
SIN, SALVATION, AND THE SPIRIT

Edited by Daniel Durken, O.S.B.

The three biblical themes of sin, salvation, and the Spirit are highlighted in Jesus’ departing words to his disciples in Luke 24:44-49.

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means divert the meaning. The third set needs no transposition, for it is the only social tension of the three from Paul's day that remains unresolved, perhaps because it is far more deeply rooted in human experience than the others. Galatians 3:28 is an emancipation proclamation, not for any one group, but for all. It is a declaration that in Christ we are all free to seek out ways of mutuality in love.

Galatians has been called Paul's gospel of freedom, and rightly so. This freedom is, however, lived out in the shadow of the cross. It is paradoxical that the Pauline letter which speaks most of freedom also is the one that speaks most often of the cross as means of liberation and salvation. Paul sees his own life as one lived in the crucified Christ (2:20). His preaching of Christ was that of the cross (3:1). Crucifixion becomes the image for overcoming resistance to grace (5:24). The mystery of the cross is the real meaning of persecution, the saving power which those who conform to the Law flee (6:12). The cross of Christ is the only object of Paul's desire and the only focus of his love (6:14). The timeliness of this message need not be demonstrated.

The Letter to the Galatians is a fascinating meditation on law and freedom. While we must admit that some of Paul's arguments are difficult for our minds to follow and some of his problems are not ours, still many of our own conflict situations are remarkably similar. And freedom under the cross of Christ is something for which we all still struggle and yearn.

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THE GOSPEL IN CONFLICT
Paul's Opponents in Galatians

Bernadette J. Brooten

When we say the phrase "Apostolic Age," images of a golden age of peace and harmony come to mind, of an age when the Church was without schism and the true doctrine was received gladly by the faithful. And yet we know that it was not so. Early Christianity was an explosion. Its rapid spread led to a great pluralism. The very direction of the Church was being hammered out in struggle and conflict; no one could predict which of the many factions would win in the end. Paul's Letter to the Galatians bears witness to this life and death struggle for the gospel.

Paul in Competition
Galatians breathes conflict from the first verse on. Paul feels called upon to defend his apostleship as of divine, rather than human origin (Gal 1:1). At the end of the salutation (1:1-5), there is no thanks-giving, an element included in all the other Pauline epistles. Instead, Paul immediately launches into a vigorous scolding of the Galatian communities and maintains this tone throughout the letter.

In the course of the letter it becomes clear that Paul has been having some competition in the Galatian churches. Other missionaries had arrived after Paul, and their message was more convincing to the Galatians than Paul's had been. Given what we know about the Roman Empire in the first century, it should not come as a surprise that Paul had competitors. Paul's era was one of religious upheaval; missionaries abounded. In the first century and succeeding ones, devotees of
Isis, Osiris, and Serapis spread the cult of these Egyptian deities as far north as Germany, while the exotic eastern cult of Mithras made its way all the way to England. Jewish missionaries were no less active. Ancient Jewish synagogues have been found from North Africa to Yugoslavia.

In light of this, when Paul set out to become a missionary, it is clear that he was not the first one on the scene. We also know that within Christianity itself, Paul would have run into little competition. The first Christians to spread the gospel were Jews, and it seems that they saw belief in Jesus and faithfulness to the Torah as the two essential components of their message. “Those from James,” who came to Antioch and were scandalized that Christians there were not following the Jewish dietary laws, would be an example of this group (Gal 2:11-13). Far from seeing the commandments in the Torah and the belief in Jesus as contradictory, they saw them as complementary and even necessary for one another.

In addition to these Jewish Christian missionaries, we should also imagine that there were Judaizing Christian missionaries. These would have been Christians, not Jewish by birth, who had adopted certain Jewish customs and theological concepts, perhaps quite selectively. In other words, they were fascinated by Judaism and wanted to proclaim Christ in the context of it. The Galatians would have been a happy target for any of these missionaries. The territory of Galatia lies in what is today central Turkey, and was hinterland even then. According to the letter (4:8-10), the people addressed had been pagans before coming to faith in Christ. It is easy to imagine that certain people in this region, longing to be modern and enlightened, would have been attracted to these missionary religions: to the urbane Isis religion, with its international flair; to Judaism, as represented by missionaries from the coastal regions of Asia Minor, with its philosophical sounding monotheism, its challenging ethics and its Semitic flavor; or to Christianity, both to the type represented by Paul and to the type preached by his opponents.

The Opponents’ Views

The pagan Christians of Galatia, at first convinced by Paul’s message of Christ crucified, a message which lacked any further ritualistic requirements, had now turned to the message of new missionaries. These new missionaries were having great success. What was their message?

It is difficult to know exactly what Paul’s opponents were saying, for we only have Paul’s letter to go on and not one of the opponents’ writings. Perhaps Paul did not even know exactly what these people were saying. If they began preaching only after Paul had left, he may not have known them personally. Probably however, he did know them or have reliable reports on them, but even this does not imply that Galatians is an accurate and systematic report of the views of the opponents. Further, the letter was written in the heat of a serious conflict, and such writings seldom give a cool, balanced view of the opposing arguments. In addition, Paul felt that he was being personally attacked and had to defend himself. Galatians is Paul’s self-defense, an apology in the sense of Socrates’ apology, and not a defense or explanation of his opponents’ views.

In spite of these difficulties, it is possible to reconstruct at least the outline of what Paul’s opponents were saying. Although this exercise may seem cumbersome and tedious to some, and its results speculative at best, this reconstruction of the opponents’ theology is essential for a proper understanding of Paul. Paul is not interested in writing abstract theological treatises. His theology is always contextual, and in order to understand it, we must understand the context.

It is clear that the opponents called upon all males to circumcise themselves (5:2-12; 6:12-17). This means that they were either Jewish Christians or Judaizing Christians. It is also further confirmation that the Galatian Christians had not been Jewish before becoming Christian or circumcision would not have been an issue. Theologically, circumcision implies an entry into the Torah covenant, an identification with the Jewish people. (It is worth noting here that not all ancient Jewish missionaries required circumcision of adult male proselytes. The operation was a painful and dangerous one, and some missionaries felt that it should not be required. Therefore, even in the context of Jewish missionary activity, Paul’s opponents in Galatia seem to have been fairly rigorous.)

A further aspect of the opponents’ theology seems to have been the emphasis on calendar: “You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years!” (4:10). While the observation of certain feasts and seasons was important for all Jews, it played a special role in apocalyptic groups, such as the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Whether the opponents placed an emphasis on dietary laws is unclear. The dietary laws did play a significant role in Paul’s conflict with Peter and with those from James (Gal 2:11-14), but that incident
occurred in Antioch and not in Galatia. Paul’s narration of this incident is meant to establish his own authority vis-à-vis Peter and not to imply that table fellowship with Gentiles, that is, with those who do not follow Jewish dietary laws, is the issue in Galatia as it was in Antioch.

It is further unclear what the opponents’ stand on the rest of the Torah was. Paul emphasizes that the circumcized man must fulfill the entire Law (5:3). Could this mean that the opponents placed great significance on circumcision, while being lax about the other commandments?

**Paul in Conflict**

Although we do not have in Galatians a systematic report of the opponents’ views, it is possible to imagine why they would have argued this way. They were preaching the message of Jesus the Jew. Perhaps they pointed to the fact that Jesus himself was circumcised in order to support their requirement of circumcision. They could have also pointed to Jesus’ observance of Jewish feasts and perhaps also to his predictions of the coming endtime to lend credence to their teachings on days and months and seasons and years.

Or perhaps these people did not base their teachings on the earthly Jesus at all. Perhaps simply the fact that Jesus had been a Jew seemed to them justification enough for preaching obedience to Jewish commandments. They probably viewed themselves as missionaries of a particular branch of Judaism, namely, the Christian branch, which they took to be the highest form of Judaism.

Why would these people so vehemently attack Paul? In the context of their perspective, it is not difficult to imagine that they saw Paul’s preaching as a watering down of the Christian message, as a diluted and lax version of Christianity. If they saw their mission as a unique opportunity to spread the ancient Jewish religion—Jesus being one aspect of this, perhaps in their eyes the perfect fulfillment of the Torah—they must have seen the ease with which Paul dispensed with the commands of the Torah as folly and blasphemy. One can imagine them saying, “Rather than watering down our message to the Gentiles, we should be challenging them to strive to reach our level, to enter into the rigorous, challenging life of Judaism.”

Seen against this background, we can begin to understand Paul’s position. Paul was not in an offensive position, but rather in a defensive one. The Galatians had gone over to the opponents, and Paul now had to defend himself and his message. The core of Paul’s argument is that if belief in Christ is sufficient for salvation, then the Law is not necessary (2:16; 3:11). If the works of the Law were also necessary, then faith would be diminished.

To us this argument seems convincing, for today’s Christians see Christ as the center of faith and the Law as a thing of the past. In Paul’s environment, however, this was not so. The majority of Christian missionaries in Paul’s time would have been Jewish or Judaizing, and to them the proclamation of the Torah was as integral to their gospel as the proclamation of the risen Christ. To dispense with the Torah was seen as a serious breach with the tradition of the fathers, a tradition of which Jesus was a part.

Paul is biting in his rejection of the opponents’ views. In the context of circumcision he writes: “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the Law; you have fallen away from grace” (5:4). Thus, while the opponents argue that circumcision is necessary for all males, Paul says that those who follow this view actually forfeit salvation! He even adds: “Would that those who are disturbing you castrate themselves!” (5:12). In saying this, Paul is close to the view of some ancient non-Jews who saw circumcision as little better than castration. The Roman Emperor Hadrian (117–138), for example, made both circumcision and castration illegal, an event which was one of those leading to the second Jewish revolt against Rome. One can only imagine the anger of Paul’s opponents, who considered circumcision to be a mark of God’s covenant with Israel, with Paul’s statement.

Or consider the opponents’ concern with the calendar, which they must have considered to be God-ordained. Paul dismisses this as no better than heathen superstition: “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years!” (4:9-10).

**How to Live with Freedom**

Judging by Paul’s arguments, the opponents must have responded to a genuine need in the Galatian communities. These other missionaries brought with them the Jewish ethical wisdom of the ages, as well as the richness of Jewish ritual law and custom. From the psychological standpoint, it is reassuring to people to have that base, to know exactly what is expected of oneself. Perhaps the opponents