

Article 1: The Discipline of Deference

And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain.

- Galatians 2:2

From the beginning of his public ministry the Apostle Paul seemed to have had the hand of God on him. He confounded the opponents of the Gospel in Damascus, so infuriating and humiliating them that they sought his life. Years later, as his ministry resumed in Antioch, God used him to bring many Gentiles to faith and to strengthen the Church with his doctrine. We might think Paul would have been content to claim validity for his ministry by the results he was achieving. We would be wrong.

In spite of his evident success, Paul knew he could not be sure that his labors were not in vain until he had cleared his teaching with the Apostles in Jerusalem. So he went with Barnabas to Peter, John, and James and laid out for them the content of his preaching and teaching. He was happy to learn that they heartily approved, and that they had nothing more to add to what he was teaching. Just as he claimed, Paul had indeed, learned the Gospel by direct revelation. But in his action toward the Apostles in Jerusalem he established an important precedent for all students of Scripture, especially those called to the ministry of teaching.

We must always be careful to examine our understandings, conclusions, and teaching in the light of the Word of God as understood by the Apostles. The Apostles have the last word on what the Bible teaches, because they have the fullest Word on Jesus Christ. We cannot understand the rest of the Bible unless we understand it in the light of Peter, Paul, John, and the rest. The Jews of Jesus' day taught that the Old Testament Law was a source of righteousness, when it was rightly understood and assiduously obeyed. Paul, on the other hand, said that the righteousness we need in order to be pleasing before God was not to be found in the Law, but in Jesus Christ. Only in Him, and in His righteousness, could we take up the Law with benefit – not unto justification, but unto sanctification in Jesus. Certain of the religious leaders of the day taught that the Old Testament didn't really mean all that stuff about angels and a spiritual world. The Apostles insist on the importance of focusing on and practicing these "unseen things." The keepers of the Old Testament in the days of the early Church insisted that they were the final word on what could be preached and taught in Jerusalem. The Apostles boldly insisted that they must obey God rather than men, as they continued to insist that all the Scriptures lead to Jesus and the Gospel.

In our study and teaching we must be in constant contact with the Scriptures, especially with the teaching of the Apostles. We defer to them in everything. Moreover, it is wise, in making sure we understand their teaching, to consult the tradition of interpretation that has preceded us in the Church. The fathers and teachers of previous generations can help us to understand the meaning of God's Word as we study their comments and teachings on various portions of the text. But how can we do this? I like to include, as part of my morning devotions, a reading from *The Ancient Christian Commentary* series (InterVarsity) or *The Church's Bible* (Zondervan). In these volumes we have a pastiche commentary on the Bible, book by book, drawing on the preachers and theologians of the first eleven centuries of the Church. These volumes are valuable tools for helping us see how the Word of God and the teaching of the Apostles have been understood throughout the ages. Not all their comments are equally useful; however, the cumulative sense of their teaching can be a lighthouse through what are sometimes the rocky shoals of interpretation. By deferring our understanding of God's Word to the Apostles and our forebears in the faith, we may gain assurance that our teaching is not in vain, and may teach even more boldly, knowing that we stand on the shoulders of giants.