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Letter to the Galatians

In some ways this has been considered the most Pauline of the Pauline writings, the one in which anger has caused Paul to say what he really thinks. Paul discards diplomacy in challenging the Galatians. Not surprisingly, Christian innovators or reformers have appealed to Gal's vigorous language and imagery. For instance, Luther called it his "pet epistle," for he found in Paul's rejection of justification by the works of the Law support for his rejection of salvation by good works. Others, however, have been embarrassed by the crudeness of the polemic and the lack of nuance about the Jewish heritage. One thing is certain: no one can fault the Paul of Gal for making theology dull.

THE BACKGROUND

In the years before AD 55 Paul had proclaimed the gospel to Gentiles who now constituted the churches of Galatia. Although his stay among them was brought about or affected by a "weakness of the flesh" (4:13), the Galatians were more than kind during Paul's affliction and treated him as an angel of God. Seemingly they saw him work

SUMMARY OF BASIC INFORMATION

DATE: 54–55 from Ephesus is more likely than 57 from Macedonia (Traditional Chronology; see Table 5 in Chapter 16 above for Revisionist Chronology).

TO: Churches around Ancyra in ethnic Galatian territory, i.e., north-central section of the province of Galatia in Asia Minor (evangelized in 50 and 54), or, less likely, to churches at Antioch, Lystra, and Derbe in the south of the province (evangelized in 47–48 and 50).

AUTHENTICITY, UNITY, AND INTEGRITY: Not seriously disputed.

FORMAL DIVISION:

- A. Opening Formula: 1:1–5
- B. Thanksgiving: None
- C. Body: 1:6–6:10
- D. Concluding Formula: 6:11–18

DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS (AND RHETORICAL ANALYSIS):

1:1–10: Introduction:

1:1–5: Opening Formula (already defensive in describing apostleship and what Christ has done)

1:6–10: Exordium or introduction (astonishment in place of Thanksgiving), describing the issue, the adversaries, and the seriousness of the case (by anathemas)

1:11–2:14: Paul narrates his preaching career to defend his thesis about his gospel stated in 1:11–12

2:15–21: Debate with opponents, contrasting his gospel with theirs; justified by faith in Christ, not by observing the Law; Christians live by faith

3:1–4:31: Proofs for justification by faith not by Law: six arguments drawn from the past experiences of the Galatians and from Scripture, particularly centered on Abraham

5:1–6:10: Ethical exhortation (paraenesis) for them to preserve their freedom, and walk according to the Spirit

6:11–18: Conclusion: authenticating postscript in Paul's own hand (as distinct from scribe who took dictation); recapitulation of attitude toward circumcision; benediction.

miracles (3:5). This memory sharpens his outrage that the Galatians now (4:16) evaluate him as an enemy who somehow cheated them in his preaching about Christ. How had this come about?

After Paul left Galatia, Christians of Jewish origin (6:13) had come, probably from Jerusalem, preaching another gospel (1:7), that is, an understanding of what God had done in Christ different from Paul's. In subsequent Christian history a sense of the sacredness of NT Scripture and respect for Paul as the great apostle have naturally led Christians to a conviction that his gospel was true to Christ and that of his

adversaries was not. Nevertheless, since there is no convincing reason for thinking that “the preachers,” as they may be called, were fools or dishonest, I shall seek to show why their gospel, so far as it can be reconstructed, sounded plausible.

A key factor in the preachers’ proclamation was an insistence on circumcision and observing the calendrical feasts (4:10). As the preachers explained, the one true God had blessed all the nations of the world in Abraham who believed in God (Gen 15:6) and then, as part of the covenant, gave Abraham the commandment of circumcision (Gen 17:10) and the heavenly calendar. Through the preachers the work of Jesus the Messiah was now being extended to the Gentiles, who can be fully included in the covenant if they are circumcised in imitation of Abraham and do the works of the Law.

Yet had not Paul already brought the gospel to the Gentile believers in Galatia? No! In order to make quick converts Paul had preached a truncated gospel that did not tell them that sharing in the Abraham covenant depended on circumcision. Paul had left them without the guidance of the Law, prey to the desires of the flesh; and that is why sin was still rampant among them. This was a persuasive message, especially if the preachers pointed out that Paul was a latecomer to the gospel; that he had not known Jesus as the real apostles had; that Jesus, who was circumcised himself, had never exempted anyone from circumcision; and that the real apostles at Jerusalem kept the feasts and the food laws. How could Paul answer the preachers and win back the Galatians to recognize that he had preached the truth? (As we turn to analyze the letter he wrote, we should keep in mind that controversy with the preachers shapes his expression and phrasing. Too often Paul’s “theology” of justification, faith, and freedom is abstracted from Gal without recognizing the apologetic shaping.)

GENERAL ANALYSIS OF THE MESSAGE

In the Opening Formula (1:1–5), Paul designates himself as an apostle, a status stemming not from human beings but from Jesus Christ (1:1—and from God: 1:15). Atypically, he does not explicitly name a co-sender as he addresses himself “to the churches of Galatia,” that is, a group of communities in the Galatian region or in the larger province

of Galatia. Paul is the target of the attack in Galatia, and his response is marked by anger that does not allow for a Thanksgiving.

The Body opens with a type of *exordium* or *introduction* (1:6–10) that, with a biting tone of disappointed astonishment, quickly lays out the issue, the adversaries, and the seriousness of the case: there is no other gospel than the one proclaimed by Paul to the Galatians in the grace of Christ; cursed are those who preach something different. Then, using the rhetorical pattern of court defenses, Paul writes in letter form an *apologia* (1:11–2:21), polemical in tone but employing a sequence of rhetorical devices. To appreciate the points made by Paul, one should keep in mind the claims of the preachers as reconstructed in the *Background* above. Paul's main thesis is that the gospel he proclaims came through divine revelation and not from human beings (1:11–12). As a paradigm of that, Paul relates the story of his call and preaching, touching down on key points, for example: the initial divine revelation and commission; no dependence on the Jerusalem apostles; the challenge to him from the party insisting on circumcision for the Gentiles; the agreement reached between him and the Jerusalem authorities rejecting the challenge; and the acknowledgment that he was entrusted with the gospel and apostolate to the uncircumcised (1:13–2:10). Then, in 2:11–14, describing those of the circumcision party who afterward came to Antioch from Jerusalem claiming to represent James, Paul is suggesting that they were the progenitors of those who came to Galatia; for he blends his defense of the gospel at Antioch against the earlier adversaries into a type of dialogue with the Jewish Christian preachers in Galatia (2:15–21).

Paul next piles up six arguments from experience and Scripture to convince the foolish Galatians who have allowed themselves to be bewitched (3:1–4:31)—arguments now simplified. First (3:1–5): The Galatians received the Spirit without observing works of the Law. Second (3:6–14): Against the preachers' insistence on the circumcision of Abraham (Gen 17:10, 14) he cites God's promise that in Abraham all the nations would be blessed (Gen 12:3)—a promise independent of circumcision. Third (3:15–25): A will that has been ratified cannot be annulled by a later addition. The Law came 430 years after the promises to Abraham. The Law was but a prison warden until Christ came. Fourth (3:26–4:11): The

Galatians, who were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe, have been redeemed by God's Son and adopted as God's children; why do they want again to become slaves, this time to the demands of the Law? Fifth (4:12–20): The Galatians treated Paul like an angel; how can he have become their enemy? Sixth (4:21–31): Paul takes up the Hagar/Sarah story (Gen 16–21) in an allegorical interpretive fashion. Hagar, the slave woman, does not represent the descendance of the Gentiles but the present, earthly Jerusalem (the church there?) and the enslaving covenant of the Law given on Mt. Sinai; Sarah, the free woman, represents the heavenly Jerusalem and the covenant of God's promise to Abraham—she is the mother of all who have been made free in Christ.

After the argument Paul finishes the Body of Gal with a *passionate exhortation* (5:1–6:10) against the preachers and a warning that the Law will not help the Galatians against the works of the flesh (contrasted with the fruit of the Spirit in 5:19–26). In 5:6, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any force, but faith working through love,” Paul makes it clear that he does not consider circumcision something evil but rather something that has no power to bring justification to the Gentiles. Paul thought of faith as something that had to find expression in love manifested in the life of the believer. (He would see God at work in both the faith and the love, with neither being simply human reactions.) “The law of Christ” is not the Law of Sinai but the obligation to bear one another's burdens (6:2).

Then, Paul stops the scribe and writes the *Conclusion* (6:11–18) against circumcision with his own hand in big letters, so that the Galatians cannot miss the point. In “the Israel of God” it makes no difference whether one is circumcised. As for the preachers, “From now on let no one make more trouble for me, for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body.” What Paul has suffered as an apostle is more important than the marks of his circumcision!

THE “FAITH [PISTIS] OF CHRIST” (2:16, ETC.)

A major discussion has centered on what Paul means when he speaks of being justified or of justification, not from the works of the Law but from/through the *faith of* (Jesus) Christ (2:16; 3:22; also Rom

3:22,26; Phil 3:9). The construction “from/through faith of Christ” (*ek/dia pisteōs Christou*) can be understood as an objective genitive—that is, the Christian’s faith in Christ, or as a subjective genitive, that is, the faith possessed or manifested by Christ. The debate also affects the simpler and more common expression “from faith” (*ek pisteōs*). Both interpretations require comment.

Faith in Christ is probably the more common interpretation and may be supported by Gal 3:26, which uses the preposition “in.” In that interpretation, however, although faith in what God has done in Christ, especially through the crucifixion and resurrection, can be seen as a response that brings about justification, one needs to emphasize that God also generates the response—a divine grace given to believe, responding to the divine grace manifested in Christ. The faith of Christ is sometimes understood as his fidelity to God’s plan, a fidelity that brought about justification. Some find that interpretation weak and prefer to think of the faith manifested by Jesus in going to crucifixion without visible divine support. J. Louis Martyn contends that Gal 2:20–21 shows that Christ’s faith is Christ’s faithful death. Still others combine the two approaches and suggest that Christ’s faith manifested in his death is given to his followers through faith in Christ.