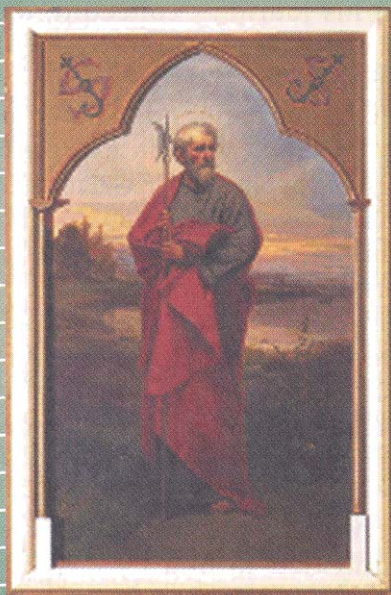




GALATIANS



Eugene V. Goetchius

The Epistle to the Galatians

GALATIA WAS A ROMAN PROVINCE in Asia Minor. St. Paul had founded churches there in Pisidian Antioch, Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium (Acts 13:13f; 14:1, 6, 21-24). The Letter to the Galatians was written from Macedonia in the year 47 A.D., while Paul was on his journey "collecting for the saints," which he mentions in Gal 2:10 and 1 Cor 16:1.

The opening verses of Paul's letters usually conclude with an expression of thanksgiving or blessing; in Galatians, however, this place is taken by an exclamation of astonishment. Paul is astonished at the Galatians for falling away from the gospel he originally preached to them and accepting instead a "different" gospel—which he denies is a gospel at all. In the heat of his indignation Paul provides us with information we might otherwise not have.

Paul asserts that the true gospel which he delivered to the Galatians was not communicated to him by any human predecessor, but was a gift he received by a "revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11). In substantiating this claim Paul gives a brief

summary of his own ministry, beginning with his conversion.

Paul says that God "was pleased to reveal his Son *in me*" (1:16). Most English versions have "to me" here, but "*in me*" is the literal meaning of the Greek (cf. the marginal note in NRSV). Jesus Christ was not only revealed *to* Paul but *in* him, so that the revelation could be passed on by Paul to those he encountered.

Paul says that he did not meet with any of the original apostles immediately after this revelation, but first went off to Arabia and then returned to Damascus, where he had been converted (cf. Acts 9:3-6). Then, three years later, he went to Jerusalem to see Peter. He stayed with Peter fifteen days but saw no other apostle except James, "the Lord's brother" (i.e., not the brother of John nor the disciple called "James the less"). After this he went to Syria and Cilicia.

Then, after fourteen years, he went up to Jerusalem again, with Barnabas and Titus. Almost certainly, these "fourteen years" include the three years previously mentioned. During this visit Paul laid out the gospel he was preaching, and the other apostles gave it their seal of approval (2:2-9).

Paul next describes his altercation with Peter at Antioch. (Antioch in Syria, not Pisidian Antioch. He does not say how he got there.) Peter used to eat with the Gentile converts as Paul himself did, but when "certain people" came from James (who seems to have been conservative in such matters), he "drew back and kept himself separate." Paul accused Peter of hypocrisy: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (2:14).

In the course of explaining his argument with Peter, Paul states, for the first time, the doctrine of justification by faith. This doctrine was proclaimed anew by Martin Luther at the time of the Reformation, and still provokes argument and misunderstanding. In his statement of the doctrine Paul is using a legal or forensic metaphor; he abandons this metaphor after Galatians and Romans, though, to be sure, his teaching concerning salvation remains constant (cf. Eph 2:8f, quote below).

It is rather curious that he uses this metaphor and bases his argument on the story of Abraham, since most if not nearly all of his Galatian converts must have been

Gentiles, unaware of the biblical material. The "Judaizers" doubtless supplied it, and Paul was constrained to use it.

Paul says that a person is justified, reckoned righteous in God's eyes, "not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (2:16a; see the note in NRSV margin). The words "faith in Jesus Christ" and similar phrases elsewhere (2:16b, 2:20, 3:22) have puzzled scholars and translators. The old King James Version has *of* in these passages in place of *in*; that is, it has "by the faith *of* Jesus Christ," and so on. The marginal notes on NRSV show similar renderings.

The phrase "faith *in* Christ" seems unsatisfactory because it does not express a contrast, or the *right* contrast, with "works of the law." The performance of prescribed "works" would seem to be more difficult, and hence more potent to "justify" a person than mere "faith in Christ," which could be understood as simple belief. How strongly must one believe in Christ in order to be sure than one has been "justified?" This difficulty is recognized in the letter of St. James, where the author says, "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead...I by my

works will show you my faith" (Jas 2:17f).

There is obviously a misunderstanding here. St. Paul can hardly have meant by "faith" what the author of the Epistle of James means.

The Greek word *pistis*, translated "faith" in the passages quoted above, may sometimes be rendered by the English word "faithfulness." (It is so rendered by NRSV in Gal 5:22 and Rom 3:3.) Thus the Greek phrase *pistis Iesou Christou* can be translated as "the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ." This makes the meaning clearer: if we understand the phrase to mean "faith in Jesus Christ," as it appears in many English translations, we may get the idea that our "justification" depends on *our* believing, and hence, on something that *we* do. That this is not the case is made explicit in Ephesians 2:8f (NRSV)—"*By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*"

It is Christ's faithfulness to us, not ours to him, that saves us. Our own faithfulness, *our* faith, is our response to his prior act. This is clear from Gal 5:22, where our "faith" or "faithfulness" is said to be a "fruit of the

Spirit," and 1 Cor 12:9, where it is called a "gift" (*charisma*) of the Spirit.

The persons against whom Paul is arguing here are known as "Judaizers" because they want to impose the strictures of the Jewish law on Gentile converts. Paul deals with them in several of his letters. (Cf. Phil 3:1-11; 2 Cor 11:4f, 12-15, 22; Col 2:20-23.)

Here he uses the story of Abraham; this example is ill-suited for Paul's argument, and we can only assume that it was originally used by the Judaizers for their own purposes, and that Paul then adapted it.

It would seem to be obvious that the Jews, not the Gentiles, were the descendants of Abraham, and hence, were heirs to God's promise made to Abraham. The Jewish Christians, therefore, wanted to make Jews of all Gentiles who were converted to Christianity, and compel them to obey Hebrew law.

Paul, however, says that "all those who rely on works of the law are under a curse," and that "no one is justified before God by the law" (3:10f). He supports his argument by quoting the prophet Habakkuk: "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (Hab 2:4, also quoted by Paul in Rom 1:17.) In the

Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures, which was the version regularly used by St. Paul, this passage reads, "The one who is righteous will live by *my* (i.e. *God's*) faith (or faithfulness)."

Paul points out that the promise of God was made to Abraham and his *offspring*, and since "offspring" is a singular noun, it meant Jesus Christ, and him alone (3:16). This promise preceded the giving of the law by four hundred and thirty years, and therefore the law could not nullify the promise which was guaranteed by God's previously ratified covenant (3:17).

Paul winds up his argument in Galatians with the grand assertion: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (3:27-29). Those who are clothed with Christ and belong to him are thus included in Abraham's offspring, though the word for "offspring" is still singular. Paul may have felt this as a difficulty, for he later explains

that Christians are children of God by adoption (4:5-7).

Paul's words, "There is no longer male and female...in Christ Jesus," are perhaps the clearest evidence of how far he has transcended the "male-chauvinist-pig" outlook of the patriarchal society in which he lived.

Paul pleads with the Galatians to "become as he is," reminding them of how it was "because of a physical infirmity" that he first preached the gospel to them, and how they had received him with great kindness (4:13-15). [Paul's "physical infirmity" may have been a disease of the eyes (cf. 4:15), and may also be that which he elsewhere referred to as "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7).]

Paul now returns to the story of Abraham, reminding the Galatians that the patriarch had *two* sons, one by a free woman (Isaac, by Sarah) and the other by a slave (Ishmael, by Hagar). This story he treats as an allegory, and argues that Christians are children of the free woman, Jews of the slave. This is, of course, the opposite of what the story actually teaches. Paul does not use this part of the Genesis story when he comes to write his letter. (Bishop J.B. Lightfoot said,

"The Epistle to the Galatians stands in relation to the Roman letter as the rough model to the finished statue.")

Romans gives substantially the same argument as Galatians for justification by faith (or, faith=faithfulness), but modifies several details of the earlier letter: Galatians speaks of those under the law as "enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world...beings that by nature are not gods" (4:3, 8). This would seem to deny the sovereignty of God, so in Romans Paul speaks of "slaves of sin" (Rom 6:16f). In Romans Paul draws back from attacking God's law (cf. Rom 3:31; 7:12, 22), and makes his enemy "the law of sin that dwells in my members" (Rom 7:23).

Having spent most of his letter urging the Galatians not to be subject to the law, Paul states that "the whole law" is summed up in a single commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (5:14, quoting Lev 19:18). This, of course, echoes the saying of Jesus in the Gospels (Mk 12:31, 33, etc.) and is repeated by Paul in Rom 13:9. Was Paul aware of this paradox?

The paradox is, after all, only apparent. It is obvious that the laws deplored and disparaged by Paul were ritual requirements,

such as the dietary laws and, especially, circumcision. There is no law, he says, against such things as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and self-control," which are "fruit of the Spirit" (5:22f).

The concluding verses of Galatians are interesting because they reveal that Paul customarily used an *amanuensis* to write his letters, but that he wrote the last lines of this letter in his own hand (cf. 1 Cor 16:21, 2 Thess 3:17f). He admits to making "large letters," no doubt because of his poor eyesight. (One of his amanuenses actually "speaks for himself" in Rom 16:22; others may be mentioned in the opening verse of other letters.)

After another brief warning against circumcision, Paul ends his letter with a reference to his own sufferings for the sake of the Gospel: "From now on let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks (*stigmata*) of Jesus branded on my body." A few older writers have understood the "marks of Jesus" to have been like those borne by St. Francis, actual nail scars in the hands and feet simulating the wounds of Christ; this is unnecessary: Paul bore many



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actual scars as a result of his preaching (cf. 2 Cor 6:4f; 11:23-27).

Like all of Paul's letters, the letter to the Galatians ends with words of blessing: "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

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Cover Image: Life-size painting of St. Paul
by Giuseppe Cali' (1846-1930)

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