

Introduction to Galatians

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Author

Paul names himself the author at the beginning of the letter:

Galatians 1:1 Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—

Recipients

Paul tells us to whom he is writing in v. 2: “To the churches of Galatia.” This makes the letter to the Galatians unique in that it isn’t addressed just to one city, but to a group of churches in cities in the whole Roman providence of Galatia.

Galatia was the name originally given to the territory in north-central Asia Minor where the Gauls from France had immigrated. This changed in 25 B.C. when this area came under the control of the Romans. The boundaries of the Roman province of Galatia included not only this ethnic Galatian region, but also the more southern parts including Pisidia, Isauria, Lycaonia, and a portion of eastern Phrygia.

Paul had personally visited these churches:

Galatians 1:8-9 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Galatians 4:13-15 You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

And Paul had just recently visited these congregations:

Galatians 1:6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—

The book of Acts tells us that Paul had gone through the southern Galatian cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe twice on his First Missionary Journey (Acts 13 & 14) and again at the beginning of his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 15:41-16:5).

Occasion and Purpose

After Paul had left the congregations in Galatia, others had come to them and told them that Paul had not taught them everything they needed to know and do. These were Jewish legalists who told the believers in Galatia that they must also follow the requirements of the law. They were teaching that faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection was not enough. They were also saying that Paul was not a true apostle because he had not been called by Jesus during Jesus’ earthly ministry.

Paul wrote this letter to defend his being a true apostle. He wrote it to defend the true gospel

of grace. And he wrote it to call the Galatians back from seeking to be justified by works to justification by grace through faith apart from works.

Date of Writing

Paul evidently wrote this letter before the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. That council dealt with the question of whether Christians had to follow the law. As this was the same problem the Galatians were facing, Paul would have mentioned the decision of this council if he had written this letter after the council had taken place.

In Galatians 4:20 Paul says, "I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you." This implies that he was far away, perhaps on his way to Jerusalem to discuss this very matter (Acts 15:2). Instead of going back to Galatia, Paul wrote this letter to deal with this matter.

Paul visited these churches again on his second missionary journey. It is on this trip that he told them the decision of the Jerusalem Council.

If Paul was writing this letter on the way to Jerusalem, that would explain why there are no greetings from other churches. These greetings are common in Paul's other letters. Instead, Paul simply says in v. 2, "and all the brothers who are with me." These would then be Paul's traveling companions who went with him to the council in Jerusalem.

Based on these things, Paul wrote this letter after his first missionary journey shortly before or on his way to his third visit to Jerusalem when the council recorded in Acts 15 took place. He probably wrote this letter in August 49. This would make Galatians the first letter written by Paul.

Content

Paul's letter to the Galatians can be divided into three main parts:

1. Paul's defense of his apostleship in chapters 1 and 2. The Judaizers had told the Galatians that Paul was not a true apostle like the other eleven, because he had not seen the Lord Jesus and he had not been called by Jesus. Paul writes:

Galatians 1:1 Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—

Galatians 1:11-12 the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:15-16 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone;

Galatians 2:6-9 And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the

Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Galatians 2:11-14 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

2. Paul’s defense of justification by grace, through faith in the last part of chapter 2 and in chapters 3 and 4.

Galatians 2:16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Galatians 3:22-25 But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian,

Galatians 4:4-7 But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.

3. Paul defense of the liberty we have in Christ in Chapters 5 and 6.

Galatians 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Galatians 5:13 For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

In this letter, Paul distinguishes between the weak brethren in the congregations and the false teachers who are disturbing the congregations. He is very patient in instructing those are being misled, but Paul condemns and rejects those who are undermining the truth of the Gospel:

Galatians 1:8-9 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Galatians 5:12 I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!

Galatians 6:1-2 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Outline

1. Introduction (1:1-5)
2. The Defense of Paul's Apostleship (1:6-2:21)
3. The Defense of the Doctrine of Justification (3:1-4:31)
4. The Defense of Christian Liberty in the Gospel (5:1-6:10)
5. Conclusion (6:11-18)

(this overview is based on a study prepared by Pastor Nathanael Mayhew,
<http://atlanta.clclutheran.org/booksofthebibleoverview.html>)