

Galatians

The Clash between Two Church Leaders

Galatians 2:11-16

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Scripture

A man was stranded on a deserted island in the Pacific for many years. One day a boat came sailing into view, and the man frantically waved and got the skipper's attention. The boat landed on the beach, the skipper got out and greeted the stranded man.

After a while the skipper asked the castaway, "What are those three huts you've built?"

The stranded man replied, "That first hut is my house."

"What's that next hut?" asked the sailor.

"I built that for my church."

"What about the third hut?"

"Oh," the castaway answered solemnly, "that's where I used to go to church."¹

This humorous story illustrates a very serious problem.

Conflict is part of life, and it is certainly part of every church. People find themselves in disagreement and, rather than resolve their differences, they simply leave and go somewhere else. In some instances, they cannot find a suitable church with which to join, and so they start their own denomination. A number of years ago it was reported that one new religious denomination was started each week in the United States.²

We do not always handle conflict very well. In today's text, we see that conflict existed in the New Testament. I want you to notice how Paul preserved the integrity of the gospel at a crucial point in the Church's history. Let us read Galatians 2:11-16:

¹¹ When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. ¹² Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when

¹ *Mikey's Funnies* (8-20-02).

² Steven Waldman in *The New Republic*, 1/27/92. "To Verify," Leadership.

they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

¹⁴ When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?”

¹⁵ “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’¹⁶ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.” (Galatians 2:11-16)

Introduction

On April 16, 1521, a thirty-eight year-old monk entered the German town of Worms in a Saxon, two-wheeled cart with a few companions. Although it was the dinner hour, a crowd of about two thousand people turned out to escort the young monk—their hero—to his lodgings for the night. The next day the young monk was scheduled to appear before the Emperor Charles.

The reason for the meeting was to examine the monk’s views concerning the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church.

The young monk denied papal infallibility and taught justification by faith alone. He had come to understand that a person comes into a right relationship with God by faith alone and not by any personal effort or merit.

He had written about this rediscovered biblical truth, and was now at the center of a controversy. The essence of this controversy really had to do with the truth and integrity of the gospel itself.

The scene was dramatic. On the one side was Charles, the heir of a long line of Roman Catholic sovereigns and ruler over a greater territory than any of his predecessors except Charlemagne. Alongside Charles were the leading civil and ecclesiastical leaders

of the day. Before this powerful, potent, and pompous group stood a young monk, a simple miner's son, whose name was Martin Luther.

Luther was examined by Archbishop Eck of Trier. A pile of books were brought out, placed on a table, and Luther was asked if they were books that he had written. Luther acknowledged that they were his books.

When asked by Eck if he would recant what he had written, Luther asked for time to compose his answer. Somewhat surprisingly, he was given until the next day to compose a reply.

The next day everyone gathered together for Luther's reply. The atmosphere was electric. Luther's writings had stirred up the German people and they were discovering the liberty that comes from the gospel. They were ready to revolt in order to support Martin Luther. Because of this brewing dissension, the civil and ecclesiastical leaders felt constrained to muzzle the monk.

Archbishop Eck repeated his question to Luther: would Luther recant what he had written. Luther did not answer with a simple yes or no.

After a while, an exasperated Eck interjected, "I ask you, Martin—answer candidly and without horns—do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?"

Luther then replied in these immortal words, "Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of Popes and Councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen."³

By submitting to the true teaching of Scripture and not to the false teaching of men, Luther defended the gospel of Jesus Christ. His unyielding stand against the Roman Catholic Church itself re-

³ Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York, NY: The North American Library, Inc., 1977), 144.

captured the true gospel for his generation and indeed for us as well.

Lesson

The clash between Luther and the leaders of the Church is reminiscent of the most significant clash ever between two church leaders. Almost fifteen hundred years earlier, the apostle Paul clashed with the apostle Peter.

Today I want to examine the controversy between Paul and Peter, and learn how Paul preserved the integrity of the gospel at a crucial point in the Early Church's infancy.

I. What Happened Between the Two Apostles? (2:11-16)

First, what happened between the two apostles?

Let's try to understand what happened between the two apostles before we draw out the ramifications for us today.

A. *The Context (2:11a)*

Let's begin by looking at the context.

Paul says in verse 11a, "**When Peter came to Antioch. . .**"

The scene of the controversy was **Antioch**.

The two participants—Paul and Peter—were each apostles, mighty men of God (cf. vv. 7-8), both commissioned to their apostleship by Jesus himself, and both respected in the churches of Christ.

In fact, the book of Acts is practically the story of the ministry of these two men, being virtually divided in half by the accounts of their ministries, the first part telling the account of Peter, and the second part telling the account of Paul.⁴

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 49-50.

The event was occasioned by a visit of Peter to Antioch, the details of which are unknown to us. Apparently Paul was out of town at the time because it is hard to imagine that he would have allowed things to have progressed as far as they did if he had been in town. (Paul, you remember, had by this time already planted the churches in Galatia and the Jerusalem Council had not yet taken place).

B. The Clash (2:11b-14a)

Now, let's observe the clash.

We read about the clash in verses 11b-14a.

The apostle Paul says about the apostle Peter, **“I opposed him to his face, because he was in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray”** (2:11b-13).

While in Antioch Peter **used to eat with the Gentiles** and he enjoyed wonderful fellowship with them.

This practice of eating with Gentiles was taboo in Jewish circles, but Peter had learned in a revelation that God viewed it differently. In this vision, described in Acts 10:1-11:18, Peter learned that there no longer was a difference between Jews and Gentiles as far as God was concerned. In fact, in his sermon at Cornelius' house, Peter himself said, “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (Acts 10:34-35).

Yet when **certain men came from James**, claiming to be his representatives, Peter **began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles**.

Why did Peter do this? Why did he **draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles**? Because he feared the Judaizers, Paul

said that **“he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group”** (2:12b). In other words, Peter bowed to peer pressure.

Let me pause and note an important lesson here. We talk a great deal about peer pressure affecting teenagers and young children, and it does. But notice that even the great apostle Peter caved in to the pressure of peer group.

Any one of us is prone to peer pressure.

And what is peer pressure? Peer pressure is fear of disapproval.

What is the antidote to peer pressure? You will find it in Proverbs 29:25, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.”

When you love the approval of others more than you love the approval of God, you will cave in to peer pressure too. The antidote to peer pressure is to trust God, to love God, to care more about what *he* thinks about you than what *others* think about you.

Bowing to peer pressure, Peter was denying the very principles he held to be true. Most likely he refused to join **the Gentiles** in celebrating the Lord’s Supper together. Peter’s actions caused a split among the Jewish and Gentile believers.

Paul said that **the other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray** (2:13). The Greek word for **hypocrisy** is “play-acting, pretending, or wearing a disguise.”

Peter and **the other Jews** who followed his example acted in insincerity and not from personal convictions. Their withdrawal from fellowship with the Gentiles was not prompted by theological conviction but by craven fear of a small pressure group.

When Paul saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, he confronted **Peter in front of them all** (2:14a). It is important to notice that this was a public confrontation. Paul publicly rebuked the apostle Peter.

Why did he do this publicly? Because Peter’s actions were public, and so he had to be confronted publicly.

C. The Reason (14b-16)

Now, let's look at the reason why Paul confronted Peter publicly.

Paul said to the apostle Peter in verses 14b-16, **“You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”**

The reason Paul confronted Peter in front of everyone is simple.

Peter knew that neither Jew nor Gentile were **justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. . . because by observing the law no one will be justified.** Peter's actions were wrong and they were having a harmful effect on the lives of others.

Peter betrayed the heart of the gospel by adding obedience to the Law as a condition of salvation. He did this not because he denied justification **by faith**, but because he succumbed to peer pressure.

Paul realized that he could not let this two-facedness go unchallenged. And so Paul confronted Peter in front of everyone.

D. The Outcome

Let's notice the outcome of the apostle Paul's clash with the apostle Peter.

How did Peter respond to Paul's rebuke? Galatians 2 does not tell us, but Acts 15, the account of the Jerusalem Council which convened to discuss the controversy, does tell us.

Acts 15 shows that Peter took the lead in establishing that justification is by faith alone and not by faith plus works.

So, Peter responded positively to Paul's rebuke.

II. How Does This Apply to Us?

Now, how does all of this apply to us?

Peter's failure at Antioch contains a number of applications, but let us look at some of the most important.

A. *All Christians Are Prone to Error*

First, all Christians are prone to error.

No matter how gifted, all servants of Christ are prone to error, even some of the errors and sins they formerly spoke against.

I remember as a young Christian hearing a dynamic preacher speak on the subject of sexual purity. At that time I was a student at the University of Cape Town and found his talk especially helpful. Imagine my deep disappointment when I learned a few months later that he had fallen into an adulterous relationship.

The point is that the possession of the new life in Christ is not a guarantee against falling into error. A new relationship with the Spirit of God is not a guarantee against error. Maturity in Christ is not a guarantee against error. Not even a sound knowledge of doctrine is a guarantee against error.

The apostle Peter was a hand-picked disciple of Jesus Christ. He had spent three years with Jesus. He had been one of the "inner circle" of three disciples who were especially close to our Lord.

And yet his failure here at Antioch was not his first failure. You remember that he denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest.

Friends, if one of Jesus' closest and dearest disciples can fall into error, don't think that you and I cannot fall into error.

Knowing this should drive us to our knees. We should recognize that our hearts, even though renewed by the Holy Spirit, are still prone to error.

So, what is our safeguard against error? Our only safeguard against slipping into error is a constant clinging to Christ who

alone can keep us from stumbling. This is the testimony of Jude 24-25: “To him (i.e. Christ) who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.”

B. Faithfulness Involves More Than Believing Right Doctrine

Second, faithfulness involves more than believing right doctrine.

It is one thing to believe right doctrine. It is another thing to put it into practice. Right doctrine without right practice always leads to hypocrisy.

Commentator John Stott says, “It is not enough that we *believe* the gospel (Peter did this, verse 16), nor even that we strive to *preserve* it, as Paul and the Jerusalem apostles did, and the Judaizers did not. We must go further still. We must *apply* it; it is this that Peter failed to do.”⁵

Today we fail to apply the gospel when we refuse to have fellowship with other believers. It is all too easy for us, especially for Presbyterians who strive after right doctrine, to distance ourselves from those whose doctrine is not the same as ours.

We refuse to fellowship with believers who hold to a different view of baptism.

We refuse to have fellowship with believers who are affiliated with a different denomination.

We refuse to have fellowship with believers who have a different skin color.

We refuse to have fellowship with believers who come from a different social level.

We refuse to have fellowship with believers who have a different educational background (usually a lower one).

⁵ Stott, 56.

We refuse to have fellowship with believers who have a different economic status than ourselves (also usually a lower one).

We refuse to have fellowship with believers over a whole host of varying issues.

All this is a grievous affront to the gospel. Justification—right standing with God—is by faith alone.

We have no right to add a particular form of baptism or denomination or race or social status or educational level or economic lever or anything else to faith. God does not insist on these things before he accepts us into fellowship, and neither should we.

C. We Must Oppose Those Who Deny the Gospel

Finally, we must oppose those who deny the gospel.

When the issue is trivial, we must be as pliable as possible. But when the truth of the gospel is at stake, we must stand our ground.

Several years ago I had to deal with the issue of Freemasonry in the church I was serving. During the time of wrestling with how to handle Freemasonry, I talked with a friend of mine, who is Professor of New Testament at a Bible College in South Africa. I asked him how to deal with this issue. I remember him saying, “Freddy, when the gospel is at stake, you have to take a stand.”

That was helpful advice. I did take a stand. It was not pleasant, nor was it easy. But, I believed that the gospel was at stake. And so I opposed Freemasonry because it is a denial of the gospel.

Conclusion

Thank God for Paul who opposed Peter. And thank God for Luther who opposed the whole Roman Catholic Church. And thank God for every believer who has stood for the truth of the gospel. May God give us some of their spirit. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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