

GALATIANS

Date of composition: A.D 54-55. The title “to the Galatians” was added only to distinguish each of Paul’s several letters in a single scroll.

The pastoral challenge

Paul is shocked at what he learns about the new Christians in Galatia (central Turkey today) since he preached the gospel there on his first missionary journey (1:6). So serious is the crisis that Paul dispenses with the customary introductory remarks of thanksgiving and commendation, and instead Paul opens with a curse!

What is the crisis? New teachers have appeared on the scene. These are Jewish Christians from Jerusalem—many of whom are former Pharisees—who are pressuring the new Gentile Christians to follow certain aspects of the Jewish law. These “missionaries” believe the Christian movement needs first to be firmly anchored within the historical covenant between God and Israel.

What upsets Paul is that the Galatian Christians appear to be giving their consideration to these “agitators.” Paul wants the Galatians to reject the notion that they need to abide by Jewish law and expel these rival teachers.



Chapters 1, 2

Paul begins his letter by asserting that his own commission to preach the gospel comes “**through Jesus Christ and the Father of God**” (1:1). In fact, Paul insists he is answerable not even to his fellow Apostles, let alone the rival teachers from Jerusalem, but to God alone.

Regarding Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem, Paul knows that his reputation as a zealous Pharisee and persecutor of the Church precedes him. So it takes time for the Jewish Christians to understand the new “Way” that Paul is preaching, and to react to his sudden conversion. Paul simply sees himself as embracing the fulfillment of what God had promised all along.

Peter and the confrontation in Antioch (2:11-14)

In Antioch Peter finds Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds worshiping and eating together. So Peter also freely eats alongside fellow believers without regard for their ethnicity. But when “**some people from Jacob** (i.e., Apostle James)” arrive who expect to find the Jewish Christians still keeping their distance from Gentile Christians (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2), Peter withdraws from such meals in order to be a more respectable “**apostle to the circumcision**” (2:8), that is, to the Jews.

Restrictions on social interaction between Jews and Gentiles is understood to assist Israel in maintaining its distinctiveness in practice of worship and the moral life.

Upon learning that Peter is acting against what he knows to be true about Jews and Gentiles who are “in Christ,” Paul confronts him. “**But when Cephas came into Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For before certain people came from Jacob, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they came, he started pulling back and separating himself out of fear of those of the circumcision.**”

However from Peter's point of view, he is merely protecting the mission to the Jews and the unity of the overall Christian movement by yielding to the earlier Jerusalem agreement for Jewish Christians (). But Peter's withdrawal from eating with Gentile Christians only makes matters worse. Now Jewish Christians from Antioch think they should follow Peter's example and also avoid eating with Gentile Christians.

What is justification before God?

For Paul, righteousness does not come through the law but by means of the Spirit and trust in Jesus (Galatians 5:5). Such righteousness involves "being made alive" to God in a way that the Torah cannot achieve (2:19-20).

What are the "works of the law?"

For Paul the works of the law are the Torah's ethical, ritual, and boundary-maintaining regulations in God's economy of salvation. 430 years after Abraham, the Torah was a boundary marker that served a positive function for the Jews for a prescribed time (3:19-25). However, the Torah's divinely given mandate came to an end in "the fullness of time" with the coming of faith.

With the death and Resurrection of Jesus, God extends the promise and blessing of salvation to all the nations, something that "zeal for the Torah" inhibited. Therefore to reintroduce works of the Torah such as circumcision, dietary regulations, and observance of the Jewish sacred calendar *after* the "fullness of time" is to work against God's purpose—to bring the promise given to Abraham to all people in the new community of Christ. Categories such as "Jew," "Gentile," "slave," "free," "male," and "female" no longer apply. Therefore while insisting that they are trying to remain true to the law, Judaizing Christians are actually betraying the goal of the law that has been reached in the coming of Christ.

Arguments against adopting Torah observance (3:1-4:11)

Paul's essential message to Galatia is "Christ crucified" (3:1; 1 Corinthians 2:2). However, the proclamation that Jesus is the *Christ* ("anointed one") or the messiah is a foreign concept to the Galatians. Indeed, the historical fact of Jesus' crucifixion—a sign of utter degradation—is seen as hardly fitting for the "anointed one."

Critical to the Galatians' understanding is what makes a person a son or daughter of Abraham. The rival teachers are making much of circumcision and Torah observance as the way to become part of the family of Abraham, and thereby heirs of God's promises. But Paul tells the Galatians that they are already heirs of the promise: "**you are of Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, heirs in accordance with promise**" (3:29).

"O unthinking Galatians! Who has put a spell on you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified?" Some translations use the term "**stupid**," but Paul is not making a statement about the Galatians' intellect, but about their having given serious consideration to the teaching of the rival teachers.

Proof from Abraham's precedent (3:7-9)

Since Abraham was once a Gentile and a worshiper of idols, he is considered the exemplary convert. And with his conversion, Abraham accepted the sign of circumcision upon himself and upon every male in his household. Therefore since the Galatians already share the essential "gene" of Abraham's lineage, namely, *trust* in God's promise, there is nothing to be gained from circumcision or the yoke of the law. Actually, there is only something to be lost.

Paul explains that the law was an arrangement that consigned all things "under sin," and that sin placed humans in a need of redemption (3:22). As such the Torah was introduced as a temporary

measure to serve for a limited time between God's promises to Abraham and the "fullness of time"—the promised blessings of Christ.

Much like the relationship between a child and his teacher, when the child comes of age and cannot (and should not want to) turn back to the time when he was under the teacher's discipline, so those who have come to know Jesus cannot turn back and return to live under the Torah (4:8-11). For the Torah's authority extended only until the coming of Christ.

Coming of age in the household (4:1-7)

Paul uses the example of an heir that cannot turn back the clock to return under the care of his guardians. At that time, after a father's death the surviving minor child lived under the authority of the guardian until he came of age and entered into his inheritance. Until then the minor child could not dispose of his inheritance; neither did the child have authority over his own person or actions.

Paul continues his point of what makes believers sons and daughters of God by contrasting slavery with adoption. For God sent his Son, born "**under the law**" (Torah), in order that he might redeem those under the law and receive adoption. The law or Torah no longer has the authority to constrain the Jewish people and maintain their separation from other nations. Now it is possible for all people, Jews and Gentiles, to receive the promised inheritance.

Regarding Gentile Christians, Paul admits that before their conversion they had failed to consider the created order and discover the Creator of all things. Instead, they served "**things that are not divine by their very nature**" (Galatians 4:8). Such ignorance comes to an end with the gospel. As such, Paul plainly writes: "**How can you turn back again to the weak and impoverished elementary principles, to which you desire to submit yourselves to live as slaves all over again**" (4:9)?

Paul's admonition is necessary because the Galatians are still observing the Jewish Sabbath and new moon festivals (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). They do so because they believe that Abraham and the patriarchs somehow observed the Torah before it was given to Moses! But of course, Genesis does not suggest that Abraham actually observed the Sabbath. For Paul, the law's authority has ended. God is now reaching back to fulfill his promise to Abraham to bring all peoples together into his family.

Paul's infirmity

Due to Paul's unknown physical condition, it might have been expected that the Galatians would turn away from him in contempt. Bodily ailment or disability could be interpreted as a sign of divine displeasure or simply as a shameful defect. That is, what kind of spiritual power could Paul have as Christ's ambassador if he cannot gain the upper hand over his own sickness or infirmity? Paul acknowledges this possibility: "**And you know that I originally proclaimed the message of good news to you on account of a sickness of the flesh, and you neither scorned nor spat in response to the trial you endured in my flesh, but rather you received me as an angel from God, even as Christ Jesus**" (4:13-14). Still, against these expectations, the Galatians receive Paul warmly and embrace both him and his message.

Chapter 5

Writing about slavery and freedom, Paul appeals for the Galatians to ignore what the teaching of the rival teachers. Here Paul recounts the Hagar and Sarah episodes: "**Christ liberated us to live in freedom stand firm, therefore and do not bow down to take on the yoke of slavery again**" (5:1)."

The image of the yoke illustrates a Jew's submission to the Torah, but in Christ the yoke brings freedom from oppressive burdens. Paul assures his hearers that God does not wish for people

to continue to bear any such burden; for God sent his Son to die so as to redeem people from every yoke of slavery.

Thus for Jewish Christians to continue to trust in the law means going back to perform those same sacrifices as if they were still the means of mediation between God and the Jewish people. But one cannot claim Christ's death to be the fulfillment of a *portion* of the Torah (the cultic aspects of its ritual law), and still cling to the validity of other portions. For if the Galatian Christians submit to circumcision, they are in effect committing themselves to the whole ritual-cultic system of the Jews. Likewise the Gentile Christians who formally carried the yoke of pagan rituals; for them to turn to the Torah is also to enslave themselves to yet another yoke—the law.

Paul lays out what is at stake: **“if you get yourself circumcised, Christ will not benefit you in any way”** (5:2). This is the sharp line that Paul draws between the law and Christ's ransoming death, Resurrection and gift of the Holy Spirit. In this Paul uses the analogy of a foot race. Rival teachers from Jerusalem have crossed over into the Galatians' lane, trying to trip them up and break their stride. Paul wants his fellow Jewish Christian missionaries to walk straight in line toward the truth of the gospel.

Paul affirms that the Spirit gives the believer (as the law does not) the power to overcome the flesh and to walk in line with God's righteousness. Yet for the new Jewish Christians the power of the flesh is what makes the removal of the “bridle” of the law seem too risky. What is to save them from being swallowed up by her own desires if not the Mosaic law? Paul's answer is “the Spirit,” the divine Spirit poured into the heart; for laws and regulations can never tame the passions of the flesh, but the Spirit of God can.

Paul's listing of the works of the flesh shows what follows when the flesh directs the lives of human beings. According to Paul, taking part in God's eternal kingdom means submitting to God's rule over one's life now. For if the impulses of the flesh direct individual and community life, the result is ugly. But the **“the fruit produced by the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, forbearance, self-control”** (5:22-23). These virtuous qualities will naturally result in the person who has received God's Spirit to control and guide him.

Conclusion

It was typical for people to use a professional scribe or secretary when writing letters or business documents. However Paul chooses to draw attention to his unusually large sized hand writing—**“Look at what large letters I made as I wrote to you with my own hand,”** which is not the professional, economically-sized lettering of a scribe (6:11)! Paul's oversized scrawl is of a writer who is emotionally agitated and personally invested in his message.

Paul usually ends his letters with a prayer, but this is the only letter in which Paul addresses the recipients as brothers and sisters. And apart from the formulaic “Amen,” Paul's closing invocation of kinship reflects his desire to affirm his connection with the Galatian Christians at the end of a challenging communication.

