

Galatians: A Study Guide

(Part 1)

by Bryan Gibson

Galatians is addressed “to the churches of Galatia” (1:1), local churches established during Paul’s first preaching journey (Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and possibly others which may have been planted later—see Acts 13-14). Galatia was a Roman province, which included the regions of Lycaonia, Pisidia, and a portion of Phrygia. Paul did pass back through Galatia at the beginning of both his second and third journeys (Acts 16:1-6; 18:23).

Between Paul’s first and second journeys, a significant event took place, which certainly has some bearing on this epistle. Certain men came from Judea to Antioch of Syria and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). After “no small dissension and dispute with them,” Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the apostles and elders (Acts 15:2). While in Jerusalem “some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). A discussion ensued, and guided by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), they concluded that Gentiles do NOT have to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved. Decrees were written to this effect, and distributed to various churches, **including the churches of Galatia** (Acts 16:4-6). Exactly when Galatians was written, relative to these events, is difficult to determine, but one thing is certain: when Paul did write this was still a major issue among the churches of Galatia (5:1-4; 6:12-13).

Again, the precise time of writing is a big question mark, but IF the trip to Jerusalem described in Galatians 2 is the same as the one described in Acts 15, we can at least narrow the range. It would then be **after** the events of Acts 15 and **before** Paul made the decision to collect aid from the predominately Gentile churches to take to the saints in Judea (A.D. 52-54). Not a word is said about this effort in this epistle, although the churches of Galatia did participate in this collection of funds (1 Corinthians 16:1; Acts 20:4). Now, if the trip to Jerusalem described in Galatians 2 is the one we read about in Acts 11:29-30, this epistle could have been written earlier. Some question marks for sure, but what we do know for certain is that it was written “soon” after their conversion to Christ. “I marvel that you are turning away so soon

from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6). It doesn’t take long for false teachers to have their way.

Something normally seen in Paul’s epistles is conspicuously absent from this one, which is thanksgiving for the brethren. The love they once had for Paul was quickly turning to enmity (4:11-16). At first they “received [him] as an angel, even as Christ Jesus” (4:14), but now they had doubts about his apostleship and the source of his gospel. False teachers were “zealously court[ing]” them (4:17), and they were being enticed! These same troublemakers (1:7; 5:10, 12) had “bewitched” them (3:1), “hindered [them] from obeying the truth” (5:7), and as a result were turning them away from the true gospel (1:6-9). You must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses—that was the tune they were playing, and they had a captive audience. Paul wasn’t ready to give up hope (4:19; 5:10), but he did have serious doubts about these brethren (4:20), so serious in fact that he was afraid his labor for them might be in vain (4:11).