

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Background

Galatia was the name the Romans gave to the province in northern Asia Minor.

The Galatians were Paul's converts, most likely among the descendants of Celts who had invaded western and central Asia Minor in the third century B.C. and had settled in the territory around Ancyra (modern Ankara, Turkey). Paul had passed through this area on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:6) and again on his third (Acts 18:23).

The majority of the scholars date this letter around A.D. 54. Paul wrote this letter most likely from Ephesus after his arrival there for a stay of several years on his third missionary journey (Acts 19; [Acts 20:31](#)).

Scope of the Letter

Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians to combat the attacks by the Jewish-Christians who had shaken the community in Galatia.

Paul intervened in his passionate and vehement style. The new Christians whom Paul is addressing his letter were converts from paganism (Gal 4:8-9) who were now being enticed by Jewish Christians to observe the Jewish law, including the rite of circumcision and the Jewish dietary laws. These Jewish Christians believed that such observances were necessary for salvation.

Biblical scholars suggest that they were Jewish Christians who had come from the austere Essene sect.

The Mosaic Law

These Jewish Christians insisted on the necessity of following certain precepts of the Mosaic Law along with faith in Christ undermining his death and resurrection.

They were undermining Paul's authority also, asserting that he had not been trained by Jesus himself, that his gospel did not agree with that of the original and true apostles in Jerusalem, that he had kept from his converts in Galatia the necessity of accepting circumcision and other key obligations of the Jewish law, in order more easily to win them to Christ, and that his gospel was thus not the full and authentic one held by "those of repute" in Jerusalem (Gal 2:2).

For Paul this denigration of Jesus and his work was unacceptable and the deception of the Galatians was reprehensible.

Paul's Defence

When Paul learned of this situation, he defended his apostolic authority as an Apostle recounting his vocation and mission (Gal 3-4) and to bring the Galatians back to his original Gospel: we are saved exclusively by our unconditional acceptance, that is our faith in Christ, and not by our observance of the Jewish law (cf. Gal 3-4). Christians are called to true freedom, through which faith is activated and carried out in charity (cf. Gal 5-6).

Paul set forth the unique importance of Christ and his redemptive sacrifice on the cross, the freedom that Christians enjoy from the old burdens of the law, the total sufficiency of Christ and of faith in Christ as the way to God and to eternal life, and the beauty of the new life of the Spirit. Paul was convinced that any undermining of his gospel meant that "Christ died for nothing" (2:21).

The letter to the Galatians is thus a summary of basic Pauline theology. Its themes were more fully and less polemically developed in the Letter to the Romans.

Christ Centre of God's Salvific Plan

In his vigorous emphasis on the absolute preeminence of Christ and his cross as God's way to salvation and holiness, Paul stressed Christian freedom and the ineffectiveness of the Mosaic law for gaining divine favour and blessings (Gal 3:19-29). The pious Jew saw in the law a way established by God to win divine approval by a life of meticulous observance of ritual, social, and moral regulations.

But Paul's profound insight into the higher designs of God in Christ led him to understand and welcome the priority of promise and faith (shown in the experience of Abraham, Gal 3:6-18) and the supernatural gifts of the Spirit (Gal 3:2-5; 5:16-6:10). His enthusiasm for this new vision of the life of grace in Christ and of the uniquely salvific role of Christ's redemptive death on the cross shines through this whole letter.

We are justified not by works of the Law but through faith in Christ as children of God. Paul in fact affirms strongly: "As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Through the letter to the Galatians Paul introduces us to a deep spiritual theology: religion is above all a relationship with the person of Christ who, named in the first and last verses of the letter, truly dominates it.

Structure of the Letter to the Galatians

Greeting: 1:1-5

Loyalty to the Gospel 1:6-10

Paul's Defence of His Gospel and His Authority 1:11-2:21

Faith and Liberation 3:1-4:31

Exhortation to Authentic Freedom 5:1-6:10

Conclusion 6:11-18

COLUMN

Paul in his own words

Through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus.

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendant, heirs according to the promise.

Galatians 3:26-28

BOOK

PAUL AND HIS WORLD

Stephen Tomkins

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