

Galatians: An Introduction

Overview

Significance

Called “The Magna Carta of Christianity” because it rightly maintains that only through the grace of God in Christ is a person enabled to escape the curse of sin and of the law and to live a new life in genuine freedom through the power of the Spirit. Galatians was the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation (Gaebelein, 409).

Author

- § Paul an apostle through Jesus Christ and God the Father (1:1; 5:1)
- § And from all those of God’s family with Paul (1:2)
- § Received the gospel directly from Christ (1:12)
- § Former leader in Judaism and opponent of the church (1:13)
- § Set apart as an apostle to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles (1:15-16; 2:8)
- § Resided in Arabia for period of time after conversion and then returned to Damascus (1:17)
- § Visited Jerusalem only twice (1:18-2:10)
- § Challenged Peter in Antioch over circumcision (2:11ff)
- § Brought gospel to Galatians (4:12-13)
- § -Paul b4 Jerusalem council
- § -B/c of chronology in Gal.1, Paul must have been converted 3 yrs after death of X (Tenney, 268)
- § -see chart of Early Pauline Chronology on pp.268-9
- § -identifies himself in the body of the letter in 1:1 and 5:2
- § -autobiographical account in ch.1 (BKC,587)

Recipients

- § the churches of Galatia (1:2)
- § deserting the grace of Christ and accepting another gospel (1:6)
- § Paul’s brothers (1:11;3:15; 4:12,28; 5:11; 6:1)
- § Paul calls them foolish (3:1)
- § Began by God’s Spirit but continuing by own power (4:3)
- § sons of God (4:1-7)
- § submitting to the Law (4:21ff)

§ Specific cities not mentioned although Acts revealed Paul on his first missionary journey visited the Galatian cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. The letter implies that the recipients came to faith around the same time. However, some scholars think this letter was addressed to northern Galatian churches spawned by the events of Acts 18:23 where general reference is made to Paul again traveling to Galatia. Nonetheless most evangelicals today believe the recipients most likely were from the previously mentioned south Galatian churches (Gaebelien,412).

§ -Galatia in north central Asia Minor where invading Gauls settled in the 3rd century B.C. Became a Roman territory in 25 B.C. and a larger division of land was added to be the province of Galatia. So there was a Galatia proper and the province. (Tenney, NT Survey, p.265)

§ -Thus, the North v. South Galatia theories. (South Galatia is assumed - see paper for Toussaint in 307)

Date

§ After a turning away from the gospel in the Galatian church (1:6; 3-4)

§ After Paul's many years of preparation (1:11-24)

§ After Paul's confrontation in Jerusalem and in Antioch with Peter (2)

§ After Paul brought the gospel to them (4:11-12)

§ S.Gal. assumed then it would be 1st Miss. Journey which ended about A.D. 48

§ Peter visited city and converts after this (Gal.2)

§ later date - late 50's (Keener, IVP Biblical Backgrounds Commentary, 518)

§ Preceded Acts 15 (Tenney, p.267)

§ if S.Galatia then A.D.48 or 49 (Wilkinson and Boa, Talk Thru the NT, p.393)

§ if N.Galatia then A.D. 53-56

§ at a time when Judaizers' insistence that believers must keep the law in particular circumcision for salvation (Tenney,269)

§ Judaizers had challenged Paul's apostleship (BKC,588)

Location

§ Galatia (1:1)

§ not from Jerusalem (1:14ff)

§ Opposed Peter at Antioch (2:11ff)

§ Paul brought the gospel personally to them in Galatia (4:11-12)

§ specific towns not specified

Tone

§ "modify my tone" (4:20)

§ rebuke, plea

§ “like a sword flashing in a great swordsman’s hand” (Barclay, 3)

§ warlike, crackling with indignation (Tenney, 269)

§ forceful, polemic (Wilkinson, 396)

§ deliberate rhetoric aimed at changing behavior (Keener, The IVP Biblical Background Commentary, 517).

Purpose

§ Paul apparently was moved to write because of the Galatians’ desertion of the gospel (1:6-7).

§ To defend justification and sanctification by grace (Toussaint, DTS class notes)

§ Written as Paul and his gospel were under attack. The danger at risk is that Christianity might have remained just another Jewish sect due to the Judaizers’ insistence upon circumcision for faith (Barclay,3).

§ We must remember that Paul was added to the apostolic band, thus causing some to question his place of authority in this regard.

§ Apparently three charges were leveled by Paul’s opponents against him:

- o He was not an apostle
- o His gospel was not authentic
- o His gospel led to loose living
- o (Gaebelein, 411).

Content

§ a protest against corruption of the gospel of Christ

§ an assertion of justification by faith

§ The doctrine of justification by faith as the foundation for the believer’s liberty and freedom in Christ (Toussaint, 6).

§ symmetrical and logical (Tenney,269)

§ to vindicate Paul’s apostleship and the gospel

§ While the precise focus of the controversy over circumcision seems a distant concern to most Christians after the first century, the central issue is the basis of our faith relationship with God. Martin Luther relied heavily on this book to attack the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation (Wenham, et al, New Bible Commentary, 1206).

§ to call from the Law back to grace, from legalism to faith (BKC, 588)

§ charter of Christian liberty (Wilkinson, 393)

§ key verse 5:1

§ Paul writes to do away with the false gospel of works and demonstrate the superiority of justification by faith

Martin Luther's Preface to the Galatians

Abridgment and paraphrase by Tim Keller

1. The most important thing in the world

a. The one doctrine, which I have supremely at heart, is that of faith in Christ, from whom, through whom, and unto whom all my theological thinking flows back and forth day and night. This rock...which we call the doctrine of justification...was shaken by Satan in paradise, when he persuaded our first parents that they might by their own wisdom and power become like God.... Thereafter the whole world acted like a madman against this faith, inventing innumerable idols and religions with which everyone went his own way, hoping to placate a god or goddess, by his own works; that is, hoping without the aid of Christ and by his own works to redeem himself from evils and sins. All this is sufficiently seen in the practices and records of every culture and nation....

b. The devil our adversary, who continually rages about seeking to devour us is not dead. Likewise our flesh and old man is yet alive. Besides this, all kinds of temptations vex and oppress us on every side, so that this doctrine can never be taught, urged, and repeated enough. If this doctrine is lost, then is also the whole knowledge of truth, life and salvation lost; if this doctrine flourish, then all good things flourish...

2. Kinds of righteousness

a. Paul expounds the Biblical doctrine with the goal of demonstrating beyond doubt the difference between Christian righteousness and all other kinds of righteousness, for there are many kinds. First, there is political or civil righteousness--the nation's public laws--which magistrates and lawyers may defend and teach. Second, there is cultural righteousness--the standards of our family and social grouping or class--which parents and schools may teach. Third, there is ethical righteousness...the Ten Commandments and law of God--which the church may teach (but only in light of Christian righteousness). [Now it is right to be a good citizen, to be loved and respected by your social group, and to be a morally upright person. So all these may be received without danger], if we attribute to them no power to satisfy for sin, to please God, or to deserve grace....These kinds of righteousness are gifts of God, like all good things we enjoy

b. Yet there is another, far above the others, which the Paul calls "the righteousness of faith"--Christian righteousness....God imputes it to us apart from our works--in other words, it is passive righteousness, as the others are active. For we do nothing for it, and we give nothing for it--we only receive and allow another to work--that is God.

3. The need for Christian righteousness

a. This "passive" righteousness is a mystery that the world cannot understand. Indeed, Christians never completely understand it themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. For anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience, will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.

b. For human beings by nature, when they get near either danger or death itself, will of necessity view their own worthiness. We defend ourselves before all threats by recounting our good deeds and moral efforts. But then the remembrance of sins and flaws inevitably comes to mind, and this tears us apart, and we think: "How many errors and sins and wrongs I have done! Please God, let me live so I can fix and amend things." We become obsessed with our active righteousness and are terrified by its imperfections. But the real evil is that we trust our own power to be righteous and will not lift up our eyes to see that Christ has done for us....So the troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by grace, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness...If I tried to fulfill the law myself, I could not trust in what I had accomplished, neither could it stand up to the judgment of God. So...I rest only upon the righteousness of Christ...which I do not produce but receive; God the Father freely giving it to us through Jesus Christ."

4. Law and grace

a. It is an absolute and unique teaching in all the world, to teach people, through Christ, to live as if there were no Law or Wrath or Punishment. In a sense, they do not exist anymore for the Christian, but only total grace and mercy for Christ's sake. Once you are in Christ, the law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. In fact to those outside of Christian righteousness, the law needs to be expounded in all its force. Why? So that people who think they have power to be righteous before God will be humbled.

b. Therefore the communicator of the Word of God must be careful when dispensing the knowledge of both law and grace. We must keep the law within his bounds! If you teach that we can be accepted by God through obedience, then Christian righteousness becomes mixed up with earned/moral righteousness in the people's minds. Such a teacher is an ill logician--failing to "rightly divide". On the other hand, if you teach to persons outside of Christ about God's acceptance and love, with no mention of repentance and the cross of Christ, you also confuse and fail to "rightly divide". Rather, he that applies the law and works to the flesh or the old man [the unconverted], and who applies forgiveness of sins and God's mercy to the spirit or the new man [the awakened by the Spirit] does well.

c. For example, when I see a man that is bruised, oppressed with the law, terrified with sin, and thirsting for comfort, it is time to remove out of his sight the law and active righteousness, and that I should set before him by the Gospel the Christian and passive righteousness. Then the man is raised up and realizes the hope of being under grace, not under the law (Rom. 6:14)...But upon the man without Christ there must be laid the obligation of works and the law--we do have to fulfill the law. This burden must press him down until he put on the new man, by faith in Christ--then he may enjoy the freedom of the spirit of grace. (Nevertheless, no one fully does this in this life!)

d. Therefore, no one should think we reject the importance of good works or of obeying the Law. When we receive the Christian righteousness, we consequently can live a good life, naturally, out of gratitude. If we try to earn our righteousness by doing many good deeds, we actually do nothing. We neither please God through our works-righteousness nor do we honor the purpose for which the law was given. But if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

e. So, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, nothing at all/For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only--that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become for us, our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think: "Although I still sin, I don't despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life." In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life or mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God, who knows no sin or death, but is eternal righteousness and eternal life.

5. Living the gospel

a. Now both these things continue while we live here. We are accused, exercised with temptations, oppressed with heaviness and sorrow, and bruised by the law with its demands of active righteousness. These attacks fall upon Our "flesh" [--the part of our heart that still seeks to earn our salvation]...Because of this, Paul sets out in this letter of Galatians to teach us, to comfort us, and to keep us constantly aware of this Christian righteousness. For if the truth of being justified by Christ alone (not by our works) is lost, then all Christian truths are lost. For there is no middle ground between Christian righteousness and works-righteousness. There is no other alternative to Christian righteousness but works-righteousness; if you do not build your confidence on the work of Christ you must build your confidence on your own work. On this truth and only on this truth the church is built and has its being

b. This distinction is easy to utter in words, but in use and experience it is very hard. So you who would be teachers and counselors of others I admonish to exercise yourselves continually in these matters through study, reading, meditation on the Word and prayer -- that in the time of trial you will be able to both inform and comfort both your consciences and others, to bring them from law to grace, for active/works-righteousness to passive/Christ's righteousness. For in times of struggle, the devil will seek to terrify us by using against us our past record, the wrath, and law of God. So if we cannot see the differences between the two kinds of righteousness, and if we do not take hold of Christ by faith, sitting at the right hand of God (Hebrews 7:25) who pleads our case, sinners that we are, to the Father, then we are under the Law, not under grace, and Christ is no Savior, but a Lawgiver, and is no longer our salvation, but an eternal despair.

c. So learn to speak to one's heart and to the Law. When the law creeps into your conscience, learn to be a cunning logician -- learn to use arguments of the gospel against it. Say:

6. "O law! You would climb up into the kingdom of my conscience, and there reign and condemn me for sin, and would take from me the joy of my heart which I have by faith in Christ, and drive me to desperation, that I might be without hope. You have overstepped your bounds. Know your place! You are a guide for my behavior, but you are not Savior and Lord of my heart. For I am baptized, and through the Gospel am called to receive righteousness and eternal life....So trouble me not! For I will not allow you, so intolerable a tyrant and tormentor, to reign in my heart and conscience -- for they are the seat and temple of Christ the Son of God, who is the king of righteousness and peace, and my most sweet savior and mediator. He shall keep my conscience joyful and quiet in the sound and pure doctrine of the Gospel through the knowledge of this passive and heavenly righteousness."

a. When I have this Christian righteousness reigning in my heart, I descend from heaven as the rain making fruitful the earth. That is to say...I do good Works, how and whensoever occasion is offered -- Whoever he be that is assuredly persuaded that Christ is his righteousness, does not only cheerfully and gladly work well in his vocation...but submits to all manner of burdens and dangers in his present life, because he knows that this is the will of God, and that this obedience pleases him.

b. This then is the argument of this Epistle, which Paul expounds against the false teachers who had darkened the Galatians' understanding of this righteousness by faith.