

May 16 Galatians

Intro

Galatians is Paul's letter with the harshest tone. He is addressing the churches that he himself planted in Galatia (Turkey), who have now been visited by other missionaries who are preaching and teaching what Paul sees as "a false gospel". The "false gospel" being proclaimed by Paul's rivals was that salvation in Jesus Christ was for Jews only, and therefore any Gentile accepting the message of Christ must first become Jewish (be circumcised) in order to become Christian. Paul argued that we are justified by faith in Christ alone, no works can justify us. Paul is angry that all his hard work is being undone and that the spiritual health of the churches he planted is being threatened. Paul visited Galatia on his first missionary journey (Acts 13: 14-15, 14:1), and likely during his second missionary journey as well (Acts 16:6, 18:23). Between these two journeys an important council was held in Jerusalem to discuss and debate the same issues raised by Paul in this letter (namely, must Gentile Christians be circumcised before they can officially be accepted as Christians). The date of this letter is unknown, but could have been written anywhere from 48 CE- the mid 50's CE.

Chapter 1

Paul immediately establishes his authority and credentials from God, rather than from humans. There is no flowery, encouraging, love language present in his address to the Galatians as there was when he addressed the Thessalonians. Paul charges the Galatians with deserting the gospel, and his opponent apostles as "perverters of the gospel." Paul repeats his curses on his opponents for added emphasis. Vs. 10, if Paul were seeking human approval, he would jump on the bandwagon with everyone else, but he has to stand up for the purity of the gospel. Paul is essentially saying that you can't please everyone and serve Christ at the same time. Paul received the gospel through divine revelation during his dramatic conversion experience in Acts 9. Paul's amazing conversion is Paul's understanding of God's grace toward him, and also a story that has been used to draw others to faith in Christ. It is a miracle that the former persecutor of the church has now become one of its most effective apostles. Paul states that he immediately began following God's call to him, rather than seeking out the human approval of the other apostles. Paul was kind of a loose cannon, frequently butting heads with both Peter (Cephas), as well as James (Jesus' younger brother, now leader of the Church in Jerusalem, and one of the most prominent supporters of the "false gospel" that Jewish Christians should remain "separate but equal" from Gentile Christians by continuing in Jewish dietary laws, etc.).

Chapter 2

Now Paul gives the background of his “butting heads” with the Church leaders in Jerusalem. He first shares with them about his trip to Jerusalem during the time when the church was debating whether or not Gentiles should have to be circumcised. This was a matter Paul was deeply invested in both theologically (only Jesus Christ justifies us), as well as practically (imagine how much harder it would be to spread the gospel if adult men had to be circumcised in order to join the Church). Paul brought Titus with him as proof that people could be faithful Christians –missionaries even- and not be circumcised. Titus was Paul’s evidence at the trial. You can tell by the tone of this letter that there was no love lost between Paul, Peter, and James. They agreed to so arrange their roles within the Church that Paul’s mission was to the Gentiles, Peter’s mission was to the Jews, and James served mainly as a Church administrator. The one thing they all enthusiastically agreed on was social justice, caring for the poor.

Paul next details an episode that happened in Antioch whereby Peter had been sharing in table fellowship with the whole Church (Gentiles and Jews alike), but when some of James’ minions arrived he cowardly began observing Torah dietary restrictions and refused to eat with Gentiles. Paul called out this hypocrisy to his face, and pointed out the hypocrisy of their expectation for Gentiles to change their behavior when they themselves seem to have no trouble living as Gentiles when no one else is around to report back to James.

Vs. 15-21 is a concise expression of Paul’s theology, that we are justified by faith in Christ alone and not by completing the works of the law. As we die with Christ, Christ lives in us. But as we strive to make ourselves justified, we nullify the grace of God.

Chapter 3

Paul now shifts his tirade to the Galatians themselves, reminding them of their experience of receiving the Spirit when all they had was their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul artfully connects all Gentiles as descendants of Abraham, and thus joint heirs of Abraham’s covenant. Paul then shares a somewhat convoluted argument that rather than having many beneficiaries to the covenant, Abraham’s sole beneficiary was actually Jesus Christ, who through his death, gave the promise of life and blessing to everyone (even the Gentiles).

Paul then argues that the law was our human disciplinarian until the time when faith arrived and made us children of God. Vs. 27-29, Baptism is what makes us one family of faith in Christ, where no human divisions may separate us. There’s no such thing as “separate but equal” in the body of Christ. Hierarchy is obliterated through Jesus Christ, we are all one.

Chapter 4

We are heirs in Christ Jesus, having been adopted by God. And because of the presence of the Spirit in our hearts, we are able to call out to God in prayer, “Abba, Daddy.” Paul argues that that intimate relationship with God should be enough for the Galatians, who are now back to celebrating the festivals of Judaism. “Elemental spirits” suggest the common criticism that Jews had for pagan religions: namely, that they shaped their lives around forces with no real power. Paul is flipping this argument on its head to talk about the Galatian’s obedience to Jewish dietary restrictions, circumcision, etc. rather than their reliance on the grace of God alone.

Paul recalls his first arrival to Galatia, when the Galatians helped him through a period of infirmity (perhaps having to do with his eyes). He describes himself as experiencing the pain of childbirth all over again, trying to give birth to the church anew with a spiritually healthy understanding of the gospel.

Finally, Paul ends chapter 4 with an allegory of Sarah and Hagar as a way of describing the present persecution the Church is experiencing (both externally and internally).

Chapter 5

Paul now tells those considering circumcision that they are duty-bound to observe the ENTIRE law if they’re going to be circumcised. Paul’s main issue with the concept of circumcision is that people are relying on this rite to save them rather than on the acts Christ has already performed on their behalf. They have made an idol out of the rite of circumcision. It’s not that the act itself is wrong, but it’s the people’s wrong understanding of it as an act of salvation that they can control. Vs. 6 “the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” That’s what the church is to be about.

The fruit of the Spirit is just one fruit that is expressed through all of these traits: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We don’t need people to speak in tongues or have other ecstatic expressions, the fruit of the Spirit is the visible evidence of God at work within us and within our brothers and sisters. Paul urges the church to live in the spirit and be guided by the Spirit, not by our own competitions and quarrels.

Chapter 6

“Bear one another’s burdens and you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Instead of obeying a multitude of laws, the only law we need follow in Christ is the law of love. Paul urges the Galatians to focus on their own behavior rather than that of their neighbors. “You reap what you sow...” “So let us not grow weary of doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.” Working for the good of all is a mark of the community of faith.

Paul closes his letter by affirming that he himself has written it (with large letters, perhaps because of his former eye infirmity), and reminding the Galatians that those urging their circumcision are essentially using them for their own personal gain in reputation. All that matters is that you have been made a new creation in Christ Jesus.