



# Digging Deeper

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## The Clash with Peter

By The New Testament Commentary on Galatians

e. The clash with Peter (2:11–16) Paul has now made it abundantly clear that his presence at Jerusalem in no sense showed any subservience to the apostles there. They had made no contribution to his present position. But now he will go further in order to demonstrate the essential independence from them both of his gospel and of his position. 'When Cephas came to Antioch, I stood up to him, face to face, because he stood condemned. For before some parties came from James, he used to share meals with non-Jewish Christians; but as soon as they had come, he shrank back and made a clear break between himself and them—just because he was afraid of the "Circumcisers". And the rest of the Jewish Christians joined him in acting this false role so that even Barnabas was actually carried away and did it along with them. 'So when I saw that they were not being straightforward about gospel truth, I said to Cephas in front of everybody, "If you, who start from a Jewish position, live like a non-Jew, and not a Jew, how can you try to force non-Jews to live like Jews?" We, who are Jews by birth, and thus not "sinful non-Jews", because we know that no-one is justified by doing what the law commands, but only through trust in Christ Jesus—we ourselves have put our trust in Christ Jesus, with the aim of being justified as a result of our trust in Christ, and not as a result of our doing what the law commands (because "no-one can be justified by doing what the law commands").' 11. Unfortunately, we have no idea when or why Peter visited Antioch. If we translate *ēlthen*, came, as 'had come' (which is just as likely), then Peter may have already been there for some considerable time when the recorded incident took place. In any case, for the charge of 'play-acting' to be effective, Peter must have been there for a period long enough for the local Christians to observe that this Jerusalem Christian at least had no scruples about eating with Gentiles, any more than any of the local Jewish Christians had (v. 13). All that is known is that Barnabas was also 'on the staff' of the church at Antioch at this time, and this would suggest an early period before his rift with Paul had taken place. But since we know almost nothing of the movements of Barnabas it is unwise to be dogmatic here. It is possible to use the 'psychological argument', i.e. to say that it is inconceivable that Peter should have acted in this way after a recent conference with Paul recorded in Galatians, whether we consider it to have been the 'famine relief' visit, or the Council visit, or some other visit totally unrecorded in Acts, in which case 'had come' would be the appropriate translation. Another group of scholars will answer at once that, while it is, of course, possible that Paul narrates this episode out of its chronological order and that the events took place before the conference, we have no proof; anyway, nothing that Peter does is 'inconceivable'. If we protest that this makes Peter a weathercock, they will reply that this is precisely what Peter is, and that this is why Paul is so angry. Such circular arguments will take us nowhere. Paul makes his point, that he opposed or 'stood up to' (*antestēn*) Peter to his face: but he wants to show that he had good reason for this. Peter stood condemned (*kategnōsmenos*; less strongly in niv, 'was in the wrong'). He was acting not only against his conscience and against the clear revelation that he had received in Acts 10, but also against his past tradition and custom in Antioch. Paul may have wanted at the same time to show that no Jerusalem church authority was infallible just because he was an 'apostle' or even a 'pillar'. 12. But it is not an honest mistake that stirs his wrath so much as the deceitfulness of it all. Peter's common

practice at Antioch had been to share meals with the non-Jewish Christians; all knew that and all had rejoiced in it. After all, Peter had been the first chosen by God to preach to Gentiles, as he would remind, or had already reminded, the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15:7. No doubt, the church at Antioch had some common feeding arrangement for its members, not unlike the 'community kitchen' of Jerusalem. If this system did not extend to all members, it would certainly have covered those engaged in 'full-time ministry', for they would have had neither a home to cook in nor means wherewith to buy food, apart from the gifts of the Christians to whom they ministered. Thus *synēsthien*, he ate with, or better, 'used to eat with', must have referred primarily to the common meal, which seems to have characterized the early Christian groups as much as it did the Qumran community. But it cannot have failed to include the Lord's Supper. For if Peter ate with Christians on ordinary occasions, he surely joined with them in that solemn meal at which they remembered the death of their common Lord. By the same rule, if Peter ceases to eat the common meals with them now, he also ceases to join them at the Lord's Table. How narrow the line of demarcation was between the 'church feast', or *agapē*, and the Lord's Supper we can see from the very possibility of Corinthian abuses arising at all. In the modern 'abstract' liturgical setting of the Lord's Supper, such things are unthinkable. Peter is therefore refusing to sit at the Lord's Table with fellow Christians. Worse still, he does this not from considerations of conscience, but simply fearing the circumcision party. Who were these certain men who came from James? Again, it sounds as if Paul is preserving a studied anonymity; he could perhaps have given names if he had so desired, though it is doubtful if they would have meant anything to us now. This is the more likely if, with *neb mg*, we prefer the other possible reading and translate, 'a certain person' in the singular. The words 'from James' are not as strong in Greek as in English, but they do express controlled indignation. Paul is not implying that James of necessity sent them (indeed, James denies this in Acts 15:24); but they were certainly men from James' circle, James' group, within the Jerusalem church. The implied criticism is that James should not have tolerated such views. James in Acts 15:24 does accept responsibility for them being of his circle (using the same preposition *apo*, 'from') but denies that he or the Jerusalem church gave them any commission to spread their views among the Gentiles. They were clearly his own 'right wing', the Pharisaic group, and a sore embarrassment even to him. We give much thought to the problems of Paul, but few to those of James. This is scarcely equitable, especially in view of the vast range of opinion among Jewish Christendom. Paul describes this group, here and elsewhere, as *hoi ek peritomēs*, often translated, as here, the circumcision party. In our paraphrase above, it has been translated 'the circumcisers', as descriptive of their distinctive practice. The word might, however, mean no more than 'the circumcised', 'those from the Jewish Christian Church', using *peritōmē*, 'circumcision', as a collective term for Jewish Christendom. Why Peter should be so afraid of this group of extremists in Antioch, when he was prepared to oppose the same people in Jerusalem, is a problem that we cannot explain. Of course, if this Antioch incident happened before the Council, perhaps Peter had learned his lesson on this occasion: he would not make the same mistake again. 13. Had this piece of 'play-acting', this playing false to his own convictions, been confined to Peter alone, it might not have been so serious. But all the rest of the local Jewish Christians were carried away by the tide, including even faithful Barnabas. Paul had to act quickly, or there would have been 'two communions' in Antioch, two Christian groups existing side by side, one Gentile and one Jewish, unable to share the Lord's Supper together. This was unthinkable to Paul, although today we accept it as a matter of course. He sees Peter's action as arising from fear of the circumcision party: of Barnabas' motives he says nothing. To Barnabas, no doubt, this was simply a matter of love. He did not want to grieve the brethren from Jerusalem; abstention from table fellowship with his Gentile fellow believers was all that would be necessary. Once the Jerusalem emissaries had departed, the old terms of fellowship could be resumed. Was not this a small sacrifice to make for peace? But to Paul, this was 'peace at any price', and he was not prepared to

buy peace on those terms. The strange thing is that, at the Council of Jerusalem, Barnabas stood four square with Paul on the matter. But in this case at Antioch there can be no doubt but that Paul was right in his stand, and he knows it. The one anomaly is that, had not Barnabas been what he was, there might well have been no Paul to withstand him in this way; for, under God, Paul owed to Barnabas both his introduction to the Christian circle at Jerusalem and, later, his introduction to the Christian ministry at Antioch (Acts 9:27; 11:25-26).

14. The word *orthopodousin*, were not straightforward, has occasioned some discussion. True, it may mean 'act straightforwardly', as translated above: but the *neb mg.* translation, 'making progress', is just possible. We should then take the whole phrase as meaning 'not advancing in the direction of the truth of the gospel'. The main sense is clear, however: *niv* well has 'not acting in line with'. Paul lays stress on the fact that, while his earlier talks with Peter and James at Jerusalem had been *kat' idian*, 'privately' (2:2), this rebuke was *emprosthen pantōn*, before them all. Peter's feelings are not recorded, but they can be imagined; his piece of deception had been all in vain. Everybody in the local church at Antioch knew very well that Peter was in the habit of living *ethnikōs*, like a Gentile. Probably the main reference is to the complicated system of Jewish food laws which made social intercourse between Jew and Gentile almost impossible. This was indeed Peter's strong point; he had received a special revelation on this matter and its validity had been accepted by part at least of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 11, though the final reaction of the Pharisaic party on that occasion is not recorded): Peter gained nothing by the 'hypocrisy'. Even the very Judaizers must have known his past lapse in this area; and if they did not, there would doubtless have been local church members glad to tell them in hushed tones. But in what way was he trying to compel the Gentiles to live like Jews? Presumably, by inducing them too to observe the Jewish food laws as the price of full fellowship. No doubt Peter would have rightly protested that nothing was further from his thoughts. But this was precisely the aim of the Judaizers; indeed, this was their whole purpose in coming to Antioch. Peter's ambiguous behaviour was playing right into their hands, and Paul wanted to shock him into seeing this clearly. There may be another reason for the violence of Paul's reaction. Peter would not realize it, but this withdrawal from fellowship with Gentile Christians was tantamount to saying that they were not as good as Jewish Christians, and that in some way they lacked something of the fullness of the gospel. Otherwise, why separate from them? The Judaizers would have admitted this view at once. If Peter were pressed, he would no doubt have denied it. But the action of both Peter and the Judaizers asserted it, for we can be sure that the Judaizers would not join with Gentile Christians at Antioch, still less Jerusalem, at meals of any kind, and it was their action that counted. When we refuse to eat at the Lord's Table with those whom we acknowledge to be fellow Christians, the reason must be because we consider ourselves to have something that they have not, whether it be a mode of baptism, or a theory of apostolic succession, or some other particular theological doctrine. This in effect denies the other the full status of Christian, and, to Paul, that status depends solely on relationship to Christ by faith. Of course, the Judaizers went far beyond Peter, who was concerned only with table fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. They wanted to have the Gentiles actually circumcised, and keep not only food laws, but the whole law of Moses. Paul will deal with this larger issue in the next section of his letter. From verse 15 to the end of the chapter, there follows a passage of close theological argument, in many ways anticipating chapters 3 and 4. As we try to interpret it, we face the kind of problem which meets us so often in John's Gospel. Where do Paul's words to Peter on this historic occasion come to an end, and where does his later theological reflection on the issue, for the benefit of the Galatians, begin? Probably the answer is that he passes from one to the other easily, without being conscious of the change himself. The opening verses certainly make better sense if we imagine them as part of an expostulation addressed nominally to Peter, but actually to all the Jewish Christians present, whether members of the local church or strangers from Jerusalem. The argument is

strictly Jewish; for the moment the Gentile Christians, whether of Antioch or Galatia, have become awed onlookers at a battle of giants. 15. We ourselves, who are Jews by birth, phisei, or perhaps 'by nature'. Paul starts with the known position of the Jewish Christian, making for the purposes of argument no distinction between the Judaizer and the orthodox Jewish Christian believer, including himself. He had already made it painfully clear that he sees no distinction between the Judaizer and Peter. But now he makes no distinction because to him there is no distinction. Jewish believers had all alike believed in Christ with a view to being saved. That in itself is a confession that the old system of Judaism was not enough. If keeping the law had been an effective way to win acceptance with God, then there would have been no need for Christ to have come. He accepts the fact that they are not Gentile sinners or, sometimes more abusively, 'Gentile dogs'. The word hamartōloi probably applies more to Gentile shamelessness than to anything else; Paul is of course using, perhaps bitterly, the common terms used within Judaism. By this he means that those coming from a Jewish background were presumably free from the grosser vices of the pagans around them, those vices which were directly restrained by the law of Moses, at least in their outward manifestations. 16. Nevertheless, by believing in Jesus as Messiah, the Jewish Christians had shown that they believed that a man is not justified by works of the law. Christ had made it clear that he had no message of salvation for 'the righteous', but only for those who were conscious of their status as 'sinners' (Matt. 9:13). All Jewish Christians, therefore, had initially agreed that it was utterly impossible to commend themselves to God by law-keeping. They had shown this by abandoning law-observance as a possible means of salvation, and turning instead to that salvation offered freely by the Messiah in response to faith. At the end of verse 16 this position is reinforced, suitably enough, by a reference to Psalm 143:2. Now, all Paul has to do is to show that the present insistence of the Judaizers on the keeping of the law is utterly at variance with their own basic belief. It is not only Peter who is playing false to his own deepest convictions; the Judaizers are doing the same thing, whether they realize it or not. f. Death and the new life (2:17-21) 'But if, at the very moment when we are desiring to be justified through Christ, we prove to be sinners ourselves, does that mean that Christ is only causing us to sin? Perish the very thought. I say this because, if I try to build up again what I once pulled down, I only prove myself to be a law-breaker. For I, through law, "died" as far as law was concerned, so that I might "live" as far as God is concerned. 'I shared Christ's cross. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. I live my present earthly life in commitment to God's Son, the one who loved me, and surrendered himself for me. No, I am not going to declare God's gracious act invalid: I say this, because, if righteousness comes through the law, then after all Christ died to no purpose.' 17. The passage 2:17-19 is again not easy to interpret. Here the problem is not disjointed thought and language, but rather some ambiguities in the first sentence. The question centres on the exact meaning of heurethēmen hamartōloi, found to be sinners, translated above as 'prove to be sinners' (niv has 'it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners'). In view of the later development of the argument, neb mg. is probably right with 'we no less than the Gentiles have accepted the position of sinners'. In either case, hamartōloi, sinners, is to be understood with reference to our position in the eyes of God rather than our direct moral condition, although it is the same word used above for 'Gentile sinners', and this can hardly be an accident, since a different word is used below. Those who have thought that the word referred to actual sin see here a direct reference to the charge made by the Judaizers that Paul preached 'antinomianism'. To the Jew, Paul's gospel of salvation by free grace through faith in Christ would remove all incentive for moral effort and all desire to avoid sin. In their eyes, such a doctrine would lead to a lower moral standard than under the law of Moses. Therefore, even Christ would have only become hamartias diakonos, an agent of sin, or 'an abettor of sin' (neb), one who 'promotes sin' (niv). Paul rightly recoils from such a blasphemy with horror. As often, his first reaction to this sort of charge is not theological argument, but a strong statement that this is utterly inconsistent with the revealed nature of

God. There is no need for him to show in detail at this stage how utterly false such a charge would be. In the third and last section of the letter ('The argument from results', 5:2-6:18), Paul will develop this thought further. If the first sentence had been standing by itself, unquestionably the above would have been the simplest interpretation. But in view of what follows, it may be better to understand it something like the following: 'If, at the very moment when we say that we ourselves are justified by faith alone, we turn out to be preaching to others that "faith alone" is inadequate, but that they must keep the law as well, does that not mean that trusting in Christ is only leading them into sin? for it is teaching them not to trust the law.' The exact meaning of *dikaïoumai*, translated conventionally 'be justified', need not be discussed in detail, since the dispute here is not over what 'justification' is, but how it is to be obtained. In general terms, it means to be put in right relation with God. BAGD therefore translates the verb as, 'to be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous, and thereby become *dikaïos* (righteous), receive the divine gift of *dikaïosynē* (righteousness)'. This reflects the modern swing from a purely forensic understanding of the verb (which could, at extremes, resemble a legal fiction) to the understanding that it is fundamentally a 'salvation-word', closely connected with the biblical concept of grace. Without in any way obliterating the biblical distinction between justification and sanctification, it is important to realize that being 'put right' with God involves and issues in a subsequent total change in our moral behaviour, though this in itself could never commend us to God. 18. This verse is plain sailing, especially if the interpretation of verse 17, which has been suggested here, is correct. The Judaizers, with their reintroduction of law-keeping as an essential of salvation, are painfully rebuilding the very structure of human 'merit' that, for Paul, had come crashing in ruins on the Damascus road. At best all Paul can do through trying to keep the law is to show that he is a *parabatēs*, a transgressor, or a 'law-breaker' (*niv*). Paul will explain elsewhere that this convicting task is the whole function of the law of Moses, but there is clearly no path to salvation lying in that direction, although there may well be a preparation for salvation. 19. For Paul, the 'once-for-allness' of his conversion experience will allow no return to the past. Perhaps he remembers those three days of darkness and agony of mind in Straight Street before Ananias came and the light streamed in. The law had brought him to the gates of death; he was in despair, a condemned criminal, with no hope. So be it; he accepted 'death' as far as the law was concerned. He would never again turn to it, hoping to find a path of life. But he had turned from the law as a way of self-commendation to God only in order that he might find the path of life offered by God in Christ. 20. Calmer water has been reached now. Paul will try to explain more clearly this spiritual experience of his which has involved such a revulsion from the law, to which he had after all devoted the best years of his life. Judaism could think of a rabbi as wedded to the Torah, in much the same way as a medieval churchman might regard a bishop as wedded to the church. What strange unfaithfulness is this, to leave the Torah, and seek a new bride? In Romans, Paul will use this 'marriage' metaphor to great effect (Rom. 7:3). Here, although Galatians may be in many respects the 'rough draft' of Romans, he does not actually use the marriage analogy, although he uses the concept of death breaking the relationship, as in Romans. But the psychological problem is still the same. How can he explain this total change, this complete revulsion? In many ways, this is one of the central passages of Galatians. It is, indeed, a text frequently used by preachers, but it is important to realize that it is not so much an exhortation to personal sanctification as a powerful argument for the total sufficiency and efficacy of the work of Christ. It is true that it deals with the great motives for Christian service, but the central thought is the complete breach with the old ways of thought and life which is demanded by faith-committal to Christ. The 'faith that justifies' is total, in extent if not in quantity: it is a radical faith, in this sense. But what does Paul mean when he says I have been crucified with Christ, the verb form *synestaurōmai* giving the sense of past action issuing in a lasting result? Again, the context does not justify us in seeing this as an account of a mystical experience. There are certainly references to such

experiences in Paul's writings (see 2 Cor. 12:2), but this is not one of them. This is initially a simple statement of Paul's relation to the law, which then becomes a statement of his relation to Christ. It stands for a complete change in his way of looking at all things, a 'reorientation of thought', to use modern jargon, which involves a total change of life. He means that, as the death of Christ marked a total change in the relationship of Christ to all things including, in this case, to the law of Moses, or even law, as a principle, in the wider sense, so it did for Paul himself. The cross was, for Christ, a complete break with this life. In one sense, every human death is just such a break, although there was a deeper sense in which it was true of Christ. He had perfectly fulfilled the law; we have utterly failed to keep it. But for both, law is now no more. Henceforth, Paul is dead to all claims of the law to be able to commend him to God. Such appeals now fail to arouse him. He has long ago plumbed that agony and has reached the freedom on the other side. Those who spend all their lives in fear of death sometimes find a strange relief when death itself comes; there is nothing left now to fear. So it was with Paul; he had laboured all his life under the nagging fear that perhaps in spite of all his rigorous observance of the law, he might not be able after all to win God's favour. Now, as he sees the cross of Christ, and realizes the work of love and grace that was necessary to save him, he freely admits that this nagging fear of the past was fully justified. Not only is it possible that he may fail to commend himself to God; it is inevitable that he will fail. There go all his hopes for evermore. A lifetime of painstaking accumulation of 'merit' attained by 'works of the law' has been wasted. Paul must confess himself a sinner like any needy Gentile. That is the death of the 'old nature', the last killing blow to pride and self-esteem. There the old Paul dies, and who can assess the agony of that death for the proud self-righteous Pharisee? But likewise, who can tell the blessed peace and relief that has come to him, now that the fear of failing to win God's favour has been faced and acknowledged to be justified, or who can tell the new freedom and joy that comes from such spiritual release? We do well not to try to explain a spiritual experience in psychological terms alone, yet some understanding of our own psychological 'make-up' will help us to enter into Paul's thought here. If we do enter into it at all, we shall understand that a return to the law, seen as a possible means of 'putting oneself in the right' in God's eyes, is an utter impossibility to Paul. It is not Paul's way to sketch the negative side alone, though sometimes, as here, the exigencies of controversy may demand that he deals with the negative side of a question first. At once he moves on to the positive aspect, to describe the new release of spiritual life and power. It is no longer I who live. Live? Of course Paul lives, but it is Christ living in him now. As in the old days the law had filled his horizon and dominated his thought-life, so now it is Christ. Christ is the sole meaning of life for him (Phil. 1:21): every moment is passed in conscious dependence on Christ, to whom he looks for everything. This is Christian faith; and it is intensely personal, both as regards subject and object, if these terms are allowed. It is faith in the Son of God (thus linking the cross with the will of the Father) who loved Paul, and gave himself (neb has 'sacrificed himself' in its first edition of 1961) for Paul. 21. After this impassioned outburst, verse 21 is a calmer summary of the whole passage. An attitude like that of Paul's shows a full appreciation of the grace of God shown in Christ. But to act like the Judaizers is to declare this grace invalid or to nullify it. Obviously this is so: for if they are preaching a return to law-keeping, it can only be because they consider that what God did through Christ on the cross was inadequate or ineffectual. Furthermore, if this had been true, then Christ died to no purpose, his death was gratuitous; he died 'for nothing' (niv): he might as well not have died. The reason and sheer logic of this is incontrovertible: not even the Judaizers should have been able to deny it. Paul is therefore free to return to a fresh argument.