

Gal. 2: 6-14; Acts 18: 24-28; Influence within the Church I. Identifying the Influential II. Approaching the Influential III. Confronting the Influential

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, how do you deal with confrontation? If you are on the receiving end of confrontation, you are likely to either respond in kind or shut down and retreat.

But what if you are the one who has to confront someone else? Would you avoid confrontation at all cost- or would you do what is necessary. Two extremes tend to be found- either you are spineless or cruel. Finding the right balance is a rare trait. Conflict is not fun for most people, but it is necessary when it comes to sin and to the preservation of the gospel. As we return to Gal. 2, we find that Paul is in a position where he must confront a fellow preacher of the gospel because that preacher's life was contradicting the gospel. This evening we consider this theme: Jesus Christ confronts the erring apostle in order to preserve the gospel.

I. Identifying the Influential

In our first point we consider how Paul comes to identify specific people in the early church as influential- people who are really important. Paul started in v. 2- that he revealed the gospel he received before those who seemed influential in Jerusalem. And again in v. 6- those who seemed to be influential. It is interesting that Paul refers to these as people who seem to be somewhat important. These would be called the "pillars of the church" in v. 9 as well. I mean, you can imagine the status of certain men in the early church. Men like James, Peter and John. These were the apostles- they had walked and talked with Jesus! Don't we say that we are part of the apostolic church. These were the representatives of Jesus- the ones through whom the gospel had been handed down- the ones being used by the Spirit to preach the good news! By their hands the sick were healed and the blind received sight! Who could compare to them! But that is not the whole story- because Paul is defending his own apostolic identity and authority as well. Was Paul a second class apostle? Was the word he proclaimed of less authority? That was the whole reason for his first visit to Jerusalem as indicated in v. 2. Paul spoke to the 12 apostles to confirm that they were all preaching the same gospel- and the right hand of fellowship was extended. So these pillars of the church had accepted Paul and the message

he proclaimed as authentic and in line with the gospel Jesus handed to the original 12. So there is equal honor and authority between Peter and Paul- they were not in competition but coordination! One was sent to the Jews while the other sent to the Gentiles- but both proclaimed the same gospel and were sent by the same Jesus. But Paul also makes this important distinction- although people may elevate these pillars of the church- they were still men who needed to be saved and could make mistakes. Their status was not one that would impress Paul. Paul would not kiss Peter's ring if you will. Who they were and their importance made no difference to Paul as he states in v. 6. He will respect them as co-laborers- but he will not cower before them. Their place and use by God was up to God. These men could not boast in themselves. God shows no partiality! Yes- these 12 were pillars- apostles; and yet they were but jars of clay. Instruments in the hands of God. Why is this so important? Well, as we are going to see, even a pillar can be wrong! Even an apostle who walked and talked with Jesus could be corrected when they fell into sin. This is an important reminder- even within the church today. There is no man, woman or child that is above correction! There are patriarchs and matriarchs in the church who have great influence and sway. But that does not mean that they never need to be challenged or rebuked! God does not respect man's hierarchies. Although we may cower before the really important and influential leaders- even within the context of the church. The fact is, God does not judge man based on the opinion of other men! Peter will even say as much in Acts 10- God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him is acceptable to Him! So although people may be influential and important in the eyes of man, God can use the weak to humble the strong! You don't have to be powerful and rule over nations to be important and used by God! And the flip side is also true- even the most powerful pillar can be humbled by God!

II. Approaching the Influential

So far we know that a confrontation is coming- Paul and Peter are going to go head to head. Where will this conflict take place? Where else than at church- at a fellowship meal at the church in Antioch as v. 11! Now the approach that Paul takes towards Peter is very important. The fact is, leaders tend to bring others along with them. As the leaders go, so goes the congregation. As

we see in v. 13- Barnabas was even led astray by Peter's actions. So Paul needs to do something- and he addresses the issue right out in the open. Paul meets the problem head on- going right to Peter. Face to face as v. 11 puts it- Paul opposed Peter to his face. Now this illustrates an important principle- when you see someone in sin you are to go to that person as Matthew 18 puts it. Paul did not write a letter or hide behind others. He did not gossip or slander- but he spoke directly to Peter. Now this is not always possible- sometimes a letter or message is the only possible way to address sin. Paul would have to use letters when dealing with sin at the church in Corinth because of distance. But when possible, Paul would speak face to face. We find the same thing in I Thes 2:17- we endeavor to more eagerly come and with great desire we want to see you face to face. Both encouragement and confrontation tend to benefit when done face to face. As a quick application- important discussion should take place in person if possible. We hear the same thing in II and II John- I have much to write to you but I would rather come to you. I hope to talk face to face. Especially in the Christian life, we are to live face to face. Christian communion and accountability only work if you see each other. So Paul confronts Peter face to face. This does not mean that he was getting in his face with a red face- but rather he dealt with the issue and spoke plainly to Peter. Why? What was so important that Paul would call Peter out like this? Well, remember that Peter has been influenced by the Judaizers. Peter was preaching the gospel which promised the acceptance of the Gentiles by Christ. This was the verdict of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. But in the church gatherings- here at Antioch- Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles because he was afraid of the Jews. So his message and his actions did not line up! By way of his segregation, his actions undermined the gospel! Peter was acting like a hypocrite, so Paul confronted him.

III. Confronting the Influential

This confrontation is necessary, because Peter was sowing the seeds of division within the NT church. How many churches are there? Will there be a Jewish church and the Gentile church? When a Gentile visits a Jewish church, will they have to sit in the back? Will they be welcomed to

participate in the Lord's Supper? As I said before, the gospel was at stake! Did Jesus really welcome and receive the Gentiles as they were- without requiring them to become Jews as well? As v. 14 puts it- their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel. Now here we have to make a distinction. Last week we saw that circumcision does not matter and the OT ceremonies were fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So Titus did not need to be circumcised- but Timothy could without undermining the gospel. This week we find Peter acting like a Gentile- eating with the Gentiles as he did with Cornelius in Acts 10. So far so good. But when these Jewish, false brothers came into the church all of the sudden Peter starts acting like a Jew again- refusing to eat with the Gentiles. This was undermining the gospel. The lesson we learn is two-fold. First, Gentiles are to be welcomed on equal footing as the Jews within the NT church. Second, even leaders of the church can get things wrong and need to be confronted. Paul's rebuke of Peter is proof of this. We find something similar in our reading from Acts 18- Apollos was preaching the gospel as he knew it- as he had received it- but it was partial and incomplete. So Aquila and Pricilla go to Apollos and explain the way of God more accurately- filling in the gaps in his understanding. And thus Apollos becomes even more powerful as he proved from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ because of this correction! As James 5 concludes, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, whoever brings a sinner back from wandering will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. Or again in Prov. 19- the wise listen to and accept instruction. So it is by way of this instruction that Peter is corrected and the purity of the gospel is preserved.

As we close, confrontation and rebuke is a necessary part of the Christian life. Learning how and when to speak- speaking the truth in love- making your defense with gentleness and respect- is the calling of every Christian. Jesus used the rebuke by Paul of Peter to correct a pillar of the church- and to preserve the purity of the gospel. The erring apostle is set back on the right path and the unity of the church is upheld. So may we all learn to speak up when necessary- so that sin might be exposed and hypocrites humbled.