

February 18, 2007

“Considering Their Consensus” Galatians 2:1-10

FCF: The struggle to believe God’s love could be as good as He says

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because the apostles do indeed speak with one voice,
(magnet) our ear must be tuned to them in a whole new way.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

“*Could it really be that good?*” Could it really be that good? – a question we find ourselves asking all the time. The reviews of a film are just glowing – the story, the performances, the effects – it sounds like it’s worth seeing. Then there’s the other team. They’re undefeated, strong, fast, smart, and well coached. But could they be that good? Perhaps it’s a meal, a book, a vacation spot, a blind date. It’s a reasonable question to ask

Especially when we’re asked to believe so much. What of the message of the gospel itself? “*Could it really be that good?*” That was the question Paul’s readers were asking. And the answer comes back, unequivocally, “*Yes! Yes, it’s that good!*”

SCRIPTURE READING: Galatians 2:1-10

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

A lesson from “Parenting 101.” Children need to hear their parents speak with one voice and not present a divided front. For their security – lest they begin to doubt the stability of the home. For their safety – lest they try to push the limits of the home. Children need to hear their parents speak with one voice and not present a divided front.

Followers of Christ need to hear the apostles of Christ speak with one voice as well. Then and now. Questions arise as we read. “*How does this square with that? And if these two authors are contradicting one another, how do I know if any of this is true?*” We need to know they speak with one voice. Questions come from other sources – scholarly theories creating rifts, fashionable views of some experts on “the separate theologies of James, Peter, John, or Paul.” Such things have been around a long time.

Understand where we are in the flow of the letter. Paul’s message and calling are being questioned. And so he stresses in 1:6-10 that there is no other gospel. The one he preached is the one by which all others should be measured, to which all others must be compared. Why? He goes on in 1:11-12 to explain that the message he preached was not by invention or tradition but by revelation from Christ Himself. Then in 1:13 through 2:14, he gives an autobiographical account, setting the record straight, showing how his opponents had twisted the facts. Regarding the other apostles, Paul had not received his message from them but from the Lord. His message was independent from theirs. At the same time, however, he goes on in our text to make clear that, though his message was independent from the other apostles, it was identical as well. He recounts a visit made to Jerusalem – mentioned in Acts 11:30 in connection with a famine. He speaks of his relief to learn he had “not run in vain,” learning that the others were, in fact, supporting what he was doing. Contrary to what the Galatians had been told by Paul’s opponents, he was not at odds with the message proclaimed by the other apostles. Rather, there was consensus, a clear agreement as to how one can be accepted and made right with God – the finished work of Christ on our behalf. That and that alone with nothing to be added.

Now this consensus reached there in Jerusalem by these men is startling. Think with me. It has enormous implications. Then and now. The apostles speak with but one voice. Which means our ears should be tuned to their words in a whole new way.

I. CAUSE TO WONDER

Beginning simply with this – cause to wonder. A cause to wonder at what God did and was determined to give to us through them. What is it we have here?

A) Different Writers

Think of the different writers represented – just in the New Testament alone.

1. Personalities and styles

Think of the different personalities and styles. James, the brother of Jesus, with his wisdom. Peter, the impetuous fisherman, with his transparency. John, the youngest of the apostles, and his imagery. Paul, the former Pharisee, the apostle of the heart set free.

2. Issues and emphases

Then think of the different issues and emphases in their writings. James addressing the need to live out the faith to the fullest. Peter facing the dangers of both persecution and heresy. John warning against the early development of Gnosticism. Paul striving with all he had that we might know and live by the grace of being saved through faith.

B) Same Gospel

Each one so different. And yet the same gospel (**READ Galatians 2:6-10**). Paul is not being sarcastic here. He is not playing down the position and prestige due the other apostles. In this context, he is countering how some had played down the position and prestige due him as an apostle so as to play down his message – this unified message.

1. Same problem

Speaking to the same problem – God’s intention that we would trust Him and follow His commands, living lives ordered under His good rule. Yet our response of buying into the lie, living independent of our Creator, going our own way. That’s the apostolic message.

2. Same solution

The same problem. And the same solution – God’s response to this rebellion was to demand that justice be served and yet to provide One to serve it on our behalf – His Son. The call then is to receive and rest on Him alone, following Him wherever He might lead.

The wondrous thing in all this is not just the reality behind the message itself but the unity demonstrated in communicating this message. God worked through these different writers such that what they wrote was exactly what He wanted them to write. As instruments in His hands, despite all their differences, their message was the same.

Illustration:

Now contrast that consensus to the statements that come forth from different parties in every other realm. Some group does a study, debates the findings, makes a report, a report usually concealing the real positions, barely expressing anything. That’s the best we can do. But it’s not what you see here. Here you see a wondrous fullness.

Application:

Which really takes us to an obvious application. Recognizing what we have here in this Word, we need to be people of the Word. Regularly reading it, thoughtfully studying it, consistently applying it, pursuing avenues available to do that together, and modeling such a life before our children. Hearts filled with wonder as to what we have here. Opening its pages with the posture not of shaping it but being shaped. Not “half-listening” but really paying heed to what we hear because of who is speaking.

II. CAUSE TO LISTEN

That’s the first implication that comes with the recognition of how the apostles so astonishingly speak with one voice – a cause to wonder. And the second implication comes immediately from that, closely related to it – a cause to listen. A cause to listen.

A) *The Fight on Our Hands*

For we have a real fight on our hands. The circumstances Paul is dealing with here may have changed but the struggle has not. Paul was facing a group referred to as “Judaizers” – “false brothers” who maintained that while what Jesus did was necessary, it wasn’t enough. There was yet more in terms of rules and traditions to follow.

1. Within

And the reality is we are still fighting this battle – starting within. If you’ve been in the church any length of time, you’re glad to hear of the good news – by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But at the same time we want to believe we’re not so bad, that there’s something we can still bring to the table. Paul’s audience had fallen prey to this. When they sold out, they were simply buying into what they really wanted to hear.

2. Without

Then with that, there are always some who feel threatened by the radical message of the gospel, not seeing the radical nature of our need is such that our works simply cannot address it. And so they insist that there must be more to it. There must be more to do.

Illustration:

I saw a dramatic sketch a few years ago done by an amazing team called “Peculiar People.” It’s a twist on the “Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector” in Luke 18. The religious man prays his prayer and the tax collector asks for mercy. The forgiven sinner then stands up and shouts, “*Thank God, I’m a Christian and I’m free!*” During the remainder of the sketch, the new Christian encounters a variety of people who are but mildly pleased with his new status as a believer. And so they try to teach and disciple him. One tells him all this is fine but that he isn’t really saved until he labors for these causes. Another recommends Reformed theology. Another says he should get up in the morning for prayer. And it goes on and on until the new Christian is burdened down with all it “means” to follow Christ. In the final scene, the new Christian enters a church to pray and opens with these words: “*Lord, I thank you that I’m not like other men. I get up at four in the morning to have devotions. I have the right positions. I read theology...*” And the sketch ends. That’s how it happens. Self-righteousness is built upon good things – good things well worth doing but understood and carried out in the wrong way.

B) *The Need of Our Hearts*

Oh, how we need to listen to this message for we have a fight on our hands – both within and without. There’s a fight on our hands and a need in our hearts.

1. Community

The need of community. We see that here in who Paul brings with him on this journey – Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile who has become a Christian (**READ Galatians 2:3-5**). Some of you have heard me say this before – the radical grace of the gospel is what makes radical community possible. It is what ultimately makes for humility regarding ourselves and patience towards others. But not only that, the gospel also tears down walls, obliterates all the barriers. Recognizing that the only hope any of us have in being accepted by God is the work of Christ, all excuses for discrimination are taken away.

2. Certainty

The gospel is what makes for community. And certainty as well. Paul speaks of the gospel as setting us free from slavery. Slavery – not knowing, always wondering, never sure, forever striving and struggling to earn God’s favor and pleasure. Such bondage! And Paul is saying, “*No! You’ve been set free, set free for certainty. Rest assured.*”

This is the finished work of Christ. There is nothing to add.

Illustration:

You cannot refinish the finished work of Christ. You cannot add to or improve upon it. To add anything we do to the gospel is like taking an Olympic gold medal and having it bronzed. It is to decrease its value, its preciousness, and its power.

Application:

Which then takes us yet to another obvious application – the need to stand in the gospel. Where we see this in ourselves, we need to root it out. Where we see this in others, we must stand against it. Listen to this quote from Martin Luther ([READ quote](#)):

We will suffer our goods to be taken away, our name, our life, and all that we have; but the Gospel, our faith, Jesus Christ, we will never suffer to be wrested from us...God assisting me, my forehead shall be more hard than all men's foreheads...Yea, I am glad even with all my heart, in this point to seem rebellious and obstinate. And here I confess that I am and ever will be stout and stern, and will not one inch give place to any creature.

How does this play itself out for us? In an utter resolute refusal to put any conditions on anyone's acceptance by God or by the people of God. Again, how does He see us? How are we made right with Him? What have we seen already in this study? It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Yes, there might be a position taken on an issue that maturity and wisdom would seem to demand. Yes, there might be some practice or discipline that would encourage growth in some area. But we must not add to the finished work of Christ. To do so is to create a stench before God. And others as well. What are we communicating? What are we modeling? Where we see this in ourselves, we must root it out. Where we see this in others, we must stand against it.

CONCLUSION:

Back to where we started. Followers of Christ need to hear the apostles of Christ speaking with one voice. What we see here is clear testimony to that unity. All worth considering. As is one other thing. I'm going to say this as plainly as I can. Either God has spoken or He hasn't. Either this is His Word or it isn't. If it isn't, then don't read it like it is. If He hasn't spoken through it, then don't bother. Recognize the bleak, barren, dark, cold silence for what it is and stop borrowing hope from something that isn't real.

If this isn't God's Word, then don't read it like it is. But if it is God's Word, then don't read it like it isn't. Give yourself to it. This is a wondrous thing we have here. Have you ever really thought about it? The very thing we're searching for – the answer to the question "*Is anyone there?*" – is right here. We've sent out spacecraft to answer the question. Did you know that? Two of NASA's Pioneer spacecraft carried small metal plaques depicting male and female humans with a coded message identifying the time and place of the spacecrafts' origin. Two of the Voyagers carried a gold-plated copper disk recording of sounds and images portraying the diversity of life and culture on Earth – including a variety of natural sounds, musical selections, and spoken greetings in 55 languages. These messages are now on their way to the stars. Then there is the SETI program – sophisticated radio telescopes aimed out there, listening in on millions of channels, ready to hear if there is a signal, some sign of life somewhere out there.

Is there life out there on some other planet? I don't know and that's not the point. The point is that the answer to the question "*Is anyone there?*" is right here before us. Right here. God has spoken. It's borne out in the fact these great apostles speak this great message with one voice. May we have ears to hear what they have to say.

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because the apostles do indeed speak with one voice,
(magnet) our ear must be tuned to them in a whole new way.