

Galatians

We don't know for sure when Paul wrote Galatians, but it was probably in the time frame of Acts 15:30-41. The Galatian churches who originally received the letter probably were those established in Acts 13:13-14:23. Paul, Barnabas and Titus traveling to Jerusalem in Galatians 2:1-10 was probably the trip recorded in Acts 15, to settle issues some false teachers had raised about circumcision. Paul directly asserts that those "brethren" promoting conformity to the Law for Gentiles were "false brethren" (Galatians 2:4) and had them in mind when he mentioned "some who trouble you" (Galatians 1:7) and taught a different "gospel" that wasn't good news at all.

Galatians 1 focuses primarily on Paul's authority as an apostle, commissioned and taught by Jesus through revelation. His mission and message were in conformity with that of Peter and James and the other apostles, but he did not learn it from them, receiving it directly from the Lord.

The warnings about false teachers in Galatians 1:6-9 and imprecations of condemnation are consistent with the Law and Prophets and Jesus own words, as well as the other New Testament writers. God's people must always be on their guard against those who twist the scriptures, or otherwise misrepresent Jesus and the gospel. The particular misrepresentation in view in the Galatian letter was a matter of substituting a code of law for salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

The first 2 chapters are an affirmation of the once for all message of the gospel (good news) of grace in Jesus Christ for all people (1:6-7, 11, 2:2, 5, 7, 14). The gospel of Paul and of Peter was the same, from the same empowering source (2:7-8) working in each of them.

There is always a tendency, even for the best of us, to slip into old habits or be a bit inconsistent as in the recounting of Peter/Cephas's visit to Antioch, 2:11-14. Paul's comment in 2:14 about the lifestyle of Peter is worth noting, in view of some even today who advocate imposing Jewishness on the New Covenant of Christ.

The crux of the matter in the discussion of Acts 15 and in the letter of

Galatians is in 2:16 (Acts 15:11). Some think that what was needed was a better law, but no law can give life (3:21). Only receiving the promise of the Spirit (3:14) by faith in Jesus Christ (2:16, 3:7, 22, 24).

The work of the Holy Spirit in those who walk by faith is mentioned 15 times in chapters 3-6.

Paul's exposition of the Law and the Promise given to Abraham in Gal 3 stresses the temporary necessity of a code of law in order to bring the previous promise given to Abraham into fulfillment. Yet, even before the Law faith was the means by which God justified Abraham, and in Christ faith is the means by which we are justified in Christ and made children of Abraham and sons of God. Baptism into Christ is that new birth that sets aside barriers of nations and economics and gender to make believers one in Christ Jesus (3:27-29).

Galatians 4-6

In Galatians 3 Paul built a case for Jew and Gentile being heirs of Abraham and thus beneficiaries of God's promises and sons of God by faith in Jesus Christ. Chapter 4 continues that conclusion, affirming the Christian's are free to share fully in the inheritance of the kingdom by virtue of what Jesus did as a man. Galatians 4:4 alludes to the virgin birth of Jesus and the fulfillment of the promise in Genesis 3:15, that the seed of the woman would overcome the evil one and the consequences of sin.

Sons of God (3:26) receive the Spirit of the Son (4:6). Without the Spirit in our hearts we could not truly say, "Abba! Father!" to God and be an heir along with Jesus.

The things listed in 4:10 as weak and worthless are not especially wrong, but they aren't helpful for knowing the Lord and can become impediments if pursued religiously, enslaving God's children who have been called to freedom in Christ (5:1).

We don't know anything about the illness Paul mentioned in 4:12-15, perhaps the same thing he called a thorn in the flesh in 2 Corinthians 12:7ff, or perhaps something completely different. The Spirit did not provide specifics. The point Paul made about the kindness and concern of the Galatian believers is the point. They didn't receive the gospel from a mighty

man, a charismatic preacher, they received it with divine power from a sick man they might have scorned. The gospel was the thing, not the eloquence or appearance of the preacher.

The attraction of substituting rules for life by the Spirit perplexed Paul, and should be perplexing to all of God's children. Why pursue the path of human wisdom and human accomplishment when God has kept his promises, as highlighted with Paul's allegory based on Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, and the 2 sons that were born (4:21-31). Notice the emphasis on new birth by the Spirit, and the contrast between geographical Jerusalem and God's Jerusalem, the Jerusalem above.

Freedom in Christ by the Spirit has been a running theme from 3:23 on through Galatians 5. Paul stressed in 5:3 that one cannot pick and choose the parts of the Law they want to be bound by, it's either Law or Spirit. If one is going to bind circumcision, or Sabbath keeping, or dietary rules, or some other subset of the Law, they are going to be bound to keep the whole Law and have declined life and freedom in Christ. The Law had a great purpose, and was fulfilled in Christ, and is still essential for understanding the will and work of God, but is not the guiding authority of the Christian faith, working through love (5:6). Note the repeated theme of 5:13-14, found over and over again in the Word of God.

Paul contrasted flesh and Spirit in 3:1-6 and approaches that same contrast from a different angle in 5:16-24. Law, a set of rules that define righteousness, appeals to the flesh, but has no power to restrain the flesh. In contrast, the Spirit produces fruit with the attributes described in v22-23. These are not works as such, but the character of the fruit produced by one joined to Christ by the Spirit (recall John 15:1-8).

Notice the warnings against biting and envying one another in 5:15 and 5:26. Such competition and conflict are contrary to the "word" in 5:14.

The outcome of the admonitions in chapter 5 includes helping one another overcome sin (6:1) and working together to handle the burdens of life (6:2).

Teachers of the word are to be blessed/helped by those who receive the teaching (6:6). That's part of the sowing to the Spirit in 6:8 that leads to a harvest of eternal life. Similarly, doing good without fatigue or

disillusionment sows to the same harvest outcome in v9.

Paul made a habit of in some way signing his letters to help prevent fraud and false teaching (6:11, and recall 1:8).

Note 6:14 and recall 2:20.

Note the “new creation” of 6:15 and watch for that idea in other scriptures.

The “Israel of God” in 6:16 would be those described as sons of God by faith in chapters 3-4.

Bearing the marks of Jesus, 6:17, testifies to Paul’s unwavering faith in Jesus, and the Lord knows those who are his.