

## The Gospel in Crisis

Galatians 2:11-14

*11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13 And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"*

Many threats are poised against the gospel, but what happens when the danger arises from within the ranks of the church herself or worse from among her key leaders? More damage has been done to the gospel by those who are supposedly her friends that has ever been done by those who attack from the outside. When the gospel is in such peril how do we respond?

Paul, although noting his unity with the Jerusalem apostles and the unity of the gospel they preached, points to a time when Peter and Barnabas were led astray by the pressure and influence of the circumcision party. Peter had gone to Antioch and was communing with the Gentiles openly, sharing table fellowship without reservation. When members of the circumcision party came, however, Peter, the Jews, and even Barnabas began to withdraw from the Gentile believers and separate themselves. Apparently, this withdrawal did not occur immediately but happened over some course of time. Where Paul was during this process is not clear. Some have suggested that he may have been away only to return and find the current state of affairs. Whatever the case, Paul noted the hypocrisy and responded with an open, public rebuke of Peter.

The situation at Antioch was likely a well known incident that the Judaizers in Galatia were noting as another case against Paul's

gospel message. Whatever front they were putting forward in reality the apostles were divided over the status of the Gentile converts and Paul was not being completely honest. In answer to such an objection Paul notes the incident at Antioch thus highlighting the deceptiveness of the human heart and the failure of even the greatest of the pillars of the early church. Over against the Judaizers' claims Paul notes that Peter's actions were hypocrisy that lead the Jewish Christians at Antioch and even his trusted cohort, Barnabas, away from the truth of the gospel. The authority of the gospel rests not in the persons who preach, rather the authority of the preacher rests in the authority of the gospel. Even though Peter was a pillar apostle he was wrong!

At this time, Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire boasting more than 500,000 residents. It was a melting pot of cultures with a large Jewish community of more than 60,000. The Jews in Antioch had grown accustomed to life among Gentiles and enjoyed good relations with their neighbors making it an ideal home base for the mission to the Gentiles.<sup>1</sup> The hypocrisy of Peter was a major threat to the ongoing unity of the church and the future of the mission to the Gentiles. The hypocrisy is even more insidious when one considers that Peter was the first to bring the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 10. Cornelius, a centurion of Caesarea and a god-fearer, was told in a vision to send for Simon Peter from Joppa. Meanwhile, Peter, while praying, fell into a trance and say a vision of a large sheet full of all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air: "And there came a voice to him: 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean' And the voice came to him again a second time, 'What God has made clean, do not call common'" (Acts 10:13-15). When the men from Cornelius came Peter freely went with them and preached the gospel to the household of Cornelius. Peter himself said, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation

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<sup>1</sup>Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1990) 67-71..

anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). The Holy Spirit fell on them and Peter responded, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47). Later, when Peter returned to Jerusalem members of the circumcision party criticized him for going and eating with uncircumcised men (Acts 11:3). Peter reported the incident stating, “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11:17). Those who heard Peter’s report “fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:18).

What a tragedy for the gospel, then, when Peter himself, the defender of the faith, gave in to the pressures of the circumcision party. Over the years, rationales have been offered for Peter’s actions: he was merely trying to accommodate weaker brothers as Paul would (1 Cor. 8 & 9). But Peter cannot be defended, here. He abandoned the gospel and surrendered his own convictions on the freedom of the Gospel. Whatever the rationale may have been, Peter was clearly in the wrong. Timothy George notes, “The principle of accommodation cannot be stretched to include solidarity with a practice or belief that stands in contradiction to the gospel itself.”<sup>2</sup>

Some have also criticized Paul for attacking Peter so violently in public. Paul should have pulled Peter aside and reproved him quietly before addressing him publicly according to the pattern set forward by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20. But the gospel was at stake! Paul rebuked Peter in the open because the crime was committed in the open.

## IMPLICATIONS

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<sup>2</sup>Timothy George, *Galatians* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Hollman Publishers, 1994) 180.

1. Even good leaders fail. The security of the gospel is always at risk when carried by such weak vessels as men. Only through prayer and determined diligence can we protect the gospel from the attacks within and without. No matter the quality of the man who preaches we should pray for him without ceasing. Threats abound at every turn and the gospel must be defended and proclaimed. No flesh is fit for the task; we are dependent on the Holy Spirit to sanctify and to secure the gospel for our generation.

2. Everyone is accountable. Despite Peter’s position as a pillar apostle of the church, the founding pastor of the church at Jerusalem and the first missionary to the Gentiles he was not above reproof and correction. The Roman church is wrong to attribute so much weight and authority to Peter and his supposed successors, for the gospel stands above all men and no man stands above the gospel.

3. The principle of accommodation or contextualization cannot be used to undermine the gospel itself. Good intentions are not enough when it comes to missions. We may be tempted to water down the harsh truths of the gospel or to soften its exclusive claims for the sake of peaceful relations with those who are antagonistic to the gospel, but we cannot. We must maintain the gospel at all costs, for once we have lost the gospel we have lost the mission.

4. Discipline must be decisive and fit the situation. Matthew 18:15-20 cannot be appealed to in every matter of church discipline. For one, Matthew 18 deals with altercations between two brothers of a personal nature. Therefore, the attempt at resolution begins with a personal, private address. It cannot be applied to the case in Galatians 2:11-14 because it the offense is not against Paul and is was not done in private. Peter, the Jewish believers, and Barnabas were abandoning the gospel and distorting the truth. They key here is that they gospel is paramount and must be defended.