

## The Letter to the Galatians

### *Bearing One Another's Burdens Is Fulfilling the Law of Christ*

#### Background

**G**ALATIANS IS an ancient theological document and foundation of Christian freedom from the early stages of Christianity through our present day.

#### *Freedom in Mutual Regard in the Past and in the Present*

At a church coffee hour in a church that my husband served as pastor, an elderly gentleman spoke to me about his conviction that women should not have leadership positions in the church. I quoted from Galatians. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). He replied, “Got me there,” and then we enjoyed the coffee hour together in fellowship with our church family.

#### *Call to Christian Freedom*

Galatians is also a circulating letter and call to Christian freedom. Paul wrote this letter to the churches of Galatia around AD 54–55.<sup>1</sup> This letter was composed to be read aloud to each Galatian congregation and was a substitute for Paul’s personal presence. The letter presents a defense of Paul’s understanding of religious requirements.

1. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 468.

*Freedom to Forge a New Identity in a Formative  
Stage of Church Development*

In the process of forming their new faith communities, the Galatian congregations faced an identity crisis. Were they a branch of Judaism? Or were they a new community of Jewish Christians and former Gentile pagans that did not need to become Jewish before becoming Christians? Paul wanted his people to know that they could be Christians without becoming Jews first. Thus, in summary, Paul asked people to ignore the rival missionaries with their narrow view of Christianity that demanded incorporation into Judaism. In other words, according to the warring preachers, men had to be circumcised. In Paul's understanding of life in the Spirit, circumcision was not a requirement to become a Christian. In contrast to the leaders who preached a different understanding of requirements for church life, Paul preached a style of Christianity that emphasized both having faith in Christ and also having the faith and trust that Jesus had in God.

Line of Thought in the Text

Paul was not one of the original disciples, but he saw himself as an apostle. (Gal 1:1). He expresses his annoyance that some people are turning against the graced message he taught, to a different understanding (1:6–7) Paul, who had persecuted Christians, changed his mind because of revelation. He insisted that his message and calling were not from humans but from revelation (1:11–12). Paul tells us the story of his calling in Gal 1:11–24. Consider one sentence from the story of Paul's call of mission to the Gentiles: "But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being" (vv. 15–16).

Paul stated that Jews and Gentiles are both offered justification. Abraham had faith in God, or "believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). This God-given justification or declaration of righteousness came before the introduction of circumcision in Genesis 17. Paul interpreted God's promise in Gen 17: 2–6 that Abraham would be the father or ancestor of all nations to mean that Abraham is the ancestor of all people, or our shared father in faith. Paul's theology of promise, in essence, is "God's promise that in Abraham all nations would be blessed—a promise independent of circumcision—so that in giving the Spirit to the uncircumcised Gentiles, through faith, God is fulfilling the

promise to Abraham, a man whose faith was reckoned as righteousness.”<sup>2</sup> Since Abraham was made righteous through faith, faith is the most important spiritual bond among believers (3:6–9). Paul’s summary is “The one who is righteous will live by faith” (3:11).

Faith has both personal and social implications. Unity in Christ is a communal bond: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28).

It seems to me that inclusion in God’s family as children and heirs supports faith and trust that justifies and makes righteous. Paul used adoption language to explain why Gentiles can be part of God’s family:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that they we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” (4:4–6)

“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (5:6). (“Faith working through love” is at the core of community throughout the centuries.) Paul says it is wrong to use freedom for self-indulgence (5:13), a theme that will come up again in other New Testament books. Stressing freedom from details of Jewish law, Paul summarizes the law as loving neighbor as self (5:15). Expounding upon Jesus’s teachings, Paul serves Jesus by simplifying and opening up Jesus’s thought that was rooted in Judaism.

If people listen to their hearts, the Spirit will inspire good living. In contrast to various forms of destructive behavior, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (5:22–23). Paul asks his community to “bear one another’s burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). Sowing your seed (or putting your efforts into spiritual endeavors) will result in reaping eternal life (6:7).

Paul made a point of signing this letter in his own hand rather than having a scribe or secretary sign it for him (6:11). Cherishing the new creation, Paul closes with a personalized image of the cross, Jesus’s marks in Paul’s own body (6:17). In keeping with his gracious offering of life in the Spirit, Paul prays: “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen” (6:18).

2. Brown, *Introduction to The New Testament*, 472.

## The World in Front of the Text

Female readers may wonder if the emphasis on the debate about the circumcision requirement means that this letter is more for males. Eventually, baptism replaced circumcision as an identifying rite of passage. Baptism, confirmation, service, and ongoing renewal of the Spirit in communities of God's people are for both males and females. Both men and women are called to help other people bear their burdens. Believing that we are all children of God as part of a new creation means heartfelt certainty that women are as valuable as are men. Whenever hearts warm and turn, flower and bear the fruits of the Spirit, there is a personalized new creation.

What does it mean to "bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ"? How do you do this as an individual or as a church community?

SAMPLE