

# **VERDICT**

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## **Galatians Today**

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The book of Galatians is possibly Paul's earliest letter. In this brief presentation the apostle makes a fiery declaration on Christian liberty. Unless we understand the historical setting and issues of the book, however, the significance of Paul's Magna Charta statement of Christian freedom may be virtually lost. The identity of the troublemakers in the Galatian churches is particularly crucial to our understanding. F. F. Bruce has probably given the simplest explanation in viewing the situation against the background of the Jerusalem conference and recognizing that the troublemakers in Galatia were the Jewish Christians represented in Acts 15.

A Jew is defined not so much by what he believes but by what he does. The first Christians were Jews. They practiced the Law and its great distinctives. They (1) circumcised their children, (2) kept the Sabbath and (3) obeyed the Jewish food laws. For many years they remained part of the Jewish community and even continued their worship at the synagogue.

When some of the more radical Jewish believers— Hellenists such as Stephen and Phillip— were scattered by persecution, they went to places like Antioch and there proclaimed Christ. But they did not impose their culture on the Gentile believers. Thus, a company composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers was formed at Antioch. At this juncture some of the members of the church at Jerusalem became disturbed and said that it was necessary for the Gentile believers at Antioch to be circumcised as a sign of submission to the Law. Some of these Jews may also have hastened to nearby Galatia and caused dissension among the Gentile Christian believers there.

The same three identifying Jewish distinctives referred to previously were issues in the Galatian church. (1) Circumcision was a prominent issue because it was a sign of accepting the yoke of the Torah (Law). (2) The keeping of sacred days, especially the Sabbath days, had also become an issue. Paul says, “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years!” (Gal. 4:10). (3) There was also a food issue. In Galatians 2 Paul recalls the incident at Antioch when the Jewish and Gentile believers were enjoying table fellowship until certain representatives came from James in Jerusalem. Peter, Barnabas and the other Jewish believers then withdrew from eating with the Gentile believers. So the question of table fellowship, along with the eating of clean and unclean foods, must also have been prominent.

In response to these issues Paul declared that the Law, which was an interim administration from Moses until the coming of Christ has now become obsolete. Since Christ and the Spirit have come, we are no longer under the Law. Paul therefore denounced the agitators as false teachers who were bringing in another gospel. He urged the Galatian believers not to accept that yoke but to remain free in the gospel by the leading of the Holy Spirit.

If this message to the Galatians is to be used in an edifying way today, it must first be understood in the historical setting in which it was given. Then it must be reinterpreted for our time, since the historical situation is never exactly the same. Only when we have grasped what the message of Galatians meant in its original setting can we more intelligently reinterpret the message for our own situation, asking, “What does the message of Galatians mean to us now?”

## **Justification by Faith**

The first issue in the book of Galatians is the matter of justification by faith without the works of the Law (Gal. 2). When Paul introduces this subject, he does not do so as a means of explaining to either Jewish or Gentile Christians how a person is to find salvation and acceptance before God. Those to whom Paul writes had already heard the gospel and believed it. They had already received the Spirit (Gal. 3). Paul introduces the issue of justification by faith in the context of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians meeting together in table fellowship.

Thus:

**When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.**

**When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” – Gal. 2:11- 14.**

Peter had been living like a Gentile, but by withdrawing from table fellowship with other Christians he was virtually saying “We are not going to fellowship with you

Gentile Christians unless you begin living like Jews. And that means you must live according to the Torah. You must be circumcised, keep the Sabbath and eat kosher foods. Indeed, you must obey Moses.” Paul does not introduce justification here to explain to the Gentile or Jewish believers how to find acceptance with God. He introduces justification by faith to explain on what basis they were to accept one another. So Paul continues:

**“We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’, know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.” – Gal. 2:15, 16.**

In a secondary sense, of course, any person who puts his faith in Jesus Christ is justified before God. But Paul introduces the doctrine in the context of the conflict over table fellowship. He wishes to show that there is no excuse for Jewish Christians to exclude Gentile believers. If justification is by faith without the deeds of the Law, the implication is that the Gentiles who have believed in Jesus Christ have equal status in the covenant, and they ought to be accepted. Thus, justification by faith is directed on the horizontal level of Jewish Christians accepting Gentile Christians who do not live as they do.

How then should we apply the doctrine of justification by faith today? God has already reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ. He publishes the fact that he has not counted our sins against us but has sent us the message that in Jesus Christ we are all forgiven and have been redeemed. The gospel proclaims what God has done in Jesus Christ, and any poor sinner who believes it has the assurance that his sins are forgiven, whether or not he has ever heard of the so-called forensic doctrine of justification by faith. Indeed, it is pitiful to find Christians continually concerned with the same question of how to get right with God. God is not that difficult to get along with! He is a gracious God. Even the poor tax collector who came to the Jewish temple— not a Christian temple— and simply said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” went down to his house justified (Luke 18:10- 14).

What then is the practical application of justification by faith? The problem in the church today is the same problem that Paul faced: How can Christians who come to belief in Christ from diverse backgrounds and who often radically differ in many respects accept one another?

Unfortunately, we often do not think it is sufficient for people to gladly accept the reconciling good news of Jesus Christ. So we ask questions about what theological system to adopt, how to organize and operate the church and how to perform the ceremony of baptism. We hold other Christian believers at arm’s length until they become like us. This is a denial of the first-century doctrine of justification by faith. The doctrine has been used for a personal relationship when it was intended to deal with the matter of fellowshiping with other believers. Thus, the very doctrine that was

to unite believers of diverse religious backgrounds has often been used to deepen the divisions among Christians.

## **Christian Ethics**

The second issue in the book of Galatians relates to how believers in Christ should live after they have heard the gospel message. The Jewish Christians who visited the Pauline churches in Galatia recognized that Paul had brought the news about Jesus Christ, but they felt he had not taught the Galatians how to live as Christians. To leave new believers without a clear direction on how they ought to live was to leave them in danger of not being finally saved. As Jewish Christians, they assumed that they needed to help their Gentile brothers. Had not the Jews been given a great body of holy instruction in the Law, which taught them how to live? It is clear that the Jewish Christians appealed to the example of the apostles at Jerusalem. The apostles had all been circumcised. They all kept the Sabbath. They all obeyed the Jewish food laws. The Judaizers must also have used the new-covenant argument:

**“The time is coming” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” – Jer. 31:31, 33.**

So the Judaizers argued that a benefactor in the new covenant must be numbered among Judah and Israel. They also argued that the new covenant means that the Law would be written in the heart and in the mind. Through the power of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, all the precepts and regulations of the Mosaic Torah would now be obeyed by the believer in Jesus. In doing this, these Judaizers did not argue that the keeping of the Law is a means of earning salvation. Rather, they argued that the keeping of the Law is the proper effect and fruit and sign of salvation.

Those Judaizing Christians were not far from traditional Christianity, which says that Christ brings salvation, but the Law gives directions on how to live. As the old Puritans said, “The Law leads us to Jesus Christ, but then Jesus Christ sends us back to the Law.” “Christ gives us salvation, but the Law tells us how we ought to live.” That view has had a long and hallowed tradition in Protestantism. But as Nicholas Thomas Wright points out, the Protestant doctrine of the third use of the Law sounds suspiciously like the issue the intruders were agitating in the churches of Galatia. 1

## **The Nature of the Law**

This leads to the third question on the nature of the Law. In all of Paul’s works “the Law” is always in the singular. It is never “laws.” The term obviously embraces the Ten Commandments, but it is broader than that. The Law relates to all the regulations and stipulations imposed on Israel by Moses. But it is also clear that the Law is even broader than mere legal stipulations. Thus:

**Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two Sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. – Gal 4:21, 22.**

The Law includes the story of Sarah and Hagar and their sons in the book of Genesis. Furthermore, the Law embraces all five books of Moses, called the Pentateuch. Most of that Law is story. It is God's story of redemption, his leading of his people.

However, in the broadest sense the Law is even bigger than the Pentateuch. Thus, Jesus answered the Jews, "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'?" (John 10:34). And again Jesus said, "They have hated both me and my Father. But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: 'They hated me without reason'" (John 15:24, 25). These passages are not taken from the five books of Moses but from the Psalms. Other parts of Scripture, therefore, were also regarded as the Law. So in the broad context the Law was a term that embraced the entire Jewish Scripture. That was the only Scripture then in existence for any of the people of God, and it was all called the Torah.

Thus, Paul's argument about the Law and the New Testament references to Law ultimately refer to Jewish Scripture. The entire body of Jewish Scripture was called the Law, and the Law therefore equals Scripture. In Galatians Paul makes this clear in his discussion on the Law:

**Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! ... [But in the next verse Paul changes his expression.] But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin. – Gal. 3:21, 22.**

This passage can be translated, "But the Scripture has concluded [has shut up, has incarcerated, has consigned] all men under sin." The following verse states that "before this faith came, we were held prisoners [were shut up] by the law" (Gal. 3:23). Thus, "the Scripture has imprisoned... the Law has imprisoned." Additional evidence also shows that Paul used the terms Law and Scripture interchangeably:

**Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written... [The expression "it is written" is *graphe* in the Greek, which is "it is Scripture."] – Gal. 4:21, 22.**

Paul then recalls the story of Abraham and says, "But what does the Scripture say? 'Get rid of the slave woman and her son' " (Gal. 4:30). Paul could have asked, "What does the Torah [Law] say?" (cf. Gal. 4:21). Law is Scripture. In light of this definition of "the Law" in Paul and in the New Testament, the word "Scripture" can be substituted for "Law" in the following passages:

**So the law [Scripture] was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law [Scripture]. – Gal. 3:24, 25.**

**If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law [Scripture]. – Gal. 5:18.**

Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the Scripture. "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under [Scripture]." In other words, "Your religion is no longer a book religion."

What have Christians gained by rejecting the Jewish regulations of the Old Testament and then introducing a Christian Torah? Rabbinic Judaism was a religion



of the Book. Orthodox Protestantism likewise has long boasted of being the religion of the Book. In many respects orthodox Protestantism uses the Bible like the Jews tried to use Scripture. In light of their history and of their particular prejudices, various religious systems have suppressed some things in the Bible and elevated other things in order to support a particular tradition within Christianity. The Bible thus becomes an instrument of authority, a tool to bring people under the domination of a particular religious system. In the name of allegiance to the Bible and of having a religion of the Bible, Christians have presented different versions of the Torah. How then should believers live? They must live, of course, according to the Baptist Torah, the Lutheran Torah, the Calvinist Torah or some other Torah. Believers are not accepted into full fellowship unless they accept the marks of a Baptist, a Lutheran, a Calvinist, etc. By this we simply establish a form of Christian Judaism.

The Bible has a necessary place. It has an authority. But it does not have the place that is traditionally given to it. Like the Jews, Christians have made an absolutely inflexible rule book out of the Bible. People are locked into rigid systems of living out of a supposed allegiance to the Bible. But what is gained if one legal body of material is simply substituted for another? No, Paul says that we are not under the Law; we are not under the Scripture; we are not under a rigid, inflexible book religion. "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under [Scripture]" (Gal. 5:18).

Paul, of course, can use the Bible. He appeals to Scripture, but not in the way that many have supposed. In reply to the question, "How then should we live?" Paul never appeals to Scripture or urges the Bible alone. Rather, he declares, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14).

The Spirit comes by hearing the gospel. The Spirit of Christ sets the image of Christ before our minds so that we live out of Christ. To the question, "How then should we live?" Paul says, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Living by the Law, by the Scripture, will lead us to prison. It will grind us up. It will set us to fighting and bickering, to biting and devouring one another (Gal. 5:20). If, however, we live by the faith of the Son of God, if we hear the gospel and allow the Spirit to set the image of Christ before our minds, we will not fall into that; for "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control" (Gal. 5:22, 23). Above all, living by the Spirit is the way of liberty. The great message of Galatians is that the fruit of the Spirit brings a glorious harvest of freedom.

This freedom is not license. It is not hedonism. "Serve one another in love" (Gal. 5:13). It is freedom for others. It is freedom to join the human race. Religion of the Book always shuts Christians away from the human race. It sweeps them into religious devotion and escape from the world so that they cannot have true contact and fellowship with one another. No one is free to serve his fellowmen as long as he is under a religion of the Book, a religion of laws and rules and regulations. But those

who are led by the Spirit are free for others— free to join the human race, free to bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). The Spirit frees us for others.

Think how free Paul is. “I have become all things to all men,” he says (1 Cor. 9:22). “To those under the law I became like one under the law” (1 Cor. 9:20). If it will help the Jew, Paul will keep the Sabbath; he will have Timothy circumcised; he will eat kosher food. “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law” (1 Cor. 9:21). If it will help the Gentile, Paul will regard all days alike; he will eat food offered to idols. With the weak he will not eat food offered to idols, but with the strong he can eat anything. Paul is free for others. He said, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:22, 23).

Of course, we will live as civilized human beings. If the custom is to wear a tie, we will wear a tie, because we must be free for people. But the Torah is to serve people and not the other way around. We must break all laws, as Luther says, even the laws of the Bible, if faith and love obviously demand it. If the laws separate us from bringing the saving message of Christ, then we must subordinate them, because in the final analysis “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value.” Indeed, religion is nothing, but “faith expressing itself through love” is everything (Gal. 5:6). That is the only thing that counts. That is the only thing the Lord will approve in the final judgment.

## Notes and References

**Unless otherwise indicated, scriptural quotations are from the Mew International version.**

1. See Nicholas Thomas Wright, “The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans” (Ph.D. diss., University of Oxford, 1980), p. 296n.

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