

The Galatian Problem

To understand Paul's letters to the Galatians, we have to go back there - at least in time - and gather all the pieces of information we can gather and then, with the letter to Galatians as our guide, we can gain an understanding of why Paul wrote this letter, what was at stake, in his mind, and for the gospel that would be preached throughout the world over the next 20 centuries. Today we're going on a journey of discovery, to see the world the way the new believers in Galatia saw it, and to begin to ask the kinds of questions that they were asking.

First off, we're in the Roman Empire, still pretty early on its history. The Republic of Rome had ended less than 100 years earlier with the death of Julius Caesar and the victory of his adopted son Augustus in the civil war that followed. The religion of the empire was paganism, which involved animal sacrifices and the honouring of a whole series of deities. There were sacred groves throughout the cities and each home would have its shrine where people would offer their prayers and pour out libations - liquid offerings to the gods. The Roman calendar was structured around religious observances - special feast days or holidays would celebrate the various pagan gods. This way of worship was simply part of the life of Roman citizens. You couldn't just ignore the shrines and festivals, especially when the Roman emperors made it law that everyone join in these rituals.

But the Jews absolutely refused to pour out offerings to the Roman gods or to participate in the festivals or to eat the food that had first been offered to deities that they didn't believe in. And so the Jews, among all the groups that were part of the Roman Empire, had been granted an exemption from participating in the pagan rituals of Rome.

When Rome had conquered Judea in 63 BC they realized that, for the first time, they were ruling over people who couldn't participate in the worship of their pagan gods. That would have violated the core of their faith and, unlike all the other religious groups that had or would come under Roman rule, the Jews would violate their own religion by offering sacrifices to Jupiter or Apollo or Minerva or Venus. So the Roman leaders, whose policy was to try to include the people they had conquered within Roman culture, exempted the Jews from pagan worship, from emperor worship and from having to fight in the Roman wars.

But what about the Christians? While the Jews were owed favours by Julius Caesar and others, nobody owed the Christians anything. While the Jews had a long history and an advanced civilization of their own, the Christians had a very short history. Why would Rome exempt the Christians from paganism as they had done for the Jews? This forms part of the backdrop to the issues Paul addresses in Galatia.

The other key factor that we must keep in our minds about the Judaism of the first century is that they still lived in fear of another exile. Those who had come back from Babylon and rebuilt and resettled Judea were convicted by the words of the prophets -

men like Isaiah and Jeremiah - who had predicted the exile over and over again and who had told the people it was because of their failure to obey God, their failure to worship Him alone, their failure to take seriously the terms of the covenant He had made with them, that would lead Him to abandon His people and allow them to be overrun by their enemies and sent into exile in a foreign land. They were determined to not let that happen again.

How did they do this? Well, you don't hear anything about Baal worship or about Jews joining in with the worship of their pagan neighbours in New Testament times. They became a people who were devoted to Sabbath-keeping and to studying the law, the Torah, that Moses had given them in the wilderness after their deliverance from Egypt.

So they had rabbis who studied the law and who came up with commentaries on the law and who devised interpretations of the law which were really expansions on the law. In theory, these expansions were to help people to know how, in practical terms, they could please God, but in practice these add-ons, also known as the 'traditions of the elders' became their own law, and were elevated to a high status by the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Jesus' day. Behind all of this was the thought that, if the Jewish people failed to honour God appropriately at this time, they might be sent away again. Their beloved Temple might again be destroyed and the land God had promised to them might again fall into the hands of people who had no fear of Yahweh. But if they kept the Sabbaths and worshiped God and kept His laws, they believed they would be allowed to stay in the land and that, ultimately, God would deliver them from all their enemies.

Sadly, what happened was that their devotion to rules kept them from seeing their Messiah and, after rejecting Jesus, they lost their Temple, their authority and, ultimately their land - from 135 A.D. to 1948.

So, let's turn now to the visit that Paul and Barnabas paid to the region known as Galatia. The story is told in Acts 13 and 14, starting with a prayer meeting in the church in Antioch, where the Holy Spirit told them to dedicate Saul and Barnabas for a mission. They sailed first to Cyprus, where it seems that Saul began to be called Paul instead - from this point on Luke always refers to him as Paul. From there they sailed to Pamphylia and from there went inland to Antioch of Pisidia. This is part of a region known as Galatia and included stops in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Then they returned the way they had come, strengthening the believers in each town they had been in and then got on a ship and sailed home to Antioch.

One of the things that stands out to me about this particular missionary journey is the hostility of the Jewish community towards Paul and Barnabas. In Pisidian Antioch, they had a fairly open response at first and were invited back to speak in the synagogue the following week. But when the Jewish leaders saw the huge crowds that turned out to hear what Paul had to say, they became jealous and slandered Paul and argued against him. Here's the aftermath from Acts 13:46-51:

Then Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and declared, "It was necessary that this Good News from God be given first to you Jews. But since you have rejected it and judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life - well, we will offer it to Gentiles. For this is as the Lord commanded us when He said, 'I have made you a light to the Gentiles, to bring salvation to the farthest corners of the earth.' When the Gentiles heard this, they were very glad and thanked the Lord for His message; and all who were appointed to eternal life became believers. So the Lord's message spread throughout the region. Then the Jewish leaders stirred up both the influential religious women and the leaders of the city, and they incited a mob against Paul and Barnabas and ran them out of town. But they shook off the dust of their feet against them and went to the city of Iconium.

Again, in Iconium, it was opposition from the Jews that turned a portion of the town against them and incited the decision to stir up a mob to attack and stone them. Paul and Barnabas heard about their plot and made a run for it.

In Lystra, they healed a man and the people decided that the gods had come to visit them and were ready to offer sacrifices to them. Verse 19 tells of a sudden change in their attitudes:

Now some Jews arrived from Antioch and Iconium and turned the crowds into a murderous mob. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, apparently dead.

He wasn't dead and the next day they left for Derbe, where we're told that they made many disciples, or true followers of Jesus. So, despite hateful opposition they established churches in each of these places and, on their way back through, they appointed elders and prayed and fasted for them, encouraging them to remain strong in the faith.

When did this all take place? There is some wiggle room when it comes to dating the events of Acts and the New Testament letters, but Paul does say in Galatians 2:1 that it was fourteen years later that he went back to Jerusalem. Fourteen years after his conversion? or after his first visit to Jerusalem? It's difficult to be certain of the year of Paul's conversion. But, when all the various factors are put together, it's reasonable to conclude that Paul travelled to Galatia in the fall and winter of 47-48 and that he wrote his letter to the Galatians later in the year 48. The following year, 49 AD, was the Council of Jerusalem which would have had a strong bearing on the issues he addresses in Galatians and, because he doesn't refer to it at all in this letter, it is probable that the Council is still in the future at that point.

So, I'm half way through this message. You know that the Jews had some special grace from the Roman Emperors to practice their own religion in their own way, ignoring pagan worship requirements in the process. And you know that the Jews were fearfully fastidious in their approach to Torah, the law of Moses, because they were afraid of losing their land and their Temple again. And, you know that as Paul and

Barnabas travelled through Galatia, telling the good news and establishing churches, their primary opposition came from the Jews and that it was extremely hostile and violent.

What was at stake for these Jews?

1. We see that the message that Paul brought was popular, that it drew large crowds and that he always started his mission in each new town in the synagogue. Therefore, his message was a threat to the Jewish community that wanted everything to stay the same as it always had. Acts tells us that they were jealous, and you can see why.
2. We can imagine that the Jews were very attached to the special exemption that had been granted to them by Rome. Anything that could possibly threaten that exemption, or compromise it in some way would cause a lot of concern - and maybe that played a part for the Jews as well.
3. The third factor that would have had a bearing on the Jewish reaction to Paul's message was that he claimed that their Messiah had come, that the Jewish leaders had put Him to death and that, all by itself, was a huge threat to their future hopes. If Messiah had come and had been rejected by the Jews in Jerusalem, what authority did they have to continue to lead Judaism? What would God do with a people who had rejected His anointed One?

But when we come to the letter to the Galatians, it's not the Jews that are causing the problems that Paul has to address - it's the Jews who have converted to Christ, who have acknowledged Jesus to be their Messiah, and have now come to Galatia to set the new believers straight, to correct things that Paul had taught them. These are known as the "agitators" in the Galatian letter and we need to know as much as we can about them.

1. We know that they are outsiders. Most of those who have come to faith in Christ in this region were Gentiles - non-Jews. We get that from a few references in the letter itself and from the account in Acts which shows that the Jews in the area were hostile to the Gospel and that Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles with their message. Where did they come from? We're not told directly, but in Galatians 2 Paul tells us that he experienced a similar challenge in Antioch which was led by Christians who were friends of James, the brother of Jesus who was now leading the church in Jerusalem. Before they arrived, Peter would eat with the Gentile Christians in Antioch, but after they had come, he wouldn't eat with them anymore and soon other Jewish Christians were following Peter's example. So, just to make it simple, let's assume that the outsiders who were troubling the Gentile believers in Galatia were very similar to those who had come from Jerusalem and caused trouble to the Gentile believers in Antioch.
2. The second thing we know about them is that they made a big deal about a few specific requirements of the law of Moses. If you've been reading the letter to the churches in Galatia lately, you'd be able to name some of those things. They were concerned that the Gentiles become circumcised and therefore bound by the rest of the Mosaic law. They were concerned about what they ate, especially about

meat that had been, or might have been, offered to idols. Another would be Sabbath keeping and the observance of several other feast days that were unique to Judaism. What do these things have in common? None of them is a matter of personal, private conviction - they are all visible to the world outside. No, there were no bathing suits worn in Roman baths. So, circumcision, skipping the feast days, observing Sabbaths, refusing to eat meat that had not been butchered by a Jew - those things would be noticed. And, while there was a Jewish exemption - it's not clear that there would be a Christian exemption.

3. What we can't address, at least from Paul's letter, was the motivation of these agitators. Were they afraid of the civil authorities or afraid of the Jews who had opposed Paul and Barnabas' original mission? Were they angry that Paul was teaching something contrary to their strict views on the law and how it should be kept? Did they fear God's punishment on the whole nation for what they would call the rebellion of these few? We'll need to make educated guesses as we study the letter.

Next week we'll start in on the text, which comes entirely from Paul. We don't get to read the actual words of the agitators, nor do we have a letter from the churches in Galatia. Everything we know about their situation comes to us from Paul. As we study the texts, though, we'll be able to piece together a good part of the story of the Galatian churches. We'll be looking for what fault the agitators found with Paul and his message and we'll be looking in depth at his defense of himself and the gospel he preached.

Now, what have we learned today that has some bearing on how we live our lives?

1. One thing we see is that fear is a huge factor in determining how we will act and react to events, especially to things that are new. Why were the agitators afraid? Why did the Galatians give in to their fearful arguments? What was Paul afraid of in relation to his ministry in Galatia? In every case, there was a big "what if?" attached to the issue. "What if" God punishes His people for not doing better at keeping the law? "What if" Messiah has come and we missed it? "What if" the Gentile believers of Galatia decide that they have to become Jews in order to be welcomed in to the Christian family? Some of the fears were legitimate and some were not. What separated them was, as it always is, the truth. And that's what Paul is going to be all about in the rest of this letter. He is determined to show these new, Gentile believers from Galatia what the truth is about the message he had preached to them, his authority to preach it, and the consequences for them if they choose to alter his teaching in some way to accommodate the agitators. For us, the lesson is clear. We need to anchor our lives in the truth of who God is, what He has done for us in Jesus and who we are as a result. Jesus said that we would know the truth and the truth would set us free. Our freedom from fear, from bondage, from self-doubt and from guilt and shame, comes from the knowledge of God's love and forgiveness, from the grace of God that changes us daily as we grow up in Him.

2. The second point I want to bring out is the importance of keeping the main things the main things. The Galatians were being thrown off course by issues that weren't central to the good news they had received from Paul and Barnabas. We can get thrown off by issues that aren't at the heart of the Gospel, that we don't have certain answers for or that are just confusing. They cause unnecessary doubt and we're better off to just let them go, without an answer, if necessary.
3. And finally, I think it's important to understand the times that we live in. What are the permanent things that will shape our lives and what are the temporary marks of a shifting cultural climate? We are living in a period of history that is unique in North America where a massive shift towards socialism and state control is taking place at a rapid pace. That influences how we speak about the claims of Christ, but should not limit how we love people in His name. Later in Galatians we will read words that describe the fruit of the Spirit, words like love, joy, peace, patience and goodness and Paul concludes, "Here there is no conflict with the law." That was true of Jewish law and also the law of the land - there is still an opportunity for the love of Christ to be received.