

6 But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me.

Paul identifies some who were “of high reputation.” Many equate these with James, Peter (Cephas) and John, but this does not fit Paul’s argument here. His point, at the end of the section, is that though there were those, even of high reputation, who disagreed with his position on the gospel, the leaders of the Jerusalem community gave him their hearty approval and sent him off to complete his mission among the Gentiles. Indeed, v. 7 makes a clear contrast between these who had a well-known reputation (who are grouped with the “false brethren”), and Peter, James and John, who were also reputed to be “pillars” but who approved of Paul’s mission and message.

Paul goes out of his way in this verse to choose his words carefully. These men of whom he speaks were highly thought of, but the Greek used here would indicate that in Paul’s estimation they no longer held this same level of respect. The parenthetical statement makes this clear: “what they once were makes no difference to me.” Though at one time “they were reputed to be something” (the NASB “high reputation” is an interpretation of the simply Greek word τι, *ti*, “something”), now Paul is indifferent to them. His reason is that “God shows no partiality,” literally “the face of man God does not receive,” which corresponds to the Hebrew פָּנִים אֲשֶׁר לַאֲדָמָה, *nas’a panim*, “to lift the face.” This combination is translated in the Lxx with the same Greek we have here, “to receive the face” (πρόσωπον [ὁ] θεὸς ἀνθρώπου οὐ λαμβάνει, *prosopon [ho] anthropou lambanei*).²⁵ Paul’s point is simply that positions and acclaim granted by men do not necessarily carry weight in the courts of God. Just because a person may have prestige among men does not necessarily mean his position is approved by God. Obviously for Paul, his direct calling from God would take priority over a leader who would disavow his divinely sanctioned mission.

Paul notes that those who (at least in his opinion) previously had positions of reputation actually contributed nothing to him in regard to his work and mission. The word translated by the NASB as “contributed” (προσανατίθημι, *prosanatithemi*) means “to add to an existing amount” or “to contribute something more.” The point seems to be that as far as Paul was concerned, he was fully commissioned to the mission with which he was trusted without the need for additional instructions and confirmation from those leaders (from Antioch) who were of some reputation. While there is no indication that Paul disregarded them, he simply states here that they did not play a significant role in the formation and direction of his mission.

What might they have added or contributed to Paul by why of his mission and message? Does Paul have circumcision in mind here? Perhaps he is simply saying that while the leaders in Antioch did not contribute anything of substance to the direction of his mission, they likewise did not “add” to Paul’s understanding of the gospel the necessity of the Gentile believer to become a proselyte (i.e., become circumcised).

There is no doubt that admitting Gentiles into the covenant community without them becoming proselytes was a clear break with the prevailing tradition. But here we must keep in clear distinction the command of God

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25 Cf. (Of judges) Lev 19:15; Deut 1:17; 17:19; Ps 81:2; Prov 18:5; Job 13:10; Mal 2:9; 2Chr 19:7. (Of God) Gen 32:21; Deut 10:17.

regarding circumcision, and the proselyte circumcision built upon the traditions of the Sages. There is a difference between receiving circumcision as a matter of obedience to God, and receiving circumcision as part of a ceremony which supposedly is required in order to become a covenant member. While it is certainly true that the Torah requires male's within the covenant to be circumcised (Gen 17), it is likewise true that circumcision was never thought of as a *means* of becoming a covenant member. Covenant membership was the result of drawing close to God through faith (note Psalm 65:4 where God's choosing and a person's drawing near are linked), not the result of completing a man-made ritual. Thus, circumcision was an act of obedience *after* one was constituted a covenant member, not as a means by which one *became* a covenant member.

Some, however, seem unable to note the distinction between the biblical commandment of circumcision, and the rabbinic ordinance of becoming a proselyte. Thus, it is presumed that Paul's teaching regarding circumcision, and the acceptance of this teaching by James, Peter, and John was a direct disregard both of Scripture (Torah) and of tradition.

We should not underestimate how astonishing a decision was here made: the Jews, leaders of a movement focused on Messiah Jesus, should agree in considered and formal terms that circumcision need no longer be required of Gentiles wishing to be counted full members of what was still a sect of second-Temple Judaism — and that, despite the plainest possible teaching of scripture (Gen 17:9-14)! Anomalies like god-fearing adherents to diaspora synagogues, or even exceptional cases like Cornelius (Acts 10) or Isates (Josephus, *Ant.* xx.38-42), could be winked at so long as they did not become a public issue or point of principle. But Paul had had the temerity to make Titus a test case, whether by design or under pressure from the 'false brothers.' And the Jerusalem leadership had given him their backing, however unwillingly. That is to say, clear scriptural teaching and historic practice had been set aside — presumably on the grounds that Paul's interpretation of agreed confessional formulae could claim not only heavenly authority (1:15-16) but also the validation of successful missionary work (2:8-9; 3:2-5). No wonder Luke gave the decision such prominence in his own account of the expansion of Christianity (Acts 15).²⁶

But of course, neither Paul nor the leaders in Jerusalem disregarded Scripture because the Scriptures never require circumcision as a means of becoming a covenant member. Membership in God's covenant is on the basis of faith, and circumcision, like all other commandments, is the fruit of this faith, not the means by which one gains membership in the covenant.

But it is also understandable that after centuries of tradition that taught a different message, Paul's message of the gospel, particularly directed to the Gentiles, must have been looked upon as revolutionary, and to some, even heretical. It would take time and effort to recover the gospel as it was clearly found in the Scriptures themselves. Much like the Reformation some 1500 years later, the message of the Gospel that Yeshua and His disciples taught was a return to the Scriptures in a radical way.

²⁶ Dunn, *Galatians*, pp. 104–5.

7–10 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

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“On the contrary,” that is, rather than yielding to those who were saying that Gentiles would most certainly need to become proselytes in order to be received within the covenant community, Paul held firmly to the gospel as it had been revealed afresh to him from the Scriptures.

We should not presume from this that Paul had recaptured the gospel, and that therefore the gospel as understood by others, even those who were from Antioch, was entirely inaccurate or false. The issue had to do with the Gentiles — how were they to be incorporated into the covenant community? The Jew and his offspring had a natural connection to the covenant, albeit on multiple levels. To the Jew who had not come to faith in Messiah Yeshua, his covenant membership, though valid, lay primarily in the physical, “this-world” aspects, having received the promises given to Abraham which were based entirely upon God’s faithfulness. These “this-world” blessings included such things as God’s blessing upon those who blessed Israel and cursing those who cursed them. Insofar as the Jewish person remained within the covenant community, he could count on God fulfilling this promise. But the blessing offered in the covenant went beyond “this-world” blessings, and extended to blessing in relationship to “world-to-come.” These spiritual blessings, however, were given only to those who by faith were doers of the Torah, not merely hearers (Rom 2:13). This message of faith was clearly being preached in the sect called The Way, and we may be settled in our estimation of those such as James, Peter, and John, that they recognized that the full blessings of the covenant came only to those who received Yeshua as Messiah.

But the issue that faced the Jewish community at this time was the ingathering of the Gentiles. The Gentile had neither “this-world” blessings, nor the “world-to-come” blessings because the Gentile was separated from the covenants of promise, without God, and therefore without hope in the world (Eph 2:11ff). It was only reasonable to think that, like the Jew, if the Gentile were to receive “this-world” blessings, he too must be circumcised like the Jew. Was it possible for the Gentile to enter the covenant at the “this-world” level, and then through faith attain the “world-to-come” blessings? Surely the influencers thought so, for this followed the pattern of the native born Jew, who, being circumcised on the eighth day, entered the covenant on a “this-world” basis before expressing his personal faith and personally securing the blessings of the “world-to-come.” For the native Jew, then, circumcision preceded personal faith. Why would this not be the same for the Gentile?

In fact, in the later, reformed soteriology, this same pattern obtained, for the child, baptized on the eighth day, “entered the covenant” in advance of his own personal faith. As such, so the reformed theologians explain, the “child of the covenant” benefits from the covenant community and the blessings attended therewith, before his own personal faith in God and His Messiah. Though without precise terms and explanation, the reformed soteriology holds that at the child’s confirmation (the expression of his own personal faith), he enters as

a full covenant member, a status he, in some measure, did not yet hold, though yet a *bona fide* member of the covenant.

For Paul, the message of the gospel, both to the Gentiles (uncircumcised) as well as to the Jews (circumcised) was essentially the same: salvation (the blessing of the “world-to-come,” including the guarantee of such by the indwelling Spirit) was available only to those who believed in Yeshua (trusted His work on their behalf as the means of God’s forgiveness and their right standing before Him). What was at odds, however, was the issue of how the Gentiles would enter the covenant on both levels. Could a Gentile participate in the “this-world” blessings without “becoming a Jew?” In other words, could a Gentile have “eternal life” without first entering the covenant people on a “this-world” basis?

Paul seems to be addressing this very question in Romans 4. Here he shows that Abraham received the covenant promises before he was circumcised, that is, before he “became a Jew” from the rabbinic perspective. What is more, he had already received the “this-world” blessings, once again, before circumcision. This no doubt formed the basis for Paul’s approach to the Gentiles. Like Abraham, they were compelled to “believe in God,” by which faith they were granted “eternal life.” But their covenant membership, granted solely upon the basis of their faith in Messiah, also afforded them “this-world” covenant status, since they had joined the people of Israel as *bona fide* covenant members. From this viewpoint, then, circumcision was simply a matter of obedience to the God of the covenant, but had nothing to do with becoming a covenant member. One would have to surmise that this was considered the “gospel to the uncircumcised.”

What is more, the “gospel to the circumcised” was the same message, albeit preached from a different angle. Since the Jew was already considered a covenant member on the basis of his lineage, the gospel came to him as one who faced the possibility of being “broken off” from the covenant through unbelief. His covenant position must be confirmed through his personal faith. And this faith, like that of Abraham’s, was faith in the Promised One, the Messiah. In essence, then, the gospel is one. Yet its approach to the Gentile and to the Jew was apparently different. One gave the opportunity for entering the covenant. The other gave the appeal to remain in the covenant. But both approaches centered upon the person of Yeshua and His work, and the need to commit oneself through faith in Him.

Paul uses the verbiage “seeing” (v. 7) and “recognizing” (v. 9).²⁷ This must reference both the evident fruit of proclaiming the gospel, for many believed and thus confessed Yeshua as the Messiah, as well as the attendant evidence of the Spirit’s presence and work in those who had received the gospel.²⁸ That the power of the gospel was evident in all who received it was proof that God’s purpose in the gospel was the same for Jew and Gentile alike: “for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentile” (v. 8). This One who worked is no doubt considered to be the Spirit of God Who regenerates the heart, opens the eyes of the soul to the truth of the gospel, and works within the believer to produce faith. As we shall see throughout

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27 Note that the Greek uses the word γινώσκω (*ginōskō*), “to know,” but in this case, the translation “recognized” is appropriate, see the comments of BDAG “γινώσκω”.

28 Cf. 2:8–9; 3:2, 5.

the epistle (indeed, throughout Paul's epistles), it is the presence of the Spirit, evident through the changed life of obedience, that is the genuine mark of salvation.

That this occurred among the Gentiles as a result of Paul's preaching is considered to be the evidence of "grace that was given" to Paul. The salvation of the Gentiles was not done through "slick salesmanship" nor through convincing rhetoric, but through the evident work of the Spirit fulfilling the purposes of God's grace. God was the One Who had called the Gentiles into the covenant—it was not the plan or scheme of Paul. The success of the gospel was God's gracious work, not the result of human efforts.

Paul does not consider his apostleship any less or greater than that of Peter's, nor vice versa. The point is simply that the same gospel (though delivered from two different angles) was empowered by the same Spirit to the end that both Jew and Gentile were born again to a living faith in Yeshua. Here Paul comes back to his primary theme: the gospel he was preaching was no different than the gospel Peter had proclaimed. But in both cases, it was a gospel that had as its core element faith in Yeshua, not the fulfillment of ritual. And it was a gospel that knew no ethnic boundaries, for it was not ethnically nor culturally based, but it was the good news "to all who believed, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16).

Additional proof of the unity of the gospel message, whether given to Jews or Gentiles, was also found in the obvious fact that the "pillars" of the Jerusalem community had given to Paul and Barnabas the "right hand of fellowship," meaning that they had commissioned them both to take this very message of the gospel to the Gentiles. It therefore had the clear backing of the Jerusalem community. If the influencers were saying that Paul's gospel was spurious, or in some measure deficient, they were at the same time saying the same thing of the gospel that belonged to Peter, James, and John.

Paul says that the three were "reputed to be pillars." It is not as though he is trying to diminish this report by the use of the word "reputed" (δοκέω, *dokēō*, "to think, believe, suppose, consider") but rather, he continues to diminish in his argument the weight of words or opinions simply based upon one's position or reputation. And further, it is not as though Paul disregards positions of authority. It is simply that here, in this phase of his argument, Paul is stressing the fact that his mission was the result of divine revelation, not that of assignment from anyone, even the "pillars."

The term "pillars" (στῦλοι, *stuloi*) must have the sense of those who supported the community, and by whose leadership the community thrived. That the pillars of Solomon (named Yachin and Boaz, cf. 1Kings 7:15-22; 2Chron 3:15-17) were considered a significant part of the First Temple may have figured into an eschatological expectation that the Temple would be restored to its former glory, and that prominent persons would be considered as pillars within it. Ezekiel's prophecy of the Temple was no doubt seen as something different than the refurbished Second Temple, and there is some evidence that the Judaisms of Paul's day foresaw some kind of destruction and restoration of the Temple in general.²⁹ We should add to this the well-known fact that Paul uses the Temple metaphor to speak of the believers in general (1Cor 3:16-17;

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29 Note Ezekiel 40-48; Jubilees 1:17, 27-28; 1Enoch 90:28-29; 2Bar 32:3-4; Testament of Benjamin 9:2. It is also evident that the Qumran society constructed their settlement to prefigure the restored Temple, and that they anticipated a time when the Temple would be restored to its proper holiness.

6:19f; 2Cor 4:16) as do other Apostles (Heb 3:6; 10:21; 1Pet 2:5), and thus the leaders of the believing community may have been considered as “pillars” in this metaphoric Temple.

The “right hand of fellowship” is replete with Semitic overtones. First, the raising of the hand was the normal manner for taking an oath. Note, for example, the following:

I will bring you to the land which I swore [lit., “lifted My hand”] to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession; I am the LORD. (Ex 6:8)

Indeed, I lift up My hand to heaven, And say, as I live forever ... (Deut 32:40)

But the raising of the hands was also a manner of bestowing blessing:

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. (Lev 9:22)

The right hand was of particular importance in the Semitic cultures, being a sign of strength as well as a sign of that which was favorable and honorable:

for none of them will deceive you when once they have given you their right hands, nor will anyone doubt their fidelity, when that is once given, even though they were before suspected of injustice. (Josephus, *Ant* 18:328f)

You stretched out Your right hand, the earth swallowed them. (Ex 15:12)

... King Solomon ... sat on his throne; then he had a throne set for the king’s mother, and she sat on his right. (1Kings 2:19)

The term “fellowship” (*κοινωνία*, *koinonia*) is a favorite one of Paul.³⁰ It’s meaning is much deeper than the term “fellowship” connotes in our times. It did not merely indicate a friendship or casual time of social interaction, but has the idea of holding things in common and thus speaks of a close relationship—one that presumes a sharing of life. Thus, the “giving of the right hand of fellowship” denotes a formal commissioning in which James, Peter, and John had committed themselves to Paul and Barnabas as sharing in the same gospel work. By such a notice, Paul has gathered the full support of the “pillars” for his gospel work among the Gentiles. Once again, the term “the circumcised” serves to identify Jews as over against Gentiles. Here Paul uses the contemporary language of his time, reminding us again of how much circumcision (and the parallel ritual of the proselyte) had come to define identity within the covenant.

The addition of the verb “that we might go” (NASB), “that we should go” (NIV) may, in fact, be misleading. The Greek clause has no verb, and we should most likely understand the preposition *εἰς*, *eis*, “to, into, for” to

30 Cf. Rom. 15:26; 1Cor. 1:9; 10:16; 2Cor. 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Gal. 2:9; Phil. 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Philem. 1:6.

mean “that we should be for the Gentiles and they for the circumcised.” Thus, what is misleading about adding the verb “go” as the English translations do is that it implies separate missions by way of geography, i.e., that Paul and Barnabas would go to the regions of the Gentiles, while Peter and his colleagues would go where the Jews live. But this misses the obvious point that the diaspora (where Paul and Barnabas travelled) had a higher population of Jews than did the environs of Judea. And we know from Acts that Paul regularly was in the diaspora synagogues, reasoning with his Jewish brothers and persuading them that Yeshua was, in fact, the long awaited Messiah. Therefore, what must have been the conclusion of the council that met in Jerusalem was that Paul and Barnabas should be responsible for the Gentiles, and Peter for the Jews. Paul and Barnabas would represent, act on behalf of, or be responsible for the Gentiles, and Peter along with the “pillars” would do the same for the Jewish community.

This, of course, was not some new “mission strategy” enacted by the pillars of Jerusalem, but was simply the confirmation of what God had already ordained (evident through the revelation given to Paul) and what was already in place. Thus Paul’s explanation of the part the “pillars” played in his own commissioning was only to confirm that the revelation he had received was recognized by the leadership in Jerusalem.

The final request of the “pillars” to all involved was that they should remember the poor as they labored among the Gentile and Jewish communities. Paul notes that this was the very thing they were already intent on doing. While the term “poor” (πτωχός, *ptōkos*) could encompass a wide range of needs, it most likely centers on financial need in this case. What is more, the request of the pillars surely is directed toward the growing need of the Jerusalem community as they shouldered the burden of many who barely had means of nominal subsistence. We know from Acts that the maintenance of the widows had become an issue (Acts 6:1) and that the famine foreseen by Agabus (Acts 11:29) had indeed come to pass, and that therefore many were in dire straits. Thus, in their attempts to reach out to the diaspora, whether to Jews or non-Jews, the welfare of the founding community in Jerusalem could not be lost sight of, and their needs were to be considered the responsibility of all. This was particularly germane for the Gentiles, who might otherwise not have a natural connection to the Jerusalem community, and might therefore not consider their own responsibility toward them. Paul later reasoned that if they (the Gentiles) had been enriched by the spiritual food of the Jerusalem community (in that they had received the message of the Gospel through their efforts and representatives), they likewise should share in the material things necessary for their maintenance (Rom 15:27). Of course, Paul had already demonstrated his willingness in this endeavor, for relief had already come to the Jerusalem community through him (Acts 11:30). But it should also be remarked that aid to the poor was a natural response for all pious Jews, and Paul’s immediate notice that this request was something already planted in his heart shows that his faith in Yeshua only enhanced his piety from a Jewish perspective—it did not diminish it in any way. What is more, that the Gentiles (over whom he had assumed primary responsibility) should see themselves as equally part of the larger Jewish community would be recognized as they likewise bore the burdens of the community as *bona fide* members of it. Their giving of support and aid to the poor in Jerusalem would affirm this in tangible ways. That call for relief is found often in Paul’s letters (Rom 15:22ff; 1Cor 16:1ff; 2Cor 8:4ff; 11:13) shows that the “handshake” he received in Jerusalem

was taken quite seriously. And even though some might misconstrue his gathering of funds from the Gentiles (as possibly as way of “buying” their acceptance into the Jewish community), such a possibility never discouraged Paul. As a matter of principle, it was the right thing to do, regardless of how some might have misunderstood.³¹

11–13 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.

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The incident of Peter’s activity in Antioch is now addressed. Given the background of the previous verses, that all had entered into an agreement pertaining to the scope of their respective missions, it is all the more clear why Paul was particularly upset at Peter’s actions. He writes as a member of the Antioch community (“Cephas came to Antioch”) but also as one of the leaders commissioned by the Jerusalem pillars themselves to oversee and represent the believing community of the diaspora, particularly the Gentiles who were no doubt a growing majority of that community. For Peter to therefore act in a way that undermined the unity of the believing community, and to do so against the clear position of Paul and (at least initially) Barnabas, was doubly to undermine the truth of the gospel and the position of the community’s leaders. It seems clear that Paul’s abrupt shift to this narrative scene is done to highlight the contrast between the apparent shalom of the “handshake” in Jerusalem and the otherwise contrary actions of Peter.

To oppose someone “face to face” is a common Hebrew idiom. Note the following:

Now the LORD said to Moses, “Rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, as he comes out to the water, and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Let My people go, that they may serve Me. (Ex 8:20)

He will deliver their kings into your hand so that you will make their name perish from under heaven; no man will be able to stand before you until you have destroyed them. (Deut 7:24)

No man will be able to stand before you; the LORD your God will lay the dread of you and the fear of you on all the land on which you set foot, as He has spoken to you. (Deut 11:25)

No man will be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. (Josh 1:5)

In all of the verses above, the underlined phrases represent the Hebrew **יצב**,

31 I am reminded of recent statements by some Rabbis that relief sent to Israel from the Christian Church had ulterior motives connected to it (i.e., a softening of the Jews for Christian evangelism) and that it therefore should be rejected.