

A Lesson in Foolishness

If anyone knew the dangers of legalism it was the Apostle Paul, and perhaps in no other epistle does he make such a harsh rebuke as in the book of Galatians. While one can scarcely encapsulate the fullness of any given person through the reading of a solitary letter, the scope has been narrowed for the sake of brevity. The focus of this paper will be to examine the rhetoric and content of Galatians and by doing so gain a small glimpse into the character of Paul. In order to better appreciate the context, it is of course necessary to have a general understanding of not only the author, but also the target audience. Therefore, preceding the examination of rhetoric and content will be short overviews of Paul and the people of Galatia.

I. Background Information

The following is a re-introduction to a cruel, vicious scoundrel. He was born as a citizen of one of the most powerful nations on earth, became an idealistic young man, and rose to a prominent position in his society. At the height of his worldly authority, he killed many innocent people because of their religious beliefs, imprisoning and executing those who dared to speak out against his cause. He took sadistic pleasure in carrying out these horrible acts of persecution until one day he was finally stopped. While this description accurately fits both Nero and Hitler, it also describes another man. This man was Saul of Tarsus.

Acts 7:54-8:3 gives an account of just how brutal he had been. He was a ruthless and efficient killer who wanted to wipe Christianity off the face of the earth. While his claim to be chief among sinners in 1 Timothy 1:15 tends to be overlooked, it should be realized that this was not his attempt at false modesty.¹ He had truly come to grips with

his horrible past because he experienced the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. Acts chapter 9 contains the explanation of this amazing transformation on the road to Damascus. After being blinded and forced to change his point of view, he received new sight and was baptized. Now the Holy Spirit was at work in Paul, and he began to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God. He preached the gospel of salvation so effectively that other Jews plotted to kill him in Acts 9:23. The tables were turned. The mighty hunter of Christians had now become a hunted Christian himself. Instead of acting as a dispenser of heavy-handed justice, he was now extending the hand of grace but with no less fervor, as is evident in his dealings with the Galatians.

The Galatians themselves were no strangers to violence or conflict. They were of comparable ethnic origin as the Celts of France and Britain, and were described as being mighty warriors, though they were eventually subdued in 232 B.C. This description was originally made by the Roman historian Livy, to describe the might of Rome in defeating such awesome foes. By the Roman elite, they were viewed as degenerates, who tended to resist assimilation by Roman Hellenization.² While there is a tendency to read modern values into history, supposing that Paul as a Roman citizen viewed them in the same way when he called them foolish in 3:1, it is clear from the end of Galatians chapter 3 that he shows no such partiality. He is not alluding to a national characteristic of the Galatians.³ Rather, his tone was that of pastoral inclination.

As to the location of the Galatian recipients, the exact geographic location remains uncertain, as in Paul's time this was the name of the entire Roman province, stretching from Pontus in the north to Pamphylia in the south. There is scholarly debate as to whether the churches were located in northern or southern Galatia, but taking into

account Acts 13-14 and the lack of certainty that Paul even founded northern churches, the recipients were most likely in the south.⁴ Unfortunately, it cannot be ascertained to which specific churches he was writing, but it is probably a safe to assume it was meant for a collective audience.

As far as Paul's relationship with the churches in Galatia, it is implied that his first visit was during and possibly because of some ailment of the eyes, which may have well been the thorn in the flesh he refers to in 2 Corinthians 12:7.⁵ Apparently this first meeting had gone extremely well, because Paul says in 4:12-15 that they would have gladly given them his own eyes, had it been possible. Given the cultural obsession with the notion of envy represented by the "evil eye" and the reputation that likely preceded him as a religious persecutor, this was probably a sign of extreme graciousness.

According to the cultural insights of Bruce J. Malina, one could protect oneself from the glances of envy from an evil eye by spitting, and wearing various trinkets or charms, none of which the Galatians seem to have done in Paul's presence. The following excerpt from Malina best sums up this concept.

This letter contains several indications that Paul had been accused by his detractors of having had an evil eye. Paul defends himself ("You did not shield your eyes from me and my portrayal of the Christ" [Gal. 3:1b]; "You did not spit in my presence" [Gal. 4:14]; "You would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me" [Gal. 4:15]) and counters this charge with an evil-eye accusation of his own: "It is not I, but rather my opponents who have the evil eye." "It is they," he implies to his Galatian readers, "and not I who have injured your children with their malignant envy and have caused divisions within your community" (Gal. 4:17-18; 5:20, 26).⁶

This is no doubt why he was so upset, for soon after receiving the gospel of Christ, they were led astray by those envious of the attention paid to the gospel, and fell prey to the false assumptions of legalism. It is for this reason that Galatians is stylistically distinct compared with other Pauline epistles. This makes for an interesting look into the arrangement of its rhetoric.

II. Rhetoric & Content

The Bible does not specifically state where Paul acquired his skill in rhetoric. He was born in Tarsus, a known center for rhetorical training, but was educated under the Pharisee Gamaliel, as is noted in Acts 22:3. It is probable that he received his forensic training during his time as a Pharisee rather than after his conversion on the road to Damascus.⁷ The style of Galatians has been described as using a “rebuke-request” form and follows a mixture of forensic and deliberative rhetoric (starting in 4:12), meaning that Paul used persuasive tactics such as in a Jewish courtroom, as well as appealed to their hearts by asking them to model themselves after what they saw in him.⁸

Galatians for the most part follows the basic form of an ancient letter: Prescript – opening, sender, addressee, greeting, thanksgiving, or blessing prayer; Body – introductory formula, substance, eschatological conclusion, travelogue; Praenesis – ethical or practical remarks; Conclusion – closing greetings or instructions, mention of writing process, benediction.⁹

What sets Galatians apart from the other epistles attributed to Paul is as much what it leaves out as what it contains. The statement of thankfulness usually given in the beginning of his letters is conspicuously absent. It is unlikely that he forgot to include this standard portion the correspondence, someone as methodical as Paul would not have

made this slipup. Therefore, the letter was either hurried, written in anger, or both. One possible explanation could have been the newness of their faith, that they had not been Christian long enough to have done anything praiseworthy.¹⁰ However, it is more likely that he was greatly frustrated with their behavior and susceptibility to false teaching, and really was not thankful for them at this time.¹¹

Chart Layout of Galatians¹²

Focus	Defending the Gospel Minister		Defending the Gospel's Message		Demonstrating the Gospel's Might	
Divisions	Perverters' Renunciation	Paul's Apostleship	Law Cannot Set Free	Grace Sets Free	Peril to Freedom	Practice in Freedom
verses	1:1-10	1:11-2:21	3:1-4:20	4:21-4:31	5:1-5:12	5:13-6:18
Topics	Autobiography		Argument		Application	
	Authority, Not Opinion		Freedom, Not Bondage		Spirit, Not Flesh	
Place	<p style="text-align: center;">South Galatian Theory: Syrian Antioch North Galatian Theory: Ephesus or Macedonia</p>					
Time	<p style="text-align: center;">South Galatian Theory: A.D. 49 North Galatian Theory: A.D. 53-56</p>					

The above diagram was adapted from a daily devotional, because of its visual appeal. However, since there are varying schools of thought regarding the breakdown of Galatians, an additional scholarly outline has been listed below.

- Salutation (Gal 1:1-5)
- Rebuke (Gal 1:6-4:11)
 - Autobiography (Gal 1:13-2:21)
 - Argument from Scripture (3:6-29)
- Request (Gal 4:12-6:10)
 - Autobiography (Gal 4:12-20)
 - Allegory from Scripture (Gal 4:21-31)
 - Ethical instruction (Gal 5:1-6:10)
- Subscription (Gal 6:11-18)¹³

On the previous page, note the structure of the epistle. If one is familiar with Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML for short), it looks much like the layout of the format used to design a webpage. Without going into great detail, this requires an opening and a closing tag for each command to be balanced. In the case of Galatians, it contained within an opening salutation and closing subscription. Within, it has balance given by the rebuke/request, and matching sub-points of autobiography and scriptural allegory in each. There is of course, the ethical instruction that is unique, but this just goes to show how methodical Paul was in his rhetorical argument, nearly flawless. Now that the rhetorical aspect of the letter has been analyzed, the core themes and content will be discussed.

In verses 1:1-3 Paul opens the letter stating his name and position, in case of any doubt, then goes on to clarify the source from which he derives his authority. He makes no claims to fame based on any accomplishments of his own, or the clout of any other person, but on God and Jesus alone. He also presents the focus of his letter, that Christ alone sets people free from the evil sins of the present age. This will be central to his argument, that any attempt to supplement the redemptive work done through the crucifixion and resurrection is not only counter-productive, but carries with it a curse.

Paul wastes no time with trifle greetings, and in 1:6 directly states his astonishment that they have so quickly given up on the gospel. He appears to be in a state of utter disbelief that the redeeming work of Christ did not have more of a lasting impact on their lives. In verse 1:8 he tells the readers that even if an angel from heaven should proclaim a different gospel not to be dissuaded, and in fact pronounces a curse on any such messenger. Verses 1:11-2:21 contain a brief autobiography, which serves as a

proof of his authority, that he sought not the approval of the original apostles, but moved by the leading of divine right. In fact, he was so convinced of the truth of the gospel that he had the fortitude to rebuke Peter (who had been a disciple and apostle longer than himself) to his face, in the presence of witnesses (2:14).

In 2:7-8, Paul calls Peter by the name $\text{Pe}, \tau\rho\omicron\jmath$ (*Petros*), the name given to him by Jesus in Matthew 16:18. While this gospel had not yet been written, Paul had obviously heard of his name change, and probably identified with it, having his own changed from Saul to Paul. It is curious then, that elsewhere (in 1:18, 2:9-14) Paul refers to him by the name $\text{Kh}\acute{\epsilon}\alpha/\jmath$ (*Cephas*), the Aramaic equivalent. It is as if he is trying to make a special point when he refers to him in Greek. Paul may have been trying to contrast the trustworthiness of Peter with the unreliability of how the Greek-speaking Galatians handled the gospel. He then goes back to referring to him as Cephas during his recount of the rebuke, as if to emphasize his old Jewish habits. It is important to note here that Paul was calling Peter a hypocrite, not a heretic.¹⁴ It is not as if they were preaching a separate gospel.

Paul concedes the fact that he himself is guilty of transgressing the Jewish law, for after his conversion, he regularly kept table fellowship with Gentiles. He dismisses this however, saying that he had been justified by faith in Christ and not by works (2:17). He then poses a huge rhetorical question, if Christ is the one who causes him to break the old law, is Christ a servant of sin? While this question in the mind of a seasoned Christian hardly needed an answer, clearly the Galatians were not thought of as mature enough to deduce the answer on their own. Paul immediately follows up his question with the answer in verses 2:17-18. He explains that should he try to once again build up

a reputation for himself, or try to earn salvation, that is when he is the real transgressor. By doing so, Christ would have died for nothing (2:21).

As if his introduction was not weighty enough, he then moves into the heavier theological argument. It has been described as “Paul’s Theological Vindication of His Message.”¹⁵ Paul calls them foolish Galatians for being so easily hoodwinked and led astray. He then asks in 3:2 another unsettling rhetorical question, posing the query of where exactly they think their salvation comes from, and who do they think they are for relying on a different source. He seems almost sarcastic in saying he wants to learn from them where they get their salvation. If the opening of the letter pricked their hearts, this could be likened to twisting the knife. Paul of course, is not trying to inflict undue pain, but bring them to a point at which they are moved to repentance.

In verses 3:6-29, Paul makes a theological argument, based on references to Genesis 12:1-3, Deuteronomy 27:26 and Habakkuk 2:4.¹⁶ His premise is that salvation through faith is not a new concept, and that not even Abraham relied on the law for justification. In 3:6, he reminds them that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Thus, Paul severs the connection the Galatians were trying to draw between works of the law and Abraham, for the true descendants of Abraham are those that live by faith. Here again in 3:10, he reminds them of the curse they will incur, should they try to live under the law and fail to live up to it. He makes a reference to the seed of Abraham and emphasizes the fact that it was singular, not plural, meaning one person and not the entire human race. The Hebrew word he is referring to is זֶרַע (*zera'*), occurring 59 times in Genesis, and a total of 170 times in the Old Testament.¹⁷ In other

words, you are not saved because you are seeds of Abraham, but because you come to God through the one true Seed that is the Christ.

Based on this logic, all racial and gender arguments and barriers break down. If all humankind is at the same level of worthlessness without the redemptive power of Jesus Christ, then there is no basis for treating one another differently, especially if they are not Christian, for it is the Christian's duty to share the gospel with them. Paul drives this point home in verse 3:28. This verse is often quoted as some sort of benediction, even among the scripturally learned. Most recently at the time of this paper, it was used in chapel at Asbury Seminary on October 28, 2003. While this is not a great problem, it should be taken in context, and people need to realize that it was originally intended as a rebuke. This does not lessen its truthfulness; indeed all believers are equal in Christ.

Paul made another key analogy in 4:21-31, drawing parallels between Hagar and slavery as opposed to Sarah and freedom (Genesis 21:8-21). It could be argued that Hagar is symbolic of a legalistic way of doing things. Rather than wait for God to bring about the promise of an heir, Abraham took the advice of his wife, and fathered Ishmael through her servant Hagar. By trying to rely on heritage and works of the law, Paul is saying that the Galatians are in reality bastard offspring, and not eligible heirs. It is only through Isaac's seed, culminating in Jesus, that they can become true recipients of the promise.¹⁸ This argument of the whole slave vs. free mentality pervades throughout rest of the epistle. In verses 5:22-23, he lists the fruits of the Spirit that will be exhibited as evidence of their proper acceptance of the salvation gospel. This fruit, he said, has no legalistic law written against it.

III. Conclusion

In verses 6:11-18, Paul adds his final admonitions and this too is where this paper concludes. He reassures the readers that he has in fact written all these things with his own hand. He encourages the Galatians to be like him, not boasting in anything but Christ. He again reiterates that bodily circumcision is not what matters, for only faith by grace counts towards being new creation. He pronounces blessing on those that will follow his words, though as an example of his personal testimony, it is no easy task. He bore the marks of Jesus on his body. There is much to be learned from the lesson Paul taught the Galatians so long ago, for while the world has changed much, the human condition has not. While ancient peoples sought to identify themselves with a group in order to derive a sense of self-worth, the modern person living in a market-driven society seeks to stand apart from the crowd and establish themselves as self-important. Either extreme is dangerous, for it detracts from the relationship one can have with the Lord Jesus Christ. Oh that the believers today be as fervent in their prayers and dedication as the apostle Paul. “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen,” Galatians 6:18.

WORKS CITED NOTES
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- ⁷ Hawthorne, pp. 820-821.
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