

Paul's Epistle to the Galatians

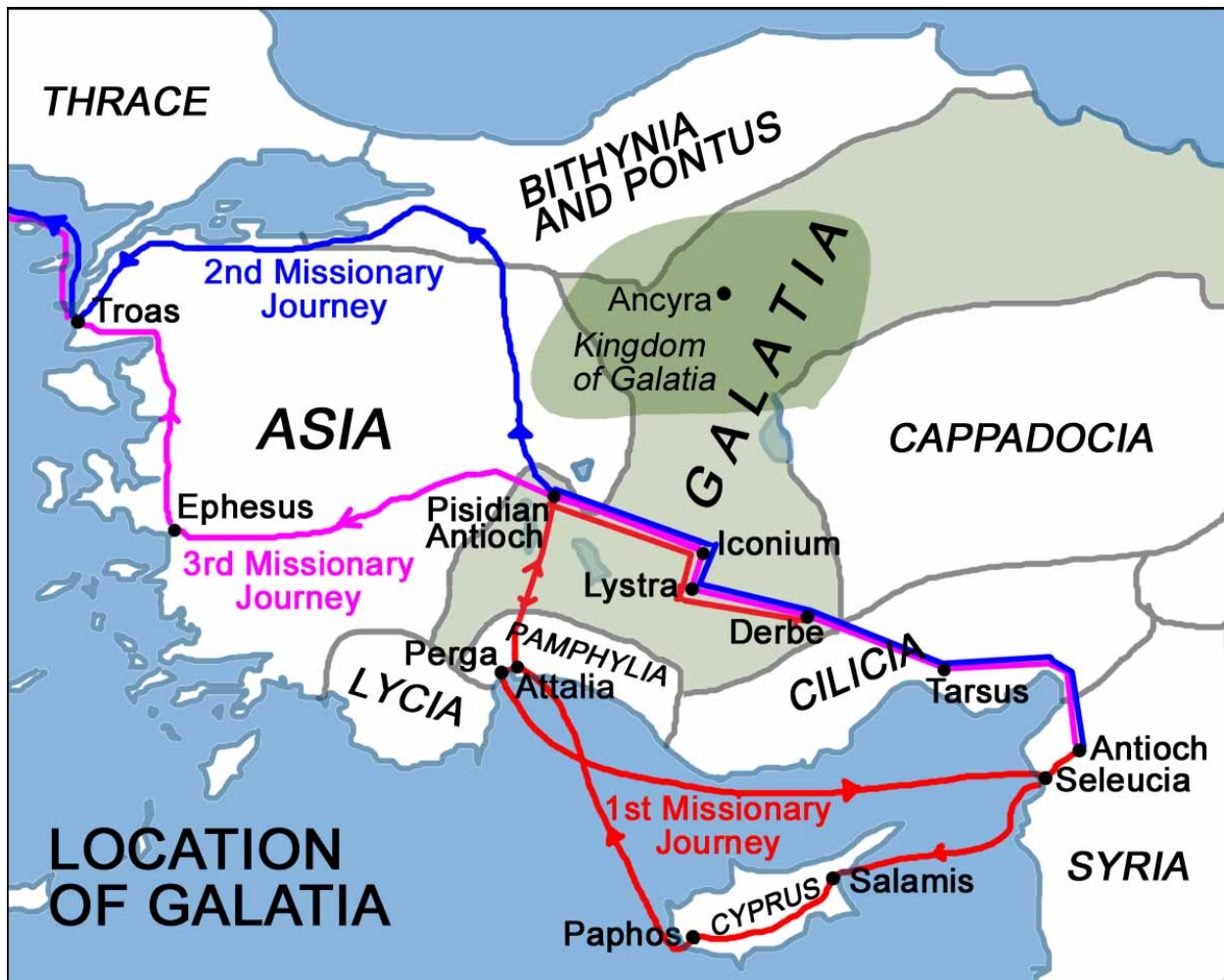
Introduction

Paul's letter to the Galatians is unique among the letters of Paul that have been passed down to us in the New Testament. Unlike the other letters, which begin with thanksgiving and move to encouragement, Galatians begins with outraged astonishment and moves through admonition. It ends almost as brusquely as it begins, though throughout Paul's pastoral affection for the Galatians occasionally shines through and his hope for them remains evident.

We cannot be sure exactly whom Paul had in mind when he addressed his letter to the churches at Galatia. "Galatia" was the name for a Roman territory. Paul could either be writing to inhabitants of the southern part of this territory, in southern Asia Minor, or he could be writing to ethnic "Galatians"—Celts who lived in the northern part of the province. Serious scholars disagree about which is more likely, trying to draw both internal evidence from our letter and external evidence from the Book of Acts. If we were sure about the intended recipients we might also be able to make a more informed guess about the date of the letter and along with that its temporal relationship to other Pauline writings, especially Romans. It would be nice to know the location of the intended recipients of this letter, but even without that information we are able to make some fairly clear inferences about Paul's relationship to these churches.

Map of Asia Minor, Showing the Province of Galatia and the ethnic area of Galatia

Paul's "First Missionary Journey" took him through cities in the south part of the Province



From the evidence of the first part of Galatians, Paul had not intended to include this territory as part of his mission work. Rather when he was on his way elsewhere he was waylaid in Galatia by illness. "You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus." (4:13-14). It is also clear that

he took advantage of this apparent setback to preach the gospel among the Galatians and became the founder of the churches there.

The Situation of the Galatian Churches

Our discussions of Galatians will center on the disappointment Paul expresses toward the churches he founded, and we will want to explore some of the details of this disappointment in our conversations. We can make some preliminary observations about what has happened in Galatia. When he founded churches there, Paul insisted that God's good and saving work in Jesus Christ was a gift available to all people to be accepted by faith. For Gentile converts to the church this meant that they were not required to follow the regulations of the Jewish law. In particular male Gentile converts were not to be circumcised, and Gentiles who became followers of Christ were not obliged to observe Jewish dietary laws.

After Paul had left Galatia to continue on his evangelistic journeys, other Christian leaders came in and tried to improve on his version of the gospel. Perhaps they wanted to argue that Paul had got the gospel wrong. More likely they suggested that what he said was all right as far as it went, but it did not go far enough. Gentiles who followed Jesus became heirs of the heritage of Israel and therefore they were expected to display the markers that set Jews off from the pagan society around them. Male followers of Christ were to be circumcised. Believing families were to keep kosher table at home and Christian churches were to observe dietary laws at congregational meals as well. Paul believed that if Gentiles took on the burden of these practices they rejected the Gospel he had preached; they rejected Christ himself.

What Kind of Letter is this?

Over recent decades a number of scholars of early Christianity have noted that there was a variety of different kinds of letters that were employed by Christian and non-Christian writers alike. While it seems unlikely that Paul wrote Galatians with a guidebook for letter writing in hand, there is no doubt that he was influenced by the rhetorical practices of his time. Even in our time business letters tend to follow a different format than more personal letters, and agenda driven-emails are different from gossipy Facebook postings.

Not surprisingly, Paul's letter employs strategies appropriate to different kinds of first century discourse. In part, he is trying to persuade the Galatians to follow the way of the Gospel he has preached. In part, he is trying to provide evidence that puts his opponents and their "gospel" on trial. Hans Dieter Betz of the University of Chicago wrote a major study of Galatians. In that book he argues that Galatians is an apologetic letter, modeled after the rhetoric of a trial: "In the case of Galatians the addressees are identical with the jury with Paul being the defendant and his opponents the accusers" (Betz, 24). Paul is thus trying to persuade the readers to come to a verdict about the opponents who dispute his gospel. Betz also suggests that the letter may be a kind of magic letter. If the readers disobey its injunctions they will be cursed (Betz, 25). Paul's willingness to curse his opponents is clear enough in Gal 1:8-9, but Betz goes further to suggest that if the members of the community read Paul's letter and still return to their lives under the "elemental spirits of the universe" they have chosen spiritual death instead of life (See 4:8-10).

The Issues addressed

There are at least three interrelated issues in Galatians. The first is the issue of the freedom of the Gospel. Do Gentiles who convert to follow Jesus take on the responsibilities of the law, especially—or perhaps exclusively—circumcision and dietary regulations?

Second is the issue of Paul's own authority. We shall see that his opponents not only disagree with his version of the gospel; they call into question his right to interpret the gospel at all. They call into doubt the validity of his apostleship, and much of the letter is a defense of Paul's right and obligation to represent Christ to the community.

Third is the question of the shape of Christian life in Galatia in the light of the Gospel. As with his other letters, Paul takes the final sections of Galatians to spell out for his hearers the ways in which the faithful life is distinguished both from a kind of licentious excess and from a slavish obedience to the law. It is obvious even from this brief description that Paul's exhortations for Christian behavior follow directly from his understanding of the freedom-giving Gospel.

The commentators sketch out somewhat different versions of the structure of the letter—based in part on its analogy to forms of ancient rhetoric and in part on its own particular function and themes. Carl Holladay provides a helpfully simple outline of the general movement of the letter:

Salutation: 1:1-5

Opening Introduction: 1:6-10 (we will write about the “missing” Thanksgiving when we discuss chapter one).

Statement of facts 1:11-2:14

Proposition: 2:15-21

Proofs: 3:1-4:31

Exhortation: 5:1-6:10

Final peroration 6:11-18 (including the final benediction)

All this fits well with Betz's suggestion that the letter can be seen rather like an address at a trial. But over against this backdrop the letter also has its own more pastoral movement—Paul defends his apostleship and authority (1:1-2:21). Paul instructs his flock 3:1-5:12. Paul exhorts them to faithful obedience to the gospel as he understands it (5:13-6:18). (Holladay, 334-335)

Time and place

Unfortunately we do not know exactly when or where Paul wrote Galatians. He has obviously moved on with his missionary program and does not intend to return to Galatia in the near future to straighten them out. He wants the letter to do that. Galatians was almost certainly written before Romans (which revisits and revises some of its themes) but how long before remains unclear.

Additional Reading

N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Galatians: Exegesis and Theology (2000)," Ch. 18 in *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 191–215.

J. Louis Martyn, "Paul's Opponents in Galatia," in A Wayne Meeks and John T. Fitzgerald, eds., *The Writings of St. Paul* (New York: Norton, 2007) 235–41.

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Hans-Dieter Betz, *Galatians (Hermeneia)*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

Charles Cousar, *Galatians* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982).

James. D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Carl Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2005).

J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians (Anchor Bible)* (New York: Doubleday, 1997)

Fred Weidmann, *Galatians (Westminster Bible Companion)*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013)

Sam K. Williams, *Galatians (Abingdon NT Commentaries)* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997)