

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-TWO)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL” (PART 8)

GALATIANS 2:14

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

14 But when I saw that they were not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, “If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

In our previous Lesson we considered verses 11-13 of Galatians chapter 2. In these verses, the Apostle Paul outlines for his readers the circumstances which led to the crisis in Antioch.

The incident recorded in Galatians 2:11-21, involved two Apostles, Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, and Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. The incident also involved a misrepresentation of the Gospel which led to an unnecessary and unfortunate separation of Jews from Gentiles, as well as a public rebuke. It is clear that the confrontation that occurred between Peter and Paul dealt with one basic issue. Unfortunately, only Paul seemed to realize what the issue was and how serious it was.

When Peter separated himself from the Gentile believers, he was, in effect, denying the heart and power of the Gospel. By refusing to eat with the Gentile converts, Peter was essentially saying that the justification that God had granted to them as a result of their faith in Jesus Christ, was of no effect, for until they adopted the practices of the Jewish Law, they were not fully members of the Body of Christ. It must

have disturbed Paul greatly when he realized that Peter, one of the original Apostles, failed to grasp the full significance of the Gospel.

Peter had come to visit the church in Antioch and at first had gladly engaged with the Gentile believers, participating fully in the life of the Body of Christ. But when a contingency of Jews arrived from Jerusalem, Peter withdrew from the Gentile believers. Many of the Jews in the region, including Barnabas, followed Peter's example. This action divided the church into two camps. By their withdrawal from table-fellowship with the Gentiles, the Jewish believers were, in effect, implying that there were two bodies of Christ, one Jewish and one Gentile. And that was heresy.

There is no doubt that Peter's action and that of the Jewish minority had a serious negative impact on the Gentile believers in Antioch. It implied that Gentile believers were second-class citizens in God's kingdom. But Paul saw more than the momentary hurt, and more than the hypocrisy. Paul saw the deadly intrusion of works into the Gospel message. He realized that this was no small matter but that the Gospel message was in jeopardy! And so he reacted. He confronted Peter publicly, and charged him with hypocrisy. In verses **14-21**, Paul explains the justification for his rebuke of Peter.

In verse **14** he writes, *“But when I saw that they were not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, ‘If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”*

Paul understood clearly that Peter, by his withdrawal from the Gentile believers in Antioch, had contradicted and thus compromised the truth of the Gospel. That was the basic issue. The Gospel proclaimed that salvation for both Jews and Gentiles was by way of the Cross of Christ and union with Him. But Peter's separation from fellowship with the Gentile believers implied that salvation for Gentiles required strict adherence to the law and incorporation into the Jewish nation. It is likely that Peter would have denied that he meant to communicate this

requirement to the Gentile believers. But how else could his action be interpreted?

The Gentile believers could not help but conclude from Peter's withdrawal that he, the one regarded as the preeminent Apostle, was of the opinion that their standing before God was not as secure as his own, and that if they wanted to enjoy fellowship with himself and other Jewish believers, they would have to become Jews. Their experience of salvation would be incomplete until they became Jews and observed the Jewish law.

The Gentile believers would have seen these implications of Peter's action even if he himself did not. Although Peter did not say so, his behaviour said quite plainly that the observance of the Law must be added to faith in Christ if sinners are to be saved. From Peter's example the Gentiles could not help but draw the conclusion that the Law was necessary for salvation. Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish defectors were, by their actions, denying the truth that on the basis of Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, and that only, both Jews and Gentiles who believe are accepted equally by God.

Because Paul had a very clear sense of what the Gospel meant, he confronted Peter, not about mere technical points of doctrine, but about something Paul saw as fundamental to the Gospel. Paul feared that Peter's decision not to eat with the Gentiles threatened the truth of the Gospel and would fracture the church. While the Gospel message is a message about the salvation of individuals, it is also a message of unity, bringing together in one all people who call on the name of Jesus.

Paul says that Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers were "*not behaving consistently with the truth of the gospel.*" The Greek word translated "*consistently,*" is **orthopodeó:** (**or-thop-od-eh'-o**), which literally means, "to walk with straight feet," thus "to walk a straight course." It speaks of straightforward, unwavering, sincere conduct in contrast to a crooked, wavering, and more or less insincere course, such as Peter and the other Jews were guilty of. We could say that they were

not walking “orthopedically,” that is, in a straight path. The idea is that Peter did not pursue a straight course in relation to the truth of the Gospel. He did not deal honestly and consistently with it. His was an attitude that led him to compromise its sacred truth, to twist it, to misrepresent it, to deal crookedly with it. What an indictment of Peter!

Brothers and sisters, while compromise is an important element in getting along with others, we should **never** compromise the truth of God’s Word. If we feel we have to compromise our doctrinal beliefs to match those of influential persons in our life, we are on shaky ground.

Because of the gravity of the situation, Paul had to confront Peter publicly. He spoke to him, “*in front of them all.*” It is apparent that Paul’s rebuke of Peter was not given before the officers of the church only, or before a specially convened and restricted number of people, but before all the members of the Antioch church, both Jew and Gentile, who were present.

Paul made no attempt to arrange for a private discussion from which the public was excluded. The **consultation** in Jerusalem had been private according to **Galatians 2:2**, but the **confrontation** in Antioch had to be public. Peter’s withdrawal from the Gentile believers had caused a public scandal and so he had to be opposed in public too.

In commenting on the situation **Spurgeon** wrote the following:

“It must have been very painful to Paul’s feelings to come into conflict with Peter, whom he greatly esteemed; but yet, for the truth’s sake, he knew no persons, and he had to withstand even a beloved brother when he saw that he was likely to pervert the simplicity of the gospel, and rob the Gentiles of their Christian liberty. For this, we ought to be very grateful to our gracious God who raised up this brave champion, this beloved apostle of the Gentiles.”

John MacArthur has an interesting comment regarding Paul’s public rebuke of Peter. He says,

"**1 Timothy 5:1** says, *'Rebuke not an elder...but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers.'* In other words, be careful how you talk about elders. You say, 'What if they deserve it?' Okay, go to **1 Timothy 5:19**. *'Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses...'* In other words, be sure that it's confirmed. Why? Because men who are in positions of spiritual leadership are targets for criticism, and much of it unfounded, and it should be substantiated before it's made an issue. But notice the next verse. **1 Timothy 5:20**, when you do find out that it is true what that elder is accused of, *'them that sin rebuke before all that others also may fear.'* In other words, you don't try to hide the rebuke of a person in a position of leadership, you make it just as public as was the display of his sin, in order that people might know that you truly believe what you say you believe...Paul set down a tremendous pattern in the church, and that is, 'I don't care who you are, when you're out of line and your out-of-line activity is public, it's going to get rebuked publicly, that others may know the church doesn't tolerate that.'"

I certainly do not believe that it would have been easy for Paul to confront Peter publicly. He may have been tempted to call Peter to a corner for some private correction. But Paul knew the cost of avoiding public confrontation was potential compromise of the integrity of the Gospel. A church that does not discipline sinning leaders publicly will eventually lose its credibility, because it does not take its own doctrines seriously. There is no question whatsoever of the preciousness of Peter and his ministry, but the truth is more precious than any leader of the church, including Peter!

Paul's rebuke must have stung Peter: *"If you, although you are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you try to force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"*

The word “*if*” at the beginning of Paul’s statement is a fulfilled condition and could be translated, “since you are a Jew.” Paul says to Peter, “Since you, a born and bred Jew, have discarded Jewish customs and are living like a Gentile, how unreasonable it is of you to impose Jewish customs on the Gentiles and force them to live like Jews!”

It is important for us to understand that in this verse, the word “*live*,” does not refer to **inward** morality, but to the shaping of one’s life with reference to the **external** social observances of Christian fellowship, such as Levitical restrictions on eating. It describes a mental attitude or habit which had in times past demonstrated itself in outward actions, and which was still in force, but which was being hypocritically covered up by Peter’s action of withdrawing from fellowship with the Gentiles. It shows that Peter had not abandoned it in principle, but had changed his customary external behavior because he was afraid of those Jews who had recently come from Jerusalem.

Paul, in confronting Peter, directly addresses his inconsistency in withdrawing from the Gentiles, for by so doing Peter was saying indirectly that they Gentiles had to obey the Levitical legislation regarding foods in order to be considered acceptable to the Jews and more importantly to God. Peter by his action left the Gentile believers with only one of two choices in the situation, either to refuse to obey the law in this respect and thus cause a split in the Christian Church, or to preserve harmony by coming under the law, which would be to give credence to another gospel. They would now feel like they must live like Jews in order to be sure of both their justification and sanctification. Such a works based, performance driven, legalistic mindset was and is still, the absolute antithesis of the truth of the Gospel.

Peter did all this with a full understanding of the vision that God had given him, which clearly taught him that the Levitical legislation for the Jew was now a thing of the past (**Acts 10:28**), and that the line of separation had been broken down between Jew and Gentile at the Cross.

Kenneth Wuest explains that,

"Peter's action of refusing to eat with the Gentiles, did not merely have the effect of maintaining the validity of the law for Jewish Christians, but it involved the forcing of that law upon the Gentile Christians, that, or creating a wide-open division in the Church. This latter was what concerned the apostle Paul. He deemed it of utmost importance to maintain the unity of the Christian Church as against any division into Jewish and Gentile groups. At the Jerusalem council he had agreed to a territorial division of the missionary field into Gentile and Jewish divisions, but to create a division between Jew and Gentile in a Gentile community and church, was out of the question and was something not to be permitted."

Brothers and sisters, if we feel that Paul was unnecessarily harsh for rebuking Peter in public, we need to recall that the freedom of all Gentile Christians and the whole future of the Gentile mission was at stake. In fact, it was the Gospel itself that was on trial! For if the separation of Peter, Barnabas and the other Jews had gone unchallenged, then the Gospel truth that sinners are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone would have been seriously compromised. From a human perspective, such a precedent would have spelled the end of the Gentile church. Furthermore, if the division along racial lines had been allowed, the church would never have been able to exhibit a new humanity unified by faith in Christ, which transcends the racial and social divisions in the world. The truth of the gospel would be negated by such division.

Brothers and sisters, **Spurgeon** spoke truly when he said,

"The idea of salvation by the merit of our own works is exceedingly insinuating. It does not matter how often it is refuted; it asserts itself again and again. And when it gains the least foothold, it soon makes great advances...Hence, when Peter sided with the Judaizing party and seemed to favor those who demanded that the Gentiles should be circumcised, our brave apostle withstood him to his face. He fought

always for salvation by grace through faith and contended strenuously against all thought of righteousness by obedience to the precepts of the ceremonial or the moral law. No one could be more explicit than he was upon the doctrine that we are not justified or saved by works in any degree, but solely by the grace of God."

Brothers and sisters, the situation that occasioned Paul's rebuke of Peter in Antioch was not a matter of personality or party, it was a question of "*the truth of the Gospel.*" Thank God Paul was prepared to fight for it!