

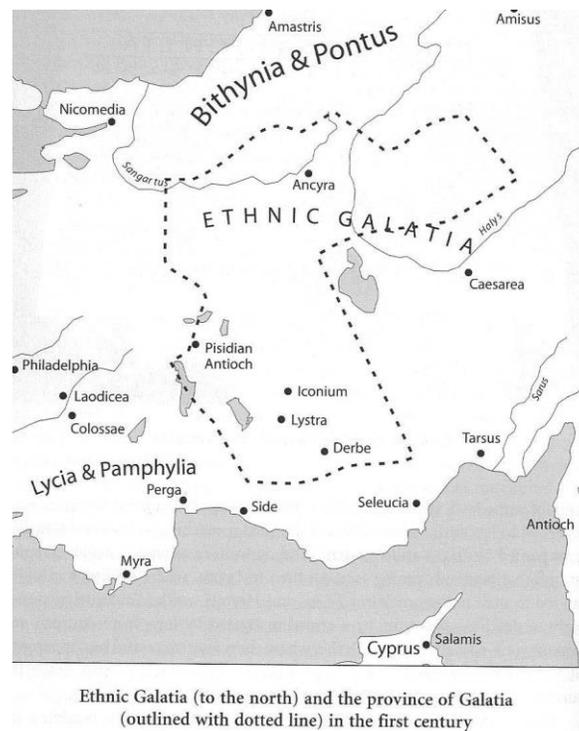
Study 28: The Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians: Jew and Gentile

Paul, the Author. With a few exceptions – and aren't there always a few exceptions? – most scholars agree that the author of the *Letter to the Galatians* is the Apostle Paul. I believe we can safely dismiss the doubters, that minority of modern skeptics, who disagree with what the Church has long taught and believed: St. Paul wrote the *Letter to the Galatians*.

Paul's First Letter...or not? There is somewhat greater disagreement among scholars – again, no surprise – as to *when* St. Paul wrote his *Letter to the Galatians*. Some claim that Paul wrote the letter not long after his first missionary journey and before the Jerusalem Council. If this theory, often called the *South Galatian Theory*, is correct, then the letter was likely written to those churches in south Galatia founded during that earlier missionary journey. This would also make *Galatians* the first of Paul's letters (c. 48 A.D.) and one of the earliest books of the New Testament. Other scholars, however, believe it was addressed to the churches of north Galatia, those Paul founded during his second missionary journey. If this theory is correct, then Paul wrote the letter sometime after 50 A.D., probably in the mid-50s. About all we can say with any degree of certainty is that Paul wrote this letter sometime between 48 and 55 A.D.

The two theories lead to differing opinions regarding Paul's visit to Jerusalem which he describes in chapter two of the letter [Gal 2:1-10]. Those who accept the South Galatian Theory believe Paul is referring to his trip to Jerusalem mentioned briefly in Acts 11:29-30. But for those who hold the North Galatian Theory, the passage in Galatians 2 describes the Jerusalem Council, held in 49 A.D. [Acts 15:1-29] Personally (and my opinion is worth very little), I lean toward the second theory, and believe Paul was addressing events that precipitated the Council and using the Council's historic decisions to support the Gospel he is preaching. There's little evidence, however, that Paul did much missionary work in the north, and I suspect he was addressing the southern churches even at the later date.

Galatia, a Province of Rome. Galatia, established as a Roman province in 25 B.C., was located in the center of Asia Minor, what is today the nation of Turkey. The city of Ankara, modern Turkey's capital and in ancient times called Ancyra, is in what was then called Galatia. (See the map below.)



We're not exactly sure who the Galatians were. The original ethnic Galatians migrated from Gaul and settled in the northern part of the province sometime in the third century B.C. But by the time of Paul the ethnic makeup of the province had likely undergone significant change. We can assume, however, that most of the first-century Galatians were certainly Gentiles.

Problems Confronting Paul. Among the problems addressed by Paul in this letter is one that was definitively answered by the Jerusalem Council; that is, the relationship between the Mosaic Law and Christianity. Paul had apparently received some bad news from the churches he had founded in Galatia. (It really matters little to us today whether these were churches of North or South Galatia, or both.) Paul received word that others who had arrived in Galatia after him had undermined his teaching. They had apparently told these new Galatian Christians, specifically, the Gentile converts to Christianity, that salvation depended on their following Jewish Law and tradition in its entirety.

Because it was such a key element of Jewish Law and identity, the rite of circumcision became the primary issue of this controversy. After all, it was through circumcision that a male marked his acceptance of the covenant with Abraham, and for almost 2,000 years circumcision had been the sign by which one was initiated as one of God's People [Gen 17:9-14]. But Paul and the other Apostles taught that Jesus, through His redemptive death and resurrection, had changed all that. Jesus had initiated a *New Covenant* through which the people of all nations received the blessings that the Abrahamic Covenant promised to the entire world [Gen 22:17-18]. The Mosaic Covenant, focused on the people of Israel, had been fulfilled by Jesus Christ and replaced by the New Covenant of faith and baptism. Through baptism one becomes an adopted child of the Father and a member of the universal (Catholic) Church founded by Jesus. Circumcision is, therefore, no longer necessary. As Paul told these new Christians of Galatia:

"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" [Gal 5:6].

Those who preached against Paul – called *Judaizers* – were in fact teaching the first heresy, a teaching that contradicted what the Church taught and, indeed, went against the decisions of the Apostolic Jerusalem Council. They also contradicted what Paul himself had taught as he followed Jesus' command to preach and teach the Gospel to all nations, baptizing Jew and Gentile alike [Mt 28:19-20]. In order to lessen Paul's influence among these new Christians, the Judaizers also tried to belittle Paul himself by saying he could not be an Apostle because he had never really known Jesus. They went on to argue that Paul, by his teaching, proved he was no faithful Jew, but rather a kind of renegade preacher motivated only by self-interest.

Reading Galatians we find Paul using some very combative language as he addresses this overt threat to the young Church. Indeed, the polemical style Paul adopts in *Galatians* is unique among his letters. It's interesting to contrast Paul's style in *Galatians* with that in his later *Letter to the Romans*. Both letters address the same subject – the relationship between Christianity and the Law – but in *Romans* Paul writes in a much more relaxed style. In *Galatians* the Apostle comes across as a troubled pastor of souls who sees the results of God's missionary work being threatened by those who are undermining the Church and distorting the teachings of Jesus Christ Himself through a kind of Pharisaic Christianity. He is not at all pleased with the situation and his readers certainly know it.

As Luke describes it, when Paul and his companions returned to Antioch from their missionary journey, they were enthusiastic about all that had been accomplished:

"And when they arrived they called the church together and reported what God had done with them and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. Then they spent no little time with the disciples" [Acts 14:27-28].

But now Paul hears that much of this work is being threatened by those who are teaching a false doctrine. Just imagine how Paul felt when he discovered that many of these new Christians were being led astray.

And so, knowing he has the full support of the Apostles and, therefore, the entire Church, Paul hurriedly picks up his pen and writes a letter to his Galatian children in Christ Jesus.

The Content of the Letter. The six chapters of Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* can be divided into the following sections:

1. Greeting and Introduction [Gal 1:1-9]
2. Paul Defends His Apostolic Authority [Gal 1:10-2:21]
3. Paul Defends the Gospel [Gal 3:1-5:11]
4. Paul Pleads for True Christian Living [Gal 5:12-6:20]
5. Conclusion and Benediction [Gal 6:21-24]

Some commentaries might offer a slightly different division of the letter, but this will suffice for our study.

Greeting and Introduction. In writing *Galatians* Paul wants to ensure his audience first understands exactly who he is. This is important if his words and the Gospel he preaches are to be accepted. He doesn't begin with his usual good tidings, but instead gets right to the point:

"Paul an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead..." [Gal 1:1]

Here he tells his audience that he received his apostleship from Jesus Christ. He didn't receive it from men or even through the Twelve Apostles, but directly from God. He then identifies those to whom he addresses his letter: "the churches of Galatia" [Gal 1:2].

Paul moves quickly to the root of the problem: "...that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel" [Gal 1:6], and continues by describing how there can be only one Gospel of Jesus Christ [Gal 1:7-9]:

"But there are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach [to you] a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, and now I say again, if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the one that you received, let that one be accursed!"

These are strong words indeed, for Paul realizes the danger if the Gospel is distorted.

Paul's Apostolic Authority. Paul then addresses the source of his apostolic authority. One gets the impression that he might well have done this earlier when he was with the Galatians, but feels the need to explain it once more in detail. Paul's confidence in his apostolic authority also argues for a later date of composition – probably in the 50s – when such confidence would be warranted.

He begins his defense by describing what must have been painful for him: "...how I persecuted the Church of God violently and tried to destroy it" [Gal 1:13]. He continues, however, by discussing how He responded to God's call:

"But when [God], who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me..." [Gal 1:15-17].

Paul goes on to explain that after his miraculous conversion he spent a total of three years in the Arabian wilderness (perhaps at Sinai where both Moses and Elijah had conversed with God) and in Damascus before finally going to Jerusalem, to the Church, to the Apostle Peter, with whom he spent two weeks. Paul then returned to his native city of Tarsus in Cilicia before going on to Antioch in Syria, "preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" [Gal 1:23].

In chapter two of the letter, Paul refers to his participation in the Jerusalem Council. He speaks of “*false brothers*” and spies – the *Judaizers* – who plotted against him, but then tells of the support he received from Peter, James and John to continue his missionary work among the Gentiles, the uncircumcised. He speaks, too, of his conflict with Peter at Antioch who, in Paul’s words, “was afraid of the circumcised.” Paul repeats the challenge he gave to Peter: “*If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?*” [Gal 2:14] A fair question! It’s inconceivable that Paul would have addressed Peter and the other “pillars” of the Church openly in such language if he were not confident in his apostolic authority.

Defending the Gospel. Paul concludes chapter two by stressing our justification by faith and not by works of the law. In the chapter’s final three verses Paul offers us a beautiful and concise summary of his teaching on justification by faith:

“For through the law I died to the law, that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing” [Gal 2:19-21].

It’s important to have a clear understanding of how Paul uses certain key words in this letter. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, for example, defines faith as follows: “*Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen*” [Heb 11:1]. For Paul this *faith* is a living faith, a faith brought to life by loving both God and neighbor. This living faith is the Christian’s response to Christ as a result of His redemptive act. Through this act Christ offers salvation and brings a “new age” into being, an age in which we share in the restoration of friendship with God.

The object of our faith is the person of Jesus Christ who established the New Covenant between God and man. For Paul, faith is at the heart of our personal relationship with Jesus, and in a sense really includes all of the theological virtues: Faith, Hope and Charity. In his Letter to the Romans, Paul expands on what it is for the Christian to believe:

“...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved” [Rom 10:9-10].

Faith, then, is more than an intellectual assent to certain truths; for Paul faith is an abandonment, a giving over of the heart, a total dedication of one’s very being to Jesus Christ. And faith is not just a private or interior assent, for one must confess the truth outwardly, “with the mouth.”

Another term encountered in this and other letters by Paul is “Law.” Prior to the Incarnation and the Redemption Jesus brought to mankind, observance of the Law was how the chosen people struggled to restore their friendship with God. In a way, it was analogous to the role of faith in the New Covenant.

For the Jew the Law could refer either to the entire Old Testament or more often to the *Pentateuch* or *Torah*. But the Law was far more than a document or collection of documents. It was, in essence, the will of God for men. As such the Law was the very heart of a Jew’s religious life. Read *Psalm 119* to get a sense of the importance of the Law to a Jew of the Old Testament.

Obedience to God’s Law was the primary obligation of His people as they strove to merit His favor and blessing. After all, Israel was His chosen people, bound together in solemn covenant with Him. The Law was not merely a collection of rules laid down by a tribal chief; rather, they were the laws of the covenant community. When the people violated the Law, they also broke the covenant, and consequently their relationship with God! The Law, then, occupied a huge place in the life of Israel.

To restore this broken relationship, sacrifices were required and penalties were prescribed; yet none of this was truly adequate. Even though God prescribed all this, no animal sacrifice could remove the guilt of the people. God, after all, is holy and just, and so sin cannot simply be brushed aside. In truth, sin is so

horrendous an affront and insult to a loving God and Creator that it merits death. This is the basic human predicament.

This then is why the Old Testament looks forward; this is why it points to the salvation of the people, to Jesus Christ. Turn to *Isaiah 53* and its message describing the passion and death of Our Lord, the suffering servant, God's only Son. In the Servant's suffering and death, God accepts a complete and totally sufficient sacrifice. Jesus carries the Cross and the sin and guilt of all humanity; He pours out His life in the one and only sacrifice that finally finishes it all. The penalty of the Law is paid.

For Paul, therefore, and for the authors of the gospels, the Law helped prepare humanity for Christ and His New Covenant, but it was always incapable of restoring men to friendship with God. Indeed, the Law helped men realize that they cannot save themselves; salvation can come only through the power of Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who transcends the Law and fulfills it. From now on, Paul instructs the Galatians, the Law is all about Jesus Christ, and its precepts reflect the Christian life and the obedience Christians owe to Jesus. As Jesus Himself taught, the fulfillment and perfection of the Law are to be found in our love of God and neighbor.

Christian Freedom. Freedom does not mean license, the ability to do whatever one desires. This is nothing less than anarchy. The Christian is free because of Christ's passion, death and Resurrection; i.e., Christ's actions have restored the damaged relationship between God and men. Through Jesus we can now place ourselves under the sovereignty of God Himself and are, therefore, truly free from the slavery of sin and the threat of death. Paul states this clearly at the beginning of Chapter 5: "*For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery*" [Gal 5:1].

Paul also reminds us that, through the redemptive actions of Jesus Christ and through our Baptism, we are now free, no longer slaves, but have become children of the Father:

"As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God" [Gal 4:6-7].

In Chapter 5 Paul continues to address the Christian's freedom from the Law. As Christians we are ruled by Love and no longer constrained or ruled by the Law:

"For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" [Gal 5:13-14].

Paul then instructs the Galatians that in order to live the Christian life, a life based on Love, they must respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit; in a sense they must be possessed by the Spirit:

"I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law" [Gal 5:16-18].

If the Christian's life is ruled by Love, if the Christian acts only in response to the Spirit, he can then do as St. Augustine famously preached: "Love, and then do what you will." For St. Paul morality is nothing less than the Love of Jesus Christ, and the Christian should live *always* in a constant relationship with God. It is only through the movement of the Holy Spirit within us that we are strengthened in our weak human condition.

Paul's Conclusion and Blessing. Although the bulk of Paul's letter was likely dictated to a secretary, he actually picks up his pen and adds a rather lengthy hand-written postscript at the end of Chapter 6. He uses this method to reinforce what he has already stated about circumcision and the false teaching some of the Galatians have received: "*For neither does circumcision mean anything, nor does uncircumcision,*

but only a new creation” [Gal 6:15]. He concludes with a blessing, as well as another reminder of his apostolic mission. Paul’s comment about the “marks of Jesus” refers to the physical suffering he has already undergone during the course of his ministry.

Peace and mercy be to all who follow this rule and to the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make troubles for me; for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen [Gal 6:16-18].

Paul’s Use of the Old Testament. Paul doesn’t hesitate to call on the Old Testament in making his points about faith, the Law, and freedom. In Chapter 3 he singles out Abraham, the Father of the Jewish people, as one who, through his response in faith, was blessed by God and brought God’s blessing to all nations. This Abrahamic universal blessing was a foreshadowing of the Good News that would come to the entire world through Jesus Christ:

“Thus Abraham ‘believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.’ Realize then that it is those who have faith who are children of Abraham. Scripture, which saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, foretold the good news to Abraham, saying, ‘Through you shall all the nations be blessed.’ Consequently, those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham who had faith” [Gal 3:6-9].

Paul teaches that it is the *faith* of Abraham that led to the covenant with God, a covenant promising salvation for all nations.

Paul returns to Abraham in Chapter 4 when he presents an allegory contrasting the patriarch’s two sons: Ishmael, born of Hagar, a slave woman, and Isaac, born of Abraham’s wife, Sarah. Paul calls Isaac, the son of a free woman, a “child of the promise,” but states that Ishmael, “*the son of the slave woman shall not share the inheritance with the son of the freeborn*” [Gal 4:30]. He concludes the allegory by telling the Galatians: “*Therefore, brothers, we are children not of the slave woman but of the freeborn woman*” [Gal 4:31].

Galatians in the Liturgy. The majority of appearances in the liturgy of Paul’s *Letter to the Galatians* are found in Year C during Ordinary Time, specifically on the 9th through the 14th Sundays in Ordinary Time. It is during this time of the liturgical year that the Church encourages us to grow spiritually in our faith as we respond to God’s promises, so Galatians is certainly a fitting vehicle for helping us do just that. It is also a time for us to ponder our response to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives as He urges us to live the life of Love preached by Jesus and Paul. The Church also includes readings from Galatians on the Mass on January 1, the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, and on Pentecost Sunday (Year B).

Some Questions to Consider:

1. Read again of the meeting between Paul and Peter [Gal 2:11-15]. What conclusions can you draw from Paul’s description of this meeting?
2. What was Paul’s central message in this letter? [Gal 6:11-18]
3. How does Paul view the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian’s life? [Gal 4:1-7]
4. How is Paul’s concept of freedom relevant to us today?
5. Did you learn anything new about St. Paul, aside from what you already knew from your reading of the *Acts of the Apostles*?