

Gal. 2:11-16 (WCF 31:3) “Apostles May Err”

For the Children: Let us say you and your older brother get into trouble for doing something wrong. Your excuse is, “He told me to do it!” Your parents reply, “If he told you to jump in the lake, would you do it?” Sometimes older brothers tell you the wrong thing. Sometimes elders might say something wrong, as might Presbyteries or synods. But the Word of God is never wrong! If someone else says something against what the Bible says, they might have to be corrected – even in public. But we must be careful how we do that, especially if it is someone in authority. **Questions:** What is the right way to correct someone? What would be the wrong way? How can members of the church deal with any errors in Sessions, Presbyteries or synods?

Introduction:

First Point: Peter’s Error

- **Peter’s Problem:** Peter had heard the Lord teach that what goes into a man can’t defile him. Then his vision at Joppa and the Spirit’s instruction to him to accompany some Gentiles to their homes – without misgivings (Acts 10) – reinforced the point that the OT ceremonial law was no longer in force. Therefore at the Council in Acts 15, Peter spoke up for the Gentile believers. He argued that they had the Spirit too, and had been cleansed by Christ through faith. He argued against forcing them to obey all the OT ceremonial laws. However, under pressure from the men who reportedly came from James, men of the Circumcision Party, Peter began to distance himself from the Gentile believers in Antioch.
- **Implications for the Church:** Others - even Barnabas, who had been involved in the mission to the Gentiles – began to follow suit. This could have led to the exclusion of the Gentiles from the entire church, ending the spread of Christianity to the world.
- **The Broader Problem:** This event shows how easy it is for believers – even apostles – to be influenced by peer-pressure and to err. That is not to deny the foundational role of the prophets and apostles (Eph. 2:20), as they delivered the inerrant Word of God under inspiration. But any man, uttering his own thoughts, may err, even the greatest of church leaders. So David sinned and was corrected (2 Sam. 12). Similarly, the Sanhedrin, various church fathers, councils and synods and denominations have erred throughout the ages – including those who call themselves “Reformed.”
- **Avoiding Extremes:** This should warn us against viewing synods etc as if they were always in the right. The Bible is our only rule of faith and practice (WCF 31:3), not Sessions, Presbyteries or synods. But at the other extreme, this realization does not mean we should opt for a system in which each congregation is independent. Because we all may err, we need help from each other – *under* the Word of God, not over it. See Gal. 1:8.

Second Point: Paul’s Correction

- **Public Correction:** Paul opposed Peter to his face (v. 11), in the presence of all (v. 14). He had led others astray publicly, therefore a public correction was needed. Not every situation is covered by “Mt. 18” – which is about dealing with a private sin observed by a brother. However, it is often good to warn a brother that you are going to have to oppose him publicly if he doesn’t correct himself in public.
- **Paul’s Argument:** The nature of Paul’s public correction of Peter was as follows. He pointed out the inconsistency in Peter’s life – that he himself no longer kept all the ceremonial laws; how could he then insist that the Gentiles should keep them? He also pointed out the theological problems behind Peter’s behavior. Peter was acting as if OT ceremonial law were more important than unity in Christ- as if Jew and Gentile were not one in Christ; and as if sinners could be saved by keeping these laws, rather than being justified by Christ alone, through faith alone.
- **Correcting Error Today:** When serious errors come up today, they may be publicly corrected in different ways, with a humble spirit, using lawful channels, with respect for lawful authority – by writing articles, speaking at meetings, or sending complaints or appeals etc to the broader assemblies of the church.

Conclusion: