

“OUT OF STEP WITH THE TRUTH”

We are looking today at the last part of the biographical section of Galatians, the section in which Paul defends his authority as an apostle by demonstrating both his independence from the other apostles and his essential unity with them. In this text, Paul shows the Galatians that he even had the authority to rebuke a fellow apostle, the apostle Peter, in a situation in which Peter’s actions clearly contradicted the gospel.

Paul refers to Peter by his Aramaic name, ‘Cephas,’ which has the same meaning as the Greek name ‘Peter’: “rock.” He tells us about a time when Peter visited the church at Antioch while Paul was there as well. Antioch was a Gentile city in the region of Syria, far to the north of Judea. As far as we know, the church in Antioch was the first church in which Jewish and Gentile believers worshipped alongside of each other. It was also the first place in which Jesus’ followers were called ‘Christians,’ as well as the first church to send missionaries specifically to Gentile peoples.

In describing Peter’s time in Antioch, Paul says that Peter initially had no problem eating alongside of the Gentile believers in Antioch. This probably included sharing meals together and partaking of the Lord’s Supper together. Peter had not always been comfortable with eating with Gentiles. He was a Jew, and mealtimes were very sacred to the Jewish people because of all of the food regulations in the Mosaic law. To eat with a Gentile would place a Jew in danger of eating something that was forbidden or something that had not been properly prepared. However, in Acts 10 we read of how the Lord showed Peter, through a vision, that the dietary laws that restricted Jews from eating with

Gentiles were no longer in effect. The Lord said to Peter, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” [Acts 10:15] He showed Peter that the dietary laws, along with the other portions of the ceremonial law, had run their course and found their fulfillment in Christ. And because of this, the Lord commanded Peter to go and be the guest of a Gentile named Cornelius, that he might preach the gospel to him.

Peter’s actions in Antioch were initially consistent with what the Lord had showed him in that vision. Paul says that Peter “was eating with the Gentiles,” which conveys that it was his regular habit to do so. But all of this changed when “certain men came from James.” This is the same James who is mentioned in the previous sections of this letter, James the brother of Jesus, who had a prominent leadership role in the Jerusalem church. The fact that these men came from James does not necessarily mean that their teaching had his support. In fact, this would seem highly unlikely in light of what Paul reports about his visit to Jerusalem in 2:1-10, where the other apostles agreed that Titus, a Gentile Christian, did not need to be circumcised. Instead, this seems to be an instance like that which the apostles described in their letter to the Gentiles in Acts 15, which began with these words: “Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions...” The men from James in this passage probably came to Antioch claiming to have James’ support when that was not really the case at all.

These men were “the circumcision party.” They were teaching the same sort of thing that the Judaizers were teaching in Galatia: that Gentile converts to Christianity needed

to be circumcised in order to find full acceptance with God. And they were obviously not supportive of Peter's habit of having table fellowship with Gentile Christians.

Peter's response to the circumcision party was a response of fear. He pulled back from what had been his regular practice and stopped sharing meals, presumably including the Lord's Supper as well, with the Gentile believers of Antioch. And the thing that is so surprising about this is that Peter knew better. The Lord had made things abundantly clear to him when he gave him that vision those many years before. Peter knew that it was the Lord's will that the ethnic barriers that used to separate Jews from Gentiles would be done away with in Christ. Yet his fear caused him to change his course. He knew what God wanted him to do. He knew that it was right for him to share meals with Gentile Christians. But his fear of the trouble that could be stirred up by the circumcision party caused him to pull back. He feared man more than he feared God.

One of the reasons why Paul took Peter's action so seriously was because of the negative effect that it had upon the church. Peter set an example that was followed by others. The other Jewish believers in Antioch, including Barnabas, followed his lead. They all stopped sharing meals with their Gentile brethren. This reminds us of the serious responsibility that is given to those in positions of spiritual authority, including church officers, parents, and husbands. Those who serve in such positions are called to set a godly example for a reason. As this incident with Peter demonstrates, those who are under our authority will follow our lead, for good or for ill.

Paul says that he confronted Peter publicly, presumably in front of the entire church. Now, we cannot be certain that this public confrontation was not preceded by a private one, but the text gives the impression that the only confrontation that took place here was public. This might seem to be a violation of the procedure that Jesus outlines in Matthew 18:15, where we are told to first confront an offending brother in private, then with one or two others, and then in front of the entire church. It needs to be pointed out, though, that Jesus' teaching in that passage speaks about matters of personal offense, situations in which one believer sins against another. Peter's actions in Antioch do not seem to fall into that category. His sin was a betrayal of the gospel. It was an instance in which his conduct as a leader in the church was clearly out of step with the gospel that he had been called to preach. Paul concluded that, because the sin was public, the rebuke needed to be public as well. The truth of the gospel was at stake.

Some Reformed Protestants read this passage and see it as an important proof text in refuting the Roman Catholic doctrines of papal primacy and papal infallibility. Calvin refers to Paul's rebuke of Peter in this passage as "a thunderbolt which strikes the Papacy of Rome." The reason why Calvin says this is because the Roman Church believes that Peter was appointed by Jesus as head of the church and that the pope, the bishop of Rome, is Peter's successor and therefore has the same authority as Peter as head of the church.

It is important to point out that the Roman Catholic Church does not teach that the pope is incapable of making any mistakes or that he is without any sin. It does say,

however, that all of the pronouncements made by the pope when he speaks in his official position as head of the church on matters of faith or morals are without error. In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “Christ endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism [spiritual gift] of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.” [CCC 890]

Now, we have to admit that Peter does not seem to have made any kind of official statement on matters of faith and morals during this incident at Antioch. Therefore, this would not be an instance in which papal infallibility would be in effect. However, Paul’s description of how he dealt with Peter in this situation does not seem consistent with the Roman church’s claims about the pope’s position of spiritual authority in the church.

Listen to these words from the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “For the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.” [CCC, 882] Paul publicly rebuked the man whom Rome claims was the spiritual head of the church, the man whom they believe to have been the first pope. Paul opposed Peter to his face, in front of a congregation of ordinary believers. He even went so far as to tell the Galatians that Peter stood condemned, proven to be guilty of hypocrisy in this situation. This is not the kind of behavior that we would expect to see from Paul if he believed that Peter was invested with supreme authority in the church.

In this sense, I would say that this text does argue against Rome’s doctrine of papal primacy.

Of course, there are a number of other reasons why we reject Rome's teachings on the papacy. Peter is not the only person who is described in the New Testament as the foundation upon which Jesus will build his church. It is the apostolic testimony, not just Peter, that serves as the church's foundation. Also, Peter does not make any claim to primacy in his two New Testament letters. Nor did Peter function as the most influential leader at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Furthermore, there is no historical evidence that Peter ever served in the office of bishop of Rome. Also, the idea of papal primacy was something that emerged very slowly over a period of time, and it was never accepted by the whole church. And finally, the doctrine of papal infallibility only originated in the 12th – 14th centuries, and it was initially rejected as a novel doctrine by none other than the pope himself. [see Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, chapter 2] We are certainly right to reject the Roman church's doctrines of papal primacy and papal infallibility.

Peter was not the first pope. He was, however, a godly man. He was an apostle. He had shown great courage as an apostle, as we see in the early chapters of Acts. This is the same Peter who, when he was summoned by the Sanhedrin and commanded not to teach in Jesus' name responded with these words: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." [Acts 4:19-20] Yes, we know about Peter's threefold denial of Christ at the time of Jesus' arrest, but his visit to Antioch took place some fifteen years after that. By the time of this visit he was a respected leader in the New Testament

church. Yet he stumbled badly in Antioch. His actions were out of step with the gospel. And what was the cause of his fall? It was the same thing that caused him to fall at the time of Jesus' arrest. It was fear; fear of what other people would think of him; fear of what might happen because of what others thought of him. This is a temptation that you and I know all too well. Fear can prevent us from speaking up in situations when we have an opportunity to bear witness to Christ by standing up for his truth. Fear can cause us to blend in with the people around us. This passage reminds us that the Lord calls us to conduct our lives in a manner that is consistent with what we believe. This is not always easy, because there are times when gospel consistency sets us at odds with those around us. And we all want to be accepted by others. We want their approval. This is why it is our natural tendency to go with the flow. We have to build the habit of non-conformity into our lives. We have to learn to be indifferent to what others think of our loyalty to Jesus Christ and his gospel. And this takes courage. Courage is an essential Christian virtue. As C.S. Lewis noted, "you cannot practice any of the other virtues very long without bringing this one into play." [*Mere Christianity*, 79] We have to cultivate the discipline of being courageous for Christ and his gospel. If we don't, then we will inevitably make concession after concession in order to avoid upsetting the people around us, and we will quickly find ourselves to be out of step with the truth.

The fact that Peter stumbled so seriously at Antioch should cause us to be that much more aware of how easy it is for us to end up doing the very same thing. If the fear of man was such a snare for an apostle, it can easily be a snare for us. How can we avoid

this snare? We can gain insight into this by looking at another episode from Peter's life. In Acts 4, Luke describes the Sanhedrin's response to Peter and John's boldness in these words: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. *And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*" [Acts 4:13] Peter's boldness in that situation was attributed to the fact that he had been with Jesus. The way to avoid the snare of the fear of man is to cultivate a life of rich fellowship with Jesus Christ.

*Am I a soldier of the cross,
a foll'wer of the Lamb,
and shall I fear to own his cause,
or blush to speak his name?*