

SERIES: Great Church Fights

SERMON: **Heavyweight Bout Over Doctrine and Practice**

SCRIPTURE: Galatians 2:11-14

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Two weeks ago we learned that there are three major kinds of conflict in the church: positive, negative, and neutral. Then last week we examined a case of negative conflict—one stirred up by divisive politics in the Church. Today we turn our attention to a case of positive conflict, one in which the motive of the person who stirred it up was good, his method of tackling the problem was correct, and the results were a significant benefit to the church. It is essential that we understand the differences between these kinds of conflict and react to each kind in an appropriate fashion.

Today we will be addressing a major doctrinal conflict that hit the early church. So major was it that it might be called *The Heavyweight Bout of the Early Church*. Ten years ago Jan and Andy and I attended the EFCA National Conference, which happened to be held in Palm Springs that year. We flew to Las Vegas because the airfare from St. Louis was so much cheaper and rented a car to drive the rest of the way. We stayed one night at the MGM Hotel in Las Vegas. It just happened to be the same night that Mike Tyson was fighting Evander Holyfield at the same hotel. Some of you will recall that at that particular fight Tyson was especially hungry and chewed the ear off his opponent. We didn't see the fight, but we saw a lot of the commotion that fight generated. Tyson, of course, was suspended from boxing and his \$30 million purse was withheld.

Sadly, this kind of theater of the absurd seems to be par for the course for the sport of boxing. It is not my favorite sport; in fact, I wouldn't cross the street to watch a boxing match. But I thought I would appeal to boxing as a useful extended metaphor in which to dress today's Scripture passage, which in just four short verses covers one of the great church fights of the first century. Let's read Galatians 2:11-14:

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.

When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" This is the Word of the Lord.

Once again I want to read this same brief text from *The Message*:

Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here's the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That's how fearful he was of the

conservative Jewish clique that's been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined in that hypocrisy so that even Barnabas was swept along in the charade.

But when I saw that they were not maintaining a steady, straight course according to the Message, I spoke up to Peter in front of them all: "If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you're not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem cronies?"

Now I want us to pay close attention to the context here in Galatians 2. In the opening paragraphs of the chapter Paul takes a rather dim view of apostolic succession and absolute ecclesiastical authority. He tells us about a trip he made to Jerusalem where he had a private audience with the leaders of the church there, including James, Peter and John. Then in verse 6 he shares with us his evaluation of the results of this meeting: "As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message."

He's speaking about the Apostles, but he isn't trying to undermine respect for them; rather he's simply affirming that one's position in the church doesn't make one infallible, nor does it give anyone the right to supercede the authority of the Gospel. Now I believe the Apostles were inspired when they were writing Scripture, but the rest of the time they were perfectly capable of making errors and misjudgments, just like the rest of us.

Here's the point: It is dangerous to become awestruck by ecclesiastical authorities and to consider them infallible. Why? Because sometimes they are wrong. In fact, we are going to discover that one of the greatest churchmen ever (an Apostle, no less, in fact, the Apostle that some believe to be the first Pope), was guilty of hypocrisy and stood in need of public censure. More importantly we're going to find that another great leader cared enough to confront him. The Church is richer because of the resulting Heavyweight Bout. Let's begin with the fight card.

The Fight card

The contenders included the reigning heavyweight champion, who was a battle-scarred veteran named "Rocky Johnson." His first name was actually a nickname, Petros in Greek. His last name was Johnson, or Son of John. We know him better as the Apostle Peter. He had emerged from the earthly ministry of Jesus as the *de facto* leader of the Twelve. His record was not unblemished, but in recent years he had experienced many more victories than defeats. His fan following was quite large. At the first great Church council in Jerusalem, which is recorded in Acts 15, it was Peter who carried the day in favor of the doctrine of salvation by grace alone. When Peter spoke, people listened.

His challenger was a 95-pound weakling named Paul, a slightly younger contemporary of Peter and a man with considerably less exposure in the church. Never a member of the Twelve, he nevertheless called himself an "Apostle" and could actually set forth a pretty mean argument for

being one. But his background was highly suspect. While Peter was evangelizing thousands in the early days of the church, Paul was busy persecuting Christians as fast as he could round them up. His conversion was initially greeted with the same sort of skepticism that would result from a report today that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been born again.

Nevertheless, in the 17 or 18 years since his conversion Paul had shown himself to be a real champion of his adopted Christian faith, and while he rarely showed up at Headquarters (Jerusalem), he was making quite a stir in the outlying areas. In fact, he had just completed a major missionary thrust into Asia Minor and reports of his success were coming from many sources. He had fought several major bouts against opponents of the faith, most of them against tremendous odds, but he seemed to come out a winner every time.

The location of this particular fight was Antioch in Syria. Paul and Barnabas had been doing evangelistic work in this great city for several years. And this is where the disciples were first called Christians. It was a major city in the ancient world and very important to the early development of the Christian faith.

The date, I believe (though there is some debate on the issue) was about 49 or 50 A.D., within a year or two after the Great Jerusalem Council described in the previous ten verses, and less than 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The media were there, too (aren't they always?) I deduce this from the strong impression given by the text in Gal. 2 that reports of this fight had already reached the Galatian churches, to whom Paul is writing. Only the reports were distorted (which shouldn't surprise anyone familiar with the media). Look at verse 11. It doesn't read as if Paul is giving them their first information about this incident. He doesn't say, "Once upon a time Peter came to Antioch and I opposed him to his face," but "when he came I opposed him *because . . .*" and then he goes on to explain the facts of the situation. I think Paul is attempting to correct the reports already made of this event in the churches of Galatia.

It's time we did some background work on this Bout, particularly regarding the reigning champion.

The background of the reigning champion

Peter started his career under a great manager. I'm thinking, of course, of Jesus Himself. And I'm thinking of the training He offered His disciples in one particular area of Christian thought and practice—that racism and classism and sexism are all antithetical to the Gospel. When Jesus called Peter from his career as a fisherman to a new career as a champion of truth, He began the painfully slow process of convincing Peter that the Gospel was for anyone who would believe.

At first Christ communicated this primarily by example as He spent the bulk of His own time ministering to those whom Peter was brought up to believe were outcasts and hopeless—Gentiles, women, lepers, tax gatherers, the poor, the demon-possessed, and so forth. Peter was a slow

learner, and at times he tried to isolate Jesus from those who were unclean, but eventually he came to realize that the good news of salvation was available to all who believed.

Still Peter had a ways to go. It was one thing to admit that Gentiles could be saved. It was quite another to treat them as brothers in Christ. A clear parallel might be drawn to many American white churches in our nation's past. Almost no one in these churches denied that black people could be saved, but many refused to treat them as equal brothers and sisters in Christ. Nor were they welcome in white churches. I clearly remember a black couple coming to the Bible church we attended in Dallas in 1967. Several people got up and moved when they sat down. That was fairly normal in evangelical churches in the south, and that was just forty years ago!

Because of Peter's prejudice toward Gentiles, God decided to give him some special training in this matter in Joppa.

He began his special training in Joppa. The story is recorded for us in Acts 10, and while I'm sure you are familiar with it, let me retell it very briefly. About noon one day Peter went up to the roof of his house to pray. He fell into a trance, and saw heaven open and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. In that sheet were all kinds of unclean animals—not dirty animals but non-kosher animals. A voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill these animals and eat them." He responded, "I've never eaten anything that wasn't kosher in my whole life." The voice reprimanded him, "Don't call anything unclean that God has made clean."

This happened three times (I guess Peter was a slow learner). Then suddenly the sheet went back up into heaven. Not surprisingly Peter was baffled about what the meaning of all this was. At the very same time three men arrived at the door of the house asking for Peter. They were a delegation from Caesarea, sent by a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Regiment. He was a devout, God-fearing man, generous and a man given to prayer, but he wasn't a Christian yet. He too had a vision which told him to send men to Joppa, find a man named Peter, and bring him back to Caesarea. The Holy Spirit told Peter it was OK, and so Peter invited these Gentiles into his house as his guests, without a doubt the first time in his life he had entertained Gentile guests in his home.

Two days later Peter was in Caesarea being entertained in the home of Cornelius, without a doubt the first time in his life he had been a guest in a Gentile home. Listen to what Peter said to the large gathering of friends Cornelius brought to his home to meet Peter: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So what I was sent for, I came without raising any objection" (Acts 10:28-29).

Well, not exactly without any objection, but what an amazing act of courage for Peter. And what an amazing result! Cornelius and all his friends were converted, were filled with the Holy Spirit, and were even baptized. All because Peter was willing to change his entire cultural orientation in favor of a truly biblical view of the fact that the ground is level at the foot of the Cross.

And if only he had adhered to what he learned there in Joppa there would never have been a fight in Antioch. But unfortunately . . .

Peter violated training rules in Antioch. Peter traveled to Antioch for ministry. When he first arrived in Antioch he made a habit of staying in Gentile Christian homes, eating with Gentile Christians, and worshiping with Gentile Christians. He fully accepted the integration of the Body of Christ, treating Gentile believers as his brothers and sisters. UNTIL, that is, a delegation arrived in Antioch from Jerusalem.

Galatians 2:12 tells us that "certain men came from James." I suspect this was a group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who came to Antioch to see how things were going or to take part in a missions conference. We don't know for sure why they came, but we do know for sure that they were conservative, legalistic, and separatistic. The reason why the church in Jerusalem was so conservative is that it was racially almost entirely Jewish. To reach other Jews they tried to avoid any unnecessary offence to Jewish people. Therefore they kept the Mosaic Law and followed Jewish customs and culture as much as possible.

The *problem* was that they expected Gentile Christians living in totally different circumstances to also keep Jewish laws and customs. It would be kind of like an American missionary who practiced abstaining from alcohol going to Germany, planting a church, and demanding that all new converts abstain from drinking beer if they want to be members of the Church.

At any rate, this delegation from Jerusalem, as we are informed in verse 12, stirred up fear in Peter's heart and produced a very unfortunate change in his behavior. Proverbs 29:25 says, "The fear of man brings a snare. But he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted." Peter developed a fear of man. Why was he afraid? Well, if this delegation from Jerusalem saw him eating with Gentiles he might not be invited to speak at the next Annual Apostles Bible Conference in Jerusalem. The honoraria he counted on might begin to dry up. His book and video sales might fall off. I don't know, but for some reason he feared the conservatives. And he yielded to their pressure.

You know, this is not the first time the fear of man got to Peter. During Jesus Christ's trial he was identified by a little servant girl as one of Jesus' disciples, and with an oath he denied it three times. He didn't abandon his beliefs about Jesus—he simply lacked the courage to stand up for his convictions. The same is true here in Antioch. Paul doesn't accuse Peter of heresy so much as hypocrisy, which is feigning to believe what one does not believe. I'm sure I have mentioned before that the Greek word for hypocrisy paints a very vivid word picture. It literally means "to speak from down under," and it describes how actors used to communicate. They would hold up a mask on a stick and speak from down under the mask. Peter was wearing a mask to suit his audience.

Ralph Keiper, a veteran Bible teacher from Denver, paraphrases Peter's mistake graphically:

"Peter, I smell ham on your breath. You forgot your certs. There was a time when you wouldn't eat ham because you thought it would keep you out of heaven. Then after you understood God's grace in Christ it didn't matter if you ate ham. But now when the no-ham

eaters have come from Jerusalem you have gone back to your kosher ways. But the smell of ham lingers on your breath. You are most inconsistent."

Friends, this whole scene raises for each of us the monumental issue of personal integrity. Are we one person at church and another person at work? I knew a man who went to enormous lengths to hide the fact that he was addicted to tobacco. He would excuse himself from any meeting that lasted longer than an hour, grab a smoke, and come back smelling like he had used Lysol for mouthwash. He kept air freshener in his car and explained his constant coughing as allergies. And to this day I'm sure he thinks I didn't know he smoked. The funny thing about it was that I was less concerned about his smoking than about his hypocrisy. I would have had more respect for him if he lit up a stogie in my presence.

On the other hand, I remember so well visiting our best friends, Jim and Diane Brower, in a little town north of Paris where they were missionaries for twelve years. They always served a glass of wine with their evening meal, but toward the end of our stay with them some other guests arrived—a deacon and his wife from their home church, a very conservative independent Baptist church back in Michigan—the church from which they received the largest amount of their support.

I remember the discussion Jim and Diane had about whether they should they hide the wine rack when this couple came to their house. To their credit they decided, "No," and when we all sat down at the evening meal they asked everyone, as was their normal custom, "Would you like a glass of wine?" To their surprise the deacon and his wife said, "Yes." The Browsers refused to be hypocrites and their fears turned out to be groundless.

The issue is not the habit itself, whether one is dealing with eating ham with Gentiles, smoking, drinking wine or anything else that is not categorically forbidden in Scripture; the issue is the hypocrisy involved in pretending to be something we are not.

Peter's actions had a ripple effect upon other trainees. (13) No man is an island. Especially is that true of those in leadership. Up until this time the Jewish Christians in Antioch had been quite content to worship and fellowship in unity with Gentile Christians. But when a man of Peter's stature set an example of discrimination, the rest of the Jewish Christians followed suit. Paul goes on to say (I believe with a good deal of inward pain) that the results were far-reaching. Verse 13 reads, "The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray."

Barnabas was Paul's closest companion. Barnabas was the one who had recruited him to come to Antioch in the first place. But *even Barnabas* was influenced to follow Peter's example of racism and segregation.¹

The Fight Itself

It started when Paul publicly challenged the Champion, Rocky Johnson, to put up his dukes. Why did he do so, especially in public? Surely, Peter was wrong, we've already seen that. But we don't

call people down publicly every time they commit a little mistake, at least not if we care to maintain unity in the Church.

The problem is that this was *not* just a little mistake.

Paul publicly challenged the Champion because the stakes were high and no one else was willing to do it. In fact, the Gospel itself was at stake. Notice how verse 14 puts it: "I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the Gospel." Well, how can eating or not eating with certain groups amount to a distortion of the Gospel? The last part of verse 14 makes it clear that the Gentiles were interpreting Peter's withdrawal from them as a clear signal that if they desired to be accepted as brothers in Christ then they had to first obey Jewish laws and customs. In fact, they were feeling compelled to become Jews before they could become Christians, to go by Mt. Sinai on the way to Mt. Calvary! And that is heresy! Just as is anything we add to the simplicity of the Gospel. There are those who say you must be baptized in order to be saved. Others say you must belong to this church or that to be saved. That too is heresy.

Paul had to challenge Peter because no one else was willing to. No one else had the guts to stand up to someone as important as the Apostle Peter and tell him he was a hypocrite or challenge the theology behind his hypocrisy. It takes a mighty courageous and discerning person to do such a thing. We need people in the church who are willing to stand up to their pastor, their favorite radio preacher, Billy Graham, or anyone else and tell them they've blown it. This one solitary act of courage on the part of Paul probably changed the entire course of church history.ⁱⁱ

Well, what was the outcome of this Heavyweight Bout, anyway? You're going to be disappointed if you like a good fight, especially after this enormous build-up I've given it today, because the fight never even came off.

The results of this challenge were:

Result #1: Peter forfeited the fight when he realized that was the only way to win. Paul had caught Peter with guilt written all over his face, and there was only one smart thing to do—accept what he had coming! Not one word of protest comes from his lips. I imagine his reaction was much the same as his reaction in the courtyard of Caiaphas' palace, when he began to weep.

I like this disciple Rocky Johnson. He was a real man. The church today is full of prima donnas too big for their pastoral britches, men who are bigger than the churches they serve. How many are willing to receive a rebuke from an inferior, or even an equal, and publicly say, "I admit it. I was wrong"? Peter could and did. He swallowed his pride and forfeited the fight.

Result #2: Paul was able to put his detractors in their place. Let's not forget why this whole incident appears in Galatians in the first place. It's not an ego trip for the Apostle Paul. Nor was this story added by Martin Luther in an attempt to undermine the Roman Catholic teaching that Peter was the first Pope. The reason Paul includes this incident is that it is an important link in the chain of his defense of the Gospel.

The Judaizers claimed Paul's teaching of salvation by grace was a recent distortion by a self-appointed apostle. But here he shows when the chief of the Jerusalem apostles, Peter, and he had a confrontation over the Gospel, it was Peter, not himself, who had to back down and admit he was wrong.

Result #3: The truth of the Gospel was vindicated. The real winner, of course, was the Gospel of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Now there are many directions we could go today by way of application. I would like for us to focus for just a few moments on some . . .

Principles of fair fighting in the Church

1. Make sure your brother or sister is wrong. I have been rebuked on more than one occasion by someone who was simply ignorant of important facts. So have you. And, I regret to say, I have done the same more often than I would like to admit. How awfully important it is to find out the facts before we make judgments.

Leslie Flynn tells the story of a young businesswoman who arrived half an hour late to speak to a Bible study group. Immediately the friend who invited her took her aside and admonished her for keeping these first-time-attending, non-Christian neighbors waiting for so long. Then the businesswoman explained, "My car was hit by a drunken driver. I could not leave till the police came; also a wrecker was needed for my badly damaged car. I should have gone to the hospital, for I ache all over, but I refused the ambulance driver and got a taxi here." Make sure your brother (or sister) is wrong before you rebuke him.

2. Make sure the issue is worth fighting over. All of us manifest inconsistencies in our lives regularly. It sure wouldn't take a Sherlock Holmes to find fault with my life, my attitudes, or my viewpoints. But if we waste all our bullets shooting at birds and rodents, we're not going to have any ammo left when the big game comes along. People won't listen to us. We lose our credibility when we yell "wolf" too often.

3. Examine your own actions and motives first. It's a psychological fact that human beings tend to spot sins in other people's lives of which they are guilty themselves. In a Connecticut town 53 residents signed a petition to stop reckless driving on their streets. The police set a speed trap and a few nights later five violators were caught. All five were signers of the complaint!

Motives, too, are crucial. I know from personal experience that it's very easy to find fault with those of whom we are jealous. Don't confront another believer unless you are sure that your motives are for the restoration of that believer and the protection of the purity of the Church.

4. Fight in the proper place. The best way to confront another believer is face to face. Verse 11 reads, "I opposed him to his face." Oh, but there are much easier and more effective ways to

oppose someone that don't risk a fight. Mentioning the matter as a public prayer request, or giving the person the cold shoulder can work wonders. The old anonymous letter route is a favorite of some. But none of these are godly ways. Paul rightly opposed Peter to his face.

I once received a letter from a young lady in our church explaining that she had a rather serious disagreement with me over something I had taught in a sermon. I want to read the last paragraph of her letter. After explaining how she felt I was wrong, she wrote:

Pastor Mike, I respect you . . . I have learned so much from you and I look forward to learning more. I just wanted you to know that this teaching causes me problems. I know there is no way for you to know unless I tell you. Respectfully, . . ."

I really appreciated that. Some people might have just left the church over the issue. Others would have perhaps undermined my teaching behind my back. Still others would just quit communicating and give me the cold shoulder. But she came to me and said, "I disagree." At least I had the opportunity to talk it over with her and see whether one of us was misunderstanding the other.

But there's another issue here. Not only did Paul oppose Peter to his face, but he also rebuked him in the presence of all. Now rarely is that necessary, and Paul isn't advocating it here for *every* confrontation. But Peter's hypocrisy was public and therefore the rebuke, to benefit the church, had to be public. I think the principle to be observed here is this: a rebuke should go as far but no further than the sin which is being rebuked. Public sins should be rebuked publicly; private ones privately.

5. Learn to lose well. This is, of course, for those of us who are confronted and who realize, though it is terribly hard to admit, that we are wrong. It takes really a big person to admit it. Years after this incident in Gal. 2:11-14 the Apostle Peter wrote the book we know as 2 Peter. In the third chapter he wrote a touching tribute to his opponent in the Heavyweight Bout. I'm reading from verses 14-16:

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

Here he acknowledges Paul as a deeper scholar than himself, but, more importantly, calls him a "beloved brother." Having learned to lose well he ended up a winner, as did the Church of Jesus Christ.

Now I'm sure most of you would agree with these five principles. But keeping them in mind and practicing them will take a power greater than any of us can drum up consistently. Friend, we don't have to drum it up. The Holy Spirit lives within us and gives us the power to live in obedience to such principles. Why try to do it on your own when you have such amazing help?

I close with the following observation: The Gospel of Grace is worth fighting for. After all, Jesus deemed it worth dying for. But we must learn to fight in right way, at the right time, and in the right spirit. If we do, God can use us to protect the integrity of His Church.

i. I would suppose that Barnabas' personality had something to do with his action here, which might help to explain, though not excuse him. He was an encourager, a man with a very loving nature, and no doubt he hated to disappoint his friends. But a love that is not strengthened by the steel of theological conviction can be wishy-washy. One of the most important lessons we learn from the book of Galatians is that our commitment to truth can never be merely intellectual. It must be heart-felt and genuine. Otherwise we can do more harm than good to the cause of Christ

ii. One of the key couples who helped us plant the church in St. Louis came to the church just about a month after we arrived there. They came from another church where they had found Christ and where they had grown considerably. But something happened at that church that caused this couple, young as they were in the faith, to put down a marker and say, "We can't allow that." The pastor had appointed a man as an Elder who didn't believe in the deity of Christ. When they learned this they went to the pastor and said, "How can a man be an Elder if he doesn't believe in the deity of Christ?" The pastor said, "Trust me. I think he'll come around over time; he's got great leadership potential and we don't want to lose him." This couple determined they couldn't follow that kind of spiritual leadership, left that church, and became key leaders in ours.