

GALATIANS

Exploring Paul's Good News

Grappling with the meaning of Galatians

Paul's Letter to the Galatians is not a letter that is immediately or easily understood. Its central message of 'justification by faith in Christ' is one that has caused considerable misunderstanding and no little controversy down through the centuries and so it requires careful and patient study to grasp what Paul is saying, and equally importantly, to understand what he is not saying.

When reading Galatians one must bear in mind the influence of Paul's own personal experience of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and how his faith in Jesus had achieved for him what the law (which he had zealously adhered to) had failed to do: namely, the assurance of God's love and acceptance.

The Importance of the letter to the Galatians

Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians teems with impassioned fervour unequalled in any Pauline letter. It reveals an embattled Paul in a fierce struggle to preserve his own apostolic credentials, to defend the gospel that he preached to them and to safeguard the spiritual health of these communities that he had founded a few years earlier. Galatians is the most revealing of Paul's letters in terms of information about himself and affords key autobiographical details concerning Paul's background, his education, his religious zeal as a Pharisee, his conversion and his dealings with the Jerusalem Church represented by Peter, (Cephas), James and John regarding the thorny question of how the church should deal with Gentile converts.

Paul's Gospel: Justification by Faith

The central theme of Galatians focuses on Paul's most distinctive and innovative doctrine: namely, that of 'justification by faith.' Paul insists that one is justified, [put at rights with God] not through adhering to the commandments of the Jewish Law (Torah) but rather through faith in Christ Jesus in whom God has freely and graciously redeemed humanity. This uniquely Pauline idea, that he refers to as 'his gospel,' revolutionised the development of Christianity. By sweeping away all Torah requirements including circumcision, Paul opened the church wide to Gentile converts. It should be noted however that what is seen in Galatians is Paul in a moment of intense and impulsive reflection, responding passionately to developments that have deeply disturbed him. The letter contains some of Paul's most bold theological reasoning, but he seems to adjust this reasoning somewhat in content and tone in his later letter to the Romans.

Who were the Galatians?

The exact location of the Galatian communities is uncertain. Some scholars suggest that the letters were directed to churches in the north central plateau area of Asia Minor near present day Ankara in Turkey (the area in the map marked Galatia) on the basis of brief references in Acts to the 'Galatian country' (Acts 16:6; 18:23).

Other scholars believe that the Galatians were Christians living in Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and other nearby cities that are mentioned in Acts as having been visited by Paul during his first missionary journey. However none of these cities are named within the letter itself. Because of their more southerly location, this area would have been more susceptible to the influence of Jewish Christians from important Christian centres at Antioch (in Syria) and Jerusalem.



Date of the Letter

Equally Galatians is not easily dated. Paul had clearly been personally involved in forming the community. If we accept the witness of Acts, he visited the region during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:13-14:23) and passed through the region again twice more (16:1-6; 18:23), the last time being on his third missionary journey in the late 40's C.E. Ephesus is regarded as the likely place of writing and the letter is dated circa 54-56 C.E. making it one of the earliest of Paul's letters.

The occasion and purpose of Galatians

It appears that shortly after Paul's second visit to the Galatian communities some agitators (1:7; 5:10, 12) [also translated as 'trouble-makers'] were undermining his authority as an apostle on the grounds that his commission did not come from Jesus (1:1, 12). These agitators moreover were insisting that Gentile converts in Galatia had to be circumcised and observe the Jewish Law if they wished to share in the promises made to Abraham and his descendants. In response Paul writes this strongly worded letter warning the Galatians not to be led astray by such teaching, defending his own credentials as an apostle and reasserting the gospel that he had preached to them; namely that one is justified or restored to right relationship with God not by observing the Law but by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. In the process Galatians becomes the earliest record of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith and the first exposition of his understanding of Christian freedom.

Faith in Christ Jesus' or 'Faith of Christ Jesus'?

Much discussion about Galatians centres on exactly what Paul means when he speaks of being justified by faith in Christ Jesus (Gal 2:16; 3:22; Rom 3:22, 26; Phil 3:9). The Greek term can be translated as either 'faith in Christ' or 'the faith of Christ'.

Faith in Christ is the more common translation and is understood as referring to the faith and trust of the believer in what God has done in Jesus, especially through his death and resurrection. The faith of Christ on the other hand is understood as referring to Christ's faithfulness to God's plan through which we are saved. Some scholars suggest that the Greek phrase actually encompasses both aspects: humankind has been justified by God in and through the perfect faithfulness of Christ on the cross but we have access to this new life only by acknowledging, as Paul does, that true life comes from faith in Christ, that is to say, by trusting in Christ and surrendering ourselves to the one "who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20).

Who are the Agitators?

Who precisely were these agitators? Given that Paul's letter is meant as a rebuttal of their preaching it is essential to have some sense of the situation that Paul was responding to when he first wrote Galatians. Almost certainly these 'agitators' were Jewish Christians. Indeed the term "Judaizer" is sometimes used to describe the opponents of Paul at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) and those who preached "another gospel" in Galatia (Gal 2:4, 12; 6:12) because they sought to induce Gentiles to observe circumcision and precepts of the Jewish Law.

Care must be taken however not to interpret this ongoing tension between Paul and the Judaizers as a dispute between early Christianity and Judaism. It was not. It was essentially a dispute within Christianity itself between those who advocated a strongly Jewish flavoured Christianity in which Christians were expected to follow all the requirements of the Jewish Law and those who believed that there was no reason for Gentile converts to be subjected to such demands. Galatians therefore reflects a very tension in the early Church as to the fundamental question of what it means to be 'Christian.'

Paul's accusation that his opponents are motivated by a desire to avoid persecution (Gal 6:12-13) may well reflect the pressures felt by Jewish Christians during the surge of Jewish nationalism that swept Palestine in the mid-first century [eventually leading to the ill-fated Jewish rebellion against the Romans in 66-70 C.E.]. During this period fierce Jewish nationalist groups such as the 'zealots' would have been vehemently opposed to any Jewish group displaying sympathy for Gentiles.

Structure of Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Introduction and Greeting (Gal 1:1-5)

Call to loyalty to the gospel Paul preached (Gal 1:6-10)

Paul's defence of his gospel and his authority (Gal 1:11-2:21)

Arguments in support of Paul's gospel (3:1-4:4:31)

The Nature of Christian Freedom (Gal 5:1-5:26)

Exhortation to Christian living (6:1-10)

Conclusion (Gal 6:11-18)

READ GALATIANS

As we noted in previous issues, respecting Paul means taking seriously what he himself writes in his letters. Bearing the context outlined briefly above in mind, take time to read the letter to the Galatians. Where possible, read it aloud and at a single sitting. Take note of its tone and its emotional quality. Galatians is not an easy letter to understand immediately: it takes time! You may wish to read it several times. You can almost sense Paul grappling with the issues as he tries to put shape on his ideas and explain his 'gospel' to the listener. There is urgency in the letter as he tries to express his deepest convictions and to offer arguments to substantiate his position. If you are technically minded an excellent way of hearing the letters is to download the letter in audio onto your PC or MP3 player from any one of a number of biblical websites that are available free of charge and then listen to the letter being read to you as it once would have been read to the early Christian communities in Galatia.

How would you describe the tone of the letter?

What do you regard as significant from the various arguments Paul makes to defend his gospel of 'justification by faith'?

What do you take away from your own listening of Galatians?

NOTES

In the opening passage (1:1-5), Paul dispenses with his usual thanksgiving and prayer and begins with a shortened greeting before moving quickly to denounce those who are promoting "a different gospel" (1:6-10). He goes on to vindicate his own authority as an apostle by claiming divine authority in preaching to the Gentiles (1:15-17), an authority moreover that has been acknowledged by the Church in Jerusalem (2:7-8). It is notable that according to Paul's account of the Council of Jerusalem (2:1-10) he yielded to no concessions to the "Judaizers" [as Acts 15 asserts] but rather strenuously defended the right of Gentile converts to be accepted into the community without any preconditions.

Paul's Gospel: Justified by Faith, not by the Law.

Paul describes his subsequent clash with Peter in Antioch when Peter withdrew from table fellowship with the Gentiles after the arrival of emissaries from James and the church at Jerusalem who presumably supported the Judaizer position. This episode shows just how far the Jewish-Gentile issue was from being resolved even after the meeting in Jerusalem. In Gal2:15-21 Paul sets forth the central message of the letter, the same truth or gospel that he had defended at Jerusalem (2:5) and against Peter at Antioch (2:14), namely, that believers are justified by grace through faith in Jesus and not through the law (2:15-21). Scholars suggest that Paul borrows the term "to be justified," [sometimes translated as "to be made righteous"] from contemporary court settings where 'to be justified' or 'to be made righteous' meant to be acquitted.

For Paul, humankind has been acquitted from sin by God in and through the perfect faithfulness of Christ on the cross. This is the fundamental truth of

the Christian faith. Humans are incapable of achieving right relationship with God by our own merits, a truth recognised in Jewish tradition itself in Psalm 143:2 'Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.' We can experience this new life only by acknowledging, as Paul does, that true life comes from trusting in and surrendering ourselves to Christ "who loved me and gave himself for me" (2:20). To suggest, as the agitators apparently did, that justification comes through adherence to the law, is to "nullify the grace of God" who has acquitted us in and through the faithfulness of Christ on the cross and render Christ's death as meaningless.

Paul's Arguments in support of his gospel. (Gal 3:1-4:7)

Having outlined his gospel of justification by faith and not by the Law, Paul now embarks on a series of arguments to support his proposition.

First (3:1-5): Paul appeals to the personal experience of the Galatians reminding them that they themselves received the renewing power of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, not through their faithfulness to the law.

Second (3:6-9): Paul draws on scripture quoting Gen 15:6 where Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" to argue that similarly today it is those who exercise faith who are in fact the true children of Abraham and therefore recipients of the promise that through him all nations would be blessed.

Third (3:10-14): Paul uses scripture to contrast the curse brought by the law (Deut 27:26) and the blessing brought by faith (Hab.2:4). Citing Deut 21:23 which speaks of "God's curse resting on him who hangs on a tree" Paul interprets Christ's death as Jesus' faithful acceptance of the Law's "curse" on our behalf thus allowing us to be justified before God. The blessing promised to Abraham, the gift of the Spirit which is now experienced by Gentile and Jewish believers alike, rests wholly on Christ's atonement.

Fourth (3:15-18): Paul further develops the theme of the promises God made to Abraham. Since the promise to Abraham in Gen 12:7 speaks of his 'offspring' in the singular [thereby pointing to a single person] Paul concludes that God's promises had a single descendent in mind: Christ. The giving of the law four hundred and thirty years after God's covenant with Abraham, does not supplement, nor replace, God's agreement with Abraham.

Fifth (3:19-24): Paul argues that the Mosaic Law was an interim measure devised by God to "hold people in custody under law" (3:23) until the promised blessing of new life could be realized in Christ. The law served to make humans aware that they are lawbreakers who, in and of themselves, cannot earn divine favour. Only Jesus, the singular promised offspring of Abraham could set them free.

Sixth (3:25-29): The Law, given as a temporary measure designed to discipline humanity and keep us on the straight and narrow. The law however has terminated with the coming of Christ in whom "all become children of God through faith." In Christ distinctions of race, class and gender are irrelevant. The basis of this radical new equality is that they are all "one in Christ Jesus" (3:28).

Seventh (4:1-7) Paul compares the situation of Jews and Gentiles before the appearance of Christ as akin to heirs who had not yet come “of age.” Though they were destined to inherit the promises made to Abraham but were yet not free to enjoy that blessing (since Christ had not yet justified them with God). In Christ, God has not only freed believers from slavery to the Law but has also adopted them as God’s children. The gift of the Spirit, which allows them to call God Abba, proves they are now heirs to the promises made to Abraham.

The Nature of Christian Freedom

What does freedom from the slavery of Torah regulations mean for believers? Aware that some Galatians used their liberty as an excuse to indulge any desire or appetite Paul insists that Christian freedom is the freedom to serve one another in love (5:13). Two kinds of slavery threaten to rob us of this essential Christian freedom to serve others in love. If I am enslaved to the law, I am more interested in keeping the commandments to establish my own merit than in loving others. If I am enslaved to my own sinful nature, I am absorbed in my selfish interests rather than the needs of others. Even if I serve others I do it in order to fulfil my own desires. So slavery to the law and slavery to the flesh both cause us to use people to serve our own ends rather than to serve people in love. Only when we are free from slavery to the law and slavery to the flesh will we be truly free to serve one another in love. Such love was demonstrated by Christ “who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20) and becomes the expression of true faith: “the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (5:6).

When such love is lived the whole law has been fulfilled (5:14). Paul’s quoting of the commandment ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ appears at first glance to contradict Paul’s own position on freedom from the Law but his reference here should be understood as descriptive rather than prescriptive. He is describing what he regards as the natural result of Christian faith which expresses itself in loving service to others. Paul does not quote the law to motivate love; he quotes the law to show that such love, motivated and empowered by faith (5: 6) and the Spirit (5: 22), actually fulfils the demands of the law.

‘Fruits of the Spirit’ versus ‘Works of the flesh’.

Freedom from the law is not a license to pursue every selfish desire. No, freedom from bondage to the law is experienced by those who believe in Christ as being led by his Spirit (5:18) rather than seeking to “gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16) The Spirit enables believers to transcend their natural selfishness and use their freedom to serve one another in love. The works of the flesh listed in 5:16-21 stand in sharp contrast to the fruits of the Spirit listed immediately afterwards in 5:22-23. Through the gift of the Spirit, love realizes and fulfils the highest moral standards that the law was incapable of achieving. The tragic irony of the Galatians’ situation was that the more they came under bondage of the law, the more they violated its basic moral standard, that of loving your neighbour as yourself, and ended up “conceited, competing against one another, envying one another’ (5:26). Freedom in Christ is essentially the freedom to love.

It is notable that the fifteen “works of the flesh” listed by Paul in 5:16-21 are all destructive to community life. The well-being and unity of the early communities remains a recurring priority for Paul throughout his letters and is a

theme and concern he returns to frequently.

For Paul we love, not in order to be saved or in order to be blessed by God. We love rather because through faith the Spirit reproduces the life of Christ in us. Therefore, the whole Christian life becomes an invitation and opportunity to repudiate the self-centred 'works of the flesh' and to rely upon the Spirit of God to reproduce in us the life of Jesus Christ who 'loved us and gave his life for us.' This idea is expressed beautifully by Paul in Gal 2:20, the verse that is perhaps the best known of this whole letter.

I have been crucified with Christ; It Is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Gal 2:20

Through faith we become identified with Christ and in particular with his radical freedom to love that finds perfect fulfilment in selflessly giving himself up to death for others. To live in Christ is to live in love.

Conclusion and final note in Paul's own hand

Paul goes on to describe how this presence of the Spirit should manifest itself in the life of believers and offers specific instructions for living in community (6:1-10). Paul concludes his letter by adding final comments in his own handwriting to emphasize both its importance and its authenticity.

The intensity of Paul's anger and passion remains palpable right to the end of the letter. He accuses those who promote circumcision of false motives: they want to be able to boast to other zealous advocates of the Law and avoid persecution. By contrast Paul's sole boast is the cross of Jesus (6:14), the redemption wrought by the passion and death of Jesus. To be in Christ is for Paul to be a new creation (6:15). Paul's closing words in 6:16-17 are as abrupt and as direct as his initial greeting. This is softened ever so slightly by his affectionate use of the term "Brothers [and sisters]" in the final verse (6:18), a subtle emotional appeal perhaps to this community that Paul himself had founded to remain loyal to the gospel he had first preached to them and not to be led astray by the 'agitators.'

Galatians 3: PAUL & FAITH

Understanding what is meant by faith is essential to understanding Paul's letters in general and Galatians in particular. If we get this wrong, Paul is convinced that our Christianity will swerve dangerously off course, if not crash altogether.

Paul's argument concerning how we are justified and made at rights with God can be summarised as follows:

We are sinners separated from God and cannot match his righteousness (3:11).

- This puts us in a double bind. The Old Testament law was given to enable us to please God, but we cannot match its demands and so we are cursed (3:10).
- Christ has redeemed us by fulfilling the law and shouldering the curse on our behalf (3:13).
- Therefore we can now be acceptable to God through faith (trust) in Christ (3:14).

- Thus the entire Christian life is to be lived in dependence on Christ (3:3).

Paul is not saying that simply believing is enough. He fully expects that people moved by faith will not carry on as before (5:22-25) but that their lives will be changed and become an expression of the freedom to serve others in love. Faith is not simply undergoing certain experiences, or practicing a certain way of life or even embracing certain beliefs although it includes all three. For Paul, faith in Christ essentially means trusting in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. In essence, faith is looking to the crucified and risen son of God and saying:

‘You died and rose so that I would be forgiven and know God, I thank you and accept this gift of new life and want you to direct my steps from here on.’

It is simple, which is why people find it hard. People feel the need to add more; the Pharisees added rules, the Galatians added special seasons and ceremonies (4:10) but Paul insists that Christ’s Gospel needs no artificial additives: faith alone is enough.

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