

The Letter to the Galatians*

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There is no mincing of words in the Letter to the Galatians. Paul does not believe in witches, yet there is no other metaphor that so powerfully evokes the bizarre change of doctrine they have come to adopt than that they have been bewitched. In the strongest language he defends the authenticity of the gospel he had originally preached to them, rigorously attacking those who have 'crept in' to take them back to the binding rituals of Judaism.

PAUL HAD originally preached to the towns of Galatia during his First Missionary Journey, establishing ecclesias around A.D. 47 in the cities of Lystra, Derbe and Iconium, and perhaps in other places also. But after he had moved on, it gradually became apparent that he was not the only one on a mission. Jews of a more orthodox persuasion than Paul, who had accepted Jesus in name but not fully (or even at all) in spirit, soon came into the church and sought to bring believers back under the yoke of the Law, at least in part.

They may even have followed systematically in Paul's footsteps, trying step-by-step, city-by-city, to corrupt the work he had done. It may be that some of them did not even believe in Jesus *at all*, and simply sought to return the converts to Jewish orthodoxy, whether they admitted this goal and their denial of Jesus or not. Perhaps some of the Jews who had originally sponsored Paul's efforts to persecute the church were now responsible for funding these quite different spoiling tactics.

The impact of the opposition

There is no doubt when one reads Galatians and some of the other New Testament material that the work of these spoilers was having an impact. Ritual and regulation certainly has its appeal to a certain kind of temperament, and there was probably no shortage of Gentiles either who were drawn to a form of Judaism/Christianity that contained heavy elements of ritual observance and legislation in the mix.

During the course of the letter Paul has quite a bit to say about his opponents; the data from the epistle that can be used to reconstruct their identity is set out in Panel 1 overleaf. Three points of particular interest emerge:

- 1** It is not clear that Paul knows the precise identity of his opponents or their ringleader. Expressions such as "those who unsettle you" and, especially, "the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is", plus somewhat vague references to "them", along with his questions, "Who has bewitched you?", "Who hindered you . . . ?", support this view. Alternatively, Paul may be simply too polite to identify them by name. He has no such scruple in other letters, however, and his desire expressed in 5:12 that they should castrate themselves hardly sounds polite!
 - 2** When referring back to his altercation with Peter, Paul refers to "the circumcision party". It is unlikely that any group actually called themselves this; most probably Paul is derogatorily ridiculing their obsession. But the fact that he uses this moniker indicates their main agenda item. Paul returns to the topic of circumcision frequently in the letter (2:3,7,8,9,12; 5:2,3,6,11; 6:12,13,15).
 - 3** The opponents will stop at nothing to win converts, whether it be through persecution, flattery or espionage. What they care about is winning converts to their religious slavery and putting down the true gospel.
- So, in sum, Paul was facing an enemy of whose identity he was not completely certain, but which was ruthless in using whatever it took to serve their agenda, an agenda upon which circumcision took prime place.

* Quotations from the ESV unless stated otherwise.

The shape of the letter

Part I Warning and challenge

The Divine origin and singularity of the true gospel. Paul's authority as a preacher of the gospel received from God, not man. Any other gospel is a vain deception. **(Approx. 1:1–2:14)**

A question of authority

Paul is both disappointed and amazed at the speed and severity with which the true doctrine of Christ is being corrupted back into ritual orthodoxy: "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" (1:6). He quickly goes on to point out, however, that there is not really a choice of gospels; it is not up to man to self-select. Whereas God had once spoken (and still speaks) through ritual and law code, now He has spoken decisively in His Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

The true gospel, then, comes from God, and from Him alone, as Paul persistently emphasises. Any other gospel is a pseudo-gospel, human-sourced and vain. Note Paul's repeated emphasis on the vanity or meaninglessness of any other belief-system than the one he has preached (2:2,21; 3:4; 4:11). See how he emphasises this Divine origin of the message, for instance in the first chapter, and contrasts it with the origins of any other teaching (see Panel 2). His extensive retrospective of his conversion experience and his subsequent

behaviour (chs. 1–2) is all about demonstrating the Divine origin (as opposed to Pauline origin) of the gospel and of Paul's preaching mission.

The question, then, for the Galatian brethren is a very simple one: Will they accept the authority of man or God, and whom will they seek to please?

Slavery

What, though, is the 'other' gospel which seems to carry such appeal for the believers? It is one that leads back to Jewish ritual; in particular, circumcision. Having argued, then, for the Divine origin of the true gospel message, Paul goes on (in the second half of chapter 2 and through into chapter 4) to argue against the false gospel and to show the superiority of the true. This then leads on to a discussion of the true place of ritual and the Law in the unfolding revelation and purpose of God. Paul comes to this head-on when he asks, "Why then the law?" in 3:19.

Given that he is grappling with Jewish matters and the transition in God's purpose from the era of Law to the era of Jesus, it is not surprising to find

Part II The theology

Arguments against the 'other' view, which advocates a return to Judaism. Why and how we are justified by faith, not by works or ritual. The true role of the Law. **(Approx. 2:15–5:13a, 5:14 or 5:15)**

that Galatians shares much of its key vocabulary and themes with the Letter to the Romans. In an earlier piece on Romans (May 2007, p. 157) we identified the Jew/Gentile relationship and their respective roles in the purpose of God as a core underlying and unifying theme of Romans, and in Galatians Paul addresses these issues again, although from a more polemical standpoint. Panel 3 overleaf pulls out some of the key words in Galatians, and many of these terms will be recognisable as being dominant in Romans also.

Those key words tell a story that can help to summarise some of Paul's key teachings in Galatians. The **works** and rituals of the **Law** represent a kind of **bondage**, not only to the Law, but, through it, to **sin**: "But the Scripture [referring to the Law] imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (3:22).

The Law makes man's falling short evident, and reveals God as **righteous** and man as sin's prisoner, powerless to escape. But the **promises** (including the promises to Abraham) will be fulfilled to those who **believe** in Jesus, for this is God's free **gift** to them. **Salvation** and **justification**, then, come not through works, but through

Part III The practical outworking

How to behave. Walking after the Spirit, not the flesh. Exhortations. **(Approx. 5:13/15–6:18)**

faith in Jesus Christ: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (3:29). **Flesh**, then, profits little, and we must now walk, not in the works of the Law, but after the mind of the **Spirit**, which, through faith, has the power to liberate and enliven.

The arguments

In the central section of the letter Paul develops various arguments to demonstrate that the liberating power of the gospel-through-faith is incompatible with a return to the Law:

- We have died to the Law by being crucified with Christ, and are justified by faith in him, not by works of the Law.
- The Galatian believers received the Holy Spirit, not because they were keeping the Law, but because they heard and believed the gospel of Christ.
- Abraham himself is a prototype of how men and women are justified: through faith. As the Scriptures state, "The just shall live by faith" (AV).
- The Law brings a curse, from which we have been redeemed in Christ through his crucifixion.

Panel 1. Identifying Paul's opponents

"Not that there is another [gospel], but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ" (1:7).

"Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery" (2:4).

"[Peter] drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party" (v. 12).

"O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" (3:1).

"They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them" (4:17).

"But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now" (v. 29).

"You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth?" (5:7).

"I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view than mine, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is" (v. 10).

"I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" (v. 12).

"It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (6:12).

Panel 2. The gospel: from God or man?

The following passages, all from chapter 1, illustrate Paul's emphasis on the truth and the Divine (rather than human) origin of his gospel.

"Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man" (1:1).

"You are . . . deserting Him Who called you" (v. 6).

"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" (v. 8). This is repeated verbatim for emphasis in verse 9; hence it is the nature of the gospel teaching, not the bearer of it, which is critical.

"Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? . . . If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (v. 10).

"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" (vv. 11,12).

"[When God] was pleased to reveal His Son to me . . . I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me" (vv. 16,17).

This emphasis continues into subsequent chapters (see, for example, 2:2).

Panel 3. Some key words from Galatians (following the AV)

(Notice how many of these are common to Romans, too.)

Serve/servant/bondage/bondmaid/bondwoman

1:10; 2:4; 4:1,3,7,8,9,22,23,24,25,30,31; 5:1,13

Faith/believe

1:23; 2:16,20; 3:2,5-9,11,12,14,22-26; 5:5,6,22; 6:10

Work(s)/eth/do(ing)

2:16; 3:2,5,10; 5:6; 6:4,9

Just(ify/ified)/righteous(ness)

2:16,17,21; 3:6,8,11,21,24; 5:4,5

Law

2:16,19,21; 3:2,5,10-13,17-19,21,23,24; 4:4,5,21; 5:3,4,14,18,23; 6:2,13

Flesh

1:16; 2:16,20; 3:3; 4:13,14,23,29; 5:13,16,17,19,24; 6:8,12,13

Spirit

3:2,3,5,14; 4:6,29; 5:5,16-18,22,25; 6:1,8,18

- If inheritance comes by promise (as in Abraham's case), then it cannot come by law. Similarly, that covenant promise (based on faith) cannot be disannulled by a law (read 'the Law') which came 430 years later.
- Christ has come to redeem us from a period of immaturity (when we were like children with a guardian or schoolmaster) and slavery (in bondage to Law and sin) to the liberation of full sonship. So why go back?
- From the allegory of Sarah and Hagar, we ought to desire to be associated with the child of promise and liberty (the Jerusalem from above) rather than the child of flesh and slavery (the present Jerusalem, which stands for Sinai and the Law).

As well as these theological or spiritual arguments, Paul also makes a personal appeal to the brethren, leveraging his past good relationship with them to try to bring them to their senses. This can be seen in three passages in particular:

"I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain. Brethren, I beseech you, be as I am; for I am as ye are: ye have

not injured me at all. Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me" (4:11-15, AV);

"I have confidence in you through the Lord, that ye will be none otherwise minded [ESV, that you will take no other view than mine]: but he that troubleth you shall bear his judgment, whosoever he be" (5:10, AV);

"From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (6:17).

Christ, and him crucified

In contrast to the pseudo-denial of the flesh involved in circumcision—which had ironically become a way of *avoiding* persecution rather than an act of self-denial (6:12)—the thing that really motivates Paul is the event of the crucifixion. Relative to its length, Galatians probably focuses on the crucifixion more than any other New Testament letter.

When we behold Christ on the cross we see a true act of sacrifice and selflessness; we see the true meaning of self-denial. There is no other 'cutting off of the flesh' that can match this. And it is an example which believers not only witness, but in which they too must participate; not only when they are baptized, but in each and every day as they wage the war of the Spirit against the flesh. This is what taking up one's cross truly means. Although there is no space to elaborate further on these remarkable passages, we can at least let Paul have the last word by quoting them (AV throughout):

"I am *crucified* with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (2:20);

"before [your] eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, *crucified* among you" (3:1);

"the offence of the *cross*" (5:11);

"And they that are Christ's have *crucified* the flesh with the affections and lusts" (v. 24);

"[They are circumcised] lest they should suffer persecution for the *cross* of Christ . . .

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the *cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is *crucified* unto me, and I unto the world" (6:12,14).