

Paul's Opponents in Galatia

The letter to the Galatians arose because some visitors had come to the churches there and had put across some solutions to matters that had worried the people there.

Paul writes in the light of these visits and what the visitors had said to the Galatians. In his letter Paul doesn't speak about his opponents, nor does he address them directly; rather, he deals with the issues that they had addressed and demonstrates his own answers are better and more in line with the Gospel that the Galatians had received from him and his team.

To reconstruct what Paul's opponents had said, we must look at:

- 1 - the internal evidence conveyed in the letter itself
- 2 – the other subsequent letters of Paul
- 3 – the Acts of the Apostles
- 4 – the letter of James

Understanding that Paul is in full flight, resisting this trend among the Galatians, we need to be careful. For not everything that he denies in this letter is necessarily an article of his opponents' belief, neither is every accusation he makes necessarily reflective of their intentions and desires.

[1] The Galatian churches had been paid a visit after Paul had left by some Jewish-Christian missionaries. Contrary to what was decided at Jerusalem [2.1-10]; these missionaries had crossed over the borders of agreed work and were making converts to their own gospel among the gentile churches founded by Paul.

Their gospel must have been close to Paul's gospel except for the demand of obedience to the Torah and the requirement of circumcision. It was this last requirement that flushed Paul out to make sharp distinctions between himself and these visitors.

Paul saw that what these rival visitors had conveyed to the Galatians had the effect of turning them away from the God who called them by grace, so that they pursued after another 'gospel'. He saw the visitors as stirring up trouble and perverting the good news of Christ [1.6-7].

[2] Paul attributes to the visitors a zeal for the Galatians. But, in his view, it is not a good zeal because it wants to shut them out of the grace of God that they already know. Their purpose is, according to Paul, to draw the Galatians to themselves [4.17]. This suggests that the underlying motive of the visitors, to draw them to themselves, could not be achieved without destroying the Galatians' adherence to a gospel of grace. That is, to live under grace means that we are freed from dependence upon others for the maintaining of the power and effectiveness of the Christian life.

[3] Inherent in the visitor's advice to the Galatians, what Paul calls the 'other gospel', was the observance of the Jewish Torah and, in particular, that they ought to be circumcised so as to secure their salvation. Paul has already historically identified them with the party who dissented at the council of Jerusalem [2.4-5]. This can only be of

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significance to Gentile Christians. Paul is adamant about this advice; it is an embracing of the law in such a way that their justification will be dependent on their keeping of the whole law [2.15; 5.2-3; Romans 10.5]. This would split them off from Christ and that means that they have abandoned grace as the basis of their secure relationship with God [see [1] above].

Anyway, whether the gracious gospel comes to a person who is already circumcised, or not circumcised, neither of these states has any power to effect the relationship with God. It is a matter of trust, of faith in God's word. This faith has, as its result, a love for God and one another [5.6].

[4] The visitors are a blockage to the continuing progress of the Galatians, who, up to that time, were running so well – living under grace. Now the Galatians are troubled, having been stopped from relying on the truth; so this new preoccupation with circumcision does not come from God who called them in grace [5.7-9].

[5] Paul identifies this advice of the visitors as being rooted in their inability to come to terms with what he calls 'the scandal [offence] of the cross'. He makes clear that the issue is either preaching circumcision or accepting that the death of Christ as a malefactor, done on our behalf, was the only basis for being in a right standing with God [5.11-12].

[6] The other root of their advice is that they want to make a fleshly demonstration by circumcision, so that they will avoid being persecuted for holding to the cross of Christ. This matter of the flesh is paramount to them because even the 'circumcised' don't keep the law themselves. So they want the Galatians to be circumcised so that they can boast in the fact that they have followed the visitors in their own fleshly solution [6.12-14]. This has the effect of drawing them away from the cross of Christ and his atoning death.

[7] To circumcision or non-circumcision, Paul opposes the 'new creation' as the real thing that matters [6.15].

We might summarise the opponents thinking in this way:

1. Only the Jerusalem apostles had the authorisation from Christ. Paul had no comparable authorisation.
2. So his authorisation was derived from the Jerusalem leaders. If he is teaching differently from them then he is acting arbitrarily.
3. The Jerusalem leaders practised circumcision and the keeping of the Torah and the Jewish customs. Paul had struck out on his own and had omitted circumcision and other customs; he had betrayed his ancestral heritage.
4. This law-free gospel has no authority except Paul himself; he didn't receive it from the other apostles who disapproved of his line and course of action. This was publically shown at Antioch in the confrontation between Paul and Peter, over a matter of observing Jewish food laws.
5. The Abrahamic covenant was an important matter to the Judaisers. There is a need to be rightly related to Abraham and the

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Abrahamic covenant. The legitimate sons of Abraham are the Jewish people. They alone can experience the fullness of the blessing of Abraham.

6. There appears to be a typically Jewish Talmudic argument running here as well. The idea was that Paul's gospel was an elemental form of the covenant fulfilment whereas theirs was the fully developed one.
 - a. While Paul directed people to Gen 15.6 he needs to realise that the developed form of God's covenant with Abraham included circumcision of Gen 17.4-14. Paul's answer to this is that the Mosaic law comes 430 years later and cannot add to or annul the former conformed covenant with Abraham [3.15-18].
 - b. While Paul spoke only of Abraham, the full development came through Moses
 - c. While Paul spoke of the promises made to Abraham they were in actuality made to Abraham and to his seed = the nation. Paul's answer is 3.16,29 – Christ, and Christ's own, are the true seed of Abraham.
 - d. When Paul assured his converts that as they accepted the gospel they entered into the experience of being the son of Abraham – the question was, which one, the firstborn, Ishmael or the later son, Isaac. Paul indicates that he can allegorise as well [4.22-28].
 - e. The opponents must have used the Torah as a check on the libertine practices within the church. It was also the only antidote for being the "flesh" [sinful nature] into line. The Galatian churches were having ethical problems and had ethical failures – this is implied by 5.13-21. Their message was one of legalism for salvation and nomism for Christian living.
[See Longenecker, Paul, Apostle of Liberty 78-83].

The situation in the Churches

1. The Judaisers had persuaded the Galatians to abandon the true gospel [3.1,5.7-8] The Galatians don't seem to have submitted to circumcision yet but are intending to do so [5.1]. So, in dealing with the Judaisers, Paul is dealing with an externally arrived threat to the gospel.
2. Yet, internally there is a libertine threat as well [5.13-6.10] about which he had spoken to them before [5.21].
3. Are these two groups? Probably not, but the anti-libertine section of 5.13-6.10 does answer questions raised by the nomistic set of ideas. In 5.14 he states that Christian love preplaces law, while in 5.23 makes it clear that the law will not condemn the fruits which flow from the spirit. In 6.2 he makes it clear that the behaviour based on love will fulfil the law of Christ.