

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

by

Philip Schaff
D.D.

Note: Author's introduction in *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1881). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

The Galatians.

Galatia or Gallo-Græcia was a mountainous but fertile province in the interior of Asia Minor. It had its name from the Gallic or Celtic tribes which inhabited it. Their ancestors, on invitation of Nicomedes, king of Bithynia, had come from the left banks of the Rhine and the Moselle, and in company with a small number of Germans settled in Asia about 280 before Christ. This was a backward movement in the migration of nations, which usually follows the westward course of the sun, but is occasionally repulsed or voluntarily recedes. In Galatia these emigrants from Gaul mingled with Greeks and acquired their language, but retained the partial use of their vernacular tongue, which resembled the Germanic (or Celtic) dialect of the region of Treves on the Moselle, as spoken in the fourth century. They were the terror and scourge of Asia Minor, but after a hundred years of warlike independence they were forced to acknowledge the sovereignty of the Romans (B.C. 187), and their country was finally made a province of the empire under Augustus (B.C. 25).

The principal cities of the province were Ancyra (declared the capital by Augustus), Tavium, and Pessinus. Their commerce attracted many Jews. Ancyra was famous for its goat's-hair manufactures, and for the great historical marble tablets which Augustus had erected there. Pessinus was the centre of the gorgeous and sensuous Phrygian worship of Cybele, the goddess of the earth. In these places were, no doubt, the most important of the congregations to which the Epistle is addressed.

The Galatians were the first of the Celtic and Germanic races to whom the gospel was preached. They are described by the ancient writers as a frank, warlike, impetuous, intelligent, and impressible, but unsteady, quarrelsome, vain, and ostentatious people. It is astonishing how national traits perpetuate themselves for centuries. In both their good and bad qualities and "the fatal gift of fascination" the ancient Galatians and Gauls strongly resemble the modern French.

Under this generous, impulsive but changeable character the Galatians appear in the Epistle of St. Paul. They received him first with enthusiastic joy and kindness, but suffered themselves soon to be misled by false teachers. They were, like all the Celts, "excessive in their devotion to external observances" (as Cæsar describes them). Their former religion was a gross superstition, with a wild mystic ceremonial, hideous mutilations, revolting cruelty, and slavish obedience to priestly authority. They were emancipated from this bondage by Paul but as quickly fell away from his pure and spiritual teaching, and embraced another showy, ceremonial, and hierarchical religion which resembled their old notions and habits. They exchanged a heathen form of ritualism for a Judaizing form and returned to the "weak and beggarly elements" and a new "yoke of bondage." In the second and third centuries Galatia was a hot-bed of Gnostic heresies and Montanist fanaticism. Gregory of Nazianzen denounced "the folly of the Galatians, who abound in many impious sects."

Conversion of the Galatians.

St. Paul came first to Galatia during his second great missionary journey, about the year 51, accompanied by Silas and Timothy, and planted the seed of Christianity throughout the province (Acts 15:6; comp. Gal. 1:6-8; 4:4-13ff.). He was at that time suffering from bodily infirmity (Gal. 4:13) in consequence of much fatigue, persecution, manual labor for his support, and that mysterious affliction which he calls a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7). But the grace of God dwelling in him overcame all these obstacles and revealed its own purity and power all the more strikingly by its contrast with the weakness of nature. The excitable hearts of the Galatians were carried away. They received the Apostle who manifested such zeal and devotion in spite of sickness and pain as an angel of God, yea, even as Jesus Christ himself, and felt so grateful and happy that they were ready, if possible, to sacrifice their own eyes for the good of the Apostle and the unspeakable gift of the gospel (Gal. 4:14,15). This enthusiastic devotion must have been one of his most cheering experiences. Hence, also, his deep grief when he heard soon afterwards of their apostasy to a false gospel.

On his third great missionary journey (A.D. 54 or 55) Paul paid a second visit to Galatia and confirmed the congregations in the Christian faith (Acts 18:23). The majority of these congregations were, no doubt, converts from heathenism. This appears from 4:8,9, where their former condition is described as one of ignorance concerning God, and as a service of false or unreal gods; also from the remark (6:12) that the Judaizing errorists constrained them to be circumcised, which implies that they were not circumcised before (compare 1:16; 2:9; 4:12; 5:23; 6:12,13).

At the same time a number of Galatian converts were originally Jews. This appears from Gal. 2:15ff.; 3:13, 23-25; 4:3, where the apostle as a *Jewish* Christian speaks of himself and his readers in a common plural. This explains the frequent allusions of the Epistle to the Old Testament and the allegorical interpretation of Sara and Hagar (4:21-31). According to Josephus, the Jews were numerous in Ancyra.

The congregations of Galatia were, therefore, like all the churches founded by Paul, of a mixed yet predominantly Gentile-Christian character. It was his practice to preach the gospel first in the synagogue and then to the Gentiles, whom he reached through the medium of "the proselytes of the gate," *i.e.*, the "God-fearing" Gentiles or uncircumcised semi-Jews; for these frequently attended the Jewish worship, adopted the monotheism and the Messianic hopes, and were unconsciously in search of Christianity, groping in the dark after the "unknown God" whom Paul preached.

The visit of St. Paul to Britain is a pious fancy based on an erroneous interpretation of the "end of the West," which he reached in his missionary tours according to Clement of Rome, but which must either be Rome or Spain (comp. Rom. 15:24). It is not impossible, however, as Dr. Lightfoot suggests, that some of Paul's Galatian converts, visiting the far West to barter the hair-cloths of their native land, may have first preached the gospel to the Britons in their kindred language. Yet it is more likely that Christianity reached Britain first from the nearer Gaul and Italy in the second century.

Occasion of the Epistle.

The Epistle was occasioned by the agitations of the Judaizing legalists and formalists who taught the necessity of circumcision for salvation (5:2,11,12; 6:12ff.), and assailed the apostolic authority of Paul, the great champion of the doctrine of salvation by free grace without the works of the law (1:1,11; 2:14). They maintained that he lacked at least one essential qualification for an apostle, having never enjoyed the personal intercourse of Christ on earth, and that he stood in an anomalous

position, outside of the regular college of the original twelve. They probably called in question the sincerity of his conversion and could not forget that he was once a savage persecutor. They regarded him as a dangerous radical and revolutionist who upset the divinely revealed law and endangered the purity and order of the Church. Their Christianity was in all its essential features identical with the Jewish system, except the belief in the Messiahship of Jesus. It was simply an improvement of the law of Moses. It could never have converted the world. It would have excluded the noblest of the Gentiles and included the meanest [lowest] of the Jews. But their error fell in very naturally with the hereditary prejudices of the Jewish converts, especially those of the strict Pharisaic school. They appealed with great apparent force to the letter of the Old Testament, which enjoins circumcision unconditionally upon all male members of Israel; to the practice of the Christian congregation at Jerusalem, which adhered to the Mosaic ritual as long as the congregation consisted exclusively of converted Jews; and to the authority of Peter and James, who, however, had taken more liberal ground since the vision at Joppa and the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10 and 11).

These errorists were defeated in the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), which had decided that faith in Jesus Christ was sufficient for salvation, but they were not convinced and continued their mischievous work in nearly all the congregations of Paul. They followed him step by step and tried to undermine his authority and influence. They sneaked into his folds during his absence and intimidated his defenseless sheep. They reaped where they had not sown. In Galatia they were particularly bold, and succeeded so well among the inexperienced converts that the majority of them for the time being fell away from the liberty of the gospel to the bondage of the law, and ended in the flesh after having begun in the Spirit. Their ceremonial worship captivated the Celtic imagination and emotional temperament more than the spiritual simplicity of Paul's rational service. They told the Galatians that they were only half converted; that they did not yet belong to the church of the true apostolic succession, and had not received the full title-deed to salvation; that they must be circumcised and observe the whole Mosaic law in order to insure their salvation (comp. 1:6; 3:1,3; 4:9,21; 5:2,7).

The apostasy took place shortly after the second visit of Paul in Galatia (1:6, "I marvel that you are *so soon* removed"). But the false teachers had probably begun their agitation before, since passages like 1:9; 5:3; 4:16 seem to allude to previous *personal* warnings of the Apostle against the same error.

We need not be surprised in the least at these disturbances. The same spirit of bigotry and exclusiveness reappears again and again in various forms. Sometimes it insists on a particular dogma, at other times on a form of government or mode of worship, or a particular rite and ceremony as being necessary to salvation. It springs from the selfishness of the human heart, which would like all other people to conform to us rather than that we should conform to them or let them have their own ways and work out their own mission. This intolerant spirit is responsible for all the religious persecutions which form the darkest chapter in the history of Christianity, and which are by no means confined to one church or sect. Nearly every sect has at one time of its history been persecuting according to the extent of its power and opportunity. We must all the more be thankful to the great Apostle of the Gentiles for his bold and noble defense of the gospel of freedom.

Object and Contents.

The object of the Epistle, accordingly, was both apologetic and polemic. It is a personal and a doctrinal self-defense, and a refutation of the Judaizing heresy which had to be once for all uprooted. To this are added appropriate exhortations. The address and salutation, with some remarks on the Galatian defection (1:1-6), introduced the discussion, and an autographic

exhortation and benediction concludes it.

The first part (1:1 to 2:14 or 21) is HISTORICAL and PERSONAL, or AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL, giving a *résumé* of the Apostle's career, partly confirmatory, partly supplementary to the narrative of the Acts (ch. 15), and justifying his office and authority from the direct call of Christ, the revelation of the gospel doctrine made to him, and the testimony of the other Apostles during the Council of Jerusalem.

The second part is DOCTRINAL and POLEMICAL (ch. 2:15 to 4:31). Others begin the second part with chap. 3:1. Paul vindicates and expounds the free gospel salvation by a living faith in Christ, in opposition to the slavish and carnal legalism and ceremonialism of the false teachers who would virtually substitute Moses for Christ.

The third part is PRACTICAL or HORTATORY (chs. 5 and 6). Paul urges the Galatians to hold fast to the Christian liberty, yet without abusing it, to study love, unity, humility, forbearance, and concludes with a benediction.

The main divisions are clear enough. Yet the Epistle is so lively and fervent that narrative, argument, and exhortation are to some extent blended together.

We do not know the effect of the Epistle upon the Galatians. Paul never visited them again, but his thoughts and words still live and burn throughout Christendom.

Time and Place of Composition.

The Epistle must have been written after the Apostolic Council, A.D. 50, since this is alluded to in chapter 2:1ff., and after the year 51 when Paul paid his first visit to Galatia (Acts 16:6). The passage (Gal. 4:13), "Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first" (former time), points to a still later date, as it seems to presuppose a second personal visit, the one mentioned in Acts 18:23 which took place A.D. 54 or 55. On the other hand, however, the words "so soon" (1:6) forbid us to bring the composition down much later than 56.

To the same result we are led by a comparison of Galatians with Second Corinthians and Romans, which bear such a strong resemblance that they must be assigned to the same period in the life of Paul. The Second Epistle to the Corinthians reveals a similar commotion of feeling, and was written from Macedonia, on the way to Corinth, in the summer of 57. The Epistle to the Romans discusses the same doctrines but more calmly, fully, and maturely, and we know it to have been composed at Corinth shortly before his last journey to Jerusalem early in the year 58. Consequently, we may with some degree of certainty place Galatians in the year 56 or 57, either before or shortly after Second Corinthians, at all events before Romans.

As to the *place* of writing, we are pointed either to Ephesus, whither Paul proceeded after his second visit to Galatia and where he tarried nearly three years from 54-57 (Acts 19:1-10), or to Corinth where he spent part of the winter from 57 to 58, or (with Lightfoot and Sanday) to some place on the journey from Macedonia to Corinth. Ephesus is preferable, as Paul had more time there and was nearer the Galatians. At all events, the Epistle was written soon after the apostasy and under the first fresh impressions of the sad news.

The Character and Value of the Epistle.

The Epistle to the Galatians is the Magna Charta and bulwark of evangelical liberty against all forms

of ancient and modern legalism, ceremonialism, and traditionalism. It is a declaration of independence, "written in jets of flame," a manifesto of emancipation from the yoke of spiritual bondage. It is a mighty plea for the doctrine of the free grace of God in Christ Jesus as the only and all-sufficient ground of our salvation; of justification by faith in distinction from all external works and rites; and of the direct relation of the believer to Christ without intervening obstacles. Tertullian, who had something of the bold and fervid spirit of Paul, calls Galatians "the principal Epistle against Judaism."

Our Epistle was written in the agony of battle and smells of powder. It burns with holy indignation, not against the persons of his opponents (whom he never mentions by name), but against their false doctrine and mean [despicable] intriguing conduct. It is impetuous and overpowering, and yet affectionate and warning in tone. It strikes like lightning every projecting point that approaches its path, and yet undelayed by these zigzag deflections instantaneously attains the goal. Every verse breathes the spirit of the great and free Apostle of the Gentiles. His earnestness and mildness, his severity and love, his vehemence and tenderness, his depth and simplicity, his commanding authority and sincere humility are here vividly brought before us in fresh and bold outlines. How severe and intimidating is the anathema (1:8,9), how sharp and cutting the reproof (3:1-4)! But nothing, on the other hand, can be more touchingly affectionate than his reference to the love and gratitude which the Galatians bore to him (4:12-15), and the assurance of his anxiety to be present with his "little children," of whom he says he was again in travail until Christ be formed in them (4:18-20).

The Epistle to the Galatians, as already remarked, bears a striking resemblance to the Epistle to the Romans, not only in particular passages, but in the whole scope and tenor. (No two Epistles of Paul are so much alike except Ephesians and Colossians.) Both discuss the same doctrines of sin and grace, of the law and the gospel, of the free salvation of Christ, of justification by faith without works. But they differ in the mode of treatment and the state of mind from which they proceed. Galatians is a rapid sketch, a fresh and fervent emotional utterance of those great truths in their bold elementary outlines; Romans is a calm and systematic elaboration of the same truths. The former is all aglow with polemic fervor and personal sympathy; the latter is composed in a serene and peaceful frame of mind and is free of censure and complaint, since Paul had at that time no personal knowledge of the Roman Christians and could not call them his children. Galatians may be compared to a fierce mountain torrent in continuous rush over the precipices; Romans to a majestic river in a boundless prairie. "To the Galatians" (says Bishop Lightfoot), "the Apostle flashes out in indignant remonstrance the first eager thoughts kindled by the zeal for the gospel, striking suddenly against a stubborn form of Judaism. To the Romans he writes at leisure, under no pressure of circumstances, in the face of no direct antagonism, explaining, completing, extending the teaching of the earlier letter by giving it a double edge directed against Jew and Gentile alike. The matter which in the one Epistle is personal and fragmentary, elicited by the special needs of an individual church, is in the other generalized and arranged so as to form a comprehensive and systematic treatise."

It is remarkable that these two most evangelical Epistles should have been written to the representatives of those races--the Latin and the Celtic--which have shown the strongest bent towards that Judaizing type of Christianity which is therein condemned and refuted.

Our Epistle resembles also the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, not in the subject treated of, but in the intense personality, in the excited state of feeling, the deep commotion of heart, and the polemic tone towards the false apostles. This similarity was already observed by a commentator in the fifth century (Theodore of Mopsueste), and has been well expressed by a modern commentator (Dr. Jewett) in these words: "In both Epistles there is the same sensitiveness in the Apostle to the behavior of his converts to himself, the same earnestness about the points of difference, the same remembrance of his "infirmity" while he was yet with them, the same consciousness of the

precarious basis on which his own authority rested in the existing state of the two churches. In both there is a greater display of his own feelings than in any other portion of his writings, a deeper contrast of inward exaltation and outward suffering, more of personal entreaty, a greater readiness to impart himself."

The doctrinal meaning and significance of the Epistle to the Galatians, as well as that of the Epistle to the Romans, was not fully appreciated till the time of the Reformation. In the hands of Luther and Calvin it became a powerful weapon against the Judaizers of their age, who wished to entangle the Church again in the yoke of bondage, and who made salvation depend upon all sorts of outward observances rather than a living faith in Jesus Christ.

In this Epistle we have to this day the divine right and divine seal of genuine evangelical Protestantism against Romanism as far as this is a revival of Judaism, and denies to the Christian man that liberty "wherewith Christ has made us free." But it is also, at the same time, an earnest protest against all pseudo-Protestantism, that would abuse the evangelical freedom and pervert it into antinomian licentiousness, which is the worst kind of slavery. For only "He is a freeman whom the Truth makes free, and all are slaves beside."

Genuineness.

The external or historical evidence for the Pauline authorship of this Epistle is not so strong as the evidence for the genuineness of the Gospels, because it was less frequently used. The allusions to it in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers at the close of the first and beginning of the second centuries are somewhat indefinite and uncertain. But after the middle of the second century it is freely quoted by Irenæus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and other fathers. All the manuscripts and versions ascribe it to St. Paul; and Eusebius counts it among the homologoumena, or the universally recognized books of the New Testament. It was also used by early heretics, especially by the Gnostic Marcion (about 150), who included it in his canon as the first of Paul's Epistles, and made it (like the Tübingen Gnostics) the chief basis of his protest against what he regarded as the Judaizing books of the New Testament.

The internal evidence for the authorship of Paul is so strong that no sane divine has ever denied or even doubted it. If there is any genuine document of Paulinism in existence, it is the Epistle to the Galatians. Its marked individuality places it beyond the reach of imitation. It is as unmistakable as the Lutheranism of Luther's commentary on it. The thoughts and style of the Epistle from beginning to end are thoroughly characteristic of Paul and in full harmony with all we know about his life and doctrine and the history of the apostolic age. There is no man in the early church who could have written such an original, vigorous, profound, and authoritative vindication of the gospel of freedom against Judaizing error but the great Apostle of the Gentiles, whose name it bears and of whose personality it is a full-length portrait.

[Return to Introductions to the Epistles of Paul](#)