

BACKGROUND FOR GALATIANS:

The Problem in Galatia: The New Testament has been called “a bad-tempered book” given the amount of space it devotes to explicit attacks and polemical arguments against various opponents who were subverters of the gospel. To sense the force of this statement one has only to think of Peter’s likening of certain apostates to dogs who turned back to their own vomit (2 Peter 2:22) or of Jude’s designation of false pastors as clouds without rain, trees without fruit, and “wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame” (Jude 12–13). Nor are such remarks confined to the latter books of the New Testament when the Christian church was engaged in a fight for its very life. No, they are equally present in the Gospels themselves. Witness John the Baptist’s blast against “the brood of vipers” or even Jesus’ pronouncements of woe against the Pharisees in Matt 23.

Still, perhaps no one in the New Testament was more belligerent in his denunciation of opponents than the apostle Paul. And nowhere was he more “bad tempered” than in Galatians. We will have to take up this theme again in the commentary proper, but it is well to note from the outset that from the standpoint of Pauline theology, polemics cannot be divorced from dogmatics. What was at stake was not merely the outbursts of an ill-tempered preacher but rather the truth of the gospel itself. [George, T. (1994). *Galatians* (Vol. 30, p. 50). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.]

Date of Galatians: When and from where in the course of his apostolic career did Paul write his Letter to the Galatians? It

has been said that “the date of Galatians is one of the most knotty problems in Pauline studies.” [Ibid.]

In the meantime Paul had received word that these false brothers or their emissaries had spread this perverted gospel among the newly planted churches of Galatia. Unable to visit these founding congregations in person, he wrote the Letter to the Galatians as a way of restoring order and reestablishing the doctrinal integrity of his dear children in Christ. Thus it is likely that Galatians was written from Antioch on the eve of the Council of Jerusalem, which **usually is dated around A.D. 49–50.** One scholar has suggested that Galatians might even have been written while Paul was en route from Antioch to Jerusalem or perhaps even from Jerusalem itself “in the whirl of discussion that seems envisaged in Acts 15:7 before the actual Council itself.” [Ibid.]

Date of Galatians: In the course of the thirty years or so which elapsed between his conversion outside Damascus and his imprisonment in Rome, the apostle Paul traveled widely through the Empire as an ambassador of Jesus Christ. On his three famous missionary journeys he preached the gospel and planted churches in the provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia (Northern Greece) and Achaia (Southern Greece). Moreover, his visits were followed by his letters, by which he helped to supervise the churches he had founded.

One of these letters, which many believe to be the earliest that he wrote (about AD 48 or 49), is the Epistle to the Galatians. [Stott, J. R. W. (1986). *The message of Galatians:*

A RELEVANT TIME LINE: (These dates though approximate are acceptable within the realm of conservative scholarship.)

1. Death, resurrection of Christ (A.D. 30-33).
2. Paul’s conversion (33-36).
3. Paul’s first missionary journey (46-47).
4. Paul writes letter to the Galatians (48-50).
5. Paul’s second missionary journey (48-51).
6. Paul’s third missionary journey (52-57).
7. Paul martyred in Rome (64-67).

Only one way (p. 11). Leicester, England; Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.]

Name and region: The name Galatia is derived from the barbaric Gauls, or Celts, who settled in Asia Minor after several centuries of plundering the Greek and Roman empires. Under Roman rule, the original region of Galatia was made part of a larger province by the same name in central Asia Minor (modern Turkey) that encompassed an area some 250 miles north to south and up to 175 miles from east to west.

In Paul’s day the name Galatia was used for the original smaller region as well as the province. On the first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas established four churches in the southern part of the province, in the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 13:14–14:23), and those churches apparently came to form something of a regional body of believers. The Galatian epistle itself does not identify the specific local churches, but they were churches in which Paul had personally ministered (4:13–15). The fact that the book of Acts mentions the four churches established by Paul in south Galatia and mentions none in the rest of the province

makes it probable that the epistle was addressed primarily to those southern churches. [MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1983). *Galatians*. Chicago: Moody Press.]

At first thought it seems strange that Paul would have words of commendation for the worldly, divisive, immoral, and immature Corinthian believers and yet have none for the saints of Galatia ... for the churches of Galatia the apostle had no such praise.

The difference was that, as bad as the Corinthian situation was, the major problem there (with the notable exception regarding resurrection; see 1 Corinthians 15) did not pertain so much to right doctrine as to right living. In the Galatian churches, on the other hand, the very heart of the gospel was being undermined by false teachers. The gospel of grace was being trampled, and in its place was being offered the gospel of works, which is no gospel at all but a distortion of God’s truth (Galatians 1:6–7) that leads to damnation rather than salvation (Romans 3:20). [Ibid.]