

# HOW TO EFFECT CHANGE<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh  
AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Feast of St  
Peter and St Paul, 29 June 2025**

Today we celebrate the Feast of St Peter and St Paul, Apostles and Martyrs. Why, you might ask, do we celebrate these two major figures on the same day? Surely, given their importance, both in the New Testament and in the early church, they should each have their own day. There is some point to these questions because, as a matter of practice, Peter has had the advantage in the celebration of their joint feast. Being the first Bishop of Rome and thus the first Pope, he has dominated the subsequent ecclesiastical history. And to be fair, Paul has a day of his own on 25 January, when we celebrate his conversion.

The standard explanation of the joint feast is their common martyrdom in Rome. We have no account of St Paul's death, but we do know that he was a prisoner in Rome, having been sent there to face trial. Tradition says that, possibly because he was a Roman citizen, he was beheaded in the persecution of Christians ordered by Emperor Nero after the great fire in 64 AD.<sup>2</sup> It is the same for Peter. We have no account of his death, but tradition places it in the same persecution. Tradition also says that he was crucified upside down at his own request. The late second century apocryphal *Acts of Peter*, says that he did this to draw a contrast between the upright pure life of Christ and the inverted life of the world, the life of Adam.<sup>3</sup> Later 5<sup>th</sup> century tradition said that he did not want to imitate the death of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Acts 12:1-11; Psalm 87; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 17-18; John 21:15-22

<sup>2</sup> [How did St. Peter die? | Britannica](#) [How did St. Paul the Apostle die? | Britannica](#)

<sup>3</sup> This thought, therefore, have I declared unto you; and the figure wherein ye now see me hanging is the representation of that man that first came unto birth. Ye therefore, my beloved, and ye that hear me and that shall hear, ought to cease from your former error and return back again. For it is right to mount upon the cross of Christ, who is the word stretched out, the one and only, of whom the spirit saith: For what else is Christ, but the word, the sound of God? So that the word is the upright beam whereon I am crucified. And the sound is that which crosseth it, the nature of man. And the nail which holdeth the cross-tree unto the upright in the midst thereof is the conversion and repentance of man. [The Acts of Peter](#) Ch XXXVIII

<sup>4</sup> Then both Peter and Paul were led away from the presence of Nero. And Paul was beheaded on the Ostesian road.

And Peter, having come to the cross, said: Since my Lord Jesus Christ, who came down from the heaven upon the earth, was raised upon the cross upright, and He has deigned to call to heaven me, who am of the earth, my cross ought to be fixed head down most, so as to direct my feet towards heaven; for I am not worthy to be

What can we say about their relationship? They certainly knew each other. Although he was in Jerusalem during the formation of the young movement, Paul never met Jesus, but he was at the stoning of Stephen, minding the coats of those who threw the stones. He then led the beginning persecution.<sup>5</sup> Peter must have observed all this. He certainly must have known about Paul, even if he had not met him.

When Paul had his conversion experience, he spent time in Damascus before returning to Jerusalem in his new role. Of course, the young church there, which was led by Peter, must have been suspicious of him. The book of Acts described how Paul's life was threatened, and he was sent to his home in Tarsus. He stayed there for about eight years.<sup>6</sup> He did not return until Barnabas brought him back to help the church in Syrian Antioch.<sup>7</sup>

Peter and Paul's initial great moment together was at what is now called the Council of Jerusalem, the first recorded account of a joint church decision-making process.<sup>8</sup> The issue was whether Gentile converts should be circumcised. That is, must Christians first be Jews. This is not an unsurprising question because the new movement originated in Judaism. Gentile converts needed to make a significant change in their world view. They must become monotheists, believing in an unseen God, and turn away from polytheistic idol worship. They must form new ways of thinking about their relationship with God and what their new life might mean. Did that change require actual identification with traditional Judaism?

Peter spoke in favour of relaxing the circumcision rule. He had earlier had his own visionary experience in which a voice had told him, "What God has made clean, you must not profane". This allowed Peter to visit the Caesaria home of the Roman, Cornelius, and baptize him, staying in his Gentile home contrary to Jewish law.<sup>9</sup> Paul and Barnabas also

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crucified like my Lord. Then, having reversed the [cross](#), they nailed his feet up. [CHURCH FATHERS: The Acts of Peter and Paul](#) 5<sup>th</sup> century pseudepigraphal writing.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 7:58- 8:3

<sup>6</sup> Acts 9:1-13

<sup>7</sup> Act 11:19-26

<sup>8</sup> Acts 15

<sup>9</sup> Acts 10

spoke and the meeting, which was apparently chaired by James, the brother of Jesus, decided to lift the circumcision requirement.

However, the decision was not universally accepted and, when Peter later went to Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas were still working, he succumbed to pressure from Jewish Christians and would not share fellowship with Gentile converts. As Paul recounted in his letter to the Galatians:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction.<sup>10</sup>

This led to a serious rupture between the two. It seems that, in this local controversy, the circumcision party prevailed, and Paul left Antioch to minister where there were fewer strong traditional Jewish communities.<sup>11</sup> That Paul mentioned the dispute in his letter to the Galatians shows that the issue was far from settled, even where Paul had ministered.

The dispute led later to a major argument between St Jerome, who first translated the Bible into Latin and St Augustine of Hippo. Jerome argued that the dispute was staged by the two saints for educational purposes, to show how church conflicts should be managed. Augustine rejected Jerome's argument because it threw doubt on the veracity of Paul's account and the authority of scripture.<sup>12</sup>

Did Peter and Paul reconcile after Antioch? Possibly they did. The Second Letter of Peter praises Paul's letters as "scripture".<sup>13</sup> Scholars doubt that Peter wrote this letter, but it shows that the tradition supports a mutual regard. Early church historian Eusebius quotes the second

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<sup>10</sup> Galatians 2:11

<sup>11</sup> L Michael White, *From Jesus to Christianity*, London, Harper One, 2004, pp. 169-171

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Green-McCreight, *Galatians* (Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible), Brazos, 2023, pp. 42-43

<sup>13</sup> 2 Peter 3:15-16 [The collaboration of Peter and Paul](#)

century Dionysius, Bishop of Corinth as saying that the two apostles preached and taught together in his city.<sup>14</sup>

This has been a long introduction to arrive at the point of my sermon this morning, which is about the management of change in the church. Unlike Jerome, I think that the dispute was real, but his suggestion about change management is useful.

We make a mistake if we downplay the seriousness of the issue that Peter and Paul debated. We have long since given up any view that Hebrew law should play a part in our life. For them, the issue was fundamentally one of identity.<sup>15</sup> Who were the first Christians? How could non-Jews become Christians? Did Christianity mean being Jewish first? Depending on the answer to these questions, who could sit down at table with each other? Then, who could partake of the Eucharist together?

In his commentary on the Council of Jerusalem, Tom Wright identifies different attitudes towards rules and regulations in the European Union (he was writing before Brexit). He suggests that the Greeks and Italians like new laws being passed. They don't intend to obey them, but they are useful safeguards if something goes wrong. The Germans, however, think that a law should be enforced. How can society be efficient otherwise? He declined to comment on the French attitude, but he described the British attitude in these words:

“What do we want? Gradual change! When do we want it? In due course!”<sup>16</sup>

Wright suggests that these different attitudes appear in theological disputes. The question of responses to changed and changing conditions has always been a problem for the church. Frequently it has led to division. Often it has led to de facto division while keeping the appearance of unity. We might think that the Anglican Communion is in that situation now as the Church of England proceeds to appoint a new Archbishop of Canterbury. That election may turn out to be the proxy for the deep underlying divisions about sexuality and the relics

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<sup>14</sup> 2.25.8 [CHURCH FATHERS: Church History, Book II \(Eusebius\) Dionysius of Corinth - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>15</sup> Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*, London, SPCK, 2002, pp. 11-22

<sup>16</sup> Tom Wright, *Acts for Everyone Part 2*, London, SPCK, 2008, p. 43.

of a colonial past. Even deeper still is how we respond to Old Testament laws in an age of increased scientific knowledge and social change. The division between St Peter and St Paul is not just an interesting part of our history. It is an example of our ongoing development. As it did then, such a discussion relates to our present struggles for relevance and integrity in our world.

I do not pretend now to offer any solution to the large problems that today's church experiences. What I do draw to our attention is that, despite the intensity of the division between Peter and Paul, the fate of the church was not ultimately in their hands, just as it is not ultimately in ours. I do not mean that we should just sit back and wait. I mean that we must, as far as we can, act with integrity in faithfulness and trust. Despite the importance of Peter and Paul, the new church survived through the faithfulness and trust of its new members, whether perplexed and angry Jews, or Gentiles doubtful of their acceptance. On the one hand, the Jewish Christians had to deal with the upheaval of centuries of religious practice. On the other hand, the Gentiles had to move into a new world different from their old one in ways that we cannot understand. Yet here we are today. Thanks be to God!

[I had planned to use the following sonnets but, when I was I arrived at this point, I knew that the sermon was ended. Nevertheless, here they are.]

To return to our two saints: a sonnet by Malcolm Guite for each of them.

St Peter

Impulsive master of misunderstanding  
You comfort me with all your big mistakes;  
Jumping the ship before you make the landing,  
Placing the bet before you know the stakes.  
I love the way you step out without knowing,  
The way you sometimes speak before you think,  
The way your broken faith is always growing,  
The way he holds you even when you sink.  
Born to a world that always tried to shame you,

Your shaky ego vulnerable to shame,  
I love the way that Jesus chose to name you,  
Before you knew how to deserve that name.  
And in the end your Saviour let you prove  
That each denial is undone by love.<sup>17</sup>

### Conversion of St Paul

An enemy whom God has made a friend,  
A righteous man discounting righteousness,  
Last to believe and first for God to send,  
He found the fountain in the wilderness.  
Thrown to the ground and raised at the same moment,  
A prisoner who set his captors free,  
A naked man with love his only garment,  
A blinded man who helped the world to see,  
A Jew who had been perfect in the Law,  
Blesses the flesh of every other race  
And helps them see what the apostles saw –  
The glory of the Lord in Jesus' face;  
Strong in his weakness, joyful in his pains,  
And bound by Love, who freed him from his chains.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> [A Sonnet for St. Peter. | Malcolm Guite](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Apostle! -a sonnet for St. Paul | Malcolm Guite](#)