

Galatians: Free in Christ

Letter of Liberty

Galatians 1:1-5

Galatians is the *Magna Carta* of Christian liberty. Martin Luther loved it, calling it “my Katie von Bora”, and John Bunyan loved Luther’s commentary on it second only to Scripture. In this early letter, Paul’s zeal for Jesus and His gospel erupts on the page. Here we find the classic statement of justification by faith alone and how it relates to everything (2:14-16). We also see a person shaped by it. Paul is kind, generous, shocked, condemning, confrontational, caustic, and loving (1:3, 26, 6; 2:14; 5:12; 6:18). Here is the only way to be right with God, which is through the cross, and the only way to follow Him, which is by the Spirit. Here is a man after God’s own heart, opened before us.

The Galatians

The Roman province of Galatia included churches Paul visited on his first missionary journey: Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Acts 13-14). They went back through these cities to strengthen their faith, but after they left, false teachers quickly rose (Acts 14:21-23; 1:6-7). There was another Galatia to the north inhabited by ethnic Gaul-atians, but we have no record that Paul went there. We do have a modern tendency to date New Testament books late. If Paul is writing to Galatian churches in the north, it makes no sense why he wouldn’t cite the council of Jerusalem, which decided gentiles did not have to be circumcised in order to become Christians (Acts 15). This would carry far more weight than his singular rebuke of Peter (2:14). If Galatians was written to the churches in the province, then this is Paul’s earliest letter, one of the earliest in the New Testament. It was likely written in the mid 40s and shows that Paul’s understanding of the gospel was not a late development. Justification by grace alone through faith plus nothing is Jesus’ gospel (2:15-16).

A True Apostle

The two themes of Galatians are the gospel of grace and the legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship, and both are threaded into the prologue. These themes go hand in hand because if Paul is discredited, so is his message, which of course is why his enemies attack *him*. He waits one word before countering: “Paul, an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ” (v1). An apostle is a “sent one.” There are apostles in general like Barnabas and others sent out from the church (Acts 11:22, 14:4; 2 Cor. 8:23). Paul, however, was not one of these: “Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1). He was “untimely born”, but Jesus appeared to him and commissioned him (1 Cor. 15:8-9; Acts 9:1-9). The original apostles were uniquely chosen and set by Jesus as the foundation of His church (Eph. 2:20). There’s a reason why Scripture is not being written today and apostles are not healing the afflicted by the power invested in them. John Stott: “There can, therefore, be no apostolic succession, other than

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a loyalty to the apostolic doctrine of the New Testament. The apostles had no successors.” Paul is not self-promoting but in fact the very opposite. Jesus Christ and God the Father did this (v1). “This is not vainglory, but needful glorying”, said Luther. He also mentions “all the brethren who are with me,” likely the church in Syrian Antioch (v2). Christian ministers must ground their calling and message in Jesus the cornerstone, in line with the apostolic foundation He laid, and the church must stand together against false teachers and their slander. Beware of the internet.

Grace, Peace & Deliverance

In Galatians, we see how relevant the gospel is to everything. You don't learn the gospel, convert through the gospel, master the gospel, and then move on to deeper and more interesting things. The gospel encompasses all things. This is because Jesus is Lord of all. He is the gospel, the good news, the second Adam, the chief apostle, and the only way to stay strong in grace is to understand how the gospel relates to everything. Paul does that right here. Some Christian teachers talk about being gospel-centered, but they've drawn a circle the size of a penny. Our obedience and redeemed life is driven by, connected to, sanctified by God's grace in every way. So when Peter waffles on treating the Gentiles as full Christian, he's not in keeping with the gospel. When people say Paul is a junior apostle, they're attacking the gospel. They've setup another system by which men can be good put right with God, and that's an anti-gospel. So Paul begins with the gospel as always (vv3-5; cf. 1 Cor. 15:1ff.). Grace is God's forgiveness, and peace is how it is expressed in our hearts and lives (v3). God's salvation is given to every individual who believes, but Jesus also gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age (v4). God didn't just make a way for us to be right with Him, but a way to be right with each other and to overcome the wickedness of our age. The gospel is not just the answer to final judgment, but to judgment right now. The kingdom of God has come upon us, and the new creation has broken in on the old (Lk. 11:20; 2 Cor. 5:17). When God's grace and peace reigns in the church, glory goes to Him (v5). Our freedom from sin and death is His glory.