

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	15		Gary L.W. Johnson
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PAUL'S CONFRONTATION WITH PETER: TRUTH VS. CONSEQUENCES

The fear of being labeled *judgmental* is a phobia that has taken on epidemic proportions within the ranks of Evangelicalism. Matthew 7:1: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" has become, as D. A. Carson has noted, "the most quoted verse in the Bible."¹ If we disagree with another person's beliefs and values, we should never come out and say so. The *Christian* thing to do, we are told, is simply suspend judgment in order not to appear harsh and unloving. But is that the loving thing to do? We are instructed to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). Isaiah 5:20 warns: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil." Refusing to make judgments about what is good and true as opposed to what is evil and false is in itself an evil thing. Of course, a number of things can happen when we do stand up and make our judgments known. You could offend someone; you could split the church. So we are warned by many today that you better consider the consequences before you speak. They are right; some bad things *could* happen as a result of speaking out. But a failure to speak out when the occasion demands it would certainly be worse. The Apostle Paul recognized this. The situation he faced was indeed delicate and potentially explosive. Peter, the chief of the original 12 apostles, hand-picked by the Lord Jesus Himself, could prove to be a formidable foe. Paul's actions could polarize the church. What was he to do?

- I. **NO ADDITION TO PAUL'S GOSPEL.** Paul has made abundantly clear that his apostleship was not second-class, and that he was in no way subservient to the original apostles; therefore his gospel is the true gospel.
 - A. ***The Negative.*** Paul has explained his gospel to them and they *added nothing to my message*. The word translated *added* in Galatians 2:6 is a form of the same word in the Greek text (PROSANATITHĒMI) as the word translated *set before* (ANATITHĒMI) in Galatians 2:2. What Paul is saying is this: "I set before them my gospel, and they did not set before me any additions."²
 - B. ***The Positive.*** Not only did the apostles not add anything to Paul's gospel (i.e. circumcision, etc.), they did just the *opposite* of that which the Judaizers were alleging. They recognized that Paul was indeed commissioned by the Lord Jesus and as such, there could be no questioning his gospel. "It speaks highly of the spiritual perception of Peter and his fellow apostles that they at once recognized Paul's calling."³ There was only one gospel given by the one true and living God to Peter and to Paul. Note that the "right hand of fellowship" is linked directly to the agreement over the gospel. They recognized what may be referred to as a *division of labor*, not in the sense that Paul was not to preach to Jews and Peter was to restrict his preaching to Jews – and it certainly does not mean that Peter's gospel was inappropriate outside a Jewish context – it means that Paul had been sent predominantly to the Gentiles and the original apostles to the Jews. The expression "only that we should remember the poor" in verse 10 is a

reference to the poor of the Jerusalem church. This was something Paul took very seriously, as texts like Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1ff; 2 Corinthians 8:1ff and 9:1ff make clear.

II. **THE CONTROVERSY IN ANTIOCH.** The scene of the conflict is in Antioch, the chief city of Syria. The Apostle Peter visited the church there, and no problems arose until a delegation from Jerusalem appeared, and then suddenly Peter began to behave differently.

- A. ***Peter's Actions*** (Galatians 2:12-13). Peter had been eating⁴ with the Gentile Christians along with Jewish believers like Barnabas. But after the arrival of the Jerusalem delegation, Peter *drew back* and *separated* himself. “The first word suggests an unobtrusive retreat. The second word indicates the result.”⁵ Why did he do this? Poor Peter proves the truth of Proverbs 29:25: “The *fear* of man bringeth a snare.” Peter was *afraid* of what the Jerusalem group would say.
- B. ***The Actions of Others.*** Peter's behavior is described by Paul with the word *hypocrisy*, which is derived from the Greek word HUPOKRISEI, which originally referred to an actor wearing a mask. Peter's actions had an adverse effect on the other Jewish Christians, including Barnabas. S. Lewis Johnson has made a telling observation: “Barnabas was a man with a very loving nature (cf. Acts 4:36-37; 11:22-26, etc.), a man of consolation. This incident shows the weakness of a love that is not strengthened by the steel of theological firmness. Love may, for fear of grieving fellow believers, melt into compromise and evasive straddling of the fence. Love, if it is not love in the truth, often becomes a cop-out. I wonder if this was not one of the elements that led to the breach between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark later on (cf. Acts 15:39)?”⁶
- C. ***Paul's Actions*** (Galatians 2:11). He “opposed him to his face” – literally this means *I stood against him face to face*. Why was Paul doing this? By Peter's withdrawing from the Gentile Christians, he was in effect joining the Judaizers in communicating to the Gentiles that they were still outsiders because they were not circumcised. In other words, it was a denial of Paul's gospel that we are justified by faith alone in the finished work of Christ. As such, Peter *stood condemned*. (The verb used is KATAGINŌSKŌ, to find fault with.) He was condemned by his own actions. He had gone against his own conscience and acted contrary to what God had revealed to him (cf. Acts 10:9-11:18).

CONCLUSION: Was Paul unloving in what he did? After all, he not only rebuked the most prominent of the 12 apostles, he did it *in front of them all* (Galatians 2:14). Some would say that this only demonstrates that Paul was insensitive and possessed by a critical spirit. What would have been the effect if Paul had not taken the stand he did? Christianity would have simply become a Jewish sect along with the Essenes, the Ebionites and other long since forgotten groups. Paul's actions were not that of a temperamental theologian who loved to split doctrinal hairs. Paul did not fear the possible negative fallout from his actions, and that is the difference between Paul and so many who are ostensibly evangelicals today. They are more concerned with the consequences; Paul was concerned with *the truth of the gospel*. Philip Ryken nicely sums up the big issue here: “When Paul squared off against Peter in Antioch, he was dealing with something more than a social problem. He was not concerned simply about cliques that were forming in the church, or about who was washing his hands before dinner. He was not even concerned about the ugly sin of racism exclusively, although the Judaizers were using their theology to justify their prejudice. Paul understood that his skirmish with Peter was nothing less than a battle for the gospel of free grace. On the surface, the issue was unity between Jews and Gentiles at the table. But beneath the surface lurked the deeper issue of what God requires for salvation. This is one of the places where the New Perspective on Paul and the law falls short in its understanding of New Testament theology. The New Perspective views the Jewish-

Gentile conflict primarily in terms of cultural boundaries. But for Paul the main issue was soteriological, not cultural. Thus the letter to the Galatians brings us back, yet again, to the good news about Jesus Christ. The gospel proclaims that through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave, Jesus has done everything God requires for our salvation. There is nothing else we need to do to gain forgiveness for sins, enjoy fellowship with God, or have the hope of eternal life except trust in Christ alone. This is the gospel of free grace, and anyone who believes it is a Christian. After the gospel tells us how to get right with God – or rather, after it tells us what God has done to make us right with him through the cross and the empty tomb – it proceeds to tell us how to live with one another. We must have fellowship with anyone and everyone who is in fellowship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. If we refuse to have fellowship with them, then our actions deny the gospel. We are making a distinction that God himself does not make. We are adding some qualification to the only thing God requires, which is faith in Jesus Christ. The problem with the “James gang” is that they were recovering Pharisees. They were concerned about outward appearances. They kept a list of things people had to do to be good Christians. When Gentile converts didn’t do some of these things – get circumcised, for example – they were treated as second-class Christians. Such Pharisaism runs deep in human nature. People always want to add something they do to what God has done, and they want to look down on people who haven’t done it, whatever “it” is. When Paul stood up to confront Peter, he spoke as one recovering Pharisee to another. First he appealed to what they shared in common: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (Gal. 2:15). Peter and Paul had the same birthright. They were natural-born Jews rather than pagans. They had always been on the inside with God’s people, not outside in the world.”⁷ We too are called upon not only to *believe* the gospel and to strive to *preserve* the gospel, we also must *apply* the gospel. This is where Peter compromised the truth of the gospel. May God help us not to do the same.

ENDNOTES

¹This verse, as Carson comments, “cannot here refer to the law courts any more than 5:33-37 forbids judicial oaths. Still less does this verse forbid all judging of any kind, for the moral distinctions drawn in the Sermon on the Mount require that decisive judgments be made. Jesus himself goes on to speak of some people as dogs and pigs (v. 6) and to warn against false prophets (vv. 15-20). Elsewhere he demands that people ‘make a right judgment’ (John 7:24; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5; Galatians 1:8-9; Philippians 3:2; 1 John 4:1). All this presupposes that some kinds of ‘judging’ are not only legitimate but mandated.” *Matthew: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Zondervan, 1984), p. 183.

²This has the idea of “confer” as in 1:16. The underlying thought is that the apostles did not, in conference with Paul, require him to change or modify his gospel. Cf. the discussions by J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (MacMillan, 1869); E. D. Burton, *A Critical & Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (T & T Clark, 1977).

³D. Guthrie, *Galatians: The New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1973), p. 81.

⁴It is very possible that this expression includes a reference to participation in the Lord’s Supper – cf. 1 Corinthians 11:20-22, 33f; cf. R. Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 106.

⁵H. N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Eerdmans, 1953), p. 96.

⁶S. L. Johnson, Jr., *Galatians: Believers Bible Bulletin* (Dallas: Believers Chapel, 1978), No. 5, p. 4.

⁷P. G. Ryken, *Galatians: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P & R, 2005) p. 59.