

## Galatians 2:11-21. The Blast from the Past

During the Gulf War a young, inexperienced artillery officer was ordered to provide covering fire for an infantry advance. But his orders to his battery resulted in their firing at his own infantry. He was oblivious to this. When the shelling stopped, an orderly ran in with a message from the Commanding Officer. The young conceited officer assumed he was about to be congratulated. To impress his staff he commanded, "Read the message out loud!" The orderly read out in a loud voice, "You are the most inefficient, stupid, bungling, incompetent in the whole army." The officer glanced around at his staff and quickly said, 'Er, yes, well - have that decoded at once, will you."

In Galatians 2:11 Paul reports, "*When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.*" All the Christians in Antioch see the tallest poppy in all Christendom being lopped down to size. Paul pulls no more rank than Peter but he can speak to him eyeball to eyeball in a way no one else could. In verses 7-8 Paul identifies himself as God's primary agent in taking the gospel to non-Jewish peoples and Peter as his counterpart for the Jews. So in verse 11 the Apostle to the Gentiles applies the sledgehammer to the Rock, Cephas, the Apostle to the Jews. In war friendly fire kills one's own troops just as effectively as enemy bombs. Peter's stupid, bungling action is comparable with friendly fire. If Peter persists with his present way of relating to non-Jewish Christians there is great danger that relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians will be permanently damaged.

We will zoom in on two major aspects of this passage:

1. The Wrong Move made by Peter
2. The Right Stuff epitomised by Paul

### THE WRONG MOVE

The wrong move made by Peter is described in verse 12: "*Before certain men came from James, [Peter] 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 party.*"

When we analyse Peter's action carefully we can see it was the wrong move for at least 4 reasons:

1. It resulted from *Wrong Motivation* on the part of Peter
2. It communicated a *Wrong Meaning* to the Gentile Christians
3. It presented a *Wrong Model* for the church
4. It constituted a response to a *Wrong Message* or gospel.

1. It was *wrong motivation* which caused Peter to stop eating with Gentile Christians in Antioch. He did this "*because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision party*" (v12).

The circumcision party was made up of nationalistic Jews threatened violence against Jewish Christians deemed guilty of undermining the Jewish way of life. These fanatical Jews had Peter in their sights. James sent men to warn Peter about them.

Peter made a monumental error of judgment, allowing himself to be intimidated by these fundamentalists, letting them dictate how Christians from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds should relate to each other. His conduct was controlled by his fear.

John Smith is the founder of *God Squad*, the Christian bikies who minister to bikie gangs. He was once employed as a full-time youth evangelist by Campaigners for Christ. He started off with short hair, wearing a suit. But after leading a crusade in Mount Isa he wanted to minister to street kids and others who were living alternative life styles. So he took to wearing scruffy jeans and growing his hair long. In order to minister to such people he and his wife attended the Sunbury pop festival, just north of Melbourne, in 1972. When he returned to the Campaigners office he was sacked.

I don't know the full story about John Smith's sacking. But Jesus was criticised for mixing with despised tax collectors and sinners. Now Peter was in the hot-spot for mixing with Gentiles. Don't allow yourself like Peter to be moved by wrong motivation. Don't let fear of what people might think, say or do hold you back from getting involved in the lives of people from non English-speaking backgrounds.

2. But Peter's move was the wrong one for a second reason. Not only did it involve the wrong motivation but it also conveyed the *wrong meaning* to the Gentile Christians.

Look at verse 12 again. In what context did Peter separate from Gentile Christians? In a church service? No! In the context of table fellowship: "*he used to eat with Gentile Christians*" but stopped doing so.

Hospitality is central to biblical culture and most cultures today. For us it is a nice thing to extend from time to time. Some Aussie Christians make more of it than others. But it is seldom central to the way we live. In Chinese culture hospitality is inseparably associated with giving honour. A guest may say, "You show your face to me" and the host responds, "You appreciate my face." In Pakistan I invited a guest into my home saying, "*Tashreef Laie*", that is, "Bring your honourable self." I then said, "*Tashreef Rakhie*", that is, "Seat your honourable self down." Peter's refusal to eat with Gentile Christians conveyed the wrong meaning. He failed to treat them with the honour due to them. He shamed them. He effectively slapped them in the face and told them they were second class. To be effective in cross-cultural ministry we must take hospitality seriously both individually and as church communities.

3. Peter's move was wrong because it sprang from the wrong motivation (fear) and conveyed the wrong meaning (dishonour). It was also wrong because it presented the *wrong model*.

*What did the instructor at the school for Kamikazi pilots say to his students? A: Watch closely. I'm only going to do this once.* Peter's wrong model for relating to Gentile Christians was close to being an act of suicide for the church.

Look at verses 13-14: "*The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. 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?'"* Peter caused all Jewish Christians in Antioch to close ranks and separate themselves from Gentile Christians. It was not Peter's intention to reject the Gentile Christians. In verse 14 Paul chastises Peter saying, "*How is it...that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"* Peter was still seeking unity but he had adopted a new model for achieving this. When he first came to Antioch his approach was one of "Go to them on their terms". But now he is trying to force the Gentile Christians to behave like Jews. His approach was now ethnocentric: "Come to us on our terms."

In the famous 2000 year old work, *The Art of War*, by Sun Tzu, we read: "*...there are five traits that are dangerous in generals: those who are ready to die can be killed; those who are intent on living can be captured; those who are quick to anger can be shamed; those who are puritanical can be disgraced; those who love people can be troubled.*" The five disastrous qualities are recklessness, over-cautiousness, anger, a puritanical disposition and an unbalanced love for people. Peter's fear of Jewish zealots led him to become puritanical. He will not eat with Gentiles because they are unclean, because their standards aren't good enough for Jewish Christians. When Peter first came to Antioch he related to Gentiles in a natural, intimate manner. But now he has committed himself and all Jewish Christians in Antioch to formalised, superficial relationships with non-Jewish Christians. There is one criterion by which we can always easily recognise whether a church model is operating well or not: *Does our model enable Christians in the church community to relate to each other in a natural and intimate manner or does it encourage formalised, superficial Christian relationships?* When we ask this question we should think not only of how Christians relate to each other across cultural and ethnic boundaries but also with respect to age, gender and socio-economic dimensions. Does our church model really promote tremendous Christian fellowship or not? That's the issue!

4. Peter's move was the wrong move. It sprang from the wrong motivation. It signalled a wrong meaning to Christians of another ethnic and cultural background. It presented a wrong model. But, fourthly, it was the wrong move because it represented a response to the *wrong message*. So in verse 14 we read: "*I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel...*"

In Galatians from the word "Go!" Paul fights for the gospel with no quarter given, uttering an eternal curse on anyone who dares to preach a different gospel. In verse 11 the precise translation is "*he [Peter] stood condemned.*" Peter stood under God's judgment for his action. Unless Peter recognised his folly and did an about face he was in big trouble with God. Peter's failure to honour the gospel message brings us to the other half of our sermon. We have looked at the Wrong Move made by Peter. Now it is time to look at the Right Stuff, as capture epitomized by Paul.

#### THE RIGHT STUFF

Herman Melville, the writer of *Moby Dick*, remarked: "*To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme. No great and enduring volume can ever be written on the flea, though many there be that have tried it.*" Galatians is a mighty book because it revolves around a mighty theme - the greatness of the gospel!

A certain congregation was about to erect a new church building. A building committee was appointed. In consecutive meetings the committee passed the following resolutions:

1. We shall build a new church.
2. The new building is to be located on the site of the old one.
3. The material in the old building is to be used in the new one.
4. We shall continue to use the old building until the new one is completed.

In verse 18 Paul says, *"If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker."* In verses 16-19 Paul reminds Peter that as Jews he and Peter had agreed to live in a brand new building on a brand new site - a building constructed by God himself in Christ. This new building is the new way of relating to God, that is, in a faith relationship. When Peter allowed Jewish food laws and circumcision to exclude Gentiles he was rebuilding the old Jewish way of relating to God and putting pressure on non-Jewish Christians to use the same old Jewish building materials: circumcision, food laws, etc.

In verse 20 Paul refers to the destruction of the old building and the construction of an entirely new building on a new site: *"I have been crucified with Christ [there goes the old building!] and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me [the building of a new life]. Now the life I live in the body I live by the faith of the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."* In verse 20 Paul is describing a fundamental reality which he knew Peter also agreed with. Like Paul Peter too claimed to be crucified with Christ. He too claimed that it was no longer he who lived but Christ living in him. But at this point in Peter's life he had removed himself from the central reality of the Christian life.

A boy kept telling his girlfriend how much he loved her. To test whether he really meant it she asked, "Do you really, truly love me?" He ardently remonstrated, "Of course I love you. Haven't I made that abundantly clear?" She then asked, "Would you die for me?" In a flash of honesty he sheepishly admitted, "No...mine is an undying love."

In one sense the love of Christ is a dying love. We all confess: *"The Son of God loved me and gave himself for me."* In context Paul is reminding Peter that both he and Peter, though Jews, are just as much sinners as Gentiles. In verse 20 Paul asks Peter to remember, "The Son of God loved me - a sinner - and gave himself for me - a sinner." We all stand on level ground at the foot of the cross, whatever our ethnic background: sinners for whom Christ died. This gospel exposes the folly of Peter's message which implicitly treated Jewish Christians as superior to Gentile Christians.

Peter's action sprang from the wrong motivation (fear). It conveyed the wrong meaning (dishonour). It represented a wrong model (Come to Us on our Terms). It was a response to the wrong gospel (rationalising Jewish superiority). Paul, epitomising the right stuff, takes us back to the gospel. Your gospel-bred love for people will drive you into cross-cultural ministry; you will not allow fear to deter you. You will make a priority out of extending hospitality to show NESB people how greatly you honour and esteem them. Because Christ died for sinners you will minister to people from non English-speaking backgrounds on their terms not ours, working towards the creation of a church model that will enable all Christians in this church community, from

whatever cultural or ethnic background, to enjoy rich fellowship with each other. Having a clear understanding of the gospel of grace you will want to stress in all your teaching that though we are all sinners Jesus showed his amazing love for us by dying for each one of us, making no distinction between us on the basis of culture, language, ethnicity, gender or socio-economic background.