

## *Galatians*

This letter is addressed to “the churches in Galatia” (Gal 1:2). There are two differing interpretations as to which area of Western Asia (modern Turkey) is being referred to here as “Galatia.” One theory holds that it refers to northern Galatia, which included such cities as Ancyra, Tavium, and Pessinus, the old territory of the ethnic Galatians, descendants of the Celts. A second maintains that it refers rather to the Roman province in southern Galatia. According to this hypothesis, Paul was writing to the churches of Antioch in Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe, which he founded on his first missionary journey (Acts 13–14). Paul does not disclose the location from which he is sending the letter, but he includes “all the brothers who are with me” as senders of the letter (1:2).

It was because of some physical illness, literally “a weakness of the flesh,” that Paul first proclaimed the gospel to the churches in Galatia. Although Paul’s weak condition was a trial for the Galatians, they did not despise or disdain him. On the contrary, they welcomed him as “an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (4:13–14). Since they were Gentiles, Paul did not require them to undergo the Jewish initiation rite of circumcision. They thus did not have to observe the “works of the law” such as dietary prescriptions and Sabbath observance. In other words, they did not have to engage in all of the practices of Jewish worship.

After Paul left Galatia, some Jewish Christian missionaries came and preached a “different gospel” (1:6), which called for the Galatians to have themselves circumcised and to observe the “works of the law.” Although Paul did not require Jewish believers to renounce their Jewish heritage, according to the gospel he preached, it was not necessary for Gentile believers to adopt Jewish customs and practices of worship in

order to be “justified,” that is, brought into a right relationship with God. Paul thus wrote this very passionate letter to strongly urge the Galatians not to undergo circumcision and adopt the practices of Jewish worship.<sup>1</sup>

## Galatians as a Ritual of Worship

### *Introductory Worship*

Paul initiates the epistolary worship with a ritualistic greeting to the “churches” or “assemblies” (*ekklēsiai*) gathered, probably in various houses, to listen to the letter within a context of liturgical worship (1:2), as he pronounces, “grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3).<sup>2</sup> That Paul addresses the Galatians as “an apostle not from human beings nor through a human being but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead” (1:1) establishes his divine authority to utter this pronouncement. As one sent to them through Jesus Christ and God the Father, Paul quite appropriately reminds his audience of the grace and peace that they, as believers, have already received from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, the implication is that his being sent to them as a divinely authorized apostle is part of that grace. His greeting also indicates that the letter intends, and possesses the power, to effectively communicate to them a renewed experience of this grace and peace. And it functions as Paul’s prayer that after and as a result of listening to the letter as a liturgical assembly they will continue to experience the divine gifts of grace and peace.

The divine gift of this “grace” is further described as coming from the Lord Jesus Christ, who “gave” himself for our sins that he might deliver us out of this present evil age according to the will of our God and Father (1:4). Paul then leads his audience in an act of doxological worship in response to this marvelous divine gift, as he exclaims, “to whom the glory for the ages of the ages. Amen!” (1:5). This exuberant doxology acknowledges and praises God for the magnificent “glory” (*doxa*) that

1. Matera, “Galatians,” 476–77; idem, *New Testament Theology*, 152–53. See also Soards, “Galatians,” 508–14.

2. Suggit, “Galatians 1:3,” 97–103.

has always been, still is, and always will be his distinguished characteristic forever and ever. Paul potently punctuates this sudden burst of worship with the solemn liturgical formula of affirmation and assent intended to reverberate throughout the worshipping assembly—“Amen!”<sup>3</sup>

Paul expresses his great astonishment that the Galatians are so quickly turning away from the God who called them by the “grace” of Christ and following a gospel different from the one Paul preached to them (1:6). Such an abandonment of the God who calls them by “grace” contradicts the doxological worship of God in response to that “grace,” the worship in which Paul has just engaged them (1:5). That God also called Paul through his “grace” to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (1:15) further confirms how Paul’s apostleship and gospel are part of the “grace” that motivates worship.<sup>4</sup> Rather than contradicting their doxological worship inspired by the “grace” of God, the churches in Galatia should be following the example of the churches of Judea that are in Christ (1:22). When they heard that Paul was now proclaiming the gospel of the faith he once tried to destroy (1:23), they were motivated by the “grace” manifested in Paul (cf. 2:9) to offer doxological worship. They “glorified” (*edoxazon*) God on account of Paul (1:24).<sup>5</sup>

3. “The ‘glory’ of the God of Israel in the OT is primarily the radiance of his presence; when ‘glory’ is ascribed to him it denotes the transcendent praise and worship of which he is worthy. . . . As this letter was read in the churches of Galatia, the hearers would add their ‘Amen’ to Paul’s at the end of the doxology, thus endorsing the ascription of glory to God (cf. 2 Cor 1:20)” (Bruce, *Galatians*, 77–78). “In v 4 Paul probably draws on an early Christian *confession*. He then pronounces a solemn *doxology* (v 5), and he closes the sentence with the word *amēn*, an exclamation by which worshipers are invited to participate in a blessing, a prayer, or a doxology. Taken as a whole, then, vv 3–5 do not merely extend Paul’s greetings. They have the effect of evoking the setting of worship. . . . We may assume that Paul brings the doxology from its usual liturgical setting into this epistolary introduction in order to make clear that the reading of this letter belongs properly to the context of worship” (Martyn, *Galatians*, 87, 91, emphases original). See also Van Voorst, “Why Is There No Thanksgiving Period in Galatians?” 171.

4. “Probably Paul has in mind God here as ultimately the one who called them in grace, though Paul was the agent of God in this” (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 82).

5. “[T]hey glorified God on my account’—every time they heard such news (imperfect tense)—because of the transforming grace that had been manifested ‘in me’” (Bruce, *Galatians*, 105).

*Meal Fellowship and Worship*

The gospel that Paul preached had ramifications for the worship that took place in and through the meals shared by believers, which possessed a sacred character and included the eucharistic celebration of the Lord's Supper.<sup>6</sup> Paul reports to the Galatians an incident that took place in Antioch involving Peter and the corporate worship that took place within the meals shared by both Jewish and Gentile believers. Until certain people came to Antioch from James in Jerusalem, Peter used to "eat with," that is, share meal fellowship with, the Gentile believers. But when these people, who advocated that Gentiles must be circumcised and thus become Jewish, arrived, Peter began to draw back and "separated" (*aphorizen*) himself—a technical cultic term—from this kind of worship (2:12). The rest of the Jews, including Barnabas, followed Peter in this cultic "separation" of themselves from the meal fellowship of "eating with," and thus worshipping with, Gentiles (2:13).<sup>7</sup>

But when Paul saw that they were not behaving correctly with regard to the truth of the gospel, he chastised Peter in front of all, "If you, being a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (2:14). Paul goes on to explain that even Jews are "justified" and thus brought into a right relationship to

6. "In sum, the Christian sacred meals reflected in the NT and other very early Christian texts likely were varied in what was done and in what they meant for the participants. But in all cases, Jesus was the central figure for whom and with whom thanks were offered to God, and the meal itself was a central feature of Christian corporate worship across various circles of the Christian movement. Further, as a group meal, there was an emphasis on the solidarity of those who partook; it was a corporate action and not that of individuals in some private act of devotion" (Hurtado, "Worship," 922–23).

7. According to Kellermann ("*aphorizō*," 184), "*aphorizō* became a technical term for the dissolution of cultic community (Gal 2:12). Peter *separated* himself from table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians and held the Lord's Supper for the Jewish Christians separately when the 'visitors' from James arrived." "The Jerusalem church, truly observant of the Law, held its common meals—including the Eucharist—in accordance with the Jewish food laws. . . . In the Antioch church, however, the meals—again including the Eucharist—were arranged by an adjustment on the part of the members who were Jews by birth. At least by implication, the food laws were declared to be essentially a matter of no consequence in the church. . . . Since the Eucharist was part of the common meal, Peter's withdrawal from the latter brought with it his withdrawal from the former. He has now separated himself from the Gentile members, as they eat the Lord's Supper" (Martyn, *Galatians*, 232–33).

God, so that they may properly worship God, not from the works of the Jewish law but through faith in Christ (2:15–16). The implication for the Galatians is that they do not need to have themselves circumcised and become Jewish in order to be able to worship God properly, including the worship that takes place in and through their meals.<sup>8</sup>

### *Baptism and Ethical Worship*

As Paul points out, it was not through Jewish circumcision but through faith in Christ Jesus that all of the Galatians are “sons” of God (3:26). Faith in Christ Jesus was sacramentally ritualized in a ceremonial immersion with water known as “baptism,” an initiation rite that replaced the Jewish initiation rite of circumcision.<sup>9</sup> The Galatians who were baptized into Christ have “clothed themselves” with Christ (3:27). The metaphor of “clothing oneself” was a symbol of the transformation of one’s very life and way of living. This spiritual “clothing” of oneself with Christ in baptism thus initiated a new behavior and conduct in accord with Christ that was part of ethical or moral worship. This is further indicated as Paul goes on to proclaim, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither free nor slave, there is neither male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Having been “clothed” with Christ in baptism thus means that there is no longer a need for Jewish and Gentile believers to worship separately. All believers are now members of one and the same community who live for and worship God in Christ Jesus both liturgically and ethically.<sup>10</sup>

8. “This reference indicates that the practice of circumcision includes more than simply performing the physical act itself. Practicing circumcision also means maintaining distinctions between the circumcised and the uncircumcised (Gen 17:14), especially by refusing to engage in table fellowship” (Martin, “Circumcision in Galatia,” 228).

9. “Thus Christian water-and-Spirit baptism replaces the mark of Jewish circumcision” (Taylor, “Baptism,” 394).

10. “Clothing’s function as an object of societal symbolism allows it to serve as a symbol of life itself. Garments indicate gender, membership in a community or profession, and as a metaphor encompassing both proper and improper behavior” (Matthews, “Clothe Oneself,” 696). “For Paul, the very composition of the people of God that includes both Jews and Gentiles denies circumcision as a requirement for holiness” (Martin, “Circumcision,” 231).

That being “clothed” with Christ in baptism indicates a transformation to a new way of living and worshiping (3:27) recalls and resonates with Paul’s previous proclamation of this new and total transformation of life. Employing the first-person singular to refer not only to himself personally but to speak as the preeminent representative of every believer, Paul explains, “For I through the law died, so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I live—no longer I, but Christ lives in me, and insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me” (2:19–20). Christ’s love and sacrificial “giving himself up” not only for Paul but for every believer is a further expression of the “grace” of the Lord Jesus Christ, who “gave himself” for our sins (1:3–4). It was this divine grace that motivated the liturgical worship of Paul and the Galatians, expressed in their giving “glory” to God (1:5). And this divine grace now motivates the ethical worship of every believer who has been “clothed” with Christ in baptism, so as, like Paul, to “live for God.” How it is this divine grace that now motivates this new way of living that worships God ethically is confirmed as Paul continues, “I do not reject the grace of God, for if righteousness is through law, then Christ died for nothing” (2:21).

### *Freedom for Worship in the Spirit*

As “sons” of God (3:26) who have reached the age of being “heirs” (4:3), the Galatians are no longer “slaves” deprived of an inheritance, no longer “enslaved” to the elemental powers of the world that prevent them from properly worshipping God. Now that the fullness of time has arrived, God has sent his Son (4:4) to redeem those enslaved under the law, so that we believers might receive “sonship” (4:5) with full rights of inheritance. This includes inheriting the promise of God’s own Spirit (3:14). Consequently, God has sent into the hearts of us who are “sons” of God the Spirit of his Son, who cries out within us as we are gathered as a community for liturgical worship, “Abba! Father!” (4:6; cf. Rom 8:15). We believers are thus privileged to be members of God’s family and to address God as our own Father as we worship liturgically. But

we also have the responsibility of offering ethical worship to God as our Father by the way we conduct our lives.<sup>11</sup>

Before they became believers, the Galatians did not know the true God. Since they were then enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods at all (4:8), they were not capable of worshipping the one and only true God. If they undergo the Jewish ritual of circumcision, they will be turning back again to these weak and worthless elements and become enslaved to them again (4:9). Indeed, as Paul draws to their attention, they are already engaged in Jewish practices of worship, as they are “carefully observing days and months and seasons and years” (4:10), which seem to be a reference to Jewish sabbaths, feasts, and other religious days.<sup>12</sup>

But the Spirit that God sent into the hearts of us believers frees us from slavery to what is opposed to God and empowers us not only to worship God liturgically by crying out, “Abba! Father!” (4:6), but to worship God ethically, not fulfilling the desire of the flesh, but “walking,” that is, conducting our lives by the Spirit (5:16). If the Galatians allow their lives to be led and guided by the Spirit, they will not be enslaved to the realm of the flesh under the Jewish law (5:18). The fruits

11. “[E]ven though the *Abba*-cry is very much the realized experience of individual believers, the cry itself is most likely to be heard in the gathered worship of the community. . . . we need to take seriously that believers ‘cried out’ to God within the assembly, and did so with full awareness that the Spirit was moving them so to do, and that they were thus using Jesus’ own word of intimate relationship with the Father” (Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 409–10). “[H]onour is ascribed to us because of our association with God as ‘Father’ and our belonging to his family. Indeed, this relationship also brings an accompanying moral responsibility for God’s children to live in ways that bring glory to their adoptive Father and to his family name. The expression ‘*Abba*, Father’ also enables adopted sons to address God in prayer through the Spirit; and in doing so they use the same language Jesus, God’s Son, used in communion with the Father. *Abba* was a term that found its way into the Gentile-speaking churches of Paul because Jesus had taught his disciples to address God in this way. And because *Abba*’s sons are also *Abba*’s heirs, the inheritance believers can look forward to is God himself” (Burke, *Adopted into God’s Family*, 99).

12. “The point of this verse is to draw a close parallel between what the Galatians used to do in regard to religious observances and what they are now doing or at least contemplating doing by following the Mosaic Law. Without question, the agitators would never have agreed that following the Mosaic Law was anything like practicing pagan rituals or participating in the worship of the Emperor, but that is what Paul’s analogy is meant to suggest, in so far as the effect on the worshipper is concerned” (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 301–2).

of the Spirit, in contrast to the works of the flesh (5:19–21), describe the ethical worship empowered by the Spirit and demonstrated by behavior such as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (5:22–23). If the Galatians bear one another’s burdens through love, they will thus fulfill the “law of Christ” (6:2), epitomized by the commandment that “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18), which fulfills the whole law (5:14).<sup>13</sup> If one “sows to the flesh,” he will “reap corruption from the flesh,” but if one “sows to the Spirit,” which includes the practice of loving one’s neighbor as oneself, he will “reap eternal life from the Spirit” (6:8). God is thereby not “mocked” (6:7) by such behavior, on the contrary such behavior renders appropriate and proper worship to God.<sup>14</sup>

### *Worship in the Letter’s Closing*

As he begins to bring the letter to a close, Paul pronounces a prayer for all those who will follow the rule that he has put forth in the letter, which includes especially that the Galatians not undergo the Jewish ritual of circumcision. He prays that the divine gifts of peace (cf. 5:22) and mercy will be upon them.<sup>15</sup> That he further identifies “upon them” as “upon the Israel of God” (6:16) provides his Galatian audience with an explicit and emphatic assurance that they are members of the chosen people of God, the “Israel of God,” as believing members of the “church of God” (1:13) without becoming Jewish by having themselves circumcised.<sup>16</sup>

13. “The ‘law of Christ’ is not essentially different from the commandment of love to one’s neighbor, in which ‘the whole law’ is comprehended” (Bruce, *Galatians*, 261).

14. “Paul awakens those into whose hearts God has already sent the Spirit (4:6), reminding them both of the Flesh’s genuine power and of the Spirit’s ultimate power” (Martyn, *Galatians*, 553).

15. “The apostle concludes this paragraph of brief reiterations of the chief ideas of the letter with a benediction upon all whose life is conformed to the great principle for which he has been contending, viz., the essentially spiritual character of religion as against the ascription of fundamental religious value to any physical or material condition, however sanctioned” (Burton, *Galatians*, 357).

16. For the interpretation of the Israel of God as the church of God, see Martyn, *Galatians*, 574–77; Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 451–53; “If one takes the context of the letter seriously, it seems much better to conclude that the phrase ‘the Israel of God’ refers to those Gentile Christians in Galatia who walk according to Paul’s rule” (Weima, *Neglected Endings*, 97).

When Paul goes on to request that from now on let no one cause him troubles, the implication is that no one should oppose him regarding his insistence that believing Gentiles need not become Jewish by undergoing the rite of circumcision. For, as he explains, “I bear the marks of Jesus on my body” (6:17). More important than the physical mark that circumcision leaves on the body are the “marks” (*stigmata*) of Jesus that Paul bears on his body. In addition to referring to the physical scars Paul incurred on his body through his apostolic labors (cf. 2 Cor 4:10–11; Acts 14:19), the “marks” of Jesus on Paul’s body carry a worship connotation. There was a practice in antiquity of tattooing marks on one’s body to indicate religious devotion to a divinity. That Paul bears the “marks of Jesus” on his body suggests that the various scars and wounds he has received in the course of his ministry for the gospel are part of his ethical worship of God. These “marks of Jesus” thus resonate with and reinforce Paul’s previous pronouncement that, rather than rejecting the grace of God (2:21), he responds to it by offering worship to God. He has been crucified with Christ that he might live for God (2:19). Paul worships God not with the mark of Jewish circumcision but with the “marks of Jesus” on his body.<sup>17</sup>

This final prayer that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, which has been and still is with them, will continue to be with “your spirit, brothers” (6:18), provides the Galatian audience with a final reminder of how their human “spirit” has been transformed by the divine “Spirit” of God’s Son, which they have received as a grace from God. This Spirit has empowered them to offer proper worship to God not by undergoing the Jewish ritual of circumcision but by their faith in Christ. This prayer that the divine grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with the human “spirit” of the Galatians, addressed as “brothers” by Paul and all the “brothers” with him (1:2), climaxes all of the letter’s previous references to their reception of the divine Spirit that made them sons of God (4:6) and brothers of one another within the worshiping household of God.

17. BDAG, 945; “In contrast to the now irrelevant mark of circumcision, Paul asserts that he has marks on his body which do mean something real—the *stigmata* or scars which he has acquired as the direct consequence of his service for Jesus. These proclaim whose he is and whom he serves. . . . It has been pointed out that the term *stigmata* was used of the tattoo-marks by which devotees of various religious cults were identified as worshippers of this or that divinity” (Bruce, *Galatians*, 276).

Paul reminded them that they received the Spirit from faith not from works of the Jewish law (3:2, 5, 14). After beginning with the Spirit, they will be ending with the flesh, if they have themselves circumcised (3:5). God sent the Spirit of his Son into their hearts, enabling them to cry out in their liturgical worship, “Abba! Father!” (4:6). Just as the one born according to the flesh (Ishmael) persecuted the one born according to the Spirit (Isaac), so now those insisting upon Jewish circumcision are persecuting the Galatians (4:29). It is through the Spirit, from faith, that we await the hope of righteousness (5:5). The Galatians are to conduct their lives by the Spirit in order not to fulfill the desire of the flesh by being circumcised (5:16). Although the flesh desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, the Galatians are guided by the Spirit (5:17–18). They are able to offer ethical worship as a fruit of the Spirit (5:22–23). They who live by the Spirit should follow the lead of the Spirit (5:25). They who are spiritual should correct one who has sinned with a Spirit of gentleness (6:1; cf. 5:23). And, finally, one who “sows” to the Spirit, from the Spirit will “reap” eternal life (6:8).<sup>18</sup> Paul concludes the letter with his prayer that the gift of this divine Spirit, as the preeminent grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, continues to be with the spirit of the Galatians (6:18), enabling them to offer proper worship to God.

In addition, Paul’s verbless pronouncement of the letter’s final greeting, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ with your spirit, brothers. Amen!” (6:18), completes a literary inclusion with the letter’s initial act of worship. His prayer that the gift of “peace” that comes from God be upon the “Israel of God” (6:16) echoes the proclamation of “peace from God our Father” in the initial greeting (1:3). And his prayer that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ that has been and still is with your spirit may continue to be with your spirit resonates with his prayer that the grace that has been and still is given to you from the Lord Jesus Christ may continue to be given to you (1:3). Furthermore, the solemn “Amen!” that concludes the letter invites the audience to add their final assenting confirmation to the epistolary worship. It reverberates with their “Amen!” that concluded the letter’s initial worship (1:5). This literary inclusion formed by the letter’s introductory (1:3–5) and con-

18. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 377–471.

cluding acts of worship (6:16–18) thus places the entire letter within a context of prayerful worship.<sup>19</sup>

*Conclusion: Worship in Galatians*

In sum, rather than contradicting their doxological worship inspired by the “grace” of God (1:3–5), the churches in Galatia, like those of Judea (1:22), should offer the doxological worship of glorifying God on account of Paul (1:24) and his gospel that eliminates the need for believing Gentiles to undergo the Jewish initiation ritual of circumcision. Paul’s chastisement of Peter for cultically “separating” himself from the worship, including the Eucharist, that took place within the meals shared by both Jews and Gentiles at Antioch (2:11–14) indicates that the Galatians do not need to have themselves circumcised and become Jewish in order to be able to worship God fully and properly. The “grace” of the Lord Jesus Christ, who “gave himself” for our sins (1:3–4), motivates the ethical worship of every believer who has been “clothed” with Christ in the ritual act of baptism, so as, like Paul, to “live for God” as a way of worshiping God ethically (2:19–20).

The Spirit that God sent into the hearts of us believers empowers us not only to worship God liturgically by crying out, “Abba! Father!” (4:6), but to worship God ethically by conducting our lives in accord with the fruits of the Spirit (5:16)—“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (5:22–23). Paul concludes the letter with his prayer that the gift of the divine Spirit, as the preeminent grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, continues to be with the spirit of the Galatians (6:18), enabling them to offer proper worship to God. The literary inclusion formed by the letter’s introductory (1:3–5) and concluding acts of worship (6:16–18), each of which evokes a resounding “Amen!” on the part of Paul’s Galatian audience, places the entire letter within a context of prayerful worship and praise of God.

19. With regard to this final “Amen!” Bruce (*Galatians*, 277) remarks, “It would form the congregation’s response to the reading of the letter; it would be pleasant to think that a well-meant and hearty ‘Amen’ was forthcoming in all the congregations to which this letter was sent.” “The letter thus ends where it began, with the invocation of God and God’s will” (Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 458).