

## The Courage to make a Stand

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Galatians 2:11-16

Why should I care? It's not my problem!

Why should I get involved? Everyone should sort out their own affairs and leave me out of it.

How many times have we heard these kind of statements or remarks?

It seems today, because we're increasingly likely to offend someone, we have to be careful with what we say and do, or we simply take the easy way out, keep our own thoughts and mind our own business.

A few years ago Cheryl and I were driving along and spotted a car stopped on the side of the road with a flat tyre. A woman was struggling to get her spare out of the car-boot. We stopped and I walked back to offer assistance. To my horror I was greeted with a tirade of abuse, because (according to her) I had assumed that she (a woman) could not change a tyre. Needless to say, without a further word I walked back to our car and we left her to it.

Would I offer my services again if I saw someone in a difficult situation? Yes! But I don't blame anyone who may think twice about it. Sometimes it is just easier to not have an opinion, avoid situations, avoid potential confrontation and walk away.

Is this what the Apostle Paul did? It would seem not! Paul was a man who was sure in what he believed, and always prepared to confront the difficult issues. Paul, so often, called things as he saw them.

In Galatians 2 we have Paul's account of a rather heated debate he had with the apostle Peter.

For Paul, the issue was one of Christian integrity, and the courage to make a stand for what you hold to be true and right, in the sight of God.

Apparently, in the company of gentile believers Peter was quite happy to eat with them, and we can only presume that this also meant Peter was happy to eat their non-Kosher foods.

The problem arose because the early church was struggling to see how it should go forward.

Would it remain a part of Judaism, requiring ALL new believers, both Jewish and gentile, to adhere to the laws and traditions of the Jews, or would it focus on a faith relationship with God, free from past laws and traditions, based solely on the salvation message of Jesus?

It was a vexing issue, because, on the Jewish side, there were many who wanted to maintain traditions such as circumcision, adherence to food laws and ritual lustrations (washings).

The danger of this position was that spiritual acceptance by God, and therefore salvation, was linked to these legalised observances.

The other side of the coin was that the Holy Spirit had obviously touched the lives of so many gentile believers, demonstrating God's acceptance of them apart from the requirements of the Jewish law (Acts 10:15).

The leaders of the early church, including James the brother of Jesus, were still grappling with this issue and trying desperately to keep everyone happy - but this state could not last forever. It was an issue that required a definite solution.

The issue came to a head when Peter and Barnabas were seen by Paul to be flip flopping - trying to please everyone, when in fact they were compromising their own convictions of faith.

Was a person justified before God by their observance of the Jewish law, or were they justified by their faith declaration in the Lord Jesus (vs.16)?  
It was an issue that would ultimately define the future direction and ministry of the church.

When we read vs.12 today, aren't we also horrified that Peter was so inconsistent. One minute he was friendly with the gentile believers; the next, the strict Jewish believers arrived on the scene and Peter pretended that he would have nothing to do with the gentile believers?

It was clearly an example of **ethnic discrimination and indefensible**. No wonder Paul went for Peter.

What made it worse was that **even Barnabas** separated himself from fellowship with the gentile believers. It demonstrates the conditioning and power of ones cultural heritage and upbringing.

Even today, it can prove quite difficult for us to put aside many of the thoughts and attitudes we were raised with and taught as children? I'm not just talking about things like wearing a hat to church on Sunday, or eating fish on a Friday. I'm talking about our attitudes toward people whose cultural ways and attitudes may be different from our own.

In some churches today it can be difficult for long time believers to enjoy fellowship with some new believers. New believers, who have come to Jesus out of a non-Christian or troubled background can sometimes feel uneasy or uncomfortable. Sometimes, our different backgrounds and heritage can become a hindrance to our sense of connection as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I can only imagine, in Antioch, that the differences between the Jewish believers, who had been raised in strict religious homes, was huge when compared with many of the gentile believers, who had been raised in secular Greek or cultic homes.

So often, we feel more comfortable sharing with people who are like US, who think like US and behave like US, BUT, if our faith walk with the Lord is at the forefront of who we are as believers then, for the sake of Jesus, we should be prepared to consciously overcome these cultural differences and reach out to others with the love of Jesus.

Paul challenged Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish background believers when they separated themselves from the gentile believers. Peter, of all people, should have known better (Acts 10:15, *'What God has cleansed you must not call common'*).

**What these men had done was totally unacceptable and against the spirit of Jesus.**

It was an issue of Christian doctrine that was at stake here and Paul was passionate to ensure that the church did not lose its way. As Paul defended his opposition to Peter and Barnabas, he penned these words: *'I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.'* (vs.21).

**Paul had the courage of his convictions to make a stand, and he argued his case well.**

This however raises some questions for us today:

Is the message of the church to be so focused on the love of God, such that there is no place for believers to make a stand on the basis of faith and conviction?

Should we compromise our faith convictions for the sake of peace, harmony and general acceptance, or should we be prepared to stand for what we believe, trusting in God's vindication?

These are questions that vex many in the church today. What are the critical issues of faith, and what are merely cultural and heritage issues?

As Paul travelled around the many new churches, he constantly grappled with many of the issues faced by the churches. Most of his letters repeatedly gave guidance to the churches and we do well to consider his teaching in the church today. Issues of legalism, immorality, and our attitudes and behaviour toward others, were constant themes for Paul. **Paul had the courage of his convictions and the courage to make a stand for God.** He was not afraid to call a spade a spade, and sin - 'sin'.

Paul taught people without fear or favour and the church grew; lives were transformed and the Lord was glorified.

Today, the church is being confronted with many different issues that demand a truly Christian response. If all we do is mouth the current modern theories and platitudes, without a solid Christian critique, then we will fail to impact the community in any meaningful way and the community will see a church that has lost its prophetic voice.

There are so many current issues today facing the world, this nation and this community that need a truly Bible based Christian response. Our muted mutterings and silence is only allowing other voices to be heard and therefore set the agenda.

In the name of the Lord Jesus, what does the church today, have to say about issues like slavery; bigamy; adultery; marriage; incest; prostitution; pornography; homosexuality; abortion and euthanasia; protection of women, children and the elderly; and the list goes on.

In these issues, it is not the voice of the vocal majority that needs to be heard, but the still quiet voice of God. We are being told to leave things to the so called experts in the areas of politics, economics, medicine, psychology, and the like. We are being told that the voice of God today has nothing to say in the modern contemporary world.

**How wrong they are!**

It is because the experts have failed to heed the voice of God that the world is so divided politically; economies are under such enormous pressure; legalised greed and corruption are rampant;

we have lost our appreciation for the God given value and dignity of life; and everywhere we see the poor being shamelessly manipulated for the advantage of the rich.

Governments are powerless to effect lasting and meaningful reforms and many parents are struggling to control the aberrant behaviour of their wayward children, because the rule of law is no longer a deterrent to unacceptable attitudes that lead to unacceptable outcomes.

Where is the voice of God? Why is the church apparently silent? Certainly, the example of the early church, through people like Paul, was one of having a voice for God in the midst of enormous social pressures that were anything but godly.

It was the voice of the early church that gave so many a voice that changed an empire. So, what has happened today? Is not the true church still a minority in a social climate that is both antagonistic and ungodly? So, where is our voice, where is our courage?

God has called us to treat all people with respect and love; but this does not mean to turn a blind eye and excuse sinful behaviour. God has called us to be forgiving and merciful; but this does not mean we are to condone sin or avoid taking a stand.

**Like Paul, we are being called to have the courage of our faith convictions.**

Without being judgemental, which denigrates the person, like Paul, we are still being called to declare what is right, pure and according to the will and purposes of God.

**May your voice for Jesus never be muted.**