

THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS - PART II

SALVATION THROUGH FAITH IN CHRIST JESUS

I. The introduction to the Galatians sets up the theme that the Gospel is salvation from our sins through Jesus Christ

A. As usual, St. Paul introduces himself as an apostles, but here emphasizes the fact that his calling is directly from God. He focuses on God, focusing on Jesus Christ and God the Father.

- St. Paul makes the same point in other letters, but here at greater length, distinguishing that authority from that given by humans.. Compare Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:1, 2 Tim. 1:1.
- St. Paul also emphasizes the Resurrection. That issue is not central to this letter, but other letters, especially First Corinthians and First and Second Thessalonians, that some people doubted the Resurrection. St. Paul may have included this reference here to combat any doubts that could arise.
- St. Paul indicates, however, indicates that the message is not just his; it is that of all the brethren, that is of the whole Church.

B. The letter is addresses to the churches (plural) in Galatia. This reference could simply mean that there were a number of cities in Galatia. Or it could be an indication that the letter was addressed to both northern and southern Galatia.

- As with First and Second Thessalonians, but unlike the other Pauline epistles to communities, there is no reference to "the holy one" or "the ones called to be holy." This omission may be due to the fact that this letter, like those to the Thessalonians was written early, or could be due to fact that St. Paul was indicating that they were not to be set aside by the Jewish rites, which were sometimes called the Levitical holiness code.

C. As is common, St. Paul wishes them grace and peace from Jesus Christ and God the Father.

- As with the first lines, there is not as much of an emphasis on the Spirit at this early time in Christianity, although the end of the letter will certainly describe living in the Spirit. Other (probably later) letters would more clearly describe the Holy

Spirit as a person. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 12:1-13; Eph. 4:1-6

- Here, St. Paul sets up the theme that we are saved from sins by Jesus Christ, and thus rescued from "the present age." There is a calling not to rely on works for salvation, but also to avoid the decadence of the world. See also Matt. 11:16, 12:39-45; Luke 11:29-32; 2 Cor. 4:4.

D. In place of the usual thanksgiving, there is a rebuke here for turning to the different gospel. This rebuke sets up the theme for the letter.

1. St. Paul dramatically contrasts the true gospel with a false gospel presented by some people whose interest is in disturbing them.

- The implication is that the community was at peace until outsiders came.

- As he emphasizes elsewhere, there can be only one gospel, for there is only one way to salvation, that is, through Jesus Christ. See also Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 1:10-17, 12:12-31; Eph. 4:5-6.

2. St. Paul says that anyone who presents a gospel other than the one that the Galatians first received should be anathama (accursed, separated, cast outside.)

- He warns that even if an angel of God proclaims a different gospel, he should be anathama. A true angel, of course would not do so. But the point is that, even if a person's eloquence, appearance, and arguments appear good, his message should be rejected if it contradicts what is known to be true. The argument goes back to the distinction in Deuteronomy between a true and false prophet. Duet. 13:2-6.

- Likewise, St. Paul emphasizes that he did not create the gospel, and so if he should contradict it, he should be rejected.

E. St. Paul then begins to take on what appears to be a claim of the interlopers that he had not told them that the Jewish ritual law was needed because he was currying favor with them.

II. The letter then turns to a history both of St. Paul's ministry and of the question at hand.

A. First, St. Paul emphasizes that he received the gospel directly from Jesus, not from a human being. Such is the basis for his argument that he is an apostle like the rest.

1. He begins by emphasizing how zealous he was for the law, to the point of persecuting the church because of his beliefs.

- Part of the idea is that, if the Jewish ritual law had been necessary, he of all people would have kept it.

2. Then, St. Paul describes how God had called him from his mother's womb to be a prophet and now made clear that calling.

- Isaiah and Jeremiah had likewise said that they were called from before their births. See Is. 49:1; Jer. 1:4-6.

- St. Paul indicates that it was no accident that he did not know the truth until that time, for God revealed it to St. Paul exactly when He wanted to.

3. St. Paul indicates that he went into Arabia (probably here meaning either an area to the south of modern day Syria or the Nabatean kingdom in modern day Jordan), presumably to reflect upon the gospel and learn more about it. It appears from Second Corinthians that he had some mystical experiences here. See 2 Cor. 12:2-10. He then went back to Damascus and it is likely that he proclaimed the gospel there as he had done at first. See Acts 9:19-22.

4. He then went to Jerusalem to confer with Peter and James. This journey may be the same as the flight required by assassination attempts in Damascus. See Acts 9:23-30.

- The James referred to here would presumably be James the Greater, who the Gospels refer to a "brother of the Lord" although that term in Greek also means any close male relative. See Mark 6:3, 15:40. It would appear to be the same James the Apostle who is the brother of John. That James would later be killed in the persecution under Herod. See Acts 12.

5. St. Paul then refers to his widespread acceptance from the people in Judea even though they had not seen him. This

reference would give him greater credibility for arguing that the ritual laws were not needed, for if anyone should object to that principle it would be the people in Judea.

B. St. Paul then refers to his consultation with Peter, James and John in Jerusalem.

1. The most likely time for this consultation was just before or during the council of Jerusalem that was called to resolve the issue of whether the Gentile converts to Christianity should be required to adopt the ancient Jewish practices. See Acts 15:1-35.

- This consultation was about either 14 or 17 years after St. Paul's conversion; the former calculation would easily fit the timing of the Council of Jerusalem, which occurred in 49 or 50 A.D. That latter timing could fit it.

- It is possible, if one accepts that Jesus was crucified around 30 or 31 A.D. and St. Paul converted within three years of that time, that this consultation could have occurred just before St. Paul's first missionary journey. See Acts 13:1-3.

- St. Paul's description of the council emphasizes the approval of his mission given by the church, especially her leaders. Here, St. Paul does not emphasize the role of the leaders as much as he would elsewhere. See, e.g., Eph. 4:11-14, 1 Tim. 3:1-13, 4:11-16.

2. St. Paul emphasizes here the Council's approval of his ministry in general.

- He refers to Peter again as Cephas, for apparently by that time, Peter was known more by this title, which means rock.

- The James would mean the Bishop of Jerusalem, rather than the James referred to earlier, for he had been martyred by then.

- The John referred to here is almost certainly John the Apostle.

C. St. Paul then describes an incident not referred to in Acts of the Apostles, in which Peter was in Antioch and tried to satisfy

the Jewish converts by refusing to be at table with the Gentile converts.

1. It appears that St. Peter and the others were not insisting that the Gentile converts adopt the Jewish practices. However, to avoid causing offense, St. Peter, St. Barnabas and the other leaders were not dealing with the Gentiles as much.

- The passage emphasizes eating with the Gentile converts, for that was apparently a crucial part of the community.
- St. Peter and the others may not have cut off all dealings with the Gentile converts, but did not deal with them as much.

2. St. Paul took Peter to task for allowing by his actions people to get the impression that adhering to the Jewish law was necessary for membership, or perhaps full membership, in the Church.

- St. Paul did elsewhere keep some Jewish practices to avoid giving offense to the Jews, such as having St. Timothy circumcised and keeping the Jewish law in Jerusalem. See Acts 16:3, 21:22-26.
- Apparently, this particular insistence on the law was giving more of an impression that dissent from the Council of Jerusalem was permissible than the other occasions.

3. St. Paul apparently prevailed in this dispute, for verses 15 and 16 indicate that all of the leaders agreed with him.

4. The Catholic faith maintains that the Pope and the bishops are without error when teaching doctrinally for the Church, not that their behavior is always a good witness. See Vatican II Council, Lumen Gentium 25; Catechism 890-892; see also Matt. 23:1-3.

III. In verses 15 to 21 of chapter 2, St. Paul then outlines the main point of his argument, i.e., that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ.

A. In verses 15 and 16, he argues that even the leaders of the Church, who were from the Jewish faith agreed on the point that salvation is through Christ Jesus.

1. He repeats three times for emphasis that we are justified through faith in Christ Jesus, not through the works of the law.
2. The term for justified here, *dikaion* implies both making a situation right and declaring someone just. The sacrifice of Jesus does both of these things, making up for our sins and making us just in God's sight.

3. The contrast is between faith and works of the law.

- Faith means more than abstract belief, but rather a personal relationship with Jesus. Chapter 5 will build on the moral implications of this expansive view of faith.

- The works of the law would mean the torah, the ancient Jewish law. He does not seem to mean the natural law available to all peoples, as the letter to the Romans discusses, for the implication here is that the Jewish leaders had the law and others were sinners in light of it. However, the same principle would apply; salvation is not through works of the law, although moral actions are needed to live out that faith.

B. Verse 17 responds to the objection that Christ is allowing sin or ministering to it, for He provides salvation outside of the law. The letter to the Romans responds to a similar objection. See Rom. 6-8.

C. Verses 18 and 19 instead respond that the law points the way to Christ, and therefore to insist on the old ritual law is paradoxically to violate it, for one misses the very point of the law. As with the ministry of St. John the Baptist, the law points the way to Christ and diminishes as He approaches, for it is fulfilled. See John 3:22-30.

D. Verses 20 and 21 describe that fulfillment of the law as Christ living within one. When this condition is fully present, sin is driven out, not by the external law, but rather by the transformation from within. The prophets spoke of a day when the external law would be written on the peoples' hearts. See Jer. 31:31-34; Ez. 36:25-29, 37:23-28. St. Paul is indicating that this prophesy has been fulfilled.