

Art & Belief

The Concordia Apostolorum Icon

The embrace of Peter and Paul is one of the earliest significant themes in Christian art. Their distinct portrayals—Paul with a long beard and bald head, Peter with white hair and short beard—date to the 4th-century fresco and continues in iconography through the “Concordia Apostolorum” icon, a theme that became especially popular in the early 15th century with efforts to reconcile the Western and Eastern churches. Also called the “Apostolic Harmony” icon, it portrays two different points of view (or notes) that blend.

Disagreement has been part of the church since the beginning. In the Book of Acts, church leaders debate whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses and chose not to burden Gentiles with the entire Law, but only a few requirements (Acts 15:29). Paul, Peter, and Barnabas speak passionately against requiring Gentiles to follow Jewish Law because faith in Christ rather than adherence to the Law justifies a person.

Paul conforms to the practice of his audience to win as many converts as possible for Christ: “To those under the Law I became like one under the Law (though I myself am not under the Law), so as to win those under the Law” (1 Corinthians 9:20). His statement is reflected in the decision of whether to have his companions circumcised. Timothy is Jewish because his mother is Jewish, but with a Greek father, he is uncircumcised. When he accompanies Paul to an area where there were many Jews, he is circumcised to give his Jewish identity legitimacy (Acts 16:3). On the other hand, Paul’s Greek companion, Titus, was not compelled to be circumcised (Gal. 2:3).

Peter, the first apostle to recognize Jesus as the son of God, welcomes Gentile and Jewish believers as equal and ate in community with both (Acts 10). However, when those who imposed the Law on Gentiles arrived in Antioch, Paul noticed that Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles and that others, including Barnabas, followed Peter’s lead. Paul publicly challenges this hypocrisy (Gal. 2:14). Peter’s withdrawal has doctrinal implications. Unlike Paul’s code-shifting to connect with people, Peter’s actions exclude people and imply that Gentile Christians are inferior unless they adopt Jewish Law. Peter doesn’t respond directly, but we can infer from his actions that he



Cretan School, Angelos Akotantos, Icon of the Embrace of the Apostles Peter and Paul, early 15th century. Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archeology, Oxford, England.

recognizes his error.

Despite their differences, Peter and Paul respect each other and, according to tradition, embrace before their separate executions in Rome. In the icon, Peter and Paul do not look into each other’s eyes but look to Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit. The icon teaches us how to work with those whose views differ from ours. Additionally, it reminds us that humans are fallible and that even church leadership should be a community, not one person. Ironically, Peter’s fallibility and marriage are forgotten as he was singly reinterpreted as Pope above the other church fathers and the dogmatism around Papal Supremacy largely led to the failure of 15th-century ecumenical efforts. Schism continues to weaken the community of believers today. The icon shows us grace with one another as we keep our eyes to Christ’s teachings rather than strict adherence to dogma. Some disagreements will not lead to consensus and that is ok. The test for any issue is to ask if it results in people being included in or rejected from Christ’s love.

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