

## **Pope: Paul's Conflict With Peter Taught Dialogue**

Explains Apostles Were Seeing Two Different Perspectives

VATICAN CITY, OCT. 1, 2008 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).-The relationship between Sts. Peter and Paul helped the two apostles to learn that only sincere dialogue, open to the truth of Christ, can guide the path of the Church.

The Pope affirmed this today during the general audience in St. Peter's Square, in which he continued with his series of catecheses on the Apostle Paul. The Church is celebrating through June the Pauline Jubilee Year, which marks the 2,000th anniversary of the Apostle's birth.

The Holy Father spoke of two main encounters between Paul and Peter: first at the Council of Jerusalem and then in the well-known encounter where Paul rebuked the first Pope.

Regarding this second episode, Benedict XVI explained that the perspectives of the two apostles were different, though both were eager to protect the faith of believers.

The incident arose over the question of what to do when Christians of both Jewish and pagan origin share at one table.

The Pope recalled that initially, "Peter, shared the table with both, but with the arrival of some Christians linked to James [...] Peter had begun to avoid contact at the table with pagans, so as not to scandalize those [of Jewish origin] who continued observing the rules regarding food purity. [...] That choice deeply divided the Christians come from circumcision and those come from paganism."

### **Concerns**

The Holy Father noted that Peter's decision "brought a fiery reaction from Paul, who arrived to the point of accusing Peter and the rest of hypocrisy."

But, the Pontiff clarified, in reality "the concerns of Paul, on one hand, and Peter and Barnabas on the other, were different."

He explained: "For [Peter], the separation of the pagans represented a way to teach and avoid scandalizing the believers coming from Judaism. For Paul, it constituted, on the other hand, the danger of a misunderstanding of the universal salvation in Christ offered as much to the pagans as to the Jews.

"If justification was brought about only in virtue of faith in Christ, of conformity with him, without any work of the law, then what sense was there in still observing the [rules on] purity of food when participating at the table?"

Thus, Benedict XVI contended, it is likely that Peter and Paul simply had taken different perspectives: "For [Peter], not losing the Jews who had embraced the Gospel, for [Paul], not diminishing the salvific value of the death of Christ for all believers."

The Pope mentioned, however, that Paul would later face the same dilemma, and espouse a perspective similar to that which he rebuked.

"Writing to the Christians of Rome a few years later -- around the middle of the decade of the 50s -- Paul will find himself before a similar situation and he will ask the strong that they not eat impure food so as not to lose the weak or cause scandal for them," the Holy Father recalled.

### **A lesson**

Thus, Benedict XVI concluded, the Antioch event "showed itself to be a lesson both for Peter and for Paul. Only sincere dialogue, open to the truth of the Gospel, could guide the path of the Church."

And, he affirmed, the same lesson needs to be learned today: "With the distinct charisms entrusted to Peter and Paul, let us all be guided by the Spirit, trying to live in the liberty that finds its orientation in faith in Christ and is made tangible in service to our brothers.

"It is essential to be ever more conformed to Christ. It is in this way that one is truly free, in this way the deepest nucleus of the law is expressed in us: the love of God and neighbor. Let us ask the Lord to teach us to share his sentiments, to learn from him the true liberty and evangelical love that embraces every human being.

### **Robert Sungenis comments:**

Although I admire Pope Benedict XVI, to be very honest, I believe he is quite incorrect in his analysis of the conflict between Peter and Paul in Galatians 2:11-16. I don't know anyone in the history of the church who has taken his side on this passage. Previous exegesis has taken the thesis-antithesis approach wherein Paul presents a thesis, and Peter's antithesis is not only wrong but it is akin to perverting the Gospel. Note the factual evidence the passage gives us: (1) Peter is to be condemned for leaving the Gentiles with whom he was eating when the Jews came to Antioch. (2) Paul adds that Peter engaged in this dissimulation because he "feared the Jews," and that other Jews joined Peter in what Paul calls "hypocrisy." (3) Paul adds that when

Peter and fellow Jews did this deed, “they were not being straightforward about the truth of the Gospel.” These are serious indictments. Conversely, Peter says nothing in return to Paul. There is, contrary to what Pope Benedict says, no “dialogue” between Peter and Paul. Rather, Peter stands condemned for his hypocrisy and the passage offers him no defense.

Pope Benedict claims: “For [Peter], the separation of the pagans represented a way to teach and avoid scandalizing the believers coming from Judaism.” This is a stretch. There is no indication in the text that Peter was justified in his actions, or that he had the right to depart from the Gentiles to avoid a so-called “scandal” with the Jews. In fact, the accusation of Paul against Peter serve as the backbone for the rest of what Paul teaches in the Galatian epistle about the futility of the Jewish law and the saving power of the Gospel, all of which is done under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In Galatians 1:11, Paul tells us that the teaching he is presenting in the Galatian epistle was not given to him “by any man” but taught to him “by a revelation from Jesus Christ.”

Moreover, in the Galatians epistle we see no sympathy from Paul for the Jews, and, opposite Pope Benedict’s claim, the Jews in Galatians 2:12-15 are not understood as “believers from Judaism.” The text does not say whether they were believers. As far as Paul is concerned about the Jewish party in Galatia, they were the ones who were still pushing circumcision (Galatians 5:1-4; 6:13-14). More importantly, Paul’s major theme in the epistle is that there is now no distinction between Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3:28; 6:16). With these Gospel truths in the foreground, how could Peter be justified in refusing to eat with Gentiles when the Jews came on the scene? We can just imagine what his excuse might have been: “I’m sorry, Joe, I cannot eat with you any longer because some Jews are coming here and I don’t want to scandalize them by eating with what they believe are low-lives like you.” Is it not the case in Acts 10:34-35 that Peter was taught the exact opposite, that is, God shows no partiality to anyone, especially Gentiles among Jews? So why would this suddenly change in Galatians 2, as the pope claims? How else could Jews be scandalized by seeing Peter eat with Gentiles if not for the pride of race that the Christian Gospel was seeking to eradicate from their Jewish hearts?

The pope’s view that: “For [Peter], not losing the Jews who had embraced the Gospel, for [Paul], not diminishing the salvific value of the death of Christ for all believers,” is simply short-sighted. First, the pope assumes the Jews had already accepted the Gospel, but there is no indication in the text that they had. Hence, the whole basis for the pope’s interpretation of the passage is built on an unproven foundation.

But even if the Jews in Galatians 2 were believers, shouldn’t they, all the more, be required to set aside their racial pride and accept Gentiles as neighbors, especially since Peter had befriended these Gentiles so as to win them over to the Gospel? Why does the pope give no consideration as to how the Gentiles will feel when they see Peter depart from them for no

more than the Jews who think of themselves superior to Gentiles? Why is it, also, that Pope Benedict seems to have no qualms about scandalizing faithful Catholics by having an unconverted Jewish rabbi speak to the hundreds of bishops at the current Synod on Scripture, yet he allows for Peter to claim that the Jews would be scandalized by seeing Peter eat with Gentiles? I submit there is a double standard working here. It seems that the pope's criterion in both cases is how the scene affects the Jews, not how it affects Gentiles.

If there was even the slightest hint in the passage that Peter was in the right, the pope would have at least some basis for making his non-traditional exegesis, but there is none. Everything in the Galatian epistle speaks loudly against Peter's actions. I'm afraid to say that the pope's understanding of this passage falls right in line with the liberal hermeneutic that we have seen so often in the last forty years. It is the theological version of the Hegelian synthesis. Not surprisingly, the pope's interpretation of Galatians 2 is the precise way Protestant liberals, following Hegel, had interpreted the passage. As opposed to seeing Paul's thesis (i.e., that the Gospel was not to be compromised) as the truly correct position and distinct from the incorrect position of Peter's antithesis (i.e., that it was acceptable to leave one party so that another party would not feel put out), the liberal Protestants considered Paul's position as an opinion; Peter's position as another opinion; and the outcome a synthesis that would see its results many centuries later as the Church struggled with how to regard the Jews.

Lastly, I must also take issue with the pope's conclusion here as well:

"The Pope mentioned, however, that Paul would later face the same dilemma, and espouse a perspective similar to that which he rebuked. 'Writing to the Christians of Rome a few years later -- around the middle of the decade of the 50s -- Paul will find himself before a similar situation and he will ask the strong that they not eat impure food so as not to lose the weak or cause scandal for them,' the Holy Father recalled."

Unfortunately, here the pope makes another exegetical blunder, for he is mixing very different contexts, Romans 14 and Galatians 2. In Romans 14, Paul is speaking about those with weak consciences who, because they have not been able to overcome some erroneous notions about eating meat that was once offered to idols, are to be treated with much sensitivity and love, such that a stronger Christian should not eat the idol meat in front of the weaker Christian. This is an act of pure love, for it puts the weaker brother first and human appetites second.

But the situation in Galatians 2 is quite different. Peter, apparently on a mission to befriend the Gentiles, has already accepted them and therefore he eats with them. Galatians 2:12 indicates that Peter had been eating with the Gentiles for quite a while, and thus he, as a Jewish Christian, knew it was God-pleasing. But Peter forsakes his Gentiles friends when the Jews

come. Now, if these Jews were believers (as the pope claims), should not Peter have persuaded these Jewish Christian to accept the Gentiles, even as Peter, a good Christian seeking to set an example, had done? Why is it that the pope allows these Jewish believers to remain in ignorance about the Gospel mandate to have fellowship with Gentiles? Why does the pope allow the prideful attitude of these Jewish believers toward Gentiles to go unchecked? Shouldn't it be Peter's job to set these Jewish believers straight about what their responsibilities are toward Gentiles? The fact that Peter did not do so was rightly interpreted by Paul as "hypocrisy."

Conversely, if the pope were to change his mind and say that the Jews who came on the scene were unbelievers, in this case as well, Peter's dissimulation is to be condemned, for Peter would be allowing Jewish unbelievers to dictate how Peter, a Christian, is supposed to act toward Gentiles.

As you can see, in either case (i.e., whether the Jews who come to Antioch are believers or unbelievers) the pope's interpretation of the passage falters. The only correct interpretation of the passage is what we see in the tradition: Paul was right in condemning Peter for his hypocrisy, and the pointing out of the hypocrisy becomes the backbone for the rest of what Paul writes in the Galatian epistle about the futility of the Jewish law and the saving power of the New Covenant Gospel.

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