



Galatians - Introduction

Author and Title

The first word of the letter to the Galatians is *Paul*, and there has been widespread agreement by scholars down through the ages that Paul is indeed the author. The title in most Greek editions of the NT is 'To the Galatians', and the main body of the letter mentions the addressees as 'the churches of Galatia' (1:2) and 'foolish Galatians!' (3:1). The only debate is, which Galatians?

Date

Although the question of the date of Galatians is related to this question of 'which Galatians', some clues can probably be found in the letter itself. The main indicator is the lack of reference to the Jerusalem Council that is recorded in Acts Chapter 15. Although this is an argument from silence, many commentators have regarded this as a deafening silence. It would have been enormously helpful to Paul's argument if he could have mentioned the decision of the council that Gentiles should not be circumcised; this, after all, appears to be a major point of contention between Paul and the false teachers influencing the Galatians. Since the council took place in AD48-49, and Paul evangelised South Galatia in AD47-48, sometime around AD48 is a plausible date for the composition of Galatians. However, determining dates in Paul's life is always somewhat uncertain, and so one cannot place too much weight on the date in the interpretation of the letter.

Theme

Christ's death has brought in the age of the new covenant in which believers do not have to become Jews or follow the outward ceremonies of the Mosaic Law. To require these things is to deny the heart of the Gospel, which is justification by faith alone, not by obedience to the law. In this new age, Christians are to live in the guidance and power of the Spirit.

Purpose

A crisis has hit the church in Galatia. The church came into being as a result of God's Spirit at work in Paul's proclamation of the Gospel. But within the short space of time since Paul left, the church has been visited or infiltrated by false

teachers whom Paul calls those 'who are confusing you' (1:7), or 'those who unsettle you' (5:12).

These teachers have convinced the Galatians of a false Gospel which requires them to be circumcised. Paul sees that these pseudo-Christians merely want to win converts for their own prestige; they want to win approval from the Jewish authorities by showing how effective they are in converting Gentiles to a form of Judaism. Since the Jewish establishment approves of the fact that they are making Gentiles Jewish, the false teachers have the best of both worlds: they have created a sect of which they are the leaders, and they also escape any Jewish persecution. One further effect of this on the Galatians appears to have been the division within their church, presumably over these issues of circumcision and law that the false teachers have raised.

Although the Galatians appear to have come under the spell of these teachers and have become convinced of their teaching, Paul does not regard the situation as hopeless. Nevertheless, Paul is more critical of his audience here than in any other letter, and he chastises the Galatians for being foolish; providing numerous reasons why they should return to the truth.

The less important question, which makes little difference to how one interprets the letter, is 'which Galatians?' There was a people group of Galatians who lived in the northern part of what is now Turkey, but there was a Roman province called Galatia that extended into southern Turkey. The Galatians in the letter are probably those in the Roman province, especially the southern part, because Paul did much less in the way of missionary activity in the north, and he usually refers to places by their Roman imperial names.

Key Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Verses</u>
1 In his sin-bearing death, Christ is a substitute for all Christians, whom he brings into a new realm of freedom and life.	1:4; 2:20; 3:13.
2 This Gospel of Christ is for humanity, but there is no sense in which it has its origin in humanity; it comes only from God. Paul is himself an illustration of this. His conversion to Christ and his apostleship were not through human consultation but through the direct revelation of Christ.	1:1; 1:11-12; 1:15-20.
3 The Gospel is appropriated not by works of law but by faith, which is the route to justification.	2:16.
4 To require circumcision and other Mosaic ceremonies such as dietary laws and Jewish holidays as a supplement to faith is to fall back from the realm of grace, faith and freedom, and to come under the whole law and its curse, since comprehensive observance of the law is impossible.	2:12-14; 2:16; 3:10; 4:10; 5:3.

- 5 OT Scripture itself testifies to the truth of justification by faith, both in the life of Abraham and in the prophecy of Habakkuk. **Gen 15:6; Habakkuk 2:4.**
- 6 The Christian life has its source in the believer having died with Christ to sin, and thereby having renounced the flesh. **5:24; 6:14.**
- 7 The Spirit is the source of power and guidance in the Christian life, and the work of the Spirit produces love and faith. **5:6; 5:16; 5:18; 5:25.**
- 8 The Christian life consists not in pleasing people but in pleasing Christ our master and being willing to suffer persecution for the sake of his Cross. **1:10; 6:12; 6:14.**

Summary of Salvation History

Through Jesus Christ, salvation and justification come to both Jew and Gentile, fulfilling the promise to Abraham of blessing to the nations: **<<I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed>>** (Genesis 12:3), **<<And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you’>>** (Galatians 3:8).

Literary Features

Like the rest of the Pauline letters, Galatians follows the conventions of letter writing in NT times. There is a salutation, a body, a parænesis, i.e. set of moral exhortations, greetings and a benediction. There is no initial thanksgiving, however, which indicates Paul’s agitation and alarm over the theological situation in Galatia. Paul gets right to the point, which is that the Galatians are in danger of turning to a different Gospel, thereby risking the everlasting ruin of their souls. The main argument of the epistle is advanced by the use of autobiography, example, allegory, satiric rebuke and exhortation.

The doctrinal thrust of Galatians gives it a strong internal unity. In one way or another, everything in the epistle is related to Paul’s defence of justification by faith alone. The letter is also unified by the apostle’s intensity of tone, which comes through as strongly here as it does in any of his writings; especially in his intolerance of false doctrine and his indignation with people who promote it.

Stylistically, Galatians finds literary coherence in its thematic contrasts: the true Gospel vs. a false Gospel, faith vs. works, law vs. grace, liberty vs. legalism, sonship vs. slavery, and the fruit of the Spirit vs. the desires of the flesh.

Ancient Galatia

Galatia was originally a Celtic region in north central Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. It became a client kingdom of Rome under Pompey in the mid-1st Century BC. With the death of the client king Amyntas, who died in 25BC, an expanded Galatia came under a Roman governor.

In Paul's day the province of Galatia included parts of Pontus and Paphlagonia to the east and north, and encompassed portions of Phrygia, Pisidia, Isauria, Lycaonia and Cilicia to the south. Thus many of the cities of Paul's first missionary journey, recorded in Acts Chapters 13-14, were considered part of the province of Galatia, or at least near its sphere of influence.

Starting with territorial alterations under the emperor Vespasian at the end of the 1st Century AD, the province changed shape; thus the other ethnic territories were gradually drawn off, back to their earlier affiliations, and the province of Galatia returned to its more ethnically defined northern boundaries. Some contend that these subsequent reductions to the province of Galatia influenced the later church fathers to assume that Paul wrote his epistle to residents of northern Galatia.

Archæological evidence indicates a combination of Hellenistic, Celtic and Roman influences in the province of Paul's time.

The Setting of Galatians (circa AD48)

Paul's letter to the Galatians was likely written to the churches he had established during his first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-14:28). He probably wrote the letter from his home church in Antioch in Syria, sometime before the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1-31).



A regional map encompassing Galatia

Outline

It is difficult to divide Galatians into neat sections, since Paul returns to the same themes on numerous occasions and often moves gradually into different topics rather than breaking off sharply to address a new theme. The following can serve as a rough guide.

I. Opening (1:1-10)

- a. Salutation (1:1-5)
- b. There Is No Other Gospel (1:6-10)

II. Indirect Appeal: Paul's Career with the Gospel (1:11-2:21)

- a. Paul's Vindication of His Apostleship (1:11-24)
- b. Paul and the Other Apostles (2:1-10)
- c. Paul's opposition to Peter, to preserve the truth of the Gospel (2:11-21)
 - i. Paul Rebukes Peter at Antioch (2:11-14)
 - ii. Jews and Gentiles Are Saved by Faith (2:15-21)

III. Direct Appeals to the Galatians (3:1-5:12)

- a. Law or Faith (3:1-14)
 - i. The Galatians' experience of conversion (3:1-5)
 - ii. The Gospel in the OT (1): Abraham (3:6-9)
 - iii. The Gospel in the OT (2): Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Habakkuk (3:10-14)
- b. The Promise to Abraham (3:15-18)
- c. The Purpose of the Law (3:19-4:7)
- d. Paul Reproves the Galatians (4:8-20)
 - i. Passing from idolatry to the true God (4:8-11)
 - ii. Appeal to the Galatians' knowledge of Paul (4:12-20)
- e. The Allegory of Hagar and Sarah (4:21-5:1)
- f. The Nature of Christian Freedom (5:2-15)
 - i. Judgment for those who turn from the Gospel (5:2-12)
 - ii. The law of love (5:13-15)

IV. Life in the Spirit and Love (5:16-6:10)

a. The desires of the flesh vs. the fruit of the Spirit (5:16-26)

i. The Works of the Flesh (5:16-21)

ii. The Fruit of the Spirit (5:22-26)

b. Bear One Another's Burdens (6:1-10)

V. Final Admonitions and Benediction (6:11-18)