

*“Gospeling” the Faithfulness of Christ  
Among the Gentiles:  
A Study of the Letters to the Galatians and Thessalonians*  
Diocese of West Texas  
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*Introduction to Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*

Historical Background

**In the early church (30-60 CE), the apostle Paul was a controversial leader and teacher.** As a Jewish Pharisee, well educated in the Torah and faithful to the traditions of his people, Paul’s earliest involvement with the nascent Christian movement had been to persecute the church and try to destroy it. Given this history, Paul’s revelation of the risen Christ in the mid-30s CE<sup>1</sup> and his claim to be an “apostle” of Christ to the Gentiles challenged the authority of the early, acknowledged Jewish leaders of the Christian movement: Peter, James (the Lord’s brother), and John.

**Apostle, or imposter?** For Peter and the other original disciples of Jesus, an *apostle* was someone taught by Jesus during his lifetime, and then sent into the world to proclaim the inauguration of the kingdom of God on earth. These original disciples were schooled in Jesus’ own interpretation of the Torah (or Jewish Law), set out in the scriptures.

Paul, however, did not meet these criteria, never having been a disciple of Jesus during his lifetime. To the recognized apostles, Paul was an outsider, claiming to be an apostle by virtue of having received a revelation of the *risen* Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> CE stands for “common era,” and has become the world’s standard for establishing dates (replacing A.D., which was not a worldwide standard). BCE is the equivalent for the English B.C.

**Paul contributed to the conflict.** Paul, himself, added to the conflict with these early Jewish-Christian church leaders by proclaiming a gospel to the Gentiles that did not include the necessity for observing the entire Torah (Jewish Law).

**Paul's gospel: freedom from Torah for those being led by the Spirit of Christ.** His gospel proclaimed freedom from the Torah for those who were being led by the Spirit of Christ (Gal 5:18; 4:6-7). In other words, Paul taught Gentiles that many parts of the Jewish scriptures did not apply to them. But Peter and the other original disciples, being faithful Jews, still committed to living by the Jewish Law as interpreted by Jesus, aggressively opposed Paul's Law-free teaching.

**Paul's letter to the Galatians lies squarely in the middle of this crucial conflict and debate about the role of Gentiles in the life of the early church, and whether they must follow the Jewish Law to be part of that church.**

- Even though Paul proclaimed a gospel to the Gentiles that did not include observance of the Law, **Paul nevertheless remained thoroughly Jewish over the course of his life and ministry.**
- As we will see in this study of Galatians, **the symbolic and scriptural world of first century Jewish beliefs and practices shapes everything Paul says and does, even to Gentiles.**
- In his attempt to remain a faithful Jew following Jesus the Jewish Messiah, while making the gospel comprehensible to Gentiles, **Paul creates substantial conflict with his more orthodox Jewish-Christian brothers and sisters.**

## Paul and the Churches in Galatia

**Paul makes an unscheduled stop in Galatia.** In the mid-50s, some kind of physical ailment caused Paul to make an unplanned stop in the region of Galatia (Gal 4:13-14), probably located along the central and southern

region of what is now eastern Turkey. There, he spread the gospel of Christ to audiences made up mostly of Gentiles (see Gal 4:8). They received Paul's Law-free gospel of "Christ crucified," and experienced for themselves the power of God associated with the outpouring of the Spirit among them (see Gal 3:1-5).

**Paul's teaching questioned by outside influences.** As often proved to be the case in Paul's ministry, at some point after he left the region of Galatia and his fledgling churches there, other Jewish-Christian teachers (more than likely sent from the mother church in Jerusalem) arrived to counter Paul's Law-free teaching (Gal 1:6-9; 6:12). Apparently, they convinced at least some of these new Gentile converts in Galatia that it was necessary to follow the Jewish Law, including circumcision and observance of the Jewish liturgical calendar, if they wanted to become part of the people of God (Gal 5:2-4).

**Paul hears about the dissension.** When Paul heard about the disruption and dissension in his churches now being caused by these Jewish-Christian teachers, he wrote this blistering letter to his churches. It is far and away his most strident letter to a group of congregations he founded. He even invokes a curse on these Jewish-Christian teachers (Gal 1:6-9) who have come to Galatia to counter his teaching!

**Circumcision or baptism? Men and women in Galatia.** By insisting upon circumcision for the men in Paul's churches, these Law-observant teachers were undermining one of the key pieces of evidence for Paul that, in Christ, God was healing the divisions among people in every arena of life. Paul saw baptism (available equally to men and women) – and not circumcision – as the single entry rite into the community of the people of God. As Paul says so eloquently in the third chapter (perhaps quoting from an early baptismal rite):

*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,*

*there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27-28).*

**Sound familiar?** When we read Galatians and understand its historical setting, the letter gives us a lot to think about in the context of our own church conflicts over what things constitute the “essential” terms of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we may find encouragement in the power of the Spirit to guide Christian communities as we wrestle faithfully with differences of understanding and practice in our own day.

*Paul's letter is designed to shape a community ethos:* We must remember that Paul's concern in his letter to the Galatians is not so much to write a theological treatise as it is to give moral exhortation designed to shape a certain kind of community ethos in the churches of Galatia.

**Experiences of the power of God.** Following the disruptive effects of the teaching of these outsiders, Paul attempts to persuade the Gentile followers of Jesus once again that **they have *already* experienced the power of God through the outpouring of the Spirit** without the necessity of circumcision or complete observance of the Law.

**Experience as persuasive.** Because he is writing to congregations that he founded, Paul consistently reminds them of **their shared experiences and the persuasive influence these experiences *ought to be providing them in their own lives of faith.*** Thus, the letter “raises intriguing questions about the authority of scripture over against the authority of personal experience” (Williams, 15).

## The History of Interpretation of Galatians

**The way Galatians has been interpreted at different points in history has made a profound impact on the course of Christian thought and practice.**

**Early opposition.** In the first two centuries of the Christian movement, Jewish-Christian groups opposed Paul's Law-free perspective and, particularly, his letter to the Galatians.

**The Gospel of Matthew.** Before the end of the first century, we hear Matthew's not-too-subtle critique of Paul, his disciples, and their teaching in Matt 5:19-20 : "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, *and teaches others to do the same*, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven."

**Christian writings outside the New Testament.** Two non-canonical Christian writings of the second century are particularly harsh towards Paul and Galatians.

- In the *Epistle of Peter to James*, Paul's Law-free gospel is characterized as *law-less* and false.
- Similarly, in the *Ascents of James*, the writer charges that Paul's work has greatly hindered the growth of the church among Jews.

**Marcion's use of Paul's letter to the Galatians.** Marcion was a very popular and successful mid-second century church leader, whose development of an acceptable list of Christian texts helped push the church as a whole to consider which early Christian documents should form the backbone of Christian teaching. In contrast to the negative Jewish-Christian assessment of Paul, Marcion favored the use of Paul's writings in his churches. **BUT:**

**Marcion's mid-second century church prospered in part because of a (wrongly) perceived "anti-Jewish" point of view in Galatians.** Based on his misguided interpretation of Galatians, Marcion's harshly "anti-

Jewish” point of view ultimately led him to reject the god of creation (the inferior god of the Jews who made a mess of creation) in favor of the God of Jesus Christ, who redeemed the world from its inferior creator god. For this, and other similar views, the early church ultimately declared Marcion a “heretic.”

**Martin Luther and Galatians.** Centuries later, the great reformer, Martin Luther, also fell in love with Galatians as he heard Paul’s message of grace and freedom. Galatians thus worked its transformative power on Luther and the letter became one of the pillars of the Protestant Reformation.

On the darker side, however, like Marcion, Luther also read Galatians as having a similarly “anti-Jewish” perspective. This “anti-Jewish” interpretation of scripture, perpetuated over subsequent centuries, had devastating consequences for Jews in the Holocaust of the twentieth century.

*The destructive power associated with particular interpretations of scripture highlights why we must be responsible and ethical interpreters of scripture if we hope to embody faithfully the life of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century.*

With this background, we are now ready to travel back in time to the middle of the first century, to the region of Galatia and the churches of Jesus Christ founded by our brother Paul. Let the journey begin.