

# Showdown in Antioch: Peter and Paul Face Off

Peter Ditzel

I think that if you were to ask a representative sample of average churchgoers to name two apostles, they would most often name Peter and Paul. Today, we might call Peter and Paul the powerhouses of early Christianity. Peter was the apostle to the Jews, and Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7). So, it was no small thing when these two men had a head-to-head confrontation in Antioch. Paul records it in Galatians 2. I want to go over those verses, explain what really happened, and point out why the outcome was crucial for the truth of the Gospel.

## Paul Establishes the Background

In the first ten verses of Galatians 2, Paul tells of his traveling to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus to establish the validity of his Gospel against the claims of the "false brothers" (*pseudadelphos*). In Acts 15, we learn that these false brothers were from Jerusalem and that they asserted that the Gentiles needed to be circumcised and keep the law (Acts 15:1, 5). Paul did not yield to them (Galatians 2:5).

Paul then establishes another important point: "But from those who were reputed to be important (whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God doesn't show partiality to man)—they, I say, who were respected imparted nothing to me." This verse is very important as it shows Paul followed God's example of not being a respecter of persons, an observation that Peter made about God many years earlier when he first brought the Gospel to the Gentiles in Caesarea (Acts 10:34). Peter, John, and James were esteemed to be something, but Paul says they conferred nothing to him; he was already an apostle and he already knew the Gospel. Paul gives the impression here that the Jerusalem assembly was showing respect of persons, and it was a practice he gave no regard.

## The Facedown

In Jerusalem, James, Cephas (Peter), and John gave Paul and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9). Paul describes these three as "they who were reputed to be pillars." Again, Paul only says they were "reputed to be pillars," not that he was a respecter of persons toward them. When they parted, it was with the

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understanding that Paul's Gospel of grace, as opposed to law-keeping, was the true Gospel that was to be preached (see, for example, Acts 15:10-11).

In Galatians 2:11, the scene shifts to Antioch: "But when Peter came to Antioch, I resisted him to his face, because he stood condemned." My use of the term "face off" in the title of this article is not at all an exaggeration. What Paul actually says here is, *kata prosōpon autōi antestēn*: "I withstood against his face (or person)." It can also be translated, "I withstood him in a facedown." What did Peter do that was so awful that Paul called him out on it?

"For before some people came from James, he ate with the Gentiles. But when they came, he drew back and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision" (Galatians 2:12). Peter had been eating with the Gentile brethren, but when Jews who had come from James in Jerusalem walked in the door, Peter was afraid they would see him eating with uncircumcised Gentiles, and so he separated himself from them. What does this tell us?

For one thing, I think Peter's actions indicate that there was a weakness in the Jerusalem assembly. Apparently, even after their defeat when Paul and Barnabas were in Jerusalem, the Judaizing brethren had regained enough influence that Peter feared (*phobeō*) them. From what we will see in the verses that follow, I think it is safe to say that Paul rightly perceived this as Peter reneging on the agreement what was reached in Acts 15. So, even after the matter was supposedly settled in Jerusalem, we now have another confrontation: Are Jewish Christians going to continue keeping the Law of Moses or are they not? Are Jewish Christians going to require Gentile Christians to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses in order to fellowship with them or are they not?

"And the rest of the Jews joined him in his hypocrisy; so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy" (Galatians 2:13). Peter knew grace and was trusting in Christ, but he was trying to remain on good terms with the law keepers.

Today, many Christians who know the truth make the same mistake. For whatever reason—trying to keep the peace, wanting to be irenic, desiring to be seen as broadminded, fear of being labeled antinomian, fear of the trouble the law keepers may cause—they try to accommodate the law keepers. They start resting on Sunday (or Saturday, as the case may be); they start speaking of giving as

tithing; they hang signs up in their churches that say, *Ye shall keep my sabbaths, and reverence my sanctuary*; they start using weasel words and saying that there is "substantial continuity" between the Law of Moses and the law of Christ, there is a place for using the Ten Commandments for "Christian ethical instruction," the Decalogue applies to Christians in "moral substance" but not "in all respects...as it applied to the Jews"; and so forth. Paul had one word for this behavior—hypocrisy.\*

So often, modern promulgators of the law defend themselves by saying that they are not preaching the keeping of the law for salvation. They are then usually vague as to why they are preaching it, but it seems to come down to the law being the proper standard of morality for a Christian or a way of pleasing God. Well, I have news for them. When Paul confronted Peter in Antioch, he made no distinction over keeping the law as a matter of justification or salvation or for any other reason. That's because he understood that all law keeping, for whatever reason, is a denial of grace and the finished work of Christ.

You ask, How is eating with Gentiles a matter of law? This may seem so remote to us today that we have trouble seeing it as keeping the law. But to those first-century Jews, it was a very immediate and pressing matter. Gentiles were not circumcised, ate meats forbidden by the law, touched things and did things forbidden by the law. Therefore, they were unclean according to the law. So, whether Jews could eat with Gentiles was absolutely a matter of morality to them; it was an important matter of law. If, then, Jewish Christians considered themselves still under the law, they would not eat with Gentiles. If they believed that the Gentiles must also keep the law, then they would not eat with the Gentiles until the Gentiles were circumcised and keeping the law (that is, the Gentiles would have to convert to Judaism). If they went half-way, they might grudgingly admit that God was showing grace to the Gentiles but that the Jews must still keep the law, and they were certainly not going to eat with the uncircumcised. If they completely trusted in Christ and understood that all believers were under grace, they would eat with Gentiles as equal brothers in Christ. The controversy, then, was plainly one of law or grace.

"But when I saw that they didn't walk uprightly according to the truth of the Good News, I said to Peter before them all, 'If you, being a Jew,

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\* The words enclosed in quotes are from Martin Rizley, "Puritan and New Covenant Baptists: Co-Defenders of the Decalogue" (<http://gracemadison-al.com/TheDecalogue>)

live as the Gentiles do, and not as the Jews do, why do you compel the Gentiles to live as the Jews do?" (Galatians 2:14). Peter knew better. He knew he didn't have to live according to the Law of Moses, and Paul knew that Peter was not doing so in his everyday life. Peter was living like a Gentile, not under the law. But by withdrawing from the Gentiles when the Judaizers walked in the door, he was giving the Gentiles the message that, unless they were circumcised and kept the law, they were unclean to him. What does that boil down to? The message Peter acted out that day logically boils down to the conclusion, "Christ's sacrifice wasn't good enough. Even after Christ died for the Gentiles, they were still unclean." It was an outright, public rejection of the Gospel and another denial by Peter of Christ. Yes, this was pretty serious stuff. It was, in fact, a life or death struggle between the Jewish, Judaizing Christianity that still observed the law—and that was flourishing in Jerusalem—and the Gentile, grace-alone believing Christianity in the rest of the world.

There are many people who would disagree with my saying that this was a serious matter. They would say that eating or not eating with Gentiles may be a question of church policy but it is not an issue of salvation, it may be a subject of Christian morality but not a topic of justification, it comes under the heading of praxis and not under the heading of the doctrine of soteriology. Theologians today might say that Peter was unwise to keep this point of the law because it offended his brethren and because it was only a point of the "ceremonial law" that has been abolished. They would say that Peter's action didn't give a message that keeping the law was needed in addition to justification by faith. Paul would disagree with them.

"We, being Jews by nature, and not Gentile sinners, yet knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the law, because no flesh will be justified by the works of the law" (Galatians 2:15-16). Paul is still speaking to Peter, and he could hardly be clearer. Even though he and Peter are both Jews, they know that no one is justified by the works of the law. Justification is by faith in Christ alone; that's why they believed. And for emphasis, he adds the statement that no flesh will be justified by the works of the law. If what Peter did was not a matter of turning from justification by faith in the saving work of Christ alone, Paul would not have brought up the topic of justification. The next verse explains more.

"But if, while we sought to be justified in Christ, we ourselves also were found sinners, is Christ a servant of sin? Certainly not!" (verse 17). From the context, it is clear that Paul is here saying that if, while we were seeking justification in Christ, we should instead have been seeking it in the law, we would be found to be sinners and Christ would be a servant of sin, a promoter of sin, by teaching us to abandon the law. Paul's razor-edged perception of what is really at stake here is stunning. He sees that if Peter thinks that any point of the law must be kept, however small and for whatever reason—even if he doesn't think he's doing it for justification—then he is implying that if he doesn't keep that point of the law, he is a sinner. And if he is a sinner, then he has made Christ's teaching to trust in Him alone for justification a lie, and he has thus made Christ a servant of sin.

"For if I build up again those things which I destroyed, I prove myself a law-breaker" (verse 18). If Paul were to rebuild (*oikodomeō*—"house-build") the house of the law that he had destroyed (*kataluō*—"loosened down," "demolished," "destroyed"), he is admitting that the law was right and he was wrong to have destroyed it. Thus, he condemns himself as a lawbreaker. Turning back to the law in just one little point (even if it is not for justification, as so many claim), is to begin rebuilding the house of the law and to admit one is a law-breaker and a sinner and not trusting in Christ alone. Notice also that Paul admits here to destroying the law in his life, something that many theologians have written volumes trying to say he did not do. (Jesus had already fulfilled and ended the law. By destroying the law in his life, Paul means demolishing it as the system by which he had lived all of his life until conversion.)

"For I, through the law, died to the law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me. That life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me. I don't make void the grace of God. For if righteousness is through the law, then Christ died for nothing!" (Galatians 2:19-21). As much as many people don't like it, Paul is saying here that if we try to attain even a nanoparticle of righteousness through the law—keeping the Sabbath, paying tithes, living morally because we are restrained by the Ten Commandments instead of being led by the Spirit—then we are saying either that if we don't do it we are sinning or that if we do perform it we are adding to the righteousness Christ has obtained for us. And if we do that, we make void (*atheteō*—"set aside") the grace of God. The works of the law cannot coexist with grace: "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of

works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work" (Romans 11:6).

### **Be Watchful**

Using the logically precise arguments we've just studied, Paul upheld the truth of the Gospel of grace alone and prevailed in his confrontation against the temporarily misguided Peter. In doing this, Paul won another round against the legalist "gospel" of the Judaizers. Although it's not recorded, I'm sure that Peter repented. He later wrote,

Regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also, according to the wisdom given to him, wrote to you; as also in all of his letters, speaking in them of these things. In those, there are some things that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unsettled twist, as they also do to the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. You therefore, beloved, knowing these things beforehand, beware, lest being carried away with the error of the wicked, you fall from your own steadfastness. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

2 Peter 3:15-18

The Judaizers, unfortunately, were apparently not repentant and continued their harm. The very reason Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians was because law-preachers had gone to the Galatian brethren and were telling them that they must be circumcised and keep the law. Paul likens such teaching to witchcraft (Galatians 3:1) and twice pronounces a curse on those who promote it (Galatians 1:8-9).

Paul called the law the "service of death" (2 Corinthians 3:7). But he also taught that "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:2). Let's not be tempted to compromise with those who advance law-keeping. Jesus not only told us to be harmless as doves. He also said to be wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16). In other words, learn from Scripture and from your own and others' experience what are the tactics that Satan uses so that you can anticipate his moves and avoid taking damage. Interestingly, it was Peter who said, "Be sober and self-controlled. Be watchful. Your adversary the devil, walks around like a roaring lion,

seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Don't make the misstep that Peter made and in any way return to the law. To do so is to deny Christ.