**The Letter to the Galatians**

**A Call for Freedom from Legalism - #1**

**A General Introduction**

**Who are the Galatians?**

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is so called because it is addressed to “the churches in Galatia” (1:2), who later were called “foolish Galatians” (3:1). But who were the Galatians? Where did they come from? Were they Galatians ethnically specific, or were they called Galatians because they lived in the Roman province of Galatia? Where exactly in the province did they live? When in Paul’s missionary endeavors were they evangelized, and what contacts did Paul have with them afterwards?

**Celts, Gauls, Galatians:** Greek writers commonly used ****** (Galatians) and ****** (Celts), as did Latin authors with ***Celtae*** (Celts), ***Galli*** (Gauls), and ***Galatae*** (Galatians). Originally thought to have lived in the Danube River basin of central Europe, the Celts migrated into Switzerland, southern Germany, and northern Italy, then into France and Britain, and finally southeastward into the Balkan peninsula and Asia Minor. In Britain they were most commonly known as Celts; in France as Gauls (their territory there as Gallia); and in Asia Minor as Galatians (their region was Galatia or Gallograecia, “the land of the Greek-speaking Gauls”).

**Who Are the Opponents of Paul?**

Are these a group who are only the opponents of Paul? Or is Paul facing a movement which is active in preaching something contrary to the Gospel? The teaching is alluded to throughout Galatians, but it is never spelled out precisely nor what sort of people they are and what is their complete teaching. It is, therefore, only from some type of “mirror reading” of the letter itself that we are able to speak of the opponents and their message, and so to reconstruct the situation to which Paul speaks. Mirror reading, however, is always difficult and dangerous. Its difficulty lies in the fact that it is not always possible to distinguish among:

1. Exposition

2. Polemic arguments where the original objection is not recorded

3. Apology or rather a defensive response.

A mirror reading works only where we have other documents – which can help us to see clearly what were the main topics which we do not have – when we deal with the letter to the Galatians. We possess no other writing from antiquity that speaks so directly to the situation except Paul’s own letter. Paul never addresses his opponents directly, but in Galatians 5 he addresses the issues which they had introduced. So it is necessary to begin with the issues that Paul addresses and to try to distinguish:

1. How the opponents understood them

2. How the Galatian Christians understood them

3. How Paul understood them.

If we simply reverse Paul’s affirmations and deduce the opposite we can discover what the opponents taught and why they taught as they did, or how the Galatian Christians understood matters. Often, however, such a procedure gives us only how Paul in the heat of controversy characterized (even caricatured) their teaching and activity.

**The Identity of the Opponents**

So much has been written on the identity of Paul’s opponents at Galatia. The common, almost uncontested view during the Patristic *(era of the early Church fathers, approx. 100-500 AD)* and Reformation *(Luther, et al, 16th century)* periods was that Paul’s opponents were Judaizers, Jewish Christians who mixed Jewish law and practice into Christian faith. But that identification has been both challenged and considerably refined during the past 150 years or so. F.C. Baur, J.B. Lightfoot and others agree that there was a group of Judaizers who became known later as the Ebionites.

The subjects of basic disagreement between the NT scholars were:

* What was the attitude of the church in Jerusalem and apostles to this group?
* Were the apostles of Jesus part of this group?
* Did they agree with these zealous Jewish Christians?
* Did they come from Jerusalem?

J. B. Lightfoot argued that, in fact, they may even have been personal disciples of Jesus himself – they were not supported by the Jerusalem apostles in their Judaizing activities, and therefore must be seen as having taken a line of their own. On the words of Paul, “*certain men came from James*” (Gal 2:12), Lightfoot writes: “Did they bear any commission from him? If so, did it relate to independent matters, or to this very question of eating with the Gentiles? It seems most natural to interpret this notice by the parallel case of the Pharisaic brethren, who had before troubled this same Antiochene Church, “going forth” from the Apostles and insisting on circumcision and the observance of the law, though they “gave them no orders” (Acts 15:24) (*Commentary on Galatians,* p 371)

If the Jerusalem apostles were slow in checking/blocking the Judaizers’ activities it was probably because they had hopes of conciliating them. And if James was more reticent than Peter to approve Paul’s missionary outreach to Gentiles, that at worst must be seen only as a case of his understanding “in this, as in his recognition of Jesus as the Christ, moving more slowly than the Twelve” (ibid., 372).

The situation cannot be made clear by one or more theories. What we have is our speculation which has its roots in what appears later in the sub-apostolic period (100-150 AD). In 1971 Robert Jewett proposed an explanation of Paul’s opponents at Galatia in terms of the Zealot movement that was rising in Palestine as a national movement aiming at the liberation of Judea from the Romans, particularly during the Roman procuratorship of Ventidius Cumanus (A.D. 48-52; *New Testament Studies 17,* 198-212).

During the period from the late forties until the outbreak of the Jewish war in A.D. 66, the Zealots sought to purge Israel of all Gentile elements in the hope that God would then usher in the Messianic Age. Absolute separation from the heathen world was what they wanted, and so their activities were directed against all who had Gentile sympathies and all who associated with Gentile sympathizers. As Jewett puts it: “Jewish Christians in Judea were stimulated by Zealot pressure into a nomistic *(religious conduct based on law)* campaign among their fellow Christians in the late forties and early fifties. Their goal was to avert the suspicion that they were in communion with lawless Gentiles. It appears that the Judean Christians convinced themselves that circumcision of Gentile Christians would thwart Zealot reprisals.” (*Agitators and the Galatian Congregation, NTS 16, 1971, ibid. 205*). Thus it was about this time, Jewett believes, that agitators first appeared at Antioch (Gal 2:11-14), and then later at Galatia.

As Jewett sees it, the Judaizers’ strategy was not to oppose Paul but to offer a supplement to the Pauline message and so bring the Galatian Christians to perfection. “The promise of perfection,” Jewett observes, “would have a powerful appeal to the Hellenistic Christians of Galatia, for such was the aim of the mystery religions as well as of classical philosophy” (*ibid. 207*).

Circumcision and the observance of the cultic calendar, in fact, would be most congenial to Paul’s Galatian converts – though, so as not to weaken their case, the Judaizers made no mention of being obligated to keep all the Mosaic Law. At the same time, the Galatian Christians with their pagan backgrounds were as susceptible to libertinism as to Judaism. So since they believed that the Spirit gave them immediate immortality, they had little interest in ethical distinctions and were just as much in danger of ethical excesses as of apostasy.

**The Message of the Opponents**

1. Having identified Paul’s Galatian opponents as Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who were motivated by concern for the welfare of Palestinian Christians amidst the rising pressures of Jewish nationalism and so carried on a Judaizing campaign among Paul’s converts in the Diaspora in order to thwart any Zealot purification campaign against the church back home, the question arises: Is it possible to go further and delineate the contours of their teaching in Galatia?   
     
   For from the way in which Paul so vigorously and extensively defends both the independence and the equality of his apostleship *vis-à-vis* that of the Jerusalem apostles in Galatians 1-2 even to the point of recounting his opposition to Peter, the “*men from James*” and “*even Barnabas*” at Antioch (2:11-14), it can be concluded that the opponents were arguing that Paul was, in fact, dependent on and subordinate to the leadership of the mother church at Jerusalem (from whence, of course, they came and were accredited representatives).  
     
   The Jerusalem leaders are the only persons with authority to say what the true gospel is, and this authority they received directly from Christ. While Paul received his authority directly from Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul has no earthly authority comparable to that of the Jerusalem leaders … he was not one of the Twelve. Any commission Paul exercises was derived by him from the Jerusalem leaders, and if he differs from them on the content or implications of the gospel, its relationship to the law, the covenant or the customs, he is at variance with them. Paul struck out on a line omitting circumcision and other ancient observances from the message he preached, and thus he betrayed his ancestral heritage as a Jew. This law-free gospel has no authority but Paul’s own.
2. Jesus himself said nothing about circumcision and that exposes Paul to criticism
3. A further feature of the Judaizers’ message must have been on the Abrahamic covenant and being a descendant of Abraham, and so on being legitimately Abraham’s sons and experiencing fully the blessings of God’s covenant with Abraham (and, by extension, the people of Israel). Paul’s exposition of the faith of Abraham in Galatians 3:6-9 (“*he believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness”; “all nations will be blessed in you*”), has a polemic *(argumentative)* approach to both the covenant and its promise in 3:15-18. The polemic side is that the blessing of Abraham was given apart from the law, with its promises being focused particularly on Abraham’s Seed, “*who is Christ*”, and his application of that polemic to the situation at hand in 3:29, *“if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”*
4. To the Judaizers, the most irritating part is Paul’s allegorical treatment of Hagar and Sarah and their sons in 4:21-31, and later his use of the expression “*the Israel of God*” for his Galatian converts in 6:16 – all these, to judge by their prominence in Paul’s argument, strongly suggest that Abraham and the Abrahamic covenant loomed large in the Judaizers’ teaching.
5. Throughout his treatment of these matters Paul seems to be interacting with a typically Jewish attitude, as expressed most clearly in the Talmud, which the Judaizers’ argument could very well have run along the following lines:

* While Paul directed the Galatians to Genesis 15:6, they must realize that the developed form of God’s covenant with Abraham appears in Genesis 17:4-14, with its requirement of circumcision emphatically stated in verses 10-14.
* While Paul spoke only of Abraham, the full development of Israel’s religious legislation came with Moses.
* While Paul spoke of the promises of the gospel, the promises were in actuality made to Abraham and to his “seed,” which means the nation of Israel.
* While Paul assured his converts that by accepting the gospel they became sons of Abraham, the question must be raised as to which son they represent, for Abraham had two sons—the first being Ishmael, with Isaac born later.

1. Paul responds by asserting that Christ and Christ’s own are Abraham’s true “seed” (Gal 3:16, 29). Furthermore, Paul insists that the covenant with Abraham was confirmed by God 430 years before the giving of the Mosaic law, and so having been confirmed, it can neither be annulled nor added to by later developments (3:15-18).
2. Natural birth (as a Jew) does not bring any advantage. Jews born according to the flesh are Ishmaelian. Paul allegorizes and makes Hagar stand for Mt. Sinai (from whence came the law that the Judaizers so extol), who should be associated with the present Jerusalem, which explains the bondage of Jerusalem and her emissaries; it is, however, Sarah, Isaac, and spiritual Jerusalem who are the true ones who bring the blessing to the nations.

*These notes updated from George’s Spring 2007 E91 class on Galatians.*

**The Book of Galatians - New Translation**

***(by George Bebawi, January 2007****)*

***Chapter 1***

*From Paul, who is appointed an apostle not by human means or human commission, but by commission from Jesus Christ and from God the Father who raised him from the dead. I and the group of friends now with me send greetings to the churches of Galatia.*

*Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who sacrificed himself for our sins, to rescue us out of this present age of wickedness, as our God and Father willed: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

*I am astonished to find you turning so quickly away from him who called you by grace, and following a different gospel which is in fact not in any sense another gospel; the matter is that there are persons who unsettle your minds by trying to distort the gospel of Christ. But if anyone whoever may be, if we ourselves or an angel from heaven, should preach a gospel at variance with the gospel we preached to you, he shall be held outcast. I now repeat what I have said before: if anyone preaches a gospel at variance with the gospel which you received, let him be outcast!*

*Does my language now sound as if I were begging for human support? Whose support do I want but God’s alone? Do you think I am seeking favor with men? If I still sought human favor, I am no longer a slave of Christ.*

*I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel which you heard me preach is no human invention. I did not receive it over from any man; no man taught it me; I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.*

*You have heard what my manner of life was when I was still living as a Jew: how savagely I persecuted the church of God, and tried to destroy it; and how in the practice of our way of life, I was outstripping many of my Jewish contemporaries in my boundless devotion to keep the traditions of my ancestors. But then in his good pleasure God, who had set me apart from birth and called me through his grace, chose to reveal his Son to me and in me, in order that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.*

*When that happened, without consulting any human being, without going up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before me, I went off at once to Arabia, and afterwards returned to Damascus.*

*Three years later I did go up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas. I stayed with him for a fortnight, without seeing any other of the apostles, except James the Lord’s brother.*

*What I write is plain truth; before God I am not lying. Next I went to the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and remained unknown by sight to the churches of Christ in Judaea. They only heard it said, “Our former persecutor is preaching the good news of the faith which once he tried to destroy”; and they praised God for me.*

**Galatians *(Bebawi translation 2007)***

***Chapter 2***

*Next, fourteen years later, I went again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus with us. I went up because it had been revealed by God that I should do so. I laid before them – but at a private interview with the men of repute – the gospel which I am committed to preach to the Gentiles, to make sure that the race I had run, and was running, should not be run in vain. Yet even my companion Titus, Gentile though he is, was not compelled to be circumcised.*

*Circumcision as a subject was urged only as a concession to shame certain Christians, who act as intruders to spy upon the free life we enjoy in the fellowship of Christ Jesus. These men wanted to bring us into bondage to the old customs, but not for one moment did I yield to their dictation; I was determined that the full truth of the Gospel should be maintained for you.*

*But as for the men of high reputation (not that their importance matters to me: God does not recognize these personal distinctions) – these men of repute, I say, did not prolong the consultation, but on the contrary acknowledged that I had been entrusted with the Gospel for Gentiles as surely as Peter had been entrusted with the Gospel for Jews. For God who called Peter to be an apostle to the Jews, also made me an apostle to the Gentiles.*

*Recognizing, then, the grace that is bestowed upon me, those reputed pillars among us, James, Cephas, and John, accepted Barnabas and myself as partners, and shook their right hands with us as a sign of accepting us in the fellowship agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles while they went to the Jews. All they asked was that we should keep their poor in mind, which was the very thing I made it my business to do.*

*But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. For until certain persons came from James the leader of the Jewish church in Jerusalem he was taking his meals with gentile Christians; but when they came he drew back and began to hold aloof, because he was afraid of the advocates of circumcision. The other Jewish Christians acted with the same hypocrisy; even Barnabas was carried away and acted as a hypocrite like the rest. But when I saw that their conduct did not square with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas, before the whole congregation: “If you, a Jew born and bred, live like a Gentile, and not like a Jew, how can you insist that Gentiles must live like Jews?”*

*We ourselves are Jews by birth, not Gentiles who trespass the law as all sinners, but we know that no man is ever justified by doing what the law demands, but only through faith in Christ Jesus; so we too have put our faith in Jesus Christ, in order that we might be justified through this faith, and not through deeds dictated by law; for by such deeds, Scripture says, no mortal man shall be justified.*

*If now, in seeking to be justified in Christ, because we ourselves are sinners like the Gentiles and condemned by the law, does that mean that Christ is a servant of sin? No, never! No, if I start building up again a system of condemnation which I have pulled*

*down, then it is that I show myself up as a transgressor of the law which does not allow anyone to be justified by faith. For through the law I died to law to live for God. I have been crucified with Christ: the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me; and my present bodily life is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed himself for me. I will not nullify the grace of God; if righteousness comes by law, then Christ died for nothing.*

***Galatians (Bebawi translation 2007)***

***Chapter 3***

*You stupid Galatians! Who bewitched you in order to depart from truth – you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly displayed upon his cross! Answer me one question: did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message? Can it be that you are so stupid? You started your life under the Spirit; do you now seek to complete your life by keeping rituals which you imagine that these rituals make you perfect? Have all your great experiences which demanded some pain have been in vain – if vain indeed they should be?*

*I ask then: when God gives you the Spirit and works miracles among you, why is this? Is it because you keep the law, or is it because you have faith in the gospel message? Look at Abraham: he put his faith in God, and that faith was counted to him as righteousness.*

*You may take it, then, that it is the men of faith who are Abraham’s sons. And Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles through faith, declared the Good News to Abraham beforehand: “In you all nations shall find blessing.” Thus it is the men of faith who share the blessing with faithful Abraham.*

*On the other hand those who rely on obedience to the law are under a curse; for Scripture says, “Cursed are all who do not persevere in doing everything that is written in the Book of the Law.” It is evident that no one is ever justified before God according to the terms of law; because we read, “he shall gain life who is justified through faith.” Now law does not demand having faith: we read, “he who does this shall gain life by what he does.”*

*Christ redeemed us, that is bought us freedom from the curse of the law, by becoming for our sake an accursed; for Scripture says, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.” And the purpose of being made a curse is that all the blessing of Abraham should in Jesus Christ be extended to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*

*My brothers, let me answer whoever objects, by giving you an illustration. Even in ordinary life, when a man’s will and testament has been duly executed, no one else can set it aside or add a supplement. Now the promises were pronounced to Abraham and to his “issue.” It does not say “issues” in the plural, but in the singular, “and to your issue”; and the “issue” intended is Christ. What I am saying is this: a testament, or covenant, had already been validated by God; it cannot be invalidated, and its promises rendered ineffective, by a law made four hundred and thirty years later. If the inheritance is by legal right, then it is not by promise; but it was by promise that God bestowed it as a free gift on Abraham.*

***Galatians (Bebawi translation 2007)***

***Chapter 3 (continued)***

*Then what of the law? It was added to make wrongdoing a legal offense. It was a temporary measure pending the arrival of the “issue” to whom the promise was made. It was promulgated through angels, and there was an Intermediary; but an intermediary is not needed for one party acting alone, and God is one.*

*Does the law, then, contradict the promises? No, never! If a law had been given which had power to bestow life, then indeed righteousness would have come from keeping the law. But Scripture has declared the whole world to be prisoners in subjection to sin, so that faith in Jesus Christ may be the ground on which the promised blessing is given, and given to those who have such faith.*

*Before this faith came, we were close prisoners in the custody of law, pending the revelation of faith. Thus the law was a kind of tutor in charge of us until Christ should come, when we should be justified through faith; and now that faith has come, the tutor’s charge is at an end. For through faith you are all sons of God in union with Christ Jesus. Baptized into union with him, you have all put on Christ as a garment. There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus. But if you thus belong to Christ, you are the “issue” of Abraham, and so heirs by promise.*

(NOTE: This translates from the Greek, compared against several modern New Testament translations such as King James, NIV, The Message paraphrase, and others.)

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