

THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

SERIES: GALATIANS

By Steve Zeisler

Hypocrisy is the issue we are going to focus on today in the section we will be looking at Galatians 2. The apostle Peter, no less, is the one who is accused of holding an intellectual belief in Christian freedom, while at the same time acting contrary to that belief. Thus the hypocrisy of false Christianity is the issue which the apostle Paul is addressing in his confrontation with Peter at Antioch.

We have already seen in previous studies that a delegation consisting of Paul, Barnabus and Titus went to Jerusalem to meet with James, Cephas and John (“who were reputed to be pillars,” as Paul writes in Galatians 2:9), to settle the question, “Do Gentiles need to become Jews in order to be Christians?” That was a very critical issue. Another way of phrasing the question could be, “Is Christianity a sub-set of Judaism? Is it really a way of gathering in people who would otherwise be left outside of Judaism and making them into Jews so that the progress of traditional Judaism would continue apace? Or, in fact, has a new awakening occurred? Did the death of Christ on the cross accomplish something so new and so remarkable that Gentiles can be included just as they are and not be required to adopt the appearance of Jews, the style of Jews, the culture of Jews and the historical concerns of Jews?”

In Galatians 2:10, the focal point of that question concerned circumcision. Must Gentiles also be circumcised? Must they partake of that great rite of the Jews, given to Abraham, in which Jewish men were physically set apart and symbolically cut off from the world? As you can well imagine, for adults coming to Christ this was a formidable question. Physical pain and possible feelings of embarrassment and exposure were involved in the consideration of circumcision. So the debate raged. The group from Antioch met in formal session with the apostles in Jerusalem, and together they announced in complete agreement that Gentiles did not, in fact, have to become Jews. Titus came to Jerusalem an uncircumcised Gentile and that was how he left Jerusalem, yet he was fully accepted by both groups.

Today the scene reverts to the other city, Antioch, for the second act in what we have already called the apostle Paul’s “Tale of Two Cities.” Galatians 2:11-14:

But when Cephas [Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy, but when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of everyone, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Circumcision was not the only rite given to the Jews to distinguish them from other peoples. Among other things they were also given dietary laws, and regulations about what kinds of foodstuffs and utensils they should use in the preparation and eating of their meals. Those regulations are followed today by Orthodox Jews. We are all familiar with kosher products. It

was common, therefore, for young Jewish Christians from Jerusalem to regard as unclean and disgusting the eating practices of Gentile Christians.

Peter, however, knew better. He had once had a dramatic vision at Joppa when the Lord had taught him, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy” (Acts 10). What was necessary, of course, in this clash over the eating habits of Jewish and Gentile Christians, was the proclamation that God did not stand in either camp; that as time went on and the great “koinonia” of Christ, the great fellowship of Christ, made inroads into the various traditions, each culture would learn how to enter into the other’s without embarrassment, but rather with rejoicing in the Lord.

In his maturity, Peter had already practiced table fellowship with the Gentiles at Antioch. He recognized his freedom and was no longer personally bothered by this issue. A problem surfaced, however, when some young Jewish Christians from Jerusalem, who had been raised under the law, visited Antioch and discovered Peter eating with the Gentiles. The apostle found himself being subtly pressured to change his eating habits.

That is the nature of the problem that Paul addresses in this section, and in it we will see how Peter responds to that pressure. These men who came from Jerusalem to Antioch, sent there by the apostle James, did not have the same level of maturity as James. I am convinced that he would have had no problem eating with Gentiles. James, like Peter, knew better. After all, he was one of the leaders who later drafted the letter in Acts 15 that contained the words, “...some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words. . . .” Writing to Gentiles, James declared, “There are some going out from us who are untaught”; “some do not know any better,” in other words. They create trouble wherever they go because they are immature; because their freedom has not yet progressed to the depths of their thinking. So despite the fact that these people came from James they did not represent his thinking on this issue. In their immaturity they began to put pressure on Peter, and he responded badly.

Let us look at the history of the apostle Peter for a moment. Peter was an outgoing man, a man of the people, possessed of a certain amount of charisma. But he had a fearful streak about him which manifested itself at various points in his life. That fear surfaced on the evening when Jesus was arrested, even though our Lord had warned him of the problem ahead of time. Despite these personality problems, however, Peter was the one whom Jesus chose as a leader among his apostles. Peter was clearly the pre-eminent one in the early days of the church. Throughout that period, indeed, Peter was looked up to as the exemplary servant-leader whom the Lord had personally selected for his church. But this tension of his being a man of great stature, respected by Christians everywhere, while at the same time having certain fears and weaknesses can be traced throughout the New Testament.

The specific fear to which Peter succumbed, as recorded by Paul in this section in Galatians, was “fear of the circumcision party” (Gal. 2:12). Let’s see if we can discover what was going on in Peter’s mind that made him fearful of this group. He had long since gotten over being afraid for his life. If someone had demanded of him, “Deny Christ or die,” he would have died willingly, in contrast to the choice he made on the night of his three-time denial of his Lord. He had long since learned that his own life was not worth saving if it meant denying Jesus. If he had been placed in any kind of personal jeopardy he probably would have responded in magnificent fashion. He had matured; his stature as a leader was well deserved.

What I think Peter feared--and I recognize the power of this fear in myself--was the danger of a split in the church in Jerusalem. He was afraid of the party of the circumcision--the Jerusalem block possessed of bad feeling or immature feeling--would take advantage of his actions in Antioch and sow discord among his people. He feared that the power of God to protect the Christian church was not strong enough so he had better avoid problems and take the easy way out rather than go back to Jerusalem and face the accusations, the secret meetings and the councils.

Peter did not relish the prospect of leading the church when it was facing difficulty, anger and a campaign of whispering. It was in his capacity as a leader that he was afraid. He did not want to stir up trouble unnecessarily for his people. He did not want to give ammunition to immature Christians from Jerusalem--who really were suspicious of Gentiles in any case--which would aid them in splitting the church. Peter was afraid he would not be strong enough to lead under those circumstances.

Do you see the problem? So long as there were immature, legalistic Christians in the church at Jerusalem there was great potential for trouble--perhaps even a split--in the church. Thus Peter compromised: "I'll avoid trouble. I won't give them occasion to report negatively on my lifestyle here in Antioch. I'll nip this whisper campaign in the bud and take the easy way out." Fearing that his leadership abilities would be unequal to the task, the apostle compromised.

I hope you sense why this was such a difficult problem for Peter. All of us have at one time or another been called upon to lead. Parents have to lead their children; Sunday school teachers are responsible to lead their classes; even older brothers and sisters have to lead their younger siblings. Oftentimes leaders face tremendous pressure to do what is convenient rather than what is right, to not want to face the hard things, make the hard choices, etc., to take what is, in effect, the hypocritical way out and thereby avoid problems. The mantle of leadership is heavy. As he surveyed the kingdom he inherited from his father, Solomon prayed, in effect, "Lord, give me the wisdom to lead these people. I am afraid of the mantle of leadership. Heavy hangs the head that wears the crown."

Peter counted the cost of having to deal with the whispering campaign, with the machinations of the circumcision party, and he chose the easy way out. He pretended that he never ate with the Gentiles, thus giving the impression that in God's eyes it was better to be a Jewish Christian than a Gentile Christian. That was his failure.

Let's try to illustrate a 20th century example of a similar kind of problem. Suppose there was in this church a group of influential people, wealthy people with connections who, because of their cultural background, held that Christians should not be involved in, say, ministry to prisoners, or evangelization of homosexuals; they refused to be led in prayer by women, and declined to be taught by anyone who was ever divorced. How do you think that situation should be handled? One way--the easy way, obviously--would be to agree with them and not involve this church in any of those activities, thus avoiding the problem. But what does God have to say about such things? What does he call us to? Do you see the kind of problem Peter faced? All we have here is Paul's story; we did not get Peter's side. We do not sense his pain, the pressure he was under, why it was so difficult for him. He was in a tough spot. For the sake of convenience he became a hypocrite.

A couple of issues were apparent to Paul, the second character on center stage in this drama. The first was his accusation in Galatians 2:14: "You compel Gentiles to live like Jews." Peter might well have thought, "All I'm doing is making a harmless choice. I'm just going to eat at this rather than that table." We sometimes have potluck dinners here in church during summer. What's the big deal about sitting at one table rather than another? Peter may have reasoned, "Unlike circumcision, which table I sit at during mealtimes is not such a critical issue. It does not irreversibly alter anyone, as circumcision does. I can go back and eat with the Gentile Christians later. This is just a convenience for the short run. We're not in Jerusalem now, meeting as pillars of the church, rendering a formal decision; we're not putting anything in print. All I am doing is merely deciding to eat over here temporarily."

But Paul says that by his decision Peter was "compelling Gentiles to live like Jews." It was not an innocent, neutral matter. Paul is saying, in effect, "You are declaring by your actions that God does not love these people the way they are, that they must become in appearance like the Jews of Jerusalem. Thus you are missing the heart of the whole matter. You are saying

that what counts are the outward things, that in the final analysis these people are unacceptable to God in their present condition. This is not an innocent decision you have made. It is a very serious matter.”

Besides acceptance by God, a second thing is at stake here. It too is very important. It is the matter of the great New Testament concept of “koinonia,” fellowship, oneness in Christ, one of the greatest themes in the Bible. Ephesians 2 and 3 declare in magnificent fashion the barrier-breaking power of the gospel; “koinonia” in Christ. A oneness that transcends barriers is one of the greatest evidences of the presence of God, but in Antioch this was being set aside for the sake of convenience. What a terrible reversal of what ought to have been true!

Thus, Paul faced a difficult problem. He had to stand in public (for the sake of the church) in a face-to-face confrontation with Peter--who in everyone’s eyes was the leader of the young church--and condemn his behavior. Perhaps even more difficult was his responsibility to write the painful words, “Even Barnabas was led astray.” He could see that Barnabas, the man who had loved him even when he was Saul of Tarsus, the man who had stood by him and supported him when he was the persecutor of the church, “even Barnabas” was led astray and needed to be challenged.

Christian leadership is a serious and difficult calling. The pressures are great, but the need for righteousness is even greater. Failure has painful results; it takes courage to be what one ought to be. As it is true that all of us fail at times, it is a good thing to have a faithful brother or sister come alongside and straighten us out when failure occurs. We see before us the example of Christian leaders failing but being restored by one another.

What I want to leave us with, as a congregation, are two things. First, I urge you to pray for anyone you know who has the mantle of leadership in Christ. Realize that this is a hard responsibility. When you see failure do not be too quick with harsh judgment. Remember that the call to lead for Christ’s sake is both very important and very difficult.

My second exhortation to us as a people is to recognize how terrible a thing is hypocrisy. Hypocritical Christianity is probably genuine Christianity’s greatest enemy. A Christian faith that says one thing but acts differently, a Christian faith that declares truth and lives by lies is devastating to the cause of Christ.

The twist of all this is that Peter did things “right” during the debate in Jerusalem when circumcision was the issue. He did it “right” in the formal surroundings, when the “pillars” were meeting, but he did it wrong in the seemingly less important environment. How often that is true of us! In the big things we will get it right. When the light is focused on us and much is being demanded of us we will stand for the Lord. But in the small things, the less visible, off-in-Antioch circumstances, we become hypocrites; we give way and serve convenience rather than “koinonia.” But as we will see next week and the following weeks, as Paul takes this event and begins to analyze the frightening repercussions of it, carried all the way through hypocrisy is a terrible thing. This ought to serve as a warning to us. Even the great apostle Peter was capable of hypocrisy. Let us renew our willingness to take seriously everything about our faith, everything about the call of Christ to us.

Let us remember to pray for those who have the mantle of Christian leadership placed upon them; and let us examine our hearts and their tendencies to hypocrisy, realizing that hypocrisy is the deadly enemy of the gospel.

Thank you, Lord, for your Word. We ask you now to stand with those whom you have called to leadership, to help them see themselves and free them from their temptations to fear and hypocrisy. Help us all to see what we are doing and allow us to be thorough in our faith. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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