

SESSION 1: Galatians

Four main points

1. Background
2. Theme
3. Issues
4. Application

1. Background

Reading: Galatians 1:1-2:10

2. Theme

Reading: Galatians 2:11-3:25

3. Issues

Reading: Galatians 3:26-4:31

4. Application

Reading: Galatians 5:1-6:18

Discussion questions:

Is it necessary to be baptised (at all or by total immersion) in order to be right with God?

What things as being necessary to salvation are we tempted to add to the gospel message?

1. Background

A papyrus sheet was a little wider than modern A4 paper and about the same length. About 250 words would have fitted on it comfortably. It was unusual for letters to be longer than one sheet. Paul wrote an average of 1,300 words in his epistles (Romans 7,101). Writing on papyrus scrolls was difficult. The style indicates that Paul probably dictated at speed to a scribe (*amanuensis*), sometimes losing his train of thought, sometimes digressing, sometimes breaking off, sometimes giving an outline for the scribe to complete and editing the final draft himself.

The Bible commentator William Barclay remarked, 'It is a great pity that Paul's letters were ever called *epistles*. They are in the most literal sense *letters*'. Paul wrote a series of genuine letters addressing specific issues for the new Christians of New Testament times.

In the ancient world letters were usually undated. Galatians is generally presumed to be the earliest of Paul's New Testament letters to the churches. Galatia was a huge Roman province extending almost coast-to-coast through the mountains and plain of central Turkey. Galatia is therefore not one town or city but a whole geographical area, hence Paul writes to the churches of Galatia.

Who were the intended recipients of the letter? Did they live in North Galatia (that is north of the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe) or were those cities included? The Romans added southern districts when they made (north) Galatia a province.

Evidence revolves around the key event of the Jerusalem Council. The apostles and elders sent their decisions to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia and these are very relevant to the subject matter of Galatians (Acts 15:24-29).

We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul — men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

If Paul knew of that Council why does he not mention its decisions, as they are very relevant to the issue discussed? The South Galatian theory adopts the view that Paul wrote the letter before the Jerusalem Council and that the visit to Jerusalem in Chapter 2 is the one mentioned in Acts 11:27-30. Paul also mentions Barnabas three times as though he were well known to the readers. Barnabas travelled with Paul only in South Galatia.

By the time Paul visited North Galatia the two leaders had separated because of their disagreement about John Mark. 'While there are some quite good arguments for holding that the letter was written to churches in the northern part of Galatia, they do not seem strong enough to counter those considerations that point to those in the south of the area, churches that Paul is known to have visited and indeed to have founded' (Morris). The South Galatian view and earlier date is widely accepted, though somewhere about A.D. 50 is about as close as we are going to get. The earlier something was written the closer it was to the life and ministry of Jesus and this is important because it is likely to show greater historical reliability as it could be verified by those who remembered him.

2. Theme

In the course of the thirty or so years between his conversion on the road to Damascus and his imprisonment in Rome, Paul travelled widely throughout the Roman Empire preaching the gospel and establishing small groups of believers. Letters to the New Testament churches supplemented these visits and were always written for good reason. Any letters that were less important have simply not survived. The letter to the Galatians was written to deal with some serious problems that had arisen in the church and the urgency of the matter is shown by the fact that Paul moves straight to the subject without commending the church.

To Paul's astonishment, soon after he had left them (1:6), the Galatians had started to embrace the message brought by some new unnamed teachers (1:7, 1:9). Paul says that this is not really a different gospel so much as 'no gospel at all' (1:7), the crux of the matter being that according to this teaching the acceptance of circumcision is necessary for salvation (5:2). Circumcision was the rite of initiation given to Abraham and was practised on male children born into Hebrew families. As far as Paul was concerned, acceptance of circumcision was just the first step in a requirement to keep the whole law of Moses (5:3), not just the Ten Commandments but all the dietary and ceremonial regulations. It appears that the Galatians had already started new observances of 'days, and months, and seasons, and years' (4:10). While circumcision and these other observances were not necessarily harmful in themselves, indeed we know this because for different reasons, Paul decided that it would be helpful for his ministry to the Jewish community if Timothy were to be circumcised (Acts 16:3), in this case Paul realised that acceptance of circumcision would effectively mean accepting a totally different scheme of salvation, which would be achieved by obedience to the law and not, as he had consistently taught, by faith in Jesus Christ (3:2). To accept such an alternative 'gospel' (or non-gospel) would mean abandoning spiritual liberty and going back to the law from which they had been set free. Those who taught this are commonly called 'Judaizers'.

While it might seem astonishing that Gentile converts were accepting that they had to be circumcised and observe the law of Moses in order to be saved, the reasons for doing so were fairly obvious. As far as we know, Jesus had never ministered among Gentiles. He had lived as a devout Jew and never questioned the propriety of circumcision, the most basic requirement for Jewish males. Jesus kept the Jewish festivals. The Judaizers could easily appeal to the example of Jesus. It is clear that matters such as this troubled the whole New Testament church and not just the Galatians. Paul refers to a confrontation that he had with Peter at Antioch (2:11 ff.). One of the requirements of the law was that Jews did not eat with Gentiles but Peter and other Jewish Christians had eaten with Gentiles at Antioch. However, for fear of the 'circumcision party', the Jewish Christians stopped doing this. We can safely assume that the Galatian Judaizers were also insisting on the ceremonial food laws. It is not surprising that this teaching was causing such trouble.

This desperate situation required the most forthright and strongly worded of Paul's letters. The other teachers not only undermined Paul's teachings but his credentials as an Apostle of Jesus Christ and of the gospel. Paul refers to people who opposed him in every chapter (1:6-7, 2:4-5, 3:1, 4:17, 5:7-12, 6:12-13). The Judaizers contended that faith alone is not enough; there are things that must be done to merit salvation. Although initiation into Judaism was by circumcision, Paul asserts most strongly that circumcision is not necessary for salvation. It is not necessary that Gentile converts become Jews by the outward rite. Paul taught that repentance and faith were all that was needed to receive God's forgiveness and the gift of new life. Galatians has been called the '*Magna Carta of Christian liberty*'. The letter therefore has two main themes, a defence of Paul's apostolic authority and a statement of his gospel of justification by grace alone, through faith alone and an insistence that for salvation nothing more than faith in Jesus Christ was needed.

3. Issues

The main issue in Galatians is the question as to how and why sinful men and women can be accepted by God. Paul's answer is quite clear. An individual is made right with God 'by faith in Jesus Christ' (2:16), particularly in his death on the cross (6:14). This faith in Christ's work results in the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (3:2). In New Testament times, sons rather than daughters had greater privileges and blessings in the family, particularly by way of inheritance. Paul, therefore, writes that believers have become sons of God receiving the Holy Spirit in their hearts (4:6).

Salvation brings a new freedom of the Spirit (5:1). Believers are not to return to a yoke of slavery (to the law of Moses) but the new liberty or freedom that a believer has must never be allowed to become a licence. As a devout Jew, Paul would have thanked God each day that he was not born a Gentile, a slave or a woman (because none of these had the privilege of studying the law). However, in Christ, Paul can write, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (3:28).

Justification by faith is central to the letter to the Galatians because it is central to the very nature of the gospel (Cole). Relying on our own efforts or adding something else to the gospel, such as outward observances, is a constant temptation. Paul is concerned that justification by faith is not limited to theoretical doctrine but extended to the experience of the Christian believer.

Another important issue for Paul and Galatians was that of compromise. Paul would have made life much easier for himself and probably for the church at Galatia had he not taken such a hard line against those who said that Gentile Christians should be circumcised. In any event, would much harm have been done by following the traditional food regulations and the observance of special days that were so much part of the life of Jewish Christians? Far from making light of it, Paul treated the whole issue as critical to the gospel and rightly so. If Paul had accepted that Gentile Christians had effectively to become Jewish proselytes (converts to Judaism) then Christians would have been nothing more than a sect within Judaism. If we accept the south Galatian theory and the early date of the letter then this matter will be resolved at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Paul seems to have been under considerable pressure from the Judaizers to have Titus circumcised (2:3) but Paul would not give into this kind of pressure. In Galatia, circumcision was not a matter of being tactful or even becoming all things to all men (1 Corinthians 9:22), rather it would have been negotiating on the very essence of the gospel, which Paul was not prepared to do.

Paul resolutely opposed any circumcision of Gentile believers. Not because it was wrong of itself but because it was part of a system that was no longer relevant. It belonged to the old time of preparation (4:1-11) and to accept it or reintroduce it would be a retrograde step, implying that salvation was dependent upon keeping the law. The situation was different for Jewish Christians. Paul accepted that they could continue to observe the law (Acts 21:20), or ignore the law (2:12) or observe it at times and ignore it at times (1 Corinthians 9:20-21). Paul was ready to compromise on non-essentials but was immovable when the very essence of the gospel was at stake.

Paul states quite clearly in his letter that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile and while the church has some history of anti-Semitism it is in no way justifiable through Scripture. Paul also makes a sweeping statement that there is no distinction between male and female. In this he is not saying that men and women are the same but that they are one in Christ and complementary. In later letters Paul will spell this out in more detail. In Galatians, Paul is outlining Christian liberty. This is very different from the legalism of the Judaizers who could offer little or nothing to women.

4. Application

Galatians is 'a passionate letter, the outpouring of the soul of a preacher on fire' (Morris). Paul's urgency can be sensed right from the start. He abruptly asserts his authority (1:1) and there is no characteristic word of praise or encouragement. Instead Paul immediately and violently introduces his reason for writing. He is shocked that the Galatians are deserting to another gospel, which in reality is no gospel at all. Their so-called 'gospel' is nothing other than a return to the works of the law. Paul's brief autobiography is intended to show the gospel of God's grace did not come from his background in Judaism but by direct revelation from Jesus Christ. The Jerusalem Apostles acknowledged this gospel on his rare and brief visits. When Peter made legalistic distinctions over eating with Gentiles it seems he yielded to Paul's rebuke.

From the very beginning of the letter, Paul defends the gospel of grace. Paul points out that anyone who exchanges Christian freedom for Jewish legalism is a fool that is a person who has failed to think things through. The gospel is about salvation by grace through faith. After all, this is how the Galatians first became Christians. If works can achieve salvation the cross is unnecessary. The only explanation that Paul can offer for such muddle-headedness is that the Galatians had been under the spell of a magician. The heart of the gospel is 'Christ crucified'. The legalistic Judaizers talked about making the Gentiles sons of Abraham through circumcision (Genesis 12 and 17) but Gentile Christians are already sons and heirs for they share his faith, after all even Abraham was blessed through faith and not through circumcision. Abraham was the man that God started with, the father and prototype of Israel. 'Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6) that is he was in a 'right standing before God' because he believed him. Abraham's faith was the same kind of faith as his spiritual heirs who believe. The promise to Abraham from the beginning was that Gentiles (all nations) would be blessed. As no one can ever be justified by the law the two principles must be kept separate. The law brings death but faith leads to life, 'the righteous will live by faith' (Habakkuk 2:4). It is not circumcision that matters but what it stands for. Christ has saved us and set us free, not to live permissive self-indulgent lives, but to put ourselves at God's disposal. When we live to please ourselves, it shows in the way that we behave. When we live to please God, we show a character produced in us by the Holy Spirit as he controls and transforms our living.

The letter to the Galatians is so closely tied to a historical issue of circumcision (that is of little concern to us) that some may question its use. Luther found the Epistle helpful in his struggles against legalism. Justification by faith was as relevant to Luther, as it was to the Galatians, as it is to us today. Any form of legalism is bondage, which is alien to Christianity as Paul saw it. Any approach to Christianity that rests upon the rigid observance of external rules as a means of salvation is no better than that which the Galatians were in danger of adopting. Galatians disproves the erroneous teaching that baptism (either for infants or adults) or anything other than faith in Jesus and his death on the cross is necessary to salvation. The doctrine of justification by faith delivers the church from a mere formalism to which the neglect of its preaching leads.

The legalistic method is dangerously attractive. It is simpler to follow a pattern of observances than personal faith. Justification by faith in Christ alone will inevitably be suspicious of priestly mediators. The opposite course is also a possibility, not legalism but licence or lawlessness (antinomianism). Paul makes it clear that freedom in Christ is not an excuse for self-indulgence. The type of Christianity that Paul advocates (I am crucified with Christ) makes rigorous demands despite its anti-legalistic approach.