

A DEFENCE OF THE AUTHENTIC GOSPEL: A STUDY OF GALATIANS

(LESSON TWENTY-ONE)

“CONTENDING FOR THE GOSPEL” (PART 7)

GALATIANS 2:11-13

(NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he had clearly done wrong.

12 Until certain people came from James, he had been eating with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he stopped doing this and separated himself because he was afraid of those who were pro-circumcision.

13 And the rest of the Jews also joined with him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray with them by their hypocrisy.

In verses **11-21** of **Galatians** chapter **2**, the Apostle Paul continues his defense of his apostolic ministry and message by informing his readers, not only of his independence of the Jerusalem Apostles, but also of his exercise of authority, on a particular occasion, over Peter, whom most believers in the early church considered to be the preeminent Apostle. So independent was Paul that he could oppose even the chief of the original Apostles himself!

The noted Greek New Testament scholar of the mid-twentieth century, **Kenneth Wuest**, provides us with excellent background information on **Galatians 2:11-21**:

“In this verse Paul opens the question as to whether the **Jew** himself is still bound by the Mosaic law. In the Jerusalem council, the question

was as to whether the rite of circumcision should be required of the **Gentiles**. The particular Mosaic legislation to which Paul had reference here and which he presented as a test case before the Galatians, had to do with the Levitical legislation regarding the eating of certain foods.

While one purpose of the giving of this legislation permitting the eating of certain foods and the prohibition regarding other foods, was a dietary one to promote the physical well-being of the Jews, yet another was that of keeping the Jews a separate people from the Gentiles, thus preserving clean the channel which God was using to bring salvation to the earth. The forbidden foods were found on the tables of the Gentiles. Hence a Jew could never accept a dinner invitation of a Gentile. This was one of the factors which kept the nation Israel apart from the Gentile world.

God had made clear to Peter that this legislation was set aside at the Cross, by the vision He gave him while he was on the housetop of Simon the tanner (**Acts 10:9-16**), with the result that Peter was willing to go to the home of Cornelius (**Acts 10:24-48**). This occurred before the incident to which Paul refers in these verses.

When Peter came to Antioch, he saw Jews and Gentiles eating together and joined their fellowship. When certain Jews from the Jerusalem church came as representatives of James, and saw Peter eating with the Gentiles, they contended that he was going against Levitical legislation. They brought pressure to bear upon Peter, and he discontinued his practice of eating with the Gentiles. This caused the Jews in the church at Antioch to cease eating with the Gentiles, and brought about a division in the church. Paul, in resisting Peter, thus showed that he not only refused to take orders from the Jerusalem apostles, but on the other hand felt that his apostolic position gave him the right to stand openly against them in matters of wrong conduct. In

no way could he have better demonstrated his independence as an apostle.”

What was it that motivated Paul to report his conflict with Peter to the believers in Galatia? The word “*But*” in verse **11** is the key to answering that question. In the previous section, Paul described how the leaders of the Jerusalem church, including Peter, had agreed with him and Barnabas regarding the test case of Titus. None of them required Titus, a Gentile convert to Christianity, to be circumcised, even though the Judaizers pressured them to do so. The leaders understood that the Law contributed nothing to either a person’s salvation, or sanctification. Peter and Paul saw eye to eye on that issue. **But** when Peter arrived in Antioch some time later, his actions openly contradicted his doctrine!

The contrast between verses **9-10** and verse **11** is dramatic:

9 and when James, Cephas, and John, who had a reputation as pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we would go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

10 They requested only that we remember the poor, the very thing I also was eager to do.

11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he had clearly done wrong.

(New English Translation)

In verses **9** and **10**, Paul speaks about the unity that himself and Barnabas enjoyed with the Jerusalem Apostles, and their extension of the “*right hand of fellowship*” to them both, as their official endorsement of their ministry and message. But now, in verse **11**, Peter does an “about-face” in Antioch which causes Paul to stand against him face-to-face!

As one commentator observes,

"We just left them in Jerusalem unified and now in Antioch there is conflict. Paul goes to Jerusalem and in their **creed** they are unified. Peter goes to Antioch and in their **conduct** they are divided...In Jerusalem Paul looked on Peter as his equal in rank and sphere of work, but in Antioch he was his superior in character and courage."

The time of Peter's trip to Antioch is not known. There is no reference to it in the Book of **Acts**, but perhaps the visit occurred soon after Paul, Barnabas, and Titus returned to Antioch from Jerusalem.

Paul says that in Antioch he, "*opposed [Peter] to his face, because he had clearly done wrong.*" The word "*opposed*" is the translation of a Greek word which means, "to set against; to set oneself against, to withstand, resist, oppose." The word gives us a vivid picture of this apostolic confrontation for it was used in secular Greek to describe an army in battle array against the enemy, thus depicting a face to face confrontation. The word usually implies that the initial attack came from the other side. Thus in Paul's mind, it was Peter, who was the aggressor. Peter was the one who "*had clearly done wrong.*"

The **English Standard Version** translates the phrase, "*had clearly done wrong,*" as "*stood condemned.*" The Greek word literally means "to know against." The idea is of finding someone guilty on the basis of direct, personal acquaintance, or of specifically condemning someone by having a first-hand awareness of the facts.

Of course this had nothing to do with the security of Peter's position in Christ. Peter was not condemned in the sense of **losing his salvation** but in the sense of **being guilty of sin** by taking a position he knew to be wrong. He was condemned by his own conscience as a result of his contradictory actions. He also stood condemned in the eyes of the Gentile believers in Antioch, who were well-grounded in the Gospel of grace, and would therefore have been perplexed and deeply grieved by his cold-shouldering of them, especially in light of his reputation as the

preeminent Apostle. The inconsistency of Peter's conduct would have been evident not only to himself, but to everybody else.

In verse **12** Paul explains the circumstances that led to his rebuke of Peter and why he was to be blamed. He writes, *“Until certain people came from James, he had been eating with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he stopped doing this and separated himself because he was afraid of those who were pro-circumcision.”*

The **Bible Knowledge Commentary** provides the following exposition of this verse:

“On arrival at Antioch, Peter found Jewish and Gentile Christians fellowshiping together at mealtimes without regard to Jewish dietary laws. Because of the vision Peter had received at the house of Simon the tanner (**Acts 10:9-15, 28**), he felt free to eat with the Gentiles, and did so on a regular basis. While it lasted, this was a beautiful demonstration of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ. But a breach occurred when some arrived from Jerusalem who were shocked at Peter's conduct. These emissaries came from James and belonged to the circumcision party, but it is doubtful that they had James' endorsement. Nonetheless Peter was influenced by their presence and slowly but surely began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles. The verb tenses indicate a gradual withdrawal, perhaps from one joint meal a day, and then two; or it may be that he began a meal with Gentiles but finished it with only Jewish Christians. By such actions Peter in effect was teaching that there were two bodies of Christ, Jewish and Gentile. And that was heresy. But why did Peter create this breach? Not because of any change in theology, but simply out of fear. Once, after preaching to Gentile Cornelius, Peter courageously defended himself before the Jerusalem leaders (**Acts 11:1-18**); but this time he capitulated to some Jewish friends.”

Paul informs his readers that, “*Until certain people came from James, [Peter] had been eating with the Gentiles.* The Greek word translated “*eating with*” is **sunesthió: (soon-es-thee’-o)**, which literally means “to eat with someone, to take food together with.” The word speaks of an intimate association, indicating that Peter’s interaction with these Gentile believers in Antioch was one of close communion and genuine fellowship with persons whom he regarded as fellow believers in Christ. The word is in the **imperfect tense** implying that it was Peter’s regular practice to commune with them. It was a wonderful relationship that powerfully demonstrated the unifying effect of the Gospel on both Jewish and Gentile believers. But Peter’s subsequent actions began to call into question the truth of the unity that all believers have in Christ.

When the brethren from Jerusalem came to Antioch, Peter stopped eating and fellowshiping with the Gentile believers and separated himself from them. When a Jew refused to eat with a Gentile, he did this in obedience to Jewish rituals. Peter had already learned that obedience to these rituals was not essential for salvation or sanctification, for either Jews or Gentiles. He had stopped keeping these Jewish rituals for himself, but now he acted as if he did keep them, so as to accommodate the legalism of those who came from Jerusalem. Peter no longer kept a strict observance of the Law of Moses for himself, but by his actions, he implied that Gentiles believers must keep the Law-when he himself did not. This was hypocrisy and a repudiation of the truth of the Gospel!

Why did Peter stop eating and fellowshiping with the Gentile believers and separate himself from them? Paul says he did so “*because he was afraid of those who were pro-circumcision.*” Peter’s **freedom** was threatened by Peter’s **fear**. He had not been afraid to obey the Holy Spirit when He sent him to the house of Cornelius, nor was he afraid to give his testimony at the Jerusalem Conference. But now, with the arrival of some legalistic men from Jerusalem he lost his courage.

In **Proverbs 29:25** we read, “*The fear of people becomes a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD will be set on high*” (**New English**

Translation). In a footnote, the **New English Translation** explains that the word “*Snare*” is an implied comparison. Fearing people is like being in a trap-there is no freedom of movement or sense of security.

Don Anderson writes,

“When we get our eyes off the Lord Jesus and our one desire to please Him, and we get those eyes on people around us and our desire is to please them, we then begin to fail in making the normal progress toward spiritual growth that should be ours.”

The Anglican theologian **John Stott** comments that Peter’s “withdrawal from table-fellowship with Gentile believers was not prompted by any theological principle, but by craven fear of a small pressure group...He still believed the gospel, but he failed to practise it.”

Peter pretended that his actions were motivated by faithfulness, when they were really motivated by fear.

Brothers and sisters, before we denounce Peter, let us examine our own lives to see how many Bible doctrines we, who have the benefit of the full canon of Scripture, are actually obeying. An examination of church history will reveal that even with a complete Bible, believers through the years have been either slow, reluctant or fearful to believe and practice the truths of the Christian faith.

David Guzik makes the following insightful comments:

“It is easy to criticize Peter; but every person knows what it means to do something that you know is wrong. Everyone knows what it feels like to go against what you know very well is right. Everyone knows what it feels like when social pressure pushes you towards compromise in some way...We see that the flesh was still present in Peter. Salvation and the filling of the Holy Spirit did not make Peter perfect; the old Peter was still there, just seen less often. We might be surprised that Peter

compromised even though he knew better; but we are only surprised if we don't believe what God says about the weakness and corruption of our flesh. Paul himself knew this struggle, as he described it in **Romans 7:18**: *'For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.'*"

In verse **13** Paul describes the damaging consequence of Peter's inconsistent, hypocritical conduct. *"And the rest of the Jews also joined with him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray with them by their hypocrisy."*

The effect of Peter's withdrawal was that the other Jewish members of the congregation, and even Barnabas, likewise began to dissociate themselves from the Gentile members. The Jewish Christians in Antioch, in a similar manner as Peter, the Apostle to the Jews, refused to eat anymore with their Gentile brothers and sisters. The church was split wide open on the issue. The love-feast, that bond of fellowship expressive of Christian love amongst believers in Christ, was divided into two groups. The friendly groups of Jews and Gentiles in the fellowship of the homes were discontinued.

Paul says that the other Jewish believers joined Peter in his hypocrisy. The word "*hypocrisy*" is the translation of a Greek word which literally means, "to answer from under," as an actor who speaks from behind a mask. The actor hid his or her true self behind the role he or she was playing. The word speaks of the act of concealing one's real character under the guise of conduct implying something different. It usually referred to the act of concealing wrong feelings or character under the pretense of better ones.

Peter and the other Jewish believers' actions of withdrawing from the Gentile believers in Antioch concealed their genuine belief that an individual is saved only by grace through faith, without the addition of works of any kind and that such an individual is preserved in his or her

relationship with God in the same way. Their withdrawal from the Gentile believers was a “work of the Law” in the sense that they were adding to the Gospel of grace. Paul saw this for exactly what it was—a dangerous detour from the truth of the Gospel. Paul charged them with pretending that their change of attitude toward the Gentiles was the expression of loyalty to the Law of Moses, whereas it was really the outcome of their fear of the Judaizers.

By characterizing their actions as hypocrisy, Paul implied that there had been no real change of conviction on their part but only a change of conduct that misrepresented their true convictions.

Regarding the hypocrisy of Barnabas, **Kenneth Wuest** writes the following:

“It was bad enough for Paul, the apostle to the *Gentiles* and the champion of *Gentile* liberty from the law, to have Peter act as he did. But the hypocrisy of Barnabas was the cruel blow. With the single exception of Paul, Barnabas had been the most effective minister of the gospel in the conversion of the *Gentiles*. He had been deputed with Paul by the Antioch church to the council at Jerusalem as its representative. He had come back with the news that the position held by Paul and himself with regard to *Gentile* freedom from circumcision had been sustained by the Jerusalem apostles. Now, his withdrawal from social fellowship with the *Gentiles*, came with the force of a betrayal to Paul and the church at Antioch. The defection of Barnabas was of a far more serious nature with regard to *Gentile* freedom than the vacillation of Peter. Barnabas was Paul's chief colleague in the evangelization of the *Gentiles*, and now to have him play the hypocrite and deserter, was a bitter blow to the great apostle. This may well have prepared the way for the dissension between them which shortly afterwards led to their separation (**Acts 15:39**). Barnabas, the foremost champion of *Gentile* liberty next to Paul, had become a turncoat.”

In an earlier Lesson we noted that when the Gospel of the grace of God came to the Gentiles in Antioch, it was Barnabas who was sent by the leaders of the Jerusalem church to encourage them in their faith. So Barnabas had been associated with the Gentile believers from the earliest days. It was Barnabas who had gone to Tarsus to enlist Paul to help with the work in Antioch, and the two of them had worked together, not only in teaching, but also in helping the poor. He had accompanied Paul on the first missionary trip and had witnessed God's blessings on the Gospel that they preached among the Gentiles.

How could such a one as Barnabas deny the truth of the Gospel now? Didn't he of all people know that Gentile believers were to be fully accepted? Yes, he did. But the emotions stirred up in the crisis swept him along with Peter and the other Jewish Christians to act contrary to his convictions. And so he, along with the rest of the Jewish believers was guilty of behaviour inconsistent with his basic beliefs.

As one commentator states, "Like falling dominoes the defection of Peter brought the defection of the other Jews and finally even Barnabas."

Lord willing, in our next Lesson, we will consider the response of Paul to this crisis.