

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

Galatia, you may remember from the book of Acts, was a region in the centre of present-day Turkey. Paul and Barnabas visited Galatia on the First Journey, and made many converts there. At the end of their mission they returned to their base in Antioch. Some time afterwards, several Jewish Christians from Jerusalem also travelled to Galatia, and began to teach the new disciples there that they must all be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses, otherwise they would not be saved. These men were not sent out by the apostles. They were ploughing their own furrow.

When the Apostle Paul heard of this development, he was deeply disturbed. He had already had a brush with these preachers (they are sometimes called Judaisers) at Antioch. He could see his great work of preaching to the Gentiles being undermined, and Christianity reduced to an off-shoot of Judaism. Unable to leave Antioch to visit his friends, he wrote them the Letter to the Galatians. He was determined to nail this opposition on the head. All his skills as a trained lawyer were called up to present logical and powerful arguments to prove the travelling preachers wrong – that salvation comes not by keeping commandments, but by faith in Jesus.

He begins his letter with a warning that there is only one gospel. The truth about Jesus and his Kingdom is not open to modification. What the apostles preached, he says, is what we have to believe. Maybe this is a valuable reminder in our own day, when so many groups all claim to be Christian; we must go back to the New Testament to find the original, First Century gospel.

Paul now presents seven separate arguments to support his case. Firstly, he insisted, the gospel he had preached to them had not been taught him by other men, but by direct

revelation from Jesus himself (this was probably during the time he spent in the wilderness after his conversion, (Galatians 1:15-18)). And when he met the apostles in Jerusalem 14 years later, they had listened to an account of his preaching, and given him their blessing. So his gospel was the same as theirs.

At that visit to Jerusalem he took his young friend Titus with him – a Gentile believer. The other apostles had accepted Titus without question as a brother. They had not insisted he should be circumcised. So circumcision was not part of the apostolic gospel.

Then there was the case of Peter. Simon Peter had been convinced after the conversion of Cornelius the centurion that God wanted Gentiles to be saved, and from that time had sat down at the same table as Gentiles in perfect fellowship. But when visitors from Jerusalem came to Antioch, he had reneged on his convictions and gone back to keeping himself apart from the Gentile Christians in the congregation. Paul had had to publically rebuke the apostle, in spite of his seniority, and Peter had graciously accepted the rebuke. So Peter agreed that Gentiles were acceptable without circumcision.

The believers in Galatia had been blessed by the amazing gifts of the Holy Spirit to help their work for God. Did these gifts come because they had obeyed the commands of the Law, or because they believed in God's grace? There was only one answer.

Then there was the case of father Abraham. Reading his story in Genesis, do we find the promises God made to him conditional upon his obedience to hundreds of commandments? No, says the apostle, the blessings God promised to Abraham and his Seed (offspring) were made long before the

Law came along, and they were unconditional. It was Abraham's faith that commended him to God, and by the same faith we can be counted as Abraham's Seed, even if we are Gentiles.

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise". (Galatians 3:28, 29)

In a powerful analogy, Paul likens the Law to a 'pedagogue' – the slave in an important household whose duty it was to make sure the children went to school and learned their lessons. The Law was intended to teach people about the coming of Jesus. In his death on the cross, the Saviour had fulfilled the sacrifices of the Law. Now he had taken away sins by his own death, the Law was redundant. It had no more purpose. To go back to it would be like returning to the irksome timetables of school after you have moved on and started your first job.

The last argument is a beautiful piece of Bible exposition. It is an allegory, beloved of the Greeks. Abraham, the apostle reminds us, had two sons. The first to be born was Ishmael, son of Hagar, Abraham's wife's slave. Ishmael was ousted from his position as favourite son after Isaac was born to Sarah herself, by a miracle, in her old age. God himself had decreed that Isaac was to inherit Abraham's promises, and that the slave girl and her son must be sent away into the desert of Sinai. Now, says Paul, this was an allegory.

We have two mountains, and two women. Mount Sinai, where God gave the Law of Moses, is in Ishmael's country, Arabia. It represents Hagar the slave. It stands for the Law, which brings an endless slavery to a list of rules. In contrast, Isaac, son of Sarah, was prepared for sacrifice by Abraham on Mount Zion. Isaac represents Jesus, the son God promised to send to save us. And Sarah, alias Mount Zion (Jerusalem) represents the grace and freedom God has given us in Christ. Jerusalem, not Sinai, is the true mother of the Christian.

In passing, we can assume Paul's arguments worked, because we hear no more about the travelling preachers, and when not long after the great Council was held in Jerusalem to discuss the position of Gentile believers (we reviewed this in Acts chapter 15), they were not obliged to be circumcised or keep the Law.

But Paul has one last word. Just because we have been set free from the onerous rules of the Law, this does not mean we can do what we like. Rather, we must reach up to a higher standard still. It is not good enough to control the bad ways of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21). We have to aim to produce the fruits of the Spirit, the qualities God the gardener looks for in the flower border of our lives – love, joy, long-suffering and peace.