

Peer pressure: the betrayal of personal values...

1. Study Gal 2: 6-14. In this paragraph, verses 6-10, what do you observe of the apostles? What is the term "right hand of fellowship" mean?

Paul and Barnabas were given the task of evangelizing to the Gentiles (the uncircumcised). Peter was given the task of evangelizing to the Jews (the circumcised). "The right hand of fellowship," while a subtle term, has great implications for today's church. Those who distorted doctrine, to fit more mainstream or socially acceptable thoughts, threatened the early church. There were three main heretical doctrines at that time: 1) Judiazers: Jewish "Christians" who insisted that Gentiles could not be a Christian unless they first became a Jew, 2) Gnostics: Gnostics held that Jesus was not God's Son and that there was no triune nature of God, and 3) Nicolaitans: These were extreme Gnostics who believed that their bodies were inherently evil and that their spirit defined their salvation; hence, they physically indulged without conscience. The early church dealt firmly with those who distorted the Word of God by: 1) barring their fellowship and thus preventing their influence and 2) prayed for their salvation. The Jerusalem Jews, James, Cephas (Peter), and John recognized that Paul and Barnabas' ministry was divinely authorized and supported their ministry by giving them the "right hand of fellowship."

2. From other references, what do you know about Antioch?

Because of the persecution of Christian Jews following the death of Stephan (Acts 7:59), many fled to Gentile cities. Antioch of Syria was one of the first Gentile churches established and was made up of Christian Jews and Gentiles.

3. What did Peter do that upset Paul?

Jews and Gentiles typically ate separately, because they had different food customs. Some of the food conflicts that would face a Jew would be eating non-kosher foods such as pork. Paul preached that God accepted all regardless of the food one ate kosher or not. Despite being a Jew, Peter would also eat non-kosher food with the Gentiles. When the Jerusalem Jews came, Peter ate apart from the Gentiles. And as a leader, Peter caused other Christian Jews like Barnabas to follow suit. The hypocrisy is what upset Paul.

4. Why did Peter, the apostle and witness of Christ's miracles and ascension, behave so hypocritically? How did Paul respond to Peter's hypocrisy?

Peter appears to be more concerned about how his friends would view him than living by his convictions; he may have feared being seen not adhering to Jewish eating traditions namely eating non-kosher foods and with Gentiles. Paul rebuked Peter in front of the Jerusalem Jews for the hypocrisy and with a rhetorical reference of Peter as a Judiazer.

The literary genre of Galatians is regarded as **logic**. In this passage, we see that culture, tradition, and heritage can cause compromises in our convictions. Paul, a Jew but unlike Peter, did not witness Jesus' miracles or ascension, yet he did not succumb to peer pressure. One obvious principle for application is apparent: hypocritical behavior by Christian leaders can lead other Christians astray. However, hypocritical behavior is unfortunately common. Why was this particular event mentioned to the Galatians? Only by understanding the problems of the Galatian church can one understand the significance of this event. The church was facing a growing problem of Jewish Christians promoting observance of the Mosaic Law and Jewish rituals while de-emphasizing faith in Christ; Christianity was at risk of becoming a sect within Judaism. In such high profile and public controversies, associated behavior clearly cannot have any appearance of hypocrisy. Without knowing about the problems of the Galatian church, the context and implication of Paul's words can be easily missed; awareness of similar highly visible situations clearly require higher sensitivities and wisdom, not only for the possible hypocrisy, but also for the risk of misleading other believers. Note that knowledge of the problems that Paul was writing about provided the context from which the Epistle could be accurately interpreted and thus more accurately applied. Don't forget this key when studying the Epistles!

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