

Unit 2 Introduction

The Book of Galatians

How many of us have ever thought or declared, “I just can’t believe this. How can this have happened?” If so, we share the state of mind reflected long ago by the apostle Paul as he wrote a letter to the churches of Galatia, a foundational letter for the future theological development of the church and its understanding of God’s saving work in Christ.

Paul’s angst is reflected by his omission of a thanksgiving for the letter’s recipients normally found at the outset of correspondence in the Hellenistic world. Instead, Paul states: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (1:6). Later in this letter, Paul asks: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” (3:1).

The bewitchment of the Galatians involved challenges to Paul’s understanding of the gospel and accompanying questions. How does the largely Gentile community of Christ-followers in Galatia relate to God’s creation of a people beginning with Abraham and moving toward the end of this age? What is the relationship between old covenant Judaism and new covenant Christianity? Do Gentiles have to follow the traditions of Judaism to become Christians?

Initial Issues

While Paul’s authorship of Galatians is secure, debates have arisen about the precise location of the letter’s recipients. Galatia was a broad geographic region in Asia Minor generally located in what is now modern-day Turkey. One theory is that Paul addressed churches in the original ethnic territory of Galatia (the North Galatia theory), and the other is that he wrote to an area later incorporated into the larger Roman province of Galatia (the South Galatia theory).

Presently, the South Galatia theory holds most support, in part, due to its association with cities such as Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium referenced in other travels of Paul. A date for writing of AD 52-56 and a place of writing in Ephesus or Macedonia is associated with this understanding. In Galatians 4:13, Paul indicates that he established the churches in Galatia when he became ill on a journey through this region. No plans for a future visit are mentioned.

Paul’s Opposition

Upon preaching the gospel primarily to Gentiles in Galatia, Paul was fervently accepted by those who became part of the churches which were established. They were deeply committed to the gospel of grace and faith that he had proclaimed. Paul had been welcomed as if an “angel” or “Christ Jesus himself” (4:14). Using a culturally understood figure of speech implying great sacrifice, he declares: “I

can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me” (4:15).

It seems that soon after Paul left Galatia, the churches were visited by those who opposed his presentation of the gospel. From Paul’s description, these infiltrators were surprisingly persuasive (1:6). Sometimes identified as Judaizers, they argued that being made right with God involved more than having faith in Christ. Gentile Christians should adopt Jewish practices and customs as well. They should demonstrate their loyalty to the covenant between God and the Jewish people by keeping select Jewish dietary regulations (2:11-14), observing certain Jewish holidays (4:10), and, most importantly, being circumcised (5:2-12; 6:12). Based on the arguments made in Galatians, Paul had previously introduced the Galatians to the Jewish Scriptures (3:7-9; 4:21-31). Seemingly, these Scriptures were now being used for the Judaizers’ own aims.

Paul’s Response

Paul begins challenging the Judaizers by defending his own apostolic authority in preaching the gospel. In Galatians 1, he reveals his passion for the traditions of Judaism which led him to persecute and attempt to destroy the church. While on the road to Damascus, however, all changed through his experience of the risen Christ and an accompanying redirection of mission or calling to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (1:11-12). Paul did not convert from one religion to another. Instead, he realized Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of his own Jewish heritage.

While the ultimate authority for Paul’s preaching derived from God himself, his ministry to the Gentiles had been validated by the church in Jerusalem (1:18-24; 2:1-10; Acts 15). The church had recognized Gentiles need not keep the Jewish law, as represented by circumcision, to be made right with God. Instead, Paul writes: “We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified” (2:15-16).

The Galatians lived in a cultural environment where the widespread belief was that there are forces of nature and unseen powers (elemental spiritual forces of the world) influencing every aspect of life (4:3). A wide array of religious rituals were practiced with the aim of encouraging these powers to act in a positive way on the worshipers’ behalf. While having differing objects of worship than the God of the Israel, Judaism also had its rites and practices involving “special days and months and seasons and years” (4:10).

For Paul, any attempt by the Gentile Christians to live under the Law would be just as bad as returning to slavery “to those who by nature are not gods” or those “weak and miserable forces” that had enslaved them before coming to know God. He reminds the Galatians of God’s sending His Son into the world “to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship” and freedom from such slavery (4:4-10).

In Galatians 3:6-9, Paul defends justification by faith apart from the Law by referencing Abraham, the father of Judaism. In Genesis 12:1-3, God calls Abram (later Abraham) to leave his family and land to go to a land that God would show him. He promises to make him a great nation, one through which all the nations of the world will be blessed. In Genesis 15, God establishes a covenant or formal and legally binding contract with Abraham. He is told to “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’” (15:5). The text continues: “Abram believed the Lord, and it was credited to him as righteousness” (15:6).

Citing this promise, Paul states: “Understand then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith” (Galatians 3:7-9).

As argued by Paul, the Law introduced to Moses 430 years after God’s promise to Abraham did not abolish His earlier promise. God’s covenantal way of working with Abraham was continuing in Paul’s mission to the Gentiles. The Law does not rule over those who trust in Christ. Rather, those who rely on the Law for righteousness are “under a curse” (3:10). Paul states: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (3:13). This occurred through His death on the cross (3:13).

In Galatians 3:15-18, the language of covenant illustrates what was accomplished through Christ’s death. While Judaism stressed God’s covenant with His people at Mt. Sinai, God’s promises to Abraham were often seen as foreshadowing that event (Genesis 17:9-14). Abraham and his “seed” (descendants or Israel) were viewed as the vehicles for God’s blessing of all nations. Generally, Paul also follows the typical Jewish interpretation of Abraham’s seed as being Israel (Romans 9:6-7, 29-31; 11:1). In Galatians, however, he employs a singular usage for “seed” with Christ being the ultimate seed for blessing.

Based on his argument against the Judaizers, Paul recognized the question that may be raised “Why, then, was the law given at all?” (3:19). In fact, “Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God?” (3:21). In response, Paul declares: “Absolutely not!” (3:21).

In Paul’s time, Jewish rabbis maintained the supremacy of the Law that brought life both in this world and in the age to come. In Roman society, male heirs were kept under the care of custodians or

guardians until coming of age and being ready to assume their roles in family and society. For Paul, unlike other Jewish teachers, the Law had a temporary role creating an awareness of sin and confining all things under sin’s power. It had a preparatory role for faith (3:22-23). No law had ever been given for the purpose or with the ability to give life (3:19).

In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul continues his appeal to those Galatians being persuaded to live under the Law through use of an allegory involving two covenants. Paul reminds them that Abraham had two sons, one from a slave woman (Hagar) and another from a free woman (Sarah). The son of the slave woman is associated with Mt. Sinai (the Law), and those descendants who remain under the Law are represented by present Jerusalem. The son of the free woman is identified with the Jerusalem above or future Jerusalem and the children of promise which Paul associates with all who trust in Christ for salvation.

For Paul, freedom from the Law should not be confused with license as held by Christian libertines (5:13). Freedom is not the right to live as one pleases. Rather, it involves loving your neighbor as yourself. This is the summation of the Law (5:14). In Christ, one is freed from the bondage to sin to live a life led by the Spirit of God. This life does not involve a new legalism or set of rules to be followed, but a life exhibiting its transformation by God.

A Spirit-led life is not characterized by “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like” (5:19-21). Instead, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (5:22-23a).

In chapter 6, Paul describes the Spirit-led life in terms of restoration, bearing one another’s burdens, having a proper estimation of oneself, and doing good to all people, “especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (6:10). He contrasts a life focused on pleasing the “flesh” (self) with a life lived aiming to please the “Spirit” (6:8). The outcome of one’s choices is either destruction or eternal life (6:7-8). For Paul, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation” in Christ (6:15). Through the Spirit, the life associated with the world to come should begin to be reflected in the lives of believers now.

Conclusion

Paul’s message to the Galatians long ago remains crucial today as the faith community navigates our present culture. The temptation always remains to trust in something other than Christ for salvation or to live as if a transformed life is not the result which the Spirit brings.

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