

CONFLICT IN THE CHURCH GALATIANS 2:11-14

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Hall was a fellow first year student in seminary. Like me he was a single student living in the dorms on campus. Occasionally we ate together, or were at least at the same table together, in the cafeteria. Hall's favorite subject was Greek grammar. I was able to keep up a conversation with him on the subject, but there were other things that I liked to talk about. Hall was persistent about keeping the focus on Greek grammar. He was also into himself. He was not someone with whom I was inclined to hang around with a lot.

Hall's best friend was a fellow graduate of North Carolina State, who was a year or two older and was married. He was also going to Dallas Seminary. Sometime during that first year of seminary Hall's friend had a confrontation with Hall. He told him that if he was ever going to make it in Christian ministry, he had to get out of himself and get to know other people and care about them. He had to also stop talking about Greek grammar.

That was a risky confrontation to have. But it worked. Hall changed. He started trying to get to know other people. He told me about the confrontation that his friend had with him, and I witnessed his change. He started going to the singles group of which I was a part. He turned out to be a nice guy. He still is interested in Greek grammar. For he is a New Testament professor. I suspect that he is a pretty good teacher. Occasionally I have referred to his published notes on books of the New Testament. This confrontation involving Hall had a great outcome.

Over the years I have occasionally heard people say that they attend a New Testament church. I suspect that at least some of the time they mean that their church tries to follow New Testament principles. Sometimes I wonder if they mean that their church is modeled on churches described in the New Testament. If that is the case, they need to realize that the early churches were a mixed bag. The Apostle Paul told the church at Corinth in Greece that they were a bunch of immature babies who needed to stop fighting with each other. We have been looking in recent Sundays at Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. He is telling those churches that they do not even have the gospel straight.

The Book of Acts in the New Testament describes the beginnings of the Christian church. It describes great and wonderful things that happen. There were miracles. There were churches which were started in the face of great opposition. Some early Christians were killed because of their faith. Christians also struggled to figure out how to do church. They did not have the New Testament yet. They didn't have Christian bookstores to go to in order to find the latest best seller about how to grow their church.

So there were struggles and conflicts. Sometimes there were necessary confrontations. We find that in the passage before us today.

(PROJECTOR ON--- GALATIA 2) We have seen that the Apostle Paul and his friend Barnabas undertook their first missionary journey from the city of Antioch in Syria. Several of the churches which they started were in the Roman province of Galatia. Soon after their return to Antioch they got word that Jews who claimed to be Christians showed up in the area and tried to convince the new Gentile Christians that they not only had to believe in Jesus but that they also had to follow the Old Testament law and Jewish traditions. In the process they undermined Paul's authority and his message.

Beginning in #1 v. 13 Paul describes his spiritual story. His main point is that he got both his message and his authority directly from Jesus. He had only very limited contact with the Jerusalem church leaders after that. We pick up his story in v. 11 of #2.

I.

In v. 11 of Galatians 2 we learn about THE SETTING FOR THE CONFLICT. (I. THE SETTING FOR THE CONFLICT) The Apostle Paul writes, **"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned."** Cephas, remember, is Peter's original Aramaic name.

The setting for this conflict and confrontation is Antioch. We have mentioned this city before as the base of operations for Paul and Barnabas in their missionary journey. I would like to take a little bit of time to look at Antioch in more detail.

(ANTIOCH MAP) Antioch was in the Roman province of Syria. It was twenty miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea on the Orontes River. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire at this time after Rome and Alexandria, Egypt. (ANTIOCH RECONSTRUCTION) It was named after a family of earlier Greek leaders who controlled this region. You might remember in our recent study of the Book of Daniel there was a story about Antiochus Epiphanes who defiled the temple in Jerusalem and tried to get rid of Judaism. He was fourth in a line of rulers named Antiochus. This Syrian city got its name from these characters. Estimates of the population of Antioch in the first century range from 250,000 to 500,000.

The story about how Christianity came to Antioch is described in Acts #11 vv. 19-26. (PROJECTOR OFF). If you would like to follow along, you will find it on p. 920 in the black Bibles. This is what the story says: **"Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen [Stephen was killed in Jerusalem because of his bold witness.] traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists [That means Gentiles.] also, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas [He was from Cyprus, and some of these church planters in Antioch were from Cyprus. So this was a**

good connection.] **to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25 So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul [His name was soon changed to Paul], 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”** So this was where the term “Christians” originated.

Jesus told His disciples to bring the message of the gospel to the whole world. The first Christians were slow to do that. They were content to hang around Jerusalem. So the Lord caused a persecution to happen which forced the first Christians to spread out. Some of these first Christians, who were all Jewish, went to Antioch, which had an estimated Jewish population of 20,000 to 65,000. Some of these Christian Jews not only told other Jews about Jesus but also the Gentiles. Thus a church was started there. Barnabas was sent to Antioch from Jerusalem to help provide leadership. He went and got Paul from Tarsus to help out. Then the first missionary trip happened.

Notice here that some of the best things in terms of Christian growth and outreach happen not as a result of human planning. There is no evidence that the apostles in Jerusalem had a five year plan to grow a church in Antioch. This was the work of God who planned, or at least allowed, a persecution to happen in Jerusalem. Some of the persecuted Christians ended up in Antioch. Regular Christians started telling others about Jesus, and a church got started. The Christian leaders in Jerusalem were smart enough to realize what was happening. So they sent some leaders to help out. Jewish and Gentile Christians start working together. In a couple of years they sent out Paul and Barnabas as missionaries.

II.

In v. 12 of our passage we come to THE ISSUE OF CONFLICT. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE ISSUE OF CONFLICT) Paul writes in v. 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.”** The reference is to Peter.

The background issue here is the Jewish view of Gentiles. It may be a bit hard for us in the twenty-first century to grasp the nature of this relationship in the first century. But it was a big deal back then. Jews grew up being taught that Gentiles were bad. They were associated with paganism and worship of multiple gods and sexual immorality.

Then there were also the dietary restrictions. The Old Testament told Jews that they were not to eat certain foods. Gentiles didn't care about those restrictions. So in the first century Jews generally came to believe that it was better to avoid associating with Gentiles as much as possible. You should not go into their houses. You should not eat with them. Hanging out with them was just defiling.

There was an ancient daily prayer which included this statement: **“Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has not made me a Gentile.”** There were some extreme statements in the Jewish Talmud about how Gentiles were to be treated. At one point there was an admonition not to help a pregnant Gentile mother or to provide nourishment for her baby so as not to bring up a child of idolatry. (*Mishnah Ab. Z.ii.1*) At another place Jews are told, **“It is prohibited to raise a gentile from a pit, even in exchange for a payment...”** (*Avodah Zarah 26a:16*) Of course Gentiles responded in turn with bad treatment of Jews.

All of the first Christians were Jews. But then in places like Antioch and Galatia Gentiles started believing in Jesus. It was hard for many of these Jewish Christians to get it out of their minds that people could be right with God without becoming Jewish. But as we have seen Paul himself, who was a budding rabbi, came to strongly teach the idea, which he got directly from Jesus, that you only have to believe in Jesus to be right with God.

As I have pointed out earlier, down through history Christians have unfortunately tried to put add-ons to the simple gospel message. People have tried to convince Christians that they must belong to this or that church, that they have to be baptized, that they have to go forward in a church, that they have to show that they are sorry for sins, that they have to observe the sacraments, that they have to refrain from certain sins, and so on. The Bible says that we have to believe in Jesus to go to heaven. That's it. Everything else is secondary. Now there are rules and principles and laws in the Bible about how we should grow as Christians, about how to have an abundant life, about how to relate to other people. But the starting point is the gospel. How do we become right with God? The simple answer is: Believe in Jesus.

So in v. 12 in our passage we see that Peter and Paul and the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians are eating together and getting along just fine. But then men from James in Jerusalem show up, and there is a problem. This James was the half-brother of Jesus and the recognized leader of the church in Jerusalem.

We are not told why these representatives from Jerusalem showed up. Many Bible teachers suggest that the issue involved persecution. We just read from Acts #11 that there was a big persecution of Christians that happened in Jerusalem. The regular Jews were tearing into the Christian Jews. Perhaps they heard stories about the Christian Jews hanging out with Gentiles. This may have made them even more angry.

So one possible scenario is that these Christian Jews from Jerusalem asked the Christian Jews to back off a little from their Gentile Christians for the sake of the persecuted Christian Jews in Jerusalem. Backing off for a bit would also make it a little easier to reach the Jews in Jerusalem with the gospel. Perhaps there were also Jewish extremists in Antioch who were threatening the Christian Jews. Perhaps this prompted Peter to back off for a while from his interaction with the Christian Gentiles. We don't know for sure if this was the exact situation. But it is one possible explanation.

But also this would have made the Gentile Christians suddenly feel like second class Christians. Then it would also give room for these Judaizers to come in with their message that to be completely right with God they should become Jewish. Such was the issue of conflict.

Today the causes of conflicts among Christians are usually different. They may involve theological issues. Often they involve personality clashes, different ideas about how to do things, and different perspectives about how to spend money. We have been blessed in recent years to have a pretty good spirit of unity in our church. We shouldn't take it for granted. It is a good thing to pray that the Lord will keep us working together and showing love for one another.

III.

In vv. 13 & 14 of our passage we come to THE PERSON CENTRAL TO THE CONFLICT. (III. THE PERSON CENTRAL TO THE CONFLICT) According to vv. 13 & 14, **“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?’”**

Paul had apparently been out of town when these Jewish Christians from Jerusalem showed up. Maybe he was preaching in other towns nearby. When Paul returned, he discovered that Peter and the other Jewish Christians had withdrawn from the Gentile Christians. They had stopped going to Chick-fil-a together and probably were not even having the Lord's Supper together. Peter was taking a lead in this change of behavior toward the Gentile Christians.

So what do we know about Peter? He was among the closest of the original twelve disciples to Jesus. He was an outgoing guy. He was a natural leader. He appeared to take the lead among the other disciples. Indeed Jesus often treated him as the leader among them. Yet he sometimes put his foot in his mouth. At the time of Jesus' arrest Peter denied that he even knew our Lord, despite his vows the previous day that he was willing to die for Jesus. He messed up, but Jesus forgave him.

Early in the history of the church Acts #9 tells us that Peter was hanging out in Joppa (JOPPA), which was a town on the Mediterranean coast. According to Acts #10 he had a vision of a bunch of animals coming down out of the sky. This happened three times in a row. These animals included animals described in the Bible as unclean. Then an angel declared that Paul was to take and eat them. He was resistant.

Just then three men showed up from Caesarea. Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judea. It was 24 miles to the north of Joppa. The three men had been sent by a Roman centurion who was a Gentile, but a God-fearing man. He was attracted to the God of Israel. An angel had appeared to him and told him to send for Peter from Joppa.

So Peter goes with these three men to Caesarea. He enters the house of this Gentile army official and starts telling the gathered relatives and friends about Jesus. They start believing and they have the same kind of experience that the Jewish Christians did on the Day of Pentecost described in Acts 2. So Peter baptizes them. He recognizes from this experience that Gentiles can be right with God simply by believing in Jesus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

But now in Antioch he withdraws from the Gentile Christians. Barnabas joins him in this separation. Maybe they think that this will help the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Maybe they think that this will make it easier for them to evangelize the Jews.

But there is a bigger theological and practical issue at stake. The unity of the church is a big deal. Gentile Christians are being made to feel like second class citizens. This creates a division in the church. The important truth is that no Christian in a local church should feel like a second class citizen because of his or her ethnic background, moral background, economic background, or social background. Paul described himself as the worst of sinners. He had indeed been involved in killing Christians. If he could be accepted by God, then every person should be accepted by God on the basis of belief in Jesus.

So Paul confronts Peter in v. 14 in front of a group of Christians. A few years earlier Jesus gave His disciples a principle for all of His followers to observe in dealing with conflict. This principle is recorded in Matthew #18 vv. 15-17. (PROJECTOR ON--- MATTHEW 18:15) Beginning in v. 15 He tells His disciples, **"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. (MATTHEW 15:16) But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (MATTHEW 15:17) If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."**

So this is a basic, common sense principle about how to deal with conflict, especially among Christians. If someone sins, or hurts us, we should go to that person in private. If that does not bring a resolution, then bring another person. If that does not bring a resolution, you cut that person off. So this assumes that there is a major issue involved. For minor things and hurt feelings, it is often better to let them go. It is often better just to forgive the other person. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In the situation here involving Paul and Peter, it is possible that Paul approached Peter in private and did not get a good response. The impression I get is that Paul just addressed the issue in public. The reason for that is that it was a public issue already. Everybody in the church knew that the Jewish Christians had withdrawn from the Gentile Christians. Everybody knew that Peter had taken a lead in this, and Barnabas had followed along.

There was also a key theological issue at stake. These Judaizer characters were claiming that Gentiles, in order to be right with God, had to become Jewish. By separating from the Gentile Christians, Peter and Barnabas and the others by their actions were supporting the idea that Gentile Christians were not as right with God as were the Jewish Christians. That was a bad message to send.

There is another theological perspective by which we could examine this incident. The traditional teaching of the Catholic church is that Peter was given authority by Jesus to rule over the whole church. That authority has been passed down to the successor bishops of Rome. Here Paul is challenging Peter's authority. He is saying that Peter is wrong in his actions and behavior. Paul seems not to have recognized the superior authority of Peter.

The conclusion which some of us would make is that ultimate authority in the church lies in the Word of God, not in any human being. All of us Christians, pastors and priests and even apostles like Peter and Paul, are still sinners and can still mess up. All of us are accountable to each other and especially to the Bible.

This incident fits into a broader argument which Paul is making to the Galatian Christians. The Judaizers are trying to convince the Gentile Christians in Galatia that they not only need to believe in Jesus, but they also need to become Jewish. These characters are undermining Paul's authority. They are probably saying that whatever authority he claimed came from the church leaders in Jerusalem.

Paul is telling the Galatian Christians that at one point he even had to hold Peter accountable, because he was not living up to Christian standards. In v. 13 he calls this behavior hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is not living and acting according to our own teaching and stated values. Such was the problem with Peter. Hypocrisy never goes over well within the church or outside of the church.

IV.

We come then to THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. THE RESOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT) The text does not tell us the specific result of this conflict and confrontation. But we can look at the rest of the New Testament to see if there was any lingering resentment from Peter toward Paul. Is there any sign of tension between these two leaders of the church?

This Judaizer issue continued to fester in the early church. Some Jewish Christians continued to push the idea that Gentiles needed to believe in Jesus plus become Jews and follow the Hebrew Bible. A few years later there was a big meeting in Jerusalem where this issue was again addressed. Paul and Barnabas showed up and talked to the Jerusalem church leaders. The story is told in Acts #15.

In #15 v. 1 we are told about another problem with Judaizers in Antioch. (ACTS 15:1) The author says, **"But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you**

cannot be saved.” So Paul and Barnabas go up to Jerusalem to address the issue again. The two of them describe how God has been doing great things among the Gentiles.

In vv. 6-11 of #15 we read (PROJECTOR OFF), **“The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. 7 And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8 And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.’”**

So Peter is backing up Paul. There is no sign of resentment toward Paul. There seems to be a tacit understanding that Paul was right in his earlier stand. It takes a mature person to admit wrongdoing in a case like this.

Notice also what Peter later says about Paul when he writes his second epistle, which is included in the New Testament. (2 PETER 3:15) According to vv. 15 & 16 of 2 Peter the apostle writes, **“And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, (2 PETER 3:16) as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.”** Notice that Peter calls Paul “our beloved brother.” Notice also that he describes Paul’s writings “Scriptures.” It would seem that there was a good resolution to this earlier conflict in Antioch. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Two years ago I was on a hike on Mt. Charleston with this guy named Dan. I made a note that the date was July 24. Dan was part of a platoon of the 101st Airborne Division that fought in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. He was talking about the importance of unit cohesion. Their platoon put up with a lot of difficult situations. There were often people trying to kill them. They were often living out in the open. Sometimes it was very cold. Sometimes it was very hot. Sometimes they ran short of food. Sometimes they ran short of ammunition. Some of their members were wounded. Some of them were killed. But hardly ever did any of them complain. Why was that?

They realized that they were involved in life and death missions. They realized that they were involved in a war. They were committed to each other and to their mission.

The Bible tells us that we Christians are involved in a cosmic conflict between good and evil. People are taking casualties around us. We have been given a mission to rescue people from sin and point them to heaven. We can’t afford to be mucking around with

selfish complaints. Yes, there are sometimes issues that need to be addressed. Yes, there are sometimes confrontations that need to happen. But we should never lose sight of the bigger mission which we have as Christians and as a church.