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D. A. CARSON & JEFF ROBINSON SR.

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Christ Has Set Us Free

Preaching and Teaching Galatians

Edited by D. A. Carson
and Jeff Robinson Sr.

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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Christ Has Set Us Free: Preaching and Teaching Galatians

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Preface

Martin Luther's efforts to make himself right with God were herculean to the point of being physically painful. He deprived his body of food. He slept on wooden floors. In anger over indwelling sin, Luther beat his own body. The future Reformer even climbed what some considered a holy staircase in Rome, crawling on his hands and knees. But nothing worked. Even though his teachers at the monastery assured him, Luther had no peace of heart, no confidence that he was right with God.

Four words leaped forth from the pages of Scripture and haunted him like a midnight ghoul: "the righteousness of God." Luther felt, with equal intensity, the weight of his sin and the white-hot holiness of the sovereign God. How could a sinful human being be made right with the infinitely righteous God?

Anyone who knows the basic narrative of church history is likely acquainted with how the Lord used Luther and his anxiety over justification in the eyes of God. He eventually encountered the good news of Christ's imputed righteousness in Romans 1:17: "For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Luther said that incredible truth opened the gates of paradise for him. Not long after his rediscovery of the gospel, the Protestant Reformation was born, and through it, the gospel was brought out of eclipse and into the light that we still enjoy today.

Two decades later, in 1535, Luther penned his favorite work, a commentary on Paul's letter to the church at Galatia, the subject of the book you now hold in your hands. The depths of the gospel that Paul upholds and defends in Galatians—the gospel in which justification by faith alone is the beating heart—could never be plumbed by a mere man, Luther wrote. He added,

If we are capable of doing anything at all, the glory of it belongs to us and not to God. But how can dust and ashes receive praise and glory? . . . In my heart only one doctrine rules—faith in Christ. From it, through it and to it all my thinking about theology flows and returns day and night, yet I am aware that I have grasped no more than the first fruits and fragments of such infinite wisdom.¹

Luther and other Reformers, such as John Calvin, John Knox, and Ulrich Zwingli, were used mightily by God for the recovery, reassertion, and defense of the gospel as summarized in five *solas*, which argue that salvation is *sola gratia* (by grace alone), *sola fide* (through faith alone), *solus Christus* (in Christ alone), *solus Deo gloria* (for the glory of God alone), and *sola Scriptura* (revealed in Scripture alone). It was a recovery of Pauline doctrine, of biblical doctrine. As might be expected, Galatians, with its defense of the gospel and central emphases of justification by faith and the freedom the gospel gives sinners in Christ, drew the intense gaze of the Reformers.

In 2017, Christians across the globe celebrated the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, one of the most glorious movements of God's Holy Spirit in human history. On April 3–5 of that year, more than ten thousand followers of Christ gathered in Indianapolis, Indiana, for the Gospel Coalition's bi-annual National Conference to celebrate the anniversary of the Reformation. Speakers delivered sermons from each chapter of

1. Quoted in Gerald L. Brad, ed., *Reformation Commentary on Scripture, New Testament X: Galatians, Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 22.

that great Reformation epistle, Galatians, and this book has been adapted from those talks and supplemented with important introductory material to give pastors and teachers a resource to help them interpret and apply Galatians faithfully for a new generation of Christians who desire to breathe the rich gospel air of the Reformation. We pray God will use it in some small way to encourage his church until Jesus returns.

D. A. Carson and Jeff Robinson Sr.
Soli Deo gloria

Introduction to Galatians

Thomas R. Schreiner

Martin Luther captured the message of Galatians and the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 5:3) when he wrote:

Therefore, God accepts only the forsaken, cures only the sick, gives sight only to the blind, restores life to only the dead, sanctifies only the sinners, gives wisdom only to the unwise fools. In short, He has mercy only on those who are wretched, and gives grace only to those who are not in grace. Therefore, no proud saint, no wise or just person, can become God's material, and God's purpose cannot be fulfilled in him. He remains in his own work and makes a fictitious, pretended, false, and painted saint of himself, that is, a hypocrite.¹

Amazingly, Gordon Fee writes from quite a different perspective, saying that his goal is to help people read Galatians "as if the Reformation had never happened."² On the one hand, Fee's goal

1. Martin Luther, "The Seven Penitential Psalms," trans. by Arnold Guebert, in *Selected Psalms III* from *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 14:163.

2. Gordon D. Fee, *Galatians*, Pentecostal Commentary Series (Dorset: Deo, 2007), 1.

is laudable. He wants to read the text on its own terms. On the other hand, it is remarkably naive and ahistorical, for he pretends that he can read Galatians as a neutral observer of the text apart from the history of the church. I am not suggesting that we must read Galatians in defense of the Reformation, nor am I denying that the Reformation may be askew in some of its emphases. But it must be acknowledged that none of us can read Galatians as if the Reformation never occurred. Such a reading is five hundred years too late. Nor can we read Galatians as if the twentieth century never happened or apart from the works of Ignatius, Irenaeus, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and the like. We can consider whether Reformation emphases were wrong (I will argue that they were not), but what we cannot do is read Galatians as if we were the first readers.³

Theology of Galatians

Paul is engaged in a battle for the gospel in this letter, and his words still speak to us today. Vital issues for the Christian life are tackled in Galatians. Paul unpacks the heart of the gospel. We see the meaning and the centrality of justification by faith, which Luther rightly argued was the article by which the church stands or falls. How can a person stand before a holy God without being condemned? Paul answers that question in Galatians.

Jesus Christ is also central in Galatians. We will see that Jesus is fully divine and hence should be worshiped. And the cross of Christ plays a fundamental role in the letter, for no one is justified apart from the cross. Believers are right with God because Christ on the cross bore the curse that believers deserved, and Christ freed us from the power of sin through his death and resurrection.

Paul also emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers, for as Christians we please God only through relying

3. The material in this chapter was originally published in Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010). Used by permission of HarperCollins Christian Publishing.

on the Spirit. The Christian life is not an exercise in autonomy or self-effort but is lived in dependence on the Holy Spirit. The role of the law in the Christian life is also unpacked, so that we gain a sharper profile of the relationship between the old covenant and the new, between the law and the gospel, between the old age and the age to come.

Galatians focuses on soteriology, but at the same time the nature of sin is set forth in the letter, and thereby we understand more clearly why the death of Jesus Christ is of supreme importance. Reading Galatians should not be merely an academic enterprise. The gospel Paul proclaims in it has often been used by the Lord to revive the church. We see from Paul's passion for the gospel that issues of life and death are at stake.

Author

No significant scholarly debate exists on whether Paul wrote Galatians.⁴ Indeed, Galatians is often identified as quintessentially Pauline. I will assume, therefore, without further argumentation that Galatians was written by Paul.

Recipients

Was the letter to the Galatians written to south or north Galatia? Why does it even matter? It should be said at the outset that the destination of the letter does not fundamentally change its interpretation. Where it makes a difference is in terms of history. The letter's destination determines how we correlate Galatians with Acts. For instance, did Paul's confrontation with Peter (Gal. 2:11–14) take place before the apostolic council of Acts 15 (so most who support the south Galatian theory) or after that meeting (the north Galatian theory)?

These historical matters shape our interpretation of the book, at least in minor ways. Does Paul omit mentioning any of his visits

4. For a helpful history of interpretation of Galatians, see John Riches, *Galatians through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

to Jerusalem in the letter to the Galatians? How do we correlate the Pauline visits to Jerusalem with his visits as they are recorded in Acts? The issue is of some importance because we have a historical faith and believe that the events of biblical history are significant. Still, the importance of the issue must not be exaggerated, and some readers may want to skip to the next section and read about the situation of the letter.

Galatia became a Roman province in 25 BC, and the province included people from many ethnic groups, including the “Celts” or “Galatians,” who had migrated to Asia Minor by 278 BC.⁵ In Paul’s day the province was a large area that touched the Black Sea in the north and the Mediterranean in the south. As time passed, however, the province changed. “Vespasian detached almost all of Pisidia from Galatia in AD 74 and about AD 137 Lycaonia Galatica was removed and added to an enlarged province of Cilicia. In AD 297 southern Galatia was united with surrounding regions to form a new province of Pisidia with Antioch as its capital.”⁶

Hence, commentators in early church history naturally thought Galatians was written to the province as it existed in later Roman history, and therefore, virtually all scholars believed that Galatians was written to the ethnic Galatians in the northern part of the province. But the work of William Ramsey and others in the twentieth century has provoked scholars to reexamine the destination of the letter, for scholars are now apprised of the dimensions of the Galatian region during Paul’s day. Therefore, the identity of the recipients of the letter has been debated intensely in the last century.

The north Galatian theory maintains that the letter was sent to ethnic Galatians located in the northern part of the Galatian province.⁷ As Philip Esler remarks, the north Galatian theory could be

5. Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 2–3.

6. Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 5.

7. This view is accepted by most German New Testament scholars, though it is not limited to them. E.g., Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 1–5.

described as “tribal” Galatia since on this view the letter was sent to those who were ethnically Galatians.⁸ The south Galatian view proposes that the letter was sent to the cities Paul visited on his first missionary journey in Acts 13–14.⁹ It is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss in detail the destination of the letter, and I will argue that the south Galatian hypothesis is more likely. In any case, the interpretation of the letter is not affected significantly by whether one holds to a north or south Galatian hypothesis,¹⁰ though one’s view on the destination of the letter has major implications for Pauline chronology.

Date

The date of the letter is determined by the question of the recipients. If one espouses a south Galatian hypothesis and places the letter before the events of Acts 15:1–35, then Galatians is the earliest Pauline letter and may have been written circa AD 48.

8. Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (New York/London: Routledge, 1998), 32. Esler supports the north Galatian theory (32–36).

9. For a defense of a south Galatian destination, see Rainer Riesner, *Paul’s Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*, trans. Doug Scott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 286–91; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 43–56; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), lxiii–lxxxvii; Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* WUNT 49 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 247–51, 277–307; Stephen Mitchell, *The Rise of the Church*, vol. 2 of *Anatolia: Land, Men, and God in Asia Minor* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 1–5; Cilliers Breytenbach, *Paulus und Barnabas in der Provinz Galatien: Studien zu Apostelgeschichte 13f.; 16,6; 18,23 und den Adressaten des Galaterbriefes*, AGJU (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 99–173; Richard Bauckham, “James, Peter, and the Gentiles,” in *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tension in Early Christianity*, eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig Evans, *Novum Testamentum*, Supplements 115 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 135–36; James M. Scott, *Paul and Nations: The Old Testament and Jewish Background of Paul’s Mission to the Nations with Special Reference to the Destination of Galatians*, WUNT 84 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 181–215. But Scott’s appeal to the table of nations fails to convince. For a critique of Scott, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission, Volume 1: Jesus and the Twelve* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 498–99; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission, Volume 2: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1298–99.

10. A number of scholars have supported a north Galatian destination, but at the same time defend the historical accuracy of the letter. See J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians with Introductions, Notes, and Dissertations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957), 4, 12–15; J. Gresham Machen, *Machen’s Notes on Galatians: Notes on Biblical Exposition and Other Aids to Interpretation of the Epistle to the Galatians from the Writings of J. Gresham Machen*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 22–26.

One could support, however, the south Galatian hypothesis and correlate Acts 15:1–35 with Galatians 2:1–10. In such a scenario, the letter could be dated in the early 50s. If one accepts the north Galatian hypothesis, the letter was likely written somewhere between AD 50–57.

Situation

The situation of Galatians must be discerned from the letter itself. But how can we reconstruct what occurred when we are separated from the letter by two thousand years and are limited to Paul's comments and perspective in detecting the historical circumstances that called forth the letter? It has often been said that we suffer from the disadvantage of hearing only one end of a phone conversation. There was no need for Paul to explain the situation thoroughly to the Galatians since they were obviously acquainted firsthand with what was happening. Therefore, we have to engage in mirror reading to determine the historical background of the letter. The method for such a mirror reading has been set forth in an important essay by John Barclay, with which I am in significant agreement.¹¹ I will begin by identifying the major elements Barclay sets forth for identifying opponents in a polemical letter.¹²

Barclay begins by warning us against overconfidence in reconstructing the situation when opponents are named since we are limited to Paul's perspective on the situation. In addition, he observes that the Pauline response is often polemical and emotional, and hence Paul inevitably distorts the character of the opponents.

11. John M. G. Barclay, "Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test-Case," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (1987): 73–93. See also Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988), 36–74. On mirror reading, see also Moisés Silva, *Interpreting Galatians: Explorations in Exegetical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 104–8. For an approach that is less convincing, see B. H. Brinsmead, *Galatians—Dialogical Response to Opponents*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 65 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 23–33. Barclay notes the weaknesses in Brinsmead's reconstruction ("Mirror-Reading," 82–83).

12. For another helpful analysis of the opponents, see In-Gyu Hong, *The Law in Galatians*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* Supplement 81 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 97–120.

Barclay rightly perceives that Paul does not present the opponents as they would have presented themselves. Paul does not attempt to write an objective report of the theology of the agitators.

Still, it does not follow that Paul's portrayal is inaccurate. For if he had miscommunicated the views of his opponents, it is less likely that his response to them would have been effective in convincing the Galatians. Furthermore, it is certainly the case that no one has a "God's-eye" view of any situation. But if we accept the Scriptures as the Word of God, Paul's words in the letter represent the divine perspective of the opponents and cannot be restricted merely to his human judgment. In other words, Paul's view is privileged. Obviously, those who put the Scriptures on the same level as any other human writing will not accept this judgment.

Barclay warns of common pitfalls in historical reconstruction. For example, J. B. Tyson relies on Paul's defensive statements alone to establish the identity of the opponents, but in doing so he omits Galatians 3–4.¹³ Ignoring one third of the letter, which also contains the heart of Paul's argument, is methodologically flawed.¹⁴ We must also beware of overinterpretation. Some scholars read too much into 5:11 in reconstructing the nature of the opposition.

In the same way, we must be cautious about identifying the slogans and catchphrases of the opponents and using such to sketch in the nature of the opposition. As Barclay observes, such a process demands that (1) Paul knew the "exact vocabulary" of the opponents; (2) Paul reused this vocabulary ironically or polemically; (3) we are able to discern where Paul borrows the vocabulary of opponents; and (4) we are able to reconstruct the meaning originally intended by the opponents.¹⁵ Too often in the history of scholarship, scholars have placed too much confidence in their ability to read between the lines.

13. J. B. Tyson, "Paul's Opponents in Galatia," *Novum Testamentum* 10 (1968): 241–54.

14. Cf. also Hong, *Law in Galatians*, 102.

15. Barclay, "Mirror-Reading," 82.

I would suggest the following principles for discerning the opponents.¹⁶ (1) We should begin by looking for explicit statements about the opponents or explicit statements about the recipients of the letter. (2) The frequency and clarity of Paul's statements may indicate the nature of the opposition. (3) The simplest and clearest reconstruction should be preferred, unless there is compelling evidence for more complexity. (4) The reconstruction that is the most plausible historically should be accepted. There is no fail-safe way to determine the nature of opponents, for interpretation of historical documents remains an art. Still, Barclay's principles are an important advance in deciphering the historical plausibility of various reconstructions.

Outline

- I. Introduction: Desertion from Paul's Gospel Is Desertion from the Gospel (1:1–2:21)
 - A. Greeting: Paul's Apostolic Authority (1:1–5)
 - B. Problem Explained: Desertion from the Gospel (1:6–10)
 - C. Paul's Gospel Derived from God, Not People (1:11–2:21)
 1. Thesis: Source of His Gospel Was Revelation (1:11–12)
 2. Thesis Support (1:13–2:21)
 - a. His Past Hostility (1:13–14)
 - b. His Call from God (1:15–17)
 - c. His Relative Obscurity in Judea (1:18–24)
 - d. Recognition of Paul's Authority by Pillars (2:1–10)
 - e. Rebuke of Peter Substantiates Paul's Authority (2:11–21)
 - i. Rebuke (2:11–14)
 - ii. Transition: The Nature of the Gospel (2:15–21)

16. Barclay lists seven principles ("Mirror-Reading," 85). I am citing the exact wording of some of his principles here.

- II. Paul's Gospel Defended from Experience and Scripture (3:1–4:11)
 - A. Argument from Experience: Reception of Spirit by Means of Faith, Not Works (3:1–5)
 - B. Argument from Scripture: Blessing of Abraham by Faith (3:6–14)
 - 1. Members of Abraham's Family by Faith (3:6–9)
 - 2. Curse of Law Removed Only in Christ (3:10–14)
 - C. Argument from Salvation History: Priority of Abrahamic Covenant and Temporary Nature of Mosaic Covenant (3:15–4:11)
 - 1. Addition of Law Does Not Nullify Promise to Abraham (3:15–25)
 - a. Interim Nature of Mosaic Covenant (3:15–18)
 - b. The Purpose of the Law (3:19–25)
 - 2. Sons of God Are Abraham's Offspring (3:26–29)
 - 3. Argument from Slavery to Sonship (4:1–7)
 - 4. The Folly of Reverting to the Law (4:8–11)
- III. A Call to Freedom from the Law and Freedom in the Spirit (4:12–6:10)
 - A. Live in Freedom from the Law: Argument from Friendship (4:12–20)
 - B. Stand in Freedom: Argument from Allegory (4:21–5:1)
 - C. Resist the Dangerous Message of Bondage (5:2–12)
 - 1. It Involves the Requirement of Circumcision (5:2–6)
 - 2. Its Perpetrators Will Be Judged (5:7–12)
 - D. Live Out Freedom in the Spirit (5:13–6:10)
 - 1. Freedom Expressed in Love (5:13–15)
 - 2. Living by the Spirit instead of the Flesh (5:16–24)
 - 3. Caring for One Another by the Spirit (5:25–6:5)
 - 4. Doing Good by the Spirit (6:6–10)
- IV. Final Summary (6:11–18)

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Galatians: Solvent for the Stubborn
Stains of Legalism and Antinomianism?

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