

4.3.1. The Antioch Conflict (by Peter Lampe)

At issue in the Antioch conflict between Paul and Peter (Gal. 2:11-21) was the table fellowship of Gentile and Jewish Christians. In Antioch the two groups met in their homes to eat together. That was possible because the Jewish Christians, including Peter and Barnabas, had decided to eat without worrying about the Torah (Gal. 2:14, 12). For a long time nothing stood in the way of this table fellowship, which presumably included the eucharist, until the arrival of James's people from Jerusalem.

For a number of reasons, in Antioch the Torah-faithful people from James ate separately from the Gentile Christians. One reason was that in Jerusalem the situation was different from that in the Gentile metropolis of Antioch. In Judea the Jewish Christians struggled to convince their Jewish neighbors that in spite of their faith in Christ they were still proper Jews. They were even persecuted by the synagogues (1 Thess. 2:14; cf. Luke 6:22; 11:49-51).

Thus it was important for them to keep the Law as strenuously as possible so that they would not give even greater offense to their Jewish neighbors.

A further and more principled reason was that under “people of God” they obviously understood something different than did the people of Antioch. In following Jesus, James’s people were of the firm opinion that Israel was the people of God to be renewed and that the Jesus community constituted the already renewed nucleus. The Jewish Christian Peter had to confront the question whether he had renounced the fellowship of the Jesus community *with* Israel and thus had placed himself outside the people of God. In addition, James’s people will have remonstrated with him: “How can you abandon the Torah when at the Apostolic Council you were appointed missionary to the Jews? How does someone hope to convince Jews when he knowingly violates the commandments of the Torah? It may be permissible for Gentile Christians not to keep the Torah, but how can Jewish Christians stop being obedient to the Torah?”

Peter gave in to James’s people, either from conviction or under pressure. He no longer went to the common meals with the Gentile Christians, and the other Jewish Christians, including Barnabas, followed his example. Thus Jewish and Gentile Christians were separated. In Antioch the one church consisting of Jews and Gentiles was fractured.

For Paul, who continued to participate in the law-free table fellowship with the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Peter’s step meant two things:

1. By acting as he did, Peter was forcing the Gentile Christians to join James’s people in their Torah obedience if they wanted to continue to eat with the Jewish Christians (Gal. 2:14). Peter may not have directly demanded that of the Gentile Christians, but that was the practical consequence of his behavior. Whether he wanted to do so or not, Peter was forcing the Gentile Christians to be obedient to the Torah. Paul understood Peter’s behavior as an attack that had to be resisted (Gal. 2:11).

2. It did not bother Paul that Jews such as James’s people, who had obeyed the Torah from their youth, continued to do so after their baptism. Nowhere does he engage in polemics against James’s people. Furthermore, he had shared in the Jerusalem agreement that permitted a Torah-faithful mission to Jews. What aroused his anger was something else. People who, like Peter, had already given up the Law and who then “built [it] up again” (2:18) — or especially those who, like the Gentile Christian Galatians, introduced it after their conversion — demonstrated that for them the gospel of Christ’s death on the cross did not have sufficient saving power. When he took this step, Peter revealed, whether he wanted to or not, that he attributed justifying power only to the works of the Torah and not to faith in Christ alone (2:16). In

so doing, Peter contradicted himself, since he knew (2:16a) that this was not the truth. Otherwise he would not have previously lived a law-free life. For Paul, the consequence of Peter's behavior was that it represented Christ as having died in vain (2:21).

Paul reacted sharply: Peter has departed from the "truth of the gospel" (2:14); he is a hypocrite who acts contrary to his better knowledge (2:13, 16); he is "condemned" by his behavior (2:11). Paul openly opposed him (2:11, 14), and there was an open break between Peter and Paul. Or, more precisely, Paul himself placed his seal on Peter's abandonment of the table fellowship by separating himself from Peter. "The truth of the gospel" (2:14) was more important to him than fellowship between the two apostles.

For Paul, fellowship was not an end in itself — not a goal to be reached at any cost. In Antioch he subordinated it to the truth of the gospel. It had to correspond to the gospel of the unconditional love of God, not betray it. Thus the gospel justified both things: the table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians *and* breaking off the fellowship between Peter and Paul. It united and separated at the same time. By contrast, what was important for James's people was the fellowship between the Jewish Christians and the as yet "unbelieving" part of Israel. *Here* is where they placed the emphasis. In so doing, were they, too, wanting to express the "truth of the gospel"? Was their understanding of the gospel different from that of Paul (cf. Gal. 1:6)? Probably so. Ultimately, for them the community of Israel was more important than the new, universal community of Jews and Gentiles established by Christ. Paul, however, did not let it come to a break with James. The break with Peter in Antioch — a temporary break as it turned out — was enough for him. It was for Paul a sign of the truth of his gospel.