"At Odds in Antioch"
Sermon for 31 January 2016
Text: Galatians 2:11-21

Paul has demonstrated that he received his gospel "apart from human teaching" (1:13-17); ministered independently of the major Judean churches (1:18-24) and has done so apart from the endorsement of the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church (2:1-10). He does this to defend the legitimacy of his claims to apostleship through authentic but alternative direct (divine) revelation. The reason that he does all this is important for us to consider. Even back then there were those questioning his credentials—after all he never saw Jesus in the flesh, never attended Jesus' teaching, preaching or miracles personally. Everything he knew had to be second-hand, dependent on the apostolic authority of the "real" apostles. He wasn't chosen by the Lord as the original twelve were either! Therefore, he was no authentic apostle.

There came to Galatia, from James (meaning the Jerusalem church) **certain men**, false apostles indeed, whose mission it was to discredit Paul and to reform his ministry, and to call his gospel as well as his authority into question. (2:12) As it turns out, none of the men, claiming authority to rectify things in churches planted by Paul, were delegates sent by the twelve—and not even James was one of the original twelve. (He was the Lord's brother who disbelieved in Jesus until after the resurrection and rose to prominence as a church leader later.) Therefore, none of these men were "genuine" apostles either—not according to their own criterion. *But that didn't either give them pause, or stop them.* They came to address "the deficiency" of Paul's gospel which was: the failure to teach the Gentile converts the importance of fulfilling the Mosaic Law (moral, ceremonial and judicial laws) (Wittenberg Project, Ch.2, pp.60-68— p.4) to be **justified before God**, or truly saved. There are two, mutually exclusive and incompatible systems in view here: the Christ system (you are saved by faith in Christ alone) and the Mosaic system (you are saved by temple atonement and the performance of good works—what we refer to as "works righteousness" which means you are justified because you earn it.). Self-salvation is, I take it, the theological ancestor (or parent) of the self-help movement

Martin Luther makes this crucial distinction in dealing with this matter of Grace and Law. He says "if it is a matter of faith or conscience ignore the Law and invoke the righteousness of the Gospel . . . if it is a matter of works, then light the lantern of works and the righteousness of the Law." (Luther, Commentary on 2:14-16) "In Civil affairs, we attend to the Law; the Gospel, conscience, grace, remission of sin, even Christ Himself *do not count*, but only Moses with law books." (WP, Ch.2, p.1) In the affairs of heaven, all of this is reversed: the Law is out, and Grace is in—in heaven, it is the Gospel which *justifies*, faith and conscience dominate matters of law.

Several years prior to this dust-up, as God would have it, Paul was serving out of Antioch as a missionary there. The prophets and teachers were leading a church which like the one in Jerusalem consisted of many converted Jews and Gentiles. Peter, having escaped the murderous plot of King Agrippa and fled persecution in Jerusalem, came to Antioch. At first he fit in with the Gentiles fine, but the Jewish Christian contingent was

restive, agitated over the assimilation issues of being a Jewish/Gentile fellowship. There were, among the Jewish believers, some who would be best described as “gospel-plus” believers. Salvation by faith in Christ’s finished work, a work of grace, was, in their eyes, insufficient. They wanted new believers to adopt Mosaic Law as well; they wanted the Gentiles to become acculturated Jews. They feared that the Christ system, *without the Mosaic Law to constrain believers,* would lead to a decline in personal holiness and immorality. They still held to a lawful obedience as a co-valid path to salvation.

Now Peter, for a variety of reasons, engaged with the grace, faith and Christ alone crowd initially (heavenly-minded) but, finding the position of the gospel-plus (earth-bound legalism) people persuasive, shifted his allegiance.

Here’s the problem: the gospel-plus position is ***theologically*** wrong (it is erroneous about salvation). Ironically, as we know, immorality flows from such faulty theology. As some self-professed atheists have admitted, they do not want God to exist because it is morally inconvenient! *If there is no God, there is no right or wrong, and everyone can do just as he, or she pleases!* ***A wholesale pursuit of unholy living follows and this issues in lawlessness.*** The party of the circumcision believed in the “constraint” of Mosaic Law as a moral necessity to secure holiness (which pleases God) and to stave off lawlessness (which distresses mankind).

WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST ALONE

Paul, on the other hand, believed that upon salvation, a Christian was in-dwelt by Christ (**a new creature in Christ**) and, having received the Holy Spirit *at that time*, was made, and kept “holy” though the operations of the Holy Spirit *quite apart from the Law.* It was a new day! The old had passed away. The Law remained in force for the unsaved, or for the wicked—its purpose being to expose their sin and drive them to repentance. Remember, **all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, <u>and are justified by His grace as a gift,</u>** so all have need of a Savior. “Jewishness” was no longer a spiritual necessity, because, for the Christian, obedience to the Law was effected supernaturally through the Christ who lives within us.

Neither the Jewish Christians, nor the Gentile Christians held to the rosy picture (held by Progressives today) that man is basically good and that, with a little effort, poor training can overcome, and man can save himself! The Jewish Christians distrusted human nature (hence the hedge of regulations to rein in our propensity to sin) and the Gentile Christians believed that man was lost, in need of redemption.

“To trust in our own strength, our own goodness, our own wisdom is a perilous thing.”

That *bad theology* is what appears to have set Paul off. Self-salvation doesn’t happen. Lifting oneself up by the moral bootstraps is impossible just as it is in the world of physics! When the Law has done its proper work, one despairs of self-salvation and

throws oneself on the mercy of God and embraces the hope of redeeming grace. Peter's retreat from grace, from Christian liberty, had to be exposed and confronted. Gospel-plus is not just bad theology; it is dangerous. It throws people back upon their insufficient strength and anyone who has been there knows the futility of self-salvation . . . the utter folly of trying to be good enough to merit salvation, or to earn justification/ acceptance, or right standing with God. Paul is not opposed to either good works, or to holiness—just the opposite.

There is a crucial order here, that Peter's shift jeopardized. A Christian is saved (by faith), accepted (in Christ) and then performs good works (out of obedience and gratitude *and not to obtain favor, or to merit salvation as if one could earn it*). What Peter's position implies is that we do good works, merit salvation and earn acceptance. No. A thousand times, no. Obedience is an inside job. Obedience comes from the life of Christ within the heart of the believer. Faith, a gift, brings the transformation. Faith (not conscious choice, or personal determination/grit) issues in a trust that both receives the truth of the gospel of Christ *and continues to live in that truth.* We err when we reduce "faith" to an "act of credence," of intellectual assent, or bare belief. ***That is not what it meant to Paul who wrote it!*** Pauline faith is ever a gift, and it is a gift of trust.

A better question than "Do you believe in Jesus?" or "Have you accepted Christ?" is "Have you entrusted yourself to the finished work of Jesus and submitted to His person?" [It is helpful, perhaps, to think of faith more as a verb; so that being a Christian is a matter of "faith-ing" our way through life.] Active faith is more "what we do," than a body of truths, or a collection of facts, or a force within, *although it is most certainly those things, too.* Yes, let us activate our faith!

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Peter had, perhaps unwittingly, sided with the self-salvation folk; with those "gospel-plus" people who believed that our works effect our justification (these "works" make us right with God) whereas Paul knew that it was the finished work of Christ alone that merited our forgiveness and, having atoned for our sins, make us acceptable to God. Therefore Peter had to be confronted, rebuked and corrected. Peter had slipped into bad theology: "To trust in our own strength, our own goodness, our own wisdom is a perilous thing." We can do the same thing. May God grant us the humility of a Peter to repent of this false thinking, or any other error, when we do fall into it. Always remembering the strong encouragement of God, **who is for us** (Romans 8:31). I close with:

> Philippians 2:12-14a: **So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. 14 Do all things without grumbling or disputing;. . .**

Amen