

The Message of Galatians

INTRODUCTION

Paul was stunned. He could hardly believe what he had been told. The churches he had recently established in southern Galatia¹ were deserting the truth for “another gospel.” Not only that, but his enemies were spreading lies about his ministry and apostleship. A flood of emotions swept through him: disappointment in the foolishness of the Galatians, anger toward those who had hindered them, confusion over how the tragedy had come about, pain at the realization that his new converts now viewed him as the enemy, and anguish at the thought that he might have labored for them in vain.² If only he could be there and talk with the Galatians face-to-face! But he could not. He was currently in Syrian Antioch, and circumstances prevented his return. He had to deal with the crisis immediately, and his only option was the pen. So it was that Paul wrote his first recorded letter³ and sent it to the churches of Galatia.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Paul’s letter to the Galatians was written some fifteen years after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ (AD 33). Much had happened in the intervening years: the stoning of Stephen, the great persecution of the church, the conversion of Paul, the martyrdom of James, and the growth of the church in Syrian Antioch. Yet the events which shed the most light on the

¹ For a thorough discussion of the identity of “the churches of Galatia,” see Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990): lxii–lxxi; Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 3–9; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 23–29. All three commentators favor the south Galatian hypothesis (with which I concur). Other commentators and scholars who favor the south include: Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Chronological Problem of Galatians 2:1–10,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120:480 (Oct 1963): 335–340; Paul R. Trebilco, “Itineraries, travel plans, journeys, apostolic parousia,” in *Dictionary of Paul & His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin and D. G. Reid eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993): 446–456; Joe Morgado, Jr., “Paul in Jerusalem: A Comparison of His Visits in Acts and Galatians,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37/1 (March 1994): 55–68; David J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem in Its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts* (Mohr Siebeck, 2008): 33–39; Ronald Y. K. Fung, *Galatians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1988): 86; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, (Eerdmans, 1998): 13–18; Timothy George, *Galatians*, New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 1994): 136–137; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Paternoster, 2002): 43–56; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary Vol. 5, (Sheffield Academic Press, 2003): 258–262; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Volume 2, Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004): 988–89.

² The list of emotions was derived from the following verses: disappointment (3:1), anger (1:9; 5:12), confusion (4:20; 5:7), pain (4:15–16), and anguish (4:11, 19).

³ I agree with Moo when he says, “Galatians, we conclude, was probably written in AD 48 just before the Apostolic Conference of Acts 15. It is the earliest extant letter of Paul” (Moo, *Galatians*, 9). This position equates the Galatians 2:1–10 visit to Jerusalem with the private visit of Acts 11:27–30. Other commentators and scholars who favor this position include: Schreiner, *Galatians*, 29; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 46; Morgado, “Paul in Jerusalem,” 68; Toussaint, “Chronological Problem,” 340; Bruce, *Galatians*, 109; George, *Galatians*, 49; Witherington, *Galatians*, 18; Marshall, *Acts*, 262; and Schnabel, *Paul and the Early Church*, 988.

background of Galatians are the conversion of Cornelius, Paul's famine relief visit to Jerusalem, Paul's first missionary journey, and the incident with Peter at Syrian Antioch.

The Conversion of Cornelius (c. 38–40)

The conversion of Cornelius was a watershed moment in the history of the early church.⁴ Prior to this event, there had been no organized effort to take the gospel to the Gentiles, for the Jews still regarded them as unclean (cf. Acts 11:19). Indeed, it is unlikely that Peter would have gone to see Cornelius if he had not received a vision from the Lord. Once Peter understood the vision, he realized that he should not “call any person common or unclean” (Acts 10:28b). He went to Cornelius' house and preached the good news of Jesus Christ. “While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (Act 10:44–46).

Word of what happened in Caesarea spread quickly throughout Judea, and when Peter went up to Jerusalem, those from the circumcision criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:2–3).⁵ Their belief that Peter had defiled himself by having table fellowship with Gentiles was based on what Peter himself had thought prior to the vision: those who were uncircumcised were unclean, regardless of their piety. When Peter explained what had happened, “they glorified God, saying ‘Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11:18).

Cornelius' conversion demonstrated to the Jews that Gentiles could be saved apart from circumcision and that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Act 10:34b–35). The Gentiles were saved the same way the Jews were saved—by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 15:9). The gift of the Holy

⁴ Most commentators hold that Cornelius, although “a devout man who feared God” (Acts 10:2), was not born again until after he heard and believed the “good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36; cf. Acts 11:13–14; 15:7). I personally found Alex R. G. Deasley's article, “Entire Sanctification and the Baptism with the Holy Spirit: Perspectives on the Biblical View of the Relationship,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 14.1 (Spring 1979): 27–44 to be helpful in confirming this view. See also, F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951), 235; Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 399–401; Marshall, *Acts*, 194; David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 326; Charles W. Carter & Ralph Earle, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 154; Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 513–14. For a dissenting view, see Glenn N. Davies “When was Cornelius saved?” *Reformed Theological Review* 46.2 (May–Aug. 1987): 43–49 and John E. Sanders, “Is Belief in Christ Necessary for Salvation?” *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988): 241–59. In either case, the issue of whether or not a Gentile could be saved apart from circumcision was at the heart of the controversy that followed.

⁵ The “New Perspective” (NP) on Paul claims that the issue at stake in Acts 11:2–3 and Galatians 2:11–21 was the Jews' desire to use circumcision as a means to exclude Gentiles from the covenant people of God. The problem was nationalism and exclusivism, not legalism; it was sociological, not theological. This NP is summed up in the phrase “covenantal nomism,” and it holds that the first-century Jews *did not* believe that they entered a covenant relationship with God by keeping the law; rather, they believed that by keeping the law they maintained the covenant that God had already graciously given them. For a helpful critique of the NP, see Edward P. Meadors, “N. T. Wright's “Fresh Perspective” on Paul: An Introduction and Analysis,” *Evangelical Journal* 26.1 (2008): 5–18. As far as I know, the most comprehensive criticism of the NP is still *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, 2 vols., ed. D. Carson, P. O'Brien, M. A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker 2001, 2004).

Spirit had been given to “uncircumcised men,” and Peter correctly concluded that since God had accepted the Gentiles, the church must accept them too (Acts 11:17).

Paul’s Famine Relief Visit to Jerusalem (c. 47)

It might be expected that the issue of salvation apart from circumcision was settled by the conversion of Cornelius and his household, but not all Jews were convinced. The first recorded effort to subvert the “truth of the gospel” took place during Paul’s visit to Jerusalem to bring famine relief to the brothers living in Judea (cf. Acts 11:27–30). Paul wrote that “false brothers” were secretly brought in to “spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery” (Gal 2:4). Clearly, some Jews still refused to accept that Gentiles could be saved apart from circumcision. Paul stood his ground—“to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Gal 2:5)—and Titus was not forced to be circumcised. Moreover, the apostles recognized that Paul “had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised,” and they encouraged him to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Gal 2:9).

Paul’s First Missionary Journey (c. 47–48)

Shortly after Paul’s famine relief visit to Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit instructed the church at Syrian Antioch to “set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2). Paul and Barnabas sailed to Cyprus and proclaimed the gospel in Salamis and Paphos. From there they sailed to Perga, and then traveled north to Pisidian Antioch.



At the synagogue in Antioch, Paul preached the gospel, and both the Jews and God-fearing proselytes were fascinated by his message (Acts 13:42–43). Paul and Barnabas agreed to speak again the next Sabbath, and nearly the entire city showed up to hear the gospel. When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and they drove Paul and Barnabas out of the city. However, some of the Gentiles believed and were saved (Acts 13:48; note that they were saved

without being circumcised, cf. Gal 3:2). They became the first of Paul's converts in Galatia, and the first of the "churches of Galatia" (Gal 1:2; cf. Acts 14:21–23).

From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas traveled east to Iconium. They visited the synagogue first, as was Paul's custom, and "a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed" (Acts 14:1). They stayed in Iconium for some time, discipling their new converts (Acts 14:3, 21).

Learning of a Jewish plot to stone them, they fled to the cities of Lystra and Derbe. There they continued to preach the gospel. They hadn't been in Lystra long when Jews came from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. But while the disciples stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe (Acts 14:19–20).

After they had preached the gospel in Derbe, and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:23).

Paul's first missionary journey was the beginning of a long and fruitful ministry to the Gentiles, and it serves as an example of how to build the church of Christ. Paul faithfully preached the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike, he endured persecution, he took time to disciple his new converts, he established a church in each city, he appointed elders who would care for the flock, and he exhorted the Galatians to continue "in the faith" (cf. Acts 14:22; Gal 3:3). If anyone had a right to think of their converts as their "children," it was Paul (Gal 4:19). He had literally laid down his life for them, and he bore in his body "the marks of Jesus" (Gal 6:17). That is why Paul's letter to the Galatians is so emotionally charged.

The Incident at Syrian Antioch (c. late 48)

Paul and Barnabas returned to the church at Syrian Antioch, and they told everyone how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles in Galatia. They stayed "no little time" with the disciples (Acts 14:27–28), and while they were there, Peter came to visit the church (Gal 2:11). He ate with the Gentile believers and enjoyed their company. However, he "drew back and separated himself" when "certain men came from James."⁶ These men began teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1).⁷ Peter's actions were so influential that "the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy" (Gal 2:13).

⁶ Paul said they came "from James" (Gal 2:12), but James later denied that he had personally sent them or endorsed their teaching: "We have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions" (Acts 15:24). Note that this James was the half-brother of Jesus (cf. Gal 1:19), not James "the brother of John" whom Herod had killed (cf. Acts 12:2).

⁷ On the view that Acts 15:1–3 is equivalent to Galatians 2:11–13, see Richard Bauckham, "James, Peter and the Gentiles," in *The Missions of James, Peter and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity* (ed. B. Chilton and C. Evans; Leiden: Brill, 2004) pp. 135–39; *idem*, "James and the Jerusalem Church," in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting: 4. Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 4:467–75; *idem*, "Barnabas in Galatians," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2 (1979): 61–70; Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, ed. Conrad Gempf (Tubingen: Mohr, 1989), p. 269; Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999), pp. 276–98; F. F. Bruce, "Galatian Problems 1. Autobiographical Data," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library Manchester* 53.2 (Spring 1971): 270–271; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 283–86; David Wenham, "Acts and the Pauline Corpus: II. The Evidence of Parallels," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (ed. B. W. Winter and A.

Peter's hypocrisy was a matter of public record, and so Paul confronted him publicly: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:14b). He then repudiated the tacit approval Peter's hypocrisy had given to the false teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation. 'We Jews know,' Paul said, 'that a person is justified by faith in Christ, not by works of the law. If we are *not* justified by faith in Christ—if we also need to be circumcised to be saved—then Christ's work has left us in a sinful state and He is the minister of sin! May it never be!' (cf. Gal 2:16–17).

There is no record of how Peter responded to Paul's rebuke, but Barnabas was persuaded by Paul's argument, and he joined Paul in debating the men who taught the need for circumcision. Together, they "had no small dissension and disputation with them" (Acts 15:2a). Finally, with the debate in deadlock, the church agreed to send Paul and Barnabas and some of the others to Jerusalem to ask "the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15:2b). So it was that the Council at Jerusalem was convened (Acts 15:4–29).

THE GALATIAN CRISIS

Before Paul and Barnabas traveled to Jerusalem, word reached Paul from the new churches in Galatia.⁸ To his dismay, he discovered that the Galatians were deserting Christ and "turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1:6). This "gospel" was being taught by certain men who wanted to distort the true gospel. A careful reading of Galatians reveals the following about these false gospel agitators (hereafter FGA):⁹

1. The FGA seem to have come from *outside* the Galatian congregations. Paul's various references to them—"there are some who are disturbing you" (2:7), "who has bewitched

D. Clarke; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 240–42. This equivalence is crucial for interpreting Galatians. Once the connection between "Unless you are circumcised...you cannot be saved" and "when they came he [Peter] drew back and separated himself" is seen, it is clear that Paul was right in perceiving that "the truth of the gospel" was at stake (Gal 2:14a). For this reason, I disagree with Wright when he says, "What is at issue is the question: is it right for Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians to eat together? Do they belong at the same table or not?" (N. T. Wright, *Justification*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), p. 114). I also disagree with Scacewater when he says, "It is highly unlikely they would have perceived his [Peter's] actions as communicating 'circumcision is necessary for justification.' This idea, read in from verses 15–16 and the Galatian situation, is foreign to the episode" (Todd Scacewater, "Galatians 2:11–21 and the Interpretive Context of 'Works of the Law,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56/2 (2013): 316). Wright and Scacewater have both missed how the equivalence of Acts 15:1–3 and Galatians 2:11–13 explains the nature and ramifications of Peter's hypocrisy.

⁸ Peter's fear of the men from James in Galatians 2:11–14 makes no sense if the incident occurred *after* the Council of Acts 15. Also, if Paul wrote to the Galatians *after* the Council of Acts 15, why did he not mention the council's decision? This makes no sense, especially in light of the fact that when Paul returned to the Galatians churches on his second missionary journey, he made a point of sharing the decision with them (Acts 16:4).

⁹ On the process of reconstructing the background of Galatians from the letter itself, see John M. G. Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test-Case," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (1987): 73–93. On pp. 84–85 he describes seven criteria for an appropriate use of the method: (1) the type of utterance (assertion, denial, command, prohibition), (2) the tone used by the author, (3) the frequency of a theme, (4) the clarity of the statements, (5) the presence of unfamiliar motifs, (6) the consistency of the resulting theory, and (7) the historical plausibility of a scholar's reconstruction. Barclay summarizes these concerns in his important monograph *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians*, Studies of the NT and Its World (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 36–41. On mirror reading, see also Moisés Silva, *Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd edition, 2001), pp. 104–8. A helpful application of these principles to Galatians is found in Schreiner, *Galatians*, pp. 31–35.

you?” (3:1), “They make much of you...that you may make much of them” (4:17), “Who hindered you from obeying the truth?” (5:7), and “the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is”—suggest that they were unknown to him and thus not part of the original congregations. There also seems to have been more than one of them since there were several churches and the false gospel was evidently being preached in all of them (cf. Gal 1:2; also note the plural form in 1:7).

2. The FGA taught that faith in Christ was *not enough* to be saved (cf. 5:1–4, 11). They insisted that the Galatians be circumcised (6:12–13), and they urged them to “observe days and months and seasons and years” (4:10). This most likely refers to the various kinds of celebration of days and periods observed by the Jews (as prescribed by both law and tradition). The claim that circumcision was necessary for salvation is why Paul called their teaching a “different gospel.”¹⁰
3. The FGA “probably claimed that circumcision was necessary for inclusion in the people of God. After all, only those who were circumcised would receive the promises made to Abraham. They almost certainly appealed to Genesis 17, where circumcision is required as the sign of the covenant. Circumcision was not restricted to the Jews; any foreigner who desired to attach himself to the congregation of Yahweh must be circumcised (Gen 17:11–13). Indeed, circumcision is linked with Abraham becoming the father of many nations (Gen 17:5–6). They likely reasoned that if a Gentile wanted to be a ‘son of Abraham,’ then he must receive the covenantal sign. Furthermore, the necessity of circumcision was not temporally limited because God calls the covenant ‘everlasting’ (Gen 17:7, 8, 13).”¹¹
4. The FGA disputed the legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship (1:1). They accused Paul of being a maverick and acting without official church sanction (1:2). They charged him with seeking man’s approval rather than God’s (1:10). They said that Paul’s gospel was the invention of man not the revelation of Christ (1:11–12). They claimed that Paul was a liar and could not be trusted (1:20). They claimed that the apostles in Jerusalem did not agree with Paul’s gospel (2:1–10). They accused Paul of hypocrisy by claiming that he himself still preached circumcision (5:11).¹²
5. The FGA were motivated by fear and pride. They wanted to “make a good showing in the flesh...in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (6:12), and their insistence that the Galatians be circumcised was so “that they may boast in your flesh” (6:13). If the FGA could convince the Galatians to circumcise themselves, they would avoid being ostracized by the synagogues, and they would increase their stature in the eyes of others by claiming the Galatians as their proselytes.

¹⁰ The FGA did not reject Christ; they tried to *add* circumcision to faith in Christ. This is shown by the fact that Paul says, “if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you” (Gal 5:2b), and “you are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law” (Gal 4:1a). Clearly, the Galatians were trying to have *both* Christ *and* circumcision, not circumcision without Christ.

¹¹ Schreiner, p. 50 (The Viewpoint and Theology of the Opponents).

¹² These statements are all inferences which can be made from the given references. As such, they are proposed with a certain reservation as to their accuracy.

6. The FGA were most likely Jews. I say this because in the one case where the advocates of circumcision are explicitly identified, they were Jews (cf. Acts 15:5). This, combined with the fact that the FGA were trying to avoid persecution, suggests that the FGA were Jews who did not want to lose their standing in the synagogue because of Paul's new Gentile converts. The events of Acts 13–14 support this view (esp. Acts 13:45).

PAUL'S RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

Paul had several goals in mind as he responded to the crisis in the Galatian churches. First, he wanted to show that the “other gospel” of Christ-plus-circumcision was heresy (Gal 1–2). Second, he wanted to persuade the Galatians to return to the true gospel of salvation by faith in Christ alone (Gal 3–4). Third, he wanted to ensure that their freedom did not become a license for fleshly living (Gal 5). Finally, he wanted to encourage them to persevere in the faith in spite of the persecution that was sure to follow their decision to renounce circumcision (Gal 6).

Showing that the “other gospel” of Christ-plus-circumcision was heresy (Gal 1–2)

Paul wasted no time in showing that the “other gospel” of Christ-plus-circumcision was heresy. He did this by declaring that the gospel he preached came directly from Christ—“For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:11–12). Paul's point was this: ‘If my gospel is from Christ—if it is the true gospel—*then any other gospel is false and thus heretical*. Paul verified his claim by reminding the Galatians of his former life as a Pharisee, and by sharing the details of his ministry after his conversion (1:13–2:21):

1. “For you have heard of my former life in Judaism...” (1:13–14). Paul was once a Pharisee and a persecutor of the church. This argued against the idea that he would preach a gospel that came from man.
2. “I did not immediately consult with anyone...” (1:15–17). After Paul's conversion, he did not discuss the gospel with anyone. This argued against the claim that his gospel message had been influenced by other believers.
3. “Then after three years...” (1:18–20). It was years before Paul had contact with any of the church leaders. This argued against the claim that his gospel message had been influenced by the apostles.
4. “I was still unknown in person to the churches of Judea...” (1:21–24). Paul did not spend time in Judea where he could have heard the gospel from other believers. This argued against the claim that Paul's gospel had been influenced by the church.
5. “Then after fourteen years...” (2:1–10). When Paul finally presented his gospel message to the leaders in Jerusalem, they added nothing to his message, nor did they compel Titus to be circumcised. This argued for the divine inspiration and accuracy of his gospel (2:1–10).

6. “But when Cephas came to Antioch...” (2:11–21). Paul publically opposed Peter, one of the leaders of the apostles, on the charge that his behavior undermined the truth of the gospel! This argued strongly that Paul’s gospel was *not* from men, but from God.

Paul concluded this section of the letter (often called the theological heart of Galatians) with a penetrating look at the implications of the false gospel: ‘We know that a person is not justified¹³ by works of the law (circumcision), but by faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁴ If we are *not* justified by faith in Christ—if we also need to be circumcised to be saved—then Christ’s work has left us in a sinful state and He is the minister of sin! May it never be! If I rebuild what I tore down—if I try to be justified by the law after being saved by faith—I accomplish nothing except to return to my old sinful state. Through the law, I died to the law, having been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Those who seek to be justified by circumcision nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes by keeping the law, then Christ died for no reason.’ (2:16–21).¹⁵

Persuading the Galatians to return to faith in Christ alone (Gal 3–4)

Having shown that the “other gospel” of Christ-plus-circumcision was heresy, Paul now wanted to convince the Galatians to return to the true gospel. He did this by reminding them of their original conversion experience, and by showing them that the Scriptures confirmed salvation by faith in Christ alone.

1. Paul began by asking the Galatians several questions: “Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?” (3:2), “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (3:3), and “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith” (3:5). Paul’s point was this: ‘You received the Holy Spirit by faith, and His presence is the mark that signifies that you have been justified and belong to the people of God. If you received the Spirit without being circumcised, why would you now believe that circumcision is necessary for salvation? It doesn’t make any sense!’

¹³ Paul used the verb “justify” (*dikaioō*) eight times in Galatians (2:16, 17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4) and the noun “righteousness” (*dikaioσynē*) four times (2:21; 3:6, 21; 5:5). Every occurrence of the noun comes in close proximity to the verb, and in each case the context strongly suggests that the verb and the noun occupy the same basic semantic space. Although a full treatment of Paul’s use of the term “justify” is beyond the scope of this article, I believe that the basic semantic force of the verb refers to the state of being righteous before God that the action, or verdict, of “justify” confers (justification in the forensic sense). For more detail, see Douglas J. Moo, “Justification in Galatians,” in *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century; Essays in Honor of D. A. Carson on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

¹⁴ On the ‘faith in Christ’ or ‘faithfulness of Christ’ debate in Galatians 2:16, see Debbie Hunn, “πίστις Χριστοῦ in Galatians 2:16,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 57.1 (2006): 23–33 and *idem*, “Pistis Christou in Galatians: The Connection to Habakkuk 2:4,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 63.2 (2012): 75–91. She argues convincingly for ‘faith in Christ.’

¹⁵ The nature of the crisis in the Galatians churches and the context of Galatians 2 situates what Paul says in 2:16–21 within the realm of justification and regeneration, not within the realm of a post-conversion “second work of grace.”

2. Paul continued by citing two OT passages concerning Abraham: Genesis 15:6 (“And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness”) and Genesis 12:3/22:18 (“and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed”).¹⁶ The first citation connected the Galatians’ conversion with Abraham’s. They had been justified “by hearing with faith” just as he had been. This meant the Galatians were the “sons of Abraham,” for those who follow Abraham’s example of faith are his children (3:7; cf. John 8:39–44). The second citation connected the Galatians’ conversion with the promise that “all the nations” would be blessed in Abraham. When the Galatians were saved, they were united spiritually with Christ, the “offspring” (singular) of Abraham, and thus they inherited the blessing that was promised to “Abraham and to his offspring” (3:16). This meant that God intended to justify the Gentiles by faith, not by circumcision (3:8–9).
3. Paul then explained that “all who rely on works of the law are under a curse,” for the law curses those who do not “abide by all things written in the Book of the Law” (3:10; Deut 27:26). Paul’s point was this: ‘You can’t keep some of the law’s commands and think that will justify you before God. That will only get you cursed because the law demands *complete* observance’ (cf. 5:3). Anticipating their next thought, Paul added, ‘Keeping the entire law won’t work either, because the righteous live by faith, and the law doesn’t operate on faith. The law operates on observance. No amount of law-keeping can ever justify you before God’ (3:11–12; cf. Hab 2:4; Lev 18:5). Paul then proclaimed the marvelous truth of the gospel: ‘All of us have sinned and come under the law’s curse, but Christ redeemed us by becoming a curse for us. He did this so the blessing of Abraham might come to you Gentiles, and so we all might receive the promised Spirit through faith’ (3:13–14).
4. At this point, it seemed as though Paul could hear the Galatians saying, ‘But the promise to Abraham was given before the law. When the law came, it superseded the promise.’ Paul responded with an illustration. If a manmade covenant was final once ratified, then how much more was God’s promise to Abraham final and irrevocable (3:15). Furthermore, the promise was made to Abraham “and to his offspring” (singular; Gen 22:18), “who is Christ” (3:16).¹⁷ This highlighted the immutability of the promise, for it was made by the Father to the Son! The law, which came afterward, did not annul or set aside God’s promise (3:17). “For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise” (3:18).
5. Paul anticipated the reaction of the Galatians, and he gave voice to their next question: ‘Why then the law?’ (3:19a). The law, he replied, was “added because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made” (3:19b).¹⁸ The

¹⁶ On the view that the citation in Galatians 3:8 is a composite of Genesis 12:3 and Genesis 22:18, see C. John Collins, “Galatians 3:16: What Kind of Exegete Was Paul?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 57.1 (2003): 75–86.

¹⁷ For a rebuttal of N. T. Wright’s view that the word “offspring” should be interpreted as “family,” see Jason S. DeRouchie and Jason C. Meyer, “Christ or Family as the “Seed” of Promise? An Evaluation of N. T. Wright on Galatians 3:16,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14.3 (2010): 36–48.

¹⁸ A full treatment of Paul’s use of the word “law” in Galatians is beyond the scope of this article. However, when Paul uses the word in reference to the Scriptures, it always refers to the writings of Moses, i.e., the Pentateuch. Within that semantic domain, the word can refer to either the historical narrative of Genesis (Gal 4:21b), the commands of Moses given on the plains of Moab (Gal 3:13), the holiness code given after the erection of the

words “added” and “until” emphasized the supplementary and temporary nature of the law. It was *not* the central theme of God’s redemptive plan. Furthermore, the law was put in place by an intermediary (3:19c). This showed that it was an agreement between two parties who both had obligations to fulfill. The promise to Abraham, however, was given by God alone—He obligated only Himself (3:20). Abraham participated in the promise *through* obedience, but the promise was not dependent *on* his obedience.

6. Paul again gave voice to a question he knew the Galatians would be asking: “Is the law then contrary to the promises of God?” (3:21a). Paul was emphatic—“Certainly not!” He went on to explain: “if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (3:21b). But there was no such law. That meant that law-keeping, even *perfect* law-keeping, could not justify you before God.¹⁹ There was no conflict between the law and the promise because the law was never intended to grant spiritual life. What then did the law do for a sinner who was seeking to be justified? Only this—it revealed their sin, found them guilty as a law-breaker, sentenced them to death, and confined them in prison. The law had no power to do anything else. This ensured that the promise was given to those who believed in Jesus Christ. In this way, the law functioned as a guardian (a *pedagogue*) “in order that we might be justified by faith” (3:24). The law *made sure* that sinners knew they could only be justified by faith.
7. Paul then argued that the Galatians’ spiritual union with Christ meant that they inherited Abraham’s promised blessing. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring [singular], heirs according to promise” (Gal 3:27, 29). The promise was made to Abraham “and to his offspring...who is Christ” (3:16). It follows that if you are *in Christ*, then you are joined to the one to whom the promise was made and are an heir to the blessing.
8. Consistent with his practice of connecting spiritual truth to everyday life, Paul continued by using the word “heirs” in 3:29 as a launching pad for another illustration. ‘When the heir is a child,’ Paul said, ‘he is really no different than a slave. His life is managed and supervised until he reaches the age of maturity. In the same way, you can picture your life before Christ as being like that—you were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the time was right, God sent His Son to redeem you, and you became sons and heirs with Christ. Now that you have enjoyed a relationship with God, how can you turn back to the very things that enslaved you? You are observing days and months and seasons and years! I’m afraid I may have labored over you in vain’ (Gal 4:1–11).

tabernacle (Gal 3:12), or the formal covenant agreement which was made at Mount Sinai (Gal 3:17, 19). Rosner comments, “The question is not *which bits* of the law Paul is referring to in a given instance of *nomos*, but the law *as what*” (Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 31 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2013), p. 29). Galatians 4:21 makes an interesting test case for this question: “Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?” In the first use of the word “law,” Paul is referring to the law *as covenant*, while in the second, Paul is referring to the law *as prophecy*. As Rosner goes on to say, “There is a sense in which the Law *as Mosaic covenant* is abolished, but the Law *as Scripture* has ongoing value for Christians” (p. 30). This explains how Paul can use the law to support his argument that justification is not by the law—he appeals to the law *as Scripture* to show the limited nature of the law *as covenant*.

¹⁹ While Schreiner is right in saying that the law “did not provide the power to enable human beings to live in a way that pleases God,” he incorrectly concludes: “Righteousness would have indeed been through the law if human beings had been able to keep its prescriptions” (Schreiner, *Galatians*, p. 244). The point was not that the law offered spiritual life to those who could keep it *perfectly* (cf. Luke 1:6); rather, the law did not offer spiritual life *at all*.

9. At this point, Paul's feelings pour onto the page: "Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong." (4:12). When Paul first preached the gospel to the Galatians, he experienced a "bodily ailment," and although his physical condition had been difficult for them to bear, they loved him so much that, "if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me" (4:15). But now this "blessedness," this mutual love and affection was gone. The FGA had convinced the Galatians that Paul was the enemy. "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!" (Gal 4:19–20, NIV).
10. Paul concluded by asking a question of his own: "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" (4:21). 'Remember,' he said, 'the law records that Abraham had *two* sons: one by the slave-woman Hagar, and the other by the free-woman Sarah. Only one son inherited the blessing—Isaac, the son of promise. The other son, Ishmael, was "cast out" (4:30). This shows that being a child of Abraham is *not* a matter of physical descent or circumcision. Indeed, you can think of this story as an allegory of two covenants: Hagar represents the law and Sarah represents the promise.²⁰ Hagar's children are born of the flesh and remain in slavery, while Sarah's children are born of the Spirit and live in freedom. Those who believe in Christ are "children of promise," while those who seek to be justified by the law are "children of the slave"' (4:31).

Ensuring that a life of liberty does not become a license for the flesh (Gal 5)

Having argued from the Scriptures that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone, Paul now wanted to ensure that the Galatians' liberty did not become a license for their flesh. He did this by challenging them to stand fast in their freedom, and by exhorting them to use their freedom as an opportunity to serve one another through love.

1. Paul began by calling the Galatians to "stand firm...and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). He wanted them to understand that any attempt to be justified by circumcision would result in a return to the same kind of slavery from which they had so recently been set free. If they let themselves be circumcised, "Christ will be of no advantage to you," and they would be obligated "to keep the whole law," for the law demanded complete observance (5:2–3; cf. 3:10).²¹ "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace" (5:4). If the

²⁰ For a discussion of the interpretive issues raised by this passage, see Mark Gignilliat, "Paul, Allegory, and the Plain Sense of Scripture: Galatians 4:21–31," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (2008): 135–146. See also, Karen H. Jobes, "Jerusalem, Our Mother: Metalepsis and Intertextuality in Galatians 4:21–31," *Westminster Theology Journal* 55 (1993): 299–320 and Jason Q. von Ehrenkrook, "Galatians 4:21–31: Hermeneutical Gymnastics or Historical Interpretation," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal* 14 (Spring 1998): 50–65.

²¹ "The Jew who accepts Christ may continue in his Jewish practices, but by virtue of his coming to Christ, he has demonstrated the need of Christ. But for a Gentile to turn to the Law as a necessary aspect of his salvation is to declare that Christ and grace are not enough for him. 'By implication, then "Christ" is no longer a savior and "grace" is no longer grace. As a result, such people do not merely change "denominations," but become real converts to non-Christian Judaism' [Betz]. At that point the relationship with Christ, which brings inward peace and freedom, is broken and one is back in the old life." Willard H. Taylor, "Galatians, Ephesians," *Beacon Bible Expositions*, Volume 8 (Kansas City, MS: Beacon Hill Press, 1981), p. 79.

Galatians, having begun by the Spirit, now tried to be perfected by the flesh, they would cut themselves off from their spiritual union with Christ. Instead, they should “through the Spirit, by faith,” eagerly “wait for the hope of righteousness” (5:5). Whether they were circumcised or not was irrelevant; what mattered was “faith working through love” (5:6).

2. Paul then praised the Galatians for their initial faith, and asked who had ‘cut in on’ their successful run of “obeying the truth” (5:7). The call to be circumcised did not come from Christ; it came from a small but vocal minority who were threatening to leaven “the whole lump” (5:8–9). Paul then expressed for the first time his confidence that the Galatians would accept his exhortation, and he assured them that the FGA would suffer the penalty for their heresy (5:10). He concluded by pointing out that he was still being persecuted for the gospel—this was evidence that he was *not* preaching the necessity of circumcision (5:11).²²
3. Paul continued by warning the Galatians not to use their freedom as an “opportunity for the flesh” (5:13a).²³ Freedom from the law was not the freedom to do whatever they wanted; rather, it was the freedom to serve one another “through love” (5:13b). The law was given to show God’s people how to love Him and love each other. If the Galatians loved their neighbor as themselves (Lev 19:18b), they would fulfill what the law required (5:14). If they did not, they would end up being “consumed by one another” (5:15).
4. Paul then explained *how* the Galatians could live a life of love for one another: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (5:16). The law could not empower them to love each other, but the Holy Spirit could. Indeed, if they obeyed the guidance of the Spirit and yielded to His desires, they would *never* fulfill the desires of the flesh (5:16). Why? Because the Spirit and the flesh opposed each other and worked against each other. For that reason, even though the Galatians were not obligated to keep the law, they were *not* free to do whatever they wanted (5:17). They had only two choices: yield to the desires of the flesh, or yield to the leadership of the Spirit. Paul then added, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (5:18). Following the leadership of the Spirit eliminates any need to be under the law. What the law cannot do, the Spirit can, and where the law is limited, the Spirit is not. The Galatians were “law-less” but not “lawless,” for as they followed the Spirit’s leading, He would empower them to love each other and so fulfill the law’s requirements (cf. Matt 22:35–40; James 2:8).
5. Paul continued by contrasting the “works of the flesh” with the “fruit of the Spirit.” The list of fleshly works aptly described the Galatians’ former lives as pagans, and Paul warned them that those who practiced such sins would “not inherit the kingdom of God”

²² Justin K. Hardin, “‘If I Still Proclaim Circumcision’ (Galatians 5:11a): Paul, the Law, and Gentile Circumcision,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 3.2 (2013): 145–163.

²³ For an excellent discussion of the significance of Galatians 5:13–26 to the letter as a whole, see Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 420–25; See also Ronald Lutjens, “‘You Do Not Do What You Want’: What Does Galatians 5:17 Really Mean?” *Presbyterion* 16/2 (1990): 103–117; David Wenham, “The Christian Life: A Life of Tension? A Consideration of the Nature of Christian Experience in Paul,” in *Pauline Studies* (ed. D. A. Hagner, M. J. Harris; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 80–94.

(5:19–21). His warning was real—they could not continue in willful sin and expect to escape the wrath of God (cf. Eph 5:5–6; 1 Cor 6:9–11). Instead, they should obey the Holy Spirit, and He would enable them to bear spiritual fruit. The word “fruit” stands in contrast with the word “works,” for the latter emphasized human endeavor, while the former emphasized divine empowerment. Those who are walking in the Spirit are *not* passive. They do not ‘coast along’ waiting for the Spirit to produce love and joy in their lives. Rather, they live Spirit-directed, Spirit-empowered, and Spirit-pleasing lives, and the Spirit enables them to be kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled (5:22–23).

6. Paul concluded with a reminder of the Spirit’s marvelous work in salvation: “those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (5:24). The Galatians were dead to the flesh, just as they were dead to the law. The flesh no longer had mastery over them, and they were not enslaved to its desires. All this was the result of their new life in the Spirit, and Paul urged them to “keep in step with the Spirit” (5:25). The Galatians had to live out in practice (imperative/action) what was true of them in Christ (indicative/state; cf. Rom 6:1–18). If they would follow and obey the Spirit, He would keep them from conceit and provocation and envy (5:26).

Encouraging the weary to continue in the faith (Gal 6)

Having called the Galatians to live out their freedom by loving each other and walking in the Spirit, Paul now wanted to encourage them to persevere in the faith. He did this by giving them practical examples of how to edify the body, and by reminding them of the reward that comes from enduring to the end.

1. Paul began by showing the Galatians what it meant to serve one another through love. It meant: gently restoring those who had sinned (6:1a), being sober and vigilant lest they also fall into sin (6:1b), bearing one another’s burdens (6:2), having a proper estimation of themselves (6:3–5), and supporting those who labored for them in ministry (6:6). Such behavior fulfilled the “law of Christ,” for the “new commandment” that Christ had given His disciples was that they “love one another” (John 13:34–35; cf. 1 Cor 9:19–23).
2. Paul then encouraged the Galatians to persevere in the faith by reminding them of the future results of their present behavior. If they would sow to the Spirit—if they would “keep in step with the Spirit” and “not give up”—they would reap a harvest of eternal life. But if they chose to sow to their flesh, they would just as surely reap judgment and corruption (6:7–9). This principle of sowing and reaping should motivate them to do as much good as they could, especially to “the household of faith” (6:10).
3. At this point in the letter, Paul took the pen in his own hands (he often entrusted the actual writing of his letters to an amanuensis; cf. Rom 16:22; 1 Cor 16:21), and he personally wrote the final words. He did so using “large letters” because he wanted to expose and emphasize the true motives of the FGA (6:11). The FGA wanted the Galatians to circumcise themselves “in order that they [the FGA] may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ” (6:12). This revealed that the FGA were not truly concerned about the spiritual welfare of the Galatians. Rather, they were worried about how the Galatians’ uncircumcised flesh would affect their own standing in the community. Furthermore, the FGA did “not themselves keep the law” (6:13a). This revealed that the FGA had no

intention of keeping the entire law—they only wanted to keep those parts that made for good standing in the community. In this way they could enjoy the same freedom as the Galatians while at the same time avoiding persecution from their fellow Jews.²⁴ Their ultimate goal was to “boast” in the Galatians’ flesh (6:13b)—it would be the evidence of their success in making proselytes of the Gentiles.

4. Paul continued by making a sharp contrast between himself and the FGA: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (6:14–15). Paul’s boasting was grounded in what was folly to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews—the cross of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). Paul wanted nothing more than to see both Jews and Gentiles saved by faith in Christ alone, and he called for peace and mercy on all who shared his desire (6:16).²⁵
5. Paul’s concluding words called for all involved to cause him no further trouble—the FGA should cease their heretical teachings and the Galatians should return to Christ whom they had deserted—for the scars on his body clearly showed his deep love of Christ and the Galatians (6:17). He closed with a benediction that addressed them as brothers, showing that he had confidence that they would honor his command: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen” (6:18).

CONCLUSION

Paul’s letter to the Galatians confirmed and defended the “truth of the gospel”—that both Jews and Gentiles alike are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. We who are in Christ have been crucified with Him, and we are dead to the law and to the flesh. The life we now live in the Spirit is one of great freedom, but it is not the freedom to do whatever we want. Instead, it is the freedom to serve one another through love and so fulfill the law of Christ.²⁶

²⁴ There are three likely meanings to Paul’s claim that the agitators do not “themselves keep the law” (Gal 6:13a). First, it could mean that the FGA, like the Pharisees, scrupulously kept the letter of the law, but ignored the weightier matters like justice, mercy and faithfulness (cf. Matt 23:23; John 7:19). Second, it could mean that the FGA were like the Jews of Romans 2:17–29—they boasted in the law and circumcision, but they broke the law in other ways. Third, it could mean that the FGA wanted to have the same freedom as the Gentiles, but insisted on keeping those parts of the law that made for good standing in the community. At present, I think the last option fits the situation in the Galatian churches best.

²⁵ On the view that “the Israel of God” refers to the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, see Christopher W. Cowan, “Context Is Everything: “The Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14.3 (Fall 2010): 78–85.

²⁶ Galatians in one sentence: we are saved by faith in Christ alone to live in the liberty of Spirit-led, loving service to others. Galatians in one verse: Gal 2:20; 5:13.