own calling, such that he depends upon what other men can contribute to his own strength and reputation. If that were the case, he could not be a servant of Christ! “Whatever they were, it makes no difference to me.” For he is ever conscious that he is,

B. The recipient of a trust.

As he puts it in verse 7, “they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel.” The gospel had been committed to him. Paul

knew it. The other apostles knew it. The office of apostle was a trust, given by God. It was a stewardship. It was an assignment, one for which Paul had been found acceptable. By God.

Nothing here is about man. Not about Paul. Not about the other apostles. It was all about the foundation of the church which God had laid with the apostles. And Paul was one of them. No more than that. And no less either.

So what becomes prominent now is not the personal anecdotes, the personal references. What takes center stage now is,

II. THE WORK OF THE GOSPEL.

That’s what matters in all of this. Paul had been entrusted with the gospel! And that is a common theme.

1 Thes. 2:4 “...just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. 5 For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed— God is witness. 6 Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.”

That’s what matters. Not men. Not even apostles. What matters is the gospel. The duty of the stewardship laid upon him. The necessity of the work of the gospel.

1 Cor. 9:16 “For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.”

Surely, the church of our day would be far better off if ministers of the gospel remembered that principle, and imitated the attitude of the Apostle Paul instead of following after the ways of the world. Even ministers become superhuman these days, especially ministers. They become icons, idols, as if the world—and their church—revolved around them. And for them, gaining and preserving their popularity is the chief among all goals.

Paul had no such goal. Because he knew that he was entrusted with the gospel, he knew that what mattered in his life was the advancement of that gospel. Nothing else. That was his duty, his responsibility. And so he would say to the Elders of the church in Ephesus,

Acts 20:24 “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

Such a commitment was vital to the apostolic foundation of the church, and equally vital in the ongoing work of the gospel today. So we as a church are entrusted with the gospel. That’s what matters. As a minister of the word within that church, installed in the office of a pastor, I am entrusted with the work of the gospel. That is what matters.

The point to be made here in Galatians 2 is that the gospel is proclaimed to everyone, to all nations. And so Paul’s calling brings to the forefront the need for,
v.7-8

Likewise the end of,
v.9 “...that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”

Paul’s distinctive function was to go to the Gentiles. Peter was distinctively called to the Jews, the circumcised.

Just a reminder of why that was so important? Remember the focus last week, the freedom that we have as Christians. Christian liberty. Freedom from the bondage of the necessity of having to perform our own good works in obedience to the law. And that would especially include the freedom from having to fulfill the outward duties of the Old Covenant ceremonial law which was intended to point to Christ. We are freed from the obligations of have to perform adequately in order to be justified. Thus, freed from the duty of circumcision, as if by submitting to that ritual you would somehow earn your standing before God.

So now, to become a Christian, you didn’t have to become a Jew. To put it more plainly, the gospel went to the Jew and to the Gentile. In fact, the whole of that distinction would be broken down and done away with. Can that be any clearer than,

Gal. 3:28 “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

And so, this is the message of the gospel, the very same gospel I proclaim to you this morning.

Rom. 10:8 “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. 11 For the Scripture says, Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame. 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord

is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. 13 For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Everyone. Jew or Greek. Circumcised or uncircumcised. Everyone. You confess that Jesus is Lord with your mouth. You believe in your heart what he says he has done, laying down his life for your sins and raised from the dead for your justification. You believe this promise of the gospel, and you confess it with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord.” And you are a Christian, born again to become a child of God.

That’s the ministry that was held in common among all the apostles, held in common as it was proclaimed to the whole world.

B. A ministry held in common.

v.9

This was not a compromise. This was not an agreement that had to be negotiated. This was not a competitive event between rivals. This was fellowship at its finest. This was the unity of the church. This was the fullness of the apostolic foundation for the church of Jesus Christ. “They gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship.” One gospel, common to both Jew and Gentile

That’s closely related to the freedom we studied last week, the truth of the gospel. There were no divisions, no cracks in that foundation upon which the church would be built, Jew and Gentile together as one. Everyone joined together as one. The ego of men would not divide the church. The prominence of men would not afflict the church. The arrogance and competitiveness of men, nor their jealousy, would trouble the church. That was God’s design.

And those are all the things that we must be very careful to avoid to this day. When Peter and James and John gave Paul the right hand of fellowship, they were one. No one would complain that Paul was different than Peter. No one would choose one over the other, nor align themselves with one versus the other. Any difference in personality and style were not matters of contention. Paul was given the right hand of fellowship. And with that shaking of hands, their bond was established. Their mutual commitment was secured. And upon that foundation, God would build his church.

So it must be in every age. And so it must be for us as a local congregation. It is so easy for churches to focus upon a man, a personality, a style, and miss the substance. So when the personality of a man causes divisions, then the church is deeply harmed, as it was at Corinth where Paul had to write these words,

1 Cor. 1:10 “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ. 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

A ministry held in common means that the focal point is Jesus, not any particular man. The right hand of fellowship means there would be no division, for it was not the man that mattered at all. It was Jesus. Is Christ divided? Absolutely not.

May the work of the gospel abound among us with that very same commitment.

Note, then, with this emphasis upon the unity of the ministry of the gospel, that Paul gives us such,

III. A PRACTICAL FOCUS.

He wasn't content to leave the discussion in the realm of the theoretical. Paul is not simply teaching the theology of the church, nor is he simply defining an apostolic example of the unity of the church. He is personal. Engaging. And,

A. Compassionate upon those in need.

v.10

Remember the poor! The right hand of fellowship in the ministry of the apostolic foundation of the church? Absolutely. But remember the poor. Remember, with compassion, those in need.

Do you know what happens when you don't give one another the right hand of fellowship in the church? When divisions are established? What happens? Those in need become neglected. Needs are ignored. When there is a battle for supremacy, when people align themselves with men, when the reputation or prominence of any man becomes the issue, then the ministry of compassion will suffer. Always. Every time.

So the point of all this is so clear. And so vital. "Remember the poor." Take care of people. And Paul, of course, is very happy to receive that encouragement, for there is nothing lacking in his,

B. Eagerness to serve.

v.10

Gladly. Happily, he says. "The very thing I was eager to do."

In the words of James,

James 1:27 "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

So please consider what Paul describes as "giving the right hand of fellowship." It's not simply the custom of shaking hands that I would wish to restore to its proper place, but the sense and significance that lies behind it. The right hand of fellowship. That's the case for the apostles of the church. A shared ministry, where the gospel is prominent, not any man. That's the case for the elders of the church, upon ordination, where the shared ministry of the gospel is preeminent, not the personality or style of any man. The right hand of fellowship.

That is a good way to describe the relationship each of you share with one another in this body, a handshake that would bear witness to your commitment to this body, a commitment to the advancement of the common good of the whole body, a commitment that would demonstrate the reality of what Paul says in,

Rom. 5:4 "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."

Beloved, if you are members of this church, you are members of one another. You belong to one another. You are joined together, not simply by that right hand of fellowship, but by the power of God, whom, we are told, has "arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose." So let your right hand of fellowship for one another express that reality, that God himself has arranged us in this body, as he chooses, to be members of one body together.