

**Three Issues**

Authority, guilt, godliness. They are not specially popular subjects, but they were the three things on Paul's heart as he wrote 'Galatians'. He begins his letter to the Galatians by mentioning immediately the three issues that are of concern to him.

• **Apostolic authority**

There is first the matter of his **authority as an apostle**. He starts writing: *'From Paul, an apostle. I was not chosen to be an apostle by other people, nor was I sent as an apostle by any other human being. I was made an apostle through Jesus Christ and through God the Father who raised Jesus from the dead<sup>☞1</sup>. This letter comes also from all the brothers and sisters who are with me. For the churches of Galatia<sup>☞2</sup>.*

☞1 1:1  
☞2 1:2

• **God's Remedy for guilt**

Next Paul gives his greeting in a way that focuses on his next topic, which is **God's remedy for guilt**. *'Grace to you and peace from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ<sup>☞1</sup>, who gave himself for our sins ... 'After his greeting, he goes on to mention Jesus' death on the cross. It is this that is the atonement for our sins and makes our salvation possible.*

☞1 1:3

• **Godly living**

Then he extends his description of the cross in such a way that he introduces his third topic: his concern for **godly living**, which (says Paul) is the result of Jesus' death upon the cross. He speaks of: *'... our Lord Jesus Christ<sup>☞1</sup>, who gave himself for our sins, so that He might deliver us out of this present evil world, according to the will of our God and Father<sup>☞2</sup>. To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen' <sup>☞3</sup>. These were the three matters that were much disputed among Paul's churches in Galatia.*

☞1 1:3  
☞2 1:4  
☞3 1:5

**Background to the letter**

The background to the letter to the Galatians, as I see it, is as follows.<sup>1</sup> The first Christians were Jewish. Even in those 'early days' Jewish Christians were shocked when Cornelius, a gentile 'God-fearer', became a Spirit-filled Christian<sup>☞1</sup>. Not long afterwards (in about AD 45) large numbers of gentiles in Antioch began to profess faith in Christ. Antioch was a city where many Jews lived also. The news of this spiritual awakening in Antioch soon reached Jerusalem<sup>☞2</sup>, and Barnabas was sent to help the new gentile Christians. Under his influence there were further evangelistic successes<sup>☞3</sup>, and Barnabas soon was in need of a helper in the work. He knew of Saul of Tarsus and his early preaching<sup>☞4</sup> and perhaps it was in AD 46 that he went to Tarsus to find Saul and involve him in the work in Antioch. They returned together and spent a year preaching in Antioch<sup>☞5</sup>.

☞1 see Acts 11:2  
☞2 Acts 11:22  
☞3 Acts 11:24  
☞4 Acts 9:20  
☞5 Acts 11:26, AD 46-47

• **Many Gentiles become Christians in Antioch**

• **Helpers arrive -Barnabas and then Saul**

• **Questions raised by the Jewish Christians**

When gentiles started becoming Christians, it raised many questions in the minds of the Jewish Christians. They asked: can these gentile people become Christians as easily as it seems? Can they become Christians quickly? Do they not need to change their culture and their gentile habits and become Jews? Should they not have some kind of preliminary course in being a Jew before they can truly and fully believe in a Jewish Messiah?

• **Paul – a key figure in the debate**

Paul soon became a key figure in the debate that arose over gentile Christians. He knew more about life 'under the law' than anyone, and as a young man had hated anything to do with Jesus. But when in about AD 34 he experienced a dramatic conversion, God told him his life's work would be that of preaching to gentiles. We know little about his early preaching, but about twelve years after his conversion Paul was invited to join the older Christian preacher, Barnabas, in ministering to gentiles in Antioch. He soon became a well- established teacher of the gospel.

• **Paul and Barnabas visit Jerusalem**

• **Question settled – Gentiles can be Christians without becoming Jews first**

• **Paul & Barnabas sent out to plant new churches**

• **Many come to Christ**

• **The Spirit poured out**

• **Law of Moses not mentioned**

After a prophetic prediction of famine in Jerusalem, the Christians of Antioch sent a gift to the Jerusalem church, asking Paul and Barnabas to take it <sup>☞1</sup>. It is likely that Galatians 2:1–10 tells of a meeting that Paul had with the Jerusalem leaders at this time (AD 47?). Paul did not want a breach between the work at Antioch and the work at Jerusalem. A serious rift could have arisen if their approach to gentile Christians were the subject of disagreement. In the event, despite conservative complaints <sup>☞2</sup>, all went well and Paul and Barnabas were commended for their work. It was recognized that gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews first.

It was from Syrian Antioch that Paul and Barnabas were sent out to reach gentiles further a field. In the spring of AD 47 they went by boat to Cyprus and then on to the cities of Antioch (a different one with the same name in Pisidia) and Iconium and Lystra and Derbe, preaching and founding new churches. These are cities of south Galatia.

It seems that when Paul first went to Galatia he was physically unwell. ‘You know that it was on account of the weakness of the flesh that I preached the good news to you’, he said to them <sup>☞1</sup>. Paul’s physical condition was so bad the Galatians might have been tempted to despise him <sup>☞2</sup>. Apparently Paul took a trip into the hill country of southern Galatia to recover from some kind of ill- health. But Paul’s ill health did not stop him from sharing the gospel, and there was a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Galatia. The cross of Jesus was held before them <sup>☞3</sup>. Many came to faith in Christ; the Spirit was poured out on them <sup>☞4</sup>. Miracles took place<sup>☞5</sup>. They were greatly rejoicing in their new salvation and spoke much about their blessedness<sup>☞6</sup>. No one said anything about the Mosaic law!

Then they came back to Antioch and reported what had happened. Their trip must have taken about a year (AD 47–48). The dates were roughly as follows:

Evangelistic success among gentiles	AD 45
Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem	AD 45/46
Paul comes from Tarsus to Antioch	AD 46
A year’s ministry in Antioch	AD 46–47
Visit to Jerusalem	AD 47
An evangelistic journey	AD 47–48

• **Peter’s visit to Antioch**

• **Paul rebukes Peter**

• **Major problem – Paul’s teaching undermined**

It seems that just after this mission, Peter paid a visit to Antioch as recorded in Galatians 2:11–14. For a while Peter had free and easy fellowship with the gentile Christians. He was not living according to Jewish food-regulations. However the news of Peter’s behaviour was causing a strong reaction from the conservative Christians at Jerusalem. Peter’s well-known about-turn took place and Paul had to rebuke Peter in words that are summarised in Galatians 2:11–14. We do not know precisely how Peter responded, but the wording of Acts 15:10– 11 is very Pauline and may suggest that Peter eventually took Paul’s point.

At about this time (AD 48?) Paul received news that conservative imitation-Christians had also swiftly moved into his work at Galatia and were agitating there more than ever. The successes of the gentile mission were scandalising the conservative imitation-Christian Jews, and they were visiting gentile Christians to propagate their teaching. They were having some success, for the Galatians had become suspicious of Paul, doubting his apostleship and suspecting that he was (as the Judaizers said) a corrupter of the original Jerusalem-gospel. The problem was a major one.

This is how it came about that in AD 48 and early 49 Paul did two things to resist the ‘Judaizers’. He wrote ‘Galatians’ to the churches of southern Galatia, and he went to Jerusalem for the famous consultation. The dates are (as best as one can see) as follows:

☞1 Acts 11:30

☞2 2:4

☞1 4:13

☞2 4:14

☞3 3:1

☞4 3:3–4

☞5 3:5

☞6 4:15

An evangelistic journey	AD 47–48
Events of Galatians 2:11–14	Early AD 48
Bad news from Galatia	AD 48
The epistle to the Galatians written	Early AD 49
The Acts 15 consultation at Jerusalem	AD 48
Another evangelistic journey	AD 49–50

### Three burning questions

There were really three burning questions being asked in the Galatians churches.

- (i) What is the authority of the apostle Paul?
- (ii) Is the gospel entirely focused on the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, as Paul says?
- (iii) Does faith in Jesus without Mosaic law-keeping really lead to godliness?

The bulk of his letter develops these points. Throughout Galatians 1:11 – 2:14 he is dealing with the nature of his apostolic authority. From Galatians 2:15–5:12 he re-states his gospel message of salvation by faith in Christ. In Galatians 5:13 – 6:18 he is showing that the gospel leads to godliness.

### • Full but independent apostle

**Paul insists that he is a full but independent apostle.** He is an apostle with as much authority as the original twelve apostles of Jesus. He was not made an apostle by some committee in Jerusalem. No other human being was involved when Saul of Tarsus met with the risen Lord Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road. Jesus gave Paul his message and his ministry directly. To be an apostle on the level with the original twelve, one had to be an eye-witness of the resurrection and to have received one's apostleship from Jesus Himself in His resurrection body. Paul qualified! This is exactly what happened to him on the Damascus Road. Paul had authority over the churches that he had planted. He writes to the churches of Galatia as their apostle. He has many Christian workers with him. He wishes they will experience God's grace and God's peace, amidst the controversy that they find themselves in.

### • The gospel focuses on the Cross

**Paul's message focuses on the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.** His opening words come immediately to his message. In one phrase ('*who gave himself for our sins*') he tells us what the gospel is.

### • The message really is Life Changing

**Paul's speaks of the power of his message to change lives.** Does faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ change our lives? Yes it does! It takes us out of this present evil age altogether!

### Note

1. A fuller statement of the view that 'Galatia' is south Galatia, that Galatians 2:1–10 is parallel to Acts 11:27–30, and that 'Galatians' is to be dated at around AD 49, may be found in Ben Witherington's commentary, *Grace in Galatia* (Eerdmans, 1998). Earlier statements by F.F. Bruce, R. Longenecker, and others take the same view.



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