

Galatians

Authorship

Galatians is the least disputed of the claimed writings of the apostle Paul. Both internal and external evidence point to his authorship, though other factors, such as recipients and date, are much more in doubt.

Original Readers

The readers were Gentile Christians who had been evangelized by Paul during his first recorded visit to Asia Minor. These believers were being pressured into acceptance of the Mosaic Law as the means of pleasing God.

Date

On the assumption of the south Galatian destination, Paul most likely wrote to these churches in A.D. 48/49, just prior to the Jerusalem council.

Historical Setting

A workable sequence for Paul's movements leading up to the writing of Galatians is as follows. After a time of ministry in Antioch, followed by the bearing of the famine relief to Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas undertake the establishment of the churches in southern Galatia in A.D. 47 (Acts 13:4–14:25). They then return to Antioch, their base of operation, where they deliver a progress report and stay "a long time with the disciples" (14:26-28). This extended stay in Antioch would take up the better part of A.D. 48, during which they would visit Jerusalem "by revelation" and communicate privately to the chief apostles the gospel that Paul had received and preached (Gal. 2:1-2). Following Paul and Barnabas's return to Antioch, three crisis events would transpire: (1) Paul would find it necessary to rebuke Peter over the issue of table fellowship (Gal. 2:11-14)¹ (2) he would receive troubling news from the recently formed churches of Asia minor and would pen a letter of response, which would include a report regarding the recent confirmations of the correctness of his gospel proclamation and (3) certain men would come from Judea teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1). We should probably date Peter's ill-fated visit to Antioch in A.D. 48 and the writing of Galatians either later that year (as do Johnson and Bruce) or early in A.D. 49, just prior to the Jerusalem council (as do Hodges and Constable).

¹ An important point to note regarding the Antioch incident with Peter is that the issue was not the gospel but table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers. See James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (London: SPCK, 1990), 108-26 for a discussion that probes most of the issues, though not all his conclusions seem warranted.

Occasion

Paul had established churches in south Galatia and made a repeat visit before returning to Antioch, his base of operations (Acts 13:4–14:28). At Antioch he receives disturbing news regarding a perversion of the gospel he had preached. This perversion was threatening the believers' continuance in the way of grace. Paul writes to correct this error and to encourage them to maintain their freedom in Christ.

Special Issues

The destination of this letter is crucial in determining the date and historical setting. Traditionally it was held that Paul was writing to churches of northern Asia Minor, churches that he would have established on the missionary journey recorded in Acts 16. This would date the book sometime after A.D. 50. Scholars of a more critical bent favor a later rather than earlier date for Galatians due to its developed handling of the doctrine of justification by faith. However, since the work of William Ramsay, a majority of recent scholars think that it is the churches of south Galatia to which Paul was writing, thus equating them with the ones that he and Barnabas established on the missionary journey mentioned in Acts 13-14.² The south Galatian destination seems more probable. Galatians, then, becomes the earliest of Paul's letters and reveals the critical problems presented by certain legalistic Jewish elements of the church in its early days.

Theme Statement

It is only by continuing in grace, free from the bondage of law, that believers may enjoy the full blessing of salvation in Christ.

Outline

- I. Introduction: Paul corresponds with the churches of Galatia.1:1-5
 - A. Paul writes as an apostle by the will of God.1:1-2
 - B. Paul commends Christ as the Deliverer from the present evil age.1:3-5
- II. Paul defends the gospel that he had preached to them.....1:6–2:21
 - A. Defection from the gospel had occasioned Paul's defense.....1:6-10
 - 1. The churches had been troubled by a different gospel.....1:6-7
 - 2. The troublers were worthy of being accursed.....1:8-9
 - 3. The true gospel pleases God not man.1:10

² For a summary of the arguments see F. F. Bruce, "Galatian Problems 2: North or South Galatians?" *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 52 (1969-70): 243-66. See also Donald Guthrie *New Testament Introduction* 4th ed. revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 465-74.

- B. The history of Paul's gospel argues its correctness.1:11–2:21
 - 1. Paul's reception of the gospel was apart from human involvement.1:11-17
 - a. He had received it through revelation of Jesus Christ.1:11-12
 - b. He received it apart from consultation with human agents.1:13-17
 - 2. Paul's proclamation of the gospel was without opposition by the Jerusalem church.1:18–2:10
 - a. His preaching was not resisted by the apostles at the beginning.1:18-24
 - b. His preaching was confirmed by the apostles later on.2:1-10
 - 1) He presented his gospel to the Jerusalem church.2:1-2
 - 2) He resisted the perversion of the gospel by false brethren.2:3-6
 - 3) He was confirmed as the apostle to the Gentiles.2:7-10
 - 3. Paul's application of the gospel was without hypocrisy or pretense.2:11-21
 - a. He was consistent in the matter of table fellowship.2:11-14
 - b. He was consistent in the matter of justification by faith.2:15-18
 - c. He was consistent in the matter of the life of faith.2:19-21
- III. Paul corrects the error of living the Christian life by law.3:1–5:26
 - A. Paul establishes the primacy of the hearing of faith over the works of the law.3:1-9
 - B. Paul declares their deliverance from the curse of the law.3:10-18
 - 1. The curse of the law resides in its demand of perfection.3:10-12
 - 2. The curse of the law is removed by Christ's redemption.3:13-18
 - a. Christ became a curse for our redemption.3:13
 - b. Christ becomes the channel of our sanctification.3:14-18
 - 1) The blessing of Abraham is the promise of the Spirit.3:14
 - 2) The promises were made to the Seed by covenant.3:15-17
 - 3) Thus, the inheritance is by the promise through the Seed, not law.3:18
 - C. Paul describes the true purpose of the law.3:19-25
 - 1. The law was added to reveal sin.3:19-22
 - 2. The law was given as a guardian until Christ.3:23-25
 - D. Paul delineates the true position of the Christian apart from the law.3:26–4:7
 - 1. Every believer is an heir according to promise.3:26-29
 - 2. Every believer has received the adoption of sons.4:1-7
 - E. Paul denounces returning to a condition of slavery under the law.4:8–5:15
 - 1. It would cast doubt on Paul's labor.4:8-11
 - 2. It would be contradictory to their past treatment of Paul.4:12-20
 - 3. It would be contradictory to the law itself.4:21-31
 - 4. It would be spiritually devastating.5:1-15
 - a. They would become entangled in the impossible responsibility of keeping the whole law.5:1-3
 - b. They would become estranged from grace.5:4-6
 - c. They would become ineffective in Christian fellowship.5:7-15

- F. Paul commends the freedom of life in the Spirit.....5:16-26
 - 1. The Spirit overcomes the lusts of the flesh.....5:16-21
 - 2. The Spirit produces the fruit of Christ.....5:22-26
- IV. Conclusion: Paul exhorts the churches to responsible living.....6:1-18
 - A. They must take responsibility for the welfare of the brethren.....6:1-10
 - 1. They are to give attention to the spiritual struggles of the brethren.6:1-5
 - 2. They are to give attention to the material needs of the brethren.....6:6-10
 - B. They must be careful about boasting in anything other than the cross.....6:11-15
 - C. They must walk by the rule of grace.6:16-18

Theme Development

Paul is writing to churches founded on his first mission into Asia Minor (cf. Acts 13:4–14:28). Sometime after his return to Antioch, he gets word that the gospel of grace that he had proclaimed was being perverted by Jewish emphasis on the Law as necessary to experience the full blessing of God. Paul is disappointed in their susceptibility to this perversion and writes pointedly in order to correct the error and protect them from spiritual catastrophe.

I. Introduction: Paul corresponds with the churches of Galatia (1:1-5).

Paul finds it necessary to defend his apostleship vigorously so as to authenticate his message as being divinely given. He continues this defense through 2:21 before taking up the errors specifically. As a prelude to his treatment of life in Christ, Paul notes that one of the goals of Jesus' sacrifice had been deliverance from the evils associated with living in the present age (1:4). This immediately reveals to the reader that the subject of Galatians is broader than simply justification by faith, though such faith cannot be separated from it.

II. Paul defends the gospel that he had preached to them (1:6–2:21).

A. Defection from the gospel had occasioned Paul's defense (1:6-10).

Paul protests that the gospel being newly proclaimed among them is of such a completely different strain from the one that he had delivered, that its presence must be dealt with in a most forceful way. His motivation was the pleasure of God rather than man.

B. The history of Paul's gospel argues its correctness (1:11–2:21).

1. Paul's reception of the gospel was apart from human involvement (1:11-17). In order to establish the correctness of his message, Paul appeals to his calling by God and to his initial ministry among the Gentiles. Under most unusual circumstances, God had apprehended him by grace and commissioned him to a Gentile ministry. Though Paul would have immediately realized the significance of Jesus' true identity as Messiah for a Jew (and may have immediately vis-

ited Jerusalem—cf. Acts 9:26³), from the time that he clearly understood the nature of his Gentile ministry he had become obedient to the gospel proclamation apart from any advice or confirmation by the Jerusalem church (1:16-17). Such was the compulsion of the divine message and call (1:15-16).

2. Paul's proclamation of the gospel was without opposition by the Jerusalem church (1:18–2:10). After three years of Gentile ministry, Paul visited Jerusalem in order to see Peter, likely “exchanging notes” on their respective ministries to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 10). There is no hint of disagreement and Paul engages in another Gentile mission in the regions of Syria and Cilicia (1:18-21). His only impact on the churches of Judea was by reputation as a preacher of “the faith,” presumably the same faith proclaimed by the Jerusalem apostles (1:22-24).

Not only was there no resistance to Paul's ministry, it was even positively confirmed by the Jerusalem church (2:1-10). Fourteen years after his conversion, Paul had gone up to Jerusalem in company with a Gentile convert, Titus, and under divine direction, in order to submit his gospel message for approval (2:1-2). Certain false brethren made an issue of circumcision, which was resisted, with the result that the truth of the gospel of grace remained clear (2:3-5). The outcome of this Jerusalem conference was confirmation of Paul's gospel ministry and an official “division” of the mission field with respect to apostolic activity; Paul was commended to work with Gentiles, whereas James, Peter, and John continued in their commitment to the circumcised (2:7-10). In every way Paul's gospel ministry had been recognized and authenticated as being of divine origin and direction.

3. Paul's application of the gospel was without hypocrisy or pretense (2:11-21). The issue of table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers, however, was not so clear-cut. Whereas it was permissible for a Jew to remain observant of the customs of his religious heritage, it was not permissible to make them an issue of division within the body of Christ. Paul could not tolerate this particular manifestation of hypocrisy, entertained even by Peter and Barnabas, because it denied the truth of the Gospel, namely, that a person stands accepted by God on the basis of faith, not by works of the law (2:14-16). If this were the condition of fellowship between God and man, then it must be the same condition of fellowship in the body of Christ. In fact to deny this truth makes it impossible to live the Christian life since it is faith in Christ's life on a daily basis that sanctifies, not performance of the law (2:19-21). In this way, Paul has both estab-

³ This is a position held by Elliott Johnson, unpublished class notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1999.

lished the validity of his message and ministry and introduced the subject of the rest of the letter, namely, How does the believer live the Christian life?

III. Paul corrects the error of living the Christian life by law (3:1–5:26).

The main message of this letter revolves around believers living by the life of Christ in the power of the Spirit (cf. 2:20; 3:2, 3, 5, 14; 4:19; 5:4, 16-25). This section is Paul's defense of that model over against the Judaizing heresy of experiencing the blessing of life by law. In order to accomplish this Paul, first deals with the inability of the law and its true purpose (3:1–4:31). He then moves to a more direct explanation of the ministry of the Spirit (5:1-26).

A. Paul establishes the primacy of the hearing of faith over the works of the law (3:1-9).

When Paul had proclaimed Jesus Christ in his ministry of atonement (3:1), the Galatians had believed, thereby receiving the Spirit (3:2). This was all apart from the law. They had also, subsequently, experienced the Spirit's supernatural manifestation, which likewise had been apart from the law (3:5). The prophetic foundation for this benefit was Abraham's receiving righteousness by faith alone (3:6). Since justification is by faith for all who believe, the pattern for all blessing is established—it results from faith (3:8-9).

B. Paul declares their deliverance from the curse of the law (3:10-18).

On the other hand, all that could ever be expected from law is the curse of man's inability to measure up to its stringent expectations (3:10-12). Only Christ could deliver from this curse, and this he did by taking man's penalty for sin (3:13). In this way Gentiles (as well as Jews) are enabled to experience the Spirit's ministry, the ultimate intent of God's promise to bless the world through Abraham (3:14). The actual source of blessing is Christ, Who, as Abraham's prime Descendent, had entered into covenant with God on man's behalf and is therefore free to dispense the blessing of his own life to those who appropriate it by faith (3:15-18).

C. Paul describes the true purpose of the law (3:19-25). Why then the law? There are many reasons for Israel's reception of the Sinaitic covenant.⁴ In this context Paul gives only those reasons that suit his exposition of life in Christ, namely (1) the law's ability to give objective form to sin as a transgression (3:19-22) and (2) its role as a guardian of a child (3:23-25). Paul speaks as a Jew to whom the law was directed in Israel's role as God's unique priest-nation (cf. 2:15; 4:3; cf. Ex. 19:5-6). Though the law was given to train Israel for spiritual adulthood, he confesses that only in Christ could that be accomplished (3:22). Paul is making the point that it

⁴ See J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Purpose of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 (July-September, 1971): 227-33.

is senseless to put the Gentiles under the law's "tutelage" when Israel was never able to experience spiritual adulthood under it.

D. Paul delineates the true position of the Christian apart from the law (3:26-4:7).

In fact the Galatian believers, through faith in Christ, had become sons, that is, those who have the full rights and prerogatives of spiritual adulthood (3:26-28). It is this position that has entitled them to the full spiritual blessing promised through Abraham (3:29). Israel had long been the designated heir of God's blessing, but had actually been more like a slave due to its bondage to the worldly elements (4:1-3). That bondage had now been removed for believing Israel through spiritual adoption (4:4-5), which has also been extended to believing Gentiles (4:6) who, as unbelievers, had been experiencing their own brand of slavery (4:7-8).

E. Paul denounces returning to a condition of slavery under the law (4:8-5:15).

Returning to a servitude under Torah would be just as unprofitable as their previous enslavement to false gods had been (4:8-11). Paul's ministry to the Galatian believers was irrefutable evidence that God had been at work in him for their blessing (4:12-16). While the Judaizers' motives are to be questioned, Paul only wants them to experience fullness in Christ (4:17-20). The bondage into which they are being led is illustrated by Abraham's son of the bondwoman, the son who exemplifies life according to the flesh (4:21-31).

In fact far from being able to bring them to spiritual completion (cf. 3:3), the law would actually be devastating to their progress in the faith (5:1-15). Circumcision would make them debtors to the whole law (5:1-3) and move them outside the operational realm of grace as the key to the realization of all that they were intended to be (5:4-6). The leaven of disobedience, deposited by those who had been courting their allegiance (cf. 4:17), would soon spread its disruptive influence through indulgence of the flesh if they were not careful (5:7-15). They would know that they were really enjoying the goal of the law as they manifested genuine Christian love (5:14).

F. Paul commends the freedom of life in the Spirit (5:16-26).

The focus for living must be conduct directed by the Spirit rather than the law, which only stirs up the works of the flesh (5:16-18). They will know which rule of life is being followed by what manifests itself in their behavior, works of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit (5:19-23). Co-crucifixion with Christ is the source of life in the Spirit (5:24-25; cf. Rom. 6). Life in the Spirit will not produce conceit or envy (5:26).

IV. Conclusion: Paul exhorts the churches to responsible living (6:1-18).

As already indicated (cf. 5:13-15, 20-26), life in the Spirit will be manifested in Christian relationships. Appropriately, Paul concludes with specific exhortations concerning the welfare of the body—giving attention to spiritual struggles (6:1-5) and to material needs (6:6-10). This will fulfill the law of Christ, the rule of life that follows the example of his redeeming sacrifice (6:2).

All in all it either comes to boasting in the flesh and taking thought of its ease and protection (6:11-13), or glorying in the cross of Christ and the life that it alone affords (6:14-15). This is the walk that produces peace and experiences divine mercy, regardless of the hardship of the present life (6:16-18).

Conclusion

In this first of Paul's letters dealing with the great issues of the gospel of grace, there are found all the great truths of salvation and Christian living, arranged so as to effectively answer the threat of Jewish legalism. Not many years later, writing to the church at Rome, Paul will have the leisure of developing these various strands of the gospel in a more structured way and in a less urgent circumstance. For now, Paul is hopeful that this exhortation coupled with his previous ministry will result in their continuance in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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