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978-0-521-35953-5 - The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians

James D. G. Dunn

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Galatians is one of the fiercest and most polemical writings in the Bible. It begins with a denunciation of those to whom it was written and of unnamed troublemakers (1.6–9). It dismisses another group of Christians as 'false brothers', makes snide remarks about the leaders of the Jerusalem church (2.6) and accuses Peter of hypocrisy and deceit (2.13–14). After two somewhat more restrained chapters, the tone of urgent pleading and denunciation is resumed (5.2–4, 7–10), including a rather crude and blackly humorous aside (5.12). And the final paragraph cannot resist a parting swipe at those behind the problems and challenges which the letter seeks to address (6.12–13).

It is this feature which makes Paul's letter such an exciting document to deal with. For Galatians is not an academic treatise drawn up in the calm autumn of a long life, the mature fruit of long debate, with every statement duly weighed and every phrase finely polished. Rather, it comes from the early morning of a vigorous new movement (Christianity), when basic principles were first being formulated, and when the whole character of the movement was at stake. In the pages of Galatians, one of the earliest documents in the New Testament, we see, as it were, fundamental features of Christian theology taking shape before our eyes. In no sense is Galatians an ivory tower tract remote from real life, the dispassionate statement of one high above the battle. Rather, it is a cry from the heart of one at the very front of the line of Christian advance, dealing with questions which determined the identity and whole life-style of those to whom he wrote. It is theology

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engaging with the challenge of competing interpretations of central beliefs and with the crisis of new adherents caught in the crossfire of whom to believe and how to act. It is itself theology under fire, theology in the midst, living theology. There can be no question that the man who wrote this letter was deeply engaged with and totally committed to what he wrote.

The same feature lies also, presumably, at the heart of the letter's influence in Christian history and theology. For the uninhibited nature of Paul's language gives the reader a unique insight into the heart of his theology. Here sentences carefully constructed to conceal more than they reveal, the ambiguous formulations of ecclesiastical compromise, are notable by their absence (2.6–10 may be an exception). Paul evidently wanted his Galatian audiences to be in no doubt as to where he stood, how he conceived the gospel, and what its consequences are. Here subsequent readers readily feel that they are encountering the living heart of Paul's gospel, stripped even of the qualifications and more measured tones of his subsequent letter to the Romans. This is theology in the raw, red-blooded theology, quintessential paulinism. There is an elemental quality about it, to which those tired of compromising half-truths are drawn when they feel the instinctive impulse to return to first principles. There is more nuclear power in these few pages than in the polemical cannons and mortars of theological treatises, twenty, fifty or one hundred times larger, which have peppered the history of Christianity.

Those who wish truly to engage in this letter and its theology must therefore be prepared themselves to engage in the process of theology: to ask why it was that Paul felt these points of theological principle so passionately; whether he was right in his conviction that there could be no 'other gospel' (1.7), other than what he preached, or whether, alternatively, his understanding and expression of the gospel were as unbalanced as those he attacked; and whether his gospel and its outworkings still provide a pattern for later generations and for today. Certainly as a model of theological integrity, where life-forming principles deeply felt are brought to clear expression,

where contemporary questions and challenges are addressed boldly and directly, and where passionate conviction and theological sophistication are blended in powerful exposition, Galatians has few equals.

SETTING THE LETTER IN CONTEXT

In the case of a document so thoroughly related to a particular context in history, it is naturally important to try to locate that document as fully as possible in that context. Who were the 'foolish Galatians' (3.1)? What was the nature of the crisis which the letter writer was so worked up about? Why was he so worked up about it? Even before studying the letter in detail, the presumption must be strong that it will contain allusions and references to that context. And almost certainly some at least of these references and allusions will be so integrally related to the situation addressed, that they cannot be adequately understood without reference to that context.

This is where the task of interpreting a letter is bound to differ from the task of interpreting a narrative or treatise, where the author as author has stepped back from immediate involvement with the affairs of every day or of particular situations. A letter, more or less by definition, is part of a dialogue (between specific writer and specific recipients), and to abstract it from that dialogue is to lose something of its quality as answer to actual questions or propositions posed, and as questions or propositions requiring in turn an answer from actual recipients. And this letter of all letters is so much the voice of one man addressing a particular situation with urgency and passion that the task of setting it in context has an inescapable imperative.

This is not to say that a complete reconstruction of the historical context is possible. Nor to admit that, a complete reconstruction being impossible, much or most of the dialogic meaning of the letter's content will escape us. There are sufficient indications in the letter itself, especially when set against the larger context of the Judaism and Hellenistic world of the time, to enable us to reconstruct a fairly good picture of the

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situation in Galatia.¹ There will, of course, be nuances and allusions which are difficult to recognize and will be missed, because our knowledge of the context is so sketchy. And we will frequently be unsure of the extent to which we should discount the bias and one-sidedness of Paul's own view of the issues. But even so we can reconstruct in sufficient detail both the chain of events leading up to the letter (thanks above all to Paul's own autobiographical account in chapters 1 and 2), and the theological views which Paul opposes in the letter, to be reasonably confident of recognizing the primary thrust of most of what Paul says.

This stress on the meaning of the letter within the historical context within which and for which it was written is also not intended to exclude the possibility and legitimacy of other readings of the text in later and different contexts. We will take note of some of these in the final chapter. But a text which is treated as endlessly flexible and capable of multiple contradictory readings either becomes a mere tool of dogma and ideology, or a reflex of unconstrained egoistic pluralism. In fact, however, the language of the text itself provides all the constraints necessary, especially when we recall that it was written in Greek, and that therefore understanding of it is from the start dependent on a knowledge of Greek terms, syntax and idiom at a particular period in history. In my own view, the text set within context, particularly in the case of a letter and especially in the case of this letter, determines a limited range of understanding of the text, in large themes certainly, but also in many particulars, which is bound to be normative for all other readings.²

The author

Unlike many ancient documents whose authors we can only guess at, we know well who wrote Galatians. It was Paul – the

¹ See particularly J. M. G. Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter. Galatians as a Test Case', *JST* 31 (1987) pp. 73–93.

² For full discussion of the hermeneutical issues see particularly A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (London: Harper Collins, 1992); see also my 'A Word in Time: Understanding the Bible Today', *ER* 19 (1992) pp. 27–42.

Setting the letter in context

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Paul who introduces himself in 1.1. Here at once we discover the first of Galatians' treasures. For Galatians provides us with more personal and autobiographical information than any of Paul's other letters, particularly in chapters 1 and 2. He starts at once by impressing his readers with his self-understanding as 'apostle' (1.1). We learn of his 'earlier life in Judaism' as a zealous Jew and persecutor of 'the church of God' (1.13–14). He tells us of his entry into Christian faith – his conversion as it is usually called (1.15–16). He relates his previous encounters with the Christian leadership in Jerusalem (2.1–10) and what appears to have been a highly contentious confrontation with Peter in Antioch (2.11–14). He also gives some very personal reminiscences of his evangelizing visit to Galatia (4.12–20) and hints at the personal, physical cost of his strenuous life (6.17). When all this is integrated with the teaching of the letter itself, it enables us to build up a strong picture of Paul the missionary and theologian, and enables us to situate the letter to Galatia itself within both his life and his theology.

However, we should not simply abstract such information from the letter and be content to use it to construct a biographical profile. For the information is part of the letter. It serves the purpose of the letter. As recent rhetorical analysis of the letter had indicated, the autobiographical narrative in chapters 1 and 2 was intended to build up to and to introduce the principal theological argument of the following chapters.³ The highly personal language of 2.14–21 and 6.11–17 is indication in itself of the degree to which Paul saw his own experience as an epitome of the gospel. It will be necessary, therefore, to look at this information in more detail in due course, since Paul's selection of autobiographical data and the way he uses it is itself part of the theology of the letter. As G. Lyons has observed, Paul 'presents his "autobiography" as a paradigm of the gospel of Christian freedom ... (and) considers himself in some sense a representative or even an embodiment

³ H. D. Betz, *Galatians* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 58–62. See also below p. 15 and n. 26.

of that gospel'.⁴ Whether this involved a degree of 'autobiographical reconstruction', that is, personal reminiscences tailored to fit a subsequent perspective,⁵ is something we will have to bear in mind. Such reflections also suggest a danger in assuming that the information provided by Paul will be 'pure' because first-hand, over against more 'tainted', second-hand information given by Acts. But since our concern is primarily with the theology of Galatians we need not pursue that issue further.

The recipients

Paul's reminiscences also provide valuable information about those to whom the letter was addressed and about their entry into Christian faith. They were Galatians (1.2; 3.1); that this means also that they were Gentiles is the clear implication of 4.8 ('you did not know God and were in slavery to beings that by nature are no gods'). They had welcomed Paul's arrival with great warmth and solicitousness for his poor physical condition (4.13–15). To them Paul had preached Christ crucified (3.1) and their response of faith had resulted in rich and powerful experiences of the Spirit (3.2–5). Here again, apart from their name and ethnic identity ('Galatians'), the information all serves Paul's theological purpose in writing the letter and we shall have to study it also with greater care if we are fully to appreciate that theology.

The main bone of contention for historical scholarship at this point has been the identity of the 'Galatians'. It is clear enough that they belonged to the region known by that name (Galatia), located in the heartland of Asia Minor (modern Turkey).⁶ But was the name being used in an ethnic sense

⁴ G. Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography. Towards a New Understanding* (SBLDS 73; Atlanta; Scholars Press, 1985), p. 171; see also J. H. Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (SNTSMS 26; Cambridge University Press, 1975) ch. 5; B. R. Gaventa, 'Galatians 1 and 2: Autobiography as Paradigm', *NovT* 28 (1986), pp. 309–26.

⁵ As argued e.g. by N. Taylor, *Paul, Antioch and Jerusalem. A Study in Relationships and Authority in Earliest Christianity* (JSNTS 66; Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), pp. 155–70.

⁶ The name derives from the Gallic tribes (the Gauls or Celts) who migrated into Asia Minor and settled in the region in the third century bc.

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(Galatians = descendants of the original Gallic/Celtic settlers), or in an administrative sense (the Roman province of Galatia extended further south)? In fact the question has to do more with integrating the information provided by Galatians (the letter) into the programme of Paul's missionary work as recorded in Acts. For if the name was being used of the administrative territory, the Galatians in question could be citizens of the more cultured cities in the south of the region, the cities which, according to Acts 13–14, Paul visited during his 'first missionary journey' (Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe). Whereas, again according to Acts, Paul did not visit ethnic Galatia till what is usually incorrectly described as Paul's 'second missionary journey' (Acts 16.6). However, here again the issue has very little effect on the theology of the letter, except as it bears upon the relative dating of the letter (see below), so that we can simply refer to the commentaries for fuller discussion of the alternative views.⁷

THE OCCASION OF THE LETTER

The letter seems to have been written in immediate response to what Paul perceived as an urgent crisis among the Galatian churches (1.6–9). Since he had been with them, probably for the second time (4.13),⁸ others had come among them urging them to be circumcised (5.2–12; 6.12–13). Paul calls them 'troublemakers' or 'agitators' (1.7; 5.10, 12), and it is probably a fair inference that they had criticized both Paul's claim to apostolic authority and his understanding of the gospel (1.1, 6–12), as perhaps also his consistency (5.11). Who they were, what they wanted for the Galatians and why, are central

⁷ For the 'north Galatian hypothesis' see particularly J. Moffatt, *An Introduction to the Literature of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1918) 3rd edn, pp. 90–101; W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1965) pp. 296–8. For the 'south Galatians hypothesis' see particularly E. de W. Burton *Galatians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921) pp. xxvii, xxix, xlv; F. F. Bruce, 'Galatian Problems. 2. North or South Galatians?', *BJRL* 52 (1969–70) pp. 243–66; C. J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), ch. 7; S. Mitchell, 'Galatian', *ABD* 2.871.

⁸ *To proteron* probably means 'the first time', but could be translated simply as 'once' (BAGD, *proteros* 1).

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questions for any study of the letter's theology, since the letter was evidently written directly to counter their teaching. These questions therefore need somewhat fuller attention than those touched on already.

The opponents

Who were the troublemakers whom Paul clearly perceived as opponents of the truth of the gospel (cf. 2.5, 14)? Some think they were gentile converts of Paul who had been impressed by the importance of circumcision in Jewish tradition, not least in the Abraham story of Gen. 17.9–14, and had become convinced that participation in the blessing promised to Abraham was impossible without it.⁹ This view can certainly be defended on the basis of 6.13 (which can be translated 'those who are circumcised', but may very properly be rendered 'those who are being circumcised or are having themselves circumcised'). But the fact that Paul always refers to the troublemakers in the third person, while addressing his converts in the second person, strongly suggests that the two groups were distinct. Moreover, the emphasis throughout the letter indicates that the terms of the dispute were Jewish through and through, and probably so perceived through Jewish eyes. For example, Paul makes a point of asserting his Jewish identity at the beginning of the letter and of re-emphasizing the centrality of Israel at the end (1.13–14; 6.16). The parallels cited by him in chapter 2 were those of Jews insisting on traditional Jewish terms for acceptance of Gentiles. And circumcision was demanded of would-be proselytes precisely because it was so fundamental to Jewish identity – so fundamental that Paul can use the term to designate Jews as a whole as 'the circumcision' (not 'the circumcised' – 2.7, 9).¹⁰

Most commentators therefore conclude that the agitators were Jews. But even if they were not Gentiles seeking to

⁹ See particularly J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM, 1959), pp. 130–4; L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987), e.g. pp. 29–30, 81–2.

¹⁰ See further below, ch. 2.

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proselytize, Paul's converts were. That is to say, the Jewish 'troublemakers' seem to have been enjoying considerable success in persuading Paul's Gentile converts on the need to be circumcised.¹¹ This points at once to the heart of the letter and one of its principal theological issues. It can be expressed in several ways: how do Gentile and Jew relate to each other within the purposes of God? How should Gentiles relate to the God of Israel? How can Gentiles participate in the blessings God promised through Abraham? Who belongs to Israel now that Messiah Jesus has come and on what terms? Is circumcision after all to continue to be the key identity factor which marks out the assembly of God's people? No study of the theology of Galatians can avoid giving this issue central place.

It is even clearer that the 'troublemakers' were, like Paul, Christian Jews, that is, believers in Jesus as Messiah and followers of his 'way' (Acts 24.14, 22). This is obvious inference from the fact that Paul acknowledges, however grudgingly, that they claimed to preach the 'gospel of Christ' (1.6–9), since the word 'gospel' was already a distinctively Christian term.¹² They likewise seem to have agreed with Paul on the importance of faith in Christ (cf. 2.16) and of the cross of Christ (6.12).¹³ What was at issue was the corollary to these fundamentals (3.1–5, 15–18; 4.9–10).¹⁴ Here again is matter of prime significance for understanding the theology of the letter. For it expresses a dispute between Christians, a dispute about the fundamental question of the gospel itself. It reminds us that the formative theology of Christianity was forged not simply and not primarily under attack from without, but as a wrestling of Christian with Christian (including Paul with Peter! – 2.11–18) to understand what it was that constituted the essential character of Christianity. Here again we are reminded of

¹¹ The repeated use of the present tense in the letter (1.6; 4.9–10, 21; 5.2–4; 6.12) indicates an on-going crisis, with increasing numbers succumbing to the new teaching.

¹² See particularly P. Stuhlmacher, *Das paulinische Evangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1968); also 'The Pauline Gospel', *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. P. Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 149–72.

¹³ See further below chs. 2 and 3.

¹⁴ See further below ch. 4.

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the living quality of the letter's theology and of the model for theology which it provides.

If then the opponents were Christian Jews who had come to the Galatian churches from outside, who were they and how should we refer to them? 'Troublemakers' is, of course, Paul's own way of referring to them and hardly provides an unbiased description, rather the irascible response of one who felt his authority under threat. Traditionally they have been called 'judaizers', meaning those who attempt to bring others within Judaism. This is unfortunate since the word is drawn directly from the Greek, *ioudaizein*, which means 'to live like a Jew, according to Jewish customs',¹⁵ not to impose Judaism on others. Furthermore, the latter, inaccurate meaning reinforces a view of Judaism as strongly evangelistic at this time, which although also widely held, is again almost certainly false, at least as an appropriate generalization. Gentile God-fearers and especially proselytes were, of course, welcome within Judaism, but as a rule the impetus came from without rather than from within.¹⁶ The first full-scale missionary movement (properly so-called) by Jews to Gentiles that we know of was the missionary outreach of the Jews who believed in Jesus Messiah and followed his way.

In fact, the 'troublemakers' were themselves probably part of that missionary outreach, though, as appears obvious, a different strand from that of Paul. This is implicit, as we shall see shortly, in Paul's defence of the legitimacy of his apostleship and gospel (1.1, 11–12). For at this very early stage in Christianity 'apostle' still retained its primary meaning of 'one sent

¹⁵ Esther 7.17 LXX – 'many of the Gentiles were circumcised and judaized for fear of the Jews'; Theodotus in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.22.5 – Jacob would not give Dinah to the son of Hamor 'until all the inhabitants of Shechem were circumcised and judaized'; Josephus, *War* 2.454 – Metilius (commander of the Roman garrison in Jerusalem) 'saved his life by entreaties and promises to judaize and even to be circumcised'; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.38–46 – Izates, king of Adiabene, having been converted by a Jewish merchant, without circumcision being required, was thereafter persuaded that circumcision was essential.

¹⁶ See particularly S. McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles. Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); M. Goodman, 'Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century', *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, ed. J. Lieu et al. (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 53–78.