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Introduction

When Paul's epistle to the Galatians is read with intelligence and faith, there burns within the heart a flame of fire. Who can miss the passion for the gospel of grace that pours from Paul's pastoral heart or fail to catch his inspired love for the church of Christ? The modern reader should take note that there is "a clear and present danger that the devil may take away from us the pure doctrine of faith and may substitute for it the doctrines of works and of human traditions". Therefore, believers should not doubt that "this doctrine can never be discussed and taught enough!" (Luther, *Galatians*, Preface).¹ That is justification enough for another exposition of this monumental epistle of Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Luther was certainly right to warn the church. Even though what follows is essentially a positive exposition of Galatians, I have kept in mind the various mischaracterizations of Paul's

¹ I have minimized bibliographical footnotes in this exposition by placing basic bibliographic data within parentheses in the flow of the text except for single references or in cases in which it seems that clarity demands a bibliographical footnote. The Bibliography at the end of the exposition makes it easy to identify authors and works thus cited. An author cited in parentheses with no page number means that the quotation can be found in the text of that author's commentary which deals with the verse or passage I am explaining.



epistle that have become dominant recently in some circles. These new ideas profess that Paul is not concerned with the impossibility of good works and human merit for acceptance with God but rather is concerned principally with the condition on which Gentiles become members of God's people. The exposition you are about to read maintains that a correct understanding of Paul demands that we see that his primary concern is with the eternal salvation of sinners and that membership among God's people and ecclesiastical harmony are the fruit rather than the root of Paul's doctrine. The words of J. Gresham Machen written in another context are applicable here: "Paul was not devoted to the doctrine of justification by faith because of the Gentile mission; he was devoted to the Gentile mission because of the doctrine of justification by faith."² Everywhere in every way Paul's concern is with the gospel; he is concerned with the personal salvation of sinners.

Who Were the False Teachers?

Who were Paul's opponents in Galatia, commonly called the Judaizers? No one has successfully set aside the traditional view that Paul's opponents were Jews, zealous for the law and eager to persuade Gentile Christians to accept circumcision. Whether these Jews were connected directly with factions of the Jerusalem church or arising from some other venue is not easy to determine.

Even though it is not easy to ascertain who precisely the Judaizers were, the main lines of their thought are not difficult to discern. After Paul founded the largely Gentile churches of Galatia, false teachers entered espousing that obedience to the Law of Moses was an essential part of the gospel (1:7; 4:17; 5:10). This false gospel (1:6-7) of law-keeping implies that the false teachers were themselves Jews. Indeed, they attempted to compel the Galatian believers to be circumcised (5:2ff.; 6:12) and to observe special Jewish feast days (4:10). The false teachers did not overtly deny cardinal Christian

² J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 278, 279.

truth, but by teaching that justification was by law (5:4; 4:21) they denied the gospel of free grace and substituted a false for the true gospel (1:6-7). This was an overt denial of the freedom purchased for believers by Christ (5:1), and it was essentially the issue later responded to by the church at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:1: "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.'" (NIV).

It seems clear that the false teachers even claimed that Paul preached the same message that they did (5:11). In view of this serious defection from the truth of the gospel and the potential threat that the gospel of justification by grace alone might altogether be abandoned, Paul wrote the epistle to the Galatians with flaming heart and clarity of mind, calling upon the believers in these churches not to be deceived!

The Theology of Galatians

What theological reflection does Paul apply to the Galatians who were tempted to desert the gospel of grace? We will leave the exposition to uncover the details to that question. Here I mention only two essential factors of the theology of Paul in Galatians which are indispensable in interpreting its meaning.

The first element is Paul's *eschatological viewpoint*. For Paul, the coming of Christ into the world has brought about a radical newness that is at the heart of God's revelation in Christ. Christ's coming in "the fullness of time" (4:4) to deliver us "from the present evil age" (1:4) by his death and resurrection (1:1) thrusts into prominence Paul's eschatological viewpoint that is often on the surface of his letter³ (Yet even when it is not on the surface, it is determinative of Paul's overall viewpoint). Paul's "two-age construct", whereby he stresses that Christ's resurrection determines the point at which the new age has overcome decisively the hold of the old aeon over sinners, is everywhere present in Galatians and informs Paul's approach

³ See 1:1, 4, 12, 16; 2:2, 16, 19-20; 3:2-5, 8-16, 19-4:7; 4:25-27; 5:1-14, 16-26; 6:13-17.

to the law and his reading of the Old Testament. Galatians reveals Paul to be the greatest redemptive-historical theologian of the church.

The second most important factor for interpreting Galatians, inseparably related to his eschatological framework, is Paul's teaching concerning *justification by faith*. How may a sinner be declared right with God? By what means may a sinner be accepted by God? Righteousness had largely been identified in the Jewish mind with law-keeping. "God's justice was committed to requite men strictly according to their deeds....Judaism had no hesitation about recognizing the merit of good works, or in exhorting men to acquire it and to accumulate a store of merit laid up for the hereafter."⁴

Paul, on the other hand, recognized that the demand to keep the law as a means for acceptance with God required total and complete law-keeping (3:10) and that the atonement would be nonsense if one could be saved by law-keeping (2:21). Imperfect law-keeping could never make a sinner acceptable with God. Rather, sinners are accepted by means of faith in Christ alone (2:16; 3:6-25). As T. R. Glover has said, the cross "solved the problem of God's righteousness and man's sin" since, as Paul discovered, God provided through that means "a moral and spiritual more-than-equivalent for the Judgment".⁵

Paul's theology, then, is applied to the works-righteousness of the Judaizers. For, as Calvin observed, "it is no light evil to quench the brightness of the Gospel, lay a snare for consciences and remove the distinction between the old and new covenants. He (Paul) saw that these errors were also related to an ungodly and destructive opinion on the deserving of righteousness. And this is why he fights so earnestly." (Calvin, *Galatians*, 4)

Destination and Date

Although it is possible to benefit from commentaries on Galatians vastly differing on introductory matters, the questions surrounding the destination and date of the epistle are far

⁴ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 441. This quotation is from G. F. Moore, *Judaism*.

⁵ T. R. Glover, *Paul of Tarsus*, 87, 88.

from unimportant. While an expositor of the epistle must be humble in view of the plethora of viewpoints held by notable scholars, no commentator or preacher should avoid the hard questions he faces relating to destination and date as he works through the book. Even though the focus of this exposition is on the theology of Paul and understanding the text for proclamation, it is necessary to set out some of the main lines of introductory issues associated with Galatians.

There are three perspectives on the destination and date of Galatians worthy of attention. They are the familiar North and South Galatian theories and the attendant conclusions regarding the dating of Galatians attached to each, with some variation on the latter. One central question is whether Paul wrote Galatians prior to or after the Council of Jerusalem related by Luke in Acts 15 (c. A.D. 49). The North Galatian theory is associated with a late date and the South Galatian theory is generally associated with an early date. However, the South Galatian theory does not necessitate an early date for the epistle and this possibility opens up a third perspective.

Galatia in Paul's day could be applied to two regions in modern-day Turkey. First, Galatia referred to the territory which was associated with Celtic groups who migrated from Gaul, forming a region extending in the north to Pontus and Bithynia, bounded on the southwest by Phrygia and to the east by Cappadocia. This territory, inhabited by Celtic tribes who were defeated by Attalus I, the king of Pergamum, were associated with the cities of Ancyra, Tavium and Pessinus. But the Roman conquest of this expansive region resulted in 25 B.C. in the creation of a separate province, including the cities of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe in the southern Lycaonian region visited by Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 14). The inhabitants of this area were not Celts and were designated "Galatians" because they lived within the borders of the Roman Province, Galatia. Since there are two possible meanings of "Galatia", this presents an interpretive problem for the exegete.

From the available data it is clear that Paul did not visit the northern region on his first missionary journey. However,

Paul did travel “throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (Acts 16:6) during his second missionary journey, following the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. This is a possible reference to the North Galatian area where Paul may have planted new churches. It is therefore admittedly possible that Paul established churches in North Galatia which were in need of a letter helping them to understand the nature of the gospel and its implications. This view corresponds to the North Galatian theory of the destination of the epistle and its date following the Jerusalem Council.

This North Galatian viewpoint has had a number of supporters, the most famous being the justly revered J. B. Lightfoot. Moreover, the North Galatian theory is still the prevailing one among interpreters in Europe. On this view “the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (Acts 16:6; 18:23) must mean “Phrygia and the Galatian region”, pointing to Galatia as distinguishable from Phrygia, and indicating a North Galatian destination for the letter. However, it is more probable that Acts intends the “Phrygio-Galatic region”, pointing to Paul’s travels upon leaving Lystra and Iconium (Acts 16:2).

It was Sir William Ramsay who most effectively cast doubt on this North Galatian theory and argued for a South Galatian destination of the epistle. He argued that Paul wrote his epistle to Christians in the region extending to Pisidia, Lycaonia and some other locations in the South, the area visited by Paul on his first missionary journey.

Many interpreters, following Ramsay, have also thought that the South Galatian destination cleared up a knotty problem of interpretation, namely, why Paul did not refer to the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 in his epistle. The reason, Ramsay thought, was quite simple: Paul did not mention the Jerusalem Council because the epistle was written to the South Galatian group of churches founded on his first missionary journey, and the biographical data in the epistle bearing upon the date preceded the Council.⁶ Therefore rather than identifying

⁶ It should be noted that Ramsay held initially to a South Galatian destination for the epistle and to a date following the Council of Jerusalem

the visit to Jerusalem in Galatians 2 with the visit in Acts 15 as Lightfoot had done, even though there was no express reference to the Council's decree, some interpreters think that Galatians 2 can be identified with the earlier "famine visit" to Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30).

The main elements of Ramsay's arguments may be read in his *St. Paul The Traveller and The Roman Citizen*, *The Church in The Roman Empire* and *Historical Commentary on the Galatians*, including his concern that Acts is silent on the establishment of North Galatian churches whereas Luke stresses Paul's relationship to the South Galatians. It was to Ramsay's credit that he took seriously the historical reliability of Acts and its importance in interpreting Paul's writings.

The North Galatian theory, therefore, ascribes a date to Galatians following the Jerusalem Council whereas the South Galatian theory, often though not always, assumes a date prior to the Jerusalem Council. There is however another option. It is also possible to adopt the South Galatian *destination* of the epistle while holding to a *date* following the Jerusalem Council. Some holding this view are impressed with the arguments in favor of the South Galatian destination along with Ramsay and against Lightfoot, but are influenced by Lightfoot's arguments for the identification of Galatians 2 and Acts 15 against Ramsay.

Those who agree with Ramsay that Galatians 2 and Acts 15 must not be identified point out that in Galatians 2 Paul is said to have gone up to Jerusalem by revelation whereas in Acts 15 the church at Antioch sent Paul. Titus is mentioned in Galatians 2 but not in Acts 15. John is included in the leadership of the Jerusalem church in Galatians 2 but is not mentioned in Acts 15. Moreover, Paul's meeting with the church leadership in Galatians 2 was private, but the Council of Acts 15 was public. Therefore, some conclude, Galatians 2 makes no mention of the Jerusalem Council and the best explanation of that is simply that the Council had not yet taken place. Others, however, conclude differently.

(Acts 15), but in his mature thought held to a date prior to the Council. See *The Teaching of Paul In Terms of The Present Day*, 372-403.

Silva, who lists the apparent discrepancies, concludes that “the first four items on the list...may be regarded as natural under the circumstances: they represent just the kinds of discrepancies that we expect from reliable but independent witnesses.”⁷ For example, Paul’s travel to Jerusalem “by revelation” need not contradict the commission of the church in Antioch. But what is to be made of Paul’s silence concerning the Jerusalem Council in Galatians 2? Isn’t it odd that Paul would fail to mention something as monumentally important as the Council’s decrees if Galatians had been written after the Council?

Silva assumes that Paul’s silence is due to the fact that the Galatians were already aware of the Jerusalem Council’s decrees and that “by pointing out that the Jerusalem apostles did extend to him and Barnabas the ‘right hand of fellowship,’ perhaps he accomplishes by indirect means the same purpose that would have been served by an explicit mention of the decrees” (134).

Rather than making much of the silence of Paul regarding the Jerusalem decrees Silva thinks that it makes more sense methodologically to dwell, with Lightfoot, on the similarities of Galatians 2 and Acts 15. Lightfoot points out that the *geography* is the same: “In both narratives the communications take place between Jerusalem and Antioch.” The *time* is the same. “St. Paul places the event 15 or 16 years after his conversion: St. Luke’s narrative implies that they took place in about the year 51.” The *persons* are the same. “Paul and Barnabas appear as the representatives of the Gentile Churches, Cephas and James as the leaders of the Circumcision. The agitators are similarly described in the two accounts.” In addition, the *subject of dispute* is the same. Moreover, the *result* is the same: “the exemption of the Gentiles from the enactments of the law, and the recognition of the Apostolic commission of Paul and Barnabas by the leaders of the Jewish Church.” Lightfoot concludes that “a combination of circumstances so striking is not likely to have occurred twice within a few years.”⁸

⁷ Silva, *Interpreting Galatians*, 133.

⁸ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians*, 127-28.

Lightfoot's argument is indeed persuasive but not conclusive. In particular, some have argued, since the Council's decrees would have been relevant to Paul's argument against the Judaizers, it is still difficult, on this theory, to think that Paul would fail to make overt reference to the Council and its decisions. Most importantly, Luke mentions three visits of Paul to Jerusalem (in Acts 9, 11 and 15), and in Galatians Paul's biographical points are hinged upon two visits to Jerusalem. It is best to view the "famine visit" of Acts 11:30 as corresponding to Paul and Barnabas' private interview with the pillars in Galatians 2. On this view, Galatians 2:1 may be taken quite literally as Paul's second visit to Jerusalem, and this therefore removes the difficulty of the omission of the decrees of Acts 15 from Galatians. Following the suggestions of Donald Guthrie and F. F. Bruce, this view allows a reconstruction of the data permitting the epistle to be dated prior to the Council, perhaps even as Paul traveled there. In any case, Galatians would be viewed on this reconstruction as the earliest of Paul's epistles.⁹

The viewpoint taken in this exposition is the South Galatian theory and a date for Galatians prior to the Council of Jerusalem. There is no evidence that Paul ever visited or established churches in North Galatia. But no one contests that Paul established churches in South Galatia. Moreover, Paul came to the South Galatian region initially to recover from illness (Gal. 4:13). It would not have been likely that this could refer to the hinterland of North Galatia. Also, when Paul speaks of geographical regions he uses Roman Provincial designations. Therefore in 1:1 the "churches in Galatia" must mean the South Galatian Province. In addition, Barnabas is mentioned three times in Galatians 2, indicating familiarity with the readers. Since Barnabas was Paul's traveling companion on the first missionary journey, Barnabas was well known to the churches of South Galatia. Also consider, taking the relationship between Acts and Galatians seriously argues for the South Galatian viewpoint. Paul's biography mentions two visits to Jerusalem which would correspond to the visits of Acts 9:26 and 11:27-30 prior to the Council of Acts 15.

⁹ See Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 461-63

The date of composition maintained in this exposition is prior to the Council of Acts 15. Commentators will differ on the weight that should be given to the absence of any reference to the Council in Galatians, but to my mind this weighs heavily in favor of an early date. There seems to be no reference to the Council at all in Galatians. Galatians 2 is a private rather than a public meeting as was held in Acts 15. In short, we agree with Bruce who notes that, as we are told in Acts 15:1, Judean visitors came to Syrian Antioch teaching the necessity of circumcision for salvation and it is probable that "others who wished to press the same line visited the recently formed daughter-churches of Antioch, not only in Syria and Cilicia, as the apostolic letter indicates (Acts 15:23), but also in South Galatia." Bruce concludes that if this is the case Paul wrote his letter as soon as he received news of the Galatian trouble "on the eve of the Jerusalem meeting described in Acts 15:6ff. This...would yield the most satisfactory correlation of the data of Galatians and Acts and the most satisfactory dating of Galatians. It must be conceded that, if this is so, Galatians is the earliest among the extant letters of Paul" (Bruce, 55).

Paul's Argument

Paul begins his defense of the gospel against the Judaizers by insisting that the gospel he preached was not from men but from God alone. His gospel was a matter of revelation (1:11-12) and was completely independent of the apostles in Jerusalem (1:13-2:21). Paul did not consult with the apostles after his Damascus road conversion (1:13-17). Moreover, when he did go to Jerusalem he saw Peter briefly (1:18-24), and when he later discussed his gospel and ministry with the apostles they expressed their approbation and unity (2:1-10).

Paul records his rebuke of Peter at Antioch when he was not consistent with the gospel (2:11-12), demonstrating once again the divine, revelatory nature of the gospel preached by Paul. Peter's withdrawal from table fellowship with the Gentiles was a contradiction of justification by faith (2:15-21).

Paul expounds justification from 3:1 to 4:31. He begins by arguing that the eschatological Spirit was received, not by works of the law, but by faith (3:1-5) and stresses the history

of Abraham (3:6-14) in order to demonstrate that justification is not by law but by faith. Indeed, the law that came after the covenant that God made with Abraham in no way nullifies the promise (3:15-18).

Since sinners are not justified by the law Paul must answer the question of the purpose of the law (3:19-4:6). The law played an indispensable role in redemptive history by showing the inadequacy of works to save sinners and by anticipating the Redeemer. The law, rather than providing an avenue of escape, is a prison from which there is no escape by human means. Its purpose was "that the promise of faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe". Thus freedom has been purchased for the sons of God (3:26-4:7).

The Gentile Galatians had also been enslaved to "the basic elements of the world", and should they succumb to the Judaizers' false gospel, they would once again submit to slavery (4:10-11), which would erase their joy in Christ (4:15). In 4:21-31 Paul again references the Abrahamic narrative against the Judaizers by directing their attention to the story of Isaac and Ishmael. The two sons represent a fundamental contrast shaping the whole of redemptive history.

In the final portion of Galatians (the ethical portion of the epistle), Paul enlarges upon the theme of Christian liberty. The preaching of the law as a means of justification is enslaving and would remove the scandal of the cross (5:1-11). Christian liberty is demonstrated, however, not in antinomianism but in living by the Spirit (5:16-26). Liberty is manifested in loving and caring relationships in the church (6:1-10).

Paul concludes by exposing the false motives of the Judaizers (6:12-13) and by expressing, in an unforgettable way, his own, cross-centred motives (6:14-15). The conclusion is no formality. Critical themes from Galatians are brought together at the end. Taking the pen from his amanuensis he writes with "large letters" a final barrage against the false teachers and puts forward the cross and grace of God as the one method of salvation and of Christian living.

With that brief overview secure in our minds, let us now turn to the exposition of Paul's epistle to the Galatians.