

The Letter to the Galatians

If you have ever had your authority questioned or had your ideas and intentions falsely represented, you probably know what Paul felt like when he sat down to write this letter. Centuries before the mud-slinging political campaigns that we experience with great frequency today, Paul faced a similar challenge to his authority as an apostle (one who is sent) and the legitimacy of his message; that is, the gospel (good news) he was proclaiming. In the letter to the Christians in the region of Galatia,¹ we encounter a harsh-sounding Paul who wishes to defend himself and his message against critiques arising after his departure.

The precise date of the letter is unclear. Depending on the supposed recipients (see footnote 1 below), dates range from AD 49 to 58.² Today, the majority of scholars believe Paul wrote from Ephesus c. AD 54-55.³ While the dates may not seem that important *per se*, they do help us situate the letter in the larger scope of Christian history, giving us insight into the situations and issues faced by the early church. We find in this letter a struggle to understand the Law of the Old Testament in light of the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah, which caused a debate over the requirements for Gentiles (non-Jews) to be accepted into the Christian communities of faith. A fundamental issue was the matter of circumcision.⁴ As the sign of the covenant given to Abraham (cf. Gen 12.1-3; 17), it was a distinctive part of entrance into Jewish communities, out of which the Christian faith arose. As such, the first generation of believers was faced with the dilemma of whether circumcision was required for non-Jews to become a part of the emerging communities which proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the long awaited Messiah.

From Paul's statements, we learn that he had preached the gospel in the region of Galatia and having departed, received word that another group of Christians (presumably Jewish converts) had arrived critiquing Paul's authority and preaching what Paul felt was "a different gospel" (cf. 1.6-9).⁵ While we cannot be sure of their specific teachings, what Paul took issue with was the assertion that non-Jewish believers needed to be circumcised (2.1-10; 5.1-6; 6.12-16) and observe the Jewish holy days (4.10-11) in order to be accepted as a convert. In his response, Paul recounts the events of the "Jerusalem Council" in Acts 15 (cf. Gal 2.1-10) where

¹ There are two major theories regarding the Galatians. The "south Galatian theory" suggests that the churches evangelized by Paul were part of the provincial region established by the Roman Empire. This would include towns such as Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe along the Mediterranean. The "north Galatian theory" asserts that the churches were composed of ethnic Galatians, descended from Celtic peoples who settled into the region around Ancyra, Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 302.

² G.N. Stanton, "Galatians," *The Oxford Bible Commentary: CD-ROM*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), "Introduction: D. Date." Dating is contingent upon one's view regarding the north versus south Galatian theory (see note 1 above), and where the reader places Paul's sickness during his first visit (4.13-15) within the Acts narrative of Paul's visits to the region of Galatia. If one accepts the south Galatian theory (the minority opinion among scholars) an earlier date is more probable as Paul would have visited the region during his "first missionary journey" (see Acts 13-14) c. AD 46-49, and would have written between AD 48-50 depending on whether the visit to Jerusalem mentioned in Galatians 2.1 corresponds to Acts 11.30; 12.25 or Acts 15. If one accepts the north Galatian theory ("the ancient approach and still the majority theory"), Paul would have written after the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 (cf. Gal 2.1) sometime between AD 54-58, most probably while staying at Ephesus (Acts 19.1), Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, (NY: Doubleday, 1996), 475-6.

³ Brown, *An Introduction*, 468.

⁴ "Circumcision is the ritualistic removal of the male's foreskin, practiced by many African, South American, and Middle Eastern peoples...In Jewish tradition, following biblical commandments (Gen 17.12; 21.4; Lev 12.3); males are normally circumcised at eight days of age. Proselyte [converts] males are circumcised before admission into the community.... Circumcision was traced back to the covenant or contract God made with Abraham, and thus is widely practiced by Muslims as well as Jews. It was called the 'sign of the covenant' (Gen 17.11), the covenant in the flesh (Gen 17.13), and the 'covenant of circumcision' (Acts 7.8)...In earliest Christianity, there was considerable debate over the requirement of circumcision (Acts 15.1-21; Gal 2.3-14); Paul, however, held that circumcision was part of the old contract that had been superseded and was therefore no longer required (Gal 6.15), and his view ultimately became normative for Christians," George Wesley Buchanan, "Circumcision," *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, Bruce D. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., (NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 123-124

⁵ While most of Paul's letters begin with the traditional thanksgiving for the recipients, Galatians is a notable exception. "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ" (1.6-7). This "must have sent a shudder through the Galatian congregations when they heard it read, for they would have expected a thanksgiving," Stanton, *OBC*, "Commentary: Introduction (1.1-9): (1.6-9) Rebuke." We are not told the content of this "other gospel," but later statements reveal that it proclaimed the necessity of circumcision and works of the law (see 2.15ff).

it was decided that non-Jews did not need to be circumcised.⁶ However, we cannot be sure if these Jewish Christians had received word of this resolution. Regardless, it is clear that while these believers accepted Jesus as Messiah, they still taught that circumcision and Torah obedience were pre-requisites for Christian converts and felt that Paul had preached a truncated message.⁷ Paul responds by expressing shock and disappointment that the Galatian converts had been so quickly misled (1.1-10; cf. 3.1-4), and in 1.10-2.14 Paul defends his authority and the content of his message by giving a history of his ministry and strongly emphasizing that the gospel he preached was “neither received...from man, nor was [he] taught it, but [he] received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1.11-12).

In 2.15-5.1 Paul begins a lengthy defense of his gospel, which involves establishing a clear distinction between faith and “works of the law.” Before going any further, “it is crucial to understand that the Galatians were converted directly from paganism (2.8, 14; 3.8, 24; 4.8-9; 6.13).”⁸ This is important because throughout human history there has been the idea that one must seek to get the gods on your side through acts that gain their favor. *Quid pro quo* (this-for-that) seems to be the predominant relationship of the gods to humanity from Homer’s *Iliad* onward.⁹ As such, when these Jewish Christians arrived teaching that the Galatian converts needed to be circumcised, they assumed this was the act by which God would accept them.¹⁰ In countering this notion, Paul declares that it is only through Christ’s faithfulness that we are able to believe and thereby become sons of God (2.16; 3.26). Thus, when Paul refers to “works of the law,” he is speaking specifically about actions done to earn God’s favor and acceptance, while also noting that good works will naturally come forth from genuine faith in Jesus as the Messiah (cf. 5.6; 5.13-6.10).¹¹

For Jews, Paul’s gospel obviously raised the question of the role and purpose of the Old Testament Law (3.19ff). Paul responds by declaring that since the Law came after God’s covenant promise with Abraham (3.6-18) it functioned as the means by which the world would come to understand sin—its brokenness and need for God’s redemption which can be found only in the Messiah, who is declared to be Jesus of Nazareth (3.19-29). The Law, for Paul, was a servant (3.24-25)¹² that brought about the recognition of sin and the need for grace, which was to

⁶ See notes 1 and 2 for the possibility that this refers to an earlier meeting recorded in Acts 11-12.

⁷ It should be noted that the view Paul is refuting was not atypical. It was traditional that converts to Judaism would be circumcised and observe Torah. Since Christianity arose out of the Jewish faith, it makes perfect sense that these Jewish believers at Galatia would use the same standards for converts as were being used by the Jewish synagogues at that time. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 makes it clear that this was not a self-evident, clear-cut issue. Paul’s response reveals the radical nature of Christianity—both a continuation of the Jewish faith yet also something thoroughly new. Given that the act of circumcision is applicable only to the male gender, one must seek to extrapolate the larger principle Paul is setting forth in Galatians regarding this covenantal act. Paul’s primary assertion on the matter is found in 5.6: “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; what matters is faith working through love.” Therefore, the issue (for both men *and* women) is to recognize that trust in the grace of God—not any ritual act—is what brings redemption and allows the believer to live a life that increasingly looks more like Jesus, a life that demonstrates “faith working through love.”

⁸ Johnson, *The Writings*, 303.

⁹ For example, in Homer’s *Iliad: Book 1*, Achilles says: “Let us ask some priest or prophet, or some reader of dreams (for dreams, too, are of Jove) who can tell us why Phoebus Apollo is so angry, and say whether it is for some vow that we have broken, or hecatomb that we have not offered, and whether he will accept the savour of lambs and goats without blemish, so as to take away the plague from us,” <<http://www.online-literature.com/homer/iliad/0/>>.

¹⁰ It is important to realize that Paul is not arguing against good works flowing forth from the life of one who chooses to follow Christ (see Eph 2.8-9). His argument here is focused on rebutting arguments that were driving wedges between Jewish and Gentile believers. “read in the light of the Antioch incident [see Gal 2.11-14], Paul’s teaching has important social implications: Gentile and Jewish believers are one, and they may share table fellowship on the basis of what God has done in Christ,” Frank J. Matera, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, NOTE 2.15-21, 2083. Paul’s focus is to bring unity where this “other gospel” is bringing division. Therefore, Paul declares that circumcision and works of the law need not divide Jew and Gentile any longer, “for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only things that counts is faith working through love” (5.6).

¹¹ Regarding Gal 5.6, Raymond Brown has noted that “Paul does not consider circumcision something evil but rather something that has no power to bring justification to the Gentiles. It also suggests that Paul thought of faith accepting the efficacy of what Christ had done as something that had to find expression in love manifested in the life of the believer,” *Introduction*, 473.

¹² “In the Greek world there was a household servant called the *paidagogos*. He was not the schoolmaster. He was usually an old and trusted slave who had been long in the family and whose character was high...He had one particular duty: every day he had to take the child to and from school. He had nothing to do with the actual teaching of the child, but it was his duty to take him in safety to school and deliver him to the teacher. That—said Paul—was like the function of the law. It was there to lead a [person] to Christ,” William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, revised edition, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 31.

be found in God's action through the Messiah (3.22). Since the Messiah has come, we are no longer under this servant (3.25) for our "tutor" is now Jesus the Christ whose words and deeds have set forth the manner of life that leads to redemption of all creation.

To avoid the conclusion that he is espousing a set of beliefs alone, Paul turns next to an exposition of what Christian faith truly means (5.2-6.10). It is not just accepting certain statements as true, as if Christianity were a matter of receiving a passing grade on a True/False doctrinal examination. Rather, Christian faith means trusting in the faithfulness of Christ (3.26-29) through whom we receive the "righteousness of God" (2.20-21; 3.6-7, 21-2; 5.4-5). As a result, we are able to "walk by the Spirit" (5.16, 25) allowing us to "not lose heart in doing good" (6.9-10).¹³ Thus, Paul can boldly declare that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything" (6.15)—viz. the boundaries that once divided peoples are no longer tenable (cf. 3.22, 25-29; 5.6; 6.15)—but what truly matters is "faith working through love" (5.6),¹⁴ which is made possible by the Spirit of God (5.5, 16-25) and is a manifestation of the "new creation" that is already, but coming (6.15).

Outlines of and Commentaries on Galatians

Oxford Bible Commentary¹⁵

- I. Introduction (1.1-9)
- II. Body (1.10 - 6.10)
 - A. Paul's Story (1.10 - 2.21)
 - B. Main Arguments (3.1 - 4.11; 4.30; or 5.1)
 - C. Ethical Exhortations (4.12; 4.31; or 5.2 - 6.10)
- III. Conclusion (6.11-18)

Raymond Brown¹⁶

DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS

- 1.1-10 Introduction:
- 1.1-5 Opening Formula (defensive in describing apostleship and what Christ has done)
- 1.6-10 Exordium or Introduction (astonishment in place of Thanksgiving), describing the issue, the adversaries, and the seriousness of the case (by anathemas)¹⁷
- 1.11-2.14 Paul narrates his preaching career to defend his thesis about his gospel (1.11-12)
- 2.15-21 Debate with opponents, contrasting his gospel with theirs: justified by faith in Christ, not by observing the Law; Christians live by faith
- 3.1-4.31 Proofs for justification by faith, not by Law: six arguments drawn from the past experiences of the Galatians and from Scripture, particularly centered on Abraham
- 5.1-6.10 Ethical exhortation (paraenesis) for them to preserve their freedom, and walk according to the Spirit
- 6.11-18 Conclusion: authentic postscript in Paul's own hand (as distinct from scribe who took dictation); recapitulation of attitude toward circumcision; benediction

¹³ Thus, the heart of the debate is primarily over the means by which one enters into the covenant relationship with God. It is not by means of circumcision or any other "works of the law," but only by the faithfulness of Christ. That is to say, only by God's grace. Actions coming forth from trust in Christ's faithfulness are presupposed, as faith will work through love (5.6) and the Spirit will bear its fruit (5.22-23), thereby enabling the believer to "walk by the Spirit" (5.25)—the meaning of which is revealed in Paul's closing exhortations (5.26-6.18).

¹⁴ "What counts if faith that expresses itself in love, because love is the fulfillment of the Law (5.14; Rom 13.8-10)," Frank J. Matera, *NIB*, NOTE 5.2-6, 2087. See also NOTE 11.

¹⁵ Stanton, *Oxford Bible Commentary*, "Introduction: F. Structure."

¹⁶ Brown, *An Introduction*, 468.

¹⁷ "A Greek word corresponding to Hebr. *herem* and designating an object dedicated or devoted to a deity either for consecration or to be cursed (devoted to destruction)...Most occurrences of the term...describe something or someone accursed or given to God for destruction....According to Paul, if someone preaches a gospel contrary to the one that he preached (Gal 1.8, 9), that person is anathema (NRSV: 'cursed; see also 1 Corinthians 16.22)," Paul L. Bremer, "Anathema," *OCB*, 26.

For Further Study

Barclay, William. *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letters to the Galatians and Ephesians*, revised edition. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.

Betz, H.D. *Hermeneia: Galatians*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.

Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New York: DoubleDay, 1996.

Dunn, J.D.G. *Black's New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Galatians*. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993.

Johnson, Luke T. *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Longenecker, R. N. *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*. Dallas: Word Press, 1990.

Matera, F.J. *Sacra Pagina: Galatians*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1991.

Meeks, Wayne A. and John T. Fitzgerald. *The Writings of Saint Paul*, second edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007.

Metzger, Bruce M. and Michael D. Coogan, eds. *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Stanton, G.N. "Galatians." *The Oxford Bible Commentary: CD-ROM*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.