

Galatians Introduction
May 31, 2020

1) Suggested Reading

- a) The Book of Galatians – This is a short letter of only 6 chapters. Before we begin our study it would be helpful to read through the entire book.
- b) There are many good commentaries. Here are 3 that I have found helpful.
 - i) F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Galatians (The New International Greek Testament Commentary) Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982. 305 pages. The author was Prof. of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at the University of Manchester. This is a scholarly and lengthy commentary that is regarded by some as the definitive work on Galatians.
 - ii) Charles B. Cousar, Galatians (Interpretation Commentary) John Knox Press, 1982. 158 pages. The author was Prof. of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary. This is a helpful commentary meant to be used by teachers and preachers as well as serious students of the Bible.
 - iii) Frederick W. Weidmann, Galatians (Westminster Bible Companion) Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. 137 pages. The author is now a pastor in California and previously served on the faculty of Auburn Theological Seminary. This commentary is meant to be used by pastors and laypersons as a study guide to the Bible.

2) Introduction – The book of Galatians may be brief, consisting of less than 150 verses, but it has had a dramatic impact on the life of the church. Throughout Christian history its importance has been recognized, especially in the Protestant tradition where it played a central role in the theology of Martin Luther with his emphasis on justification by faith and not works. Its current popularity is due in part to the fact that the book contains the strongest statement of equality that can be found in the New Testament, affirming the equal status of male/female, master/slave, and Jew/Greek. Recognized from the beginning of the Christian tradition as central to the faith, it remains as a crucial interpreter of the Christian tradition.

3) Authorship

- a) The opening verse of Galatians names Paul as the author and there is little within the text or in the early traditions of the church that raises any serious question about Paul's authorship. Many scholars have raised issues about the Pauline authorship of Colossians, Ephesians, 1st and 2nd Timothy, and Titus. However, Galatians, along with Romans and 1st and 2nd Corinthians, rank as the best authenticated of Paul's letters as affirmed by F. F. Bruce who wrote, "When the claims of other letters to Pauline authorship is under consideration, the standard of assessment is...preeminently Galatians."

- b) From the very beginning Galatians had a secure place in the New Testament canon. In fact, it was placed first among Paul's letters in the earliest canonical collection made by Marcion in 140. The claim of Paul's authorship is buttressed by the autobiographical information found in Galatians 1:11-2:14. When we read the book of Galatians we can read with confidence that we are hearing the voice of the apostle Paul.

4) The Recipients of the Letter

- a) Strangely, though the authorship is clear, the identity of the Galatian recipients of the letter is problematical. The Galatians were originally Celts (Latin – Galli) who migrated from the Danube River basin westward into Gaul (hence its name) and to Britain. From the Danube they also moved in an easterly direction into Asia Minor around 285 BC. The Celts occupied a stretch of land extending about 200 miles in what we now call north central Turkey. One of their primary cities developed into the modern city of Ankara. Following the Roman conquest, the territory of Galatia became a part of the Roman Empire and in 25 BC Galatia was greatly enlarged by taking in several regions to the south of their original territory. And therein lies the problem. Think of the geographical identity of New York. It can refer to a city or to the entire state. In like manner, the term Galatia can refer to the ethnic territory originally occupied by the Celts in north central Turkey or it can include the entire Galatian Province established by Rome, which stretched far to the south all the way to the Mediterranean. This is not just a geographical issue; it determines the dating of the book as well.
- b) Paul's 1st missionary journey is described in Acts 13-14 where he visited the southern province of Galatia and founded churches in Pisidia, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. This trip occurred in 46-48. The record of Paul's 2nd missionary journey is recorded in Acts 16:1-5 and on that trip he revisited the southern provincial cities and then traveled north to the original Galatian territory. The dates for this journey were approximately 49-52. So here is the question: when Paul uses the term Galatia, to whom was he referring and to whom was this letter written? If Paul was referring to the southern churches of his 1st missionary journey, then the book of Galatians was one of the 1st letters authored by Paul and perhaps the earliest in the New Testament. If Paul was speaking of the original northern region when he addressed the Galatians, then the writing would have been several years later. Biblical scholars are not of one mind on this issue as noted by Bruce, "The fact that so many competent scholars can be cited in support of either position suggests that the evidence for neither is absolutely conclusive." Bruce favors the south Galatian view while Cousar and Weidmann opt for the more limited territory in north central Asia Minor. (I assume that citizens of Richmond would favor the cause of the southern cities while viewing the northern option as just another example of unfounded Yankee pride.) In short, we know the author, but we are not sure who originally received this epistle.

- 5) Date of Writing – In light of the questions concerning the recipients of the letter, it is difficult to fix a specific time for the writing of this letter. If it occurred following his 1st missionary journey, meaning that it was sent to the province of Galatia in southern Turkey, the letter of Galatians could have been written as early as the year 49. That would make it the earliest of the New Testament books. If on the other hand Galatians was written to the original ethnic group in central Turkey, the latest possible date for its authorship would be 56. Cousar concludes, “A judicious guess would say that the letter originated sometime between A.D. 53 and 55, prior to or contemporary with the Corinthian letters but before the writing of Romans.”
- 6) Context of Writing Galatians
- a) Paul’s initial visit to the Galatians occurred at a time when he was suffering from a physical ailment. He was nonetheless received warmly by the largely Gentile population and recognized “as an angel of God.” The Galatians were enthusiastic in their response to Paul’s preaching, which was accompanied by the presence of the spirit and the performing of miracles. The founding of Galatian churches is a story of success, harmony, and faithfulness. However, at some later time, other Christian missionaries appeared in Galatia and began to preach a different message, urging the Galatians to adopt the Jewish practice of circumcision. They attacked Paul for presenting only a partial picture of the Christian faith and called upon the Galatians to receive a fuller understanding of the Christian message, demanding that Gentile Christians adopt a Jewish lifestyle.
 - b) When Paul heard how receptive the Galatians were to the preaching of these troublemakers, he became extremely angry. That agitation rises to the surface in the book of Galatians. Frederick Weidmann described the visceral fervor of Galatians by saying, “Like a freight train...this letter leaves the station fast and furious and with one purpose: to deliver its content effectively and efficiently.”
 - c) Commentators have presented a variety of descriptions in their attempts to identify these opponents of Paul. Each of these options has some textual support within the book of Galatians. Of the options given below, option 1 is the most prevalent, but it seems to me option 2 is the most plausible explanation.
 - i) They were Jewish Christians sent from the Jerusalem congregation with the support of James, the leader of the mother church. They insisted that the ceremonial laws of the Jewish people applied to the Christian community as well and they attacked Paul as a radical and a renegade.
 - ii) They were Jewish Christians with no direct link to the Jerusalem congregation who recognized the value of Paul’s preaching, but insisted it needed to be supplemented by the requirement of circumcision. This group was also seeking to avoid opposition and persecution from Jewish zealots.

- iii) They were Jewish Christians heavily influenced by Gnostic religions and advocated a syncretistic faith adopting circumcision and the observance of the Jewish calendar.
 - iv) They were Gentile Christians who felt that Paul had backed away from his original preaching which included the necessity of circumcision. They felt they were simply calling upon the Galatians to affirm Paul's earlier stance.
 - v) Those opposing Paul were really 2 different groups. One was a group of Judaizing activists who insisted upon submission to circumcision and other Jewish laws. The other was a group of the opposite persuasion who felt themselves completely free of any moral restraints.
- 7) The Literary Structure of Galatians – Galatians is filled with emotional intensity expressing Paul's anger toward those insisting that Gentiles must follow Jewish customs. More than one commentator referred to Galatians as Paul's angriest letter. Nonetheless there is a clear and careful pattern to the structure of the book.
- a) 1:1-5 – Introduction – Paul identifies himself as the author and greets the recipients (whoever they may be).
 - b) 1:6-2:21 – Paul states the reason for his letter. He reminds the Galatians of the core truth of the Christian gospel: the grace of God. Then Paul explains to the Galatians that God's grace is not restricted to the Jews and is not determined by the law. Faith is received by faith and not by works.
 - c) 3:1-5:12 – Paul reminds the Galatians of the beginning of their own Christian faith and then asks what it means to be a part of the community of faith. He raises the questions, who are the true children of Abraham and what is the true function of the Old Testament law? Paul answers the question by writing, to be birthed by the spirit and to be a child of freedom is not a matter of tracing one's ancestral line to Abraham.
 - d) 5:13-6:10 – Paul speaks to the Galatians about the irresponsible use of freedom. To be free from the imposition of Jewish law does not free one from the moral constraints of the spirit. Casting aside a strict legalism, Paul calls upon the Galatians to live a life of love with concern for those around them.
 - e) 6:11-18 – Paul concludes his letter by pointing to the cross of Christ as the guide for Christian living.
- 8) The Theological Importance of Galatians
- a) Divine grace is the central doctrine of Paul's message in Galatians. Charles Cousar writes in his commentary, "The theological excitement of Galatians lies in the radical interpretation Paul makes of the meaning of God's grace. It is more than a doctrine; it is an experience. At the same time, it is **the** doctrine which undergirds all that Paul fights

for in this letter.” Those demanding circumcision of the faithful focus on what humans can do to fulfill the law and to make them a part of God’s family. In contrast, Paul’s emphasis upon grace focuses on what God has already done for us to draw us into the family of faith. It is unmerited and it is unconditional and is not dependent on ritualistic acts or pious works. Faith is our response to God’s grace and not the result of our work.

- b) The agitators in the Galatian church had preached that Gentiles needed to become Jews in order to become fully Christian. In this book Paul shouts out a very loud **NO** to this legalistic distortion of faith. In contrast, Paul describes divine grace as obliterating all racial, sexual, and economic distinctions. By God’s grace all are made equal – Jew and Gentile, male and female, master and slave.
 - c) The correct human response to the gift of God’s grace is faithfulness. The life of faith is rooted in a confidence of what God has done for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the supreme example of God’s grace.
 - d) The life of faith which is grounded in grace is best expressed in loving action. Though the life of faith is freed from the legalistic restrictions of the law, it is not correctly understood as a life of unbounded and unregulated freedom. The moral expectations of faith are directed by the spirit of love as seen supremely in the sacrificial love of Christ.
- 9) A Final Note on Paul and Judaism – Paul’s aversion to a harsh religious legalism that demanded circumcision for Gentile converts has been often used to support a theory of Paul’s rejection of Judaism in general and even to support a form of anti-Semitism. The introduction to Weidemann’s commentary provides a helpful corrective to this view when he argues, “Paul could not conceive of himself or his ministry outside of Judaism and Jewish scripture, patterns of thought, and behavior.” After his conversion to the Christian faith, Paul continued to believe that his new faith was intimately related to his own Jewish tradition. Galatians should not be interpreted as Paul’s Declaration of Independence from Judaism.

10) Questions for Reflection

- a) How does Paul’s description of God’s grace inform your own understanding of faith?
- b) In reading the book of Galatians, how would you describe the opponents of Paul?
- c) Can you think of ways that we act like the opponents of Paul and impose legalistic restrictions upon faith today?