

PAUL AND HIS SHOWDOWN WITH SIMON PETER
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But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision. And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation (Gal. 2:11-13).

When a hammer strikes an anvil, sparks are to be expected. This was true when the very indignant Paul condemned the illustrious Simon Peter before the elders in the church at Antioch. The Lord gave to Simon the name Cephas, which meant "The Rock," but unfortunately a tide of circumstance had undermined that rock, and it was being dislodged. When Paul heard of Peter's actions he was very annoyed, and could hardly wait to meet the offending brother. When Simon arrived in Antioch, Paul was ready to challenge his disgraceful conduct, and repercussions of the confrontation disturbed all the assemblies.

Simon Peter was just a piece of human clay transformed by the Master Potter. He was ordinary like his admirers. He could soar to the top of life's mountain, but he could also be affected by fogs of disappointment and fear. Probably he meant well, but sometimes he was unreliable and infuriating. He was too concerned with the attitude of other people, and this led to disaster. Simon had been impulsive when he left the fishing boat and walked on the water to go to Jesus and desperate when he began to sink. Peter was nervous and apprehensive when challenged by a maid at the trial of the Savior, yet overconfident when the Lord predicted approaching danger. He was God's wonderful spokesman at Pentecost, but later his compromising behavior aroused Paul's indignation and caused dismay among Gentile Christians. Peter was a man of moods. As was said of Elijah, he "was a man subject to like passions as we are" (see James 5:17). Nevertheless, God used him mightily, and that supplies hope for everybody.

An Unfortunate Compromise... Dangerous

There is reason to believe Simon Peter was the most popular

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man among the original disciples, and that appealed to Gentile Christians. Each time he testified concerning his visit to Cornelius, a Gentile, they were delighted. Peter knew they were not unclean. When he visited their homes to share a meal, they felt honored in entertaining such an illustrious brother. Even Paul was pleased that bigotry had been expelled from the soul of his colleague. Then came the day when things began to change. Legalists from Jerusalem were about to visit the church, and their unyielding attitude regarding Mosaic law was recognized everywhere. Peter frowned. The visitors belonged to the head church, and their influence could cause problems. Simon began to cancel his appointments with Gentiles. He made all kinds of excuses, and his new friends became suspicious. When he "withdrew" himself and ignored them when they passed in the street, it became evident he had changed. When Paul heard of Peter's behavior, resentment filled his soul. Once again the offender was concerned about the opinions of people and had lost sight of his Lord. Uncertainty began to intimidate the church. The unity of believers was being threatened. A friend had forsaken them. Their champion had become an advocate of circumcision, and they feared that Gentiles would soon be considered second-class citi-

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zens within the assembly. Paul was annoyed! His eyes were steel, his heart aflame with indignation. He was determined to give Peter a piece of his mind!

An Unprecedented Confrontation... Determined
But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed (Gal. 2:11).

The Lord had given advice concerning methods by which problems between two church members should be solved:

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican (Matt. 18:15-17).

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Evidently Paul was impatient. He was in a hurry! He believed that a straight line was the shortest distance between two points. and the best way to solve a problem was to go straight to the heart of the matter. This incident was not a slight headache affecting the comfort of the assembly: it was a swiftly moving cancer that could destroy the church. Simon Peter needed surgery. The situation demanded immediate action. There was no time to appoint committees that would argue forever. This promised to be a battle, and Paul was ready to defend his convictions not only against Simon Peter. but against the devil himself. Years later he wrote: "But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel. I said unto Peter before then, all (Gal. 2:14).

Probably the meeting place was packed to capacity with apprehensive listeners. They expected verbal fireworks and were not disappointed.

An Unmerciful Condemnation.. .Deadly
If thou [Peter]. being a Jew, livest after the manner of the Gentiles, and not as do the Jews. why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews'? We who are Jews by nature ... Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ. even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2:14-16).

My brother you are trying to restore that which the Savior destroyed. Your words may be eloquent, but they are spoken by hypocritical lips. You told us that the Master instructed you to proceed to the home of Cornelius because those Gentiles had been cleansed by God, even though they had never been circumcised. You were instructed not to call unclean those whom God had cleansed (see Acts 10:15). Consequently, you proceeded with your mission and have since enjoyed fellowship with many other Gentiles. Then the legalists from Jerusalem scared you half to death! Why did you treat your brethren as strangers? Did you have cataracts on your eyes when you pretended not to see them in the streets? Simon Peter. you preach one thing but practice another. What kind of leadership are you supplying to the church?

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You are supposed to be The Rock but are more like shifting sand. blown about by every wind of doctrine. If we are to judge by your recent conduct, then you have forfeited the right to be a shepherd of God's flock. Are you now telling us that the death of Christ is insufficient to guarantee our acceptance with God? Are you suggesting that unless men subscribe to the rite of circumcision, not even the precious blood of Christ can remove their sins? Did observance to the Mosaic law bring peace to your soul? You are an unreliable leader, and the whole church knows that is true. It was not the law that saved you. but acceptance of Jesus as your Lord and Master. My brother. He not only lifted you from the waters of the Sea of Galilee. He rescued you from many other weaknesses which threatened to overwhelm your soul. Simon Peter, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that you are a very poor example of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

An Unforeseen Climax. ... Delightful

Be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot. and blameless. And account that the long suffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles. speaking in them of these things (2 Peter 3:14-16).

Simon Peter possessed a volcanic soul that could erupt at any moment. It would be interesting to know his reactions to the charges made against him. He had been humiliated before the entire church and could have condemned his accuser for not following the procedure suggested by the Lord. Even if Paul were correct, these deliberations could have been held secretly, so that unbelievers would not criticize the church.

It may be significant that no mention is made of Peter's retaliation. If the Scriptures are to be our guide. then it must be assumed he did not reply. Did he acknowledge his mistake and ask for forgiveness? It is unwise to speculate about matters concerning which no information is available. Many people would have been resentful and would have carried a grudge. Peter was not that type of man. Later, when he wrote to his friends, he referred to his former antagonist as our beloved brother Paul.

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He also acknowledged the wisdom which God had given in the writing of Paul's epistles. He appreciated everything his colleague had accomplished in preaching the Gospel and was proud to be associated with the man who had accomplished so much for the Lord.

The introductory salutation of his second letter revealed that he and Paul believed the same Gospel.

Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Peter 1:1).

The apostle was now a mature saint who wrote about precious facts.

The Precious Trial of Faith (I Peter 1:7)
The Precious Blood (1 Peter 1:19)
The Precious Corner Stone (1 Peter 2:6)

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The Precious Savior (1 Peter 2:7)

The Precious Promises (2 Peter 1:4)

It is never easy for a strong man to admit failure. It is to be expected that he will try to justify his conduct. That Peter refused to permit prejudice to destroy his admiration of Paul must be one of his most delightful accomplishments. Peter deserves the place he occupies in the affections of all Christians.

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