

GALATIANS RESEARCH



Galatians Overview¹

- Some theologians refer to it as the *Christian Magna Carta* because of its strong affirmation of Christian freedom.
- This book and Romans were central to the doctrinal advancements/controversies at the center of the Protestant Reformation.
 - Reformers argued good works are the expected fruit of the Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian, but they cannot establish or improve a person's standing in the sight of God. Only Christ and His gift of grace can do that.
- Considered Paul's most combative letter.
 - This is the only letter that does not open with words of thanksgiving for the recipients.
- Possibly written as early as 48AD which would make this letter the oldest surviving Christian document of any kind.
- The other hypothesis dates this letter's writing as late as AD 50-57 timeframe.
- At this stage, some of the Jews who believed in Jesus seemed to have thought that salvation was for Jewish people only. Thus, they argued that gentiles who desired to become Christians first needed to become Jews.
- Paul's ultimate fear is that the Galatians are deserting God and perverting the Gospel of Christ (cf: 1:6-7)
- Galatians makes four central assertions:
 - 1. Justification is by faith, not works**
 - People are made right with God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and not by the Law (cf: 2:16-17)
 - 2. God's favor is for all humanity**
 - This is proven in Paul's clear attack at the Jew/Gentile divide which was one of the preeminent socio-cultural dividing lines in his day (cf: 3:26-29)
 - The Judaizers "good news" is that gentiles can become part of a chosen/favored group *if* they do the works set forth by their teachers.
 - Paul's Good News is that *there is no favored group*.
 - 3. The Fullness of Time has come**
 - Paul saw the entirety of human history at a pivotal moment during the writing of this letter.
 - This shift in the whole of human history is rooted in Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit, and subsequently being seated in power as Lord of all the created order by God the Father.
 - Cf: 3:23, 3:25, 4:4-5
 - 4. The Spirit produces what the law cannot produce**
 - The law *shows* holiness and *calls* to holiness, but it is powerless to impute a state of holiness into adherents to the law.
 - Cf: 3:1-5, 4:9-11, 5:16.

¹Mark Powell, *Introducing the New Testament, 2nd ed.* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 323-337.

Galatians Outline²

- I. Introduction: Desertion from Paul's Gospel is Desertion from the Gospel (1:1-2:21)
 - A. Paul's Apostolic Authority (1:1-5)
 - B. Problem Explained: Desertion from the Gospel (1:6-10)
 - C. Paul's Gospel Derived from God, not people (1:11-2:21)
 - 1. Thesis: Source of his Gospel was revelation (1:11-12)
 - 2. Thesis support (1:13-2:21)
 - a) *His past hostility (1:13-14)*
 - b) *His call from God (1:15-17)*
 - c) *His relative obscurity in Judea (1:18-24)*
 - d) *Recognition of Paul's Authority by Pillars (2:1-10)*
 - e) *Rebuke of Peter substantiates Paul's authority (2:11-21)*
 - (1) Rebuke (2:11-14)
 - (2) Transition: The Nature of the Gospel (2:15-21)
- II. Paul's Gospel defended from experience and Scripture (3:1-4:11)
 - A. Argument from Experience: Reception of Spirit means by faith, not works (3:1-5)
 - B. Argument from Scripture: Blessing of Abraham by faith (3:6-14)
 - 1. Members of Abraham's family by faith (3:6-9)
 - 2. Curse of Law removed only in Christ (3:10-14)
 - C. Argument from Salvation History: Priority of Abrahamic covenant and temporary nature of Mosaic covenant (3:15-4:11)
 - 1. Addition of Law does not nullify promise to Abraham (3:15-25)
 - a) *Temporary nature of Mosaic covenant (3:15-18)*
 - b) *The mission & purpose of the law (3:19-25)*
 - 2. Sons of God are Abraham's offspring (3:26-29)
 - 3. Argument of slavery to sonship (4:1-7)
 - 4. The folly of reverting to the law (4:8-11)
- III. A Call to freedom from the law and freedom in the Spirit
 - A. Live in freedom from the law: argument from friendship (4:12-20)
 - B. Stand in freedom: argument from allegory (4:21-5:1)
 - C. Resist the dangerous message of bondage (5:2-12)
 - 1. It involves the requirement of circumcision (5:2-6)
 - 2. Its perpetrators will be judged (5:7-12)
 - D. Live out freedom in the Spirit (5:13-6:10)
 - 1. Freedom expressed in love (5:13-15)
 - 2. Living in the Spirit instead of the flesh (5:16-24)
 - 3. Caring for one another by the Spirit (5:25-6:5)
 - 4. Doing good by the Spirit (6:6-10)
- IV. Final Summary (6:11-18)

Excursus: The Meaning of *Gospel*

What exactly does Paul mean when he says “Gospel?” This word is found in every single one of Paul’s letters except for Titus. Prior to Paul’s day, it was exclusively a political and military word for the proclamation of a grand military or political victory (*think ticker-tape parades in NYC after defeat of Axis powers in World War II*).³ Virtually every source reviewed for this brief noted a key attribute associated with a true Gospel message is the sense of overwhelming joy flowing from recognition of the defeat of an *existential* enemy.

In the classical Greek world, a true Gospel message was never seen as the work of a human but solely as a gift from the gods.⁴ In Paul’s day, the use of this word in a theological manner was already present within imperial cults (ie: religious systems that upheld roman power).⁵ The novelty of Paul’s use of the word was that he used it in a context completely independent of Caesar, his worship, or the broader geo-political realities of his day. Paul’s use of this word clearly asserted the news of Jesus was *greater* news than any other ruler or victory humanity had ever known.

Jesus uses the word “Gospel” as a verb only once in Matthew (11:5) and it appears 25 times in Luke and Acts. It never appears as a verb in Mark or John. “Gospel” is used as a noun 12 times in Matthew and twice in Luke. Conversely, *Paul uses it over 60 times!* The reason for clarifying this is to reveal Pauline influence on our understanding of the Gospel.

²Thomas R. Schreiner, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 58-59.

³“εὐαγγέλιον” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* Verlyn D. Verbrugge, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 213.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

Danger Close Consulting

For Paul, the Gospel means God “has acted for the salvation and redemption of the world in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus (cf: Rom. 1:1-4, 1 Cor. 15:3-7). *However, it does NOT mean only the content of what is preached, but also the act, process, and execution of the proclamation.*”⁶ The key element that seems to be fading in the modern Western understanding of the Gospel as Paul perceived it was the key ingredient of *execution of the proclamation—living in the reality of the Gospel in one’s daily life*. For Paul, the Gospel truly received could not possibly be separated from one’s daily life and decisions. The totality of the victory Christ achieved breaks into one’s daily life.

This is an essential nuance of Paul’s Gospel that cannot be forgotten when preaching about his teaching against works in Galatians. The judaizers *inverted* Paul’s theology. They taught salvation flowed out of works. His Galatian message slams home the reality that works are the byproduct of the true Gospel message coming into one’s life. A.B. Luter argues “the logic of Paul’s Gospel was a natural outworking of his Damascus Road experience.”⁷ Paul’s genuine encounter with Jesus as *Lord* demanded a changed way of living. **In the same way that taking a flame to gasoline produces an explosion, the Gospel truly applied to a life will *always* yield a new way of living.** Paul’s Galatian message does not reject the notion of good works accompanying the Gospel but it repudiates the teaching that good works can *replicate* or *replace* the power of the Gospel in one’s life.

⁶Verbrugge, 214.

⁷A.P. Luter, “Gospel” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 370.

Excursus: The Meaning of *Works of the Law*

Paul uses the phrase “works of the law” eight times in his writings. In 1:6, Paul makes clear his concern is that Galatian Christians veered off course by “deserting” God “for a different gospel.” What is that *false* gospel which they have followed? 2:16 clarifies people were attempting to be justified in the sight of God through their “works of the law.” This deception is again clarified in 3:2 & 5. He asks the rhetorical question if the Spirit and miracles in their midst are the fruit of faith or earned through law?

Works of the Law are ultimately revealed not in behavior itself but rather in the motive behind one’s behavior. Paul’s use of “works of the law” was always in the context of people seeking justification *through* impeccable observation of Jewish law.⁸ When a person seeks justification *through* the law, he or she becomes subject to the force of the law. A Judeo-Christian understanding of humanity reveals this is a fool’s errand—man cannot perfectly keep the law (cf: Eccl. 7:20). As a result of a person’s inability to live a blameless life, *seeking saving through the law is willfully placing oneself under a curse* (cf: Gal. 3:10-12). Galatians 3:13 clearly states that Jesus came with the express purpose of “redeem[ing] us from the curse of the law.”

The “works of the law” were attempts to either earn God’s favor or make oneself right in the eyes of God through one’s own merit instead of Christ’s. In both the Old Testament and Paul’s writings, the use of justification was almost always in a verb form and not a noun. Why is that? Theologians argue this was meant to constantly reiterate that “justification results from an action of God.”⁹ The Bible repeatedly paints the idea of “rightness” as a condition that flows out of the heart and efforts of God alone.

⁸T.R. Schreiner, “Works of the Law” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 975.

⁹A. E. McGrath, “Justification” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 518.

Danger Close Consulting

Ultimately, Paul seems to reject the idea of righteousness through works of the law on three grounds:

1. No human being can perfectly obey the law.
2. Attempting to obtain God's favor or approval through one's own works negates faith.
3. Works of the law seek to place one's own efforts on equal footing with Christ's atoning sacrifice.¹⁰

Attempting salvation *through* the works of the law dangerously presumes man can save himself. This motive cannot deliver what it aims to achieve.

How do we as preachers of the Gospel best defend our listeners from the dangers of the works of the law? Attempting to exhaustively pass judgement on which behaviors are or are not good is a time consuming and heavy burden that no Gospel communicator should carry. Instead, Paul addresses his opposition in this book by bringing his study to the key point of *identity* (cf: Gal. 4). As one's identity shifts, the motives behind his or her behavior shifts as well. It is important to remember that Paul is not discouraging holy, principled living in his writings! Galatians is not the license for people to do what they want however they want. Paul was warring against using one's lifestyle and morality as a *replacement* for the atoning work of Christ.

One's motive and identity are key points of study when preaching about works of the law. We do not live holy lives *for* heaven's attention and approval. Instead, we live holy lives *from* the place of approval. Galatians does an exceptional job of reiterating the true heart of the Gospel message and humanity's need of saving. It reveals that any belief placing its hope in the abilities or good nature of humanity is doomed to fail. Only Christ can save. His perfect work should be the foundation of our identity, motive, and message.

¹⁰Schreiner, 977.

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