

GALATIANS

Date of composition: A.D. 54-55. The title “to the Galatians” was added only to distinguish each of Paul’s several letters that were later assembled in codices, or a collection of letters.

The pastoral challenge

Paul is shocked at what he learns about the new Christians in Galatia (central Turkey today) since he had 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 opens with a curse (1:8)!

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 new Christian movement needs 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.” But Paul wants the Galatians to reject completely 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 God the Father**” (1:1). In fact, Paul insists that he is not answerable even to his fellow Apostles, let alone the false teachers from Jerusalem, but to God alone.

Regarding his 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 be convinced of his sudden conversion.

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

As Paul recalls in his letter, in Antioch Peter finds Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds worshipping and eating together. So Peter also eats alongside fellow believers without regard for their ethnicity. But when “**some people from Jacob** (i.e., followers of the Apostle James)” arrive who expect to find the Jewish Christians still keeping their distance from Gentile Christians, Peter withdraws from such meals in order to preserve his standing among the Jews as the “**apostle to the uncircumcised**” (2:8).

Restrictions on social interaction between Jews and Gentiles was understood to assist Israel in maintaining its distinctiveness in practice of worship and the moral life (Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2).

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** (2:11-12).”

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 (Acts 15:12-21). 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 (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. Four hundred and thirty years after Abraham, the Torah was a boundary marker that served 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

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—runs counter to any image of 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, insisting they are necessary 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). Paul goes so far as to write, **"O foolish Galatians! Who has put a spell on you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was vividly portrayed as crucified"** (3:1)? 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 therefore a worshiper of false gods, he is considered the exemplary convert. After his conversion, Abraham accepted the sign of circumcision for 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 and much to be lost from insisting upon circumcision and the keeping of the precepts of the law.

Paul explains that originally the law "confined all things under the power of sin," and therefore placed human beings in 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" to be revealed in the promised blessings of Christ.

Paul writes that 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 discipline of the Torah; for the Torah's authority was to extend only until the coming of Christ (4:8-11).

Coming of age in the household

Paul uses the example of an heir who cannot turn back the clock to return under the care of his guardians. At that time, should the father of the house die, the surviving minor child lived under the authority of a guardian until he came of age. Until then the child could neither dispose of his inheritance nor exercise personal authority over himself.

Paul continues his point of what makes believers God's sons and daughters 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. But 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 order of creation and thereby discover the Creator. Instead, they served "**things that are not divine by their very nature**" (4:8). Such ignorance comes to an end with the gospel. 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 even 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 was sometimes interpreted as a sign of divine displeasure, or simply as a shameful defect. The thinking would have been, *what kind of spiritual power could Paul have as Christ's ambassador if he is at the same time afflicted with 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). Against these expectations, the Galatians receive Paul warmly and embrace both him and his message.

Writing about slavery and freedom, Paul appeals for the Galatians to ignore the teaching of the rival teachers. Here Paul recounts the Hagar and Sarah episodes and declares: "**Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery**" (5:1; Genesis 16:15; 21:2, 9).

Chapter 5

The image of the yoke illustrates the Jews' submission to the Torah; but in Christ the yoke brings freedom from oppressive burdens. Paul assures his hearers that God does not wish people to continue to bear any such burden; for God sent his Son to die for our sins and 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 still mediated between God and the Jewish people. But one cannot claim Christ's sacrifice to be the fulfillment of a *portion* of the Torah (the cultic aspects of its ritual law), and still hold to the validity of other portions of the law. For if the Galatian Christians submit to circumcision, they are in effect committing themselves to the whole Jewish ritual-cultic system. The same is true for the Gentile Christians who formally carried the yoke of pagan rituals; for them to turn to the Torah is to enslave themselves to yet another yoke, that of 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 death, Resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this Paul uses the analogy of a foot race. Rival teachers from Jerusalem have crossed over into the Galatian Christians' lane, trying to trip them up and break their stride. Paul wants his fellow Christian missionaries to walk straight toward the truth of the gospel.

Paul affirms that the Spirit gives the believer, unlike the law, the power to overcome the flesh and to walk in 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 their own desires if not the strictures of 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. For if the impulses of the flesh direct individual and community life, the result is ugly. But **“the fruit produced by the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, forbearance, self-control”** (5:22-23). These virtues will naturally result in the person who has received God's Spirit to 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 handwriting—**“Look at what large letters I made as I wrote to you with my own hand”** (6:11). This was not the professional, economically-sized lettering typical of a scribe. Paul's oversized scrawl is of a writer who is both emotionally agitated and personally invested in his message.

This is the only letter of Paul's in which he concludes with **“brethren”** (6:18). This is the only letter of Paul's in which he concludes with 'brethren' (6:18). 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."

