Galatians: An Introduction to Paul's Epistles and a Survey of His Galatian Epistle

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Salutation:
X to Y, Greetings

I. Introduction to the Pauline Epistles

We are ready with this lesson to turn to a survey of the epistles of Paul. Thirteen in number will occupy our attention for several lessons. The bulk of these seem likely to have been written during the period that we have just surveyed—the history of the first generation of Christianity, and particularly the ministry of Paul that comprised our attention in Luke's Acts of the Apostles.

A. Background to the Epistles

A few brief comments about letter-writing in the ancient Greco-Roman world in general are appropriate as we introduce the entire collection of Paul's letters. Greek and Roman, and at times even Jewish children were taught to write in specific forms in their education as youngsters. There were different genres, or literary forms—different kinds of epistles that were believed to be appropriate for different situations. And in a number of cases, we can identify Paul's letters as roughly approximating or corresponding to one of these specific literary forms. When we can, we will try to point that fact out.

B. Literary Structure

Across almost all the various kinds of letters that people could write in the ancient Middle East was a relatively fixed form or structure that, again, was taught as literally appropriate. (1) A typical Greco-Roman letter began with a salutation; we might call it x to y greetings. The author introduced him or herself, stated who the recipients were, and then gave a brief "hello." In the Jewish world, the most common greetings were shalom, "peace"; in the Greco-Roman world: chairein, "grace." Paul interestingly

Galatians 1:1-3

Paul, an apostle - sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead - and all the brothers with me, to the churches in Galatia: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, . . .

combines both of these in several of these epistles as he wishes his audience grace and peace, but then clearly Christianizes his greetings by referring almost without exception to the name of Jesus. He also frequently refers to himself as an apostle in these opening greetings, reflecting the authority and inspiration which he believed he obtained from God.

(2) Following an opening salutation, it was conventional in the Greco-Roman letter to have a brief thanksgiving, often couched in the form of a prayer of thanks or praise to God or to the gods. This, Paul does almost without exception, and those places where he omits such a thanksgiving seem to be significant. And, again, we will point those out as we go. (3) Then follows the body of the letter, the largest part, in which the main information to be communicated is recorded. (4) If there are specific requests, or in the case of a superior—a leader such as Paul speaking to those beneath him—if there are orders, commands that are expected to be obeyed, they tend to be grouped towards the end of the letter following that portion that communicates the main information that is intended. (5) Fifthly and finally, there are usually concluding greetings, and we will see a variety of forms of these greetings in Paul's letters as well.

II. Epistle to the Churches in Galatia

With that brief introduction we are ready then to turn to what seems, particularly to more conservative commentators, chronologically to be the oldest of Paul's epistles, namely the epistle to the Galatians. Traditionally, Galatia was the name of a province and of the ethnic group of people who lived in that province in northcentral Turkey, as we would call it today. However, there is no record in the book of Acts of Paul ever moving this far north in his travels, although we must admit that nothing requires us to assume that Luke gives us a comprehensive account of all of Paul's missionary travels in the book of Acts.

However, we do read—and we recently surveyed Paul's ministry in the area just south of what historically was called Galatia, the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe—when Rome took over that part of the ancient Middle East and reorganized its territories into larger provinces for governmental purposes, these southern cities just mentioned were incorpo-

Galatians 3:1

You foolish Galatians!
Who has bewitched you? . . .

rated in a larger province, also called Galatia, embracing not only the ethnic Galatians of the north, but these other peoples in central and even slightly southcentral Turkey. It is perhaps probable, therefore, that it is these Galatians that Paul has in mind when he is addressing this letter. Incidental confirmation for that judgment may appear in Galatians 3:1, where Paul laments the fact that the Galatians he was addressing were so easily bewitched. It is tempting to correlate that statement with the story that we surveyed in Acts 14 of how fooled and easily confused the inhabitants of Lystra were—first of all thinking that Paul and Barnabas were gods, and then turning against them as though they were almost devils.

A. Setting

The circumstances for the writing of the epistle to the Galatians seem to be the same as those which triggered the apostolic council narrated in Acts 15: debates over whether or not Gentile people coming to Christ, coming to faith, joining the church, needed to be circumcised, or more generally needed to keep the laws of Moses, in order to be saved. Apparently a faction of Jews, even Jews professing faith in Jesus, came to promote this perspective, and Paul in the letter to the Galatians refers to these individuals as "Judaizers." It is probable, in fact, that the immediate circumstances and date of this letter took place just as Paul is getting ready to go to that apostolic council in Jerusalem in Acts 15. There are, admittedly, difficulties in trying to correlate the evidence of Acts with the evidence of Galatia, as Paul narrates the facts surrounding his conversion and subsequent ministry in Galatians 1 and 2. He refers to a seventeen-year period of time between his conversion and a trip to Jerusalem in which he debates and discusses at some length with the Jewish leaders there the correctness of the theology that he is proclaiming. This gathering, or council, is described in Galatians 2:1-10 and bears, superficially at least, many similarities to the apostolic council of Acts 15.

12 Correlations Between Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-10

Galatians 2:11-12

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.

B. Date and Purpose

If those two passages are to be correlated, then obviously the epistle to the Galatians has to be written somewhat later, after the apostolic council. But if this is the case, then Peter's behavior narrated in Galatians 2:11 and following is

Correlations Between Acts and Galatians:

Acts 9 and Galatians 1:18

Acts 11:27-30 and Galatians 2:1-10

Acts 15:1+ and Galatians 2:11+

very difficult to understand. Peter seems to fall back from the universally agreed-on decisions of that council when he comes to Antioch and withdraws from fellowship from the uncircumcised Gentile Christians because of pressure from the Judaizers. Of course we know that Peter's career struggled with inconsistencies, but it is perhaps best to suggest a different correlation between Acts and Galatians.

Acts, in fact, refers to several trips of Paul to Jerusalem, as does the book of Galatians, and it seems that a different correlation of this data is more appropriate. Acts 9 describes Paul's initial conversion, which Paul himself refers to in Galatians 1. Paul says that it was after three years that he then first went up to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles there. That, in fact, correlates more naturally with the famine visit described at the end of Acts 11, when the prophet Agabus has predicted a famine that will hit particularly severely in Judea, and the Christians in Antioch agree to send relief funds to the church in Jerusalem. At first glance that account, described in Acts 11:27-30, seems to have less in common with Galatians 2:1-10, but, in fact, there are some incidental corroborations as well. Paul speaks of going up to Jerusalem by revelation, natural if he is referring to the prophecy of Agabus, and he speaks in Galatians 2:10 of agreeing quickly to remember the poor, the very thing he was eager to do. This ties in very naturally with Acts 11.

It seems likely, then, that we should see the gathering that Paul narrates in Galatians 2:1-10 as a different and more informal gathering of Paul with the Jerusalem leaders and apostles, prior to the more formal apostolic council described in Acts 15. To recapitulate this admittedly somewhat complex data we should thus correlate Acts 9 and the story of Paul's conversion with Galatians (1:15-24); Acts 11:27-30 with Galatians 2:1-10; and Acts 15:1, when some believers come to Antioch saying that even Gentile Christians must be circumcised to be saved, with Paul's run-in with Peter described in Galatians 2:11 and following. This means, therefore, that Paul's letter is written after his first missionary journey, but very quickly after it, as he is getting ready to go off to Jerusalem for the apostolic council—written perhaps in some haste, accounting for the harsh tones, possibly, that one finds throughout the letter, as Paul discovers that the same

Galatians:
An Apologetic Letter

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A Defense of the Faith
Against Judaizers

Outline of Galatians:

I. **Paul Defends His Apostolic Authority (1-2:14)**

II. Paul Defines Justification by Faith not Law (2:15-4:31)

III. Paul Describes the Nature of Christian Freedom (5:1-6:10)

Judaizers that led to the conflict between him and Peter in Antioch or at least the same brand of individuals is now troubling the churches that he has evangelized in southern Galatia—Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

Paul, then, writes what may be described as an apologetic letter—apologetic in the sense of that term meaning a defense of the faith—or more particularly in this instance, a defense of the faith in the way that Paul has taught it as over against these interlopers, these Judaizers, these professing Christians who are also Jews but whom Paul believes transgress the boundary of true doctrine and become false teachers if they teach that any work of the law is necessary as a prerequisite for salvation.

C. Grace Defended (Gal 1:1-2:14)

Galatians, then, is Paul's passionate defense of this perspective on the Gospel written by way of reply. And we may break it into three major categories. First, in 1:1-2:14, Paul defends his authority as an apostle. Although he is writing to people largely the products of his own evangelistic ministry there, because of the threats of these false teachers he has to defend once again the legitimacy of the form of the Gospel that he used in preaching it. And 1:1-2:14 may be subdivided into eight strategies by which Paul performs this. (1) First of all, in the opening five verses, he writes an unusually long and detailed and theological greeting by ancient standards, stressing his apostolic authority. (2) Secondly, he leaves out the conventional thanksgiving, or prayer, that will characterize almost all of his remaining epistles. Things are so serious from his perspective that he wants to write in a literary style that will cause his readers to recognize the strength of his displeasure. (3) Thirdly, he begins the body of his letter by declaring in verses 6 and following that there is no other Gospel apart from the way in which he has presented it. This does not mean that there cannot be diversity in Christian understanding of the Gospel throughout history, but it does mean that on this one point about which Paul is so concerned, any attempt legalistically to impose certain requirements of good works as mandatory for salvation—one is preaching a false gospel that must be opposed in no uncertain terms.

The remaining five points of Paul's strategy in chapters 1 and 2 of Galatians all deal autobiographically with the way God has worked in Paul's life—the one who as a Jew was Saul of Tarsus, but who took upon himself his Greek name of Paul while ministering in predominantly Gentile circles—begins to describe his conversion and his encounters with Jerusalem, the apostolate, and Christianity in the years since. (4) He begins by describing how advanced he was, how successful he was, even how blameless he understood his life to be as a Jew. This statement in Galatians 1:11-14, in particular, gives the lie to various theories that Paul is somehow psychologically ripe for conversion, or like Martin Luther—centuries later—was frustrated with his inability to keep the law as a Jew. Others may have felt that way in other times and places, but this is not Paul's testimony. Philippians 3:6 may be consulted as a cross-reference here to again point out how blameless Paul felt as a Jew he was, how zealous he was for his ancestral traditions, as he describes it here in Galatians. Rather, nothing less than the spectacular and supernatural appearance to him of the risen Lord on the Damascus road could turn him and his life around. (5) After his conversion, and fifthly, Paul stresses that he did not immediately consult the Jerusalem apostles. Throughout this section he is trying to stress how he got his understanding of the Christian faith entirely from God, at least in its most essential foundation and not through any human origin. (6) Sixthly, he describes how three years later (if we date his conversion to 32, perhaps we are now in approximately the year 35), he did consult with the apostles, but his contact with them was minimal (1:18-24). (7) And then, seventhly, as we turn to 2:1-10, he describes how, when he did meet with them more extensively fourteen years later, they endorsed his law-free understanding of Christianity and did not qualify it in any way, except encouraging him to continue his concern for the poor.

(8) All this means that, eighthly and finally, when Peter came to Antioch, he did indeed stand condemned, as Paul explains it. He was inconsistent with the principles that had been agreed upon. He may not have recognized it immediately; it may not have been until the apostolic council convened in Jerusalem that Peter, now a few days or weeks removed from the heat of the moment, could understand, as he indeed puts it in Acts 15, that we know

that we Jews are saved by grace, just as the Gentiles are. In the heat of the moment he compromised his standards; but Paul narrates the story in his strong rebuke of Peter, to make the point that Paul throughout has been following God's will, not any human authorities, and has been true to that God-revealed Gospel.

D. Grace Explained (Gal 2:15-4:31)

In 2:15 through the end of chapter 4, Paul then turns to his second major strategy and part of the outline of his letter: redefining for the Galatians, once again, the Christian Gospel as justification by faith alone, apart from the works of the law. Chapter 2:15-21—which can be read either as the continuation of Paul's words to Peter in Antioch or as the end of the quotation and the beginning of Paul's reflections on that incident, for the Galatian believers—in either event, describes in a tightly compact nature the thesis of the entire letter: justification by faith rather than by works of the law. The term "justification" is a significant one throughout Paul's writings, and is a metaphor drawn from the legal world, from a court of law. It was with that term that was commonly understood in the Greco-Roman world to be the declaration of "not guilty," or the acquittal of a defendant.

In the case of applying this spiritually, it is clear that humans, even would-be Christians, are guilty of sin before God; but using the metaphor of justification is a way of declaring them acquitted or not guilty in God's eyes because of the death of Christ, who paid the penalty that we deserved to pay, and therefore enables a verdict to be rendered as justified. Paul defends this thesis that a right relationship with God comes through faith alone rather than by the works of the law in the remaining portions of chapters 3 and 4, by means of a variety of different strategies.

(1) In the beginning of chapter 3, he appeals back to the Galatians' own personal experience, reminding them that they did not receive the Gospel through works when he first preached it to them, but rather through faith.

(2) Secondly, he goes back to the founder of the Jewish nation, the George Washington of Israel, if we like—

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Justification

namely Abraham—to point out how way back in Genesis 15 Abraham was declared righteous by the basis of his faith, rather than the good works which he then did perform in the years and chapters of Genesis that followed. If even the founder of the Jewish nation was saved by faith rather than works, then surely even Jews—to say nothing of those who had no Jewish upbringing—should be understood in the Christian era to be saved similarly.

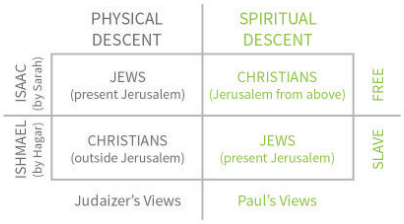
(3) Thirdly, beginning in Galatians 3:10, Paul points out how the law was never able to save anyway. The law in Old Testament times had to frequently confront the Israelites with their sin. It involved animal sacrifices as temporary provisions, pointing forward to the complete sacrifice that would come, a theme that the epistle of the Hebrews will elaborate much in greater detail. But the law was open-ended: the law was never an end in itself; it was always incomplete; it was never able to provide, in and of itself, eternal salvation for all time, for all peoples.

(4) Fourthly, Paul again uses an analogy from history speaking of how the law was, we might describe it, as a parenthetical period. The law came 400 and some years after the original covenant with Abraham, and did not supersede it so that if, before the period of the law, Abraham could be justified by faith after the period of the law has been completed, with the coming of Christ—it too marks an era when clearly religion is not by works of the law but by faith alone.

Paidagogos

At this point, Paul seems to anticipate a possible objection, namely, "What, then, was the purpose of the law?"— and in 3:19-4:7 begins to address this issue. On the one hand, paradoxically perhaps, the law actually caused transgressions—conscious breaking of the law—to increase. It is a sad fact of human nature that things that are not forbidden sometimes become more attractive once a law is given to prohibit them. But the main point that Paul develops is a somewhat opposite one. The law was given because of its custodial function. It was given as a *paidagogos* (the Greek work that is used)—although, in the ancient world a pedagogue was a slave who took children to and from school. Today we might say the law was a school bus; it was not an instructional function, primarily, but a custodial or protective function. The law protected us from

PAUL'S TYPOLOGY IN GALATIANS 4:21-31



Outline of Galatians:

III. Paul Describes the Nature of Christian Freedom (5:1-6:10)

A. No Halfway House (5:1-12)
B. Not Antinomian but Summarized in Law of Christ (5:13-6:10)

Conclusion (6:11-18)

being as bad as we possibly might have been without law until that period at which time the Christ should come. But Paul goes on to make it clear that that period has now arrived.

The remaining portions of chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4, talk about the privileges we have in Christ in this law-free era, not least that through our identification with Christ in baptism, as Galatians 3:28 puts it, there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female. After this digression, Paul then returns to further arguments for the legitimacy of his understanding of justification by faith, culminating at the end of chapter 4 in a famous allegory in which he compares and contrasts the Judaizers' understanding of who was a slave and who was a free person with his understanding in Christ. According to literal, physical descent, it was literal Jewish people, who because of their ancestry through the chosen race—Isaac, the favored son of Abraham—were viewed as God's chosen people. And Gentiles were seen as outsiders, descendants of the slave child Ishmael, by means of the handmaid Hagar to his father Abraham. Paul, however, completely inverts this allegory or analogy by saying that it is Christians—Jew and Gentile alike—who spiritually are free, because they are the spiritual descendants of Abraham by faith. And those who are still in bondage to the works of the law, though they may be Jews and literally members of God's chosen race, are spiritually in slavery. Whether or not the Judaizers themselves were convinced, Paul has certainly upended in a dramatic way conventional Jewish thinking of the time, and he assumed that it would convince his Galatian audience.

E. Grace Applied (Gal 5:1-6:18)

The final section then, the closing two chapters of Galatians, turns to a different topic. It is possible to be too legalistic, but it is also possible to give in to license, to licentiousness, to immoral living. Lest all of Paul's emphasis in the first four chapters suggest that Christian living is without any moral foundations at all, chapters 5-6 debunk this particular notion. There is no halfway house, Paul says; it is either all one or all the other. And after making this point, he discusses the way in which Christian living is very ethical and moral. In this context, in the latter

Magna Carta of Christian Liberty

part of chapter 5, are the famous descriptions of love as the summary of all the law; the famous fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control; and Paul's statement in Galatians 6:2 that when one is rightly related by the Spirit to God, one in fact fulfills the law of Christ. Paul then closes the letter with a recapitulation of these major themes and his closing greetings.

F. Theological Significance of Galatians

It is hard to top Martin Luther's famous summary of the theological message and main point of the epistle to the Galatians: It is the charter, we might even say the "Magna Carta," of Christian liberty. Christians are free from all forms of legalism. But as we seek to apply this theme, we must realize that there are at least two different kinds of legalism: what some have called a "hard legalism"—laws or good works put forward as prerequisites for salvation—which in general is not as common an affliction in the church of Jesus Christ, but also "soft legalism," that more subtle transformation of what is intended to be a vibrant relationship with God through His Holy Spirit into a long list of dos and don'ts that go far beyond anything the Bible explicitly mandates. No one may say that this list of dos or don'ts is a prerequisite for salvation, but in an attitude which transforms a free and living relationship from one of joy to one of fulfilling laws—performance-based, performance-oriented—we may be as guilty of legalism as the Judaizers Paul himself had to denounce.