

A Sermon from Pastor Dr. Gottfried Martens
Sermon for the Feast Day for Peter and Paul
Sermon Text: Galatians 2:1-10



Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. ³But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery— ⁵to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. ⁶And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. ⁷On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the

circumcised ⁸(for He who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), ⁹and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

How does one save the unity of the church? This is a question that has been and remains very relevant throughout the course of church history up to the present day. It's not only been asked at the church synod of the SELK (Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany) in recent years, but this question was asked at the very beginning of church history. What the Apostle Paul describes here in his letter to the Christians in Galatia is not just a nice anecdote, it's not just an interesting memory of a gradually aging man who is reflecting on his encounter with the alleged predecessor of all the popes. Instead, what St. Paul tells us in these verses is an event of worldwide historical proportions, the dimensions of which all those involved at that time could barely have completely understood. If the conversation between the apostles Peter and Paul, who we remember today, had gone differently, then we wouldn't be sitting here in a Christian church today. Yes, we could become quite overwhelmed from thinking about what depended on the outcome of that conversation if we didn't already know that the building and future of the Church was and is not in the hands of humans. Nor is it in the hands of such awe-inspiring apostles like Peter and Paul. The future of the Church is entirely in the hands of the Lord of the Church, who can also use such conversations and negotiations, as described to us here by Paul, to bring His plan for the Church into fruition. It had been fourteen years since Paul had been to Jerusalem as a Christian after his encounter with the resurrected Christ. Much had happened in the meantime. Paul was now working in Antioch, one of the biggest cities in the Roman Empire and had actively supported the growth of a congregation there. This congregation didn't just welcome Jews but also Gentiles, people from other nations. Those who were not Jewish did not have to convert to Judaism and be circumcised first before they could then be accepted into the Christian community here. These Gentiles

became members of the Christian congregation directly through baptism, without circumcision, without the obligation to keep all the laws of the Old Testament. For Paul this was completely clear: when he had seen the resurrected Christ, Paul also realized that this Christ was the end of the Law, that with God, it's no longer a question of keeping the Law, but only about faith, about belonging to the resurrected Christ. Yet what was clear for Paul wasn't at all clear for everyone in the early Church at that time. There were people in the Christian community, especially in Jerusalem itself, who had the following viewpoint: "In order to become a Christian, I must first become a Jew. If I was not a Jew already from birth, I must first commit myself to obeying Jewish law. If someone doesn't comply with this, then we can't accept them as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ." And these people didn't just stay in Jerusalem, they also apparently made contact with Antioch and caused some unrest there. In any case, Paul now feels prompted to go to Jerusalem because of this issue – to discuss the question of whether or not his mission among the Gentiles is accepted by the Church, and whether or not all the people who were Gentiles, and had now become Christians without observing the Jewish law and without being circumcised, were recognized as members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Paul didn't travel by himself. He took his coworker Barnabas with him as well as Titus, a Greek/Gentile who was welcomed into the congregation in Antioch without being circumcised. We already notice that Paul doesn't come to Jerusalem to request something, and certainly not because he was summoned to Jerusalem. Paul goes to Jerusalem as an apostle and interacts on equal footing with the local church leaders, including Peter. Paul also makes it clear by taking Titus with him, that he is not prepared to budge an inch from what he has recognized as right – Titus is undoubtedly a Christian, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. Paul first experiences something pleasant in Jerusalem: Titus is indeed accepted as a Christian in the congregation there. No one makes the claim that Paul should have Titus circumcised retroactively. However, the visit was not completely harmonious. Paul met a few people in Jerusalem who had already snoopied around in Antioch and had slandered Paul because of his dealing with the Gentiles in Antioch. Things got pretty heated then. But in the end, the outcome was clear – they did not agree to appoint a committee with equal representation of both sides to summarize their concerns in a joint document, instead as Paul says it here: "to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the Gospel might be preserved for you." Where truth is recognized as the truth, there can be no compromising, no strategic retreats. It is important to stand firm by what has been recognized as truth and not to water it down. This is how Paul preserves the unity of the Church – by not yielding, not giving in, but by insisting on the foundation of truth laid down by Christ. Paul apparently has fewer problems with the church leaders in Jerusalem. Where the Gospel, that Paul proclaims, is recognized as the Gospel of Jesus Christ and at the same time people recognize that Christ Himself is at work through this proclamation of the Gospel in Antioch, even among the Christians who were Gentiles, then they can concentrate on solving certain practical questions. Paul acknowledges that Peter is particularly responsible for preaching the Gospel among the Jews and Peter, along with the other church leaders in Jerusalem, acknowledges that the resurrected Christ commissioned Paul to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles. They also acknowledge that it is Christ Himself who has caused so many Gentiles to find their way to faith in Christ in Antioch. James, Peter, and John on the one hand and Paul and Barnabas on the other confirm this agreement with a handshake and agree that they don't want to interfere in each other's work. Paul and his fellow companions from Antioch should continue preaching the Gospel among the Gentiles and Peter and his companions should preach the Gospel among the Jews. Yet this work should not be done completely independently – for example, the Gentile Christian congregations gathered money for the Jerusalem

congregation. This was one way the connection between the new Gentile Christian congregation with the mother church in Jerusalem was to be expressed. And Paul continued working in this way.

How can the unity of the Church be saved? First of all, by remembering that we can't and shouldn't save the Church and its unity. It is Christ who was active at that time in Peter and Paul. It is Christ's Gospel, not the gospel of the apostles that led people to saving faith in Him, the resurrected Christ. It's not our job to establish church fellowship, as if we could create that. Instead, we can only recognize and acknowledge the unity of the Church and marvel at it, just as Peter and Paul did back then. But Paul also makes one thing very clear here. When it comes to the truth of the message that Christ has entrusted to us, there can be no compromise, no attempt to resolve differences by pointing to common concerns, there can be no strategizing and no giving in. False teaching must be called false teaching, and no attempt must be made to integrate this false teaching into an appearance of unity in the Church. True unity of the Church is promoted by testifying the truth of the Gospel, the truth of Christ's message, without compromise, and then proclaiming and putting it into practice during the church's worship service. And where people have agreed upon this united proclamation of the Gospel, as Peter and Paul did at the time, then it is quite possible to talk about the fact that this proclamation is perceived by different people in different places and that the origin of those to whom the Gospel is proclaimed is taken into consideration. Yet these very different people who are reached by the one Gospel, belong to the One Church, even if they may live their faith differently in many ways. The main thing is that they are all tied to this One Christ, to His Gospel, to His Word, to His mission. We experience something of this diversity in Christ again and again here in our congregation. But this story of Peter and Paul also painfully reminds us of one aspect of the unity of the Church. According to their agreement, the unity of the Church includes the assembly of Christians who come from Judaism as well as Gentile Christians. This very unity of the Church was called into question in a terrible way here in Germany during the Third Reich and this unity ultimately fell apart by the fact that in the end, only a church of mostly non-Jews remained. If Christians who come from Judaism today are again denied the right to be brought into the fellowship of the Christian Church, as was recently seen again at the Evangelical Church Congress in Dresden, where Christians who came from Judaism were not allowed to participate, then this too is a slap in the face of Peter and Paul and their agreement about the unity of the Church, which is described to us here. No one, absolutely no one, should be excluded from the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ because of their origin – and certainly not those to whom Peter first preached the Gospel! Amen.