

INVITATION TO GALATIANS

It's difficult to know exactly when and where Paul wrote his letter to the churches in Galatia. He doesn't say where he's writing from, as he does in his letters to Thessalonica and Corinth. And while he says he's writing on behalf of all the brothers and sisters with me, he doesn't say who these brothers and sisters are. Many interpreters believe that Galatians may actually be the earliest of Paul's letters. However, its themes and language are so close to the letter he sent to the church in Rome that it's quite probable Galatians was written about the same time as Romans. This would mean he wrote it from Corinth around AD 56 or 57, while arranging for the collection to be sent to the poor in Judea. When Paul tells the Galatians he's been eager to remember the poor, and that they should do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers, he may be referring to this collection. Galatia was a Roman province in central Asia Minor. The book of Acts reports that Paul traveled through this province on each of the three journeys he made to spread the good news about Jesus. On one of these occasions he needed to stop and recuperate from an illness and he met the people he later sent this letter to. (As he reminds them, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.) The Galatians received Paul warmly and cared for him, and through his message they came to believe in Jesus. But some people Paul calls agitators later came to Galatia and made some unsettling claims. Paul consistently taught that Gentiles (non-Jews) didn't have to keep the Jewish law in order to be Jesus-followers. But these agitators insisted that the apostles in Jerusalem taught just the opposite, that Gentiles who believed in Jesus had to be circumcised, keep kosher, and observe the Sabbath and annual Jewish festivals. The agitators also claimed that Paul

insisted on these things elsewhere, and that he'd only relaxed these requirements for the Galatians to get on their good side. In response to these claims, the Galatians had already begun observing special days and months and seasons and years, and they were considering being circumcised, too. So in his letter Paul first has to answer these charges against himself. He then has to correct the idea that certain Jewish practices have to be added to what they already have. He reaffirms the core message that faith in the Messiah is the basis of membership in God's new community. Paul could defend himself by appealing to the apostles in Jerusalem, since their message is actually the same as his. But he doesn't. Instead, he insists that the gospel I preached was received directly by revelation from Jesus Christ. Paul explains that he really had very little contact with the apostles for the first part of his ministry. But when he finally did visit them to make sure his message wouldn't be contested everywhere he went, they affirmed his teaching and welcomed him as their partner. But even after that, Paul wasn't dependent on their endorsement. Once he publicly rebuked Cephas (Peter), one of the leading apostles, for backing away from their shared message. After addressing the charges against himself, Paul proceeds to his main argument, which is that Gentiles who become followers of Jesus don't need to be circumcised or keep other key provisions of the law. He begins by asking the Galatians about their own experience. He points out that God sent them the Holy Spirit before they were even considering Jewish religious observances. Paul then makes two different appeals to the story of Abraham in the Scriptures. First he notes that Abraham, the source of spiritual blessings for both Jews and Gentiles, believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. This was 430 years before the law was given to Moses. God promised Abraham that all nations, meaning Gentiles like the Galatians, would be blessed

through him. The implications are that those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. The new worldwide family which had been promised to Abraham is created by faith in Messiah Jesus, not by keeping the law. The biblical drama had been pointing to this all along. Paul explains that he's making his second appeal figuratively, using characters and events in Abraham's story to represent spiritual realities. He observes that Abraham had two sons, but only one was to share in the inheritance. This was Isaac, the son born in freedom, who symbolizes being justified by faith. Ishmael, the other son, was born into slavery and represents trying to be justified by the law. If you really want to be included in the blessings that God promised to Abraham and his descendants, Paul tells the Galatians, stand firm in faith and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery, the law. In the midst of these arguments, Paul breaks off twice to appeal directly to the Galatians on the basis of his relationship with them (I plead with you, brothers and sisters ...you were running a good race). He's writing to people who once took care of him when he was ill. He cares about them deeply, and it grieves him to send them such a strongly-worded letter of correction. Once he's established that Gentile believers don't need to be circumcised or follow the Jewish law, Paul has to address one more concern. If people don't have the law to restrain them, what's to keep them from running wild? He explains that the Holy Spirit lives inside the believers, giving them the power and the desire to live as God wishes. Instead of external restraint, there will be inner transformation. Paul concludes his main argument by describing what this transformation should look like. He describes the character qualities that make up the fruit of the Spirit and how these qualities should be lived out in the community of Jesus-followers. Paul ends this letter, like some of his others, with a greeting in his own handwriting. This gives him the

opportunity to repeat his main theme: Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.

