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# Acknowledging a spiritual debt

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Graham Keith

The sudden and decisive spread of the gospel among the Gentiles did not pass without its problems. Not all Jewish believers readily caught the thrill of the Apostle Paul when he proclaimed as part of God's new revelation that the Gentiles were 'heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 3:6).

Paul had had the benefit of special revelation from Jesus Christ, who had specifically called him to a ministry among the Gentiles as well as the Jews. And in his subsequent missionary work he had ample evidence of the grace of God at work among the Gentiles. By comparison, those Jewish Christians who remained in Palestine had few direct indications of God's work in the Gentile world. They would be reliant both on second-hand information, and on the Old Testament prophecies which alluded to a future blessing on the Gentiles.

Some bewilderment followed news of large-scale conversions among them. There were those who felt that the preaching of men like Paul must be inadequate if these Gentile converts did not take up Jewish customs. Suppose these Gentile converts were accepted as Christians. Would this not discredit the claim of the early Jewish Christians in the eyes of their fellow countrymen to be standing foursquare in the tradition of the Old Testament? Or what if Paul and the other missionary pioneers among the Gentiles were simply out to make a name for themselves? Perhaps their converts were appearing much too easily!

These doubts were not confined to the fringes of the church. We know from *Galatians 2* that Christian leaders from both sides of the work had to take stock of these developments. On divine direction Paul went up to Jerusalem along with Barnabas and Titus to confirm that the gospel he was preaching to the Gentiles was authentic. The leaders of the Jerusalem church were fully satisfied, and acknowledged that God had called them to work in different spheres. But interestingly the incident did not end with a complete demarcation of spheres of service.

There was to be an overlap. For the church leaders at Jerusalem called on the emissaries of the Gentile church to remember the poor, 'the very thing', Paul says, 'I was eager to do' (Gal. 2:10).

Apparently in its early days the church at Jerusalem had to face the problem of poverty among a large number of its members. Hence we find that collections from Gentile churches for the Jewish Christians figure prominently in Paul's ministry. Indeed, he considered the collection and delivery of money from the Gentiles (in particular, those in Macedonia and Achaëa) as such a vital part of his own ministry that he was prepared to interrupt plans for further missionary work until this particular ministry should be completed. In going to Jerusalem, he was well aware of the personal risks involved and commended his personal safety to the prayers of the Roman Christians. Moreover, he could not even be sure if his ministry would be accepted. For he also sought prayer to this end (Rom. 15:30-31).

If the delivery of the collection to Jerusalem was fraught with risk, clearly Paul had an impelling motive for undertaking it. He considered that the Gentile Christians were spiritually indebted to the Jewish church (Rom. 15:27). In the providence of God the poverty of the Jerusalem church gave the Gentile Christians the opportunity to express their gratitude tangibly.



But the significance of the collection went further. It would give visible proof to the Jewish Christians of the reality of God's work of grace among the Gentiles. Therefore, they would thank God not only for the gift itself, valuable though it must have been, but for his work among the Gentiles. The Jewish Christians would grow not only in wonder at God's mighty acts, but in their love for fellow-believers whom they had never seen and whose background was very difficult from their own. Paul envisaged a sort of boomerang effect whereby the heart of these Jewish Christians would go out in affection towards these Gentile believers – an affection which would manifest itself in prayer for them (2 Cor. 9:13-14). Thus there would be visible demonstration that Jewish and Gentile believers were 'one body' in Christ. And Christ's prayer for believers 'that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me, and I in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17:21) would begin to be answered.

The collection which Paul took to Jerusalem thus gains significance when we consider its historical context – a context which appears remote from the present day, still more from the work of the Associates. But there are, I believe, parallels. Like the Gentiles in Paul's day, the current generation of students falls heir to a legacy – a fact they should recognize. Just as it would have been wrong and even dangerous for first century Gentile Christians to imagine that the Christian faith began with them, equally twentieth century students would be mistaken if they thought that evangelical Christianity began in their own time. Or should they live as if this were the case, very likely their brand of Christianity would soon die out or turn heterodox.

Thus Christian students and new graduates of the present day should consider their debt to older generations who helped to build up the witness of IVF/UCCF. Paul was not slow to impress on the Gentiles that they were spiritual debtors to their brother Jews. Today Christian students ought to explore ways in which to express a genuine gratitude to those who have benefitted them.

This does not mean that the older generation can now sit back in complacency and abdicate all responsibility to their younger successors. Paul remained well aware in his own ministry that it was a parent's part to provide for his children rather than *vice versa* (2 Cor. 12:14). The UCCF Associates has been and will remain in large measure a channel whereby former students can minister to their younger successors in the student world. But just as in God's providence the poverty of the Jewish Christians provided a

means for the new Gentile believers to show their gratitude, current students have a responsibility to find their own ways of acknowledging their debt to their predecessors.

Present-day students can support UCCF Associates in its various functions once they graduate. But perhaps just as significant will be their support of churches up and down the country where Christian graduates have laboured over the years for the gospel. During their own college days, when inevitably their pattern of life is somewhat unsettled, students may be unable to give much to their churches; but at least they can be encouraged to see that some of the older Christians in their congregations are those whose work and prayers have made possible the student witness. And they can contribute to the life of the church in whatever way they can. This will involve the students in some initiative in deciding where they can be useful. 'Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you' is apposite in this context!

There are obvious benefits in this. Normally older Christians will hear of the student witness only at second-hand. Glowing stories of many conversions in the student world will appear hollow if they see no evidence in the students or young graduates coming to them. Should the converted students bypass evangelical churches or behave presumptuously when they do attach themselves, the older folk are bound to question the integrity of the work in the student world. On the other hand, those students who bring youthful zeal in a desire to serve will find a welcome in a healthy church. At the same time they will provide an incentive to the older folk to pray more earnestly for the student work.

It would be worth drawing another lesson from the early contacts between Jewish and Gentile believers. The way in which God blessed the Gentile world ran counter to many Jewish expectations. Young people may genuinely have received blessing from God as students in conversion or in spiritual growth. Sometimes older Christians may fail to recognize this because God has now blessed in ways very different from those they experienced at a similar age. By placing too tight a straitjacket on early Christian experience and by neglecting the lessons the young people have learned, older church members may quench the Spirit and leave their church impoverished. Like Peter when he gave way to the demands of the Judaizers, older folk may consciously add the cultural forms of the own day to the essence of the gospel. Thus they may raise stumbling-blocks for young student Christians. Or if this sets out the issues too starkly, at least they will fail to give the young Christians the welcome which Paul lays down for



those who are truly Christ's (Rom. 14:1 and 15:7).

The 'generation gap' is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it is one of the fascinations of history that a new generation rarely, if ever, turns out to be a carbon-copy of the old. We would be foolish to hope or even to desire that in society at large the younger generation should reduplicate the old. Perhaps *Ecclesiastes 7:10* warns against this. ('Do not say: "why were the old days better than these?"' for it is not wise to ask such questions'.) However, in the church young and old have a vital role to fulfil in ensuring they pull together, and not at cross purposes. This may be one significant way for the church to exhibit true unity in Christ in a divided and estranged world.

That is why evangelical student work and the witness of the local church, despite the different channels in which they operate, cannot function with a total lack of interest by each in the other. Those who can bridge the two worlds, as with Paul between the Jewish and Gentile Christians, have a strategic role to play. The UCCF

Travelling Secretaries come immediately to mind. But we in the Associates who can look back on our own student days have an important ministry in our churches. Are we encouraging our own church to have a lasting interest in its students? Are we helping to integrate young graduates and to encourage them in appropriate ministry within the body of Christ? Are we (in the church prayer meeting, for example) keeping the church informed of the needs and the opportunities of the student world?

Paul thought it was worthwhile risking his life in a ministry which would express the unity and love of Gentile and Jewish believers. Surely we have a duty to develop similar bonds between today's students and those of previous generations. May God help us carry it out faithfully.

**Graham Keith wrote this article while he was Associates Assistant Secretary; he has now returned to Scotland for further study in Glasgow.**