

Through The Bible

Session #47 – Galatians

January 19, 2005

General Comments on Galatians:

- Though modest in length (less than 150 verses compared to Acts – 1000 verses; John – about 870 verses; Hebrews – 303 verses), Galatians has had a great impact on the Church.
- Issues of: freedom and faith, gospel and law, Spirit and ethics are greatly aided by Paul's words in Galatians.
- The epistle contains the strongest statement on equality of males and females found in the New Testament (see 3:28).

What kind of "letter" is Galatians?

- Paul is using a standard form of a letter at this time often known as a "rebuke-request" letter.
- Paul does not follow his salutations (1:1-3) with any kind of thanksgiving. He gets right to the point (1:6). The expression, "I am astonished..." (1:6) is often used in letters at this time as a rebuke for not meeting the expectations of the writer.

Authorship:

- The epistle bears the name of Paul (1:1) and neither internal evidence nor external evidence seriously questions Paul's authorship.
- Paul's statement in 6:11, "See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!" suggests that either Paul wrote the whole letter by himself, or that he wrote the latter parts himself and had an amanuensis (someone he dictated to) do a large portion of it.

Galatia & the Galatians

- We're talking about a region here and not a specific city. Mostly a rural province.
 - The province able to supply most of its food. Wool brought wealth to the province. Much of the central and southern area was a huge sheep farm.
 - Major cities in province in Roman Galatia: Ancyra & Pisidian Antioch. (See map #17 in Harper Collins Study Bible).



- Originally Celts who immigrated into central Asia Minor around 285 BC. These Celts were of the same ethnic origin as the Celts of France and Britain.
- Primary cities originally were: Ancyra, Pessinus, and Tavium.
- At the time of Roman conquests, the territory of Galatia was expanded and now included parts of Lycaonia and Phrygia. So, does Paul address the smaller territory or the expanded one?
 - If Paul meant the original Galatia, then he passed through this region on his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 16:6) and his 3rd missionary journey (Acts 18:23).
 - If Paul meant the expanded Galatia after the Roman conquests, then Paul passed through here on his 1st missionary journey when he set up churches in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe (see Acts 13-14).
 - Bottom line: we just don't know which "Galatia" Paul is meant. And more importantly, it doesn't affect the interpretation of the letter.

Paul's relationship with the Galatians

- Paul's first stay with them was connected to some kind of physical ailment Paul was suffering from (4:13-15). We don't know much about this physical ailment.
- The Galatians received him warmly and they responded to his preaching of the Gospel.
- Crucial to Paul's early preaching in Galatia was the work of the Holy Spirit and the evidence of miracles (3:1-5).

Paul's reason for writing:

- Sometime after his first or perhaps second visit some itinerant missionaries came and began to preach a different message (1:6-9; 3:1; 4:8-11; 5:6; 6:15).
 - Adaptation of Jewish practices (i.e., circumcision) would bring the Galatian spiritual experience closer to perfection.
 - Many Galatians no doubt embraced this “other gospel.”
- Who were these itinerant missionaries who preached a different gospel?
 - Paul refers to them as agitators, trouble makers, and those who have a selfish motive in advocating circumcision (1:7; 4:17; 5:10; 6:12-13).
 - The most common options for identifying these itinerant missionaries of a distorted gospel are:
 1. Jewish Christians from Jerusalem – probably claimed the support of James and the circumcision party. They argued ceremonial Jewish laws still were valid for Christians and attacked Paul's message of freedom in Christ.
 2. Jewish Christians with no connection to Jerusalem – Paul's preaching was OK but with circumcision, it would be much better! Christianity needs the supplement of circumcision.
 3. Not Jews but Gentile Christians – they felt that Paul's original message included circumcision but that Paul bowed under the pressure and now was advocating not circumcising. This group's goal was to bring Christianity closer to Judaism.
- We don't know whether the Galatians heeded Paul's warning and admonitions.

When was Galatians written?

- Answer depends on whether we're talking about the original Galatian territory or the expanded Roman Galatian territory. Remember that Paul visited cities in each territory on 2 different missionary journeys.
- Some date Galatians as early as AD 49. The latest possible date is AD 56.
- We can't say for sure where Paul was when he wrote Galatians. Some say Ephesus, Corinth, Macedonia, or Antioch.

The Structure of Galatians

- Galatians is written with emotion and intensity. Paul hides neither his feelings of frustration with the Galatians(1:6; 3:1; 4:16; 5:7), nor his anger with the agitators who are preaching a different gospel (5:10-12).
- Though filled with emotion, Paul's argument follows a fairly rational process. It's orderly. Paul is not so emotional that he's simply “flying off the handle.”
- Structure has 3 major sections

- In the 1st section, Paul clarifies his reason for writing (1:6-2:21) – Paul wants to remind the Galatians of the gospel of grace (1:6, 9). This gospel of grace is received by faith (2:15-21).
- In the 2nd section (3:1-5:12), Paul reminds the Galatians of their origins as Christians (3:1-5). Paul also faces two key questions that he seeks to address: (a) who are the people of God? and (b) what is the function of the law?
- The 3rd section (5:13-6:10) speaks of the responsible use of Christian freedom. Freedom doesn't mean to do whatever one pleases and treat one another however one chooses. Freedom is guided by the fruit of the Spirit (5:13-14, 22).
- Another way to look at Galatians:
 - Galatians 1:1-5 – Salutation
 - Galatians 1:6-4:11 – Rebuke for embracing a different gospel
 - Galatians 4:12-6:10 – Request to return to original Gospel.

Key Theological theme in Galatians:

- It's all about God's grace! Grace gives us freedom. Grace gives us unity with other Christians.
- The agitators were not opposed to grace, they simply tried to say it was only part of the story. Circumcision provided:
 - A visible sign of one's commitment.
 - A step toward maturity – those who were circumcised were one step further down the road toward spiritual maturity than those who weren't.
 - A connector to the Old Testament – being circumcised was a requirement initiated early on the Old Testament (Genesis 17:9-14). Surely God would honor this obedience.
- Paul's counter argument was focused on the radical nature of God's grace – it's an experience in the way God works. Paul felt the Galatians were working on the wrong end of one's relationship with God – what people can do to assure themselves a place in God's family. The right end of the relationship focuses on what God has done in Christ for us.
- Grace is not a "thing." It's the manner in which God gives himself to us.

Sources used:

Charles B. Cousar, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching and Preaching, Galatians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982).

G.W. Hansen, "Letter to the Galatians," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, editors: Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 323-334.