



## Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

### Galatians 1 & 2: Paul's Personal History

In the opening chapters of Galatians, Paul lays the ground for his argument against the teaching of his successors and opponents. In order to do this, he needs first of all to remind the Galatians of the grounds and the validity of his own authority as an apostle. Hans Dieter Betz in his analysis of the rhetorical form of Galatians says that this section consists of an exordium—an introduction to the themes of the letter, and a narration, a narrative account of the facts that bolster Paul's claims that he is an authentic preacher of the gospel and that the gospel he proclaims comes not from his own wisdom or even his own benevolence but from God through Jesus Christ.

#### The Salutation 1:1-10

The standard form of salutation for a letter in Paul's day begins with the introduction of the author and the designation of the recipients. Typically, Paul does not simply state his name in this salutation; he states his credentials. As in Romans 1:1, 1 Cor. 1:1, and 2 Cor 1:1, Paul introduces himself as an apostle, and as in Romans and 1 Corinthians he reminds the audience that he is an apostle because he has been "called."

Soon he will include his version of the story of his call, but first of all in Galatians he wants to make absolutely explicit what is implicit in Roman and the Corinthian letters as well: His apostleship comes from God, and only from God. It is not that he protests too much, but he certainly protests a great deal; and we can begin to suspect what we will soon discover, that his opponents have been raising questions about the validity of his claim to apostolic authority.

"Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead." (1:1)

The brief description of his apostleship reminds the Galatians of who Paul is. His address to them reminds them of who they are: "and from the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself up for our sins, to set us free from the present evil age." For Paul the history of the cosmos is divided between the present age and the age to come. The good news is that in Jesus Christ, the age to come, God's triumphant rule, is even now breaking in on the present evil age. The bad news, as

we shall see, is that the Galatians keep trying to fall back into the very age from which Christ has come to rescue them.

With 1:6 we come to a surprising feature of this letter—a telling silence. In Paul’s letter to the churches the salutation is always followed by a prayer of thanksgiving for the congregation to whom he writes. So, for instance in Philippians, Paul follows the salutation with these words: “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel.” (Phil 1:3-5)

We do not know for sure whether the Galatian Christians who heard this letter knew of Paul’s habit of moving from greeting to thanksgiving. The use of a thanksgiving early in the letter was characteristic not just of Paul’s letters but of many letters at the time. Surely they were taken aback when, instead of praising them for their steadfastness in the gospel, as he did the Philippians, Paul writes:

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to another gospel.” (1:6). Imagine or remember a letter from someone you love and admire. You open the letter hoping for commendation and receive condemnation instead. For the Galatians the reasons for the condemnation will soon become clear. They have deserted Paul’s gospel, which is the only true gospel. The Galatians are to be condemned; those who have led them astray are accursed. The transliteration of the Greek sounds familiar to English speakers to “let the one who led you astray be *anathema*.” (1:9)

Paul’s Testimony: His Call 1:10-24

Paul tells of his call for at least two reasons. First of all he himself becomes an example of the radical shift from the present evil age to the new age of grace and mercy. From being a persecutor of the church he has been turned into its staunch defender. He has not fallen back into his old ways; nor should the Galatians.

Second, Paul wants to make clear that he does not derive his apostolic authority or the gospel that he preaches from any human source, especially we shall see, from the apostles who knew Jesus during his earthly ministry. Paul deliberately sets himself in the great tradition of the prophets. His description of his own call to apostleship very closely echoes Jeremiah 1:4-8. For this reason and because of its context in Galatians, students of Paul have wanted to refer to this as his call narrative, not his conversion narrative. He does not change religions so much as he changes vocations. (A more elaborate and dramatic version of this story is presented in Acts 9:1-19, 22:6-16 and 26:12-18.) Because this is the story of Paul’s prophetic call and of his particular mission to the Gentiles it may be preferable to translate Galatians 1:16 as the NRSV note suggests: “(God) was pleased to reveal his son in me.” That is, by means of my proclamation.

Paul’s Testimony: His Relationship with the Earlier Apostles (2:1-10)

What is perfectly clear in this section is that Paul wants to emphasize that his authority comes entirely from the risen Christ and not at all from those who were apostles before him, particularly Peter, James the brother of Jesus, and John, who were leaders of the church in Jerusalem.

What is not clear is why Paul feels it necessary to stress his independence so completely. One plausible guess is that the teachers who have followed after him in Galatia claimed that their teaching is congruent with the teaching of those earlier apostles and that by correcting Paul they are in fact enforcing the gospel that the prior apostles rightly proclaim.

Paul's defense is twofold. Its two claims are somewhat in tension with one another, but this is not surprising given his strong sense of his independence and his estimation of his authority. First, he wants to insist that he does not need the approval of the apostles in Jerusalem. In the section leading up to our passage he says that he did visit Jerusalem three years after his call, but he did not stay long and he did not ask for approval.

Second, he wants to insist that though he does not need the approval of the apostles in Jerusalem, he in fact has that approval. Those apostles not only approved his ministry, they made clear their approval of a gospel that did not require adherence to Jewish law by the fact that they accepted Titus, a Gentile, as one of their fellow believers without insisting that he be circumcised.

Paul's attitude toward the earlier apostles seems relatively respectful but hardly reverent. In fact, the tricky phrase in 2:9 suggesting that Cephas, James and John "were acknowledged to be pillars" might also be translated "they were reputed to be pillars" or perhaps even, "the so-called pillars." Reading the text in that way would prepare us for the dispute between Cephas and Paul that lies just ahead. (Cephas is the Aramaic that is translated into the Greek, Petros, and into the English, "Peter.")

As Paul remembers the conversations in Jerusalem, the pillars required only one thing of him in his ministry, that he would remember the poor in Jerusalem, that is, he would collect an offering from the Gentile congregations for the sake of the "poor" Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. A review of his letters will reveal how seriously he took that mission. (See for example 2 Cor 8 and 9; 1 Cor 16; Rom 15). It would seem that the discussions reported in Acts 2 are the same conversations reported in Acts 15, so scholars ask why. Two insights may help: First, Acts is written some decades after Galatians, sometime after the dispute about the mission to the Gentiles has been largely resolved in favor of a Gentile mission. Furthermore, throughout his work, the author of Acts wants to stress the unity of the church in ways that perhaps underplay some of the more evident tensions of Galatians 2. Second, as J. Louis Martyn suggests, Paul is not writing to the Galatians primarily to report the debate between Antioch and Jerusalem, nor to validate his larger missionary activity with Barnabas; he is writing to validate the gospel he has preached to the Galatians and his right to preach that gospel. (See Martyn, 208-211)

## The Narrative Continues: Paul and Cephas at Antioch 2:11-21

With every good reason we wish we had Peter's version of this story. As in so many anecdotes from the pulpit then and now the author emerges as the hero of his own reminiscence. The situation is fairly clear. Peter has come to visit Paul in Antioch where there were Gentile believers. When he was on his own, Peter was perfectly content to eat what the Gentiles ate without worrying about any dietary restrictions. But when some delegates came from James (by happenstance? As spies?), Peter withdrew from the Gentile meals eating only kosher food with the Jerusalem contingent, and he dragged other Jews including Paul's close companion Barnabas into what Paul calls Peter's hypocrisy.

In Paul's version of the story Paul gets the last word: "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews." (Gal. 2:14). In this telling of the story Paul makes a couple of points. First, he has stayed true to the Jerusalem agreement as Peter has not. Second, Peter himself by his behavior approves of the very law-free Gospel that Paul's successors are opposing among the Galatians.

We have to acknowledge that if Paul were to read his criticism of Peter in the light of some of his other writings he might have to acknowledge that Peter had a point. In both 1 Corinthians and Romans Paul admonishes Christians not to let their fellow Christians stumble as a result of their own Christian freedom. If a Christian's faith is strong enough to let her eat food sacrificed to idols, she ought to refrain from such eating if it would scandalize her more scrupulous brother. (See 1 Cor. 8:7-13; Romans 14:13-23.) In many ways Peter is doing exactly what Paul will elsewhere encourage "strong" Christians to do: not let his freedom be the occasion for another's dismay.

Perhaps it was the case that by the time he got to writing Romans, Paul was more willing to concede Peter's point. The Jerusalem agreement seems to allow for admission of Gentile believers to the Christ community, perhaps on the grounds of the universal vision of passages like Isaiah 49:6, 60:1-7. The decision to admit Gentiles to the community apparently did not specify how such Gentiles are to behave when they are in fellowship with Jews. Can they serve shrimp cocktails (or the first century equivalent) at the pot luck after a prayer service? The issue was not decided in Jerusalem. Paul thought it was all right to eat such meals. The men from James thought it was not. Peter tried to hold everyone together, as Paul does in 1 Cor. Perhaps by the time he wrote that letter and the letter to the Romans, he had learned some lessons.

Because our early Greek manuscripts include no punctuation or paragraphs we cannot be sure whether Galatians 2:15-16 is the punch line of Paul's speech to Peter or the beginning of the more general claim he makes to the Galatians at the conclusion of this narrative section. In either case the implication for the Galatians is broader than the discussion of the incident at Antioch. The question has now become: "How are we justified" or to put it too simply "How do we enter a right relationship to God." The answer is through Jesus Christ. In his crucifixion Christ opened up a new way to God, not through obedience to the Law but through trust in

Jesus, who put the law to death but is himself alive in the lives of believers and in the community of the church.

It is much debated whether in v. 16 Paul is saying that the Galatians are justified by their faith in Christ or by Christ's faithfulness to God. The Greek phrase is entirely ambiguous. It may be that there is less at stake here than the debates would indicate. What is clear enough in Paul's writings throughout is that our justification, our getting right with God, depends first of all on Jesus Christ (whether best understood as his faithfulness or as his obedience)? But we lay hold of that righteousness through our faith, through our trust. The details of the vocabulary are less important than the centrality of the claim.

It is that claim that Paul will elaborate in reminding the Galatians of the Gospel that he preached and that they are in danger of abandoning.

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