

Book of Galatians

Title: Galatians derives its title (pros Galatas), from the region in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), where the churches addressed were located.

It is the only one of Paul's epistles specifically addressed to churches in more than one city (1:2; compare 3:1; 1 Cor. 16:1).

The letter is addressed "unto the churches of Galatia" (see 1:2), and its readers are called "Galatians" (3:1).

The term Galatia was originally used in an ethnic manner, referring to north central Asia Minor settled by the invading Gauls.

Later "Galatia" was employed in a political sense, referring to the Roman province that included the cities south of the Gaulish territory: Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch.

While it is uncertain whether the letter was sent to North or South Galatia, this problem has little bearing on the value or understanding of the epistle.

Author – Date: The letter to the Galatians claims the apostle Paul as its writer (1:1, 5:2), and this is attested by the brief autobiography in 1:12-24, as well as by the epistle's language, style, vocabulary, and theology.

Paul was born in Tarsus, a city in the province of Cilicia, not far from Galatia.

Under the famous rabbi, Gamaliel, Paul received a thorough training in the Old Testament Scriptures and in the rabbinic traditions at Jerusalem (Acts 22:3).

A member of the ultra-orthodox sect of the Pharisees (Acts 23:6), he was one of first century Judaism's rising stars (1:14; compare Phil. 3:5-6).

The course of Paul's life took a sudden and startling turn when, on his way to Damascus from Jerusalem to persecute Christians, he was confronted by the risen, glorified Christ (see the notes on Acts 9).

That dramatic encounter that had turned Paul from Christianity's chief persecutor in to its greatest missionary.

His 3 missionary journeys and trip to Rome turned Christianity from a faith that included only a small group of Palestinian Jewish believers into an Empire wide phenomenon.

Galatians is one of 13 inspired letters that he had addressed to Gentile congregations or his fellow workers.

In chapter 2, Paul described his visit to the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 (see note on 2:1), so he must have written Galatians after that event.

Since most scholars date the Jerusalem Council about A.D. 49, the most likely date for Galatians is shortly thereafter.

If the letter was sent to North Galatia, Paul and his missionary team planted the Galatian churches during his second missionary journey.

So the epistle was written to them from either Ephesus (A.D. 54), or Macedonia (A.D. 55), while on his third missionary journey.

But if the letter was addressed to the political (South), Galatia; then Paul started the church on his first missionary trip, writing to them at the end of this journey from his home church in Antioch (A.D. 49).

Paul had led the Galatians to Christ (3:1).

They had made a good start in the Christian life (3:3), and were doing well spiritually (5:7).

Later, some Jewish teachers (called Judaizers), taught the Galatians that to be saved one must not only believe in Christ, but must also obey the Mosaic Law, the sign of which is circumcision.

In preaching this heresy, they also attacked Paul's apostleship and gospel.

Their false gospel had a detrimental effect on the Galatians: it was beginning to hinder their obedience to God (5:7), they were starting to observe some parts of the law (4:10), and they were considering a complete acceptance of the law (6:12; 4:9).

Background – Setting:

In Paul's day, the word Galatia had two distinct meanings.

In a strict ethnic sense, Galatia was the region of central Asia Minor inhabited by the Galatians.

They were a Celtic people who had migrated to that region from Gaul (modern France), in the third century B.C.

The Romans conquered the Galatians (in 189 B.C.), but allowed them to have some measure of independence until 25 B.C. when Galatia became a Roman province, incorporating some regions not inhabited by ethnic Galatians (e.g., parts of Lycaonia, Phrygia, and Pisidia).

In a political sense, Galatia came to describe the entire Roman province, not merely the region inhabited by the ethnic Galatians.

Paul founded churches in the southern Galatian cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13:14 – 14:23).

These cities, although they were within the Roman province of Galatia, they were not in the ethnic Galatian region.

There is no record of Paul's founding churches in that northern, less populated region.

Those two uses of the word Galatia make it more difficult to determine who the original recipients of the epistle were.

Some interpret Galatia in its strict racial sense and argue that Paul addressed this epistle to churches in the northern Galatian region, inhabited by the ethnic descendants of the Gauls.

Although the apostle apparently crossed the border into the fringes of ethnic Galatia on at least two occasions (see Acts 16:6; 18:23).

Acts does not record that he founded any churches or engaged in any evangelistic ministry there.

Because neither Acts nor Galatians mentions any cities or people from northern (ethnic) Galatia, it is reasonable to believe that Paul addressed this epistle to churches located in the southern part of the Roman province, but outside of the ethnic Galatian region.

Acts then records the apostle's founding of such churches at Pisidian Antioch (13:14-50), Iconium (13:51 – 14:7; compare 16:2), Lystra (14:8-19; compare 16:2), and Derbe (14:20-21; compare 16:1).

In addition, the churches Paul addressed had apparently been established before the Jerusalem Council (2:5), and the churches of southern Galatia fit that criteria, having been founded during Paul's first missionary journey before the Council met.

Paul did not visit northern (ethnic) Galatia, until after the Jerusalem Council (Acts 16:6).

Paul seeks to expose the error of the Judaizers' gospel and their impure motives (6:12-13).

His ultimate goal is to prevent the readers from embracing a false gospel and to encourage them to retain their spiritual freedom in Christ (5:1).

The apostle does not want his dear converts to be tied up with all the now abolished rules and regulations of the Mosaic Law, which will lead them into legalism.

Paul wrote Galatians to counter Judaizing false teachers who were undermining the central New Testament doctrine of justification by faith (see note on Romans 3:31).

Ignoring the express decree of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:23-29), they spread their dangerous teaching that Gentiles must first become Jewish proselytes and submit to all the Mosaic law before they could become Christians (see 1:7; 4:17, 21; 5:2-12; 6:12-13).

Shocked by the Galatians' openness to that damning heresy (compare 1:6), Paul wrote this letter to defend justification by faith, and warn these churches of the dire consequences of abandoning that essential doctrine.

Galatians is the only epistle Paul wrote that does not contain a commendation for its readers, that obvious omission reflects how urgently he felt about confronting the defection and defending the essential doctrine of justification.

The central feature of the letter is justification by God's grace through faith.

In chapters 1 and 2 Paul defends his gospel, arguing that it is the true message of salvation since he received it directly from Christ.

Then in chapters 3 and 4 he defines exactly what his gospel is: man is justified (saved), not by keeping the law, but by God's grace alone.

That is, through his faith in Christ's atoning death.

Lastly, in chapters 5 and 6 the apostle briefly applies his gospel to various areas of daily living.