



One Page Sermon

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Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21 Paul's conflict with Peter over inclusiveness

Paul and Peter loomed large over the early church as leaders and evangelists. Last week, Acts describes a lively debate that came to a compromise conclusion, and made it look like everyone was on board with the decision. This week though, we read Paul's letter which describes a more contentious situation. In this letter Paul uses the name "Cephas," which is the Aramaic word for "Rock," while "Peter" comes from the Greek word for "Rock." In this letter, Cephas is the apostle we more commonly call Peter.

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul is upset because it seems as if the agreement that they came to in Jerusalem has been overlooked. This week and next we read a very frustrated Paul. It is revealed that Paul and Peter were real men, with real emotions, thoughts, and disagreements. It turns out that the Church is, and always has been, messy.

At the heart of this conflict is identity. For Paul, the community is built around the common table. People become followers of Christ in community. They become Christians around a shared table, a common cause, and unity in the Holy Spirit. The community is built around a table, and anything that gets in the way of this community is a perversion of the good news of Jesus Christ. For Paul, this includes the exclusion that Peter feels toward eating with Gentiles. For some of the more traditional members of the new community of Christians, rules about who could eat together must be enforced, and one such custom was for Jewish people to not eat with Gentiles.

The degree to which this is an authentic expression of Judaism is debated—especially among Jewish scholars who want to suggest that xenophobia is NOT a Jewish value. Nonetheless, in this debate between Paul and Peter, this is the heart of the matter. Peter no longer wants to eat with uncircumcised Christians. Paul believes this is damaging the community. He also believes this is a backtrack of the agreement that they made. This is why Paul is so upset.

We would do well however, to consider Peter's conundrum. The geopolitical climate of the time was putting pressure on the Jews in Jerusalem, including the fledgling Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem. Around this time,

there was a purging of all Jewish people out of Rome. Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews (especially those who were following a new teacher called 'Crestus,' which may in fact, have been Christ, or some of the early Jewish Christians who were at this point indistinguishable from other Jews, especially to the Roman Emperor) out of Rome at about the same time this letter was written.

Remember too, that in about 10 years, there would be a violent uprising in Jerusalem. There is evidence that at this time in Jerusalem, there was a rising tide of "Judah First" nationalism, and an increased distrust of the Romans in particular and Gentiles in general. The Jewish leadership in Jerusalem was becoming more isolated exclusionary. It is under this backdrop then, that Peter was expected to eat with Gentiles in Galatia. With pressure from home to be more exclusive, and pressure from Paul to be more inclusive, Peter seemed to choose the traditionalist view, and his infuriated Paul.

In the midst of real persecution, it was reasonable for the Jerusalem leaders to feel guarded. They wanted to aim inward, resist new influences, and protect themselves. Paul though—and more importantly the Holy Spirit—was pushing them outside their circle.

May the Spirit continue to push us out of our comfort, resist "circling the wagons" mentality, and draw us to new forms of inclusion, embracing others, welcoming guests, and drawing new people into the circle of community. Paul was transformed by Christ and by table sharing. As we are one in Christ, may we keep looking to draw in more to this radically open table.



The Feast of Saints Peter and Paul is June 29. Learn more at <https://orthochristian.com/95310.html>