

The Letter to the Galatians



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The question of Paul's original intended audience for this letter, and its date, has long been debated. Galatia was a large Roman province in what is now Turkey. The inhabitants of the northern part were Gentiles, Celtic in origin. The southern part included towns mentioned in Paul's first missionary journey in Acts 13-14. There are no clear pointers to the date the letter was written but it could well have been around the time of the events Paul described in his second letter to the Corinthians, in the mid-fifties CE. As we have seen in the letters to Corinth, Paul's main concern was the unity of the Church but the immediate circumstances that created this concern are different.

The converts Paul addresses were not Jewish, but they may have included people who in Acts were known as 'God-fearers', people who had not been circumcised but were sympathetic towards the Jewish religion. In Acts 13:16ff, Paul's sermon addresses both 'Israelites and God-fearers', assuming both share a common story and that the God-fearers were well positioned to hear the Gospel message. When Paul first brought the gospel to the people of Galatia, he did not see any need for them to be circumcised or to be bound to observance of the Law of Moses. He had argued this forcefully before the other Apostles (cf. Galatians 2:1-14). The heart of the Gospel was Jesus Christ, whereas the Law of Moses was an antecedent to the gospel. At the beginning of the letter Paul claims that the gospel he preached came to him from divine revelation (Galatians 1:12). His gospel, while new, was also in radical communion with all the acts of God that had formed his people and given them hope in the coming of a Messiah.

*"For freedom Christ has set us free;
stand firm therefore, and do not
submit again to a yoke of slavery."
(Galatians 5:1)*



TEMPLE OF AUGUSTUS IN ANKARA, GALATIA

Among those who received the gospel message were Jews who had practised the Law of Moses all their lives.

The rite of circumcision and the observance of the dietary laws of Moses in particular, separated them from the Gentile idol-worshippers. While Jews could associate with Gentiles in the public squares, it was a different matter to eat with them in their homes as the food they would be offered would be non-kosher. In practice, this would have made it impossible for them to join with Gentiles at the Eucharist which originally was celebrated in the context of a meal (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:17ff).



When Paul set up the communities in Galatia there were no such tensions, but soon after he left these 'Jewish Christians' began to persuade the Galatians that they ought to be circumcised and follow the traditional dietary laws. Paul was amazed at this turnaround, so much so that he did not include the thanksgiving he would normally write and addressed them as 'You foolish Galatians' (Galatians 3:1).

Paul responds by reflecting on the core issues involved in this debate. By opting to be circumcised, the Galatians have refused God's greatest gift and have put themselves back in the position they were in before the coming of Christ. Paul sums up their predicament in two questions, 'Did you receive the Spirit, by doing the works of the Law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?' (Galatians 3:2)

Paul's point is that in the death and resurrection of Christ, God had given his Spirit to those who believed, miraculously enabling them to participate in the same power that had animated Christ. It would be by believing in Christ and following his way of life that they would receive salvation, because in dying and rising Christ had overcome sin. Their only hope was not in human observances, but in believing in Christ and receiving God's Spirit by being spiritually incorporated into his body.

That was not to say that the Law did not have a purpose. The Law was a temporary remedy for sin (Galatians 3:19) but it could not, of its power, turn anyone away from sin or give them the motivation not to sin. Paul described the Law as a 'paidagogos'. This Greek term refers to the household slave whose task it was to bring the boys to school and if necessary, discipline them by force along the way, but he was not a teacher. Likewise, the purpose of the Law was a disciplinary one, to point out sin and punish accordingly, but at a deeper level to lead people towards Christ and the possibility of being 'justified' by faith in him. This then brought them under the power, no longer of sin, but of his Spirit.

*"There is neither Jew nor Greek,
there is neither slave nor free,
there is no male and female,
for you are all one in Christ Jesus."
(Galatians 3:28)*



Justification (Greek: dikaiosune) is an important word in Paul's vocabulary. Literally it means being acquitted in a court of wrong-doing or of breaking the Law. The person who is justified has been restored to friendship with God and has become a child of God. While the Law was unable to bring about this justification, Paul searched through the Scriptures and found an ancestor of the Jews who had been justified, not through the Law but through faith. That ancestor was Abraham, 'who believed God and it was accounted to him as righteousness' (Galatians 3:6; cf. Genesis 15:6: LXX/Septuagint translation).

Another translation of dikaiosune is righteousness, or the state of having been justified. Those who express their faith in Christ by being baptised are heirs to the promise made to Abraham 'and his offspring' and are guided by the Spirit to fulfil 'the law of Christ'. The law of Christ is not to be found in observing laws as such, but in the fruits of the Spirit – 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22-23).



DIKAIOSUNE

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Question for Reflection

How can we enable our communities to be open and welcoming especially to seekers and strangers?

The Letter to the Romans



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Paul's letter to the Romans is the longest and arguably the most difficult to understand of all his writings. As a result, it has often been misunderstood and reduced to soundbites such as 'faith alone', or 'justification by faith', to support different agendas. Across the centuries readers have approached this rich and dense text as a theological source with answers to their questions. Meanwhile they ignore the context in which this letter was written, the issues Paul's ministry had thrown up and the concerns of the communities he was addressing.

Paul wrote this letter sometime between the mid to late 50s CE, possibly when he was staying in Corinth and waiting for a boat to take him in the direction of Jerusalem. He intended to give the community there the collection he had raised for the 'mother church'. His plan was that the next part of his missionary journey should take him to Spain. Just as at the beginning of his travels he needed a base in Antioch, so to go to Spain he would need a base in Rome.

Rome, like Corinth, was a cosmopolitan city. The Christian community there was divided into several 'house churches', composed of Gentile converts and some people who had been brought up as Jews. In the beginning this was a community comfortable with its Jewish inheritance, and it continued many of the customs and practices of Judaism. Unusually here, Paul does not address the letter to the whole church/ekklesia (Greek = assembly). This may indicate that the Jewish and Gentile members gathered for the Eucharist in their respective groups.

The communities must also have included at least a small number of people who would be able to support Paul's mission financially and even travel with him on the next part of his journey. Significantly this was a community that Paul had not founded himself, nor visited, though the final chapter suggests that Paul knew several people living in Rome who had previously worked with him (Romans 16:1-23).



THE COLOSSEUM, ROME

*"Owe no one anything,
except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."
(Romans 13:8)*

But the community also knew people who would undermine Paul and his teaching (Romans 16:17-20). Jewish groups in Rome and Jerusalem would have kept in contact with one another, and word had got around suggesting that Paul was no longer a real Jew, because he did not promote obedience to the Law of Moses. Indeed, according to Tacitus' Annals 15, by this time the Emperor Claudius (41-54 CE) had already expelled the Jews from Rome because of riots instigated by an agitator called 'Chrestos', most probably a reference to Jesus Christ. However, the edict lapsed on the emperor's death. The 'Messianists' in the Roman communities seem to have put distance between themselves and the mainstream Jewish community and taken cover with the Gentile membership. Then some representatives of Jerusalem or perhaps returned exiles must have put pressure on the Gentile community to be circumcised and follow the Mosaic Law, as had happened in Galatia.

Polemical argument tends to over-simplify this situation. Paul writes to set the record straight diplomatically and allay any tensions between Jewish and Gentile members. So, the underlying theme of Romans is a reflection on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the extension of the people of God that had been brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Specifically, Paul writes to address the disputes about obedience to the Law of Moses which threatened to undermine not only the community but the very meaning of the gospel and its power to bring about salvation.

After an opening address focussing on what Paul has to offer - the gospel of the Son of God, crucified and risen from the dead - he states his vocation as an apostle to the Gentiles and gives a thanksgiving. After this he develops the body of the letter in four parts.

Paul begins the first part (Romans 1:18-4:25) by defining what the Gospel of Jesus Christ actually is. It is good news revealing the power of God to save both Jews and Gentiles who receive it with faith. This good news has relevance beyond the community, affecting the whole world wherever there is wickedness, wrongdoing and rebellion against God. Using the technique of a debate with an imaginary opponent or opponents, he describes this power as the 'wrath' of God against sin, from which no one is exempted, Jew or Gentile.

No one then can judge the other without condemning themselves, since as the letter unfolds, Paul makes it clear that sin is not just about what individuals do but rather about the whole human race, which is infiltrated, so to speak, by the power of sin, from which it needs to be rescued and redeemed (cf. chapter 7).

The Jews have a certain advantage, having received the law of God from Moses, but the Gentiles have their own law, a law written on their conscience, which teaches them how to live. However, the fact is that both Jew and Gentile disobey their law, because both are under the power of sin (Romans 3:9). This power, the root cause of humanity's sins, finds its way into the hearts not only of those who disobey the Law of Moses, but even into those who appear to observe its commandments outwardly. So, the observance of the Law on its own does not guarantee a good relationship with God.

THE APPIAN WAY, ROME





But there is another way to access salvation, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. The grace of Jesus Christ is a force that can overcome the power of sin within people, but this requires faith, an active trust that manifests itself in the concrete following of Christ.

Paul explains to the Jews, using Genesis 15-17, how they already have a model of such faith in Abraham, who lived, and was circumcised, before the Law was given. Abraham then becomes the father in faith to both Jews and Gentiles.

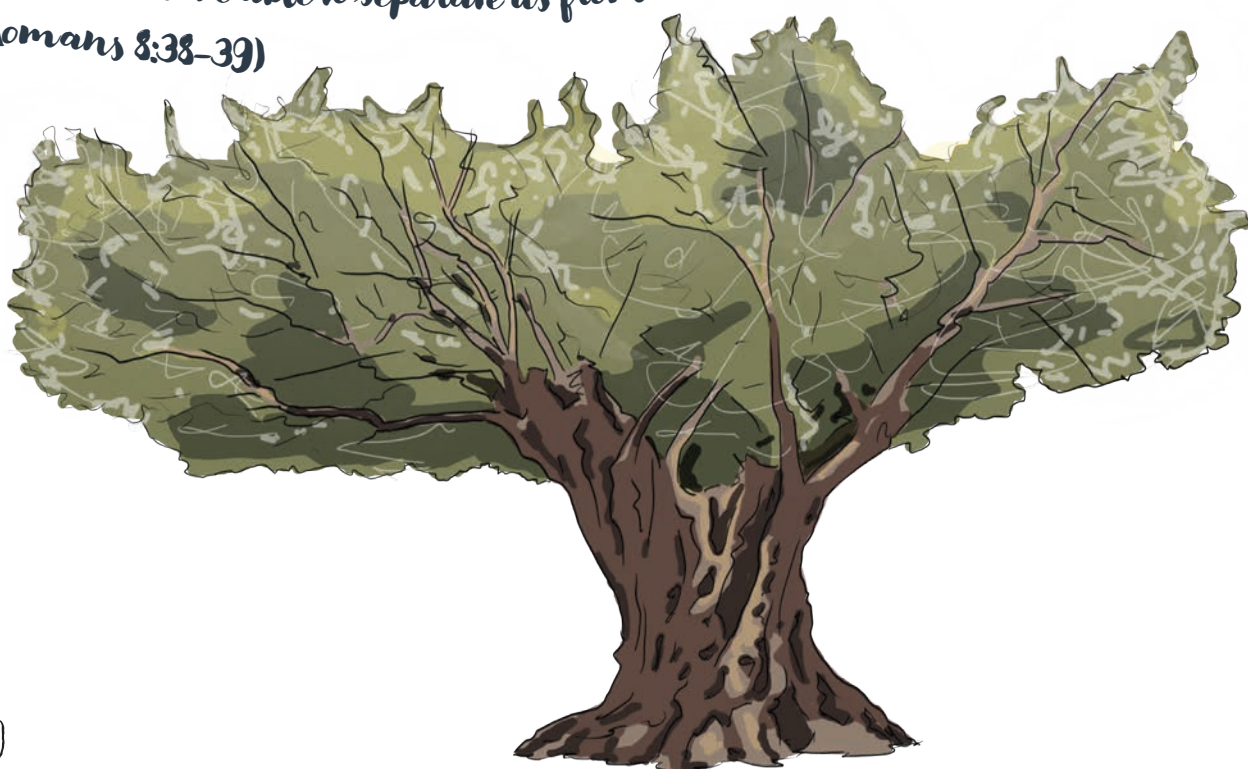
In the second part of the letter in 5:1-8:59 Paul goes deeper into the implications of the divine justice/righteousness that has been revealed in Christ. In the death of Christ, undergone not just for good people but even for his enemies, God reveals a love which no law, let alone the Law of Moses, can create of itself (Romans 5:8). It is grace - a freely given gift of God which can be received by anyone who believes in Christ. Then the Spirit of God will be in them, leading to a new life (Romans 8:13), the opposite of the life that Adam - the first man - bequeathed, which was little more than life leading to death. This new state Paul describes is like the transfer of the ownership of slaves. Believers in Christ are transferred from being slaves of iniquity to the 'slavery' of divine righteousness which will show itself as freedom.

That does not mean that sin and its destructive power has gone away. But Christ's victory over sin and death brings the person of faith back from alienation from God, the state of Adam, to a new relationship of being a child of God who can join with Christ in calling God 'Abba' meaning Father. (Romans 8:15). In this lies the ground of our hope that the overwhelming power of divine grace compared with human sin will find its fulfilment in our sharing in the resurrection of Christ.

In the third part of the Letter, chapters 9:1-11:36, Paul moves on to discuss the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the context of the history of salvation. The sub-text here is Paul's experience of rejection on the part of his fellow Jews. Despite their preparation through the covenants, the Law and the other gifts of God throughout history, many of them reacted as if the death of Christ was a stumbling block designed to cause offence rather than an act of God, a gift to be received in faith.

Though Paul does not try to conceal his emotional connection with the Jewish people among whom he first came to know God, he responds here theologically, with the help of scripture, to the questions which must have arisen in his own mind as well as exercising his enquirers – was God unjust? Had God's word failed? Had God rejected his people? To all these questions Paul answers 'No'. His problem though is that 'Israel' (as reflected in his opponents) continues to pursue righteousness through observing the Law without understanding that with the death and resurrection of Christ all has changed. They reject God's astounding work of mercy. In seeing God's action as offensive they failed to see both their and God's solidarity with the whole human race. However, for Paul, this does not mean that God has rejected Israel. A remnant of Israel remains, an olive tree to which a wild olive root (the Gentiles) has been grafted (Romans 11:24).

*"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."
(Romans 8:38-39)*





Then Paul concludes by addressing the Gentiles, 'So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery. A hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of Gentiles has come in. And so, all Israel will be saved'. 'They are beloved (of God). ... the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable....' (Romans 11:25, 28, 29). He ends with a prayer of praise to God, for his wisdom, knowledge and inscrutable ways (Romans 11:33-36).

In the final section of the body of the letter (Romans 12:1-15:13) Paul changes style with an ethical exhortation known as parenesis. He presents the whole of Christian life as a kind of 'rational worship', in which 'a truly renewed mind' no longer conformed to the world is transformed to discern the will of God – 'what is good, and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:1-2). All the commands of the Jewish Law are summed up and fulfilled in the command to love, which must be the norm of relating to those both within and outside the community. Paul exemplifies how this love works by ending with practical advice for those who will hear this letter being read.



Question for Reflection

How does Paul's understanding of the ongoing importance of God's call to Israel shed light on our use of the Jewish scriptures in our prayer and worship? (e.g. The Psalms)