



Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Chapters 1-6

False and True Good News

The letter to the Galatians is written by the Apostle Paul to the Christian Church located in geographic region of Galatia. Paul had been informed that the Galatian Christians were “turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one” which was being taught by false teachers who were “distorting” the message.

What was this “different gospel”? One of the first challenges faced by early Christians was how do the laws of Moses apply in light of the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The first Christian council of Jerusalem was convened to address this very question (see Acts 15).



Figure 1: Artist depiction of "Saint Paul Writing His Epistles", 16th century (Blaffer Foundation Collection, Houston, Texas).

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. —Acts 15:1-2

Some of the Jewish Christians were seeking to convince and teach Gentile converts that they must adhere to Jewish laws related to circumcision, diet, Sabbath and the like. These false teachers are sometimes called “Judaizers” because they were seeking to “judaize” Gentile Christian converts. (Gal. 2:14)

But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?” —Gal. 2:14

This letter was likely written prior to the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15 sometime around 46-47 AD. In that case, it would be one of Paul's earliest letters. The later letter to the Romans would more fully develop the theology behind Paul's argument with the Galatians.

Clearly, something new has come about with the advent of the Messiah and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost—the New Covenant. But how does the New Covenant relate to the covenants made by God with Abraham and Moses? This is the question which lies at the heart of the book of Galatians.



Paul will teach the church that in the Good News through Jesus Christ, God has now brought an end to the slavery, curse and condemnation brought about by the Law of Moses. Moreover, God is now, through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, fulfilling the incredible covenant promises which were originally given to Abraham concerning the nations of the world. (Genesis 12:1-3)

The Structure of the Letter to the Galatians

Paul crafts his letter to provide personal and theological backing to the Galatian Christians in order to empower them to resist the burdensome teaching of the Judaizers and stand fast in their freedom in Christ.

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Paul will open his letter rather abruptly, in order to get right to his concern for the Galatians. He will share the own personal struggle he has had with the issue with which they are facing (1:11-2:21). He then will provide the theological and historic understanding for the Gospel which will explain why the Judaizers are so deeply incorrect in their assertions (3:1-4:11). He will then exhort the Galatians to stand firm in their true identity and freedom in Jesus Christ (4:12-6:10). He then closes with a final warning against the false teachers (6:11-18).

Addressing the Problem: A Different Gospel

Out of all the letters of Paul, his opening to the Galatians is the most abrupt. Typically before launching into his main points, Paul will offer encouragement and prayerful thanksgivings for the church or individual to whom he is writing. In this letter, he launches directly into his concerns.

*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.
—Gal. 1:6-7*

Paul perceived that the Galatians Christians were adopting a false belief and that would have dramatic implications for them if they accepted those false teachings. It is absolutely critical that they understand the serious nature of false teaching and the serious consequences facing those who teach falsely: "Let



him be accursed!" (1:9) Paul engenders them to follow his example in seeking to be God pleasers rather than people pleasers. The young Gentile Christians were allowing themselves to be influenced and controlled by people who did not have their freedom in Christ at heart. They needed to be made of stronger stuff. The approval of God is all that matters for the Christian, even if it means certain "important" people disapprove. Paul's own witness for the Gospel will bear this out.

Paul's Personal Witness for the Gospel (1:11-2:21)

As he does in his other letters, Paul will use his own personal story and witness as an example to be followed. The Galatians needed to be strong and personally secure in order to resist the peer pressure from those who would "judaize" them. Paul wanted them to know that he personally has had to fight the battle against Jewish zeal for the law in his own life personally and in the relationships with the fellow leaders in the church.

First, Paul was himself a zealous advocate for Judaism—to the point of violently persecuting the church and seeking to destroy it! (1:13) Yet, God in his grace would not allow him to persist in that posture toward the Church (v. 16). But God called him to a new revelation in light of the Good News of Jesus Christ for the nations of the world. Paul consulted with the apostles concerning the Gospel and contended for it. He and the message which he was given to proclaim was confirmed by the other apostles (2:1-10).

But even the Apostles, gave into the pressure of those who continued to assert the Jewish law—the Apostle Peter (Cephas) being one of them!

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. —Gal. 2:11-12

Just as he is asking the Galatians to do, Paul had to stand up to powerful people and contend for the truth. Paul recounts the words that he used to stand up to Peter and the other Christians at the time to point to the inconsistency between their own beliefs and actions. (2:14-21). They were being hypocrites (actors) by placing expectations on others that they themselves even were not able to keep, expectations which were inconsistent with their own understandings of the law and the cross. The crux of his argument is that no one will be justified "by the works of the law", but rather by faith in Christ. The requirements of the law are met on the cross by Christ, so with Christ we "die to the law" in order to live to God. (2:19) The key to righteousness for both Jew and Gentile alike is union with Christ through faith in him and his work and not by keeping Torah!

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. —Gal. 2:20-21



The Gospel and the Fullness of Time (3:1-4:11)

Paul then turns from his own witness to the “truth of the Gospel” (2:14) to calling the Galatians to come out from under the spell of those who would lead them back into bondage under the Law of Moses. Paul gives three things to help them “snap out of it”.

First, remember the prominence of “Christ crucified” to the center of your vision. If righteousness could be attained by the works of the law, then the cross was pointless. (2:21)

Second he recounts their experience with the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. This is the gift of the New Covenant, why would they want to go back to the old ways of bondage and struggle under the law and the flesh. Paul will return to this and expand on this second point in Galatians 4:12-6:10)

The third point (upon which Paul will expand) is that the Gospel is the long awaited fulfillment of the covenant given to the patriarch Abraham. The plan of God was always to bring the blessings of God’s covenant to the nations of the world. (Genesis 12:3) Abraham’s offspring was given an incredible promise of blessing which is inherited in due time.

In you shall all the nations be blessed.
—Galatians 3:8

Paul argues that the promise was made to a singular offspring: Jesus Christ. This child of Abraham would bear the curse of sin and the condemnation of the law on his person by “becoming a curse for us” (3:13)

The question then is raised: Then what is the purpose of the Law of Moses? (3:19) The law serves a temporary purpose in order to restrain sin not unlike a parental guardian restrains unruly children until they reach an age of personal responsibility and self control. (3:24-25) But, since the coming of Christ and the baptism into him, there is no longer the need for the guardian. (3:25)

“...for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.” —Gal. 3:26-29

The implication is that those in Christ find their identity and righteousness completely in him alone and not in the “works of the law”. Indeed, in him there is no other identity than as heirs of the promise!

So Paul asks, if we are indeed mature adult heirs of the promise, why would we want to go back under the bondage of the parental-guardianship of the law? We have been redeemed by Christ from that

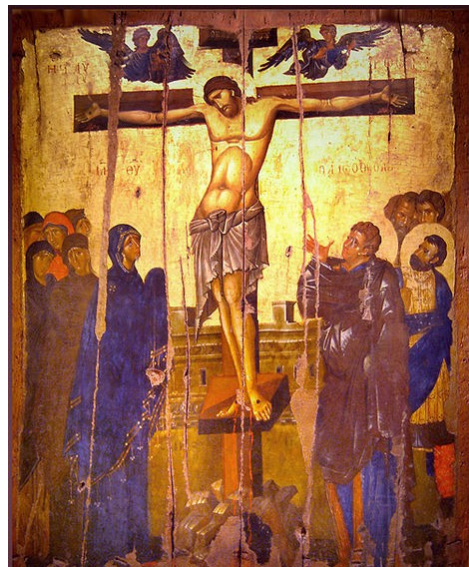


Figure 2: Icon of Crucifixion in the Byzantine and Christian Museum in Athens. 14th century.



slavery in order to receive the full adoption as sons! (4:5) With the privilege of adoption comes the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of adoption. It is to the call to live in the freedom of the Spirit of Adoption that Paul now turns.

Exhortation to live in the now of Gospel Freedom (4:12-6:10)

Having recalled to their minds three arguments for the truth of the Gospel, he now exhorts them to live into the freedom they once enjoyed when they had first received the Gospel from Paul himself. Paul desperately wants to see them live into their true identity in Christ through his Holy Spirit. He describes his heart for them as “laboring in the pains of childbirth.” His words for them are painful to write—but profoundly worth the hard labor if they will receive and live the life of Christ! (4:19)

Using an allegory, Paul compares those who would remain under the slavery of the law and the covenant of Mount Sinai to Abraham’s wife, Hagar. Yes she bears children but they are children for slavery. The other woman is Sarai who bore Isaac and the children of the promise, children of freedom! (4:21-31) He challenges the Galatians to find their identity in children of freedom! (4:31)

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. –Gal. 5:1

Paul argues that if you accept circumcision, then you have to come completely back under the slavery of the entire law. The implications are dire. Law means being severed from Christ, which means fallen from grace.

The Galatians were doing well in their understanding of their freedom in Christ. But Paul has harsh words for those leaders who have mislead them back to the Law of circumcision—that they would go the whole way with the knife! (4:12)

No, the life of the Spirit will accomplish its work of sanctification apart from the burden of the law, if they will keep in step with the Spirit. (5:16) Paul describes the works of the flesh, and the fruits of the Spirit. (5:16-26)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. –Galatians 5:22-24

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. –Gal. 6:15

Paul concludes his letter with final encouragements about the practical day to day life walking in the fruits of the Spirit. And calls them to resist the peer pressure of the Judaizers, who care more about the “good show” in the flesh, than the inward “new creation” that comes from the cross of Christ and the Spirit of God.