

PART I

Reading the Theology of Galatians

What is presented within the covers of this book follows the structure of the volumes in this series.* Part I establishes the context for reading the theology of Galatians. Part II explores the theological discourse of Galatians through selected themes of particular importance. Part III explores some ways that Paul's Galatian discourse pertains to other texts within the New Testament, outlines some ways that Galatians has been interpreted over the centuries, and offers a short prospectus for the contemporary challenge of Galatians.

Chapter 1 in this section introduces the occasion for Paul's writing of the Galatian letter, while Chapter 2 frames the main contours of the message of Galatians. A light overview of the flow of Galatians is offered in Chapter 3.

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CHAPTER 1

An Introduction to the Study of Galatians

Galatians was written when the world's population was probably around 60 million. According to common estimates, only about 1,400 of those people were Christ-followers, dotted around the Mediterranean basin in small groups of roughly two dozen to three dozen people. Some of those groups were based in the Roman province of Galatia, and to them Paul wrote this letter. Laser-focused in its vision, the letter's contents advance at a fast clip, and its discourse is powerfully unrelenting.

At the same time, this letter is anything but straightforward in its theological discourse. It is tremendously rich and densely packed, often ambiguous, sometimes with important aspects of the argument left unarticulated or extremely truncated. This is what makes the study of Galatians so intriguing for people who love the thrill of the chase, in a sense. It is also what makes some aspects of Paul's discourse in Galatians so resistant to simple takeaways. Theologically profound, conceptually complex, and prophetically challenging, the discourse of Galatians makes theological contributions not only with respect to what God has done in Christ but also with respect to what life looks like apart from that divine initiative. To understand the profundity of Paul's presentation of "the solution," we need also to understand the profundity of Paul's presentation of "the problem" that the

solution corrects. For Paul, properly aligned relationships in Christ offset the relationality that characterizes “the present evil age” (Gal 1:4) – a toxic relationality in which forms of identity are prioritized over others, in endless cycles of social discord. Subsequent chapters of this book often explore Paul’s presentation of the problem (especially Chapters 4 and 5) as much as his presentation of the solution of what God has done in Christ (Chapters 6 through 9).

Before looking in particular at Paul’s theological discourse in this letter, it will be helpful to glance at the situation that he seems to be addressing.¹

THE GOSPEL IN JEOPARDY

Paul’s letter to the Christ-followers of Galatia is nestled within a context of his ministry of preaching the “good news,” or gospel, in urban centers of the first-century world. It was a world where (as many Jews maintained) “pagan idolatry” was rampant. Where Paul’s gospel was welcomed by gentiles, he expected them to abandon their entrenched idolatries and “serve the living and true God, waiting for his Son from heaven, whom God raised from the dead – Jesus, who will rescue us from the coming wrath” (1 Thess 1:9–10).

Paul often entered cities that were devoid of Christ-followers of any kind, since Christ-devotion had not yet arrived within their walls. Paul sometimes stayed in a city just long enough to establish

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Paul’s Galatian letter are my own, from the Greek but often in consultation with academic commentaries and translations (in particular, the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV], the New International Version [NIV], the New English Translation [NET], and the Common English Bible [CEB]).

a small cohort of Christ-followers before moving on to another city. In Thessalonica and Philippi, for instance, he stayed perhaps only a few months. He stayed longer in other locations, but even then his residency was not protracted.² One way or another, Paul was often on the move again, articulating his message in the next rented workshop while plying his trade. By the time he wrote Romans (about 57 CE), he could say that he had “completed the circuit of preaching Christ’s gospel from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum” (Rom 15:19, CEB).³

In the aftermath of his departure from any given city, small groups of a few dozen people met together to worship Jesus Christ in houses or workshops or apartments. In one sense, they did not have much to nurture their corporate life of Christ-devotion. There were no Christian publishing houses churning out devotional literature, or systematic theologies, or inspirational books of historical fiction. There were no websites to explain and promote devotion to Jesus Christ. There was no “back catalog” of traditional Christ hymns to draw upon and no long-standing reserves of Christian history to reflect upon. Although Christ-groups may often have had recourse to the scriptures of Israel in some fashion, perhaps not all were in that beneficial position. There wasn’t even anything identifiably known as “Christianity” at that time (only messianic forms of Judaism that were often distinctive when judged by other ways of practicing Jewish ancestral traditions). All of these things would come later. Whenever Paul left a city to

² He seems to have stayed in Corinth for about a year and a half and in Ephesus for about two and a half years. For the chronology of Paul’s life, four reconstructions are roughly similar and the most convincing: Riesner 1997:3–28, 318–26; Hengel and Schwemer 1997 (esp. xi–xiv); Wedderburn 2004 (esp. 99–103); Dunn 2009 (esp. 497–518).

³ Illyricum is roughly equivalent to the territory of Bosnia and Croatia today.

move to the next, most Christ-groups would have very few resources to enhance the devotion of their corporate life. They will have had the memory of Paul's theological reflections on the story of Jesus Christ and perhaps (although we have no way of knowing this) a few sayings spoken by Jesus and (with even less certainty) a few selections of scripture that Paul had interpreted in the light of Jesus Christ (although some Christ-groups may have had copies of scripture made for them, or some of their members might also have attended Jewish synagogues, where the scriptures were read and expounded).

These resources are (historically speaking) scant and slender. But Paul had confidence, it seems, that these fledgling Christ-groups would survive and thrive after his departure, even though the time until the Lord's return might well be short (e.g., 1 Thess 4:17; 1 Cor 7:29; Rom 13:11–12). This confidence seems to have been based on little other than his belief that those groups were richly endowed with and empowered by the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God that would resource and guide these small groups that were already enjoying eschatological blessings, even in the midst of their paltry numbers.

GALATIANS IN CONTEXT

Paul's confidence in the power of the Spirit seems to lie at the heart of the issue that Paul addresses in Galatians. In one of the clearest windows into the Galatian situation (3:1–5), Paul asks, “Does God supply you with the Spirit and accomplish powerful things among you on the basis of your observance of the Torah?” (3:5). Paul is certain that the Spirit has been “supplied” to the Galatians in powerful ways. But the Spirit becomes increasingly important throughout the remainder of the letter, as Paul focuses

on the Spirit's role in the ongoing formation of the Galatian Christ-followers.

A strong case can be made that the situation in Galatia is driven by the Galatians' interest in preserving and enhancing the Spirit's presence among them.⁴ The Galatians (or at least some of them) seem to have been under the impression that their experience of the Spirit needed to be protected (and perhaps enhanced) by means of observance of the Mosaic Torah – the faithful practice of following the instructions given by God to the ethnic people of Israel. This would ensure their protection from the ways of idolatry, immersing them in the people-group (the Jews) whose ideals of devotion to the one sovereign God often differentiated that group from the “polytheistic” nations all around them. If Christ-followers were called to turn “to God from idols,” it would make sense if that rejection of idolatry necessarily involved adopting the ancestral traditions of the only ethnic group known to have rejected polytheistic idolatry: the Jewish people. Christ-devotion and Jewish practices could be seen as interlocking components of what nonidolatrous relationship with God through the Spirit looks like in the aftermath of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It made sense to (some of) the Galatian Christ-followers. But Paul saw things quite differently. For him, the Galatians' interest in circumcision (and, beyond that, the full observance of the Torah) was not in step with their worship of the one God. Instead, Paul saw it as “turning back” (4:9) into the situation out of which they had already been extracted. Embracing a distortion of the gospel, they were in danger of losing the Spirit altogether. This distortion had been conjured up by teachers who had

⁴ Cosgrove 1988.

recently arrived in Galatia, intruding on Paul's relationship with the Galatians, who were being "compelled" (6:12) to adopt the teachers' point of view.

Who were these "new teachers" who had been "agitating" the situation (1:7)?⁵ We have no information about them and their message apart from what we can glean from Paul's discourse in Galatians. From that, we can surmise that they had linked their case to the figure of Abraham, whose story is told in Genesis, and to the interpretation of passages from the Pentateuch that highlighted the necessity of observing the Torah – the Mosaic covenant between God and the people of Israel. That story and that covenant can easily be interpreted in ways that match the interests of the new teachers. In fact, Abraham was often considered the model par excellence of someone who did exactly what the Galatian gentiles had done – turning away from idolatry and adopting exclusive devotion to the one and only God (see *Jub* 12.1–21; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.155; *Apoc. Abr.* 1–8; Philo, *Virt.* 219).⁶ But in turning away from "paganism," Abraham had also embraced certain practices as a consequence, including circumcision for himself and his male descendants. The new teachers were probably adept at interpreting scripture and saw direct lines of applicability from the Genesis account of Abraham to the life of Galatian Christ-followers. They were calling Christ-followers to a consistent form of life in relation to the story of Abraham, the ex-pagan whose obedience included the adoption of circumcision. Along with that, other passages in the Pentateuch make clear that observing the Torah is expected of all who trace their identity to

⁵ I borrow the term "new teachers" from de Boer 2011.

⁶ On the reception of the story of Abraham in Early Judaism, see Calvert-Koyzis 2004.

the blessed, nonidolatrous Abraham – both the specific practice of circumcision (e.g., Gen 17:9–14) and all other instructions spoken by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well (e.g., Lev 18:5; Deut 27:26). Abraham himself is said to have “obeyed my [God’s] voice and kept my requirements, my commandments, my statutes, and my instructions” (Gen 26:5).⁷ It is little wonder that Paul feels the need to engage with scripture repeatedly in Galatians 3–4. There he offers a novel interpretation of the Abraham story, together with other passages that, instead of supporting the view of the new teachers, are used to support the gospel that he had already proclaimed to the Galatians.⁸

It is possible that the new teachers were not overtly hostile to Paul. They may simply have thought that his gospel was an introductory version of the gospel for pagans, a version that merely needed to be supplemented by further efforts to take Christ-devotion to the next level. But it is also possible (and perhaps probable) that the new teachers sought to diminish Paul’s influence by disparaging him and his message, characterizing him as a dangerous maverick beyond the controls of the leadership of the Christ-movement based in Jerusalem. Paul himself seems to imagine them having some animosity toward him (4:16–17), and his claim right at the start of the letter that he is not a “people-pleaser” (1:10) may have countered the way the new

⁷ On this basis, some texts suggest that Abraham knew and observed the Torah (often understood as the Torah in truncated fashion) even before it was revealed to Moses. See *Jub* 15.1–2; 16.28; *Sir* 44.19–20; 2 *Bar* 57.1–3; *CD* 3:2–4; Philo, *Abr.* 275–76.

⁸ For reconstructions of the message of the new teachers, see Martyn 1997a:117–26; Hurd 2005; de Boer 2011:50–61; Fredriksen 2017:102–7; deSilva 2018:16–26; Keener 2019:31–36; Bachmann 2021. On the availability of scriptural knowledge among the Galatians, see Abasciano 2007.

teachers depicted him – also explaining his rather aggressive rhetoric toward them (see 5:12 and 6:12–13). Along the way, Paul's discourse includes reframing the legitimacy of Jerusalem-based leaders of the Christ-movement (1:15–20; 2:1–10; 2:11–14; 4:21–31), with whom the new teachers were evidently aligning themselves. The new teachers may even have wanted gentile Christ-followers to adopt Torah observance so the good news of Jesus Christ might be more compelling as the Jerusalem assembly took that news to Jews, not least to Jews in Jerusalem, where the temple of Israel's God was standing.

A few years after Paul left the Galatian Christ-groups, word got back to him that those communities (or at least some of their members) were enamored with the message of the new teachers. Messengers must have left the Galatian communities and traveled for several weeks to reach Paul (whether in the city of Ephesus in, say, 54/55, or, much more likely, in the city of Corinth in 50/51). Upon hearing the news, Paul decided to write and give guidance to the Galatians. In his emotional letter, Paul writes at times as if the Galatians are still considering whether to adopt observance of the Torah at some point in the future (5:2–3; 6:12; perhaps 1:6; 4:21) and at other times as if they have already done so (4:10; perhaps 5:4, 7). These two forms of discourse might suggest that the Galatians had adopted certain practices already (such as the observance of certain Jewish festivals, as in 4:10) but not circumcision itself (as in 5:2–3). Or perhaps members of the Galatian communities were at different stages in their adoption of Torah observance, with some already having gone fully down that road and others lagging behind in certain respects.

Scholars continue to debate matters that are not necessary to determine for the purposes of this book (with its focus on Paul's

theological discourse). In what cities were the Galatians resident?⁹ How does Paul's account of events in Galatians relate to the origins story recounted in Acts?¹⁰ More can be done to press into these intricacies, but that is not necessary for the purposes of this book. So we move from this brief overview of the Galatian situation to an overview of Paul's message to the Galatians.

⁹ For recent contrasting arguments, see John 2022 (south Galatia) and Coşkun 2022 (north Galatia). See also Sanders 2015:749–77; deSilva 2018:39–48; Keener 2019:16–22.

¹⁰ See deSilva 2018:33–38.