

GALATIANS 2:11-21 | MOCKERY OF THE CROSS AND HOW TO AVOID IT

Conflict is not a pleasant topic at the best of times. We tend to keep our conflicts private and not air our dirty laundry. Conflict in the church can be particularly difficult and painful.

So, what do you make of the conflict in Galatians 2? Not only is it public, it also involves the 2 highest profile Apostles of the church: Paul and Peter. And to make matters worse, it's being shared way beyond its original context: it's in the Bible! It's been shared with every Christian in history with access to the New Testament, even with us in Unley in 2018! Paul, did you really need to dig this up for us all!?

What has Peter done that has upset Paul? Is this a Tony Abbott v Malcolm Turnbull kind of spat? Or K Rudd versus Julia? Those conflicts didn't help anyone, not their parties, not the national interest, let alone their own political careers. What has caused Paul to go public with his criticism? Today I hope we'll see that it was something of both *great significance* and ... *public relevance*.

The passage is basically in 2 parts: the problem and the response. Let's look at each of those in turn.

PART 1: THE PROBLEM (VERSES 11-14A)

Peter has paid a visit, heading north from Jerusalem to Antioch in Syria, where Paul is.

The focus of the early church had begun in Jerusalem, where Jesus had died and risen. But as the message of the gospel spreads, so does the action. And by the time Galatians was written, Antioch in Syria had taken centre stage in terms of the spread of the gospel.

Antioch is where believers in Christ were first called Christians. It's the city from which Paul's missionary journeys were commenced. Amazing when you think of how life is for Christians in Syria today.

There were many Jews in Antioch... some heavily influenced by Greek culture, others more strictly Jewish. And many Gentiles in Antioch had become Christians, with little or no connection to Judaism. So, it is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious community. And there are going to be tensions.

Paul is based there and Peter visits. For a while, everything is ok. But then they have more visitors from Jerusalem, specifically from James. Now this is James the brother of Jesus (a son of Joseph and Mary), a key leader in the church in Jerusalem... one of the "pillars" of the church.

And what did this envoy from James say to Peter? What was their message? Paul doesn't tell us. But he does tell us Peter's reaction. Let's re-read from v11:

¹¹ When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. ¹³ The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

So initially, Peter is unstressed by the ethnic diversity of the church and happily eats with non-Jews (Gentiles). Now we think, "of course he doesn't discriminate on the basis of race", because we live in the 21st Century!

But this had been a big shift for Peter. In Acts 10, God gives him several visions of a whole lot of animals that it was unlawful for a Jew to eat, and a voice from God tells him repeatedly to eat them, free from guilt. And then there is a knock at the door and he is taken off to the house of the Roman Centurion Cornelius, a Gentile, and asked by Cornelius to share the gospel of Jesus with him, which he does. Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit, Peter is amazed, and goes and proclaims to the leaders in Jerusalem that salvation is for Gentiles too. It is a massive shift for the Jewish believers.

So, Peter has already been through this experience and he knows that the message of Jesus breaks down the barrier between Jews and non-Jews.

But... here in Antioch, the barrier has come up again. Here he is in a Gentile city and he's drawing back from Gentiles. He's separating himself from them and he's only eating with Jews.

And why? Did you see the emotion word in the text? Fear. Fear of the circumcision group.

Who are they? It's hard to say. It could be the group from James. But James already knows that the gospel is for all people. So, probably not.

Something about what Peter has heard from James is making him afraid. Could it be that the heightened persecution of converts back in Jerusalem has made Peter cautious of inflaming the Jews, and now he doesn't want to make things worse for his brothers and sisters back home? Could it be that his high profile in Jerusalem as the Apostle to the Jews is being undermined by him acting as if he's a Gentile? I'm not sure we know for certain.

But for Paul (looking on), it is hypocrisy, and it's causing others to stumble. And because of Peter's public role, this needs to be addressed publicly.

So, Paul sets him straight. And if there's anyone among Paul's readers in Galatia who thinks they might use the example of Peter to impose Judaism on the locals, he sets them straight too. He has rebuked the great apostle himself. Peter slipped. Don't use his mistake to destroy the message of salvation that is for ***all people!***

Now in case you're thinking that Paul doesn't care about Peter's reputation or his honour, think again. I don't think he's throwing mud on Peter's reputation at all. He's protecting it. He is fighting for it. Peter's preaching the same message he is. And if his behaviour isn't corrected, they might as well ***both*** pack up and go home.

So maybe this isn't a conflict at all? It's a rebuke. An admonishment. Is it dishonouring to rebuke someone? To call them to account for their behaviour? Absolutely not! What is dishonouring to a person is to allow them to continue in their hypocrisy as if it doesn't matter!

If someone you know is starting to act flirtatiously with a person other than their husband or wife, it's not conflict if you call them out on it! It's not a fight; it's an act of love. You might feel nervous about whether they'll listen to you or snap at you for interfering, but you rebuke them because you care for them.

So, the problem as Paul sees it? Even if his intentions are pure, Peter by his actions is rebuilding the barrier that the gospel has destroyed.

PART 2: THE RESPONSE (VERSES 14B-21)

Let me give you a quick step-by-step run through the next 8 verses, because the argument seems complex and confusing, but by the end it gets very sharp.

Paul confronts Peter (v.14b),

“You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. [that is, you’re giving yourself a whole lot of freedoms]. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” [... and you won’t even follow them yourself!]

Peter, this is hypocrisy. You’re undermining the gospel. You’re rebuilding the barrier that the gospel tore down between Jews and Gentiles, between those who are on the in and those who are on the out. Jesus got rid of that barrier.

Then verse 15-16:

“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘sinful Gentiles’¹⁶ know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. [He’s saying, “even those of us who are upstanding Jews, with all the privileges of being born that way, even we realise that being right with God is about having faith in Jesus”]. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

There’s a key word here: justified. There’s a definition in the glossary. It’s about being right with God. God’s approval. People will say you need more than faith to be right with God.

But that’s wrong. Laws and expectations only become a burden upon people’s shoulders... they can never provide the liberation that comes from the gospel message of grace.

Paul continues (vv. 17-18): This is a retort, a hypothetical challenge to what Paul is saying.

¹⁷ “But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn’t that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

Surely (one might say) this faith in Christ is actually going to promote sin because it is putting righteous Jews into contact with unrighteous Gentiles... Paul says, “you’ve got to be kidding”. What would make you a law-breaker would be to work against what Christ has done by putting back up again the barrier that he smashed down!

And then we get to the meat of the chapter. Verses 19-21 are complicated. But here’s the beginning of Paul’s theological defence of justification by faith alone.

*¹⁹ “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. [He’s summarising here. The law only brings death because it shines a light on our failures. But that was necessary because it makes me cling to Christ, and that’s the only way I can live].²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. [If I put my faith in Christ, then God counts me as having **been there with Christ at the cross**. Crucified with him. My sin was supposed to put me to death, but he took my place. So my sin put him to death: he died my death on the cross. I was there when they crucified my Lord. And so, the life I now have is the life of the risen Christ. It’s not Mark, the old sinner; it’s Mark the justified... right with God because of the cross].*

The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. [And then the verse that really summarises the whole of Galatians...] ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

I gave this sermon the title, "Mockery of the cross and how to avoid it". Do you realise that Christians can be just as insulting towards the cross as non-Christians? You don't need a sharp wit and a Twitter account to insult the cross. You don't need a political agenda or an aggressive Atheism.

All you need to do to mock the cross is add to it. We say, "The grace of God may be the foundation of the faith, but being a Christian involves a certain set of views, behaviours, social acceptability". We say, "The grace of God may be the foundation of the faith, but you need to keep the 10 Commandments!" We say, "The grace of God may be the foundation of the faith, but you've got to surrender everything if you want God to be pleased with you ...

This may be a risky strategy for God, but he says, "The grace of the gospel brings freedom: grace alone" It's not the cross plus... it's just the cross. Verse 21 shows how easy it is for us to undermine the cross: If we require anything else of people or of ourselves to get God's approval, Christ died for nothing. If you add to the cross, you mock it; you strip it of its power to bring God's grace.

We'll let's bring things to a conclusion. There is a wonderful prayer in some of the Anglican Communion services that some of you will know well: The Prayer of Approach (or the Prayer of Humble Access). We're going to pray it together later.

**We do not presume
to come to your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.**

How does a person come to God? Not on the basis of their own goodness, or sincerity, or personal disciplines, or generosity of time or money, or perseverance under difficulties. We can only come to God on the basis of his manifold and great mercies. Which means that **anyone** can come to God.

Then a confronting self-evaluation:

**We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord
whose nature is always to have mercy. [The prayer continues...]**

What does all this mean? It means God loves you. God wants you to be with him. And he doesn't want anything that you've done to get in the way. He has fixed it all. He's the reconciler. He's the great lover.

(Gospel Mathematics:) Grace plus nothing equals grace. But grace plus law leaves you with nothing. This is the message of the gospel. We must not fiddle with it or try to improve it. Even if you're the great apostle Peter! Instead let's believe it! Let's rejoice in it. Let's come to God confidently and thankfully on the basis of his great mercy.