

The Right Hand of Fellowship

As the Early Church began to Develop its Outreach, Decisions were made that also give us a Glimpse into the relationships among and between Leading Ministers. Is there anything in their approach we ought to consider appropriate for our time?

© Rich Traver 81520-1411 4-25-15 [246] www.goldensheaves.org

While Christ's Great Commission to "go you into all the world and preach the Gospel" was recognized then and still is recognized as an unquestioned mandate, it was not entirely clear from the onset just what it was to involve or how it was to ultimately be carried out.

To the Jew First

The early Church was oriented to involving themselves with 'the circumcision' for the most part, those who either were ethnic Jews or who were proselytes of Judaism. That would help explain the origin of the controversy we read of in Acts 15 where the question of a requirement for circumcision involving the Gentiles came to be at issue. There were few, if any at that time, who had been 'called' (to their awareness) who were not.

Further clarification of the issue: that of taking the Gospel outside of the primitive Community of Faith, is addressed involving one chief obstacle, Peter, in Acts 10. Cornelius was not a Jew. Peter would have reacted differently had he not first been given the vision that he was given while there in Joppa. (People not understanding the point being made there have incorrectly interpreted this as involving eating 'unclean meats'.)

Unlawful Association?

Cornelius was a Gentile, well known in Judaea, as he was a renowned commander of a prominent band of soldiers. Peter, to this point, would have been inclined to reject association with such a person, despite his solid God-fearing reputation. But, a profound change of attitude and approach was now in order. God was calling new people from outside of the early Church's limited ethnic sphere of association.

The previous regard for "common Gentiles" was deemed to be becoming passé as it involved the scope of the greater Commission.

Peter acknowledged this prohibition, against eating with or associating with "common" men, (those not of their religious/ethnic orientation) in verse 28 of Acts 10. *"Then said he unto them, 'You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.'"* (NKJ) But, this new thinking isn't the only development in this regard, but as history shows, one of a series of profound developments.

Reaction in Antioch

Saul and Barnabas, on one of their evangelistic missions, presented the Gospel in a Synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia where there was a mixed ethnicity gathered. Apparently, despite the event we read of in Acts 10, Peter didn't fully comprehend the full implications of that experience, because he's shown disassociating himself from uncircumcised Gentiles when a delegation from Jerusalem arrived. While he appears to have none of his former aversions up until the time they came, his apprehension of being reprimanded by this 'party of the circumcision' delegation caused him to pose as though he was of their persuasion. He apparently didn't yet fathom the broader implications.

We read of that situation in Galatians 2:11-13. *"But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation."*

In this also we can see that the matter wasn't generally resolved in everyone's minds.

Peter Is Pointedly Corrected In Public!

What we can discern from these situations in both Antioch and Joppa, and from Peter's own words, is that he didn't yet fathom the full implications of his personal experience. The 'unclean animals' vision in Joppa, as Peter understood it, is further explained when Peter spoke to Cornelius and his household there in Caesarea.

- Peter still regarded himself as a Jewish man, as he explains in Acts 10:28.

- Peter didn't at first see his experience as extending beyond his personal actions.

- His vision in Joppa wasn't yet seen as initiating any formal outreach TO non-specific Gentiles.

- Those of Cornelius' household were Gentiles, but he first was a devout Jewish proselyte.¹

- The event in Joppa preceded the scene in Antioch by some 17 years.²

- Those Gentiles present among the gathering in Antioch had not all been Jewish proselytes previously.

- The idea of taking the Gospel generally to those outside of the community of faith as a formal 'ministry' was as yet not under consideration.

- Peter's reaction in Antioch shows that he still regarded himself somewhat as a "Jewish man" even at that late date.

- And, the situation there in Antioch shows that Peter didn't regard himself as the Chief Apostle, in unquestioned authority, exempt from critique of this "party of the circumcision" even by 58 AD, more than a quarter century after the Day of Pentecost!

- Further, Peter accepts being publicly corrected by a man (formerly a devout Pharisee) called

¹ My use of the term 'proselyte' here may imply to some that he was fully incorporated into Judaism, which would strongly imply that he was already circumcised. That may not have been the case.

² Jameison, Fausset & Brown Commentary, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Volume Three, Part Two, First printing: 3/97, pages 73 & 377.

much later than he, a man who had begun his ministry less than two decades before!³

A Jerusalem Conference

Now, it's the conference we read of in Acts 15 that addressed the major question being raised at the time. This conference in Jerusalem occurred in 52 AD, eleven years after Peter's vision at Joppa. The delay in addressing this particular question shows that Jerusalem was not yet in full embrace of the Gentiles whom Paul had preached to. As can be seen from the question itself, these Gentiles were not fully accepted within the community of faith unless they first were circumcised. But with the question resolved, some attitudes changed. It just hadn't moved on to the next obvious stage.

The WORK Expands

Despite the evidence that God was calling Gentiles, a distinction hadn't been made to specifically target the "pagan" world.

It was at this gathering in Antioch near Pisidia⁴ that caused the leaders to realize that more should be done with regard to pointedly extending their evangelistic efforts to involve non-Jewish audiences.

But there was an interesting thing that took place as a result of this event. It was fortuitous that the three principals were present. It apparently was a pre-arranged gathering for these all to be present at the same time. We aren't told what the reason was, or what the agenda had been, but something was done at that occasion which shaped the outreach efforts of the early Church from that point on.

Right Hand of Fellowship

*"And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the **right***

³ Paul was 'called' on the road to Damascus in 35 AD, but delayed some 3-years in Arabia (Gal. 1:18) and another 14-years before formally being accepted among the leading ministry in Jerusalem. (Gal. 2:1)

⁴ There were other Antioch congregations in Syria (Ac. 11:19) and Seleucia (Ac. 13:4). Seleucus Nikantor, founder of the Seleucid Dynasty, built numerous cities, naming them after himself or his relatives.

hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.” (Gal. 2:9)
We can safely deduce that there had been prior discussion of the responses, from within the ‘heathen’ community, to the Truth for this action to be regarded as appropriate.

But what is obvious is that the leading ministry from Jerusalem took a particular action that was not often mentioned as being all that common.

This was apparently **not** a ‘laying-on-of-hands’ situation where those anointed to a recognized ‘office’ would convey authority upon someone else. The act of extending the ‘right-hand-of-fellowship’ acknowledges the prior anointing of the other party by the Higher Power, like what had been conveyed upon themselves at some point in the past. Nor was this any ordinary handshake!

Recognized As Equals

In this situation, with both parties extending their right hands, it suggests an acknowledged equality! It also shows a recognition of the legitimacy of the ministries of each other, but made a point of there being two different spheres of oversight from this point forward, as God provided opportunities and as His Spirit was directing them. The ‘right-hand-of-fellowship’ acknowledges the authority and leading of the Holy Spirit as much as anything else.

Recognizing the legitimacy of the other ministry is one thing, but it also acknowledges publicly that one party is not posing as being in control of or in authority over the other. That’s a point not easily acknowledged in our current ‘state of the Church’!

For example, IF Peter was regarded by these present as being in sole and full authority, their being commended to the “Gentile Work” would need only Peter’s authorization. But this action was not one of authorization. It was one of acknowledgment. God had already provided authorization! Paul’s calling was personal and direct. (Acts 9:3-15)

Their act of extending a right hand of fellowship was an acknowledgment of and a formal statement of support of Paul’s and Barnabas’ commission to the pagan and Gentile world, as opposed to their own particular focus involving primarily Jewry.

What Does This Mean for US?

So, should we be – and are we seriously remiss to not be – extending a right hand of fellowship to all like-believing individuals and groups? (Emphasis on “like-believing”) There are many. There have been many throughout history, but particularly in our time since the dissolution of the so-called ‘parent organization’ that disintegrated under its own theological overthrow. And, can we pose that what happened was what God intended?

The early Church was more of a loosely organized institution in its first generation. More so than some would like to admit! As it matured, and as its Message spread, a wider ethnicity found their witness to be appealing. That led to the inclusion of non-Jews (and not previous proselytes) into the family of fellowship.

Extending the right hand was toward more than just Paul and Barnabas at the time, but through them also to those ‘called’ under their evangelism.

In later centuries, the Church sank into many years of a Dark Age of apostasy, persecution and suppression. Congregations which retained the Truth were small, persecuted, scattered and remained generally isolated.

By the seventeenth century, the stranglehold held by the preeminent church of that age was lessened. Bibles began being translated (at the behest of a particular civil authority) into common languages. This created a new environment. The religious world changed, moving into what is now regarded as ‘the Reformation’.

In the modern era, God’s Church was to a degree ‘reformed’ being re-focused around one particular ministry. That Church was, of necessity, somewhat isolationist and, as time progressed, increasingly exclusive. Perhaps that was a good thing at first, as it kept ‘new’ disciples from doctrinal pollutions of religiosity in general that they were not yet equipped to handle. But with the dissolution of that organizational structure, is its exclusivist posture appropriate?

Now that we’ve been divided and scattered for much of a generation, is the degree of exclusivism practiced in the past still an appropriate approach? And, what motivates its preservation?

Anyone familiar with our condition will realize that it is, for the most part, to preserve the status of a group's leadership, more than to preserve its grasp on the Truth! This we need to acknowledge and remedy.

Recognizing our scattered and purposely isolated situations, isn't it time we recognized ourselves as having achieved a maturity level in which we can confidently fellowship with and extend hands to any like-believing brethren? Should we now be extending a 'right-hand-of-fellowship' to any and all who are of the same religious persuasion as we are? The reasons for NOT doing so are what? Is it just perceived 'organizational superiority'?

How Extensive the Love?

Christ, through the beloved John, left a standard by which we can self-assess on this. He said, *"This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."* (1st John 1:5-7) *"A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another."* (John 13:34-35)

The question now is, are we facing the time for another 'reformation'? The last one having begun in the early 1990's as the Church fractured. With our current stage of experience, and with our 'issues' fairly well worked-out as congregations, can we now begin reaching through the walls of separation imposed by our culture? Is it **now** TIME to begin extending a 'right-hand-of-fellowship' to any and all who possess and exhibit God's Spirit? Why would we NOT do so if we are truly His Disciples?

Malachi 3:16-18 describes the situation with and among God's people as it ought to be. They speak often with one another, not with just 'officially approved' sayings, but with relevant and truthful dialog. *"Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was*

*written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And **they shall be mine**, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up **my jewels**; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye **return, and discern** between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not."*

What is missed in these verses, and what is obviously absent within many of the current Church of God groups is the freedom to interact with like-believing Brethren, as this passage commends. Not only do these do so openly and freely, but they are singled-out by God for a special remembrance! He hears when His Name is mentioned among His people! That fact alone suggests what kinds of conversations these are.

As it exists now in our overall Church Culture, the ministry – upon seeing members doing this – likely will 'single-out' those members and identify them as some kind of threat, not a congregational asset. Their view of this can be quite different from that of Christ! Have we noticed that? He sees them as "His Jewels"! The current ministry often has a very different take on their value.

But, more than that, He indicates that when they are "brought back" they will be used in a judgmental capacity to discern those who are God fearers and who are in fact reprobates. This is not just to discern the situation as it involves the world at large, but a process of evaluating those within the greater fellowship! These who "speak often with one another" are pointedly **special** with God, though at present aren't always regarded so highly among the current leadership!

Those presently "on top" in the leadership echelon need to be aware that the kind of job they are doing, or have done (which all too often results in harm to individuals and congregations) will not be dismissed. They will answer for the harm they've done.

That being the case, it is incumbent upon each of us who are called of God to be 'in the game'. It may require that we do an end-run around the wishes and demands of our over-controlling ministry in this regard. And, if so, keep in mind that it's God who we need to obey, not men! 