

‘The Gospel: basis for the multicultural Church’

Galatians 2:11-21

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Intro

The church of our Lord Jesus Christ is an amazing phenomenon. It unites people from all nations, men and women, young and old, poor and wealthy. Just look around, and we see a beautiful example for the world, where the mixing of cultures, rich and poor, men and women, often proves to be an explosive cocktail.

Well, in our churches, we also have *our* problems. The letter of the Apostle Paul to the Church in Galatia gives us an example of a strong disagreement between the apostles Peter and Paul. This had to do with how Jews and Greeks, people from different cultures, have to be united in one Church. This was a class of religious views and of civilizations, if you like.

The place where Paul challenged Peter was Antioch, the modern city of Antakya in Turkey, right on the border with Syria.

1 Jews and gentiles in one church

To understand the verbal confrontation in the church of Antioch, it is good to be reminded of the experiences of Peter and Paul in the few previous years.

In the book of Acts we see that Peter preached the Gospel of our Lord Jesus in the home of a Roman army officer, Cornelius. For Peter, a Jew, to even enter that house was a great step because Jews tried to minimize contacts with Gentiles.

In order to prepare Peter for going to Cornelius, God showed him a vision of a sheet that descended from heaven, full of animals that were *haraam* for Jews to eat. The laws of Israel forbade Peter to eat four-footed animals, reptiles, certain birds, but God showed Peter a vision of exactly such animals, and He told Peter:

“Get up, Peter, kill and eat! Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” (Acts 10:13,15)

These were incredible words. What was not acceptable in the Jewish religion in the past, was now commanded by God. Immediately after this vision, some people knocked on Peter’s door:

“We have come from Cornelius the centurion. [...] A holy angel told him to ask you to come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.”

Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests. (Acts 10:22-23)

Peter invited non-Jewish servants of Cornelius into his home; the next day he went with them to Cornelius. St Peter was a quick learner; God had spoken to him, and he had immediately changed his views and lifestyle. This is what he told the people in the home of Cornelius:

“You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.” (Acts 10:27-29)

On that same day many of the Gentiles became believers in Jesus Christ. Peter baptized them, and he stayed there a few days. And Peter ate their Gentile, non-kosher food. We cannot begin to estimate how shocking this decision of Peter was from a Jewish perspective. The story of what he had done spread quickly to Jerusalem:

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the [Jewish] believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them”. Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened. (Acts 11:2-4)

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life”. (Acts 11:18)

The Gospel is not only for Jewish people. It is for all people, from all nations, and languages, and cultures. One immediate result of this realization was that the preachers of the Gospel began to not only preach to the Jews, but also to all other people. Some went to Antioch, a major multicultural city, full of expats; many languages were spoken in the harbor and in the markets. The preachers of the Gospel arrived there and

...began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:21)

For the mother church in Jerusalem this was great news. In order to make sure that in the Antioch church things were managed well, they sent Barnabas to Antioch; what he found there was

one community of followers of Jesus Christ. In Antioch, the name Christians, *Christianoi*, was first used as the one common designation for both Jews and Gentiles who followed Jesus Christ. They were one group, one body of Christ, one multicultural community of people.

There was so much fruit on the labor of the preachers in Antioch that Barnabas needed extra support; he asked Paul, who was serving at that time in the city of Tarsus, to also come to Antioch for helping in the spiritual harvest and for strengthening the church.

Barnabas and Paul were able to build up the church in Antioch so well, that after a while, this church could send them on their first mission trip to Turkey; many Jews and Gentiles in Turkey became Christians and formed united congregations. And after this very successful mission trip, Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church in Antioch.

On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples. (Acts 14:27-28)

2 Forces for segregation

And now we arrive at the point of the disagreement between Paul and Peter. Peter also came to Antioch, and he also enjoyed the full community with all believers, Jews and Gentiles together. They prayed together, they had meals together, as one body of Christ, a testimony for the world of how our Lord Jesus Christ is able to change people from different cultures and unite them.

They were very much *like us* here: believers from different nations, with different cultural habits, speaking different languages, poor, rich, but all united in love in the one body of Christ.

Our Lord Jesus himself had, toward the end of his life, prayed for his disciples: '...that they may be one as we are one.' (John 17:11) Jesus also prayed to God for all who would *later* believe:

My prayer is not for [my disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21)

Our Christian unity is a pointer to God; our multicultural unity reflects God in his Trinity: He is also a multifaceted diversity in one Godhead.

But this unity in the body of Christ is something that needs hard work; it must be strengthened and

defended. This is why Jesus prayed for it, and we must also pray for it, and work for it. Even in Antioch, a city blessed with the presence of Peter and Paul, church unity was threatened. This is what we read in the book of Acts:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." (Acts 14:26-15:1)

Jewish preachers came to Antioch and told the Jews and the Gentiles in the church: You must follow all the laws of Moses in order for the salvation of Jesus Christ to be effective for you. Yes, salvation is for the Gentiles, but in order to receive it, they must first become like us, like Jews.

These Jewish preachers mixed their outdated views of God law with a heavy dose of cultural superiority. And they were so intimidating that even St Peter was impressed. He slowly began to withdraw from the Gentiles, he stopped eating with them, and so did the other Jews in Church. All because these Greek believers in Jesus did not follow their Jewish dietary laws.

Does it disturb you that in the early church we find people with different views? It should not surprise us. It took the leadership of the church some years to clearly develop their views on so many matters, like the issue of Jewish law, and they did develop their viewpoints through these conflicts.

The Christians in Antioch were increasingly divided. Initially, as preparation for Holy Eucharist all believers would enjoy love-meals together, but because of this focus on Jewish law, distance, coldness, segregation, became normal.

The norms of one culture became the norm for all, and this was not good! Not good, because this view did not bring people closer to God, and not good because it also separated people from one another. It was untrue and it was divisive.

This problem in Antioch is not surprising. For us, it is also much easier to withdraw within our own social, national and cultural subgroups with our own similar habits and rules and languages. Or to think that the others must accept our cultural habits because ours are better.

All this is so human – but that does not make it acceptable. It leads to the to same separation and disunity that our whole world is suffering from. And our Lord prays that his church will be different! So our disunity not only separates us from one another, it is actually a sin in the eyes of God.

3 Gospel keeps us together

When Peter began to withdraw from the Gentile believers and created a separate congregation, based on ethnic background, Paul confronted him sharply in public. Public sins must be confronted publicly.

Peter knew that Jews and Gentiles alike are saved by Jesus Christ only and that the laws of the Old Testament were no longer the center of the will of God. We have seen him eating with the household of Cornelius and with the Gentile believers in Antioch as well.

But now, with the Jewish legalist believers coming from Jerusalem, he did not behave in accordance with his knowledge of God and of the Gospel. He allowed his ethnicity to be more important than Christian unity with all brothers and sisters. This is why Paul called him a hypocrite.

Paul reminded Peter and his readers in Galatia how misguided this focus on Jewish law was.

No law had ever been able to make the Jews better people, or help them to get closer to God. Men and women are not made right with God by following rules. All the laws of God are fine – but *we* are not so fine. All the laws in the world cannot change us and bring us closer to God.

Is anything intrinsically wrong with rules, habits, and regulations? No, of course. We can't live without them. We need some structure in our lives, in our nations, in our cultures. But for being made right with God, faith in Jesus Christ is the answer, not laws, according to St Paul.

Based on faith in Jesus Christ, God forgives our sins and He descends into our lives through his Holy Spirit. Totally without any law, or rule, or habit that we may piously develop. So why in the world allow those laws to separate brothers and sisters who had first found unity in Jesus Christ.

Our own religious, national or cultural rules and habits should never be allowed to separate me from you, or to separate you from your Christian neighbor here in Church.

A few years after his conflict with Peter in Antioch, Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus about how Jewish and Gentile Christians have become united, according to the plans of God:

For [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by

which he put to death their hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16)

Laws divide people, Jesus Christ unites them. In himself he united Jews and Gentiles. In himself, he unites Americans, and Sudanese, Egyptians, people from India and Pakistan, English, Germans, Dutch, Eritreans... have I forgotten some nationalities of us here?

If we focus on our own particular habits, rules, languages, our national pride, and histories, we will end up like the world: throwing bombs at one another. But focus on the one who unites, Jesus Christ, and we are drawn together in real community.

Conclusion

If we desire to let our community here be a real reflection of the unity that Jesus Christ prayed for, and if we desire to grow closer to one another in Christian love, we have to let go of the idea that we are better than others.

Any Christian who has looked into his own heart and knows that the laws of God only condemn us, understands that he is not better than anyone else; any Christians who knows that he fully depends on Jesus Christ and his forgiveness, lets go of any contempt for other people and their cultures.

Then we will not allow culture, or language, nationality, social status, or any human habit, to divide us from each another. We are all equal before God, thanks to our connection with Jesus Christ our Lord, whether we are an ambassador or the one who cleans the litter box of the cat in the ambassador's home.

We are one in Jesus Christ; He lives in each one of us through his Holy Spirit; therefore we allow his life of love, peace and joy to fill us, so that we are drawn closer to one another.

The most beautiful symbol of our Christian unity is when we eat and drink together from the same bread and the same wine; and when we kneel, side by side, as one people of God.

+ In the name of the father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.