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# GALATIANS

## PAUL'S LETTER TO THE CHURCHES

*Guiding the Church*



UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD  
VERSE-BY-VERSE



GALATIANS—GUIDING THE CHURCH  
by Practical Christianity Foundation

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# INTRODUCTION



Paul's ministry throughout the [Mediterranean region \(view image\)](#) and [Asia Minor \(view image\)](#) was characterized by two interrelated factors in his labor as an evangelist and church planter. First, God blessed his ministry among both [Gentiles](#) and Jews with a fruitful spiritual harvest (*Acts 9:15*). Secondly, this success was accomplished in sharp contrast to his opponents who pursued him with single-minded hostility, seeking to undermine his ministry by distorting his message with false teaching. Zealous individuals commonly known as [Judaizers](#) derailed the church in [Galatia \(view image\)](#) with such misguided doctrine.

Much like the Jews who harassed and falsely accused Jesus, the Judaizers opposed Paul vehemently, accusing him of promoting a king other than [Caesar \(Acts 17:5–7, 13\)](#). Although they used unfounded accusations to gain a political advantage over Paul, the Judaizers were chiefly opposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul boldly preached. However, they could not successfully disprove the truth and many Galatians became disciples of Jesus Christ.

Since early believers came to faith in the region of Judea and Galilee, where Jesus had walked among the populace for three years, it is easy to understand that the great majority of converts were Jews. Some converts were Gentiles who had first given their allegiance to the Jewish faith. So it was perfectly natural for them to become followers of Christ, but continue in their Jewish traditions of worship, adhering to sacrifices, dietary laws, as well as the moral structure of their culture. "At that time conversion to Judaism was accomplished through three separate steps: (1) circumcision

(for males); (2) a ritual bath in water; and (3) agreement to take upon oneself the ‘yoke of the law,’ that is, to obey the 613 commands of the Mosaic law as interpreted and expanded in Jewish [halakah](#) (rabbinic legal decisions).”<sup>1</sup>

As the years passed, a growing number of Gentiles became Christ followers, creating a problem for their Jewish brethren. These people became believers, but did not follow the traditions of Judaism. What should a new convert do? Should he also follow the established rules for becoming a Jew and thereby complete his initiation into the Christian faith? Many Jewish Christians thought that the answer was, “Yes! Of course!” They simply could not think of any possible alternative to live faithfully for God unless a new Christian joined the ranks of faithful Jewish believers. For them, becoming a Christian and accepting Jesus as their promised Messiah enhanced their Judaism, but did not replace it.<sup>2</sup> Some Jewish Christians felt so strongly that they made this statement: “Some men came from Judea and started to teach believers that people can’t be saved unless they are circumcised as Moses’ Teachings require” (*Acts 15:1*).

Although Paul had been trained as a [Pharisee](#) and knew the [Law of Moses](#) as well as anybody, he took a completely different approach to this question. The letter to the Galatian church is a treatise on Paul’s interpretation of Jewish law and its relationship to a believer’s freedom from sin found in Jesus Christ. Essentially, Paul taught that the transformation received by believers initiated by the work of the Holy Spirit, applying the finished work of Christ to a person’s life, was the only action needed to complete one’s salvation. Anything other than the work of Christ alone was nothing more or nothing less than a distortion of the gospel message.

As a result of these two viewpoints, a sharp division arose in the early church, a division of such deeply felt principles that the Judaizers made every attempt to discredit Paul or have him killed. But Paul never backed down. When the Judaizers saw the power of the Gospel and the courage of Paul, they resorted to a personal attack, questioning Paul’s apostleship. By attacking Paul, and therefore the credibility of the Gospel he proclaimed, these Judaizers hoped to discredit his teachings among the Gentile Christians. Alarmed by the danger of leaving young believers exposed to the deceit of this teaching, Paul sent this letter to the church in Galatia,

clearly explaining the authority of his apostleship and asserting the truth of the Gospel.

On Paul's first missionary journey ([view image](#)) (A.D. 47–48) accompanied by [Barnabas](#), the pair had traveled across the island of Cyprus and into the southern region of Galatia (*Acts 13–14*). Shortly after their return to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas made a visit to the leadership of the church in [Jerusalem](#) ([view image](#)), mostly comprised of Jesus' apostles. A [council](#) was convened to put an end to this debate (*Acts 15*). This was no small matter as the Judaizers presented their side of the argument. But Paul refused to back down. In the end, Peter and James extended the right hand of fellowship and agreed that Paul was to take the Gospel to the Gentiles and Peter would do the same among Jewish people (*Galatians 2:9*). The leaders of the Jerusalem church gave Paul and Barnabas a letter showing the apostles' endorsement of Paul's ministry (*Acts 15:22–29*).



From New American Commentary, page 19

Armed with the endorsement of Jesus' chosen apostles, Paul and Barnabas returned to [Antioch](#) ([view image](#)). There, in A.D. 49, Paul penned



this letter to the Galatian Christians, a letter that displayed the [apostle's](#) certainty of the Gospel he had delivered to them as well as the intensity of his frustration with their defection to the errors of the Judaizers' doctrine.

Today's Christian could easily dismiss this letter as something that no longer applies, since the debate between Paul and the Judaizers no longer threatens the Christian community. But a closer look will reveal the very serious error of those who continue in some way or another to distort the Gospel by adding or taking away from the unique place that Jesus occupies in the process of a person's salvation. Like Paul, those who have been saved by the finished work of Christ alone will stand up and say loudly, "Read Paul's letter to the Galatians."

The reformer Martin Luther considered Galatians the best of all the books in the Bible. He claimed it as his own, saying, "The epistle to the Galatians is my epistle. To it I am as it were in wedlock. It is my Katherine."<sup>3</sup> As we enter the study of this very special letter to the Galatians, may we cling to its timeless truth in our culture with as much passion as Paul did in his day.

### **Acts 9:15**

<sup>9</sup>The Lord told Ananias, "Go! I've chosen this man to bring my name to nations, to kings, and to the people of Israel.

### **Acts 17:5-7. 13**

<sup>5</sup>Then the Jews became jealous. They took some low-class characters who hung around the public square, formed a mob, and started a riot in the city. They attacked Jason's home and searched it for Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. <sup>6</sup>When they didn't find Paul and Silas, they dragged Jason and some other believers in front of the city officials. They shouted, "Those men who have made trouble all over the world are now here in Thessalonica, <sup>7</sup>and Jason has welcomed them as his guests. All of them oppose the emperor's decrees by saying that there is another king, whose name is Jesus."

<sup>13</sup>But when the Jews in Thessalonica found out that Paul was also spreading God's word in Berea, they went there to upset and confuse the people.

### **Acts 15:1**



<sup>1</sup>Some men came from Judea and started to teach believers that people can't be saved unless they are circumcised as Moses' Teachings require.

## **Galatians 2:9**

<sup>9</sup>James, Cephas, and John (who were recognized as the most important people) acknowledged that God had given me this special gift. So they shook hands with Barnabas and me, agreeing to be our partners. It was understood that we would work among the people who are not Jewish and they would work among Jewish people.

## **Acts 15:22-29**

<sup>22</sup>Then the apostles, the spiritual leaders, and the whole church decided to choose some of their men to send with Paul and Barnabas to the city of Antioch. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, who were leaders among the believers. <sup>23</sup>They wrote this letter for them to deliver:

From the apostles and the spiritual leaders, your brothers.  
To their non-Jewish brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.  
Dear brothers and sisters,

<sup>24</sup>We have heard that some individuals who came from us have confused you with statements that disturb you. We did not authorize these men [to speak]. <sup>25</sup>So we have come to a unanimous decision that we should choose men and send them to you with our dear Barnabas and Paul. <sup>26</sup>Barnabas and Paul have dedicated their lives to our Lord, the one named Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup>We have sent Judas and Silas to report to you on our decision. <sup>28</sup>The Holy Spirit and we have agreed not to place any additional burdens on you. Do only what is necessary <sup>29</sup>by keeping away from food sacrificed to false gods, from eating bloody meat, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual sins. If you avoid these things, you will be doing what's right.

Farewell!

1. Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1236.
2. Ibid.

3. William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968), 2–3.

## **Mediterranean Region**

Marsha A. Ellis Smith, June Swann, Trent C. Butler, Christopher L. Church and David S. Dockery; *Holman Book of Biblical Charts, Maps, and Reconstructions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 131.

**ASIA MINOR** —great peninsula, approximately 250,000 sq mi (647,500 sq km), extreme Western Asia, Asian Turkey, also called Anatolia.

It is washed by the Black Sea in the north, the Mediterranean Sea in the south, and the Aegean Sea in the west. The Black and Aegean seas are linked by the Sea of Marmara and the two straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles. Near the southern coast of Asia Minor are the Taurus Mountains; the rest of the peninsula is occupied by the Anatolian plateau, which is crossed by numerous mountains interspersed with lakes. In ancient times most Eastern and Western civilizations intersected in Asia Minor, for it was connected with Mesopotamia by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and with Greece by the Aegean and Mediterranean seas.

The Hittites established the first major civilization in Asia Minor about 1800 B.C. Beginning in the 8th cent. B.C. Greek colonies were established on the coast lands, and the Greeks thus came into contact with Lydia, Phrygia, and Troy. The conquest (6th cent. B.C.) of Asia Minor by the Persians led to the Persian Wars. Alexander the Great incorporated the region into his empire, and after his death it was divided into small states ruled by various Diadochi (rulers). It was reunified (2nd cent. B.C.) by the Romans. After A.D. 395 the country was re-Hellenized and became part of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine Empire. It was prosperous until the early part of the 6th cent. when it was successively invaded by the Persians (616–26), Arabs (668), Seljuk Turks (1061), and Mongols (1243). The Mongols obliterated almost all traces of Hellenic civilization. Asia Minor was then gradually (13th–15th cent.) conquered by the Ottoman Turks. It remained part of the Ottoman Empire until the establishment of the Republic of Turkey after World War I.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul Lagassé and Columbia University, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. (New York; Detroit: Columbia University Press; Sold and distributed by Gale Group, 2000).

**GENTILES** —A non-Hebrew (non-Israelite) person. The loss of political autonomy and the spread of Hellenism caused the Jews to be increasingly wary of Gentiles during the intertestamental period (cf. Wis. 10–19). Many in the early Church, which had emerged among the Jews of Palestine, maintained this opposition to Gentiles, viewing them as morally and religiously inferior (e.g., Matt. 5:47; 6:7; Luke 12:30; Eph. 4:17; cf. 1 Cor. 5:1, “pagans”; 12:2; 1 Thess. 4:5, “heathen”). Indeed, both Gentiles and Jews rigidly opposed the followers of Christ (e.g., Acts 14:1–2; 2 Cor. 11:26).<sup>1</sup>

cf. compare, see

Wis. Wisdom of Solomon

cf. compare, see

<sup>1</sup>Allen C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987). 411.

**JUDAIZERS** — Christian Jews who, during the apostolic and early postapostolic periods, attempted to impose the Jewish way of life on gentile Christians. The Greek verb, which literally means “to Judaize,” is found only one time in the NT (Gal 2:14), where it actually means “to live according to Jewish customs and traditions.” In that passage Paul quotes part of a brief conversation he had with Peter several years earlier: “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews [i.e., to Judaize]?” (RSV). The issue that concerned Paul was not simply whether or not a person followed the Jewish way of life but whether one erroneously thought that salvation was attained thereby.

The growing number of gentile converts to Christianity forced Jewish Christians to face a very difficult problem: Must a Gentile first become a Jew in order to be a Christian? Some Jewish Christians gave a positive answer to this question, and these became known as the circumcision party

(Acts 11:2; Gal 2:12). Others, such as Peter and Barnabas, and especially Paul, vigorously disagreed. While these two radically different points of view could have split the early church into two major factions, that possibility did not occur.

Paul and Barnabas debated with members of the circumcision party before an assembly of apostles and elders in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4–12). The assembly, led by James the Just (the brother of Jesus), listened to both sides and decided to issue a compromise. A letter to the gentile churches was drafted in which it was recommended that gentile converts to Christianity adhere to only a few absolutely essential obligations: (1) abstention from meat sacrificed to idols, (2) abstention from eating blood or blood-saturated meat, and (3) abstention from unchastity (vv 23–29). These three obligations were probably singled out because they were thought to have been important features of those laws regarded as part of the covenant between God and Noah according to Jewish tradition.<sup>1</sup>

RSV Revised Standard Version

<sup>1</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale reference library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001). 752-54.

**GALATIA** - has been called the “Gallia” of the East, Roman writers calling its inhabitants Galli. They were an intermixture of Gauls and Greeks, and hence were called Gallo-Graeci, and the country Gallo-Graecia. The Galatians were in their origin a part of that great Celtic migration which invaded Macedonia about 280. They were invited by the king of Bithynia to cross over into Asia Minor to assist him in his wars. There they ultimately settled, and being strengthened by fresh accessions of the same clan from Europe, they overran Bithynia, and supported themselves by plundering neighboring countries. They were great warriors, and hired themselves out as mercenary soldiers, sometimes fighting on both sides in the great battles of the times. They were at length brought under the power of Rome in B.C. 189, and Galatia became a Roman province B.C. 25.

This province of Galatia, within the limits of which these Celtic tribes were confined, was the central region of Asia Minor.

During his second missionary journey Paul, accompanied by Silas and Timothy (Acts 16:6), visited the “region of Galatia,” where he was detained by sickness (Gal. 4:13), and had thus the longer opportunity of preaching to them the gospel. On his third journey he went over “all the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order” (Acts 18:23). Crescens was sent thither by Paul toward the close of his life (2 Tim. 4:10).<sup>1</sup>

Marsha A. Ellis Smith, June Swann, Trent C. Butler, Christopher L. Church and David S. Dockery; *Holman Book of Biblical Charts, Maps, and Reconstructions* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 131.

<sup>1</sup> M. G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893).

**CAESAR**—Title used by the Roman Emperor Augustus. *Caesar*, the cognomen of Julius Caesar, was adopted by Augustus (44 B.C.), and his successors as emperor took the name until Hadrian, who designated *Caesar* as the title of the heir apparent; the imperial use of *Caesar* was continued with the German *Kaiser* and the Russian *czar*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Paul Lagassé and Columbia University, *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. (New York; Detroit: Columbia University Press; Sold and distributed by Gale Group, 2000).

**HALAKAH** — Overall term for Jewish law. Halakah, which means literally “walking,” gives the authoritative Jewish way of life as contained in the Mishna. It shows the Jew how he is to walk and what he must do (see Ex 18:20).

First of all, Halakah rests upon the biblical laws and commandments found in the written Law (the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible) and the oral Law (according to Jewish tradition the unwritten law

supposedly given to Moses on Mt Sinai and passed down through generations, finally to be recorded in the Talmud). In the Pentateuch, then, Halakah is given as law; for example we are told not to work on the sabbath. But what, in this context, does “work” mean? The written Law gives us no help, but in the Talmud we have Halakah, which is interpretation of the written Law, and in the Talmud we learn what “work” means.

Second, Halakah rests upon all the rabbinic legislation and decisions handed down through the ages by great Jewish scholars. All these things, then, taken together provide the basis for making religious-legal decisions in the orthodox Jewish community. All these things, the written and oral Law plus the history of Jewish legal scholarship, provide us with Halakah.

Halakah is intended to be all-encompassing, to handle every situation in life. One’s eating habits, sex life, business ethics, social activities, entertainment; these and much more, are dealt with by Halakah. For this reason it has been called “the Jewish way,” that way in which we can hope to find the mind and character of the Jewish people exactly and adequately expressed. Halakah is the Jewish legal and practical guide to living.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988). 918.

**PHARISEES** — separatists (Heb. from *parash*, “to separate”). They were probably the successors of the Assideans (i.e., the “pious”), a party that originated in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes in revolt against his heathenizing policy. The first mention of them is in a description by Josephus of the three sects or schools into which the Jews were divided (B.C. 145). The other two sects were the Essenes and the Sadducees. In the time of our Lord they were the popular party (John 7:48). They were extremely accurate and minute in all matters appertaining to the law of Moses (Matt. 9:14; 23:15; Luke 11:39; 18:12). Paul, when brought before the council of Jerusalem, professed himself a Pharisee (Acts 23:6–8; 26:4, 5).

There was much that was sound in their creed, yet their system of religion was a form and nothing more. Theirs was a very lax morality (Matt.

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