“Galatians and Romans have challenged and nurtured readers of Scripture for generations. To those who are familiar with Brendan Byrne’s work, it will come as no surprise to find here an informed and informative guide to Paul’s most challenging letters.”

— Beverly Roberts Gaventa
Helen H. P. Manson Professor of
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Princeton Theological Seminary, New Jersey

“Brendan Byrne has written a remarkably clear and persuasive interpretation of Galatians and Romans, two of Paul’s most influential and controversial letters. He brings out both the similarities and the very real differences between the two letters and points to their significance for the latter church. I found his interpretations always insightful and helpful. He has done all of this in a way that is both well argued and easily accessible to a wider audience.”

— Thomas H. Tobin, SJ
Professor of Theology
Loyola University Chicago

“Brendan Byrne brings wide learning, passion for Paul, and skill as a teacher to two of the most important documents in the Christian Bible. His clear and concise expositions can open these sometimes difficult Pauline texts to beginners in exegesis and theology, and provide a model of engaged and effective pedagogy. His glossary alone is one of the best introductions to Paul’s theology that I know.”

— Daniel J. Harrington, SJ
Professor of New Testament
Boston College School of Theology
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Introduction

It is fitting to consider Paul’s Letter to the Galatians and his Letter to the Romans together. This is so not only because they are similar in content but also because of the contribution that each has made to Christian life down the ages. Linking them in content is their common focus on the issue of whether right relationship with God (“righteousness”) is attained through observance of the law of Moses or through faith. The precise terms in which Paul addressed that issue hardly bear on our concerns today. In fact, it was largely resolved well before the close of the first century AD. The theological depth, however, at which Paul addressed the issue in the two letters made a profound contribution to the forging of Christian identity especially when, along with the gospels and his remaining letters, they became part of the canon of Christian Scripture a century or so later on.

Above all, both letters stood at the center of the Reformation protest that rocked and eventually split the Christian Church in the sixteenth century. In fact, the beginning of the Reformation can with some justification be traced to Martin Luther’s lectures on Romans (1515–16) and then Galatians (1517–18) at Wittenberg.

Thankfully, we live now at a time when the polemics of the sixteenth century have largely been put to rest. The contribution that Reformers such as Luther and Calvin made to the interpretation of the letters is now accepted within the Catholic tradition. Indeed the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) in many ways represented a recapturing on the part of the Catholic Church of a Pauline legacy that had largely become the prerogative of the churches of the Reformation.

While similar in content and influence on the Christian tradition, the two letters are very different in tone. Galatians is sharply polemical, Paul’s anger frequently breaking through. Romans, by contrast, is measured, expansive, diplomatic—designed perhaps to correct an image of Paul created by the earlier letter. Where Galatians is one of the earliest
of his surviving letters, Romans presents a mature understanding of the Gospel late in his apostolic career.

The two letters, then, make an interesting contrast while also shedding light on each other. It is helpful to consider them together but appropriate to begin with the earlier, shorter, and in some respects more engaging letter: Galatians.

All of Paul’s letters, but these two in particular, throw up a great deal of Paul’s distinctive theological terms and concepts. To assist the study of the letters a glossary of these terms and concepts gathers them together in an alphabetical list at the end of the book, with brief descriptions and references. Readers may find it helpful to consult this glossary when encountering an unfamiliar term not explained at that particular point in the running commentary.
**Introduction to Galatians**

Of all Paul’s letters, Galatians provides by far the most information about Paul’s own life, notably in the opening two chapters. This is one of its most interesting features. At the same time, while shedding much light on Paul himself, the letter leaves us in considerable ignorance regarding the people to whom it was written. Paul addresses his letter to “the churches of Galatia” (1:2), clearly meaning a number of communities of believers in a region identified as “Galatia.” The problem is that at the time of Paul such a region could be understood in two distinct ways. In the early third century BC a Celtic people, known as the Galatai, invaded Asia Minor, and were, after a series of defeats by surrounding kingdoms, confined to a small area around the capital of present-day Turkey, Ankara (ancient Ancyra). In the late first century BC they were incorporated by the Romans into a much larger area to form the Roman province of “Galatia.” The question is whether, when Paul wrote his letter, he was addressing the ethnic Galatians who lived in what was now their homeland in the northern regions of the Roman province, or whether he was addressing communities of believers who, with no necessary ethnic connection to the Galatians, simply lived within the boundaries of what was now “Galatia” in terms of the Roman province.

If the latter is the case, then it is possible to identify the recipients of the letter with the communities evangelized by Paul and Barnabas in what is conventionally termed his First Missionary Journey as described in Acts 13–14: that is, communities in the cities of Antioch in Pisidia, Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium (Konya). The problem is that Acts depicts Paul making converts in these cities from Gentiles who already had association with the Jewish synagogues, whereas the evidence of Paul’s letter suggests that those to whom he was writing became believers directly from paganism. All in all, it is difficult to harmonize the evidence in Acts and Paul’s letter in regard to the identity of the Galatians, and, in any case, precise identification has little bearing on its interpretation.
What is important is to recognize that the Galatians as addressed by Paul were converts from paganism living in central Asia Minor, who at a very vulnerable moment of Paul’s life had shown him great kindness and received in return the gift of faith (4:13-14). The very special bond and sense of parental love in him (4:15-20) forged by this initial experience explains Paul’s outrage that intruders who had subsequently come among his converts should sever the Galatians’ allegiance to himself personally and to the Gospel as he had taught it.

When precisely the intrusion occurred and when and from where Paul composed his response is also uncertain. Acts tells of a long, almost three-year stay of Paul in Ephesus in the course of his Third Missionary Journey (19:1-41). It is likely that it was during this period that Paul faced both the difficulties to the west that prompted his correspondence with Corinth (1 and 2 Corinthians) and the difficulties to the east that prompted Galatians. This locates the composition of the letter some time in the early to mid-fifties AD but further precision is impossible.

What is more significant is the identity of the intruders and what they were saying about Paul and the inadequacy of his original formation of the Galatians in Christian faith and practice. As is the case with all Paul’s letters, we have only one side of the “conversation.” We have to reconstruct the situation that prompted the letter from what Paul says in it—especially by detecting arguments and accusations about himself made by the intruders that he seems at pains to rebut.

In his original stay among them Paul presumably had evangelized the non-Jewish (Gentile) Galatians according to his understanding of the Gospel. That is, he had not said anything to them about a need to take on the requirements of the Jewish law, especially the ritual requirements of circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, and various laws regarding food. They had to adopt the basic faith of Israel—the worship of the one true God—and live by the strict ethical precepts of the law. But they did not need to become Jews in order to be fully members of the end-time People of God, destined for salvation.

Some time after Paul went on his way, other Christian missionaries arrived in these communities in Galatia. Unlike Paul, they held that all believers, including those from the Gentile world, had to take on the practice of the law of Moses completely. Not content with implementing this policy in their own area—presumably Jerusalem and Judea—they actively sought to bring the Gentile communities converted on Paul’s terms into conformity with it. In the early decades of the Christian movement it seems we have to reckon with a considerable variety of views in
regard to the terms on which people of non-Jewish background (Gentiles) should be admitted to the community of believers. In relation to Judaism and the practice of the law there was a sliding scale, with these “intruders” at one extreme and Paul at the other. Where other leading figures such as James, the brother of the Lord, and Peter, stood is not entirely clear. In Acts, as well as in Galatians, both are represented as not requiring the imposition of circumcision on Gentile converts. Yet clearly by the time of the writing of Galatians, James, the leader in Jerusalem, remains very close to the Jewish heritage, while Peter’s position would appear to be more complex and was perhaps shifting. If Paul’s account in Galatians 2:11-14 is to be believed, after a clear adherence to the Pauline stance, Peter retreated to a more conservative position, closer to that of James.

While not necessarily directly inspired by James, the intruders represented the most rigorous position in regard to Gentile acceptance of the full yoke of the law. From the content of Galatians we can get some idea of how they were presenting their case. In the opening two chapters, Paul seems to be rebutting a contention that whatever apostolic status he has is secondary and subservient to that of the leading apostles, that he has spent time in Jerusalem being instructed by them, submitting to their direction and, in the matter of circumcision perhaps, even to their correction. Argument along these lines would explain Paul’s insistence that his apostolic status stemmed directly from the risen Lord (1:1, 15-16) quite independently of the leading figures in Jerusalem. It would also account for his stress upon the formal recognition those same leading figures gave to his God-given responsibility for the Gentile apostolate: their public acknowledgment that the same Lord who called Peter to the evangelization of the Jews has bestowed on him a parallel—not dependent—calling in regard to the Gentiles (2:7-8).

The long discussion of Scripture (Old Testament) that occupies the central section of the letter (chaps. 3–4), with a particular focus on Abraham, suggests also that the intruders bolstered their case by scriptural argument. In particular, they would appear to have portrayed Abraham as at once the archetypal convert from paganism and the obedient fulfiller of the divine ordinance in regard to circumcision. Paul’s lengthy “reclaiming” of Abraham as a figure of faith rather than obedience to law is clearly designed to address such a position.

Finally, it is likely that the intruders believed—even if they did not say so explicitly—that, without commitment to the law, recent converts from the Gentile world would lack effective motivation for living up to
Galatians and Romans

the strict ethical code required of the People of God. Hence Paul’s insistence in the final section of the letter (chaps. 5–6) that freedom from the law does not mean license but is essentially expressed in love: that “the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (5:14).

The foregoing may give the impression that Paul’s Letter to the Galatians concerns an issue (freedom from the law) of little interest to readers of today. This would be unfortunate. The nerve point of Paul’s objection to the Galatians’ taking on the yoke of the law is his conviction that reliance on the law means nullifying or rendering otiose the supremely costly death of Christ upon the cross. When Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ; . . . I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me” (Gal 2:19b-20), he is speaking not simply of himself. Every baptized believer should be able to take those words to himself or herself. Christ has loved me and given himself up for me. The freedom I now enjoy—from sin, law, and (eternal) death—is a freedom bought at supreme cost. To abandon or make light of it is to reject the love of Christ. No other letter of Paul puts the matter so starkly and so personally as this.

Paul’s argument moves, then, not only from the thought of what Christ has done in the past but also from the present situation of believers. Baptism has created an ongoing union with the risen Lord in which former criteria of identity—ethnic, social, gender-determined—have lost relevance (3:26-28). The blessings of salvation, promised in the Scriptures to Abraham, are focused on Christ and come to believers in virtue of their union with him. Central to those blessings is the gift of the Spirit. The Spirit assures believers that Christ has already drawn them into the intimacy of his own filial relationship with God (4:6-7) and guarantees the hope of a fullness of salvation as an inheritance to come (5:5). In the place of the law the Spirit has also become both the guide and the energizing force of the new moral life where faith finds its essential expression in love (5:6). I have touched on a few of the rich theological seams mined by Paul in the course of his letter. It will be my task as interpreter to draw them out from beneath the surface of the text.

Whereas once Galatians stood at the nerve center of relations between Protestants and Catholics, there is some justification in seeing it now as standing at the nerve center of relations between Christians and Jews. It is possible to read Galatians in a way that is anti-Jewish, if not anti-Semitic. Such a reading, particularly in light of the Holocaust, is irrespon-
possible and unethical as well as being, I believe, unfaithful to the text itself. Galatians does not record a division between Christians and Jews. Paul is contending in the letter not with Jews but with fellow Christians who have a different view of the terms on which those who respond positively to the Gospel from the Gentile world should become members of the community of faith. If, in the course of arguing strongly against imposition of the Jewish law upon such Gentiles, Paul makes negative statements about the law, it is this context that should be kept in mind when evaluating such statements in regard to Judaism. Galatians is not the text to go to when assessing the broader question of Paul’s attitude to his ancestral people and their distinctive faith. That is something he takes up far more expressly and calmly in Romans, especially Romans 9–11.

Before taking up more detailed examination of the text, it will help to set out the basic structure of the letter. In his letters Paul adheres to the conventions of letter writing in the ancient world. Letters normally consisted of three sections: an introductory section, the main body of the letter, and a conclusion. The introduction itself usually contained three parts: an address naming the sender and recipients, a greeting, and an expression of hopes or thanksgiving for the health and well-being of the recipients. Paul normally turns this third part of the introduction into a thanksgiving prayer to God. The conclusion normally contains some indication of travel plans, greetings from others associated with the sender, and a final grace. This basic structure can be seen in Galatians, with the significant omission of the thanksgiving element in the introduction and the greetings in the conclusion.

**OUTLINE OF GALATIANS**

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Address and Greeting: 1:1-5

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INTRODUCTION: 1:1-5

Address and Greeting: 1:1-5

Paul, 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, and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins that he might rescue us from the present evil age in accord with the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul’s letters normally open with an address, a greeting, and a thanksgiving prayer. Galatians is unique in the glaring absence of this third element. From what he has heard about the churches of Galatia Paul evidently feels—and signals by this omission—that he has nothing to be grateful for. Even the self-description in the address sounds a polemical note that will become insistent as the letter unfolds. Paul is an apostle, appointed not by human beings but by Jesus Christ and the Father who sent him and raised him from the dead. From the very start, then, Paul moves to counter any suggestion that he is not an apostle of equal rank and authority with others such as Peter and John.

Paul’s problem was that there were divergent “definitions” of what it meant to be an apostle abroad in the early church. As far as he was concerned, there were only two criteria for this office: to have seen the risen Lord (that is, be a resurrection witness) and to have been commissioned by him to preach the Gospel and found churches. Another criterion, seen later in the Lukan literature (Acts 1:21-26; cf. Luke 6:13), was to have been a disciple of Jesus during his earthly life. This third criterion
would exclude Paul from being an apostle of equal status with Peter and the rest of the Twelve. He could only be an apostle in a secondary sense, dependent on appointment to this office on the part of the original apostles chosen by Jesus. Hence his insistence that his apostleship in no sense flowed from human appointment but came to him directly from the risen Lord.

Paul includes in the senders of the letter “all the brothers who are with me” (v 2), a reference presumably to his coworkers in the mission. The strict translation “brothers” need not exclude women coworkers, since “brothers” was an inclusive term for members of the community of believers as the “family of God,” and Paul elsewhere salutes several women as fellow workers (cf. Rom 16:1-7; Phil 4:2-3). The collective reference lends the sense that it is not simply Paul who has a problem with the communities in Galatia; he is calling them to account in the name of the wider mission.

The greeting or grace (v 3), while standard for a Pauline letter, concludes on a significant note. Christ “gave himself for our sins that he might rescue us from the present evil age in accord with the will of our God and Father” (v 4). As we have noted already, the sense of Christ’s supremely costly self-gift on behalf of sinful human beings on the cross is the nerve point of Paul’s rejection of any rival factor in the gaining of salvation—notably taking on the ritual requirements of the Jewish law (cf. esp. 2:19-20). To adopt such a path is to fly in the face of this divine act and render it otiose (2:21).

What Christ is rescuing us from is the “present evil age.” This pessimistic judgment reflects the worldview of apocalyptic Judaism, which is the background to Paul’s argument in the letter. In this perspective, which Paul shares with virtually all the New Testament writers, there is a profound pessimism in regard to the present state of affairs. The world as currently constituted is beyond repair. The faithful can only look to divine intervention, which will involve judgment and condemnation on the powers presently prevailing in the world, followed by a radical transformation on a truly cosmic scale. For Paul, and Christian believers generally, this divine intervention has already begun through the sending of the Son. Christ’s obedience “to death” (Phil 2:8) on the cross, his resurrection and exaltation to God’s right hand, have brought about the radical defeat of the powers opposed to God and the dawning of a new age attested by the Spirit. But this is only the beginning. Believers await the return of Christ to complete his messianic work. While bodily anchored in the present (evil) age, through the union with him brought about through faith and baptism, they share his entrance into the new age of the kingdom, enjoying
a renewed relationship with God, attested by the gift of the Spirit. Hence Paul’s distress at learning of the Galatians’ temptation to place themselves back in a relationship with God belonging to the old era that they have radically outgrown: namely, life under the Jewish law.

**BODY OF THE LETTER: 1:6–6:10**

**Opening Astonished Protest: No “Other Gospel”: 1:6-10**

6I am amazed that you are so quickly forsaking the one who called you by [the] grace [of Christ] for a different gospel 7(not that there is another). But there are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach [to you] a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed! 9As we have said before, and now I say again, if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the one that you received, let that one be accursed! 10Am I now currying favor with human beings or God? Or am I seeking to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ.

In place of the customary thanksgiving, Paul sails straight into the main agenda of his letter with a strong expression of astonishment and reproach. How can the Galatians be forsaking so soon the one who called them by “[the] grace [of Christ] for a different gospel”? “The one who called them” refers not to Paul but to God. In forsaking the Gospel as he preached it to them, the Galatians are undermining and rebuffing the saving action of God in their regard. The move they are being tempted to make is no mere addition to or fulfillment of their original conversion. It is something that introduces—if that were possible—“another gospel,” that would stand over against the Gospel of the God who has reached out to them in the grace of Christ.

This sense of God as a God of grace (*charis*) is the essential theological vision that stands behind the letter and Paul’s writings as a whole. Perhaps we should linger here for a moment. The Greek word *charis* most basically denotes the charm or attractiveness of a person that spontaneously wins the favor of others. Reciprocally, then, it denotes the favor and goodwill created in the other person through such charm. More concretely *charis* can refer to a gift bestowed on a person as an expression of such favor. In the New Testament the Greek term picks up the sense, flowing from biblical (Old Testament) usage, of the favor of God bestowed on
human beings, with or without their doing anything to merit it. For Paul the sense of unmerited divine favor predominates. He sees the entire sending and work of Christ as the spear point of an immense wave of God’s grace flowing over a sinful world, seeking to reconcile it to its Creator (2 Cor 5:18–6:2; Rom 5:15). This is the heart of the Gospel that he preaches and that the Galatians have heard. There cannot be any “other gospel” (v 7)—especially one that involved taking on the yoke of the law—because that would purport to establish a relationship with God based on something other than grace.

In his strength of feeling about this Paul does not mince his words (vv 8-9). He calls down a curse (anathema) on any who might seek to proclaim an alternative gospel, including (hypothetically) even himself or an angel of God under its scope. A curse in the biblical sense assigns someone to divine destruction. The original call of the Galatians is a divine act that cannot be undone—not even by Paul himself. Those intruders now attempting to set it aside—and by implication the Galatians tempted to follow them—expose themselves to the destructive power of Paul’s curse. We may not be too comfortable with such language. But we do not have to look far back from our own time to see that perver sions of the Gospel, often with deadly implications in social terms, have not been confined to Paul’s day.

Paul’s protest climaxes (v 10) in a series of rhetorical questions that seem designed to counter the charges the intruders laid against him. Maybe Paul avoided mention of the obligation to take on the painful requirement of circumcision because what he was offering was a “soft selling” of the Gospel aimed at easy conversion rather than the requirements of God. Paul simply rejects such a charge outright. If he were seeking to please human beings rather than God, he would not be “a slave of Jesus Christ,” bearing the scars that persecutions and labors have “branded” on his body to show to whom he belongs (6:17b). The apostolic life is no recipe for human approval.

I. Paul’s Apostolic Independence and Credibility: 1:11–2:21

The Divine Origin of Paul’s Gospel: 1:11-12

11Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not of human origin. 12For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.
Having gotten his anger out of his system for the time being, Paul addresses the Galatians more calmly. They are still his “brothers [and sisters],” fellow members of the “family” of God. He then goes straight to the point. The intruders presumably charged that the Gospel as he preached it lacked authority. Not being one of the original apostles, Paul has it “secondhand,” as it were, and so is liable to correction or completion on the part of those who received it first. For Paul the divine origin of his Gospel stems from the fact that it came to him directly and immediately as “a revelation of Jesus Christ,” that is, as a divine “uncovering” of the truth that Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified One, is indeed Messiah and Son of God (cf. 1:15-16; Rom 1:3-4). The autobiographical details in the remainder of this section (1:13–2:21) are all designed to establish this truth.

**Paul’s Apostolic Call and Independence from Jerusalem: 1:13-24**

13For you heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, 14and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions. 15But when [God], who from my mother’s womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased 16to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, 17nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; rather, I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus. 18Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days. 19But I did not see any other of the apostles, only James the brother of the Lord. 20(As to what I am writing to you, behold, before God, I am not lying.) 21Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22And I was unknown personally to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; 23they only kept hearing that “the one who once was persecuting us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” 24So they glorified God because of me.

**Persecutor of the Church: 1:13-14**

We now enter upon a section of the letter that provides us with a good deal of information about Paul’s early career. He does not provide this information for its own sake. It is selected and shaped for the sole
purpose of establishing his apostolic credentials independent of the other apostolic authorities in Jerusalem. Hence Paul’s insistence over and over again of how little contact he had with Jerusalem in the years immediately following his coming to faith in the risen Lord.

To make the point that his coming to faith and apostolic call involved a rupture in his life so great as to point inexorably to divine intervention rather than mere human transition, Paul sums up his preconversion life in Judaism. He was no likely candidate for conversion to faith in Jesus. On the contrary, as the Galatians well know, he was one of the most zealous young Pharisees of his age. In fact, his commitment to the traditions of his people drove him to become a persecutor of the church of God, seeking its destruction (also 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:5-6). It is not entirely clear what it was about the early believers in Jesus that so drew the ire of the young Jewish zealot. In any case, whatever the precise motive, the main point is clear: his life at the time was going in a direction diametrically opposite to that which might lead to conversion to Christ. If such a conversion was to take place—as indeed it did—it could only have been due to the intervention of God.

**Encounter with God’s Son and Calling: 1:15-16a**

The actual description of this divine intervention is tucked away in the opening clause of a long sentence (vv 15-17), the main purpose of which is to assert Paul’s absence from Jerusalem in the years immediately afterward. The language in which Paul describes his call (“from my mother’s womb . . . set me apart”) consciously echoes the call of prophetic figures in the Old Testament (Jer 1:4-5; Isa 49:1, 5-6). In line with these biblical figures, Paul sees himself as divinely chosen from the earliest moment of his existence for a saving role in regard to the nations of the world. While his persecuting career was at full cry, divine grace reached out to activate the vocation God had in store for him from the start, turning his life in a diametrically opposite direction.

The traditional understanding of Paul’s conversion is largely determined by the three accounts of the event given in the book of Acts (9:1-19; 22:3-21; 26:9-18). These describe a visual experience on the road to Damascus where the risen Lord appears to Paul, identifies himself as “Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (9:5) and tells him to go into the city and await further instructions (subsequently completed by a disciple named Ananias). These later and more detailed accounts “unpack” with some plausibility the meeting that Paul describes so tersely here as God’s being
“pleased to reveal his Son to me.” The crucified Nazarene, concerning whom claims were being made that up to now the zealous young Pharisee had regarded as blasphemy, was now revealed to him as not only Messiah of Israel but God’s very own Son. The most profound comment on the experience is probably that given by Paul in a striking sentence in 2 Corinthians: “For God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of [Jesus] Christ” (4:6). In the “darkness” of his unbelief the Creator had said, “Let there be light” (Gen 1:3). So much of what Paul will write with such passion in the remainder of Galatians can be traced to the radical transformation in his life and understanding described here.

Besides referring to a revelation of God’s Son “to” Paul (NAB), the Greek phrase (en emoi) could also have an instrumental sense echoing biblical (Hebrew) usage. The meaning would then be “reveal his Son through me,” that is, as an instrument of the Gospel to the nations of the world. This sense prepares the way for the following purpose clause, “so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles” (v 16b). We should probably recognize some intentional ambiguity in Paul’s expression at this point. The total statement brings out the essential unity between his coming to faith in the crucified Messiah and his missionary vocation as apostle to the Gentiles.

Paul’s Early Years as a Believer: 1:16b-24

The richly theological statements about Paul’s call and mission (vv 15-16a) that are of such interest to us lead into what is most important for him: to insist on his independence from Jerusalem (vv 16b-24). He did not consult with any human being (literally, in biblical language, “flesh and blood”), nor go up to Jerusalem to confer with those who were apostles before him. Instead he went into Arabia, before returning to Damascus. By “Arabia” Paul could simply mean the region of the kingdom of Nabatea, which extended south and east of Damascus. In this case he would simply be indicating the beginning of his missionary career in the cities of this region. On the other hand, it could be that he is reporting on a period spent in the wilderness, in which, like his prophetic forerunner Elijah, he sought to come to terms with his prophetic mission (cf. 1 Kgs 19:1-18), before returning—again like Elijah—to Damascus.

Paul cannot deny, however, that there was one visit to Jerusalem, which included contact with at least two of the leading figures. But this
occurred only “after three years” and, in Paul’s carefully chosen language, involved a stay of fifteen days with Cephas (that is, Simon Peter) in order to “confer” with him (v 18). The Greek verb here translated “confer” has the sense of “visit with the purpose of finding out information.” The information that Peter was uniquely equipped to provide had to do, surely, with the person of Jesus and all that he said and did during his earthly life. Though the pre-passion life and teaching of Jesus feature minimally in the letters of Paul, it is hard to believe that they lacked all interest for him. As the British scholar C. K. Barrett has drily observed, “They hardly spent two weeks talking about the weather!” The only other leading figure that Paul saw was James (v 19). This was not James, the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve, but a member of Jesus’ family (“the brother of the Lord”), who was eventually to replace Peter as leader of the community in Jerusalem. Aside from contact with these two figures, Paul insists with what is virtually an oath (v 20), that he saw none of the remaining apostles. The visit to Jerusalem was private and brief. It in no way involved his receiving commissioning or authorization from them. Immediately afterward, Paul withdrew to the region of Damascus (“Syria”) where he had experienced the call, and to Cilicia, his own native region (v 21). This brief reference is all we have to fill out more than a decade in Paul’s life (around AD 40–49) about which we know very little. It was a time of missionary endeavor, since, as he himself tells us (vv 22-24), though his face was not known to the communities in Jerusalem, they “glorified God” because they were well aware that “the one who once was persecuting us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” For Paul, however, the main point is his absence from Jerusalem throughout these years.

An Important Meeting in Jerusalem: 2:1-10

2Then after fourteen years I again went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. 2I went up in accord with a revelation, and I presented to them the gospel that I preach to the Gentiles—but privately to those of repute—so that I might not be running, or have run, in vain. 3Moreover, not even Titus, who was with me, although he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised, 4but because of the false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might enslave us— 5to them we did not submit even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain intact for you. 6But from those who were reputed to be important (what they once were makes
no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those of repute made me add nothing. 7 On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter to the circumcised, 8 for the one who worked in Peter for an apostolate to the circumcised worked also in me for the Gentiles, 9 and when they recognized the grace bestowed upon me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas their right hands in partnership, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10 Only, we were to be mindful of the poor, which is the very thing I was eager to do.

Although the long period of Paul’s evangelizing work in Syria and Cilicia remains obscure, it seems that during this time he was already fulfilling his distinctive call to be Apostle to the Gentiles, though this does not mean that he was not also proclaiming Messiah Jesus to Jews. Acts suggests that he was pursuing this missionary work very much as an emissary of the community of believers at Antioch, with a Jewish believer of Cypriot origin, Barnabas, performing something of the role of mentor to Paul (Acts 11:22-26).

At some stage, probably around the year AD 49, both apostles, Paul and Barnabas, sensed the need to have their missionary policy in regard to Gentile converts formally acknowledged by the leaders of the mother church in Jerusalem. This led to the significant meeting in Jerusalem that Paul describes at this point in Galatians (2:1-10). While there are some differences and discrepancies, the meeting in question is almost certainly the same as that described at greater length in Acts 15:1-29. The two accounts can be harmonized on the understanding that Luke, writing much later, has turned what was initially a rather private meeting between Paul and Barnabas and the three Jerusalem leaders (James, Peter [“Cephas”], John) into a large plenary gathering. Luke also adds to the agreement clauses in regard to food (Acts 15:19-20, 28-29) that seem to stem from a later meeting at which Paul was not present. What the two accounts are agreed on are the names of the leading figures involved (Paul and Barnabas, on the one hand; James and Peter [with the addition of John in Gal 2:9], on the other) and the fact that all agreed that converts from the Gentile world were not to be required to submit to circumcision.

It is this latter point that was, of course, most important for Paul. But it emerges in a rather oblique way in the rather tortuous account of the meeting that he now provides. Paul has to walk something of a tightrope here. He has to admit that, yes, eventually after a period of fourteen years (v 1), he did revisit Jerusalem. But this was not in response to a
summons but rather as a result of a “revelation” (v 2). Quite aside from any human impetus, the same Lord who had called him to the apostolic task many years before was now impelling him, along with Barnabas, to go up to Jerusalem and lay before the leaders there the Gospel as he preached it among the Gentiles. Paul chooses his language (“lay before”) carefully; he is not seeking approval or confirmation but rather recognition for the sake of the unity of the church.

Whether or not the issue of circumcision featured in this exposition of the Gospel we do not know. It was resolved, at least to Paul’s satisfaction, in what occurred—or, rather, did not occur—in relation to Titus. Titus, who was later to play a significant role in Paul’s relations with the community at Corinth, was a coworker of Paul of Gentile origin (literally “Greek” [v 3]) and as such uncircumcised. Paul seems to have brought him to Jerusalem as a test case. If Titus was not compelled to undergo circumcision, despite the presence and pressure of “false brethren” who in some underhand way had discovered his condition (literally “the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus” [v 4]), then this was tantamount to the leaders’ acceptance of Paul’s circumcision-free Gospel. Paul’s “not yielding” for an instant to the demand that Titus be circumcised ensured that the “truth of the gospel” should stand for all Gentile believers, including the Galatians (v 5).

The remainder of the account (vv 6-10) bears on what was likely to have been the main agenda of the meeting: the recognition on the part of the leaders that Paul had received a mandate from the risen Lord to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles (literally “the uncircumcised”) in parallel to the mandate that Peter had received from the same Lord in regard to the Jews. While clearly valuing the recognition he received, sealed by a handshake (literally “the right hands of partnership”), Paul speaks of the leaders—James, Cephas, and John—somewhat disparagingly (“who are reckoned to be pillars”). They are merely human figures; their approval does not mean much to him in view of the divine commissioning he already enjoys. The main point is that they recognized his distinctive gift (v 9) and did not add any further stipulation (v 6) to the Gospel as he preached it, in particular, anything in regard to circumcision.

One thing “the pillars” did ask of Paul and his coworkers was that they should “be mindful of the poor” (v 10a). “The poor” was an honorific title for the mother community of believers in Jerusalem. Paul is recalling here an agreement to raise a collection from his Gentile churches for the relief of this community, doubtless severely affected by the general economic hardship prevalent in Palestine at the time. As references in
other letters show (1 Cor 16:1-4; Rom 15:25-28, 31; 2 Cor 8-9), Paul took this commitment very seriously. For him the collection was no mere relief measure but a key symbol of the unity of the overall church. Through it his Gentile churches acknowledged their debt in terms of spiritual blessings to the mother church in Jerusalem (Rom 15:27), while gracious acceptance of it on the part of that church would signal recognition of the Pauline communities as full partners and members of the one people of God.

But even this “clause” in regard to the collection, Paul is at pains to point out, was not something imposed on him. It was something he was always “eager” to do (v 10b). Once more, then, he has described a moment of significant contact with the church in Jerusalem. At the same time he has made clear that it was not approval or commissioning or delegation that he received but a recognition, solemnly sealed, of his God-given “gift” to proclaim the Gospel among the Gentiles, in the terms and conditions in which he and Barnabas had been proclaiming it hitherto.

Confrontation at Antioch: Paul Severely Rebukes Peter: 2:11-14:

11And when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he clearly was wrong. 12For, until some people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to draw back and separated himself, because he was afraid of the circumcised. 13And the rest of the Jews [also] acted hypocritically along with him, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 14But when I saw that they were not on the right road in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all, “If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

The meeting in Jerusalem may have resolved the matter of circumcision. There were other prickly areas of relations between believers of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds that it did not address. For the benefit of his Galatian audience, and still in the interests of promoting his independence of human authority, Paul recalls an incident in Antioch in which he fell out sharply and bitterly with Peter (Cephas) over the issue of Gentile and Jewish believers sharing meals in common.

The meeting in Jerusalem had recognized separate and equal spheres of apostolate and mission: Peter to the Jews; Paul to the Gentiles (2:7-9). This neat division would have worked well in areas where communities of believers, Jewish and Gentile, were geographically separated,
as presumably was the case in Palestine. Matters were not so easy when believers of diverse ethnic origin lived together in the same city, as was the case in Antioch. Here, by Paul’s account (2:12), Jewish and Gentile members of the community met in common for shared meals (including, presumably, the Eucharist). Peter, when he left Jerusalem to join the community in Antioch, initially fell in with this local practice. When there came to the community “some people from James,” he withdrew, as Paul says, “because he was afraid of the circumcised,” to a separate table, taking with him all the other Jewish members of the community, including—to Paul’s even greater dismay—his companion and erstwhile mentor Barnabas. For Paul this behavior amounted to “hypocrisy” (v 13) and to not being “on the right road in line with the truth of the gospel” (v 14), very serious accusations especially when delivered in the form of a public rebuke.

We have, of course, only Paul’s side of the story. What might Peter have claimed in defense? What Paul saw as striking at the heart of the Gospel, Peter may have regarded as simply a strategic move for the sake of the unity of the church. Having come more recently from Jerusalem, he would be conscious of the difficult position of James who was trying to keep the overwhelmingly Jewish community of believers there in some sort of tolerable relationship with the wider Jewish populace, especially its leadership. Any suggestion that Jewish members of the community in Antioch were compromising the separation of Jews from Gentiles could make things very difficult for the vulnerable community in Jerusalem. When delegates came from James urging separation, it is understandable that Peter, like many in a leadership position, would align himself somewhere in the middle between the two factions, in an attempt to hold both wings of the church together.

Paul saw things very differently. For him “separate tables” compromised “the truth of the gospel,” the same essential truth that had been at stake in the pressure to have Titus circumcised (2:3-5). Separate tables reerected the barrier between Jew and Gentile that the Gospel had overthrown (cf. later 3:26-28). It symbolically relegated believers of Gentile background to second-class status. It said to them, “If you want to really be members of the People of God, you must become fully Jews through circumcision and full observance of the ritual requirements of the law” (the “works of the law”). That is why Paul can characterize Peter’s action as “compel[ling] the Gentiles to live like Jews” (v 14).

Paul’s recalling here of an incident that ended up in his total isolation makes sense in view of his overriding purpose in this section of the letter,
which is to establish his independence from the leading apostles. The intruders may have been telling the Galatians that Paul suffered a defeat in Antioch and submitted to the authority of Peter. Paul firmly rejects any hint of submission: he publicly called Peter to account in the name of the truth of the Gospel.

**Justification through Christ Means No Going Back to the Law: 2:15-21**

15We, who are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles, 16[yet] who know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. 17But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves are found to be sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? Of course not! 18But if I am building up again those things that I tore down, then I show myself to be a transgressor. 19For through the law I died to the law, that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. 21I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

This passage is best understood as a continuation of Paul’s remonstration to Peter during the confrontation at Antioch. He allows the Galatians to “overhear” his rehearsing for Peter’s benefit what it meant, at radical depth, for Jews such as Peter and himself to become believers in Jesus.

Paul begins by first stating the conventional Jewish attitude to Gentiles that he and Peter would previously have held: “We . . . are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles” (v 15). On this view, Jews are “holy” simply in virtue of belonging by birth to the People of God; through not belonging to that people, Gentiles are simply “sinners.” The following sentence (v 16) describes the conversion that each had undergone: “knowing”—or having come to know—“that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law.” Within the worldview that Paul presupposes, justification is the verdict of acquittal or approbation that each Jewish person hopes to receive from God at the great judgment; it amounts to being declared righteous or in right relationship with God.