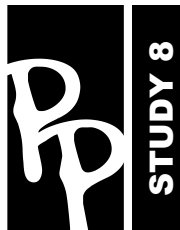


ACTIONS CAN SPEAK LOUDER

THAN WORDS



Galatians 2:11-14



This Study Paper contains the following :-

- ✎ Introduction to the passage
- ✎ What these verses mean
- ✎ Summary
- ✎ A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses
- ✎ Focus Point: Jewish rules for eating and drinking and the Christian difference
- ✎ Over to you

Introduction to the passage

An incident occurred at Antioch after the Council in Jerusalem. On the surface it may not have appeared to be of any significance. The apostle Paul, however, sees danger which will have very serious implications for the gospel. The staggering thing about all this is that the person at fault is the apostle Peter. In chapter 1:8-9 we saw what the consequences would be for anyone who did not preach the true gospel, even if it were an angel or an apostle. When we look at what happened we do not find the problem arising out of what was said, but from behaviour. Our actions can undermine the true gospel as much as our words.

What these verses mean

Verse 11

When Peter came to Antioch,

The Greek begins with the word “But”. This is to show that the happy fellowship of verses 9 and 10 is interrupted. It may seem strange to think of Peter and Paul now disagreeing, when they had been in happy fellowship. Because of that it has been suggested by some that this was a different person who was also called Peter. That seems very unlikely

indeed. In 1:18; 2:7, 8,9, it is Peter the apostle who is meant. So also in verse 11. We are not told why Peter came to Antioch. Acts 15:35 tells us that Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch for some time after the great conference.

I opposed him to his face,

Compare 1:8,9. The word “opposed” suggests that it was Peter attacking and Paul defending the liberty the Jewish and Gentile believers had to mix together as equals, without the need for Gentiles to keep Jewish ceremonial laws.

because he was [clearly ¹] in the wrong.

The great Council in Acts 15 had decided that Gentile believers should not be required to keep Jewish ceremonial laws. Peter himself argued that the way of salvation was no different for Jews or Gentiles. Salvation was by God’s gracious gift to both (Acts 15:7–11). Therefore there was to be no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers. In the church at Antioch, Jews and Gentiles were mixing happily together as equals, which is what Peter had told them to do. Peter also mixed with them all at first – but then withdrew and divided the church into separate groups of Jews and Gentiles (2:12). So Peter was to blame for saying one thing at the Council and doing another thing in Antioch. Peter was shown to be inconsistent.

Verse 12

Before certain men came from James,

The arrival of a certain group of men at Antioch influenced Peter’s behaviour. Who were these men and why did they come? The text tells us that they were in some way associated with James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem. James had earlier agreed with Peter, John and Paul (verse 9). Did James send them? It is difficult to understand why James should send messengers now to contradict that agreement. Perhaps these persons merely came from Jerusalem and were not personal messengers from James. These men were not necessarily Judaisers.

he used to eat with the Gentiles.

Peter sat at the same table and shared meals with Gentiles. He had done this regularly and consistently going back to before Acts 11:3, because God had showed him in a vision that there was to be no more difference between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 11:5–17). Coming to Antioch, Peter naturally mixed freely with Gentile believers, making a habit of eating with them without obeying Jewish ceremonial food laws.

¹ Added in some NIV versions

But when they arrived, he [Peter] began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles

Peter did these things gradually. The Greek word for “withdrawing” can be used of partially rolling up the sails of a boat so that the wind does not strike it so fiercely. Peter was retreating to avoid criticism from the Jerusalem church. He was criticised once before (Acts 11:1–3). See also Acts 10 for the full details of Peter being shown that the gospel was for Gentiles as well.

because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

The primitive urge of the human being surfaces in Peter – the fear of others. Compare Proverbs 29:25. Why Peter, who before had spoken out, should now be afraid is not easy to explain. Perhaps this action merely reflects a weakness in Peter’s character. Several times it is recorded of Peter that he said one thing and did another. Compare John 13:37 and John 18:25. The problem lay in the attention that is given to the reaction and expectations of men, rather than to the truth of God.

Verse 13

The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy,

Peter’s action was not sincere. He acted out of fear, not out of changed conviction. He had already been happily “living as a Gentile” (verse 14). So clearly Peter **did** believe salvation was by grace and not by any Jewish ceremony. Once again, as before in his life, fear made him a hypocrite. The Greek word “hypocrisy” is made up of two words “under” and “judge”. A hypocrite like an actor is “judged under” or according to the mask he is wearing. Peter hid his true beliefs under a disguise of wrong actions.

so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

Barnabas had stood with Paul until now (verses 1,9). So Paul was left alone to insist that there is no difference between Jew or Greek and that salvation is received as a gift from God and not earned by human ceremony. What a lot would have been lost that day if Paul had not stood firm, even though alone. This break between Paul and Barnabas soon became even more severe (Acts 15:39).

Peter was recognised by his fellow believers as being a leader amongst them. He may have felt that a withdrawal from the Gentiles would not harm them and at the same time no offence would be caused to the Judaisers. But his actions were repeated by others, as even Barnabas, that great encourager (especially of the Gentile believers), followed Peter in this behaviour. For the sake of an easy way out, Peter moved

away from the truth and took people with him. Leaders have to be very careful about what they say and do.

Verse 14

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel,

The phrase “the truth of the gospel” comes twice in this chapter (verses 5 and 14). The word truth means more than the facts of the gospel or the doctrines of the gospel. The Greek word means the **reality** of the gospel or the **essence** of the gospel. This heart of the gospel is *our acceptance by God, whoever we are, through faith in Christ alone*. By withdrawing and eating separately, Peter was suggesting that Jews are accepted by God in some different way from Gentiles. That was failing to walk straight (correctly) according to gospel reality.

I said to Peter in front of them all,

As far as Paul was concerned Peter’s behaviour was undermining the gospel. Because Peter’s deviation from true Christian behaviour was in public and caused other people to be persuaded by it, Paul rebuked him publicly, to his face. Compare 1 Timothy 5:20. But if we ever have to point out similar public failure in another believer’s actions, let us never forget Galatians 6:1–3.

“You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew.

The Jews, as God’s chosen people, had been given the law and a full set of instructions. These were a temporary measure intended for the people to understand God’s holiness and how human sin separates them from God. These laws also showed how people could be reconciled to God. These laws were temporary until Jesus Christ came down to earth, when his death on the cross became the means of God’s anger being turned away. The laws and accompanying instructions were foreshadows of the work that Jesus Christ came to do. The Gentiles were those who were not Jews and, in general, were excluded from the privileges and favours the Jews enjoyed. Unfortunately, throughout their history, up until the coming of Christ, the Jews had developed the laws adding many of their own rules. The outward observation (ceremonial) of many of these rules became the way that they thought God could be pleased.

Peter was a Jew and had been brought up with all these Jewish traditions. He became a follower of Christ, accepting that it was not by following any ceremonial observances that a person is saved, but that Jesus Christ gave his own life for him. It was God’s undeserved favour that Jesus should die for Peter and take God’s punishment for his sin.

There was nothing that Peter could have done to assist Jesus in his work.

When Jesus died and rose from the dead, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile was destroyed (Eph. 2:14). For those who trusted in Christ for salvation, it made no difference whether they were from a Jewish or Gentile background. The Gentile became a follower of Jesus Christ in the same way that a Jewish person did. The Gentile did not have to become a Jew first (by going through ceremonial observances), but did so directly as a Gentile through God's grace. Peter demonstrated this principle by mixing with Gentile believers, having meals with them. This was very significant because under the Jewish laws preparation of food was to be done in a strict way (see the Focus Point at the end of this study). His upbringing is Jewish yet he is now, because of God's grace, able to be with Gentile believers because observance of the old Jewish rules are no longer valid. So he is no longer like a Jew of the old tradition.

How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?"²

By no longer eating with the Gentile believers Peter is sending out the wrong signal. His actions could be interpreted that the Judaisers are right and that conforming to ceremonial ritual is required to obtain God's salvation. The Gentiles, with whom he ate, would now think that they had to become Jews to be accepted by God. Peter, through compromise, denies the truth of the gospel and inadvertently pressurises the Gentiles to follow a superseded tradition.



Summary

In trying to show the Galatian believers how gospel truth must be guarded and upheld and not watered down, Paul gives them an example from a situation that occurred earlier in Antioch. Paul challenged Peter about his withdrawal from having meals with Gentile believers. Men had come from Jerusalem and Peter feared that they would criticise him for eating with Gentiles. In doing this Peter was denying the gospel by implying a separation of Jew and Gentile. The gospel has

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destroyed the barrier dividing Jew and Gentile and Peter's action suggested that he was advocating returning to the Old Testament covenant. Peter's thinking had in no way reverted to the former way, but he had not thought out the implications of his actions. The fear of man had overtaken him, which led him to seek a course of not offending critics. Christian believers have no option but to stand for the truth of the gospel, even if it means upsetting people who surround them. All of us have tendencies to think as Peter did. From his later epistles it is evident that Peter did accept his public rebuke and repented of his sin.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Disagreement between Christians (Galatians 2:11)

Points to notice:

- i. When the disagreement occurred. The church was spreading geographically and numerically; it was growing spiritually (Acts 11:26). See map on page 20 (Galatians Study No. 2). Problems often arise when Christian work is successful.
- ii. What the disagreement was about. Whether Peter's actions properly displayed the truth of the gospel. Problems often arise over questions of Christian behaviour. See notes on "The Christian difference" overleaf.
- iii. Why the disagreement arose. From a wrong fear. We know that Peter knew better than he behaved. See Acts 10: 9 – 16; 28. There will be problems if we behave differently from the truth we know.
- iv. How the disagreement ended. The truth of the gospel was preserved; Jews and Gentiles were one church. Peter had a great respect for Paul – see 2 Peter 3:15: "our beloved brother Paul". What a happy thing when disagreements are reconciled in truth and love.

Principles to learn:

- i. Peter's character included this weakness – he could be affected by his surroundings. Honest, impulsive, enthusiastic, brave before enemies, he could also suddenly collapse. (All these things in his

² The quotation marks finish at the end of verse 21 in the NIV. See the introduction to Study No.9 . We have inserted the quotation marks because we end this study here.

life can be traced in the Gospels). After Pentecost he had stood unshaken as a pillar in the church for 20 years or so. Yet, amid such a glorious career, the old weakness suddenly betrays him again. Compare Jeremiah 17:9. Old sins may break out again after years of absence. We must never cease to watch and pray.

- ii. Peter's conduct is reproved by Paul in the light of what they both knew to be gospel truth. See Acts 15:11 – Paul and Peter are agreed on this truth. It may seem a little thing for Peter to prefer to eat separately from Gentiles, but it was a denial of the basic gospel truth that all believers in Christ are one body. Paul was not opposing Peter on the grounds of personal ideas. It was gospel truth that was challenging Peter. We are to live not by personal opinions but according to gospel truth. Paul loved Peter; he loved Barnabas; but he loved truth more. Human examples are not reliable guides in Christian behaviour. Many disagreements ought never to take place if all persons would submit to their mutual understanding of the truth of the gospel, as taught in the Scriptures.
- iii. On another occasion Paul says he is ready to “become a Jew when preaching to Jews” (1 Co.9:20). But here he refuses to “become a Jew”. Is Paul inconsistent too? No! There is a difference between adopting good cultural habits in order to be friendly and so have opportunity to preach the gospel and, on the other hand, suggesting that one can only be a true Christian if one observes certain cultural regulations. Paul was right to do the former; Peter was wrong to do the latter. A believer is free to follow whatever cultural customs are not dishonouring to God. But such customs must never be made part of a special process of salvation.

Note

Paul here further demonstrates that he did not depend on the other apostles for his authority as an apostle (see 1:1,11,12; 2:6).

Peter is clearly not regarded by Paul as the first infallible Pope of the church.

The apostles were human and fallible. It is only when they were used to write Scripture that their words were inspired and infallible (2 Tim. 3:16,17).



Focus point: Jewish rules for eating and drinking and the Christian difference

In order to understand why it was hard for Jewish Christians to enjoy mealtime fellowship with Gentile Christians, we need to understand the many rules about food which the Jews had observed for centuries throughout the Old Testament period.

In Leviticus 11 God gave to the people of Israel strict instructions which divided their animals into “clean” and “unclean” kinds. No devout Israelite would touch or eat the flesh of any animal classified as unclean. People of other nations might well eat such flesh. God was teaching Israel that his people must live according to his Word and not copy unbelievers. There must be a difference between God's covenant people and all others. So the Jew would not eat Gentile food.

Daniel gives us an example of the godly Jew who would not eat Gentile food (Dan.1:8–16). Possibly the meat that had been prepared was unclean according to Leviticus 11 and perhaps it had been offered to idols. Either way, it would be offensive to Daniel.

Over the centuries the teachers among the Jews had made many more rules and regulations to add to Leviticus 11 and to apply to situations where the Jew had to buy his food from a Gentile merchant. Under these circumstances certain procedures had to be followed. There were also rules about using utensils that had been handled by Gentiles and were therefore thought to be unclean. The Samaritan woman (John 4:9) probably referred to this rule when she said that Jews and Samaritans “do not use things in common” as the literal meaning is. There were also rules about ceremonial washing before eating (Mark 7:1–5) and about what foods may be eaten on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28).

In view of all this it is easy to see how a Jew would find it difficult to eat in the company of a Gentile. Nevertheless, the coming of Christ and his death on the cross had fulfilled all the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament and made totally unnecessary all the man-made rules that had been added to the Mosaic law.

Now everyone who believes in Christ, Jew or Gentile, is saved by the same grace of God. God's people no longer belong to one race.

There is still to be a difference between God's people and unbelievers but it is not a difference between one race and another; not a difference

between foods or cultural habits. Now the difference is between those who have faith in Christ and those who reject Christ. All who are in Christ are equal, whatever their race (Eph.2:11–16). All who are in Christ are freed from the burden of law-keeping for their salvation, for Christ has fulfilled the law (Rom. 10:4). All who are in Christ, therefore, should be free to have fellowship together as equals.

Christians are still free to refrain from eating certain foods, or to keep good national traditions, if they so wish. But such habits must never be regarded as the reason why God should especially favour them, nor as the cause of their salvation. Moreover, no Christian believer should use his freedom to behave as he may wish, if his actions cause hurt and offence to another Christian believer (1 Co.8:1–13). Where Scripture gives clear instructions (e.g. John 4:24) there can be no discussion about how to behave. But in any matter in which there is no exact biblical instruction (e.g. whether to be vegetarian or meat-eating; whether to wear Indian, African or European dress, etc. etc) the believer is free to act as he wishes. We are to enjoy Christian liberty now that Christ has fulfilled the law's demands for us. This liberty is not lawless however. The believer will test his behaviour by five tests and only behave in ways **that satisfy all five:**

YES, if

NOT CAUSING OFFENCE
(Rom. 4:21)
NOT HABIT FORMING
(1 Co.6:12)
SPECIFIC REASON FOR
(1 Co.10:23)
NOT DISRUPTIVE
(1 Co.14:40)
GLORIFIES GOD
(1 Co.10:31)



Over to you

As a Christian believer and one who is in a position of responsibility, are there actions you have taken that may have undermined the truth of the gospel in other people's eyes?