

Did Peter Deserve Paul's Rebuke?

When we are a long way from home, we may take innocent liberties that we would not take under the watchful eyes of the critical people back home. Evidently, that is what Peter was doing in Antioch. He was enjoying association with some native disciples and eating some of their exotic foods, perhaps, like ham and eggs or shrimp gumbo.

That association and food turned sour very quickly, however, when he saw some of the Judean brethren who had come from James in Jerusalem. Fearing their censure, he put on his Jewish face again and withdrew from the Gentiles, thus leading other Jewish disciples including Barnabas to separate themselves also (Gal. 2).

Now, that punched Paul's *red button*! He just about "blew his cool"! In front of the disciples of Antioch and the dignitaries from Judea, he gave Peter an embarrassing scolding with no apologies thrown in. Paul declared that Peter was hypocritical and "stood condemned." Our curiosity as to how Peter reacted is not satisfied in the account.

Busy years passed with Peter going to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles with apostolic approval and God's blessing (Gal. 2:6-10). Long after Paul had written his letter to the Galatians, and after his third missionary tour, he returned to Jerusalem bearing the gift of money from the Gentiles to the Jews. Previously, "At Cenchreae he cut his hair, for he had a vow" (Acts 18:18). Arriving in Jerusalem, he was gladly received by James and the elders who advised him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law" (Acts 21:17-26). Paul followed their suggestion the very next day.

Now, was Paul playing the same role that he condemned Peter for in earlier years? Could Peter, though evidently not present there, not have declared, "Yeah, see how the pot called the kettle black? He is practicing the same "wishy-washy" insincere behavior that he accused me of."

Since there is no scriptural record of defense of Peter's conduct and no censure of Paul's actions, it would be ill-advised for me to defend Peter or condemn Paul. So it is more appropriate that I look for the points of distinction in their actions. We might have rightly expected a stronger stand by James, however, but we can appreciate the tedious position in which he served.

In both incidents the point of contention was concerning how Jewish and Gentile disciples related to one another as they related to Christ in one body. In the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15) it had been agreed that Gentiles were not required to become as Jews by circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses, while there was no intention that the Jewish disciples would repudiate those things for themselves. Apostolic

understanding was that Peter was sent to the Jews and Paul's mission was to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:6-10).

Through a vision it had been made clear to Peter at the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10-11) that no distinction was to be made between Jew and Gentile. Out of his Judean setting, Peter was demonstrating that understanding by his association with the disciples in Antioch. But upon the arrival of those from back home, he practiced discrimination, thus making God's people into two parties with different requirements. His action intimated that the Gentiles were less acceptable unless they became as Jews.

While Jesus had told the Samaritan woman that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22), at no time did he or any writer indicate that salvation was through their Law which made them a distinct people.

In contrast to Peter's conduct, Paul's actions in response to James' proposal were conciliatory. He had collected money from Gentiles and had brought it as a bonding gesture. He was erasing party attitudes and distinctions.

It was not always a comfortable route for Paul. He once explained his varying conduct, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law – though not being myself under the law – that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law – not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ – that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Did Paul vacillate from what he had written about the Law? The tenor of his epistle to the Galatians had been "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" and "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace." (3:10; 5:4). The key words in those passages are **rely** and **justified**. Anyone who would add to or change the gospel was to be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9). It was not to be **the gospel plus the Law**. To **rely** on circumcision or Jewish identification in order to be **justified** was to fall under the curse. However, thousands of Jews in Judea kept the "customs" (sacred ordinances) as a continued devotion to God while trusting in Christ for their justification. No word of censure for such action is in the Scriptures.

Perhaps you were taught as I was. From my earliest remembrance, sincere teachers led me to think that the Law of Moses was nailed to the cross, and hence, was abolished, destroyed, and blotted out at that time. There was a sort of fifty-day limbo until Pentecost. The "new law" of Christ, supposedly, was preached on Pentecost, and keepers of Moses' law were at peril from that day forward. However, that is not taught in the Scriptures!

Law Not Abolished.

Jesus cautioned, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:17-19). In the Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus was neither **changing nor destroying the law nor giving “his own law”!** He was explaining the true meaning of the law which was to extend into the kingdom of heaven. However, this extension was to be only until its fulfillment of purpose as a custodian to bring its subjects into the spiritual kingdom of Christ (See Gal. 3:23-29).

As Jesus was nailed to the cross bearing our sins, our **sins** were nailed there with him and blotted out. Our list of infractions which held us in bondage was destroyed. Yet the custodian (the Law; Gal. 3:23-29) was not dismissed immediately. He was around for most of two more generations of transition. He had not fulfilled and accomplished his mission completely. The writer of *Hebrews* quotes Jeremiah’s prophecy (Jer. 31:31-34) that God would establish a new covenant with Israel and Judah. Then he concludes, “In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:8-13). Two generations after the cross, the covenant of law was still around but ready to vanish away.

At the inauguration of the spiritual kingdom on Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel’s prophecy about the “last days” and, using Joel’s apocalyptic language, indicated a dramatic shake-up of their current system in their time. Concluding his message, Peter “..testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation’” (Acts 2:40). Terrible vengeance was to come on their rejecting generation, but believers could escape before the fall of their of their Capital city in great tribulation associated with it.

The Hebrew epistle is a message written toward the end of this “last days” period. It encouraged disciples and was designed to show God’s fulfillment of the law in the spiritual kingdom. It may be profitable for you to read the entire epistle again with this in mind. Then in Chapter 12:18-29, the finalizing change from the earthly nation and kingdom to the spiritual nation and kingdom is anticipated. Shortly after this, in AD 70, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and the Jews were scattered, never to see their former nation restored. Rather than destroying the Law of Moses, God fulfilled it, accomplished its purpose, and made it impossible for it to be practiced in a religious-political system as in former times. Thus ended the “last days” of God’s dealing with the Jews as a nation. Now a racial Jew is accepted through faith in Christ just as anyone else is.

During this “last days” period, Paul could continue to observe rituals of the Law, but he certainly did not offer sacrifices of atonement for sins, for that would have been a denial of the sufficiency of Jesus’ atonement. However, the segregating vacillation of Peter could not be excused. The unity of the body is the vital issue involved in judging the conduct of Peter and Paul in this setting.

For sake of brevity, extensive references and contexts have not been explored here, but you may expand on this study as you see fit. When we consider some present-day applications to our conclusion, we gain more value from this investigation.

Present Applications

Are we as disciples in jeopardy if we observe any Mosaic laws? Paul declared, “Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:2-3). Most every male disciple reading this probably has been circumcised! Many sincere disciples will not eat the foods designated as *unclean* under

the Law. Some observe the Sabbath. Others fast. All disciples strive to keep the Ten Commandments (except for the Sabbath) though this legal code is not the basis of our covenant as it was for the Law.

Do such practices endanger our relationship with Christ? If we do them as a means of **justification**, the answer is **yes!** In his next sentence Paul declares unequivocally, “You are severed from Christ, you who would be **justified** by law.” However, there are many things we are at liberty to do as a matter of conscience or in an effort to honor, praise, worship, and serve God. We are not **justified** by *worship, service, and correct conduct*, but we **honor** God through them.

In spite of what I was taught to believe, there is no definitive list of actions and practices through which I must honor God, making any sincere deviation damning. Above my desk is a wooden cross artistically hand-carved by Alvis Rogers. That honors Christ. Honor can be given continuously through paintings, music, buildings for assembly, writings, and even a web site.. Worship may be expressed by bowing, kneeling, lifting up hands and weeping in veneration, laughing for joy, and shouting praises. Those uplifted hands are “holy hands” (dedicated) for all that they do is to honor God – a continuous worship. Who can say that you cannot communicate your feelings toward God by lighted candles or that your prayers may not be enhanced by incense if that, like fasting, lifting up hands, or holding hands in prayer, is meaningful to you? It is undeniable that God has favored lamps and incense.

Such suggestions may sound horrific to you. I understand fully. For most of my life I held tenaciously to the “five acts of worship” concept in which I had been indoctrinated. When I finally had courage and sense to investigate for myself, I learned that there is no example of God ever refusing sincere worship of anyone whether the method was *authorized* or not. Such “test cases” as the worship of Cain and Abel, Nadab and Abihu, and “in vain do they worship me” are still used by many who fail to recognize the insincerity of those worshippers, ignore their context, and twist their meaning to prove a pre-conceived conclusion.

To “worship by command” is an effort to please God by legal works. To worship by sincere expression is spiritual. Our living sacrifice of the whole self is not limited to a few rituals. Most of the divisions in our Movement are over efforts to define legal requirements in rituals of worship. A legal code binds and limits but the expression of love, which is the “law of Christ,” is liberating. The interaction between Paul and Peter offers liberating lessons to the willing heart. It affirms the concept and practice of unity in spite of diversity.

(For an enumeration of many “unauthorized” acts of worship which have been acceptable to God, read *Freedom’s Ring, No. 17*; Chapter 14 of *Free To Speak*, and Chapter 4 of *Free As Sons*.) []