

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Galatians

Against The Judaizers

May 27, 2012

The Crucial Issues and Theme

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians has to do with the Judaizing controversy about which the Jerusalem Council met (Acts 15). As with that council, so also with Galatians it is almost impossible to overestimate the historical importance of the theological issues involved. Many of the first Christians, being Jewish, continued in large measure their Jewish mode of life, including attendance at the synagogue and temple, offering of sacrifices, observance of Mosaic rituals and dietary taboos, and social aloofness from Gentiles. Conversion of Gentiles forces the church to face several important questions. Should gentile Christians be required to submit to circumcision and practice the Jewish way of life, as gentile proselytes to Judaism were required to do? For those gentile Christians who were unwilling to become totally Jewish, should there be a second class citizenship in the church, as for gentile "God-fearers" within Judaism? And most important, what makes a person Christian – faith in Christ solely or faith in Christ plus adherence to the principles and practices of Judaism?

The answers of the Judaizers (including Jews and Gentiles who had become Jewish) insisted on the Judaistic model for Christianity. Had their view prevailed, not only would the gospel of salvation as a free gift from God have been subverted, but also the Christian movement may well have split into a Jewish church – small, struggling, and eventually fading away – and a gentile church, theologically rootless and tending toward pagan practices. Or, more probably, the gentile mission would have almost entirely ceased and Christianity would have died the death of many Jewish sects, for most Gentiles maintained an unwillingness to live as Jews and regarded circumcision as an abhorrent mutilation of the human body, the beauty of which the Greeks had taught them to appreciate. Galatians is the great charter of Christian liberty from all oppressive theologies of salvation by human effort and the great affirmation of the unity (not uniformity) and equality of all believers within the church of Jesus Christ.

Address: North or South Galatia?

Paul wrote his Epistle to the Galatians to people residing in the region known as Galatia. His use of the term Galatia, however, has caused a debate that affects the dating of the letter. The term may refer, according to its original meaning, exclusively to the territory *north* of the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra; or it may

also include those cities, for the Romans had added southern districts when they made (North) Galatia a province.

According to the North Galatian theory, Paul addressed the letter to Christians in North Galatia, which he did not visit till his second journey on his way from Pisidian Antioch to Troas. Under this view, the letter could not have been written till some time after the beginning stage of the second journey and, therefore, after the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, which preceded the second journey. Then the visit to Jerusalem which Paul describes in Galatians 2 probably refers to the very recent Jerusalem Council. Perhaps the strongest argument for the North Galatian theory, with its late dating, are the original restriction of the term Galatia to the northern territory and the similarity of the statements by Paul concerning justification by faith to what he says in Romans, which he certainly wrote at a later date.

Against the North Galatian theory is the fact that Luke nowhere suggests that Paul evangelized North Galatia. It is doubtful Paul visited that territory on his second journey, for “the region of Phrygia and Galatia” in Acts 16:6 most naturally refers to the southern territory – a traversing of North Galatia would have required a prohibitively wide detour to the northeast. And elsewhere in his epistles Paul consistently uses geographical terms in an imperial sense, which would allow South Galatia in his Epistle to the Galatians.

| North Galatian Theory | South Galatian Theory |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Paul’s first missionary journey | Paul’s first missionary journey |
| Jerusalem Council | Writing of Galatians |
| Paul’s second missionary journey | Jerusalem Council |
| Writing of Galatians | Paul’s second missionary journey |

According to the usual form of the South Galatian theory, Paul addressed his first epistle to the churches of South Galatia just after the first missionary journey, but before the Jerusalem Council. An argument in favor of a South Galatian address and early date is that if Paul had written the letter after the Jerusalem Council, he would probably have capitalized on that council’s decree favoring gentile Christian freedom from the Mosaic law, the main topic under discussion in Galatians. It is also doubtful Peter would have vacillated, as he did according to Galatians 2:11ff., after the Jerusalem Council, where he strongly supported the position of freedom from the Mosaic law.

Introduction

The epistle opens with a greeting in which Paul stresses his apostleship, for he wishes to establish his authority against the Judaizers. In place of the usual thanksgiving for his readers, Paul immediately and violently introduces the reason for his writing. He is shocked the Galatian Christians are deserting to another gospel, which is not really gospel (“good news”) at all. Read Galatians 1:1-10.

Autobiographical Argument

Paul now puts forward an autobiographical argument for the gospel of God’s grace over against the Judaizing message, which required adherence to the Mosaic law for salvation. He states that the gospel of free grace came to him by direct revelation from Jesus Christ. Since the gospel of grace could not have come from his background or from his contacts in Jerusalem, it must have come from God. When he again visited Jerusalem after fourteen years (either from his conversion or from his first visit to Jerusalem), the leaders there – James, Peter, and John – formally acknowledged the correctness of the gospel of grace he preached to the Gentiles. They did so by giving him the right hand of fellowship. Furthermore, they did not require Titus, his gentile companion, to be circumcised.

On coming to Antioch in Syria, Peter at first ate with gentile Christians, but then yielded to pressure from the Judaizers. Paul publicly rebuked him. The implication is that Peter yielded to the rebuke. If not, Paul would hardly have brought up the incident as an argument in his favor. The fact that even Peter stood rebuked by Paul demonstrated the authority of Paul’s gospel of grace. Read Galatians 1:11-2:21.

Theological Argument

Paul now develops his theological argument. If a person is *converted* by faith, why not *continue* by faith rather than by the law? Abraham was justified before the law was given, so even in the Old Testament righteousness came by faith, not by the law. The law can only curse or condemn, because no one obeys it entirely. Christ died to deliver us from the law and its inevitable curse. The fact God made His covenant with Abraham before He gave the law through Moses suggest the Abrahamic covenant is more basic than the law. The law, then, did not annul it. The nature of the Abrahamic covenant was – on God’s side – a promise to bless Abraham’s seed and – on man’s side – acceptance of God’s promise by faith. Abraham’s seed is Christ plus all those incorporated into Him by following Abraham’s example of faith.

The law did have a purpose, but only a temporary one. It was to lead us to Christ, as ancient slave-tutors led children in their charge to school. The law accomplished this purpose by making us keenly aware of human inability to become righteous. Being under the law, therefore, was like being minors or slaves.

Responsibility in Freedom

The last main section of the epistle warns against libertinism, or antinomianism (literally, “against-law-ism”), the careless attitude that freedom from the law affords license for wickedness. Liberty from the law does not mean liberty to sin. Christians must not conduct themselves according to the flesh (the sinful urge), but according to the Holy Spirit. Moreover, they must lovingly help others, especially their fellow Christians, and give liberally to those who minister the gospel Read Galatians 5:13-6:10.

Conclusion

Paul writes the conclusion in his own handwriting. The “large letters” he uses may be for emphasis, though some think that poor eyesight necessitated them. He charges that the Judaizers are motivated by desire to avoid persecution from unbelieving Jews and by ambition to boast that they are able to steal converts from Paul. By way of contrast Paul calls attention to the sufferings he has gladly endured for his message and appeals to the Galatians that they themselves judge who has the purer motives, he or the Judaizers.

Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1981)