

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE GALATIANS

\* \* \* \* \*

## WHO WERE THE GALATIANS?

If you look at the map facing this page, you will see that the central part of Turkey around its capital Ankara was in Paul's day known as Galatia. The people who gave their name to the area had originally been Celtic tribesmen who had made their way from Europe into Asia Minor in the third century B.C. and founded a kingdom there. In 25 B.C. Galatia was made a province of the Roman Empire with its capital at Ancyra, now Ankara, but its boundaries were extended southwards to include not only the descendants of the original Celtic invaders but also other native peoples such as the Lycaonians, and various cities with a mixed population like those mentioned in the book of Acts: Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and Pisidian Antioch.

The narrative in Acts at this point (Acts 13-14) is concerned with Paul's first missionary tour, when with Barnabas and John Mark he set out from Syrian Antioch and sailed via Cyprus to Perga in the south of Asia Minor. From there they made their way northwards through the Taurus Mountains into the province of Galatia and arrived at Pisidian Antioch. The reason for this may well have been that Perga lay in a swampy area which brought on one of Paul's recurrent attacks of an illness that was in all probability malaria (Gal. 4: 13; 2 Cor. 12: 7).

John Mark left Paul and Barnabas at Perga, perhaps because he did not relish a trip into the backwoods of Asia

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## GALATIANS

*Who were the Galatians?*

Minor. At all events he returned home to Jerusalem and the two older men went on, presumably when Paul had recovered and sought convalescence in the fresher mountain air to the north. Their route led them through Pisidian Antioch and Iconium where they conducted missions among Jews and Gentiles. Although they were hounded out of both districts, they successfully established little Christian communities before going on to the Lycaonian towns of Lystra and Derbe.

At Lystra they were among people whom civilized Romans would have called barbarians. They spoke their own native tongue instead of the normal colloquial Greek, which served as a common language throughout the Roman Empire, and they were simple and superstitious enough to mistake Paul and Barnabas for the gods Mercury and Jupiter come down to earth. Despite shocking ill-treatment, engineered by hostile Jews, Paul carried on with the mission, and having laid the foundations of a Christian congregation there and at Derbe the apostles retraced their steps, visiting each of the little communities again and organizing their leadership, before returning to the coast and thence by sea to their Syrian headquarters at Antioch.

*North or South Galatia?*

There are one or two other references in the book of Acts to Paul's later travels in Galatian territory (16: 6; 18: 23), and for all we know he may have founded other Christian churches on these occasions. If so, we do not even know where they were, and indeed we know little enough of the ones that have just been mentioned. But it seems most likely that it was to these four young Christian communities, founded on Paul's first missionary tour and subsequently visited again, that this letter was written. Barnabas, who was with Paul on that first campaign, is mentioned more than once in chapter 2 of the letter as if he were well known to the readers, and Paul's description of his first encounter with the Galatians in 4: 13-14 would seem to fit in well with the narrative of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Who were the Galatians?*

## GALATIANS

first missionary tour in Acts 13–14. He refers to his illness at that time as having led to his campaign in that area, and when he reminds them that they welcomed him as if he had been ‘an angel of God’ it sounds like an allusion to Paul’s initial reception at Lystra when he was greeted as Mercury, the messenger of the gods.

This view that the letter was written to the churches of South Galatia is relatively modern. Ancient commentators assumed that Paul was writing to the Celtic racial group living in North Galatia, the old geographical area of the Galatian kingdom before the Romans enlarged it into a province with a mixed population. Some modern scholars still support this view. But we know nothing about any churches having been founded by Paul in that part of the country, nor is it clear from the book of Acts when he could have visited the area, unless Acts 16: 6 and 18: 23 can be said to mean only the North and to exclude the South.

Moreover, Paul as a Roman citizen was in the habit of referring to groups of churches in terms of Roman provinces, as when he speaks of the congregations in Asia (1 Cor. 16: 19) and in Macedonia (2 Cor. 8: 1). It is therefore more than likely that when he addresses this letter to ‘the Christian congregations of Galatia’ (1: 2) he means the whole province. There are therefore very strong grounds for thinking of this letter as being addressed primarily in any case to the four little South Galatian Jewish–Gentile communities which were founded on Paul’s first missionary journey as recorded in Acts 13–14.

## WHY DID PAUL WRITE THIS?

No one has ever seriously doubted that Paul was the writer of this letter. What we know of the man and his mind from the letters to the Romans and to the Corinthians matches up perfectly with the contents of this ‘great manifesto of Christian liberty’. The narrative of Paul’s activities in the book of Acts connects at many points with the autobiographical details he

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## GALATIANS

*Why did Paul write this?*

gives us in this letter. What we must ask, however, is: Why did he have to write to Galatia at all?

A quick glance at the letter will tell us at once that when Paul wrote it he was extremely annoyed. It begins abruptly without the usual friendly greetings, and at once it appears that the apostle is having to defend himself against charges which he is indignantly refuting. He accuses the Galatians of being stupid enough to be taken in by agitators who have been stirring up trouble, twisting the gospel into something quite different from what it ought to be, and casting aspersions on Paul himself. What was this all about?

It was indeed a serious matter and it was little wonder that Paul was furious. This letter takes us right to the heart of one of the great problems Christianity had to face in its early days, something that was far more crucial than merely the teething troubles of a growing young Church. Jesus and his disciples were Jews, racially of the same blood as Abraham, Moses, David, as well as the prophets and psalmists of Israel. Their homeland was the battle-scarred scene of more than a thousand years of Hebrew history; the Temple of Jerusalem and the local synagogues had moulded their religious upbringing; their Bible was the Old Testament.

It was only to be expected that, after the Crucifixion of Jesus, the Twelve Apostles, who became the leaders of 'the sect of the Nazarenes', as Christians were first commonly called (Acts 24: 5), regarded themselves as in every respect bound by the religious practices in which they had been brought up. Two thousand years of Jewish tradition were in their bones. The words of the Law and the Prophets which were their heritage were sacred and binding. Their association with Jesus had brought them to the conviction that he must be the long-promised Messiah for whom the Jews had hoped and prayed for centuries. Although this growing realization had often been difficult to square with what the Old Testament had said about Messiah, and was almost shattered when they saw the Messiah treated like a common criminal and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Why did Paul write this?*

GALATIANS

nailed upon a cross, the Resurrection and the appearances of the risen Christ finally convinced them that Messiah had indeed come and would soon return in power and judgement to found his Kingdom.

*A gospel for Jews*

This was the message they went out into the streets of Jerusalem to proclaim after the first Whitsunday. It was a call to their fellow Jews to accept this heaven-sent opportunity of getting into the right relationship with God through Christ and of becoming the People of God that Israel was meant to be, not merely by being born Jews but by being re-born in repentance, faith and obedience. Thus the invitation given by the Apostles to all Jews was to join the community of the new Israel, to share the new power of the Spirit which had come from Christ, enabling them to live in accordance with God's commandments, and to await the great day of Christ's Second Coming in full assurance of sharing in the blessings of his reign.

In all this there was no suggestion that those who accepted this invitation should be anything but orthodox Jews or that they should abate one whit of normal Jewish religious practice. The Temple and the Law of Moses were still supreme. The Good News was for the children of Abraham. If nothing had happened to change this attitude of the first Christian missionaries and force the young Church to restate its gospel in other terms, it is safe to say that Christianity would not have lasted for a generation. It would have flourished for a time as a Palestinian sect and died like so many others. For, stated in the terms in which the gospel was first proclaimed, it would have appeared to any intelligent pagan to be as absurd as it would appear to anyone today.

*A gospel for the world*

But Christianity was not destined to perish, and the whole narrative of the book of Acts is the story of how the Church was guided into an understanding that Christ came to renew

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## GALATIANS

*Why did Paul write this?*

the life of the whole world and not merely of his own race. As a result of this deeper insight the Church was forced to restate the gospel in terms that made sense to a pagan world which knew little and cared less about what went on in the Temple of Jerusalem or what was written in the Law of Moses.

When the Church came more and more to recognize that the gospel was a message of reconciliation between God and man, and between every man and his neighbour, and that the power of the Spirit of Christ was compelling it to break down every barrier of race, class and colour, it became obvious that it was not only a question of adopting new techniques of mission, or even of solving the problem of communicating Jewish ideas to a Gentile world, but that there had to be a radical rethinking of the whole relationship of Christianity to its Jewish origins. Within the confines of Jewry the Church could exist in association with Jewish orthodoxy. Jewish Christians had been brought up to believe that the ritual of the Temple, the practice of circumcision, the avoidance of contaminating paganism and abstention from certain types of food such as pork were all essential to salvation. This was the will of God as delivered to Moses and contained in the sacred Law.

*What had Jesus said?*

But could Gentiles be expected to treat these matters equally seriously? Were they of the essence of Christianity, or were they rather the stage props of its original setting which were no longer necessary when the next act of the drama had to be played against a different background? Further reflexion on Jesus' own attitude to Jewish practices made it apparent that while he was and indeed claimed to be the culmination of Old Testament hopes and prayers, he was highly critical not only of how the Old Testament was being interpreted in his day but also, on occasion, of the Old Testament itself.

Since his ministry was among Jews and since every Jewish male child was circumcised as a matter of course, Jesus had

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Why did Paul write this?*

GALATIANS

no cause to refer to this particular practice. But the sacred institution of the sabbath, by which the rabbis set so much store, he dismissed as being of less importance than human need (Mark 2: 27). He had mixed with the down-and-outs of society and broken through the caste system by including among his disciples a tax collector who trafficked with Gentiles (Mark 2: 13–17). He had trounced the scruples of the orthodox Jews who counted it sinful to eat ‘unclean’ food, by insisting that a man defiles himself by what he does and not by what he swallows (Mark 7: 17–23). His violent attack on the Temple traders cut at the roots of priestly practice and he shared the prophets’ view that to love God and one’s neighbour is worth more than the whole paraphernalia of animal sacrifice (Mark 11: 15–19; 12: 33–4). In the Sermon on the Mount he asserted his right not only to reinterpret the Law of Moses but to correct it (Matt. 5).

*The ‘God-fearers’*

A contributory factor in helping the early Church to distinguish between what was of permanent and universal value in their Jewish heritage and what was merely a matter of racial upbringing and tradition, was the existence of groups of Gentile adherents of the Jewish synagogues in the cities and towns of the Roman Empire. These ‘God-fearers’, as they were called, were serious-minded pagans who found no satisfaction in the various religious cults of the day but were attracted to the beliefs and practices of the Jews who lived in their midst. They were attracted by a faith which maintained that there is only one God and by the high standards which were proclaimed in the synagogues which they attended as sympathetic worshippers. It was open to any and all of them to become converts to the Jewish religion, and Jewish missionary propaganda was directed actively to win them over. Most of them, however, were unwilling to take this step, since it involved among other things full compliance with Jewish Law, including circumcision, abstention from

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## GALATIANS

*Why did Paul write this?*

prohibited food and avoidance of social contact with their Gentile neighbours.

The last of these requirements would virtually involve joining the Jews in their self-imposed isolation from the rest of the community, the second was full of practical difficulties in a normal pagan city, but the first above all was the ultimate deterrent. To the average citizen of the Roman Empire who had learned from the Greeks to appreciate the beauty of the human body, the idea of mutilating it by circumcision appeared revolting and barbaric—apart from being extremely painful. Devout adherents of the synagogue could see no connexion between the austere God of the Old Testament prophets and the high morality of the Ten Commandments on the one hand, and this relic of oriental tribalism on the other. However the rabbis might explain circumcision as the outward sign of an inward commitment to God, most pagan sympathizers preferred to retain the status of adherents.

*The impact of Stephen*

There was thus a pattern and a precedent in Judaism outside Palestine which did not fail to influence the policy of the early Church when it moved outward from its original setting in Jerusalem to the cosmopolitan cities of the empire. Even before this happened there was a cleavage of opinion among the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem: between those who regarded the new faith as an improved form of Judaism of the narrower type and those who had begun to see that Judaism and Christianity could no more be mixed together than oil and water. Particularly, this would seem to have been the case with those Jewish Christians who had lived outside Palestine and who knew the more liberal practice of the synagogues overseas in accepting as useful adherents pagans who refused to accept what conservative Palestinian-born Christians would have held to be as essential to Christianity as to Judaism.

The chief protagonist of this point of view was Stephen,



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Why did Paul write this?*

GALATIANS

whose defence of it ended in his martyrdom. From the account of him given in Acts 6 and 7 he appears to have been a brilliant advocate of the difference between Christianity and Judaism, emphasizing the importance of observing the spirit of the Old Testament as opposed to the letter. He insisted that the People of God, as the Jews claimed to be, did not depend upon the sacred soil of Palestine or the holy Temple of Jerusalem or the rite of circumcision. By implication, of course, if these things were not important for Jews they were even less important for Christians. Stephen constitutes a half-way stage between the original conservatism of the Twelve Apostles and the radical attitude of Paul on the question of how far the Church should be anchored to its Jewish foundations.

*Gentiles: second-class Christians?*

Stephen's bold critique of Judaism led to the first persecution of the Christians, in which a foremost part was played by the zealous rabbi Saul of Tarsus. But it was, in the purpose of God, this very persecution that enabled Christianity to become a world religion, not least through the efforts of the same Saul after his conversion. Driven from Jerusalem, the Christian gospel was planted in one town after another throughout Palestine and Syria. Wherever the Christians went they proclaimed their faith, and it was not long before Gentiles were clamouring to be admitted to the fellowship of the Church. On what terms were they to be admitted? Was the Church to follow the pattern of Judaism and have two levels of association—full membership for those who had been brought up as Jews or were prepared to become Jews by acceptance of the Old Testament Law, including circumcision, and second-class status as adherents for Gentile Christian 'God-fearers' who were willing to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord but unwilling to enter his Church if it involved becoming Jews in order to do so?

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09402-3 - The Letter of Paul to the Galatians

William Neil

Excerpt

[More information](#)

GALATIANS

*Why did Paul write this?**Paul's view of the Church*

Whatever reservations the Twelve Apostles and the conservative Jerusalem Christians may have had, and however reluctant they may have been to face up to the issue, it was the unwavering belief of Paul, held with passionate conviction, that Christ had broken down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles and that there must be no second-class citizens within his Church.

As a 'Hebrew born and bred', as he called himself (Phil. 3: 5), no one believed more than Paul in the priceless legacy that had been entrusted to Israel and that was now the inheritance of the Church, the revelation of God's nature and purpose contained in Old Testament scripture. No one believed more than Paul that Christ and his Church were the fulfilment of God's promises to his ancient people the Jews; no one believed more in the special role that Jews had still to play in God's plan for the salvation of the world. As a loyal son of the traditions of his race, Paul regarded it as right and proper for himself and all other Jewish Christians to respect the religious and social practices in which they had been brought up. His aim was that Jews should become Jewish Christians, not that they should cease to be recognizable as Jews. For them circumcision was still an obligation, the Temple of Jerusalem and all that went on in it was still the focus of their worship.

But he was equally convinced that none of this was necessary for salvation, still less that it applied to Gentiles. In their case commitment to Christ and baptism were all-sufficient and gave them equal status with Jewish Christians in the new Israel of God, the Church. He resisted consistently and utterly any attempt on the part of Jewish Christians to force non-Jews to be circumcised or to be burdened by obligations to keep Jewish ceremonial law. His argument, as we shall see in this letter, was simply that Christ had made men free of all such external regulations. The right relationship