

# **Galatians**

## **The Magna Carta of Christian Liberty**

*Galatians 1:1-2*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

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## Scripture

Major Scott Stanger, of Benton, AK, wrote an email to his wife Ronda from Baghdad on January 30, the day of the election in Iraq. Major Stanger describes his day, which included mobs of Iraqis thanking him and the other American soldiers for enabling them to vote. This is a part of Major Stanger's letter:

The Iraqis' statements to us were all the same: "Thank you for your sacrifices for the Iraqi people. . . . Thank you for making this day possible. . . . The United States is the true democracy in the world and is the country that makes freedom possible. . . . God blessed the Iraqi people and the United States this day. . . . We have never known a day like this under Saddam. . . . This day is like a great feast, a wonderful holiday. . . ."

There is something in the human heart that yearns for freedom. We want to be free from those shackles that bind us. Whether those shackles are political, physical, mental, economical, emotional or spiritual, we long to live in freedom.

Some 2,000 years ago the apostle Paul wrote a letter addressing this very issue. We call it Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Today, we are going to embark on a study of this important letter. We will spend the next few months examining the spiritual freedom that the apostle Paul discovered and shared with his readers.

Let us now read Galatians 1:1-2:

**<sup>1</sup> Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—<sup>2</sup> and all the brothers with me,  
To the churches in Galatia: (Galatians 1:1-2)**

## Introduction

For the Christian, Paul's letter to the Galatians ranks as one of the most significant works of literature ever produced.

Paul's letter to the Galatians has been called by many *The Magna Carta of Christian Liberty*. Galatians shouts to believers in Jesus Christ, "You're free! You're free! You're free from the bondage of the law. You're free from tyranny of trying to earn God's favor. You're free by grace through faith in Christ alone. You're free to live a life of unshackled joy based on grace and not on works."

Perhaps no piece of literature in the history of Western civilization has been as profoundly influential as Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Many Church historians claim (rightly, I believe) that Martin Luther's commentary on Galatians was the foundation for the Reformation. Luther loved Galatians, and said of it, "The letter to the Galatians is my letter. To it I am, as it were, in wedlock. Galatians is my Katie von Bora [the name of his wife]." In Luther's hands Galatians become a mighty weapon in the Reformation arsenal.

The letter to the Galatians has had a great practical effect on our lives. You may not be aware, for example, that the reason bacon and ham are eaten today is because of the truths found in the letter to the Galatians. Before the time of our Lord's crucifixion, God's people were not allowed to eat pork (cf. Leviticus 11:7-8).

Because of Galatians, clothing woven of two kinds of material can be worn. In the Old Testament, all the clothing had to be of one kind of material, wool *or* linen, for example, not wool *and* linen (cf. Leviticus 19:19).

Because of Galatians, any pot or pan in the kitchen may be used for cooking. The Law of Moses demanded that one set of pans be used for meat and another set of pans be used for cooking anything in milk (cf. Exodus 23:19).

It is because of the truths in the letter to the Galatians that we have been set free from following Jewish customs (cf. 2:14).

The message of Galatians is the message of freedom—the spiritual freedom believers have in Jesus Christ. It is the message of deliverance by Jesus Christ from the bondage of sin and religious legalism.

If you are struggling with sin, if you are struggling with religious legalism, if you lack power to resist sin, if you feel condemned and guilty, if you don't feel forgiven, then I have good news for you! Galatians is for you! You can have freedom. You can experience it daily—wherever you live and whatever your circumstances. How? You can have freedom by applying the truths in the living letter to the Galatians to your life.

I invite you to join me on a journey from bondage to freedom in our study of Galatians. As Chuck Swindoll says, “You have nothing to lose except the shackles that tie you down.”

## Lesson

Today I would like to give you an overview of Paul's letter to the Galatians, *The Magna Carta of Christian Liberty*. In the coming weeks we shall examine the letter more closely in order to glean as many jewels from it as we can.

### I. The Historical Setting of the Letter

First, observe the historical setting of the letter.

For some time after Pentecost the Church was largely still a Jewish institution. After a while, God sent a persecution to Jerusalem, “and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. . . . Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:1, 4). In time the gospel penetrated and began to take root in non-Jewish (i.e. Gentile) communities.

After his conversion, described in Acts 9, the apostle Paul eventually found himself preaching and teaching in the town of Antioch (in Syria). In Acts 13 and 14, we learn that it was from there that he and Barnabas set out on the first missionary journey.

Traveling via Cyprus they sailed to Perga (in Pamphylia). From Perga they went on to Antioch (in Pisidia), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, where Paul preached in each of those towns.

Paul preached that salvation is a free gift given by God to sinners who put their faith in Jesus Christ. This gift of salvation is never achieved by any amount of conformity to rules and regulations, even God-given regulations. Paul's gospel was well received. These former pagans (4:8) believed Paul's gospel (3:1), were baptized (3:27), and received the Holy Spirit, who began working miracles among them (3:5). After some time, churches were established, and Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church in Syrian Antioch.

While Paul was in Syrian Antioch, some Jewish believers from Jerusalem traveled to the churches Paul had established. They said that Paul was wrong in his understanding of the gospel and that they had come to give the Galatians the full gospel (1:7). They began teaching that the Gentiles had to conform to the Law of Moses. And they also taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised. Apparently the Galatians believed the false teachers (also known as Judaizers) and were departing from the gospel that Paul had preached to them (1:6).

When Paul learned what was happening in the Galatian churches, he was deeply troubled. The deeply personal letter he wrote to the Galatian churches came from the grieving heart of a godly church planting missionary whose spiritual children were buying into the error and lies of the Judaizers, who were undermining his authority and message.

## II. The Recipients of the Letter

Second, let's note the recipients of the letter.

Paul wrote this letter **to the churches in Galatia** (1:2). As I said, Paul established churches in Antioch (in Pisidia), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Most commentators today believe that these churches were the recipients of Paul's letter.

The name Galatia is derived from the Gauls, who had invaded Macedonia and later Asia Minor in the third century BC in order to settle there. In popular speech, these Gauls were known as Gallo-Graecians, from which the name Galatians comes. The Galatians' territory consisted of an area about 250 miles north to south and up to 175 miles east to west in what is known today as central Turkey.

### **III. The Date of the Letter**

Third, let's explore the date of the letter.

Although the date when the letter to the Galatians was written cannot be established with certainty, it is most likely that Paul wrote the letter shortly before the Jerusalem council (recorded in Acts 15). The reason I say this is because Paul makes no mention of the Jerusalem council in his letter to the Galatians.

You may remember that the Jerusalem council was convened in order to deal with this very problem that was plaguing the churches in Galatia and, indeed, in other places as well. "Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.' This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15:1-2). The issue was settled at the council and the Gentile believers were not required to be circumcised nor to obey the Law of Moses (Acts 15:23-29).

If Paul had written the letter to the Galatians after the Jerusalem council (which took place in about 49 AD), he most likely would have mentioned the decision reached by the council. Since he does not mention it, I take that to mean that the letter to the Galatians was written in about 48 AD, shortly before the Jerusalem council convened.

#### **IV. The Place of Writing of the Letter**

Fourth, notice the place of the writing of the letter.

Paul was sent from Antioch in Syria to attend the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:2). Therefore, I believe that he wrote the letter to the Galatians while in Antioch.

#### **V. The Author of the Letter**

Fifth, observe the author of the letter.

**Paul** identifies himself as the author of the letter in verse 1, where he writes, “**Paul, an apostle.**”

A few scholars, beginning in the eighteenth century, considered the letter pseudonymous (i.e., written by someone else, using Paul’s name), but their arguments are now curiosities of biblical scholarship.

There is no mentionable dispute today about **Paul** being the author of the letter to the Galatians.

#### **VI. The Contents of the Letter**

Sixth, let’s note now the contents of the letter.

Paul wrote the letter to the Galatians in order to defend the true gospel of freedom based on grace against the counterfeit gospel of the Judaizers based on works. The Judaizers were attacking the good news of freedom. Paul would not stand for such an attack on the gospel of freedom, and so he wrote this letter. This purpose permeates every sentence of the letter.

It is clear that Paul had heard of three charges made by the Jewish false brothers, the Judaizers. This letter is a vigorous response to each of these three charges.

##### *A. The Personal Argument (1, 2)*

The first charge against the apostle Paul is a personal one.

The Judaizers charged that Paul was not a true apostle. They said that Paul had not been one of the Twelve and had not lived with Jesus when he was alive. He was merely an evangelist who taught an easy believism in order to please men and win their approval and was opposed to the apostolic model (1:10). Since Paul was not a true apostle, they asserted, the gospel he preached had not been revealed by God.

Paul responded to their charge (in chapters 1 and 2) by telling the story of his life, particularly as it related to the other apostles. He noted that his apostolic commission is “**not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead**” (1:1). Later in the letter he also said that the gospel he preached did not come to him from man, nor was he taught it, but rather, he received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (1:12).

*B. The Doctrinal Argument (3, 4)*

The second charge against Paul is that his gospel was not the true gospel.

Obviously, this charge is closely tied to the first charge, for since Paul was a false apostle, in their minds, he could not be teaching a true gospel. Paul, they said, set aside the Law of Moses. This could not be done because even Jesus obeyed the law. The disciples obeyed the law. The Twelve apostles obeyed the law. Who was Paul to set aside the requirements of the law?

Paul answers this charge (in chapters 3 and 4) by showing the true purpose of the law. He shows that the law was designed to lead us to Christ so that we might be justified by faith (3:24). The law of God was designed to show us our sin and point us to the One who gave himself for our sins (1:4).

*C. The Practical Argument (5, 6)*

The third charge against Paul is that the gospel he preached led to loose living.



By stressing the law, Judaism stressed morality. By taking away the law, they said, Paul was inviting believers to lawlessness, immorality, and licentiousness.

Paul responded to these charges in chapters 5 and 6. He says that this is not true. The gospel does not lead believers away from the law into nothingness. The law leads a person to faith in Christ, who then, in the person of the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the believer and gives him a new nature which alone enables him to live in a way that pleases God. The change is internal. The Holy Spirit from within produces the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (5:22-23). In fact, Paul argues, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires (5:24). Life in the Spirit is free from and above the kind of religion that would result in either legalism or license. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free (5:1)—a freedom to serve God fully, unencumbered by the shackles of sin.

## **VII. The Lessons of the Letter**

Finally, let's note some of the lessons of the letter.

Galatians is doctrinally powerful and practically challenging. We must not leave this overview without a look at how to internalize some of its truths. Chuck Swindoll gives us a few suggestions:

### *A. The Gospel Is Worth a Vigorous Defense*

First, the gospel is worth a vigorous defense.

Like Paul, we need to uphold the true gospel. We need to answer as clearly as we can when objections are brought against the gospel. We need to stand against all false gospels.

Our failure to defend vigorously the gospel is one reason why we have seen such a major explosion of cults in our day. It's estimated that more than twenty million people belong to cults in the United States alone.

I urge you to defend the gospel of Jesus Christ. Don't let people say things about the gospel that are not true and let them get away with it. You need to proclaim and defend the gospel with clarity and conviction. Your study in Galatians will greatly help you in this task.

*B. No One Is Immune to the Temptation to Desert the Gospel*

Second, no one is immune to the temptation to desert the gospel.

Paul said to the Galatians, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (1:6, 7). It is vitally important to note that Paul wrote this letter to *Christians!* He did not write it to non-Christians.

Throughout history, Christians have been lured away from the faith by false teachers. It is no different today. You may even know someone who at one time professed faith in Christ but now no longer does so. I have a brother who taught me the gospel, and who today spurns it.

Don't look down on those who have fallen away. Pray for them. And remember that you and I are sinners and, except for the grace of God, we could be in the same place as those who have fallen away.

The medicine to counter the malady of believing a false gospel is a daily dose of the Word of God. Read, study, meditate, and apply God's Word to your life, and you will be able to fight off false doctrines with "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Ephesians 6:17).

*C. The Gospel Is an Invitation to Embrace Grace*

Third, the gospel is an invitation to embrace grace.

No-one can save himself. From the moment of conception, a person is alienated from God by sin, lacking all ability to change

his condition through his own efforts (Ephesians 2:3). By trusting in Jesus Christ alone, believing that his death and resurrection provide the only basis for total forgiveness, a person can be justified before God. Justification is the sovereign act of God whereby he declares a sinner “not guilty,” and pardons him of all his sin. Jesus Christ paid the penalty for sin and his righteousness is credited to the account of the guilty sinner. The amazing thing about this grace is that only God can provide it.

Have you come to know the amazing grace of God? The gospel is an invitation to embrace the grace of God. Ask God to extend his grace to you.

#### *D. The Gospel Is a Call to Holy Living*

And finally, the gospel is a call to holy living.

The gospel is not a set of rules. Neither is the gospel license to sin. The gospel is a message of freedom and it calls us to holy living.

A true understanding of the good news of freedom will lead to a life of serving one another in love. Paul said, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (5:13). A holy life is utterly devoted to serving Christ and others in love.

### **Conclusion**

As I close, let me invite you to make a personal commitment to study Paul’s letter to the Galatians. I am convinced that a proper understanding of the message of Galatians will revolutionize your life and mine, just as it did Luther’s some five hundred years ago. Make a commitment to read the letter through every day for one month. It doesn’t take long to read. I’m sure you could find the time if you really wanted to. Read the letter in different translations so that you can keep your reading fresh. And as you read, ask God to open up the message of Galatians to you. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)