

Breaking
the Culture Barrier

Acts 15:1–16:5, Galatians

A Matter of Principle

The community at Antioch was no doubt honored to receive such a visitor as the Apostle Peter. And Peter was as pleased with the work in Antioch as Paul and Barnabas knew he would be. The leadership team had done an amazing job of translating the gospel into terms Gentiles could understand (lacking Jewish background on terms like *Messiah* and *Kingdom of God*) without distorting the essential message. The Way of Jesus had not degenerated into one more Greek cult that promised immortality through contact with the divine.

And Peter, who had received a vision from Christ repealing the *kosher* laws, was quite comfortable socializing with Gentile believers. If Jesus Himself said so, then the long-standing Jewish prejudice against filthy pagans was null and void.

But then a delegation arrived claiming the authority of James, the ranking member of Jerusalem's leadership team. These visitors bore a new policy: One could not belong to the people of God unless one adhered to all of the traditions of Jewish law, including circumcision. One had to be a Jew to be a disciple of Jesus.

Further, they told Peter privately that his behavior in Antioch

was threatening efforts to spread the gospel back home. The apostles had been enjoying great favor among their Jewish kinsmen because they were known to be faithful observers of the Law. Peter was undercutting that reputation by openly flouting the *kosher* laws. Would he please rein in his own freedom for the sake of reaching the Jews?

Certainly Peter would do that, and immediately he withdrew from sharing meals with Gentiles. Under pressure from the delegation, the rest of the Jewish believers in Antioch followed suit. Even Barnabas. But not Paul. He was incensed.

Peter may have been the chief apostle, but in Paul's eyes he was just a brother and not above reproof. And since his fault was public and influencing many, his reproof had to be public, too. For by bowing to Jewish scruples—even in order to draw them to Christ—Peter was compromising an essential point of the gospel and endangering efforts to reach Gentiles. Peter's withdrawal implied that Gentiles were second-class believers. It suggested that Peter supported the delegation's whole position about having to become a Jew in order to be a child of God.

Faith or Religious Rules

Barnabas and the rest hadn't thought through the implications of this position, but Paul had been thinking about the Law for a long time. Look, he said, if you won't even eat with these Gentiles, you're pretty much saying that they're not part of the family. Therefore, you're saying that something other than committing one's life to Christ is necessary to join God's family. You're saying we need two saviors: Christ plus the rules.

But we've already admitted that keeping the Law never got us anywhere. We could never keep it well enough to satisfy God. That was why Christ died: to take the place of us lawbreakers. And we died with Him, so the Jewish Law no longer applies to us as dead people. We live with His life now, obeying God by the power of the Spirit within us. By all means, let's pursue the moral character to which the Spirit draws us—love, joy, self-control. But the ritual laws of circumcision and diet are irrelevant. At best they don't make us more like Jesus, and at worst they divide the community and deny that Christ's mercy alone is sufficient.

What got to Paul was that Peter and the rest already knew all this. They were just afraid to come out and say that belief in and commitment to Christ alone, not keeping the rules of a religious culture, were what God required. And they were afraid because part of them cared more about what people thought than what God thought.

But the part of them that really cared about God was stung by Paul's rebuke. Peter, Barnabas, and the other Antiochenes immediately saw the truth. However, the delegation did not. Hot debates got nowhere, so at last it was decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to sort the issue out.

Conference at Jerusalem

Not just the leadership team, but most or all of the Jerusalem community gathered to weigh a matter with such huge implications. The bulk of public opinion leaned toward the Law party. But Paul's accounts of the miracles God had done among the Gentiles were powerful, and Peter redeemed himself by siding with Paul. He reminded the assembly of the incident with the Roman soldier and concluded his speech with a question, Why put a yoke on the Gentiles that we have never been able to bear? Both we and they are saved by Christ's unearned work in our lives. Period.

When James—a man known to be zealous in observing the Law—was convinced, his influence swayed the assembly to consensus. James proposed that the council circulate a letter to avoid any confusion or misrepresentation. That letter would free the Gentiles from Jewish rules but would ask them to avoid three practices that Jews found especially difficult to tolerate. Paul himself didn't see anything immoral in two of the practices (eating meat used in pagan sacrifices or meat from which the blood had not been fully drained), but he agreed that Gentile believers could go that far in restraining their freedom for love of their Jewish brethren. The third requirement—avoiding sexual immorality—Paul agreed was a moral absolute, not a cultural preference.

This landmark conference gave the transcultural Christian community two bedrock principles. First, the religious rules of

one group, no matter how hallowed by time, must not hinder another group's freedom to serve Christ by the Spirit. But second, it may sometimes be entirely appropriate for a group to voluntarily limit its freedom out of love for another group.

Paul on the Move Again

The Jerusalem community dispatched two of their own prophets to accompany Paul and Barnabas in delivering the letter to Antioch. Paul got on so well with one of those prophets, Silas, that a few months later he invited Silas to join him as a new partner. Paul and Barnabas had been planning to revisit the communities they had founded, but a disagreement told them it was time to part ways. So now there were two apostolic teams sent out from Antioch: Barnabas and his nephew Mark; and Paul and Silas.

We know little about Barnabas's movements during the following years, but a great deal about Paul's. First he revisited each of his plantings to see if knowing Christ was having the desired effect upon the people's lives. Considering that the fledgling communities had had no one but the Holy Spirit to nurture them for at least eighteen months, it was remarkable how healthy they were.

In one town Paul found a teenage believer eager to join the traveling team. As an uncircumcized half-Jew, Timothy had faced identity crises all his life—he was fully welcome among neither Jews nor Gentiles. Now for the first time he belonged to someone—Jesus—and despite his shyness he longed to leave his hometown behind to serve his new Master. Paul was glad to have him. But in order to solve Timothy's neither-fish-nor-fowl problem, Paul circumcised him. For Paul the rite no longer had a major spiritual significance, but he was all for anything that would dissolve social barriers to the gospel. If Timothy would be more effective as a full Jew, fine. Circumcising Gentiles, of course, was another matter.

Letter to Galatia

At some point during these years—perhaps even before the Jerusalem council—Paul had to hit the Judaism issue head on in Timothy's hometown and the other Galatian communities.

The same sorts of legalists who misled Peter in Antioch were confusing Gentile believers in Galatia. (See map, page 344.) These "Judaizers" even questioned whether Paul was an apostle at all.

Paul was of course furious when he heard that his fledgling Galatian charges were being told to adhere to Jewish religious rules. In a scathing letter he defended his apostleship, rebuked the Galatians for listening to hogwash, and laid down the essence of his view of the gospel. The Spirit of God is active in your lives (he told the Galatians) because you believed in Christ, not because you kept religious rules. Christ bore the lawbreaker's curse for you, so that you could live freely by the Spirit. Therefore, the Spirit will continue to work in you, making you more loving, as you actively yield to the Spirit's influence and say no to the impulses of your selfish nature. Persistently obeying the Spirit will accomplish what nitpicking about rules cannot possibly do.

He continued, "As for those agitators [urging circumcision], I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (Galatians 5:12). Paul was on most matters incredibly humble and gentle, but like Jesus, he pulled no punches with people who corrupted the essentials of God's message.

More than any other man of his day, Paul understood what God had been doing ever since Eden. God had chosen a people not to huddle together in their cultural superiority, but to be a lamp in the blackness of paganism. He'd had a purpose in separating Israel geographically, ethnically, and culturally; He had to protect a group long enough for some basic concepts (one God, holiness, the Messiah) to take root. Now the time had come to scatter the people of God, to send them—equipped with the message of Christ and with the Holy Spirit—into the streets and the nations. Just as Jesus had sought out the sick over the healthy, the rough over the nice people, so Paul was committed to the Gentiles with all their unpleasant habits and funny accents. And he wasn't interested in adapting them to the religious culture he found comfortable. He was interested in renovating their hearts.