

“Speaking and Doing Truth in the Face of Divisions”
Galatians 2:11-14
Opening Sermon Delivered at the Annual Gathering of the Ekklesia Project
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About 1,954 years ago, the Apostle Paul dispatches a letter to the Galatians. The only authentic letter of Paul without the characteristic “Thanksgiving,” Galatians reveals Paul’s deep displeasure at the congregation’s being seduced into embracing another gospel—a gospel that is less than the truth which Paul both proclaimed and lived out.

While Paul challenges the body of Christ “to stand” in the freedom arising from bondage to Jesus the Christ, he does so by reminding them of his own calling, the implications of this calling, and the freedom we have in Christ. Paul engages in selective autobiography to bear the thrust of his argument that faith in Jesus Christ—as he had proclaimed it—is wholly sufficient to transform the world. Perhaps with furrowed brow and a pained look, Paul asks these believers in Galatia: “Who has deceived you?”

In responding to the perverted gospel received by the Galatians, Paul reminds them of a past confrontation he had with Peter—a stalwart Christian of Jewish descent and a much respected spiritual leader, even among the Gentile church at Antioch of Syria. As we hear this passage afresh, may its truths permeate us and stimulate us to be the people of God—set free to love as the triune God does. Listen to these verses in Galatians 2: 11-14:

¹¹When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. ¹²Before 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. ¹³The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. ¹⁴When 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?

Paul's short autobiography leads me to do a bit of my own personal reflections—Yes, I realize one must exercise caution in doing too much of this personal reflection in the proclamation of the Good News, but I believe it is helpful in this case. Please bear with me, my brothers and sisters.

Our nation's glorious history is tainted, taunted, and tangled up with—among other things--the blight of slavery and with the sinister religious, psychological, social, political, and economic realities it unleashed and still unleashes in the fabric of human relationships. We celebrate the great legal victories and socio-political advances achieved over the years in the area of race.

I can look back to my childhood and adolescent years in the segregated southwest, on the northwest side of Houston, Texas. In a family of ten children, my parents, like so many parents, provided for us a real example of a lifelong marriage until death, parental presence and discipline, food to eat, shelter over our heads, and a necessary respect for the value of education. My father was an ordained Baptist minister—who could “hoop” every now and then--and my mother and all her siblings from their childhood had been trained to love the Lord and the things of God. How often over the years did we children hear my father say: “Things will not always be this way.” While I labored to believe him, I secretly yearned in my heart that he really knew something from God I could not quite understand then. I also remember graduating from the all-Black George Washington Carver High School in Acres Homes. In this unincorporated place of 25,000 of Houston's poorest folk, we grew up with Leave it to Beaver, dancing to the soulful rhythms of Detroit's Motown, and being shaped by black gospel music and the musicality of black preaching.

In all of my growing-up years there—until my graduation in 1968 from High School, I never worshiped with any other ethnic or racial group, I never had a white teacher, never went to school with white children, never had white neighbors, never went to a pharmacy owned by whites, never went to a grocery store with white patrons, never enjoyed white friends, never went to funerals of any white person, never saw any white funeral home handling a black body, never witnessed a black funeral home handling a white body either, never saw anyone, other than a black person, buried in a “black cemetery,” never saw very early on any persons who looked like me who starred in a good TV show. There was a steady diet of Amos ‘N Andy, Step-and-Fetch It, the smiling Mammy, and the tree-swinging Tarzan wreaking havoc on entire tribes of scantily clad Africans. We breathed separation, isolation, segregation, subordination, and alienation. It all seemed so “normal”—the way the world was. Live in it. Stay in your place. There is much, much, much more I could tell. And so can many of you here today.

In the United States, we have come so very far from these times, and for that I am most thankful. Many of our younger members of EP probably have never experienced this kind of separation in the same ways that many of us more “mature” people have. Those who rant and rave as if there has been no progress just don’t get it. Those who believe we have arrived—all is well-- also just don’t get it. There are still those real moments—too frequent for my taste-- when vestiges of our separation on many levels raise their ugly heads, reminding us that changed laws do not equate to changed hearts, that urban renewal is not spiritual renewal. The 2008 democratic primary and the general Presidential campaign thus far are cases in point. Our souls cry out, “Lord, will things ever truly change?” “Can a leopard change its spots? Can humans experience wholeness? Can we love each other? Will we love one another? Will there be “peace” among us?

In the midst of racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, economic “isms,” and so on; in the face of brokenness and sin around our world—our passage this afternoon can help us to think seriously about the reality of racism and the body of Christ. I cannot interpret this passage dynamically without the influence of layers of human divisions interjecting themselves between my eyes and the printed page. Consider these multiple layers that 21st century Christians might think about as they attempt to bridge the distance between “then” and “now”. We might think about the following:

- The Jewish/Palestinian Conflict
- The war in Iraq/Afghanistan and the “saber rattling” of our nation’s and other world leaders
- The heated rhetoric and practices of inhospitality regarding the issue of immigration, especially from Mexico
- The recent incidences of racial violence and hatred in Jena, La., and the many incidents of nooses [real and symbolic] in many parts of the U.S.
 - Billie Holiday’s song “Strange Fruit” is still a testimony to black bodies—often charred and castrated—hanging from Dogwood and other trees primarily in the South
 - From 1880-1930—by one account--angry mobs lynched 4,697 fellow Americans, of which 71% were African Americans
 - Just as in Marion, IN. [@ 40-50 miles from here] teenagers Tom Shipp and Abe Smith were lynched by an angry Midwest mob, allegedly for the rape of a young white girl named Mary Ball
- The recent gang warfare between the “Crips” and the “SR7” on the ravaged turf of South Central L.A.
- The sobering statistics of black-on-black crime, children having children, and incarceration of so many of our young black men at all levels of the penal system
- The drug and sex scenes in our gated communities of our nation’s suburbs
- The rapes and domestic abuse of our women and the sexual molestation of young children—at home, at school, and even at church
- The genocides in Darfur and Rwanda
- The oppressive, demonic regimes of Zimbabwe’s Mugabe and Myanmar’s Sr. General, Than Shwe
- The Civil Rights Movement and the critical but temporal gains emerging from it
- The Viet Nam War, WWII [including the Holocaust], WWI, and the Civil War: Together all sides, including military and civilian, casualties exceed 120 million human beings, of which nearly 1.7 million were U.S. military and civilian casualties
- The tragic treatment of the first Americans—our Native American citizens

- The “Trail of Tears”
- In 1824, several miles from present-day Marion, Indiana, a massacre of several peaceful Seneca Indian families along Deer Lick Creek
- The inhumanity of entrenched “Jim Crow” Laws enforced on Black Americans
- The temporary gains of the “Reconstruction Period”
- The legitimate quest for women’s rights in society
- The tragic institution of American Slavery and its continuing effects on all of us—even those theologians and good church folk who legitimized slavery’s existence on dubious biblical and theological interpretations
- Both the positive and negative consequences of the “Enlightenment Period” and the paradigm shifts it caused in the western world
- AND THE MANY MORE LAYERS OF GOOD AND BAD
- BUT we all must face the witness of Scripture that all have sinned and come short of God’s glory—evidenced in the schism between Jew and Gentile to which Paul in this passage courageously speaks. The passage, among other things, points out the following:

First, Speaking and Doing Truth in the Face of Divisions requires that we know and embrace the authentic Gospel [[1:4, 6-7 10, 11-12, 23 // 2:7, 11]

Paul is right to label—tongue in cheek—the distorted message of the churches in Galatia as a “different” or “perverted” gospel, for its insistence that what Christ did is insufficient for salvation. Who deceived them now to believe that something else must be added to faith in Jesus Christ—in this particular text it was the requirement of circumcision. Paul reminds them that in Jesus Christ we are called to experience the divine rescue from this “present evil age” (1:4).

While Paul affirms his acceptance by the Apostles in Jerusalem, he is quick to highlight that the gospel he preached, he received “by revelation from Jesus Christ.” (1:11-12)

Paul is quick to recount in the first part of chapter 2 a previous journey to Jerusalem along with Barnabus—the Jewish Christian known as the “Encourager.” In sharing with the Jewish Christian leaders in Jerusalem the nature of the gospel he preached among the Gentiles, Paul indicated that even the Greek Titus was not compelled to be circumcised. Notice this: Those who infiltrated the ranks insisted that Titus, a Gentile, must be circumcised; Paul labels them as “false” brothers (2:4). For Paul, they are “false” brothers for they refuse to adhere to the

true freedom we have in Christ Jesus—desiring instead to judge by external appearance (2:6). Paul rejoiced that the gospel of Jesus Christ which he preached resonated with the gospel Peter preached as an apostle to the Jews. While Peter and Paul preached to different audiences, they did not preach different gospels.

No wonder that Paul grounds his response to Peter in his understanding and experience of the gospel that frees humans from the spirits of division that would undermine the unity of the body of Christ, produced by the Spirit of God. The body of Christ in the region of Galatia, Paul believes, should have known this and lived truthful to it.

Peter and Paul—as we all know—were reputable leaders in the church of God. While Peter is the apostle to the Jews, he, too, had interactions with Gentiles. He preached at Pentecost, healed a crippled man at the Temple gate, healed those brought by loved ones and placed in the streets, so that even his shadow might heal them. As the church today hears these passages in the book of Acts, the church knows that Peter was full of the Spirit, sanctified for God’s use. Yet, God graces Peter for the church’s continuing witness with the gift of a vision that serves as an antidote to the poison of cultural prejudice still abiding in his “sanctified” heart and life. Furthermore, the Scriptures of the Church remind us—in its account of the seven sons of Sceva that even the demons knew and respected Paul (Acts 19:13-16); and in Acts 19:11-12, Paul sends to the sick handkerchiefs and aprons that touched him--that they might be healed. Yet, Paul realized that with God we can never worship with such confidence that we arrogantly see no need further transformation. Paul confessed to the church at Philippi that he had not yet arrived (Phil. 3:12).

So, with the witness of the Church at stake in Peter and the others' action toward the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Paul's radical embrace of the authentic Gospel required that he oppose Peter.

Embracing the Gospel is necessary. Yet, Speaking and Doing Truth in the Face of Divisions Also Requires that We Oppose All Obstacles to Unity and Reconciliation in Light of the Truth of the Gospel [[11-14a]]

When Peter came to Antioch, Paul “opposed” him to his face....(2:11). “To oppose” means literally “to stand against” or “resist.” Paul seems to lay aside the best advice of confronting people--do not embarrass publicly, do it privately—be nice. Personally, I think this is good advice on occasions. However, why does Paul do this? Does he not care about who Peter is? Does he believe that he is better than Peter? Let me offer responses to several implied questions this passage raises for us, the body of Christ.

“Who” must be opposed? Anyone who is not walking uprightly—that is, those who refuse to practice living their lives in line with the truth of the gospel—should be “opposed.” Even in chapter 3 of this letter Paul is consistent with his earlier letter to the Church at Corinth. The gospel at its core is relational, as the pattern of the Trinity demonstrates. The gospel calls for reconciliation as God’s one-item agenda—calling humans in their fallenness to be reconciled through Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, to the Triune God and to others in the body of Christ—and this gospel intends this for “all” in the body of Christ.

“Why” must they be opposed? The life and witness of God’s church is at stake. Paul said that Peter was “clearly in the wrong.” By this, Paul meant that Peter, in this situation, was worthy of blame. When “Truth” is distorted and perverted the church’s embodied witness of peace and reconciliation is compromised and undermined by a world already divided by racism

and racist ideologies. “Truth” is exchanged for “hypocrisy and deception—fueled by fear. In the grips of this worldly way of living in the world, many are bullied into silence, quiescence—all in service to maintaining a status quo that is demonic. See Galatians 3:26-28, Ephesians 2:11-14, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 to name a few of the passages affirming Paul’s understanding of the gospel as a gospel for all peoples across all human-made divisions. Racism among the people of God does not make sense! It should find no place in the lexicon of the Church’s vocabulary, except under the category of “SIN.”

In addition, from this passage, Paul confronts Peter as he sees the sheer power of his influence which led “good” people astray. Paul is amazed that even Barnabus—his consistent supporter through the years—is led astray by Peter’s actions.

“How” should we oppose? Let’s take seriously how Paul confronts Peter. He does it “decisively” (2:11), “to his face” (2:11), and “in front of them all” (2:14a).

Speaking and Doing Truth in the Face of Divisions Require that the Body of Christ Embrace an Authentic Gospel and that We Oppose or Stand Against All Obstacles to Unity and Reconciliation. But a final point the text raises is a response to the question, “The Gospel According to Whom?”[[2:14b]]

Paul’s rebuke of Peter implies that we must be students of cultures. In Antioch of Syria, the church, according to Acts 13, was a congregation with multiple cultures or ethnicities. In the midst of a city divided along lines of ethnic differences, the authentic gospel transformed people and the Spirit placed them into one body, the church at Antioch. We might infer that the congregation’s leadership included people with different external characteristics and different ethnicities. Paul again is consistent in his understanding that the gospel of Jesus Christ breaks

down the dividing walls of hostility among Jew and Gentile, thereby creating one new humanity in Christ—the Church, the body of Christ. Peter, before certain men from Jerusalem arrived, seemingly had no problem whatsoever having table fellowship with his brothers and sisters—who happened to be Gentiles. Peter seemed unconcerned about observing the dietary laws, etc. He freely communes with his brothers and sisters. I believe we can say also that Peter participated in the Lord’s Supper with the Gentile Church in Antioch. Now suddenly Peter changes course. He gets up from the table, and separates himself from the Gentiles. Peter shrinks back, acts cowardly in the face of these men who come from Jerusalem. Obviously feeling the cultural and theological pressures brought by the visitors from Jerusalem, Peter loses his resolve to maintain unabated his desire to view the church as a church for all peoples. Is there a higher purpose to be ascribed to Peter’s action in Antioch? Did Peter do this in order to preserve the fruitfulness of his own ministry to the Jews back in the regions of Jerusalem? In view of the broader witness of the Scriptures, I do not find this a logical interpretation for what Peter did on that day. Can the body of Christ sanction accommodation to the demands of our Culture’s idolatrous preoccupation with the social fiction of race and the systemic effects of its distorted logic guiding interactions between races?

Jesus said that he would make us fishers of men and women—human beings. Just as real fishermen—which I am not—“know” fish, the body of Christ must know humans and human cultures. I am always amazed to listen to people who love fishing and who study fish. They know what rods and reels are best and what kind of bait is needed for certain fish; they know where to best find certain fish and the best times of the day or night to catch them. They “know” fish. Like this and more, we, the body of Christ, in the face of entrenched racism in our nation and tragically in the church’s life, must also “know” human cultures and how and why human

beings respond. We would do well to ask H.R. Niebuhr's penetrating question: "What's going on?"

Paul knew Jews and Jewish customs, for Paul was a Jew. Paul also knew Gentiles and much of Gentile cultures, for Paul also was a Roman citizen. Paul's missionary journeys took him to many parts of the Gentile world preaching the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. But listen to this: While Paul knew Jews and Gentiles—and affirmed aspects of these cultures—Paul also knew another culture. Paul also knew the Church's culture. In the church's culture we are members of one another—many members yet one body. In all that Paul writes, consistent with the canonical gospels—especially Luke's gospel, Paul now knows that the Triune God performs the miraculous: The Church, the body of Christ, is not fundamentally a Jewish Church; neither is it predominantly a Gentile Church; nor is it a "Black," "White," or "Hispanic" church; rather, God's church is a church for all peoples of the world: Certainly then, my brothers and sisters in Christ, we are normed by our participation "in Christ." All other particularities, while real or the accidents of history, are subordinate to this overarching reality of being "in Christ." We are now baptized "into Christ." The Church, the body of Christ, affirms this truth. Different audiences, comprising different nations, tribes, colors, ethnicities/races, genders, classes of people, body types, and more, yet there is one Gospel preached within the contextual realities of the many embodiments of what it means to be "human" in the world.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we will hear so much about racism and the body of Christ during the next two and half days; we will worship together and talk together—often late into the night--about the Church—past, present, and future—and its very life as an embodied response to the sin of racism.

We are here today because we desire to be radical disciples of Jesus Christ. No more business as usual. We cannot consign the church's primary witness to the imperfections of partisan politics. We cannot afford our politicians—and I do respect what they endeavor to do for our common life—to serve as the mouthpieces for the Church. We hear our passage today reminding us that the truths of the Gospel that transform our thoughts and actions call for the dismantling of human-made barriers that promote a distorted gospel with the tagline, “Equal (?) But Separate, Please! The cleansing begins in the Sanctuary—among the people of God. This passage reminds us that the Church for all peoples bears the truth of the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, racism and its delusions continue. We will forfeit the discernment to know the authentic Gospel and its faithful practices, the courage to oppose and stand against all obstacles to unity, reconciliation, and peace, and the intentionality in engaging people in their different contexts with the gospel that speaks to the realities of their lives.

Yes, my brothers and sisters in Christ, this passage speaks powerfully today of a cacophony of human-made divisions, even of the distorted notions of race and racism in the body of Christ. Let us as the body of Christ, therefore, continue to speak to and live truthful lives in the face of all human divisions. May the God who has called us be ever faithful to us.