

INTRODUCTION

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free (Gal 5:1). This freedom rings out in every page of Galatians, Paul's great "Magna Charta of the Christian faith." This epistle is our charter of Christian freedom, our declaration of independence from slavery to the law.

Throughout the history of the church the message of Galatians has been needed to free men from chains of false doctrine. When the early Judaizers tried to bind men to the old commandments from Sinai, Galatians set them free. When the apostate church of the Dark Ages tried to bind men to a papal system of salvation by penance and works, Galatians set them free. When modern legalists try to bind us to a joyless religion of superior "rightness," Galatians sets us free.

Martin Luther was moved by Galatians to sound the reveille of the Reformation. He said, "The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle; I have betrothed myself to it: it is my wife." His commentary on Galatians cost him more labor, and was more highly esteemed by him, than any of his other works.¹ For Luther, as for every age, the simple gospel of the message of Galatians was a mighty weapon in the arsenal of freedom.

THE WRITER

No epistle can lay more claim to being a genuine product of the hand of Paul than can Galatians. As Kümmel says, "That Galatians is a genuine, authentic Epistle is indisputable."² Paul claims to be the

¹Lightfoot, p. 68.

²As quoted in Carson, p. 290. While "the radical Dutch critics" and iso-

author (1:1 and 5:2), and the early church accepted this claim without reservation. The style and message are clearly Pauline. “His mind, character, and accents are to be seen in every paragraph.”³

THE GALATIAN CHURCHES

While the authorship is beyond dispute, there is considerable controversy regarding the recipients of this letter. They are called “the churches in Galatia,” but just what is meant by this?

During the third century B.C. some barbarian people of Celtic origin migrated to the inner plateau of Asia Minor and established a kingdom there. Since some of the Celtic people were known in France as the Gauls, these people in Asia Minor were distinguished as the “Gallo-Graecians,” from which the name “Galatians” comes.⁴ Their realm was centered around Ancyra (the modern capital of Turkey) in the northern highlands area.

After the Romans conquered this territory, it was combined in 25 B.C. into a large province containing the districts to the south, Lycaonia and Isauria, as well as parts of Pisidia and Phrygia. The newly created province was called Galatia, and included the cities known to us from Paul’s missionary journeys — Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra.

When Paul spoke of “Galatia,” did he refer to ethnic Galatia (the tribal area limited to the north), or did he refer to political Galatia (the province which also included the districts to the south)?² The traditional view, still shown on most Bible maps, is the “north Galatian theory.” The view favored by most commentaries today is the “south Galatian theory.”⁵

lated modern scholars have disputed this, by far the majority of scholars agree that Paul wrote Galatians.

³Johnson, p. 9. Johnson also cites the use of Galatians in Polycarp, with probable allusions in Clement of Rome and Barnabas. Paul was acknowledged as the author by Marcion (A.D. 144) and the Muratorian canon (A.D. 185). At the close of the second century the book was recognized as authoritative by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.

⁴Boice, p. 412.

⁵Fung, pp. 1-2.

The North Galatian Theory

If this view is correct, then Paul must have visited Galatia on the second missionary journey (Acts 16:6, although without preaching) and started churches there on the third missionary journey (Acts 18:23). However, Acts says nothing of the cities there, nor of Paul's preaching.

Possible arguments to support the "North Galatian theory" include the following:⁶

1. "Galatia" meant a place inhabited specifically by the Gauls.
2. In Acts, Antioch is called "Pisidian," while Lystra and Derbe are cities of Lycaonia.
3. The Phrygians would have objected to being called Galatians, since it would remind them of their subjection to Rome.
4. Paul could not have addressed Lycaonians or Pisidians as "O foolish Galatians."
5. The fickle nature of the recipients suits the Gallic people.
6. "The region of Phrygia and Galatia" (Acts 16:6) appears to mean that Galatia was quite distinct from Phrygia.
7. There is no mention in Galatians that Paul experienced strong opposition when he preached there.

The South Galatian Theory

In the 1880s and 1890s William Ramsay did extensive archaeological work in Asia Minor. His careful research not only proved that Luke was an accurate historian; it also laid the foundation for the "south Galatian theory." This is the view favored in this commentary.

If this view is correct, then Paul visited cities of Galatia on all three of his missionary journeys. These were among the first churches he started. The cities would include Pisidian Antioch and Iconium (where Paul met resistance from the Jews), and Lystra

⁶Carson, pp. 292-293. The classic expression of this view is found in Lightfoot, pp. 1-35. The view is still championed by certain scholars today, mainly in Germany (Fung, p. 1.)

(where Paul was first welcomed, and then stoned).

Possible arguments to support the “south Galatian theory” include the following:⁷

1. If Galatia does not include the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, then we know absolutely nothing about the churches which were so important in Paul’s life and to which such an important epistle was sent.

2. The expression “the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (Acts 16:6) is best understood as the area through which Paul would go when he left Lystra and Iconium, “the Phrygio-Galatian” territory.

3. Paul normally uses Roman imperial names for the provinces, and the Roman “Galatia” included the south.

4. “Galatians” was the only word available that would include the people of all four cities (just as “British” includes people who are Welsh, Scottish, and English).

5. “The Galatian churches” participated in the collection for the saints in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1), and Paul’s assistants included two South Galatians – Gaius of Derbe and Timothy of Lystra (Acts 20:4).

6. The northern area was not on the common trade routes, and it is unlikely that Paul would have made a difficult journey to reach such an out-of-the-way place “because of an illness” (Gal 4:13).

7. Judaizers are known to have followed Paul through the cities of the south.

8. Paul’s words “you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God” (4:14) could be connected with his reception at Lystra, where they wanted to worship him and Barnabas.

9. The early church developed along the great trade routes, and these went through the south parts of Galatia, not the north.

10. Barnabas is mentioned three times (2:1, 9, 13), as though he is known to the readers, and he accompanied Paul only on the journey that went to the cities of the south.

⁷Carson, pp. 291-292.

THE DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING

The date and place of writing are somewhat dependent on the choice of north or south Galatia as the destination. If the “north Galatian theory” is correct, the epistle could not have been written until after Paul arrived in Ephesus on the third missionary journey (Acts 18:23-24).⁸ This would produce a date no earlier than A.D. 52-55. Lightfoot proposed that the letter was written from Corinth,⁹ perhaps A.D. 56-57.

If one is convinced that the “south Galatian theory” is correct, a much wider range of dates is possible.¹⁰ Galatians could have been written as early as A.D. 48, even before the Jerusalem Conference.¹¹ However, as our discussion of Gal 2:1-10 will show, it is more likely that the Jerusalem Conference had already taken place when Paul wrote the letter. This would move the probable date to A.D. 50 or later. It is likely that Galatians stands among the first of Paul’s epistles.

The decision about the date and place of writing does not affect the interpretation of Galatians; in fact, the reverse is true. The exegesis of the text determines the decision about date and place. One cannot say, “Paul wrote at such and such a date; therefore, the text means this.” Our decision about date and place comes from

⁸Johnson, p. 16.

⁹Lightfoot, p. 55.

¹⁰Johnson lists these suggested places and times of writing:

- a. At Antioch (Syria), A.D. 48-49, immediately following the first missionary journey and before the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15).
- b. At Antioch (Syria), A.D. 49-50, right after the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15).
- c. At Corinth, A.D. 52-54, toward the end of the second missionary journey.
- d. At Antioch (Syria), after the second missionary journey.
- e. At Ephesus, shortly after Paul arrived there on his third missionary journey, or just before he left Ephesus for Macedonia, A.D. 55-57.
- f. From Macedonia on the third journey, A.D. 56-57.
- g. From Corinth on the third journey just before the writing of Romans, A.D. 57-58.
- h. From Rome (a remote possibility), A.D. 61-63, as another prison epistle.

¹¹Fung, p. 28; Bruce, p. 55; Carson, p. 294.

indications in the text itself (Gal 1:6 “so quickly deserting”; 2:1 “fourteen years later I went up again to Jerusalem”; 2:11 “when Peter came to Antioch”; 4:13 “because of an illness I first preached to you”; 4:20 “I wish I could be with you now.”) What we know for certain about Paul’s circumstances we will learn from the text.

OUTLINE

- I. AUTHORITY: The Apostolic Gospel – 1:1-2:21**
 - A. Greeting – 1:1-5**
 - B. Paul’s Astonishment – 1:6-10**
 - C. Paul’s Call by God – 1:11-17**
 - D. Paul’s Brief Meeting with Leaders – 1:18-24**
 - E. Showdown: Conference in Jerusalem – 2:1-5**
 - F. Apostolic Agreement – 2:6-10**
 - G. Showdown: Conflict in Antioch – 2:11-14**
 - H. Apostolic Conclusion – 2:15-21**
- II. ARGUMENTS: Law Vs. Faith – 3:1-4:31**
 - A. Argument One: Receiving the Spirit – 3:1-5**
 - B. Argument Two: Abraham – 3:6-9**
 - C. Argument Three: The Curse – 3:10-14**
 - D. Argument Four: A Human Covenant – 3:15-22**
 - E. Argument Five: The Child-Keeper – 3:23-4:7**
 - 1. The Job of the Child-Keeper – 3:23-25
 - 2. The Benefits for the Children – 3:26-29
 - 3. The Full Rights of the Children – 4:1-7
 - 4. The Folly of Turning Back – 4:8-11
 - F. Argument Six: Paul’s Personal Plea – 4:12-20**
 - 1. Paul’s Former Welcome – 4:12-16
 - 2. Paul’s Present Pains – 4:17-20
 - G. Argument Seven: Allegory of Hagar & Sarah – 4:21-31**
- III. APPLICATION: Living for Freedom – 5:1-6:18**
 - A. Freedom or a Yoke? – 5:1-6**
 - B. The Yeast of the Agitators – 5:7-12**
 - C. The Essence of Law and Love – 5:13-15**
 - D. The Acts of the Sinful Nature – 5:16-21**
 - E. The Fruit of the Spirit – 5:22-26**

- F. The Law of Christ – 6:1-6**
- G. The Harvest of the Spirit – 6:7-10**
- H. Paul's Own Conclusion – 6:11-18**