

New Creation | Galatians | October 15, 2017

This short letter reveals the conflict between differing ethnic groups becoming Christ followers and how difficult it was entering into a new social group with cultural baggage from one's upbringing as either Jewish Christian or Gentile Christian. The notes begin with an overview of region of Galatia and the letter of Galatians; the second grouping of authors gives us a glimpse of what Jewish life was like before 70 A.D.; the last section provides guidance on how we live out this new creation in community even when we individually come from diverse backgrounds.

Galatia

Eerdmans, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 2000

A region in north central Asia Minor (modern Turkey) named after Gallic/Celtic invaders... In 25 BCE the region became a Roman province, which gradually extended south, almost to the Mediterranean Sea. Such cities as Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch were now a part of Galatia.

Galatians has played a central role in Christian theology because it provides one of the NT's most explicit teachings on justification by faith [I would add, *The Christian Core*]. This teaching, however, is Paul's response to a serious crisis in the churches of Galatia rather than a systematic or doctrinal presentation of justification.

There is no unanimity among scholars as to the identity of the Galatians or the dating of this letter. Some argue that Paul was writing to the congregations of Antioch in Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (in the Roman province of Galatia), which he established on his first missionary journey according to Acts 13-14. Others maintain that he was writing to the ethnic Galatians of Ancyra, Tavium, and Pessinus (in the old territory of Galatia), which Paul supposedly evangelized on his second and third missionary journeys (cf. Acts 16:6; 18:23). The first theory is called the South Galatian hypothesis and dates the letter ca. 49-50 C.E., making it the earliest of Paul's extant correspondence. The second is called the North Galatian hypothesis and dates the letter in the mid-50's, a period when Paul found himself in conflict with some elements of the Corinthian church. 476

NOTE: The following references are given to help us paint a picture of Jewish life before 70 A.D. The synagogue during the period when our letters were written had not taken on the role of "Holy Place" for the Jewish and God-fearers in the Diaspora throughout the Mediterranean basin. It was a place to gather, pray and study scripture. There existed a strong ethos not to compete with the Temple in Jerusalem. After 70 A.D. that all changed.

Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, (Yale University Press, 2000).

As was the case with the Second Temple Judaeen synagogue, the New Testament has preserved invaluable material relating to the Diaspora synagogue [Jews who had dispersed throughout the

Mediterranean basin]. The account in Acts of Paul's journeys attests to the density of Jewish settlement and the subsequent development of Christianity throughout the eastern Mediterranean in general. In all, Acts mentions the synagogue nineteen times, almost always referring to the institution as "synagogue". Acts informs us of synagogues in Antioch of Pisidia (13:14) and Iconium (13:14), both in the region of Galatia. 108

While most cities appear to have had one synagogue, the plural "synagogues" is used on several occasions, probably reflecting a large local Jewish population that required more than one building. The only synagogue official specifically named in these accounts is the *archisynagogos*. In one instance, this official invited Paul to speak to the congregation in Antioch of Pisidia following the reading of the Torah and Prophets; clearly the position entailed a degree of responsibility and authority. 109

Acts singles out gentiles, both men and women, as also having frequented Diaspora synagogues [Acts 14:1-2]. The attraction of many pagans to Judaism in antiquity is well documented... What is to be noted is the central role played by the synagogue. Acts (13:15) offers us a fleeting glimpse at the Sabbath-morning liturgy in the Antioch of Pisidia synagogue. Four elements are featured in this schema: a selection from the Torah is recited; then a selection from the Prophets is read; the *archisynagogue* invites Paul to speak; Paul addresses the congregation. This order generally parallels Luke's earlier description of the synagogue service at Nazareth [Luke 4:16-21]. Perhaps the remarkable fact in this account is the receptivity of the local community to the participation of outsiders. Paul's appearance in Antioch was unannounced; he was, for all intents and purposes, a stranger. Nevertheless, he was asked to address the congregation. How widespread this custom was is impossible to assess, although we may note that something similar happened at Ephesus... Once again, the synagogue served as an open forum for Jews of different backgrounds and persuasions. 110-111

Not only was the synagogue central to internal Jewish communal life, but it attracted non-Jews as well. Church fathers repeatedly warn their flocks to distance themselves from Jews and Judaism. Ignatius [35-108 AD] so remonstrates with church members in Philadelphia (Asia Minor)... Origen [185-254 AD] cautions Christians not to discuss on Sunday matters they had heard raised the previous day in the synagogue or to partake of meals in both church and synagogue... Two dramatic instances of this attraction to Judaism in late antiquity are attested in Aphrodisias and Antioch. The monumental inscription found on a marble block in the former city records the names of Jews, proselytes, and gentile God-fearers who contributed to a memorial erected by their association in the early third century. The memorial was presumably a building that was used as a (literally dish), perhaps at a soup kitchen "for relief of suffering in the community." On one side of the stone the Jewish members of the association are listed, while on the other, following a break in the text, are the names of a few proselytes and fifty-four *theosebeis*, or gentile God-fearers. Thus, we have here conclusive proof of a group of gentile God-fearers, of high rank and significant number, who were publicly and actively associated with the local Jewish community. 272-273

Steven Fine, ***This Holy Place, On the Sanctity of the Synagogue during the Greco-Roman Period***, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

The origins of the synagogue, steeped in mystery as they are, will probably never be known. This is no doubt because this institution began as a “still, small voice,” appearing in a form that we can recognize only during the last century of the Temple’s existence... Both the sanctity of Scripture and Temple imagery were central to the Tannaim after 70 C.E., for whom a conception that holiness was movable was essential if they were to weather the Temple’s destruction. 32-33

The synagogue in the Land of Israel became the primary institutional locus for the Rabbinic revitalization of Judaism after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. Throughout its development Rabbinic sources show a tension between the mobility of the synagogue and the desire to root the synagogue in a more permanent manner. The conception that synagogues were “holy” was the ideological underpinning for this process, providing the essential rubric for the conceptual development of this institution throughout the Greco-Roman world. For the Rabbinic Sages [2nd – 4th centuries] the synagogue became the sacred institution of “the time of sand” the time between the Temple’s destruction and its ultimate messianic reconstruction [which has not yet occurred from their perspective]. The synagogue was so successful that it itself was projected into sacred time. 159

Michael White, ***The Social Origins of Christian Architecture, Volume II***, (Trinity Press International, 1997).

The Synagogue in Dura-Europos, Syria [2nd and 3rd century]. The first synagogue was constructed by renovating one of the private houses in the middle of block L7 of the city, on the Wall Street side (west) of the block... On the west wall of room 2 there was found what is almost certainly to be understood as a Torah Shrine of some sort. Its precise pattern of use remains unclear, since it is too small to have accommodated the entire scriptures, and even the entire Torah might have been too large... It must be remembered, that any Torah Shrine posited for the first synagogue at Dura would make it the earliest known from archaeological evidence, whether in the Homeland or from the Diaspora. There are indications from the later period at Dura that the scrolls were kept in a portable wooden chest that could have been carried into the assembly and set in the Torah niche, ready for use in the service. This wooden chest would have been considered the “holy ark”, not the niche itself. The niche, at least by the time of the construction of the later synagogue (244 AD), was actually called the “house of the ark”. 277-278

Gordon Fee, ***God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul***, (Hendrickson Pub., 1994)

Since the time of the Reformers, Galatians has been perceived primarily as the place where Paul contests most vigorously for his central doctrine of justification by faith, that is, that people are saved by faith in Christ not by works of the Law. While there is a profound sense in which this is a central concern for Paul, more likely at stake in this letter is the inclusion of Gentiles as full and equal members of the people of God. At issue is whether Gentiles who have believed in Christ must also accept the “identity markers” of Jewishness [especially circumcision (3:3; 5:2-3, 11-12; 6:12), observance of the Jewish calendar (4:10-11), and probably food laws, given their significance as “identity markers” in the Diaspora

and the way Paul weaves them into the argument in the crucial narrative of 2:11-14] in order to be genuine “children of Abraham,” and thereby receive the promises of God’s covenant with Abraham as expressed in Gen 12:3 and 18:18. At the same time, because of the emphasis by the Reformers on the language of “justification” [used 8 times in the letter] and “by faith,” there has been a tendency to neglect the equally important matter of the life in the Spirit, which is the central focus of so much of the argument in this letter [used over 17 times]... The argument is not basically along *positional* lines, that one has right standing with God (“is justified”) by faith alone; rather, it is especially along *experiential* lines, that by faith one has received the Spirit, and that the Spirit and Torah observance (= “works of law”) are absolutely incompatible. 368-369

What emerges in this letter is the absolutely crucial role the Spirit plays in Paul’s understanding of Christian existence. The key element of Christian conversion is the Spirit, dynamically experienced (3:2-5; 4:6), as the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham (3:14). Indeed, the Christian experience of the Spirit sets the believer off from all other existences... Thus the person who walks, lives, is led by the Spirit is not under Law; indeed, the Spirit produces the very fruit which the Law aimed at but could not produce. At the same time the one who walks, lives, is led by the Spirit will not do as the flesh desires. 370

But for Paul all is not automatic. One must sow to the Spirit (6:8) and be led by the Spirit (5:18); indeed, “if we live [= have been brought to life after the crucifixion of the flesh, vr. 24] by the Spirit,” we must therefore also “accordingly behave by the Spirit” (vr. 25). Thus the Spirit not only stands at the beginning of Christian existence, but is the key ingredient to Paul’s understanding of the whole of that existence. Accordingly, the final argument (5:13-6:10) becomes one of the most significant in the corpus for our understanding of Pauline ethics as Spirit-empowered Christ-likeness lived out in Christian community as loving servanthood. 370