

16th Sun. after Pent.
October 2, 2011

Confront... in love.

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Galatians 2:11-21

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk to the town sage. The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right." The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You're absolutely right." Afterward, the sage's wife scolded her husband. "Those men told you two different stories and you told them they were absolutely right. That's impossible—they can't both be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right."

Some people really like to avoid a conflict. Some people will go to great lengths to avoid confronting others. But conflict is a fact of life. In fact, conflict is sometimes a good sign, even within the Church. It is evidence that people really care. Avoiding confrontation is often a recipe for even greater conflict and pain.

So today we want to learn from God's word about confrontation. Why we must sometimes confront others. When we must do it. How to do it.

The passage we read this morning from Galatians is the record of one of the best known conflicts in the early church and in it I see a model for how we should deal with controversy among believers. Let's take a closer look.

Setting: If there is anyone who could not be confronted in the early church, it would be Peter! To this day, Catholics call Peter the first pope. Here was a man who walked with Jesus... and who walked on water. Yes, there was the incident when he denied Jesus three times... but Jesus restored him after the resurrection, personally appearing to Peter and charging him to feed his lambs and sheep. He was to be a fisher of men for the Lord Jesus.

Peter was prominent in the church. On the day of Pentecost, it was Peter who stood up boldly and preached to the large crowd that had gathered. God worked powerfully through the words he spoke and 3,000 came to believe that day.

Also, Peter had received a vision from God that led him to the house of Cornelius. Read about this in Acts 10. This was the conversion of the first gentiles. God made it crystal clear to Peter that non-Jewish people too were rescued from sin by the blood of Jesus Christ, and that the message of salvation should be preached to them too.

Peter was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write two books of the New Testament.

So at this point in Peter's career, prominent if not head of the church at its capital in Jerusalem... who would dare confront Peter and oppose him about anything? Mustn't we conclude that Peter's word was law by this time? Whatever he said was the rule? No!

You might think so, but here's the shocking truth. Peter strayed from God's truth, and the apostle Paul had to call him on the carpet and correct Peter, the great man of God.

Here's what happened. Paul and Barnabas were ministers of the Antioch church. Peter came to Antioch (we're not told the reason.) Antioch was a church with many solid, strong

leaders. It was the first great Gentile (non-Jewish) church and the very first church to send missionaries out from their own numbers.

Today this Jew / Gentile difference is lost to us. But remember it was a big deal to the first generation of Christians. The Christians Jews were inclined to think that salvation came from the Jews and was for the Jews. They needed to be patiently and consistently taught that Jesus is the Savior of all people, not just the Jewish people. But some refused to accept this truth. They believed in Christ, but did not believe that faith in Christ alone was enough for salvation. In addition to Christ, one needed to observe the Jewish laws, customs and rituals. The people who believed and taught this were called “Judaizers.”

This was a huge issue in the early church, so there was a big church council in Jerusalem about this. Was faith in Christ enough, or was it also necessary to observe Old Testament Jewish laws? The council prayed to God and received guidance from him. They recognized that Jesus taught that salvation came through faith in Christ alone, and not through observing God’s laws. The Judaizers were wrong. They were teaching falsely. A person didn’t have to become a Jew to be saved. He only needed to be a follower of the risen Lord Jesus. Peter was at that council and he fully approved the decision.

With that background, let me read the first few verses from today’s text:

Galatians 2:11-21 When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. 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. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

At first while Peter was in Antioch, he (rightly) joined in with the Gentiles, fellowship, eating and sharing with them. An Old Testament Jew would never do that. But a Christian Jew recognized the all-sufficiency of Christ and could do this in good conscience.

However, some Judaizers came to Antioch and began to visit the church. They were astounded to find Peter fellowshiping and eating so freely with Gentiles. Never mind that they were Christians. When the Judaizers saw Peter, the great Jewish apostle, eating with Gentiles who had not done these things, they apparently rebuked him. Peter weakened under their attack and withdrew himself from close fellowship with the Gentiles. When Peter withdrew, the inevitable happened: the church split... between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians.

How severe was this split? Peter and the other Jews separated themselves from the Gentiles, and this was of such intense magnitude that the senior minister (Barnabas) was even led to join their ranks. He compromised when he should not have compromised. And the apostle Paul calls him to the carpet for this. We continue:

[Paul says:] When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? “We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’ know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

So Paul here is just recalling the heart and core of the Christian faith. We are not justified (declared not guilty) by God by observing the law. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If you think you’re doing enough to be saved by what you do, you are sadly mistaken. You

can't meet God's standard, because God's standard is perfection and complete holiness. If you want to try to get to heaven through the law-keeping route, then understand this: you must be perfect. Always.

We Christians however, know and believe that we get right with God not by observing the law... not by what we do, but through faith in Jesus Christ. His perfect life is credited to us. Our sins paid for by him. In Christ, we are right with God. He declares us not guilty in his sight.

Peter knew this! Peter believed this! But Peter drifted from the truth when under intense peer pressure. Let's read on. This section is a little harder, so listen carefully:

“If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not!

So if you believe that you are justified by faith in Christ alone, and you also realize that you still sometimes sin, does this somehow mean Christ promotes sin? Ridiculous.

If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker.

If I rebuild the old system: salvation through works, all I prove is that I'm a lawbreaker. I'm imperfect and I can't make the cut.

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. Instead, the law of God killed me. It showed me that a law-keeping approach to getting right with God can never work. So now I don't live for the law... serving it, obedient to it in the hopes of gaining a right relationship with God. No. That way of salvation is long past. In Christ, I don't live for the law. I live for God.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.

Beautiful passage! When you are baptized into Christ. When you are a believer in Christ, you have been crucified with him. Your old sinful nature is dead. You no longer live. Instead Christ lives in you!

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

So is living a good life in obedience to God tossed out the window? No! The exact opposite. As a believer in Christ, I live by faith in Christ, knowing he loved me and gave himself for me.

I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

The person who believes he can get right with God by his own actions sets aside the grace of God. Why would you need God's grace, his undeserved kindness in Christ, if you can work for and earn your own righteousness? If you can do it, then Christ died for nothing.

Okay, those are some heavy verses. But do you get the big picture? When Peter stopped associating with the Gentiles, he was sending a message loud and clear. Christ's death on the cross was not enough! You are not saved unless you also observe the Old Testament laws! And for this attack on the very heart of Christianity, Paul boldly and directly confronted Peter, pointed out his sin, and called him to repentance. Peter accepted that rebuke in love, and repented. The division was healed. The Gospel truth of God was saved.

Friends, in your life today, you will also have to confront fellow believers when they drift from the truth of God. Confront them, not out of pride, but out of concern for their souls, and for the souls of others. God is clear about his word and his will. His principles are clearly defined in Scriptures. The way of salvation through Christ is crystal clear. When we see a drifter... a person

wandering from “the way,” Christian love dictates that we must confront them. If you love them, you will say something.

There are plenty of excuses not to!

- Who am I to say? They are better Christians than I. (Not a valid excuse! If they’re drifting, they’re not being a faithful follower of Christ. Call them back!)
- They’ve been a Christian longer than I have. (Peter had been a Christian much longer than Paul, but that didn’t mean anything. Long time Christians fall into sin too.)
- This matter is relatively insignificant. (And maybe it is. To determine how important it is, ask yourself the question: Is any of God’s word compromised? Are God’s principles violated? If so, it’s dangerous to that person’s faith, and likely to the faith of others. You must confront.)
- This person has a position within the church. The way Christ designed it, any Christian can and should confront any other Christian if they undermine the gospel of Jesus Christ. Is your pastor infallible? Is it possible that I could compromise on the truth of God? I pray that never happens, but I’m humble enough to admit that if it could happen to Peter, it most certainly could happen to me too. Be prepared even to confront your pastor!!!

Don’t make excuses. Never compromise the truth of God. Where the law of God is ignored or the Gospel of Christ is distorted, confront. Confront the person in love because salvation is on the line. Boldly speak when the gospel is threatened.

Remember this: Most heresies and heretics don’t set out to become such! So how does it happen?

- a. Fear. Peer pressure.
- b. Hypocrisy. When a person says one thing, but lives another, the truth of God is damaged.
- c. Our tendency to gravitate toward work righteousness.
- d. However it starts, here’s how false teaching gets to be an out of control snowball: when people like you and I fail to correct them when these things happen!

Brothers and sisters: Love God and his truth. Love your neighbor and his soul. When there is a deviation from the truth of God, Confront. Confront boldly... in love... for the salvation of people’s souls. Amen.