

The Epistle to the Galatians

By: Chad Knudson

Objectives

- 1.) Recognize the importance of biblical theology for the book of Galatians.
- 2.) Develop sound hermeneutical skills.
- 3.) Understand the significance of Galatians for Christian theology.
- 4.) Grow in our knowledge of the relationship between the OT and NT.
- 5.) Be able to articulate and apply the theology of Galatians.
- 6.) Articulate and defend the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone.
- 7.) Understand how the Christian relates to the Law.
- 8.) Understand the relationship of the Christian to the promises given to Abraham.
- 9.) Biblically understand the relationship between Jews and Gentiles.
- 10.) Articulate the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.
- 11.) Grow in our knowledge and love for God.

Introductory Notes Concerning Galatians

Authorship

There is very little debate among evangelical scholars as to the authorship of Galatians. Paul claims to have written the letter (1:1).

Date / Setting / Audience

There are two dates proposed for the composition of the letter. If the encounter in Galatians 2:7-10 is taken as synonymous with the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:1-35 then the dating of the letter must be after later 49 AD, since that is the general accepted date for the council. However, if the encounter with Paul, Peter, James, and John is viewed as a separate meeting prior to the Jerusalem council then it is safe to conclude that the letter was written before 49 AD.

Theology and Approach to Interpretation

When we think about how to read and interpret Galatians we must set forth two points (reading of Galatians):

- 1.) We must recall the textual, epochal, and canonical horizons as well as the already-not-yet dynamic.
- 2.) We must understand the book as a piece of literature and in doing so see the “big picture.”

Within the book we find several important themes (theology of Galatians):

- 1.) Eschatology and Christology:
- 2.) Soteriology:
- 3.) Israel, law, and the Church:
- 4.) Pneumatology:
- 5.) Galatians is a mini-theology of Romans.

In Jesus God restores his people, pours out his Spirit, and fulfills the promises given to Abraham.

In Christ the church receives the blessings of redemption, justification, adoption, and the Spirit through identification and union with Christ by faith.

Both Jews and Gentiles are able to participate in the new covenant and the powers of the age to come brought about by the person and work of Jesus Christ by believing in him as the only means for salvation. This is the gospel.

All of these themes have a two-fold purpose (purpose of Galatians):

- 1.) To teach these Galatians to hold fast the gospel they first received and realize that obedience to the Mosaic law is no benefit to them.
- 2.) To understand that Christ is the end of the law to all those who believe by faith and that the benefits of the new covenant can only be received through Jesus Christ.

Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1-10)
 - A. Salutation (1:1-5)
 - B. Occasion: No other gospel (1:6-10)
- II. Paul's Apostleship (1:11-2:14)
 - A. Paul's credentials (1:11-12)
 - B. Apostolic evidence (1:13-24)
 - C. Paul is confirmed by Peter, James, and John (2:1-10)
 - D. Paul's apostleship confirmed through confronting Peter (2:11-14)
- III. The gospel according to Paul (2:15-4:31)
 - A. Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith (2:15-21)
 - B. An appeal to the Galatians experience of faith (3:1-5)
 - C. The law cannot provide salvation (3:6-14)
 - D. The purpose of the law (3:15-29)
 - E. Slaves or Sons (4:1-20)
 - F. Hagar and Sarah (4:21-31)
- IV. Gospel living (5:1-6:18)
 - A. Circumcision is of no value (5:1-12)
 - B. Love is what matters (5:13-15)
 - C. Walking in the Spirit is the mark of a Christian (5:16-26)
 - D. Love and the Spirit manifest in the church (6:1-10)
 - E. Closing remarks (6:11-18)

Chronology of Paul's Early Life

- 1.) Paul's Conversion and initial preaching in Damascus (Acts 9:2-21; Gal 1:11-15).
- 2.) Paul is in Arabia and returns to Damascus for a short time (Gal 1:16-17; Acts 9:22-25; 2 Cor 11:32-33).
- 3.) Paul's first visit to Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-29).
- 4.) Paul ministers in Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:21; Acts 9:30).
- 5.) Paul's second visit to Jerusalem and private meeting with Peter, James, and John (Acts 11:19-30; Gal 2:1-10).
- 6.) Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-14:28).
- 7.) Peter goes to Antioch and Paul confronts him (Gal 2:11-14).

8.) Galatians is written.

9.) Paul's third visit to Jerusalem and the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1-35).

10.) Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-18:22).

Introduction (1:1-10)
Salutation (1:1-5)

Paul begins this epistle much like his other epistles:

- 1.) An identification of the writer (Paul, an apostle; 1:1).
- 2.) An identification of the recipients (the churches in Galatia; 1:2).
- 3.) Paul's characteristic greeting (grace to you and peace; 1:3).

Paul introduces in this salutation the eschatological or already-not-yet dynamic that is so prevalent in the NT. In the self-sacrifice of Christ (giving of himself), he has saved us from our sins and has rescued us from the present evil age (1:3).

What Paul is stressing is that with the coming of Christ there has been a change in human history.

The OT model was the putting away of the evil age or the old age in favor for the new age or last days; however, now this scheme is changed with the coming of Christ to an already-not-yet dynamic (cf., Acts 2:17; 1 Cor 10:11; Heb 1:2; 2 Tim 3:1; 2 Pet 3:3).

Occasion: No other gospel (1:6-10)

Paul's concern with these believers is the fact that they are abandoning Christ, the substance of the gospel itself—for another gospel.

The very content of the gospel itself is being compromised and what is it, namely that one is justified by faith in Christ alone. In the NT the idea of 'gospel' or good news is two-fold:

- 1.) It is the proclamation by Jesus that the kingdom of God has drawn near (Matt 3:2; Mark 1:14-15).
- 2.) The proclamation by the disciples is that in Jesus the kingdom of God is manifest and that by his humiliation and exaltation is the promised Christ, the Son of the living God (Acts 8:12; 28:23-31).

To better understand the fuller significance of the gospel we have to consider the origin of it in the OT (Isa 52:6-7).

For Paul the gospel under attack is a gospel that finds its beginning in the OT and its fulfillment in Jesus, which is nothing less than the proclamation of Jesus as King and Lord of his kingdom.

Paul speaks of 'another' here as *allo*, which really refers to 'another' of the same kind, whereas; *heteron* is 'another' of a different kind. Paul's idea is that this gospel is not even related to the true gospel, but is a gospel of a totally different kind, something that is a perversion of the truth.

Paul is asserting that it is the message, not the messenger that ultimately matters. The gospel that Paul preaches is not true because he preaches it, but because it is the risen Christ that has commissioned Paul to preach it.

Here Paul uses the word *anathema* to speak of a curse that is to fall upon anyone that would proclaim another gospel (Joshua 6:17-19).

This idea was originally a dedication unto the Lord for blessing. Paul uses this word to describe a dedication, but not one of blessing, but destruction.

Paul teaches that a person who is faithful to the gospel is also a person who truly pleases Christ and how one please Christ is to proclaim this true gospel.

Paul's Apostleship (1:11-2:14)
Paul's credentials (1:11-12)

Before Paul can defend his gospel, he must defend himself and this is what he begins to do in 1:11-24.

Paul shows that his gospel is unique and he does so three ways:

- 1.) It is not according to man (1:11).
- 2.) It is not received from nor did it originate with men (1:12).
- 3.) But it is given through a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:12).

Apostolic evidence (1:13-24)

In this next section Paul will prove his claim of divine apostleship and gospel. He will do so in two ways. First, he will give evidence for the claim itself and, second, he will give two examples from his early life as an apostle with the other apostles (2:1-21).

To begin his defense, Paul points out two features that are incompatible with his apostolic ministry of the gospel:

- 1.) His persecution of the church, in which he sought earnestly to destroy it (cf., Acts 8:1-3).
- 2.) Totally committed to Pharisaism. He was not only committed to Judaism, but advancing far ahead of his countrymen, both in written and oral tradition (cf., Mark 7:1-13; Phil 3:4-6).

What does Paul's introduction of his former life demonstrate? Two things:

- 1.) His message is not from Judaism or any faction or sect that promotes the whole or parts of Judaism (e.g., Judaizers).
- 2.) That Paul has the necessary credentials to speak authoritatively about Judaism and the end of Judaism, which is Christ, which he will outline in detail in chapters three and four.

By God setting apart Paul he again stresses the divine origin of his gospel. He uses three words to describe this idea:

- 1.) Set apart.
- 2.) Called.
- 3.) Pleased.

The predestinating work of God in Paul's life leads little doubt to the origin of Paul's religion.

Paul is confirmed by Peter, James, and John (2:1-10)

In defense of his apostleship, Paul will demonstrate in the next few verses two examples from his life that show his right hand of fellowship with the founding apostles; his initial encounter with Peter, James, and John and his rebuke of Peter, which demonstrates his apostolic authority and defense of a biblical gospel.

Paul states that while Peter, James, and John are of high repute among the early Christians, their apostolic credentials made no contribution to him because of two reasons:

- 1.) Because God shows no partiality (2:6).

2.) Because he knew he had been called by God to be a witness to the Gentiles (2:7-10).

Paul's apostleship confirmed through confronting Peter (2:11-14)

In Galatians 2:11-14 we find the episode where Paul confronts Peter for his hypocrisy.

The customary interpretation of this passage is as follows: Peter was a hypocrite because he acted like a Gentile by eating with them, but when the party of the circumcision arrived, which is synonymous with the men from James, Peter withdrew from Gentile fellowship.

Many problems exist with the "traditional" view.

James was painfully aware of the many sacrifices the early church made to understand the relationship between Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:13-29; cf., Amos 9:11-12).

James recognized that the inclusion of the Gentiles apart from the Mosaic law was part of God's working under the new covenant.

James considers Peter a pillar of the early church, so why would he force such stipulations on Peter or any other Jew and why would Peter fear such men (Gal 2:9)?

Within the early church four positions arose of how Gentiles related to the Mosaic law:

- 1.) Both Jew and Gentile are not obligated to obey the Mosaic law, since it has been fulfilled by Christ.
- 2.) The Jew continued to obey the law, accepting Jesus as the Messiah, but placed no obligation on the Gentiles to obey the law.
- 3.) Jews accepted Jesus as Messiah along with the Mosaic law and demanded the same system of belief for Gentiles to be saved. These Jews were Judaizers, who accepted obedience to Christ and the law.
- 4.) Jews did not accept Jesus and believed that Gentiles could only be saved by converting to Judaism. This is the belief of the Jewish religious leaders during the first-century. These people were non-believing Jews.

James did send certain men to Peter, but these men are not the party of the circumcision. Paul is writing about two separate groups of people. In other words, we should not equate "certain men" with "the party of the circumcision."

Certain men from James simply refers to the men who brought the message to Peter.

Yet what is the message that James sent about the circumcision party that caused Peter to withdraw?

The gospel according to Paul (2:15-4:31)
Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith (2:15-21)

Paul now proceeds to explain in detail the necessity for theological and practical consistency for those who are under the gospel.

Paul states, paradoxically, that the law itself has led him to faith in Christ.

Paul goes on to state that if we live to God, it is only because we have been united to Christ.

The life Paul lives now is by faith in the son of God, that is to say, his life is lived by faith in the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ. Paul rests not in the law, but in the righteousness of Christ.

An appeal to the Galatians experience of faith (3:1-5)

The central theme in these verses is that there is a sharp distinction between a life of Jewish observance of the law and the act of believing the gospel. He contrasts this idea three ways:

- 1.) Did you receive the spirit by faith or by the works of the law (3:2)?
- 2.) Are you perfected by the spirit in faith or by the flesh or law (3:3)?
- 3.) Do you see miracles and receive the spirit by faith or works of the law (3:5)?

Paul is contrasting two distinct epochs in redemptive history, the old covenant and the new covenant.

- 1.) Works of the law: flesh (4:23), slavery (4:25, 5:1), sin (3:22), and death, which reflect the present evil age (1:4).
- 2.) Faith: Spirit (3:14; 5:5ff), inheritance (3:18), promise (3:14ff), freedom (5:1), sonship (4:6ff), righteousness (3:6; 5:5), and life (6:8), which reflect the coming of a new age—the Jerusalem from above (4:25-26).

The law cannot provide salvation (3:6-14)

Paul now turns to the law and shows its inadequacy in relation to justification. He shows from the OT how the law was inadequate and how acceptance before God was never based on works, but faith.

- 1.) The law brought a curse upon those in the OT who did not keep it (3:10; Deut 27:26).
- 2.) The righteous will live by faith (3:11; Rom 1:16-17; Heb 10:38; Habakkuk 2:4 (LXX)).
- 3.) Whoever practices the law, will live by it (3:12, Lev 18:5; James 2:10).

Observing the law did not entitle a person to the Abrahamic promises.

Because the law brought curse and not promise (Rom 7:7-13ff; 8:2ff; 2 Cor 3:6ff), Paul shows that Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law.

How did Christ redeem us from the curse of the law? Quoting from Deuteronomy 21:23, Paul demonstrates that Christ became a curse for us in that those who hang on a tree are accursed of God, just as it was spoken of in the OT (Josh 10:26; 2 Sam 21:6).

The purpose of the law (3:15-29)

Paul will discuss three epochs in redemptive history in this passage:

- 1.) The time before the law (3:15-18).
- 2.) The time during the law (3:19-24).

What does this teach us about the Christian and Old Testament law? There are really three views:

- 1.) Theonomy:
- 2.) Three-tier view of the law:

Moreover, many in this camp view the law possessing a three-fold use:

- a.) The law reproveth and corrects the unbeliever morally.
- b.) To lead us to Christ, in the sense that it shows us our sinfulness.
- c.) The law now is used to guide Christians in sanctification (e.g., Martin Luther's third use of the law).

- 3.) The third view is the modified-Lutheran view or the redemptive-historical view of the law (i.e., New Covenant Theology).

a.) The law was read as a testimony to the coming of Christ, just like the entire OT.

b.) The law was only a custodian, guardian, or babysitter until Christ came. Christ is now our lawgiver.

3.) The time after the law (3:25-29).

Paul draws attention to two benefits as sons of God:

1.) Our union with Christ (3:27).

2.) Our oneness in Christ (3:28-29).

Slaves or Sons (4:1-20)

In 4:1-7 Paul concludes his lengthy theological discourse by detailing what it means to be a son.

We notice five things about the coming of Christ and how he set us free:

1.) The timing of his coming: in the fullness of time (Mark 1:14-15).

2.) The origin of his coming: sent from God.

3.) The manner in which he came: born of a woman.

4.) The condition of his coming: born under the law.

5.) The purpose of his coming: redemption, manifest two ways:

a.) To redeem God's people.

b.) To make us sons of God and, thus, receive the Spirit.

All of human history served the greater purpose of bringing about God's redemptive purposes, which demonstrates two things:

1.) The temporal nature of the law

2.) The blessings associated with sonship: the Spirit.

In the following verses 4:12-20 Paul reveals his heart as a servant of the gospel versus the actions and selfishness of the Judaizers.

How did the Galatians treat him when he first came to them?

- 1.) Paul first came to them due to bodily illness and preached the gospel to them (4:13).
- 2.) They accepted Paul despite his bodily condition and did not despise or loathe him, but received him as an angel of God, as Christ himself (4:14).
- 3.) They would have plucked their eyes out and given them to him (4:15b).

Paul asks the Galatians, “where is the sense of blessing you had” (4:15b)? In other words, at one time you considered my presence and words a blessing, but now I have become your enemy for telling you the truth (4:16).

Paul’s final plea is that Christ may be formed in them (4:19-20). The seriousness of Paul’s plea is characterized by two words:

- 1.) He calls them my “children.”
- 2.) He states that he is in “labor” over them.

Paul desires that Christ be formed in the Galatians. Paul understood that the purpose of our salvation was that we might be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom 8:29; Col 1:28; 3:10).

Hagar and Sarah (4:21-31)

Paul will continue his argument of contrasting slaves and sons. He will contrast several ideas: Sarah and Hagar, Jerusalem above and present Jerusalem, Isaac and Ishmael (implied), flesh and promise, and slave and free, old covenant (Mt. Sinai) and new covenant. Paul will argue this passage in three stages: The historical situation (4:22-23), the allegorical interpretation (4:24-27), and the practical application (4:28-31)

Paul begins his argument by appealing to Abraham.

- 1.) The historical situation (4:22-23)
- 2.) The allegorical interpretation (4:24-27)

Paul argues that each mother represents two covenants.

1. Old Covenant: Hagar proceeds from Mt. Sinai (where the law was given), which corresponds to the present earthly Jerusalem bearing children who are slaves, who's first son was Ishmael.

2. New Covenant: In contrast Sarah, the mother of Isaac, represents the Jerusalem above, who's children are children of promise.

3.) The practical application (4:28-31)

Gospel living (5:1-6:18) Circumcision is of no value (5:1-12)

Paul in the next two chapters will begin to unpack the ethical implications of the gospel (though there is still a lot of theological content).

To take circumcision is not freedom (Christ is no benefit to you) and if you are not free then you are a slave.

Paul supports his statement two ways:

1.) If you receive circumcision you are required to keep the whole law (3:11; 5:4-5; cf., James 2:10-11), something that no person could do.

2.) True justification is not by circumcision, but by faith in Christ.

Paul begins by saying that they were running well, but someone or something has hindered them from obeying the truth. Paul will argue that it is not God or himself, but others who are not of God. He will demonstrate this two ways.

1.) God called you (5:8).

2.) If Paul is preaching circumcision then why is he persecuted (5:11)?

Love is what matters (5:13-15)

Paul now returns to the freedom that the Christian has in Christ.

Paul quotes from Leviticus 19:18. If love was a command under the old covenant, then in what way is the new covenant, and its command to love God and love our neighbors new or significant (cf., Matt 22:34ff)?

Walking in the Spirit is the mark of a Christian (5:16-26)

Paul specifically lays out how one will, first, fulfill the law of love and, second, not serve the flesh.

Paul now gives a long list of what the deeds of the flesh look like.

Paul makes a succinct summary statement to the flesh-Spirit issue in the next few verses. He now contrasts the works of the flesh, with the virtues of the Spirit.

For those who walk in the Spirit, there is no law against them. Paul means two things with this statement.

- 1.) The law could only judge externally, therefore, these virtues cannot be forced like the law in regard to external and forced stipulations.
- 2.) As alluded above, to have this fruit in our lives demonstrates that we are true law keepers and, thus, we are truly obeying the law when we see its end in Christ, our new law giver, which commands us to love him and others.

Love and the Spirit manifest in the church (6:1-10)

When Paul says you who are spiritual, he is not being sarcastic, but saying that true spirituality is manifest in two ways.

- 1.) When you restore a brother or sister in gentleness.
- 2.) When you recognize your own susceptibility toward temptation and sin.

Paul states more broadly that bearing one another's burdens and restoration is love, namely the law of Christ.

Love will seek every opportunity to do what is good toward others, particularly those of the church.

Love is displayed when we restore one another in gentleness, when we bear each others burdens, when we are humble, when we realize our own frailty, when we share good things with others (especially those who minister the gospel), and when we use our resources to serve God and his church.

Closing remarks (6:11-18)

Paul closes the letter by stating what large letters he is writing with his own hand. Three ideas have been proposed here.

- 1.) Paul has faulty eyesight and is telling them he is writing large letters.
- 2.) Paul used a secretary to write the letter and is now writing the rest himself (cf., Rom 16:22; 2 Thess 3:17).
- 3.) Paul is getting ready to say something very bold and he is indicating that with robustness to his handwriting.

It is safe to conclude that the first two ideas are more speculative than anything (We have no evidence that Paul did have faulty eyesight and there is no secretary mentioned in the epistle). Thus, the third option fits best in light of the content to follow.

Paul goes right to the heart of the matter. The reason why the Judaizers want to compel you to be circumcised is three-fold.

- 1.) So they can avoid persecution for the cross of Christ.
- 2.) They want to make a good showing outwardly.
- 3.) They want to boast because of your works.

Paul contrasts his motives and life with that of the Judaizers. Paul makes three points.

- 1.) Paul boasts only in Christ (Rom 5:11; 1 Cor 1:29-31; 2 Cor 10:17; Phil 3:3).
- 2.) Circumcision or uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is a new creation. Paul is contrasting again the old age, with the new age.
- 3.) If I make a showing outwardly, it is for the sake of Christ, whose marks I bear.

The Israel of God

Throughout the book of Galatians, as well as much of his epistles, Paul insisted that all Jew and Gentile distinctions had been erased in Christ. By his death he made one new man, breaking down the wall of separation, and brought together the mystery of the Church (Gal 3:27-28; Eph 2:11-3:7; cf., Acts 10, 15).

The question remains, who is the Israel of God that Paul includes in this blessing? There are three possible positions:

1.) Paul is speaking of ethnic unbelieving Israelites who still will inherit the covenant promises given to Abraham. This interpretation fails since they do not hold to the rule that Paul speaks about, namely boasting in Christ and a new creation.

2.) The Israel of God is believing ethnic Jews, but this position is problematic because it runs contrary to Paul's insistence throughout his letter that there is no distinction between believing Jews or Gentiles.

3.) The only plausible explanation that fits with the entirety of Paul's argument in the book of Galatians and the immediate context is that Paul's phrase, "and upon the Israel of God" is explanatory. All those who walk by the rule of boasting in Christ and are part of the new creation where soteric distinctions do not exist, may peace and mercy be upon them and upon the Israel of God, who are one in the same, for the true Israelite is the one who is in Christ, the seed of Abraham. The NIV does a nice job translating this verse: "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God." Through Abraham's seed all the nations would be blessed and as a result believing Jews and Gentiles comprise the true Israel of God, a covenant people defined by the principle of new creation in Christ Jesus, not ethnic descent (Gal 6:14-16).

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