

CATHOLIC COMMENTARY ON SACRED SCRIPTURE



Galatians

Cardinal Albert Vanhoye
and Peter S. Williamson

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Galatians

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and Peter S. Williamson


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Note on Authorship

This volume is unique in the Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture series (CCSS) in that it is based on a previously published work, Cardinal Albert Vanhoye's *Lettera ai Galati*, published in 2000 and revised in 2011. Peter S. Williamson, this volume's coauthor, adapted Vanhoye's Italian commentary for this series, using a translation by his wife, Marsha Daigle-Williamson. This commentary presents Cardinal Vanhoye's work, originally written for his students, along with some additional material to better serve ministers of the word and other readers. Williamson has adapted Vanhoye's commentary in three ways. First, he has added sidebars, pastoral application sections, a glossary, illustrations, suggested resources, and indexes—features that are characteristic of the CCSS. For some of these features Williamson was able to draw upon material from *Lettera ai Galati* or other writings by Cardinal Vanhoye, although the preponderance is Williamson's own work. Second, because it was necessary to condense the Italian commentary to meet the requirements of this series, Williamson has omitted some information and arguments that would be of interest to graduate students and scholars but are less pertinent to a pastoral commentary. Finally, in a few places Williamson has included in the text or footnotes other interpretations suggested by recent commentators.

Introduction

Paul's Letter to the Galatians has long aroused the interest of readers because of the light it sheds on the early history of the Church, on Christian doctrine, and on the striking personality of its author. It keeps readers interested because its passionately expressed teaching is always relevant to Christian †faith and life.

As regards *history*, Galatians begins with an autobiographical section in which Paul relays firsthand information about his life prior to his conversion and the years after it, as well as his relationship with Peter and the church of Jerusalem. There is nothing quite like it in any of his other letters, which offer only occasional and fragmentary autobiographical information. Adding to the historical interest of Galatians is the challenge of relating its narrative to that of the Acts of the Apostles.

As regards *doctrine*, the Letter to the Galatians treats a central and essential element of Paul's theology—†justification by faith in Christ. Although this teaching merits regular review because it is foundational, there is a natural human tendency to forget it. Some scholars have argued that the main point of Galatians is no longer relevant to Christians. It deals with the choice between faith in Christ and the Mosaic †law, but most Christians today are not tempted to seek salvation through the law of Moses. However, while it is true that most Christians are no longer concerned about the need for circumcision and Jewish food laws (i.e., keeping kosher), the deeper question about the basis of our relationship with God remains. Are we relying on our own works or on Christ for salvation? For Paul the only foundation is faith in Christ: no human works can ever claim that role. The Catholic Church is faithful to this doctrine, teaching it at the Council of Trent and reaffirming it in the Catechism of the Catholic

Church (see 1987–2029). Catholic theologians have also expounded justification in their treatises on [†]grace. Nevertheless, because we human beings easily succumb to placing hope for our salvation in good deeds and good intentions, thus substituting human works for faith in Christ, it is always necessary to recall Paul's forceful insistence on justification by faith.

Of course, Galatians is not the only letter in which Paul expounds this doctrine. The Letter to the Romans offers a fuller exposition of the same themes. But Galatians holds its own unique points of interest. Compared to Romans, Galatians seems a bit like a first draft, with the disadvantages but also the advantages that entails. As for disadvantages, some passages in Galatians are hard to understand, some steps in Paul's arguments are missing, and some of his affirmations can seem a bit one-sided. As for advantages, Paul's writing in Galatians is more spontaneous, more animated, and more emphatic. This points to another difference. Paul's exposition in Romans is carefully constructed and has the tone of an academic lecture, as much as that is possible for someone with Paul's passionate temperament. Romans provides us with a theological treatise. Galatians, on the other hand, offers a deeply felt argument about a burning question. In Romans, Paul addresses a community that does not personally know him, so he expresses himself moderately and politely in order to win their acceptance. In Galatians, Paul is speaking to *his* Christians, people he evangelized. The tone is more personal, more direct, and even fierce because his letter is provoked by their unfaithfulness to his preaching. All of this makes his letter more colorful and lively.

We can add that in Galatians Paul presents himself as the defender of Christian freedom. The theme of freedom is not absent in Romans, but it comes across more forcefully in the fiery arguments and exhortations of Galatians. Freedom remains an important topic, even though attention today tends to focus on political rather than religious freedom. Just as there is a tendency among Christians to drift away from justification by faith, so also Paul's teaching about freedom is often neglected. It is natural for pastors to emphasize compliance rather than freedom, and easier to focus on the limits of freedom rather than on its essence. However, to communicate the Pauline perspective on Christian freedom is necessary to help people grow to maturity in Christ, provided that other aspects of the truth are not forgotten.

In addition to the historical information and doctrinal teaching it provides, Galatians holds a special psychological interest because of how clearly it reveals the *personality* of its author. A renowned French theologian, Auguste Sabatier, put it this way:

All the powers of Paul's soul shine forth in these pages. . . . There is nothing in ancient or modern literature to be compared with it. . . . Broad and luminous views, keen logic, biting irony—everything that is most forcible in argument, vehement in indignation, ardent and tender in affection, is found here combined and poured forth in a single stream, forming a work of irresistible power.¹

Paul's tumultuous, explosive spontaneity elicits our interest, but it also presents difficulties for interpretation because it leads to many irregularities in his expression: interrupted sentences, ungrammatical constructions, enigmatic and paradoxical formulas, obscure allusions. To understand it fully we would need to understand the concrete circumstances he is addressing. Unfortunately, we have no other sources of knowledge about the situation of the Christians in Galatia on which to draw. The best we can do is to deduce the historical context from the letter itself. It is no wonder that commentators hold diverse opinions about various points in the letter.

Overview of Galatians

The circumstances that led Paul to send this letter are indicated in vivid terms immediately after his greeting (1:1–5). Paul expresses amazement that the Galatians are turning to “a different gospel” (1:6). The Apostle immediately denounces that so-called “gospel,” saying that it arises from a desire “to pervert the gospel of Christ” (1:7). Then he strongly affirms the unchangeable nature of the gospel he has preached (1:8–9). The goals of the letter can be described as twofold: a passionate defense of the gospel Paul preached to the Galatians and a fierce attack on the Galatians' adherence to another gospel.

Most commentators agree that the letter has three basic sections, although they differ about where precisely these sections begin and end.²

The first section (1:11–2:21) defends the gospel that Paul proclaims on the basis of a series of events in his life. Its theme is clearly stated at the outset: “The gospel preached by me is not of human origin. For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:11–12).

1. Auguste Sabatier, with George Gillanders Findlay, *The Apostle Paul: A Sketch of His Doctrine* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), 153–54.

2. Some prefer a division into two parts, the first doctrinal (1:6–5:12), the second exhortative (5:13–6:10). This division, however, does not distinguish between the autobiographical argument (1:11–2:21) and the doctrinal one (3:1–5:12). Other interpreters propose four divisions, distinguishing two successive proofs (3:1–4:7 and 4:8–5:12) in the doctrinal argument.

The second section (3:1–5:12) defends Paul’s gospel more directly and at the same time combats the Galatians’ adherence to another gospel with various arguments. The basic themes of this second part are forcefully introduced at the end of the autobiographical section. Paul declares that “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (2:16). This thesis statement indicates that the “different gospel” that Paul opposes teaches that justification requires not only faith but also keeping the law of Moses. The Apostle Paul absolutely rejects that position. Some of the arguments he presents against it are based on the Galatians’ experience of the faith (3:1–5; 4:12–20), while others are doctrinal and based on Scripture (3:6–4:11; 4:21–31). Concluding the second part is an exhortation to the Galatians to conduct themselves in accord with the truths Paul has just set forth (5:1–10).

The third section of Galatians (5:13–6:10) defends Paul’s gospel against erroneous practical conclusions that readers might be tempted to draw. It rejects a false understanding of Christian freedom. The fact that Christians are free in regard to the law of Moses does not permit them to lead a dissolute life but rather summons them to a life of generous love under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This theme is introduced in the first sentence: “You were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love” (5:13).

Up to the last sentence in this third section (6:10), Paul has dictated this letter to a secretary. He concludes with a few lines in his own hand, repeating a few points that are still on his heart, and ends, as he usually does, by wishing his recipients “grace” (6:18).

Genre

To interpret a text correctly, we need to be aware of its literary type or genre—that is, what kind of writing it is. We do not interpret a poem the way we read a business letter. To what genre does Galatians belong? Its traditional title, the Letter to the Galatians, reflects the fact that it belongs to the epistolary genre, and the way it is written corresponds to Greco-Roman letter-writing conventions. The beginning states the name of the sender, “Paul,” and the name of the addressees, “the churches of Galatia,” followed by the greeting, “grace to you and peace” (1:1–3). Another salutation ends the letter: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen” (6:18).

What kind of letter is Galatians? It is certainly not merely a letter of friendship, since Paul does not send personal news about where he is, what he is

doing, or what he plans to do. Rather, Galatians is a pastoral letter, an apostolic intervention in response to a crisis that hangs over the Christian communities Paul established in a particular region. The letter contains a message that Paul wanted to address to these Christians that he was unable to present in person because he was elsewhere.

In recent decades, biblical scholars have sought to understand Galatians in light of studies of ancient †rhetoric.³ However, although it is possible to find parallels in Galatians to various kinds of rhetoric, it seems better to recognize the distinctiveness of the letter’s original setting. Galatians belongs to a persuasive genre that is not catalogued in ancient rhetorical treatises—namely, Christian preaching grounded in Scripture and the mystery of Christ, which summons its readers to faith and to life in the Spirit.

Where and When Was Galatians Written?

Today it is customary to indicate at the beginning of a letter the date and sometimes the place from which a letter is written. This custom, however, did not exist in antiquity. Paul therefore does not say where he was when he dictated his letter to the Galatians or when he did so. We can deduce that the letter was written more than fourteen years after the Apostle’s conversion since Paul mentions visiting Jerusalem “after fourteen years” (2:1). But how much time passed between that visit and the composition of Galatians?

The answer depends on the relationship between the meeting in Jerusalem Paul refers to in Gal 2:1–10 and the Council of Jerusalem (approximately AD 48) recounted by Luke in Acts 15:4–29. Some commentators believe these are two different events⁴ and that the Letter to the Galatians preceded the Jerusalem Council and was therefore written before Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 16:1–18:17), making Galatians the oldest of Paul’s letters. However, the majority of commentators believe that Paul’s mention of his visit to Jerusalem in Gal 1:18 and Luke’s account of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) refer to the same event, and therefore they date Galatians after the Council of Jerusalem.

3. Greco-Roman rhetoric distinguished three kinds of discourse corresponding to diverse situations that required persuasion: *forensic rhetoric*, intended to accuse or defend a person in court; *deliberative rhetoric*, addressed to a political assembly to argue for or against a proposed action; and *demonstrative rhetoric*, used on special occasions—a city festival, for instance—in order to praise and celebrate notable achievements. For a concise but helpful overview, see Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 83–85.

4. Some commentators think that Acts 15 synthesizes the debates and conclusions of more than one meeting.

Internal evidence from Paul's letters makes this second view more probable. Comparing Paul's various letters shows a development in the Apostle's thought on certain points, suggesting the likelihood that 1 Thessalonians is the oldest letter and that Galatians was written closer in time to the Letter to the Romans. Romans is generally considered to have been written in early 58, when Paul was about to return from Greece to Jerusalem (see Rom 15:25). It is therefore likely that Galatians was written around the year 56 when Paul was in Ephesus. In support of this, an ancient prologue to Galatians says it was written from there.

Who Were the Galatians?

Paul addresses his letter to "the churches of Galatia" (1:2). Whom exactly that refers to is far from clear. Nowhere else does Paul direct a letter to "the churches" (plural) of an entire region; he always names a particular city (Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth, Rome, Colossae), even when he intends to address the Christians in a whole province (see 2 Cor 1:1). Why doesn't Paul mention any city here? Perhaps Paul's communities in Galatia were located not in big cities but in small towns or villages, but this is only a guess.

Where is the region of Galatia? From comparing the accounts in Acts with what we know of historical geography, two possibilities for its location emerge, one northern and ethnic, the other southern and administrative. The "churches of Galatia" could be located in the region of Ancyra (present-day Ankara) in the north-central part of Anatolia (modern Turkey); this region was inhabited by a Celtic people who were called Galatians because they resided in Gaul before invading Asia Minor in the third century BC. The other possibility is the south-central part of Anatolia that constituted the Roman province of Galatia, which was inhabited by a variety of nationalities.

Both hypotheses find support in Acts. The southern hypothesis identifies Galatia with a region Paul evangelized on his first missionary journey (Acts 13:13–14:26). In his account of this journey, Luke does not mention Galatia, but he names the principal cities that Paul and Barnabas evangelized and refers to the regions of "Pamphylia" (13:13; 14:24), "Pisidia" (13:14; 14:24), and "Lycaonia" (14:6), parts of which belonged to Roman Galatia. After Paul and Barnabas's return to Antioch (14:26), Luke reports the controversy over circumcision for converted ¹Gentiles and the Council of Jerusalem, where the issue was discussed and resolved (Acts 15). After the council, on his second missionary journey, Paul passes through this same region again (16:1) before continuing toward the northwest and Macedonia (16:10–12).



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Figure 1. Possible locations of St. Paul's Galatian churches according to the northern and southern hypotheses.

Two passages in Acts, however, point to the northern hypothesis. They mention Paul's journey in "Galatian territory" (Acts 16:6; see 18:23). These two texts, the only ones in Acts that mention Galatia by name, show that Luke distinguishes between the "Galatian territory" (16:6) and the more southerly regions of Pamphylia, Pisidia, and Lycaonia that Paul evangelized earlier. We do not know, however, if Paul made the same distinction, since the names of the southern regions do not appear in his letters.

In the end, whether Paul was writing to north or south Galatia does not significantly impact the meaning of Galatians for Christian life. In either case, Paul teaches about justification by faith in Christ and about Christian freedom from the law of Moses. What shifts is our understanding of the historical context. According to the southern hypothesis, the letter could have been written before Paul's second missionary journey, and perhaps before the Council of Jerusalem. In the northern theory, on the other hand, the letter would come later, after the



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Figure 2. Remains of Roman baths at Ancyra, located in the northern region called Galatia.

Council of Jerusalem, after he passed through the north “Galatian territory” for the first time on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:6). In this case, the letter might have been written during that journey, but more likely in the course of his third journey, after his second visit to that region (Acts 18:23). If the northern Galatia hypothesis is correct, Gal 2:1–10 could refer to the Council of Jerusalem. In our view, the close parallels between the letters to the Galatians and to the Romans tip the balance in favor of a later date for Galatians, making the northern hypothesis more probable.



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Figure 3. Rural landscape from the southern region called Galatia.

Historical Setting

From the very beginning of his letter (Gal 1:6) Paul attacks the “different gospel” that his readers are on the verge of accepting. What was its content, and who was spreading it? Since the Galatians knew, Paul did not feel the need to explain, which makes it difficult for us to answer these questions. However, we can infer some things from the way the Apostle argues his case.

The first passage that is instructive in this regard is Gal 2:3–5, where the Apostle declares that during his visit to Jerusalem he had fought “so that the truth of the gospel might remain intact” for the Galatians (2:5). The context shows that the question revolved around circumcision: Titus, a Gentile convert, was not “compelled to be circumcised” (2:3). To be circumcised entailed an obligation to practice the law of Moses and adopt the Jewish way of life, especially Sabbath observance, regulations for †ritual purity, and food laws (5:3). Paul maintained that requiring Gentile Christians to keep the Mosaic law would reduce them to slavery, so he forcefully resisted the attempt (2:4–5).

From the chapter that follows (3:7–29), one can surmise that the rival gospel held that faith in Christ was not enough for a person to be justified before God. It was also necessary to enter into Abraham’s family through circumcision (see Gen 17:9–14); indeed, without this sign of the †covenant it was not possible to have any part in Abraham’s †inheritance, the blessings that God had promised to his descendants. It was likewise necessary to adhere to all the precepts of the law given on Mount Sinai (see Exod 24:3–8). While contemporary Christians do not often think about sharing in the blessings promised to Abraham, New Testament authors clearly understand life in Christ to be a fulfillment of these and other Old Testament promises.

The missionaries of the rival gospel did not lack ready arguments from the Old Testament. To these arguments, it seems, they added a critique of Paul and his way of evangelizing Gentiles. They insinuated that he was not a genuine apostle, since he was not one of the Twelve, and therefore ought to conform himself to the teaching and the practice of the apostles among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. They claimed that Paul was preaching a gospel that was merely human teaching, waiving necessary requirements in order “to please people” (Gal 1:10). In addition, he was not consistent, since in some circumstances he himself preached circumcision (5:11).⁵ The goal of these insinuations from his opponents was, evidently, to undermine Paul’s

5. Acts 16:3 reports that Paul had Timothy circumcised, although the situation was quite different from requiring circumcision of Gentile believers, since Timothy was born of a Jewish mother.

apostolic authority so that they could more effectively deny the validity of the gospel he preached.

Who were these opponents? Paul never identifies them clearly. He depicts them at the beginning of the letter as certain people “who are disturbing” the Christians in Galatia “and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ” (1:7). He is undoubtedly thinking about them when he talks about his opponents at the time of the meeting in Jerusalem: “false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might enslave us” (2:4). The troublemakers in Galatia certainly are of the same mentality as the †Judaizers of Acts 15:1, 5, who wanted to impose on Gentile converts the obligation of living like Jews. In the confrontation at Antioch (Gal 2:11–14), Paul reproved Peter for acting as though he agreed with the Judaizers. By refusing to eat with Gentile Christians, Peter was pressuring them to “live like Jews” (2:14).

We have to wait until Gal 4 to find another direct mention of Paul’s adversaries, and there what is at stake is the personal loyalty of the Galatians. Paul does not name his opponents but says with feeling, “They show interest in you, but not in a good way; they want to isolate you, so that you may show interest in them” (4:17). This attempt to seduce his readers away from him pains the Apostle, since he cares deeply about his relationship with his Galatian Christians.

Although they may only be rhetorical flourishes, three sentences in Gal 5 suggest the possibility that the Apostle did not have specific information about these troublemakers. In the first sentence he asks, “Who hindered you from following [the] truth?” (5:7). In the second, he maintains that there is one person chiefly responsible, but he is unable to say who he is: “The one who is troubling you will bear the condemnation, whoever he may be” (5:10). In a third strong statement, he refers to a group: “Would that those who are upsetting you might also castrate themselves!” (5:12).

Paul’s final remarks in his own hand at the end of the letter are more concrete. Here Paul states explicitly what was possible to surmise from chapter 2—namely, that the troublemakers are “trying to compel” the Galatians “to have yourselves circumcised” (6:12–13), the same language of compulsion used earlier in reference to Titus (2:3). To counter the strategies of these Judaizers Paul denounces their motives: they “want to make a good appearance in the flesh,” meaning that they are trying to please people and avoid persecution for “the cross of Christ” (6:12), the true basis of justification. Before his own conversion, Paul persecuted the Church (1:13, 23). Now he is persecuted because he does not preach circumcision (5:11). Finally, Paul accuses these rival teachers of inconsistency: “Not even those having themselves circumcised observe the law themselves” (6:13).

These statements do not reveal the precise identity of the Judaizers; all we can tell is that they are Jewish Christians. It is important to see that Paul does not take aim at Jews in general but rather engages in an intramural polemic against certain Jewish Christian missionaries who observed the Mosaic law and wanted to impose laws specific to the Jewish people on Gentile converts. For us, the precise identification of Paul's adversaries and a detailed determination of their position are secondary. What primarily interests us is the content of the Apostle's teaching. In a certain sense we are indebted to the Judaizers since their error elicited such a vigorous reaction from Paul, forcing him to give expression to profound and essential aspects of our faith in a letter full of apostolic teaching and vitality.

The Letter to the Galatians and Christian Life Today

Besides the perennially important themes of justification by faith and Christian freedom, several other topics in Galatians stand out for their relevance to the Church of the twenty-first century.

- In an age that wants to trim the Christian message to conform to contemporary culture, it is necessary to recall Paul's uncompromising commitment to the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ. Today it is not Jewish tradition that seeks to refashion the gospel but secular ideologies that would erase what is distinctive in its moral requirements, as well as theological currents that deny that salvation is available only in and through Jesus Christ. Paul's words echo through the centuries as a sharp warning: "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach [to you] a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed!" (1:8).
- The most-quoted verse in Galatians is probably 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (RSV). While many things can be said about this verse, contemporary readers especially cherish the poignant declaration that grounds every Christian's identity in Christ's personal love and gift of himself "for me."
- Less noticed, but equally important for the sake of the new evangelization, is Paul's confidence that Christian life is marked by a palpable experience of divine power, so much so that the Apostle can cite it in argument: "Does, then, the one who supplies the Spirit to you and works mighty deeds among you do

so from works of the law or from faith in what you heard?” (3:5). The Church must seek to recover Paul’s confidence and the experience of the early Church.

- Although Galatians has sometimes been interpreted erroneously to teach the replacement of Israel by the Church, the letter is better understood as showing the close relation between Jews and Christians, since Abraham is our common father in faith (3:7–14).
- Through Gal 4:4–7 many Christians have grasped—and many still need to grasp—the life-changing truth that God has adopted us as his sons and daughters and has demonstrated that extraordinary fact by sending the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, raising us to a dignity that is scarcely imaginable.
- Finally, Paul’s teaching in Gal 5:16–25 about the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering and guiding Christian conduct is nothing less than revolutionary. He begins with an extraordinary claim: “Live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh” (5:16). Then Paul interprets Christian experience by explaining the interior conflict between fallen human nature, “the [†]flesh,” and the indwelling Spirit of God (5:17). To avoid confusion between these opposing principles of conduct, Paul contrasts the “works of the flesh” (5:19–21) with the good fruit that the Spirit produces: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (5:22–23). In doing so he demonstrates that being guided by the Holy Spirit leads to conduct that surpasses the law’s demands (5:18, 23).

When Paul heard that the Christians in Galatia were beginning to accept the teaching of the Judaizers, it must have seemed to him an unmitigated disaster. He responded passionately, bringing to bear all his zeal, his love, and his powers of persuasion to return the Galatians to the right path. Nearly two thousand years later, we cannot help but be grateful for that trial, since it elicited from Paul such a wonderful clarification of the gospel and such rich teaching about how to [†]live as a Christian. Paul’s gospel is that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ, the one who loved us and gave himself for us on the cross (2:16, 20; 3:1). Christ freed us from the law so that we might live by the Holy Spirit and not gratify the desire of the flesh, so that through love we might serve one another (5:13, 16).

Outline of the Letter to the Galatians

Opening Greeting (1:1–5)

Reproof and Declaration of Loyalty to the Gospel of Christ
(1:6–10)

I. Paul's Defense of His Gospel with Autobiographical Arguments
(1:11–2:21)

A. The Divine Origin of Paul's Gospel (1:11–24)

1. Introduction to Part 1 (1:11–12)

2. From Persecutor to Apostle (1:13–24)

B. Official Recognition of Paul's Gospel (2:1–10)

1. Second Visit to Jerusalem and a Controversy (2:1–5)

2. Agreement among the Apostles (2:6–10)

C. The Incident at Antioch and the Gospel of Paul (2:11–21)

1. Paul Opposes Peter's Inconsistent Conduct (2:11–14)

2. The Doctrine of Justification (2:15–21)

II. Arguments from Christian Experience and from Scripture
(3:1–5:12)

A. Variety of Arguments (3:1–18)

1. An Argument from Experience: The Gift of the Spirit (3:1–5)

2. An Argument from Scripture: The Faith and Blessing of
Abraham (3:6–14)

3. A Legal Argument: The Priority of the Promise over the Law
(3:15–18)

B. The Temporary Role of the Law; the Superiority of Faith
(3:19–4:11)

1. The Provisional Nature of the Law (3:19–22)
2. The Two Periods of Salvation History (3:23–4:7)
3. Direct Address (4:8–11)
- C. An Appeal to Remember Their Love in the Past (4:12–20)
- D. Another Argument from Scripture and a Conclusion (4:21–5:12)
 1. The Two Sons of Abraham and Two Covenants (4:21–31)
 2. Concluding Exhortations and Admonitions (5:1–12)
- III. Application to Christian Life (5:13–6:10)
 - A. Freedom: Not License but Service in Love (5:13–15)
 - B. The Power of the Spirit over the Flesh (5:16–25)
 - C. Not Conceit but Solidarity (5:26–6:6)
 - D. Do What Is Good (6:7–10)
- Paul's Handwritten Postscript (6:11–18)

An Unusual Beginning

Galatians 1:1–5

All of Paul's letters to churches differ from other letters of his day in the way they begin, but Galatians is unique among them all. A typical greeting at the beginning of a letter is found in Acts 23:26: "Claudius Lysias to his excellency the governor Felix, greetings." ("Greetings" is literally "rejoice.") In contrast, Paul usually introduces himself as an apostle of Christ, mentions one or more of his coworkers as sending the letter with him, and names the church to which he is writing with a complimentary description of their relationship to God. He expresses a prayer-wish that his readers may enjoy [†]grace and peace. Paul normally follows his initial greeting by expressing thanks to God for the recipients of the letter and for God's work in their lives. However, the crisis that Paul discerns in Galatia that has motivated him to write this letter (see "Historical Setting" in the introduction, pp. 23–25) leads him to depart from his customary pattern.

Initial Greeting (1:1–5)

¹Paul, an apostle not from human beings nor through a human being but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead, ²and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: ³grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴who gave himself for our sins that he might rescue us from the present evil age in accord with the will of our God and Father, ⁵to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

NT: Acts 2:24; 9:15; 16:6; Rom 1:7; Gal 2:20

Catechism: Christ's gift his Father's will, 2824

1:1–4 As in his other letters, Paul begins Galatians with a prayer-wish for its recipients (v. 3). Instead of opening with “rejoice” (Greek *chaire*), as secular letters of that period normally did, Paul prays that his readers enjoy **grace** (*charis*), the gratuitous favor of God, and **peace**, an echo of the Jewish customary greeting (2 Macc 1:1). [†]Grace and peace come from a relationship with God that recognizes him as **our Father** and a relationship with his Son Jesus the [†]Messiah. By saying “our,” Paul refers to the standing that he shares with the Galatians as a fellow Christian. His invocation of grace and peace from God and Jesus Christ suggests that his letter will be read at a liturgical gathering of the Christian community and expresses his participation in their assembly.

In other respects, however, this letter to the Galatians begins differently. Immediately after Paul’s name and title of **apostle** is a jarring negative, **not**, which is then countered by **but**. This tone of controversy is very unusual at the beginning of a letter. Paul feels a need to immediately repudiate certain opinions about the nature of his apostleship and to vigorously affirm the divine origin of his apostolic calling. We can infer that opponents of his apostolate have discredited him with the Galatians, perhaps spreading the idea that he was not an apostle of Christ in the full sense of the term but only an emissary sent by the community in Antioch, the church from which Paul began his missionary work.¹ Paul firmly denies having received his commission **from human beings** or through the mediation of a human being such as Peter or one of the other apostles. Paul received his apostleship **through Jesus Christ and God the Father**.

It is important to note the contrast between “from human beings” and “through Jesus Christ” because it shows that for Paul, Jesus Christ is not merely a man but a divine person. Paul’s use of prepositions here is also significant. The first part of the sentence uses two prepositions—“*from* human beings” and “*through* a human being”—which might lead a reader to expect a parallel expression, “*through* Jesus Christ *from* the Father.” Instead Paul uses a single preposition, “*through*,” for Christ and the Father, indicating the union of Christ with the Father. Likewise in verse 3, Paul employs a single preposition, “*from*,” to indicate **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** as the one source of grace and peace.

Paul’s denial in this first sentence that his apostleship comes from human beings prepares for the first, autobiographical part of the letter (1:11–2:21), in which he will defend the divine origin of the [†]gospel he preaches (1:11–12). Other elements in his opening section prepare for the second, more doctrinal

1. Acts 13:1–3. See 2 Cor 8:23 for an instance when Paul uses the term “apostles” to refer to emissaries of the churches.

section (3:1–5:12). Paul immediately recalls fundamental points of [†]faith that the Galatians seem not to have fully grasped: Christ’s resurrection (1:1) and the passion and death by which he gave himself for our freedom (1:4). The Galatians are in the process of turning back to slavery (4:9; 5:1)!

Like the earliest apostolic preaching, Paul presents the resurrection as the work of **God the Father who raised** Jesus.² To refer to the passion, Paul combines two other early formulations from the gospel traditions. The first is Jesus’ statement that the Son of Man has come to “give” his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45); the second is that Christ died “for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3). Paul’s wording, **Christ, who gave himself for our sins**, emphasizes the total personal commitment of Christ in saving us. Galatians 2:20 will emphasize this even more, speaking of Christ’s love.

Christ’s purpose in offering himself was to **rescue us** from the present evil age, a liberation analogous to that of the exodus, when God saw the affliction of his people and came down “to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians” (Exod 3:8; see 18:9–10; Acts 7:34). Such a goal is therefore perfectly **in accord with the will of our God and Father** (Gal 1:4), who wills salvation. On Christ’s part, redemption is a work of obedience to the Father (see Rom 5:19; Phil 2:8) and of generous love for human beings (see Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25–26). Instead of freeing people from Egypt, Christ frees people from **the present evil age**. This phrase refers to the distinction that Jews and Christians of Paul’s day made between “this age” and “the age to come.”³ This present age is the world that was created “very good” (Gen 1:31) but now contains evil because it has become subject to Satan, “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31), on account of sin. The age to come will occur when God intervenes to establish his kingdom.

The Jewish people expected the transition from the present to the future age to take place in the days of the Messiah. They anticipated a clear-cut chronological separation between the ages:

The present age / The age to come

The early Christians, however, came to recognize that the future age was inaugurated at the resurrection of Christ (see vertical line 1 in fig. 4), although the present evil age remains temporarily until the return of Christ (vertical

2. Acts 2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10; 1 Thess 1:10. Other texts emphasize the active role of Christ or the Spirit in the resurrection (Mark 16:6—see RSV; John 10:17–18; Rom 8:11; 1 Thess 4:14; 2 Tim 2:8—see RSV).

3. See Matt 12:32; 24:3; Luke 18:30; Eph 1:21; Heb 6:5. Sometimes the Greek word for “age” is translated “world” (e.g., Rom 12:2 RSV).

line 2). They were aware of living in the overlap between the present age and the age to come.

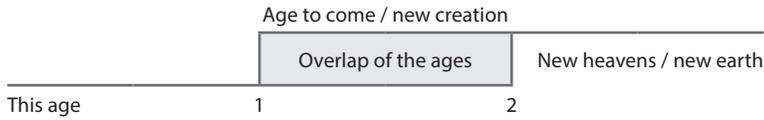


Figure 4. The overlap of the ages.

Based on Michael Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 172. Used by permission.

Christians no longer belong to the present age; instead, they belong to the “new creation” (Gal 6:15; see 2 Cor 5:17). They still find themselves in the world, but, having a new life in Christ, they must no longer conform themselves to this age (Rom 12:2).

In verse 4 Paul prepares for his doctrinal discussion, in which he will contrast the time of slavery to the †elemental powers of the “world” with the time of freedom obtained by Christ (see Gal 3:23–25; 4:3–5) and will vigorously urge the Galatians to stand firm in that freedom (5:1).⁴

By referring to the present age, Paul also sets the stage for the last part of the epistle, which is an exhortation to Christian living (5:13–6:10). Rescued and freed from the power of this evil age, Christians are responsible to †live in a manner that conforms to their new life in Christ. They have received the †eschatological gift of the Spirit, who opposes worldly and †carnal ways of living. The opposition between the present evil age and the age to come is reflected in the conflict between the †flesh and the Spirit in the life of the believer (5:16–25).

The thrust of the entire letter is thus already indicated in the first few verses. Paul has thought ahead of time about what he will say. This does not mean that his letter will be a carefully arranged discourse. Polished orators and methodical teachers are concerned not only to offer convincing arguments but also to express them in the most organized way. They prepare a well-ordered presentation arranged as clearly as possible in divisions and subdivisions, and they take time to correct every sentence, eliminating any obscurity, irregularity, and defect. Paul is not that kind of writer; instead, his style is explosive.⁵ He thinks long and hard about what he wants to say, but reflects on his topic

4. In that discussion Paul will no longer use the word “age” (Greek *aiōn*) but will speak of the elemental powers of the “world” (Greek *kosmos*).

5. While some may question whether these remarks about Paul’s writing style pertain to Romans, they clearly do not apply to Ephesians and Colossians, which some scholars believe were written by a disciple of Paul after his death. Other scholars, who consider these letters from Paul, attribute the difference in style to the aid of a secretary and perhaps to the additional time he had available to write these letters while a prisoner.

passionately without detailed attention to the form of his remarks. Although he has a clear goal in mind, when the time comes to begin dictating the letter, he does not step back to compose his thoughts in a meticulous manner (like the author of Hebrews, for instance) or to review his text and correct the style. Rather he advances full speed ahead, impelled by his passion and conviction.

This is especially true for the Letter to the Galatians, where Paul has scarcely identified himself before he begins presenting his argument. Other writers might devote more space to courteous pleasantries, but Paul considers the matter to be so urgent that he immediately gets down to business. Even the phrase **and all the brothers who are with me** (v. 2) may be intended to make a point. At the beginning of his other letters, Paul usually names one or more of his coworkers (Sylvanus, Sosthenes, and especially Timothy) as coauthors of the letter. Here no other individuals are named; there is only this general reference. The naming of only Paul himself as author forcefully asserts his personal authority. On the other hand, the fact that “all the brothers” are with him indicates that he is not isolated as he addresses the Christians in Galatia. His position is thus doubly reinforced.

Paul’s terse manner of referring to his addressees as **the churches of Galatia**—there is no compliment or praise for them—is also a hint that tension exists. This tone contrasts with the wording in his other letters. For example, 1 Cor 1:2 contains no less than three expressions of appreciation and esteem: “to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been *sanctified* in Christ Jesus, called to be *holy*.” In Rom 1:7 Paul says, “to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be *holy*.” For the Galatians there is no mention of any churches “of God,” no “beloved,” no “called to be *holy*,” since Paul wants to call their attention to an urgent problem.

Even the [†]doxological formula in verse 5—**to whom be glory forever**—can 1:5 be explained by Paul’s perspective on the situation in Galatia. In his other letters, the Apostle never includes a doxology at the beginning. Why does he do so here? In his other letters the first words after the opening are usually, “I give thanks to God,” or “I bless God.” In those letters Paul goes on to thank God for the [†]grace abundantly poured out on the recipients of his letter. Here, however, the first words after his opening sentence will be very different. He does not say, “I give thanks,” but “I am amazed,” and follows with a stinging rebuke. Paul did not feel it was appropriate under the circumstances to express thanksgiving to God about the Galatians (even though he will later express the depth of his love for them, 4:19–20). On the other hand, he did not want to forgo giving glory to God. It is thus reasonable to infer that Paul’s doxology compensates for the absence of an opening prayer of thanksgiving and signals in advance that Paul will not be praising the Galatians.