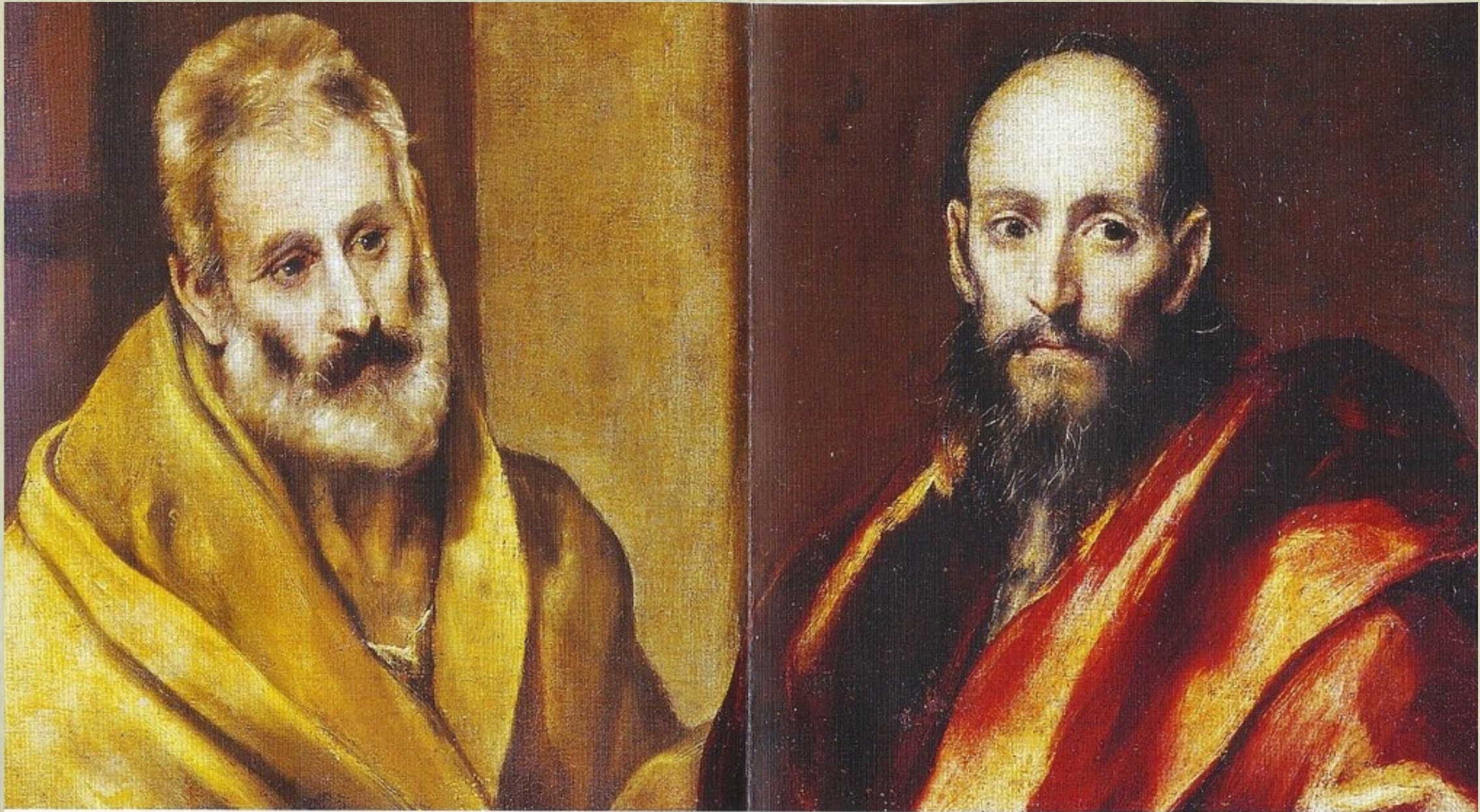


04. Galatians 2:11-14



El Greco (Theotokopoulos, Domenico 1541-1614): Saints Peter and Paul (detail). St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum. © 2013. Photo Scala, Florence

Galatians 2:11-14

‘When Cephas came to Antioch [after the mission to Galatia, Acts 14:26-28], I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles [‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane’, Acts 10:15]. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy [acting to please], so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel [breaking table-communion], I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

The confrontation to which Paul refers here takes place in Antioch. Since the church in Antioch plays such an important role in the development of the early church, and since what happened in Antioch is central to the issues at stake in this letter, it is important, before analysing Paul's account, to attempt to get a picture of the church in Antioch at the time.

Acts 11:19-26

‘Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists [Greek-speaking Gentiles] also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Acts 11:19-26

‘When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians.’

From this we learn that the church in Antioch was originally made up of Jews. Then a large number of Gentiles joined the community. We know from the account of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1 – 11:18) that the Jerusalem Christians (though, as we already know, not all of them) had come to see that it was God's will that Gentiles be admitted into the community without having to become Jews through circumcision. This was a huge step for them to take and it says a lot about the extraordinary openness of Jesus himself and the powerful example he gave by the way in which he welcomed people, whoever they might be, and shared their table with such simplicity and love. This was a major factor in his being rejected. It was also very impressive for those who opted to join him.

The welcoming of people like Cornelius into the community says a lot also about the powerful and convincing presence of Jesus' Spirit in the community and about the openness and willingness of the community to see what the Holy Spirit was doing among them and to let go their long held and cherished assumptions by accepting Gentiles as equals.

For all that, inevitably there would have been only a small number of Gentiles in the churches within Palestine, and their presence would not have constituted a threat to the Jewish character of the Christian communities. We can assume that they were happy to adapt to Jewish dietary regulations.

The large numbers of Gentiles joining the community in Antioch, plus the fact that Antioch was a Gentile and not a Jewish city, created a different kind of dynamic.

When news of what was happening there reached Jerusalem, they sent down Barnabas, one of their most trusted members, ‘a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith’ (Acts 11:24), to investigate. ‘When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced’.

No doubt he sent a favourable report back to Jerusalem. Barnabas stayed on in Antioch. He knew Paul. In fact it was he who introduced Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27).

Barnabas knew that Paul was just the sort of person that the Antioch church needed, so he went to Tarsus, brought Paul back with him, and they worked together in the Antioch church, helping to nurture a community in which Jews and Gentiles were learning to live together in a communion of love engendered and nurtured by the Spirit of Jesus.

Then comes the scene which we have just read in Paul (Galatians 2:1-10). Though Paul did not mention Antioch in his account, we know that it was from Antioch that Paul and Barnabas were sent as delegates with assistance for the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-29). While they were there the matter of Jewish-Gentile relationships in the church came up again. It is clear that there was a determined group in Jerusalem that was against what was happening in Antioch. However, as we have heard, the leaders in the church agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised: they were not bound by the law. Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch (Acts 12:25), and that it was from Antioch that they set out on the mission which took them to Cyprus and then to the southern regions of Galatia.

We quote again Luke's description of their return (Acts 14:26-28):

‘They sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.’

The scene which Paul now recounts seems to fit best into the period after the mission to Galatia and before the Jerusalem Assembly. Since it involves Peter (Cephas), we need to recall the key aspects of a conversion which Peter experienced. Because of what he came to see in prayer while he was staying with Simon, a tanner, in Joppa (Acts 10:9-16), and because of the Pentecost experience of Cornelius and the other Gentiles in Caesarea, Peter realised that not only was God calling Gentiles into the church, but that the dietary rules of the law did not have absolute value. God declared all food clean.

Another implication was that Peter could eat with Gentiles (Acts 10:15). This had profound implications for when the Christian community came together to share a common meal, especially the Eucharist.

So it is that when Peter (Cephas) comes to Antioch he quite happily shared table fellowship with Gentiles who are not following the Jewish dietary laws. He may even have been disregarding these laws himself – at least that is the impression we get from Paul's account where he speaks of Peter 'living like a Gentile and not like a Jew'. This should come as no surprise in the light of the vision which Peter had at Joppa in which he was told by God to eat food that was forbidden by the law (see Acts 10:13)

However, when Jewish Christians came to Antioch from Jerusalem ('from James'), Peter, Barnabas and others, withdrew from the common table and began to eat apart. Their behaviour incensed Paul because, whatever their motive, they were breaking communion, and making the Gentiles feel like second-class Christians. He condemned them for what he called their 'hypocrisy'. They were 'not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel' (2:14). Before Paul and Barnabas had gone to Cyprus and Galatia, they had gone together to Jerusalem with relief from those affected by a famine (see Acts 11:27-29). James, Cephas and John agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised. However, we are not told that anything was said at that meeting about how Gentiles were to eat when sharing a meal with Jews, nor about exempting Jewish Christians from their obligations as Jews (see Leviticus 11).

The purpose of the food laws was to keep reminding the people of Israel that they have been set aside by the Holy One, and that they must not do anything that would compromise or contaminate what is sacred. Since life is sacred, they could not drink blood, or eat meat from which the blood had not been drained.

‘You are a people holy to the Lord your God; it is you the Lord has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. You shall not eat any abhorrent thing’ (Deuteronomy 14:2-3).

A person who broke these ancient taboos was declared 'unclean' and had to be cut off from social contact. It was especially important that they not contaminate places deemed holy because of God's presence. The separation of what is 'holy' from what is 'unclean' led to lands other than Israel being called 'unclean' (Amos 7:17).

Since table fellowship is essential to a Christian community, and since there was a long history of problems between Jews and Gentiles when it came to sharing meals, it is understandable that, at this early stage of experimenting in how best to build community, different churches may have gone in different directions. Whereas in Judea Gentile Christians probably followed Jewish food laws, in Antioch it may well have been the Jews who adapted.

Peter had no trouble with this, for the reasons already noted, but when the group from Jerusalem arrived, he changed his behaviour. Perhaps Peter, while happy to eat with Gentiles in Antioch according to the customs that were followed there, was concerned as to how Jews back in Jerusalem would react when his behaviour was reported by the visitors who did not share his openness. Perhaps he behaved as he did so as not to jeopardise his mission among Jewish Christians. Whatever his reasons – and we should note that Barnabas agreed with him – Paul objected strongly. It is important for us to remain with Paul's focus (the gospel) and not to distract ourselves by focusing on the personal relations between Paul and Peter or Barnabas or James.

If Peter and Barnabas had changed their behaviour because of Paul's words he would surely have mentioned that fact here. We can safely assume that on this occasion Paul's view did not prevail. We can also assume that Paul had heard that the Judaeans missionaries were using this disagreement to demonstrate how wrong Paul was and how they had the backing of James, Peter and Barnabas. Otherwise it is difficult to see why Paul mentions the scene.

It is likely that it was this confrontation in Antioch that was the occasion for the calling of the Jerusalem Assembly (Acts 15:1.5), which, as it turned out, confirmed the earlier private agreement that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised. On the matter of food laws, it said nothing about Jews being free from obedience to the dietary laws. Furthermore, it was agreed that Gentile Christians should comply with these prescriptions when they are sharing a meal with Jews (Acts 15:20-21, 29).

It seems that, as a result of the Assembly, Paul came to see the appropriateness of the decisions that were reached, at least as regards communities that were largely Jewish. However, prior to the Assembly and in view of the practice that had been prevailing in Antioch, one can understand Paul's vehement reaction. There is nothing, however, to stop Paul, once the matter had been properly discerned and decided, coming to agree with Peter and Barnabas that Jewish sensibilities should be respected in shared meals. The decision at the Assembly was not about the basis of salvation. It was not insisting on Gentiles becoming Jews. It was a pastoral decision about what was the more loving behaviour in a complex situation. Why could not Paul have come to see that it was right to ask the Gentiles to respect the sensitivities of their Jewish brothers and sisters?

According to Luke this is precisely what Paul did. Luke tells us that after the assembly Paul returned to the churches of Galatia, and ‘as they went from town to town, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem’ (Acts 16:4).

What Paul is objecting to in this letter to the Galatians is the Jews separating themselves from the Gentiles and so breaking communion. This is something he could never countenance.

The key decision of the Assembly, and one which supports Paul's missionary practice, his understanding of the gospel and the central thrust of this letter, was that Gentiles could become Christians as Gentiles. They were not bound by the Jewish Torah. The practical directions concerning food were about ensuring harmony and sensitivity in a community an essential element of which was sharing in the Eucharistic celebration.

Where the majority of the community was composed of Jews who saw it as a matter of fidelity to continue obeying the dietary laws of the Torah, charity pointed towards the Gentiles adapting to these laws. Where the majority was Gentile, however, the situation was different. As we shall find in later letters, Paul felt free to advise a different way of acting in the largely Gentile churches which he founded. What is not negotiable is that Jew and Gentile Christians must share the Eucharist together.

All this, however, was in the future. As Paul is writing his letter to the Galatians, he sees the behaviour of Peter and Barnabas as a response in fear to the group that ‘**came from James**’ – the same kind of fear that the Judaeian missionaries are stirring up in Galatia. Imperceptibly, Paul’s words to Peter merge into a passionate cry to the Galatians and a challenge to the Judaeian missionaries to focus again on the central truths of the gospel concerning which there can be no compromise. It is to this statement that we now turn.