

GALATIANS CONTEXT SAMPLE – The Bible Knowledge Commentary (BKC)

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Importance of the Epistle.

Galatians, though one of Paul's shorter epistles, is highly esteemed as one of his greatest and most influential. Since both Romans and Galatians teach the doctrine of justification by faith, the former has been considered by some to be an expansion of Galatians and the latter has been called "a short Romans."

Like 2 Corinthians the Epistle of Galatians eloquently defends Paul's apostolic authority and contains in summary form what the apostle taught. In particular it contains a clear statement of justification by faith and builds on that foundation a defense of Christian liberty against any form of legalism.

In the early church, as the separation between Judaism and Christianity was taking place, the letter to the Galatians no doubt helped clarify that cleavage. Centuries later it played such a key role in the Reformation that it was called "the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation." This was because its emphasis on salvation by grace through faith alone was the major theme of the preaching of the Reformers. Luther was especially attached to Galatians and referred to it as his wife. He lectured on the book extensively and his *Commentary on Galatians* was widely read by the common people.

The profound influence of this small epistle continues. It is indeed the "Magna Charta of Christian Liberty," proclaiming to modern generations that salvation from the penalty and power of sin comes not by works but by grace through faith in God's provision.

Authorship

The Pauline authorship of Galatians has, except for a few radical critics, been generally acknowledged. Even when the higher critics of 19th-century Germany were denying apostolic authorship of book after book, the *Tübingen* school regarded Galatians as Pauline. The reasons for this are based on the clear testimony of both internal and external evidence. Importantly, the author of the letter calls himself Paul both in the salutation (1:1) and later in the body of the letter (5:2). Most of chapters 1 and 2 are autobiographical and harmonize consistently with the events of Paul's life recorded in Acts. The theology of Galatians is the theology of Paul as taught in his other writings such as Romans.

The external evidence for Pauline authorship of Galatians is also convincing. In the second and third centuries Galatians was attributed to Paul and quoted by Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. Even the heretics of that time, including Marcion, assumed it was written by Paul.

It must be concluded that no real doubt existed in the early church nor should any exist today as to the Pauline authorship of Galatians.

Original Readers

The Epistle of Galatians was addressed "to the churches in Galatia" (1:2). Where was "Galatia," and who were the "Galatians"? (cf. 3:1) This question is complicated by the fact that Galatia had two meanings when this epistle was written. First, it referred to the area in Asia Minor where the Gauls had settled after migrating from western Europe through Italy and Greece. The territory was limited to the north central and east central areas of Asia Minor and its principal cities were Ancyra, Pessinus, and Tavium. But in 25 B.C. this kingdom was converted to a Roman province, and territory was added to the south, including the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

A debate has raged for centuries over whether Paul wrote his Galatian letter to Christians living in northern or southern Galatia. The North Galatian theory held that Paul visited the geographical district

of Galatia in the north and established churches there. This church-planting ministry would have taken place on Paul's second missionary journey after he left the southern Galatian region and before he came to Troas (cf. Acts 16:6–8). A second visit to the northern territory is apparently described in Acts 18:23.

The South Galatian theory was advanced by Sir William Ramsay. In this view the churches addressed in the epistle were those of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and (Pisidian) Antioch, cities Paul visited initially on his first missionary journey (cf. Acts 13–14). Thus while there is no account in Scripture of churches having been established in North Galatia, even on the second missionary journey, churches were established in South Galatia, according to Acts.

Other arguments which tend to favor the South Galatia theory are that the main roads from Paul's hometown of Tarsus pass directly through the cities of South, not North Galatia; the Judaizers were not likely to bypass the southern cities for the northern cities; a large Jewish element which could be addressed by the Judaizers lived in the southern cities; representatives of South Galatia accompanied the offering for the poor in Jerusalem but none were from North Galatia (cf. Acts 20:4); Barnabas who is mentioned but not introduced (cf. Gal. 2:1, 9, 13) would not have been known by the believers in the northern cities since he traveled with Paul only on the first journey. For these and other reasons many New Testament scholars now favor the view that Paul wrote the Galatian letter to Christians in the cities of South Galatia.

Time and Place of Writing

Those who identify the recipients of Galatians as the believers in the southern cities of Galatia generally consider that the epistle was written from Antioch of Syria in about A.D. 48 just before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). While some chronological problems remain with this view, it is perhaps the best of the available options. After the first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. Peter came down from Jerusalem to visit them, fellowshipped with them, and then withdrew from the Gentile Christians only to be publicly rebuked by Paul for his inconsistent behavior. Meanwhile, Judaizing false teachers had infiltrated the churches in Galatia, denying Paul's authority as an apostle and teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Reacting quickly and vigorously to Peter's actions and the threatened lapse of the Galatians into legalism, Paul wrote this strong letter prior to attending the Jerusalem Council.

Purpose of the Epistle

The Judaizers in Galatia both discredited Paul and proclaimed a false gospel. It was necessary that Paul vindicate his apostleship and message, a task he undertook in the first two chapters. In this autobiographical section Paul demonstrated convincingly that his apostleship and his message came by revelation from the risen Christ. In chapters 3 and 4 Paul contended for the true doctrine of grace, that is, for justification by faith alone. Finally, to show that Christian liberty does not mean license the apostle, in chapters 5 and 6, taught that a Christian should live by the power of the Holy Spirit and that when he does he manifests in his life not the works of the flesh but the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians was written to remedy a desperate situation, to call early Christians back from the Mosaic Law to grace, from legalism to faith. It is an emphatic statement of salvation by faith apart from works and is as relevant today as when it was originally penned.¹

¹ Donald K. Campbell, "Galatians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 587-588.