

WHO IS PAUL TALKING TO?

So who is Paul talking to?

- (Galatians 2:11–15 ESV) But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13 And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” 15 We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.

First, let’s observe the audience. Paul confronted Cephas (Peter) before a gathering of professing Gentile and Jewish believers. The Galatian churches of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe were predominantly Gentile, i.e. non-Jewish. Cephas (Peter) was the leading apostle in the early church, making his defection from the truth of the gospel especially disappointing. This called for a bold, but necessary response on the part of Paul in the battle over “the truth of the gospel.”

The true motivation behind Peter’s defection.

- **2:12** [certain men from James.] Peter, knowing the decision the Jerusalem Council had made (Acts 15:7–29), had been in Antioch for some time, eating with Gentiles. When Judaizers came, pretending to be sent by James, they lied, giving false claims of support from the apostles. Peter had already given up all Mosaic ceremony (Acts 10:9–22) and James had at times held only to some of it (Acts 21:18–26). [withdraw.] The Greek term refers to strategic military withdrawal. The verb’s form may imply that Peter’s withdrawal was gradual and deceptive. To eat with the Judaizers and decline invitations to eat with the Gentiles, which he had previously done, meant that Peter was affirming the very dietary restrictions he knew God had abolished (Acts 10:15) and thus striking a blow at the gospel of grace. [fearing the party of the circumcision.] **The true motivation behind Peter’s defection. He was afraid of losing popularity with the legalistic, Judaizing segment of people in the church,** even though they were self-righteous hypocrites promoting a heretical doctrine. [MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2006). *The MacArthur study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers.]

Paul was at odds with the Judaizers (the “certain men” who had come from James). When he opposed Peter to his face, he likely turned his anger on them also. We can also see various applications beyond the actual event. He rebuked the Jews who could not or would not let go of a salvation by works. And even now his words are a rebuke to anyone and everyone who continues to insist on adding any works to the gospel.

In this defense of “the truth of the gospel” Paul would also have opposed the false brothers of Galatians 2:4; possibly the same men in Acts 15:1 who wanted to add circumcision to the gospel.

- (Acts 15:1 ESV) But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”

And his defense would have been a rebuke to the confused Pharisees of Acts 15:5 ...

- (Acts 15:5 ESV) But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

And, of course, his message would apply to the Gentiles in the Galatian churches.

Let’s try to understand what Peter and the other Jews were up against when Paul rebuked them. This is not an excuse for their actions, but it should help us understand their struggle and ours in letting go of “old religion” that is neither approved by nor blessed by God.

So who is Paul talking to?

Paul is talking to men and women who were holding onto a 4,000 year old religion. If anyone had the right to sing “gimme that old time religion,” it would be this group. Their religion was very impressive, and they were struggling to let go.

1) THEIR RELIGION BEGAN AT CREATION WITH GOD.

Read their Book: “In the beginning God.” In fact their religion began before creation, and really even before that as the God they professed was eternal. He was, is and always will be. He is the same yesterday, today and forever.

2) THE STRUCTURE AND LAWS OF THEIR RELIGION WERE GIVEN BY GOD HIMSELF.

The decrees and laws of their religion were awe-inspiring to the surrounding nations. The Jews were given instructions by God himself as to how to they were to live and govern themselves—a system of government that displayed the wisdom and greatness of God to the surrounding nations.

- (Deuteronomy 4:5–9 NIV) See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. 6 Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to *the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.”* 7 What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? 8 *And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?* 9 Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

3) THE LAW OF THEIR RELIGION WAS HOLY.

- (Romans 7:12 ESV) So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

4) THEIR RELIGION HAD BEEN THE ONLY TRUE RELIGION FOR 4,000 YEARS.

There had never been a true challenger to the throne. No other religion was ever recognized by God. Israel was the chosen nation and holy to God.

- (Deuteronomy 7:6 ESV) For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

5) BUT THEIR RELIGION HAD LOST ITS WAY.

Over the centuries their religious leaders had covered over the holy law with the traditions and principles of humans. In fact the Scriptures were so obscured by traditions and ritual that when their Messiah came to this earth, they not only did not recognize him but viewed him as a religious opponent who threatened their way of life.

They preferred their traditions. They held “what they believed” over the teaching of God while still professing their faith in God.

- (Mark 7:6–8 ESV) And he said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “ ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; 7 in vain do they worship me, *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*’ 8 *You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men.*”

Why does this keep happening, over and over throughout earth history? Because it’s always the other guy and never us, right? We would never be the unfaithful ones, would we? But we can find out if we are. There is a way. We can bring our traditions and opinions in subjection to the word of God. They thought they were “Bible-based” but they weren’t. They claimed to follow the teaching of Moses but they didn’t.

- (John 5:45–47 ESV) Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. 46 For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?

Wait a minute. What did Christ just tell them? “If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me.” But there he was, in the flesh, the Son of God, Israel’s long-awaited Messiah, and they didn’t have a clue.

And it isn’t like they didn’t study their Bibles—their Old Testament Scriptures. No, they studied diligently but their traditions and principles (again the natural mind as opposed to the spiritual mind—rationalizing what they believed as opposed to receiving God’s word from the Holy Spirit of God) had so obscured the word of God that even though they searched the Scriptures for life, they could not recognize their Messiah who literally stood before them. Their lack of sight was not because of a lack of study, and it was not because of some overwhelming intellectual hurdle. It was a flat-out refusal to believe the words. They had chosen a path of willful ignorance that over the years had

settled into a hard-hearted rebellion toward God and his word.

- (John 5:37–40 ESV) And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen, 38 and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe the one whom he has sent. 39 You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.

The end was inevitable; the conflict unavoidable. He did not meet their needs. He was not their Savior but an obstacle to be removed, so they murdered him.

- (Acts 2:21–23 ESV) And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’ 22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

It was God’s plan, but it was still their sin.

Present day application? Old religion dies hard. We also struggle in letting go of the familiar. Their religion was based, not on their sacred Scriptures, but on the traditions and principles that they had come to love and honor over the centuries. They honored God outwardly but kept him from their hearts. They weren’t vigilant.

- (Deuteronomy 4:9) Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live.

People are people. Our religion can become our spiritual comfort food. We love the familiar—the look, even the smell, of the church building; the familiar songs and worship style. The familiar is where we feel safe. But we are to live by faith, not by sight, and faith often means the unfamiliar, the unknown, even sometimes the dangerous.

“Pee or get off the pot.” Make a decision. With the gospel it is either or not both and. The people in Joshua’s time had the same problem, and he called the Israelites to quit trying to serve all the gods and serve the LORD. His challenge in the following text is very interesting—serve the LORD or pick one of the pagan gods that they had been dragging around the wilderness for forty some years.

- (Joshua 24:14–15 ESV) Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15 And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

In a moment of hypocrisy, Peter had reached back for the familiar. Paul rebuked him because he had compromised the truth of the gospel.