

The Year of St. Paul

The Letter to the Galatians



PRINCIPAL DIVISIONS of the LETTER to GALATIANS

Address (Gal. 1:1-5)

Loyalty to the Gospel (Gal. 1:6-10)

Paul's Defense of His Gospel and His Authority (Gal. 1:11-2:21)

Faith and Liberty (Gal. 3:1-4:3-1)

Exhortation to Christian Living (Gal. 5:1-6:10)

Conclusion (Gal. 6:11-18)

SUMMARY of GALATIANS

The apostle Paul founded the Galatian churches approximately A.D. 45-48. He revisited the people during his second missionary journey, around A.D.50. He made a second and third visit, one of which is discussed in the book of Acts, 16:1-6. Galatia is in modern day north central Turkey. The Galatians were Gauls who had migrated from north of the Black Sea. Some of them settled in Asia Minor while the rest continued west into France, then Gaul.

As to the date of Paul's writing of the Letter to the Galatians, the commonly accepted date is between A.D. 51-54. He wrote with a purpose. Christianity grew out of the Jewish religion and many of the early converts were Jewish. The gospel message was delivered and available to any Jew or Gentile that professed faith in Christ and his sacrifice on Calvary. After the church had been established for a few years, certain doctrines were being introduced into the faith community that Paul was attempting to correct.

The problem arose when some converted Jews tried to introduce Jewish Law into the Christian faith as a necessary rite of passage from sinner to saint. These Judaizers were requiring new male converts from the gentile flock to undergo ritual circumcision, or become Jewish, before granting them membership in the Church. These false teachers had also been discounting Paul's authority to teach since he had not been one of the twelve disciples of Jesus.

Paul claimed that his authority came directly from God.

He wrote them a little of his life story, how he grew up in the Jewish faith, how he advanced ahead of his peers in his religion, how he zealously persecuted the church. After his Damascus Road experience with the Lord, he realized that the crucified Jesus was actually the long awaited Messiah.

GOD FIRST

Year Three, Part 13

October 26, 2008

Paul had a specific mission to the Gentiles; his goal was to bring the Gospel to the non-Jewish people of Europe and Asia. He did not require the lost to become Jewish, get circumcised or follow the Law. He taught that salvation comes through faith in Christ only. He went on in this letter to the Galatians to point out that he had met with some of the other Apostles in Antioch and it was agreed that Paul would preach to the Gentiles while Peter, James and John would evangelize among the Jews.

It was at this meeting that the debate about salvation by faith alone verses the need to follow Jewish Law and customs came up. Peter and Paul did not see eye to eye. Peter was drawing away from the Gentile converts in favor of those Jewish believers who were still living by the Law of Moses. Paul said to Peter: "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile. How is it, then that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." (Gal. 2:14-16)

Paul proclaims his own understanding of the Gospel. He fully develops his theology in the Book of Romans, chapters 1-8. He clearly writes his belief that observances of the levitical law cannot bridge the relationship gap between God and mankind. Paul asserts that only Christ, and faith in Him, can bridge that separation. To add anything more to this is to abandon one's new freedom and return to legal obligations and slavery to the Law, to exchange life for

death. In other words, it is false to attempt reconciliation with God through human efforts.

How could the Galatians, after tasting their freedom and forgiveness in Christ, again submit themselves to the law that they had escaped? Paul immediately refers to Abraham: “He believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” (Gal. 3:6, Gen. 16:6) “Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The 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.’ (Gal. 3:28-29)

Paul now applies this “freedom in Christ” to everyday life and behavior. He tells them to: “serve one another with love.” (Gal. 5:13) and sums up the law in one single command: “love your neighbor as yourself.” (Gal. 5:14) He calls on Christians to be led by the Spirit, not by the law. “So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature... sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.” (Gal. 5:16, 19-12)

Paul finishes this letter by reminding his readers that although they possess a new freedom from the law: “God cannot be mocked. A person reaps what he/she sows.” (Gal. 6:7) The letter was dictated to one of Paul’s companions who wrote down what Paul said. The end of the letter, chapter 6: verses 11-18 were written in his own hand. He ends the epistle by emphasizing that it is neither circumcision nor the lack of it that means anything: “what counts is a new creation through the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ.” (Gal. 6:14)

He further reminds them that “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” (Gal. 6:17), referring to the bruises he has received as the result of stonings, beatings and imprisonment for the Gospel. He refers to them as brothers with the final salutation: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters, Amen.” (Gal. 6:18)

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For Personal Reflection:

Arguments over religion make many of us uncomfortable. Why? Does Paul’s letter to the Galatians make for uncomfortable reading?

What watered-down or distorted versions of the gos-

pel are promoted today? How can one distinguish between authentic and inauthentic explanations of who Jesus is, what he has done, and what he means for our lives?

What is the gospel? That is the central question in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. What is your understanding of the gospel? Which elements of the gospel are expressed in the opening of Paul’s letter (Gal. 1:1-5)? What other aspects of the gospel would you add to his statements?

Paul is worried about the Galatians. What have you learned about living with anxiety over the well-being of those who are close to you? Does Paul’s example offer insights into how to handle such anxiety?

Paul speaks of being set apart by God for his service from the womb (Gal 1:15). When have you had the sense of discovering the purposes for which God created you? What could you do to seek a clearer understanding of his will for you?

Paul recounts significant events in his relationship with Christ and in the work Christ gave him to do. If you were to assemble a list of significant events in your own relationship with God, what would you put on the list? What pattern emerges from these events? What can you learn about God’s relationship with you and about how he wishes you to respond to him?

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**CONNECTING THE DOTS
(CROSS REFERENCING SCRIPTURE)**

1. **OPENING:** Paul, A True Apostle and the True Message (Gal.1:1-10) see also-Rm. 1:1; Cor 1:13-14; 1 Jn 5:19; 2Th 2:2, etc.
2. **GOD’ CALL:** God Chose Paul To Be an Apostle (Gal. 1:11-24) see also-Mt 16:17; 2 Co 11:21; Ac 26:4-5; Lk 1:15, etc.
3. **THE MEETING AT JERUSALEM:** Paul Defends His Message (Gal. 2:1-21) see also- Ac 4:36; 2 Cor 2:13; Rm 6:15; Ac 12:17, etc.
4. **FAITH AND THE LAW:** Faith Is the Only Way To Be Saved (Gal. 3:1-4--4:31) see also-1 Cor 2-2; Rm 5:5; Ac 1:8; Rm 4:3, etc.
5. **CHRISTIAN LIBERTY:** Guided by the Spirit and Love (Gal 5:1—6:10) see also-Rm 6:15; Mt 11:29; Ac 15:10; Jm 2:10; 1Col 5:6, etc.
6. **POSTSCRIPT:** Final Warnings (Gal 6:11-18) see also- Mt 18:15; 2 Th 3 14-15; 2Tm 2:25; 1 Cor 10:12;