

# Faith, Freedom & Equality - Understanding Galatians

## Key Themes in Galatians

### • Faith

We cannot reach God by our works, by leading a good life or through a priest, minister or sacrament. Our relationship with God is achieved through God's grace which is a free gift from God.

### • Freedom

We are not bound by tradition or laws, there is no requirement to attend or perform any specific ceremony or fulfil any particular law.

### • Equality

Everyone is equal before God. There is no spiritual hierarchy, no one is better than or has more access to God than anyone else.

## Introduction

Galatia was an area in what we now call central Turkey. Paul and Barnabas had travelled throughout this area and had set up new churches in several towns. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians around AD48, although the exact date is argued over by

scholars. Galatians is probably the earliest document in the New Testament and was written only fifteen years after Jesus's death. The letter was written "to the churches in Galatia".



Figure 1: The Roman province of Galatia

Because the book of Acts mentions Paul and Barnabas visiting several cities in southern Galatia (Acts 13-14) some scholars believe the letter was written to those cities. However the people living in southern Galatia would not have considered themselves Galatians, the people who were ethnically Galatian lived further north and, for that reason, some scholars believe Paul was writing to the ethnic Galatians further north.

## Conflict Arises

Early Christianity was not uniformly the same across the Roman empire. Christians from the Jerusalem church still maintained their Jewish customs and even worshipped in the synagogue. On the other hand Paul had set up churches in pagan areas with people who were not Jewish and Paul taught that, in God's New Kingdom, people were saved by God's grace and that did not depend on priests, ceremonies or traditions. What mattered was living by the spirit and that was accessible to everyone. A conflict developed when Christians from Jerusalem, who maintained their Jewish traditions, travelled to Galatia and tried to persuade the new converts in Galatia to adopt these traditions. One key disagreement was the Jewish Christians insistence that new male converts

were circumcised; something which Paul had never insisted on.

## Paul's Answer

In the first two chapters of Galatians Paul is reinforcing his right to confront the Galatians. The Jewish Christians had challenged what Paul

taught in Galatia and he felt he had to defend himself before he launched into his argument. Paul's letter is not an academic thesis but a

strongly worded letter to people he cared about and Paul uses very straight forward language at the start of chapter 3.

"You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

(Gal 3:1, NRSVUE)

Paul explains that now that Jesus has come we are all children of God and no longer need to follow the Jewish law and the Galatians are equal to the Jews from Jerusalem.

"For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith."

(Gal 3:26 NRSVUE)

The Jews had always believed that they were especially chosen by God. Paul argues that in the New Kingdom the spirit of God is available to everyone and God makes no distinction on race, status or sex but all are equal before God.

"There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

(Gal 3:28, NRSVUE)

In chapter 5 Paul focuses on the nature of their new found freedom in Christ. Paul says if the Galatians let themselves be circumcised then Christ will be of no benefit to them. But if we look back in Acts chapter 16 we see an incident where Paul had Timothy circumcised, is Paul being inconsistent? Timothy was of mixed Jewish and Greek parentage and, although brought up Jewish, he was never circumcised. Paul considered Timothy to be Jewish and therefore it would have been culturally normal for Timothy to be circumcised. Paul and Timothy were also embarking on a mission to a largely Jewish population and having Timothy circumcised avoided awkward and distracting questions. Paul was sensitive to local cultural traditions but neither Paul nor Timothy attached any spiritual weight to them. The Galatians

where not culturally Jewish and therefore there was no reason for circumcision. Later in chapter six Paul states this more clearly.

"For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything!"

(Gal 6:15, NRSVUE)

Paul's argument to the Galatians is that you cannot buy or earn God's grace and if you think you can you are deluding yourself and have fundamentally misinterpreted the gospel. God's grace is a free gift and cannot be bought and you cannot ingratiate yourself with God by your actions. So if we are free in Christ does that give us licence to do whatever we wish? Paul tackles this at the end of chapter 5.

13. "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another.

14. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"

(Gal 5:13-14, NRSVUE)

Paul's argument is that if we are living a spirit filled life the spirit of God will show itself in our lives by what he describes as "the fruit of the spirit". A spirit filled life naturally exhibits the fruits of the spirit. The spirit comes first and the fruits should follow.

22. "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

23. gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things."

(Gal 5:22-23, NRSVUE)

In Chapter 6 Paul encourages the Galatians to support each other in a spirit of gentleness. Paul makes one final clear statement in Galatians 6:15, as quoted above, to reinforce his message; outward show means nothing to God.

## **Galatians and Quaker beliefs**

Galatians is a small book, just six chapters, but in those pages Paul covers the key points that: everyone is equal before God, God's grace is a free gift and we are not bound by traditions, laws or ceremonies. Early Quakers looked at the church and found a priestly hierarchy, sacraments and discrimination based on class, sex and ethnicity. Early Quakers rejected church teachings not in line with their spiritual leading. They emphasised that we are all equal before God, and that God's spirit resides in all of us. They were in a similar situation to that the apostle Paul found himself in 1500 years earlier. They were in good company.