

PETER *VERSUS* PAUL: AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE CHURCH

It can be pretty embarrassing if the two top people in the movement don't agree. Like when Aaron and Miriam opposed their brother Moses. Or when crown prince Absalom revolted against his father King David.

Perhaps the most awkward confrontation mentioned in the Christian scriptures is at Galatians 2:11-14. This embarrassing brouhaha pitted the early church's two chief spokesmen against each other. It was Peter *versus* Paul at Antioch-on-the-Orontes.

The exact time and circumstances of the face-off are not entirely clear. But a little reading between the lines brings the picture into focus.

Apparently Paul had been doing his usual mission work along the Mediterranean coast of Syria. He was converting both Jews and non-Jews to the new Christian community. In the process he made it clear that Gentile initiates would not be expected to adopt Jewish traditions. So far, so good.

Then Cephas (that's the Aramaic name for Peter) came on the scene. Whether Paul was temporarily absent, or whether the two worked together for a while is not stated. In any event, Peter adapted himself to Paul's style.

In practice that meant he felt free to take his meals at the same table with the Gentile Christians, which was no small deal. For people like Peter, who had been brought up in Jewish circles, held deeply ingrained scruples against violating kosher food laws.

It went without saying that no orthodox Israelite would risk religious contamination by dining with outsiders. So it wasn't long before news of Peter's liberal dinner-time seating arrangement got back to headquarters.

And headquarters was mad. Several hatchet men were dispatched to Antioch. And when they put on the pressure, Peter retracted and separated himself from the Gentile Christians.

Now it was Paul's turn to be angry. Whether he had just returned to town or had simply kept his mouth shut until the issue came to a head we don't know.

In any event, he was outraged that Peter should back down. To make matters worse, his own buddy Barnabas had also been snowed into siding with Peter.

To split the church like that was intolerable. If the reactionaries could get away with that, the only alternative would be for the Gentiles to adopt the Jewish strictures. So Paul confronted Peter in front of the entire congregation.

"Who do you think you are?" he demanded. "You can't reverse yourself like that. Much less expect the rest of the group to conform to our old traditional laws."

We don't know for sure how this fight turned out. Did Paul win that round? Or did the orthodox faction carry the day?

This untidy affair is not mentioned anywhere else in the Christian scriptures, only here in Paul's own letter to another church miles away in the highlands of modern-day Turkey.

Obviously it was an embarrassment. A century or two after the fact some Christian churchmen tried to smooth the whole thing over. A few suggested that the Cephas mentioned in Galatians was not Simon Peter but some otherwise unknown missionary.

Others suggested that Peter and Paul collaborated in order to teach the folks at Antioch a lesson, in other words, that the whole affair was a charade.

But most biblical interpreters recognize that this awkward event was exactly what it purports to be. This was a face-to-face standoff between the church's two premier apostles.

That's one of the neat things about the Bible. It would have been easy to edit this incident out of the collection. But it has stayed in. With the result that we are treated to a revealing insight into early church history, warts and all.

You have to appreciate the basic integrity of the biblical record. For it doesn't shy away even from such an embarrassing predicament as Peter and Paul's altercation over table fellowship.