

Commentary on Galatians

No other relatively short New Testament document has had as much influence on Christian theology as Galatians. Its language of “justification” and the contrasts between “grace” and “law” and “faith” and “works” were central to Martin Luther’s thought and have been for Protestants ever since. Though Paul also used this language in his letter to Christ-communities in Rome a half decades or so later, it first appears in Galatians. Borg put Galatians chronologically in the second place supposedly written around in late 50s.

Audience and Historical context:

Galatians is the only one of Paul’s seven letters to be addressed to a group of communities rather than to a particular community or individual; it is sent to the “churches of Galatia.”¹ Galatia was a region in central Asia Minor that contained several cities. These communities had been deeply conflicted since Paul was there. Paul himself was under attack; some were accusing him of having falsified the gospel. He accuses the Galatian communities of “deserting” and “turning to a different gospel,” because of those who “pervert the gospel of Christ (1:6-7).”²

Those in the Christ-communities in Galatia were primarily Gentiles, most and perhaps nearly all of them “God-lovers” who had been attached to Judaism. This is the central issue addressed by the letter. Did Gentile converts to life in Christ need to be circumcised? And did they need to follow at least some other Jewish laws, including food laws? While with them, Paul had taught “no.” He had offered full participation in the Christ movement without circumcision and observance of Jewish laws. After Paul left Galatia, probably some years earlier, other teachers –Paul’s opponents in Galatia –had told them “yes.” Gentile males

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 45.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 46.

had to be circumcised and follow Jewish food laws. For them, it seemed obvious that what Jesus began was a moment within Judaism, and that for Gentiles to become children of Abraham, they had to enter into God's covenant with Abraham, which include circumcision. These teachers were also followers of Jesus. They were Christians. Whether Gentile converts had to observe Jewish laws was a major issue in early Christianity. This was a conflict within early Christianity.³

The conflict and its resolution are a theme of Acts, which narrates the spread of the Jesus movement from Jerusalem and the Jewish homeland to the larger Gentile world, climaxing with Paul in Rome, the center of the world. In the middle of Acts is the story of a meeting of early Christian leaders ("apostles and elders") in Jerusalem to decide whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and follow other Jewish laws (Acts 15). Paul and Barnabas were there, representing the Gentile mission, as were James and Peter, representing the mission to Jews. They resolved that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised or follow all of Jewish law. Paul's mission to the Gentiles was blessed. Galatians refers to this meeting and the larger conflict. In 2:1-10, Paul reports that the leaders in Jerusalem had ratified his mission to Gentiles, including that males did not need to be circumcised.⁴

The issue of food was more complex because of the common meal eaten by members of the Christ-communities. When they gathered together, was the food to be kosher or not? Of the community was either all Jewish or all Gentiles, the issue would not arise. But when if it was a mixed community of Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles, was it to be kosher for all or kosher for none?

Conflict about the status of Gentiles within the community is the context for what Paul says in Galatians about justification, faith, law, works, and life in the Spirit. Paul says, "We ... Jews [referring to Christian Jews] .. "know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 46.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 46.

Christ” (2:15-16); the last phrase is better translated “through the faith of Jesus Christ”—that is, through the faith we see in Jesus). He reminds his largely Gentile communities that they had received the Spirit of God not “by doing the works of the law,” but by faith (3:1-5). He argues that Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was justified by faith, not by works of the law [at that time Abraham didn’t have Moses’ laws]. Moreover, God promised Abraham that the Gentiles would be blessed through him, and this was now happening; “In Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham” had “come to the Gentiles... through faith” (3:6-18). Requiring circumcision and observance of Jewish law would perpetuate the division between Jew and Gentiles and thus destroy the unity of life “in Christ.” [besides, it will make nearly impossible for Gentiles to accept faith in Jesus Christ.] As perhaps the best-known text in Galatians puts it: *In Jesus Christ, you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek (Gentile), there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Gal. 3:26-28).⁵

⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 47.