

The Year of St. Paul



The Letter to the Galatians

THE BACKDROP for GALATIANS

This letter to the churches in Galatia is Paul's most argumentative and passionate of all his letters, it speaks to extremely touchy subjects faced by the early church, including: whether a Gentile male had to be circumcised to be considered fully Christian. *(Theologians have recognized this epistle as a real "bombshell" that may have ignited the Protestant Reformation, if indeed this letter was interpreted by Martin Luther and others, as just cause for disagreement and dissent in the Church).* In any case, the new Christians whom Paul is addressing were converts from paganism (Gal. 4:8-9) who were now being enticed by other missionaries to add the observances of the Jewish law, including the rite of circumcision, to the cross of Christ as a means of salvation. For, since St. Paul's visit, some other interpretation of Christianity had been brought to these Galatians, probably by the Judaizers—the Jewish-Christians—Legalizers.

These "Legalizers" insisted on the necessity of following certain precepts of the Mosaic law along with faith in Christ. They were attacking St. 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 to more easily win them to Christ. (Gal. 2:2)

From the outset, Paul passionately affirms that his message is from God, not from any human (Gal. 1:1). He then presents the grace and peace of Christ's

gospel with the troubling perversions that come from the Judaizers. He writes, "even if ... an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8).

His words become passionate when he describes the attempts of certain Judaizers to sabotage his

ministry, but states "to them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you" (Gal. 2:5). Paul shrewdly puts himself on a par with Peter, whom he refers to as Cephas, citing his mission to the uncircumcised and that of Cephas to the circumcised (Gal. 2:8).

Paul writes, "but when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned, "for he had abandoned eating with Gentiles after the arrival of the "circumcision party" (Gal. 2:11-12). Peter's insincere actions influence the rest of the Jews and even Barnabas, going against the Church of Antioch whose former custom was of open fellowship between Jews and Greeks. Reacting to this, Paul says to Peter before the assembly, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal. 2:14).

It's not clear where Paul leaves off his account of his confrontation with Peter in Antioch, but by the

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GALATIANS? AND WHO ELSE?

Scholars debate whether this letter was written strictly for those inhabitants of the region called Galatia, or whether it was meant to include other regions in Asia Minor. As you can see on the adjoining map, the regions of Phrygia, Lydia, Pisidia and Lycaonia, as examples, are located more to the south of Asia Minor, while Galatia is assigned to the northern region. Yet, in many instances, these regions are spoken in the same breadth. It's difficult to know with any certainty since the known languages and origins of the inhabitants are reasons to doubt any unifying factor within the entire Asia Minor province.

beginning of chapter 3 we can sense that Paul is no longer quoting his words to Peter on that occasion. He is now presenting his understanding of the gospel directly to the Galatians. In verses 15-16, for a moment Paul drops his confrontation of Peter and looks for common ground between him and Peter (and the Christian teachers, the Judaizers who are disturbing the Galatians). "Look," he says in a friendly way, "we Jews know some things about God that gentiles do not. Without the Law of Moses to guide them, gentiles fall into some sins from which the Law protects us." Paul then makes a fundamental criticism of the Mosaic Law: "God does not make us right through the Law of Moses, but through Christ!"

A former rabbinical student, Paul properly follows the law but knows that "if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (Gal. 2:21). In this he emphasizes the singular merit of Christ's sacrificial death. Paul upholds the notion that both Jew and Greek have access to life through His saving death.

Studying this epistle reveals that Paul is far more than just a cantankerous character, which at times he appears to be; however in this particular situation, he comes across as a staunch defender of all that is essential to the Gospel, one who is more than willing to stand up to a powerful school of legalists to uphold the truth.

In the midst of all the theological arguments in this letter, St. Paul takes great care to describe a living spirituality in which Christians experience the full life of Christ: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal: 2:20).

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SITUATION: When Paul visited Jerusalem he explained that God saves Gentiles, too. Later, when Peter showed favoritism to Jews, Paul corrected him.

OBSERVATION: Keeping hundreds of laws does not save us. Because of this, God sent Jesus.

Wheel taken from "Reading the Acts, Epistles and Revelation by Kingsley E. Dalpadado, OMI, St. Paul Editions

Jesus paid the price that our actions never could.

Paul's intolerance to and efforts against legalism, divisions, and mere "cultural Christianity" should motivate the modern Christian who may feel surrounded by ungodly influences in an overly-polite Church; if Paul seems shrill, it is because some modern Christians are so dull.

Additionally, it is pivotal that Christians accept the life-giving sacrifice of Christ and proclaim with Christ; it is not 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" (Gal: 2:20).

APPLICATION: What place should Jewish teachings and the Old Testament have in the Church? Who or what tries to pervert the gospel in this age? What is essential to live the Gospel? How do we best live out that which is essential?

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