

## Galatians 2. "When in Rome Do What the Romans Do"?

In his letters Augustine quotes Ambrose as saying, "When in Rome do what the Romans do." This is not always the best advice.

A new missionary arrived in Venezuela. He couldn't speak Spanish. On Sunday he went to a church. It was packed out, so he had to sit at the front. He had no idea how Venezuelan Christians worshiped. So he copied the man sitting next to him. As they sang, the man clapped his hands, so he clapped too. When the man stood up to pray, the missionary stood up too. When the man sat down, he sat down. He didn't understand a word of the sermon, but he just tried to look like the man beside him. Then he realised that the pastor was making announcements. People clapped, and the man beside him clapped, so the missionary also clapped. Then the preacher said something and he saw the man next to him stand up. So he stood up too. Many in the congregation gasped and, looking behind him, he saw to his embarrassment that only he and the man beside him were standing.

After the service the pastor shook hands as people filed out. When the missionary offered his hand, the preacher said in English: "I take it you don't speak Spanish." The missionary replied: "No, I don't. It's that obvious?"

"Well yes," said the preacher, "I announced that the Acosta family had a newborn baby boy and would the proud father please stand up."

In Galatians 2 Paul provides us with two settings:

1. What happened when he took a Gentile with him to Jerusalem (vv1-10).
2. What happened when the Jewish Peter was in Antioch (vv11-13).

When in Jerusalem it was not a case of "When in Jerusalem do what the Jerusalemites do", for it was not appropriate for Titus to be circumcised. When in Antioch it was a case of "When in Antioch do what the Antiocheans do", for it was right for Peter to eat with Gentiles.

Galatians does not teach us, "When in Rome do what the Romans do." For Galatians 2 illustrates for Christians the issue is not one of cultural relativism but of loyalty to the gospel. The principle is "When in Rome do what the gospel would have you do."

First, look at verses 1-10 concerning what happened when Paul took with him to Jerusalem a Gentile named Titus. He tells us, "*I went in response to a revelation and set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles*" (v2a). Paul wanted to make sure, as he puts it, that he wasn't "running or had run [his] race in vain" (v2b). He knows that all Christians had a particularly high regard for Jesus' apostles and James, Jesus' brother, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. Paul wants to clarify whether there was any essential difference in the gospel preached by the leaders of the Jerusalem church and the gospel he himself was communicating.

It is important to understand how Paul thought about the leaders in Jerusalem. The words "who seemed to be leaders" indicates that Paul places a limit on their authority and this is confirmed by other comments Paul makes about these same leaders in this passage. So, in verse 6 he says, "As for those who seemed to be important - whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearances..." Again in verse 9 he speaks of "James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars." So every time Paul speaks of the authority of these leaders he adds either the phrase "who seemed to be" or "those reputed."

Mencken once quipped, "We must respect the other fellow's religion, but only in the sense and to the extent that we respect his theory that his wife is beautiful and his children smart." But it is wrong to think that Paul is expressing disdain or disrespect for these leaders and what they think. He is simply indicating that the authority of these leaders does not depend on what Christians think about them but on how God, "who does not judge by external appearance", thinks about them.

Richard Hooker observed, "The reason why the simpler sort are moved by authority is the consciousness of their own ignorance." By contrast, Paul had an immense intellect and a far more extensive education than any of the church of Jerusalem leaders. Yet, notwithstanding Paul's brilliance he accepts that if there is an essential difference between the message he communicates and that proclaimed by the leaders in Jerusalem, then this might indicate he himself had got it all wrong, as he tells us in verse 2: "But I did this [set out the gospel he preached] privately to those who seemed to be leaders, for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain".

This trip to Jerusalem was very encouraging. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem and Paul were all reading from the same page; they were all committed to preaching the same gospel. Paul cites as the first evidence of this: "*Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek*" (v3). The proof of the pudding is in the eating. When Paul preached the gospel to Gentiles he did not require them to get circumcised either before or after they placed their faith in Christ. The leaders of the church in Jerusalem similarly recognize that Christian Jews must part company from non-Christian Jews on this matter.

We began with the quote "When in Rome do what the Romans do." These words go back to something that happened in AD 387, when Augustine arrived in Milan. The Church in Milan didn't do things the same way as the Church in Rome. In Rome it was the custom for Christians to fast on Saturday. In Milan Christians didn't do this. Augustine wasn't sure what to do, so he asked the Bishop of Milan, Ambrose. Ambrose explained, "When I am at Rome, I fast on a Saturday; when I am at Milan, I do not. Follow the custom of the Church where you are."

I may be a little unfair to Ambrose, but this statement does illustrate where the early church started to go wrong. While at one level his advice seems sensible, it is also disturbing because Ambrose is proposing that "the custom of the Church", that is, church tradition, albeit local church tradition, should be the fundamental criterion used by Christians to decide how they should conduct themselves. But this, of course, is precisely what does not happen when Paul takes Titus to Jerusalem. They do not follow the custom of the Church of Jerusalem and that is precisely the point of the passage, because it is the gospel and not Jewish Christian culture or local church tradition which must determine Christian conduct.

It should now be apparent from what happened in Jerusalem that for Christians the principle is not "When in Rome do what the Romans do" but "When in Rome do what the Romans do if it doesn't compromise the gospel." The principle is not "When in Rome do what the church in Rome does" but "When in Rome do what the church in Rome does if it doesn't compromise the gospel." Christians are called to be culturally sensitive but we are not called to be cultural chameleons.

Paul views Peter as his counterpart since "Peter had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Jews", just as Paul "had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles" (v7). When Peter first goes to Antioch he acts in a manner which is a natural extension of how he and the other leaders treated Titus in Jerusalem. Before the coming of Jesus Christ the Jews had always insisted that any Gentiles who wanted to become part of God's people must submit to the same requirements of Old Testament law they themselves accepted - circumcision, food laws and observance of the Jewish religious calendar. But the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, including Peter, accept Titus as a Christian brother, as a fully-fledged member of God's people, without placing any pressure on him to be circumcised. Consistent with this, when Peter comes to Antioch he "used to eat with the Gentiles" (v12b).

A key phrase used in verses 1-10 recurs in verses 11-21 - "the truth of the gospel" (v5, 14). When Paul was in Jerusalem he was determined to ensure that "the truth of the gospel" was preserved for Gentile Christians. When Peter first came to Antioch he was "acting in line with the truth of the gospel" when, ignoring Jewish food laws and caveats against eating with the uncircumcised, he entered Gentile homes and ate with them. For in verse 14 Paul is observing that Peter and the other Jewish Christians in Antioch were no longer "acting in line with the truth of the gospel".

What went wrong? Again note how Paul skillfully draws a contrast between what happened in Jerusalem and what happened in Antioch. Look at verse 4: "This matter arose [the matter of whether Titus, a Gentile, should be circumcised or not], because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves." Now look at why things went wrong in Antioch: "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" (v12). Richard Baxter noted, "Dangers bring fears, and fears more dangers bring." That's what happens here. Since Peter was the tallest poppy in Christendom his actions were in grave danger of creating a permanent rift between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

In verse 4 Paul describes these people who insist that Titus be circumcised as "false brothers", that is, people who falsely believed themselves to be Christians. You can live in a garage but that doesn't make you a car. You can make noises like a car it still doesn't make you a car. There are many today who, like these "false brothers", attend church and deceive themselves when they profess to be Christians.

When Titus was in Jerusalem Peter and the other leaders backed Paul to the hilt and they unitedly defended the truth of the gospel. But now when Peter is on his own in Antioch he becomes "afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group". His fear now causes him to take circumcision and, therefore, the Jewish law, as constituting an essential difference between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. His fear of these intimidating and highly aggressive false Christians causes him to say to the Gentile Christians in Antioch, "I can no longer eat with you because you are uncircumcised and don't practice Jewish food laws."

Consequently, Paul publicly confronts Peter. Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute. The first man went to the home of the local sage 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."

Many people think it is sage to avoid conflict. We laugh at the sage's response to his wife, but she is correct, "they can't both be absolutely right." Indeed, Paul is faced with a situation where Peter is "absolutely wrong" in what he is doing. Paul recalls, "When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, *because he was in the wrong.*" Peter is clearly departing from the way in which he and the other leaders had acted when Paul took Titus to Jerusalem. Peter was clearly out of step with what they had all agreed upon at that time regarding "the truth of the gospel."

Do notice how Paul begins his open rebuke of Peter. In verse 14 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?' When Titus was in Jerusalem the circumcision party, the legalistic false Christians, tried to force Titus to follow Jewish customs and failed. Now Peter, afraid of the circumcision party, is himself 'forcing Gentiles to follow Jewish customs'. In verse 13 Paul speaks of Peter's "hypocrisy", here using a word that belongs to the world of Greek theatre and means essentially "play-actor". In other words, Peter, and the other Jewish Christians, are putting on a pathetic performance to please the aggressive members of the circumcision party. Peter, as Paul reminds him, though a Jew no longer privately observes Jewish food laws. But he wants to avoid conflict. He wants to avoid trouble. So for the sake of keeping the peace he puts on a public show of being a good Jew.

Fritz Kreisler, the world-famous violinist, discovered an exquisite violin on one of his trips. When he tried to buy it he discovered to his great dismay that it had been sold to a collector. Kreisler made his way to the new owner's home and offered to buy the violin. The collector said it had become his prized possession and he would not sell it. Keenly disappointed, Kreisler was about to leave, but first requested, "May I play the instrument once more before it is consigned to silence?" Permission was granted, and the great virtuoso filled the room with such heart-moving music that the collector's emotions were deeply stirred. "I have no right to keep that to myself," he exclaimed. "It's yours, Mr. Kreisler. Take it into the world, and let people hear it."

I would encourage you to take some time today or during the week just to sit down quietly by yourself and listen to the emotionally stirring symphony Paul plays for Peter in verses 15-21. Once your soul has drunk in the music of the grace of the gospel you too will say, "This gospel must be taken into the world, so that people may hear it." You will then see that what Peter did was akin to taking the record or CD of the gospel and deeply scratching it; what he did was akin to painting a moustache on the Mona Lisa. For in verses 15-21 Paul magnificently reminds Peter of the gospel they both had agreed on when Paul was in Jerusalem. By his actions Peter is communicating a wrong gospel. Peter was sounding out a doleful dirge, making it seem as though only those Christians are rightly regarded by God (justified) who observe the Jewish law, especially circumcision and Jewish food laws. The crescendo of Paul's great gospel

symphony is scaled in verse 21, "I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing." To treat obedience to the Jewish law as essential to the way one will be viewed by God is to "set aside the grace of God" since God is not impressed by anything we do even if it involves obeying things he commanded. To treat obedience to the Jewish law as essential to the way one stands before God is also to say in effect "Christ died for nothing", because, as Paul reminds Peter, in the process of seeking the right standing with God which is only to be found in Christ, Jews like them discover they themselves are sinners (v17) whose only hope is the death of Christ and not anything they are personally able to achieve through compliance with Old Testament requirements.

We have learned to treat with caution the popular maxim "When in Rome do what the Romans do." We do need to be culturally sensitive and flexible as Peter was when he first came to Antioch and ate with Gentiles in their homes. But, first and foremost, we must have a clear understanding of the gospel and refuse to allow any culture to compromise its truth. So, for example, it would have been wrong to have pressured Titus, a Gentile, to be circumcised and it was very wrong when Peter allowed his own Jewish culture to make him treat Gentiles as second class citizens.