

## GALATIANS 1-2

Galatians is an archetypal Pauline letter. Like many of Paul's letters it was written to deal with a specific problem in the church to which it was addressed. And it follows the standard format of Pauline (and other) New Testament letters, which is:

SALUTATION (1.1-5)

THEOLOGICAL SECTION dealing with the specific points of belief etc. that constitute the problem (1.6 – 5.12)

THEREFORE (implicit, around 5.13)

BEHAVIORAL SECTION, dealing with the behaviour which, for Paul, is expected to flow out as a natural consequence of what God has done (5.13 – end)

I won't spoil the story by putting down here exactly what the error of the Galatians was—suffice it to say that they had drifted into a kind of “alternative gospel”, to which Paul took strong exception. The contrast between Paul's “true” gospel and the “alternative” gospel should become clear as we go through.

Beyond this all we need to know as historical background is that Paul had first brought Christianity to the Galatians some years previously on , and this letter was written some years after that, though the exact dating is not clear.

We start . . .

### Question 1

The salutations that generally start Paul's letters are neither trite nor casual. Generally they encapsulate in a few words what the rest of the letter goes on to deal with. In this salutation there are at least two key phrases that look forwards to the rest of the letter. They are:

*. . . sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities . . .*

and

*. . . who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age . . .*

In what way may these two phrases be relevant to what Paul is going on to talk about?

### Question 2

In the rest of chapter 1 and the first part of chapter 2, Paul deviates from theology to give a potted version of the history of his own personal involvement with Christ, Christianity, and the church. This is a fascinating historical document that sheds huge light on the internal structure of the very early church (for which we have very little in the way of historical records)—but **why does Paul put it in here? What's the point he's trying to make? Does this relate back to anything in his salutation?**

### Question 3

Paul's historical narrative gradually veers into a personal attack on the leaders of the Jerusalem church—Peter, James and John, no less—whom he accuses of mind-boggling hypocrisy.

To appreciate the depth and cutting edge of Paul's sarcasm in his treatment of these three august figures, we really need to go back to the Greek of 2.6, where the actual phrase translated as 'of high reputation' used is *ton dokounton einai ti* meaning literally *those seeming(i.e. reputed) to be something*, where *something* is the magnificently disparaging word *ti*, meaning 'thing' or 'it'—the shortest, most inconsequential word Paul could think of to describe Jesus' three best friends, the three prime leaders of the Christian church!.

Twice more, again in 2.6 and then in 2.9, these three are described in similar terms of reputation—reputation only, but for Paul, no substance to back it up.

Paul in a public letter in a tone of extreme sarcasm accuses the three closest associates of Jesus Christ of crass hypocrisy. **What do we learn here about Paul's balance between the need for honesty and truthfulness, and the exigencies of church politics? Where would we stand if we felt that "those reputed to be something" in our own church were losing the plot. Would he speak out, or would he keep quiet?**

In a church environment where "Thou shalt not cause offence to others" sometimes takes precedence over "Thou shalt tell the truth", **do we have anything to learn from Paul's attitude?**

#### **Question 4**

Now we come to the crux of the letter. This is the key point, the point on which Paul thinks that Peter, James, and John (and Peter most particularly) have compromised:

*"that a person is justified not by works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ" (2.16)*

This is the central verse of the whole letter and we need to pause and let it sink in, appreciate the massive significance of it. Obviously the law he is talking about is the Jewish Law, which (apart from the Ten Commandments) most of us Westerners and Asians would probably not be thinking of following anyway. But the ten commandments are of course a part of the Jewish Law, that's where they come from; so we do have to ask the question: **Does this statement relate to the Ten Commandments as law, also?**

#### **Question 5**

As in Romans, whenever Paul mentions salvation as a free gift, it leads immediately to the implicit objection that if God is giving away salvation as a free gift, surely that is encouraging people to go out and sin. So here, the question immediately comes up in 2.17,

*But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin?*

Certainly not! Says Paul, but **why not? Paul's language is a bit ungainly here, but can you see what he's trying to say when he says,**

*But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor.*

Finally Paul goes on to say, really, *it's not so much about being in the law or out of the law, but about being elevated onto a whole new plane of existence* where, as we've seen before in the New Covenant, the spirit of God just flows through us and carries us along.

Then finally in 2.21 he returns to the central theme, saying in the strongest possible terms . . . **WHAT?**