

Introductory Material for Galatians

[These notes are copied from the syllabus, *The Life and Epistles of Paul*.]

The Judaizers

The reason for this epistle is clear from its contents. The Judaizers were Jewish Christians who taught that Gentile believers must be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses in order to be included in the church. It seems that they traveled around and sought to stir up the churches Paul had established or ministered in. Their appearance in Antioch is noted in Acts 15:1. They basically said that works were required for salvation (Gal 1:6; 5:2-4). Since Paul always taught that salvation was totally by grace through faith alone, these false teachers would seek to discredit him in the eyes of the churches. They said that the original apostles had more authority than Paul, and that he had misunderstood or was contradicting their doctrines. Naturally, their confident teaching disturbed and confused the Gentile believers in the churches. Galatians is Paul's strongest polemic against the Judaizers.

The Galatians

About 250 B.C. Gauls from Europe moved into north central Asia Minor, and in 25 B.C. King Amyntas willed this territory to the Romans. The Romans expanded the province during the next 100 years. Thus the term "Galatia" can refer to either the ethnic area, or to the Roman province. Paul seems to have been there at least twice before (cf. Gal 4:13, "As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you").

The identity of the Galatians is therefore a disputed point. They could have been the nationality of the Gauls living in Asia Minor (North Galatian theory); or those who lived in the Roman province of Galatia, but who were not Gauls by race (South Galatian theory).

North Galatian theory

Joseph Barber Lightfoot, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (1865; d. 1889)

Reasons given:

- Visited northern Galatia on second and third missionary journeys (Acts 16:6; 18:23; two previous visits required by Gal 4:13)
- Galatia and Phrygia, mentioned in Acts, are taken as separate areas; cities in Galatia would include Pessinus, Ancyra, Tavium

- Use of “disciples” instead of “churches” in Acts 18:23 strengthens the argument (but note “churches” in Gal 1:2)

“After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples.” (Acts 18:23)

- The use of the province name Galatia in Gal 3:1 would offend the people there (Lightfoot admits provincial names used in Gal 1:2; 1 Cor 16:1; 2 Tim 4:10)
- Lightfoot also believed that the temperament of the Gauls was more prone to instability, making them the likely group to be led away by the Judaizers.

(The North Galatian view was the commonly accepted one until the archaeological work of William Ramsay demonstrated that the Roman province of Galatia included the southern portion in the time of Paul.)

South Galatian theory

William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul, The Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (1897), *A Historical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (1899)

Reasons given:

- Phrygia and Galatia (Acts 16:6; 18:23) taken to mean “Phrygian Galatia,” i.e., that part of the Roman province of Galatia that is in the region of Phrygia
- Cities written to in Galatians would be those of first missionary journey: Antioch-Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe
- Those cities visited on all three missionary journeys (Acts 13:14 - 14:24; 16:6; 18:23)
- This location would make Luke's emphasis in Acts coincide with Paul's in Galatians (giving helpful background to the epistle)
- Judaizers probably would go to the cities of southern Galatia before traveling to the distant cities in the north
- Paul (and Luke) often use Roman civic or provincial names, rather than national regions (Acts 2:10; 16:6-9; 19:29; 20:4; 1 Cor 16:5; 2 Cor 6:11; 9:2, 4; Rom 15:19, 26; 16:5; Titus 1:5, 12; 2 Tim 4:10); why not in Gal 3:1?

In general, modern scholars tend to prefer the South Galatian view, but the issue is not conclusively decided. Many modern NT scholars deny the historicity of Acts, and their conclusions are thereby affected.

Date of Galatians

The date of Galatians is one of the most controversial subjects in the life of Paul. Among other things, the issue of the events in Galatians 2 and their relation to the book of Acts is tied to this question. Some would even judge the historicity of Acts according to its relation to Galatians. The chronology of Paul's life is also involved, since Galatians gives two important time statements, involving periods of three and fourteen years (Gal. 1:18; 2:1). A good summary of the various positions can be found in J. Gresham Machen, "The Triumph of Gentile Freedom," *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1925), pp. 71-113.

Early date

—After first missionary journey, before the Jerusalem Council, written from Antioch, A.D. 48-49

This view is adopted by F. F. Bruce, and is worked into his construction of Paul's life in his *New Testament History* (1971) and *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (1977). It has been accepted by many conservative scholars.

- Previous two visits implied by Gal 4:13 are said to be either the first missionary journey and a conjectural trip later, or the first missionary journey itself, counting the return trip as the second visit (Acts 14:21)
- This earliest date therefore possible only if South Galatian view is accepted
- Two visits to Jerusalem mentioned (Gal 1:18; 2:1) are Paul's first visit there and then the famine visit (Acts 9:26; 11:30)

Reasons given:

- Difficulty of harmonizing Gal 2 with Acts 15 is solved; they were different visits
- Galatians does not mention the Jerusalem Council decision; seems that Paul could easily have settled the issue bothering the Galatians by referring to the Jerusalem decision, if it had already taken place
- Paul solemnly lists visits to Jerusalem in Gal 1-2; seems unlikely he would omit the second visit (famine visit)
- The subsequent actions of Peter (Gal 2:11-21) fit well with the time before the Council, rather than after it

Middle date

—After the Jerusalem Council, during Paul's second missionary journey, written from Corinth, A.D. 50

This view is held by many scholars. It seeks to ease the chronological tightness of the earliest date, and identify the meeting in Gal 2 with the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. The middle date could include a broader range of time (perhaps written from Antioch after the Council, or written during Paul's travels on his second missionary journey, or after his return to Antioch).

- The two visits to Galatia are the first missionary journey and the second missionary journey
- Therefore, this view still requires the South Galatian destination of the epistle
- The two visits to Jerusalem mentioned in Galatians are the first visit after Paul's conversion, and the Jerusalem Council; the famine visit is not mentioned in Galatians

Reasons given:

- The 14 or 17 years after Paul's conversion (Gal 1:18; 2:1) fit better for the Jerusalem Council than for the famine visit
- Two visits being the first two journeys seems more natural
- The famine visit was not relevant to this discussion (no doctrine discussed)
- Gal 2 seems to fit better with the Jerusalem Council than with the famine visit: names of participants, issue involved
- Other arguments favoring earliest date can be answered (see notes on Apostolic Council)

Late date

—During Paul's third missionary journey, from Ephesus (A.D. 51-53), or during his trip through Macedonia (A.D. 53), or from Corinth (A.D. 53-54)

This is the traditional date for Galatians. The North Galatian view requires this date, and the South Galatian view allows it. The contents of the epistle link it to the other Soteriological epistles, which were written during this time. J. B. Lightfoot's commentary on Galatians argues forcibly for this view.

Lightfoot dates the epistle as written on Paul's journey from Macedonia toward Corinth (p. 55). Machen favors a date a little earlier, during Paul's ministry in

Ephesus (*The New Testament, An Introduction to its Literature and History*, p. 123; *Machen's Notes on Galatians*, ed. by John H. Skilton, pp. 23-26).

- Prior visits to Galatia would be the three missionary journeys (South Galatian view), or the second and third missionary journeys (Acts 16:6; 18:23; North Galatian view)
- This the only possible date for the North Galatian view; thus is the traditional date
- Two visits to Jerusalem mentioned would be first visit and Jerusalem Council (same as for middle date)

Reasons given:

- Pauline chronology OK, same as for middle date view
- Doctrinal similarity to other Soteriological epistles, all written on third missionary journey
- Especially similar to Romans, written from Corinth, winter of A.D. 53-54; see table in Lightfoot's commentary, pp. 45-48

As can be seen, the question of the date of Galatians is complicated, and a positive, dogmatic answer is out of the question. There are strong arguments favoring each position. For purposes of course organization, we will follow the traditional date of Galatians (as Goodwin does), realizing that the other constructions offer plausible outlines of Paul's life and ministry. Fortunately, the teaching of the epistle is not changed, regardless of which date it was written. Its message is important and timeless.

Unique features of Galatians

- No beginning commendation
- Strong against heresy, 1:8-9; 5:12
- Second most autobiographical epistle (after 2 Corinthians)
- Paul's argument with Peter, 2:11-21
- Paul's eye trouble, 4:15; 6:11 (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7; phps. Acts 23:5)
- Wrote ending himself (with large letters), 6:11-18
- Paul's *stigmata*, "marks" of persecution, 6:17

Outline of Galatians

I. Paul's independent apostleship, ch. 1-2

Paul begins by asserting his authority as an apostle. It comes from God directly, not through any men, even the other apostles.

1. Salutation, 1:1-5
2. Danger of heresy, 1:6-10

Some of Paul's strongest words are against those who preach "another" (ἕτερος *heteros*, another kind) gospel, which is not "another" (ἄλλος *allos*, another of the same kind). The false preacher is "anathema," considered to be eternally condemned.

The rest of ch. 1-2 is given over to showing that Paul received his gospel directly from God. His limited contacts with the apostles show this to be true.

3. Paul's conversion and first Jerusalem visit, 1:11-24

Paul's conversion was not the work of man, but of God himself (vv. 11-16a). Paul did not confer with any other apostles until three years later, but rather stayed in Arabia and Damascus. Then he made his brief visit of only 15 days in Jerusalem, and saw only Peter and James. He then tells how he returned to the region of his native Tarsus to preach for many years.

4. Paul's visit to Jerusalem 14 years later, 2:1-10

This is either the famine visit or the Jerusalem Council visit (see arguments above and in Paul notes). At this time, rather than learning the doctrine from the apostles, Paul stood up and defended his gospel, and was accepted by all the apostles as equal in office to themselves.

Paul refused to allow Titus, who was with him, to be circumcised; thus he opposed the Judaizers. This event is not recorded in Acts.

5. Paul's dissent with Peter, 2:11-21

To conclusively prove his point, Paul recalls how he opposed Peter's conduct openly in Antioch. In the same passage he demonstrates the actual doctrinal unity that he and Peter shared.

II. Justification by faith alone, ch. 3 - 5:12

Having established his independent apostleship, Paul now enters into the subject at hand: how is one saved and how does one please God? Is it by keeping the Jewish external law? Paul responds with a strong argument for justification by faith alone.

1. The question introduced, 3:1-5

The Galatians should know by their own experience that the gift of the Holy Spirit is associated with faith, not works.

2. The promise and example of Abraham, 3:6-29

Paul shows that Abraham was saved by faith, not by his circumcision, or other works (vv. 6-9, quoting Gen. 15:6). The promise to Abraham is given to all who believe the gospel, even those not his descendants by race (v. 29). In the church there is no human distinction (v. 28).

3. The Christian now a son of God, not a slave to the law, 4:1-20

Paul is concerned that the Galatians will forsake their good beginning and turn to the “weak and miserable principles” of the external law as their means of acceptance with God. He mentions their love for him, and his great concern for them.

4. Illustration of Hagar and Sarah, 4:21-31

Abraham’s method of operation in trying to achieve God’s promise corresponds to that of the Galatians. He tried the way of the flesh: Hagar; then he rested and trusted in God, and the promised son came through Sarah. This is a “figure” to show how God’s promised salvation comes: not through human effort, but by simple faith in God’s fulfilling of his promise.

5. Christian freedom, 5:1-12

Paul warns against the Judaizers, who try to lord it over the lives of the Galatians. If we trust in Christ, then men cannot have this power over us (vv. 2-4). Paul strongly condemns these false teachers (v. 12).

III. Practical exhortations, 5:13 - 6:10

1. True spiritual life, 5:13-26

Contrast between the “flesh” (sinful nature) and the “Spirit”; the Christian will live in true freedom, led by the Spirit in all moral action and thought.

2. Brotherly love, 6:1-10

We should all be a blessing to each other, and help each other.

IV. Paul's concluding testimony, 6:11-18

Written in large letters (v. 11). Notice his calling the church "the Israel of God" (v. 16); this verse is quite controversial, with dispensationalists believing that it refers to national Israel only.

Summarizes the main ideas of the epistle, and closes with a benediction.