

GALATIANS—WEEK 1

TECHNIQUES FOR SLOW GROWTH



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The cover picture is Peter and Paul by El Greco (1541–1614)
It depicts the confrontation described in Galatians 2:11.*

Paul is upset that the Galatians have been led astray by a group of Judaizers into thinking they need to be circumcised to be Christians. He starts his apologetic case against them by establishing his authority and by pointing out the confirmation he received from Peter, James, and Paul.

More logic to come.

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Galatians, Week 1 — Techniques for Slow Growth
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1 Galatians 1:1–9 (ESV)

Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, 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 to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Paul is hopping mad, but notice who he’s angry with. It’s not the Galatians; it’s whoever *is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received*. Paul is *astonished* that these false teachers were able to mislead the Galatians with their *distorted gospel*. He’s so angry he says, twice, “*let him be accursed*.”

That’s pretty strong stuff. Christianity is still new, and a lot of people don’t have their doctrine sorted out yet. What could possibly get Paul so worked up?

As we’ll soon see, these *accursed* preachers are teaching that Christians must be circumcised. Sure, they’re wrong, but it’s the timing that really trips Paul’s wire. You see, this letter was written after the Jerusalem council, possibly right after it (see Galatians 2:1). The council was a gathering of the apostles that decided, once and for all, that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised.

So when Paul finds out that Judaizers have invaded churches he planted and are making folks get circumcised, he gets as hot as Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. Lacking any tablets to smash, he takes out his anger on these Judaizers with this brilliant epistle. Welcome to anger meets logic.

But notice that Paul doesn’t mention the specific doctrinal issue (yet). That’s important because the lesson is meant to be general.

Anyone who distorts the gospel is *accursed*.

We need to pay attention to this. America is the land of a thousand gospels. We’ve moved past debates over circumcision, but there’s no shortage of theological issues to debate. Many of these are worthy and thought provoking. Others are quite minor and not worth much attention.

But some points of view are fatal distortions of the gospel.

Know the difference.

2 Galatians 1:10–17

For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

This feels defensive. Paul is obviously responding to criticism. Apparently, the people who preached “another” gospel argued against the true one by attacking the one who taught it—Paul. No surprise there.

So, in defending the gospel he preached to the Galatians, Paul has to defend himself. This is a delicate operation, since he doesn't want to brag.

That's why this passage reads the way it does. Paul starts out super self-deprecating—calling himself a bondservant (dou-los, δούλος). A doulos is a slave (maybe temporary)—the lowest class of person.

Then he goes on to recount his conversion, simultaneously confessing having committed great wrongs while giving God the full credit for his transformation. It's very personable and sincere.

But there's something else that comes out—confidence. Even though this letter starts out admonishing the Galatian church for their quick falling away from the true gospel, it still has a warm, solid feel. Paul planted this church and his bond with them is familial.

These people are his kids.

Fostering, even directing, relationships like this is a key function of the church. New Christians need mentors. Actually, every Christian needs someone to lead them forward in Christ. Often that comes through organizations like The Fellowship of Ailbe.

But churches often neglect this, particularly after the great COVID hiatus. Who's mentoring or shepherding you? Who are you mentoring or shepherding? Is your church doing anything to push this?

We need to get this back on track.

Strong mentoring grows strong Christians.

3 Galatians 1:18–24

Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother. (Now concerning the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie.)

Afterward I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. And I was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ. But they were hearing only, "He who formerly persecuted us now preaches the faith which he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God in me.

Paul continues with his life story, but right in the middle of this is a comment with interesting implications. *But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord's brother.*

Paul is describing his relative isolation, but incidentally implies, most certainly, that James is an apostle. That brings the total to fourteen (including Paul). Remember, the apostles replaced Judas with Matthias because they thought the number had to be twelve.

"Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."

And they proposed two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. ... And they cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles. — Acts 1:21–23, 26

But they were wrong; the number doesn't have to be twelve. Including Paul and James shows that the apostles eventually recognized this.

This raises an important point—the apostles weren't infallible. Of course, it doesn't matter much that the apostles were wrong in thinking that there had to be exactly twelve of them. That number isn't important. Still, it sets the stage for a number of debates where the apostles didn't all agree (e.g., circumcision).

It's scripture that's infallible, not the apostles.

This has practical applications in our lives. The study of Christianity includes trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. That should humble us. Our understanding of any issue is simple-minded, if not downright wrong.

Everybody is wrong sometimes. As an inventor, I can tell you from personal experience that being wrong is the secret to inventing. You have to love being wrong. If your first idea works, then the invention is too easy to be patentable. If it doesn't work, that's when the fun starts. The key is to not be discouraged.

A lifetime of studying God leads to recognizing how limited our understanding of Him is.

You don't have to love being wrong, but you have to be comfortable with it. It's the key to growth.

4 Galatians 2:1

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with me.

Time out (pun intended). Fourteen years? Galatians 1:18 mentions three years before his first trip up to Jerusalem. The fourteen years mentioned here might include the three. If not, the total is seventeen years. Whether it was fourteen or seventeen, that's the better part of a generation. Why so long?

This takes a little time to unravel, but it's clear that Paul's ministry had to wait a long time to get off the ground. In Acts 9:23-30, Paul tried preaching right after his conversion and that did not go well. After rescuing Paul from mob violence a couple of times, the disciples decided that they had seen enough and packed him off to Tarsus.

This is a wonderful example of how God's timing isn't our timing. This delay sounds excessive, but is it disproportionate to what lay ahead? Paul's background gave him a great foundation for his ministry, but his training was far from complete. There was, for example, nothing in his background that prepared him for trials. He had the passion and fervor common to new converts, but he wasn't ready for ministry.

And the world may not have been ready for Paul's ministry either. Paul's mission included one of the great plot twists of the first century—including the Gentiles in God's covenant.

"He is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel." — Acts 9:15b

It looks like God gave the world a chance to get familiar with the basic concept of Christianity before unveiling the big surprise.

Great things take time.

If you're frustrated with how slowly you are growing in Christ, welcome to the club.

But take heart; Paul was frustrated too. We're impatient, and that's an impediment. God's timing takes some getting used to.

But objecting to it (even quietly) is a sign of spiritual immaturity. Being in a hurry reflects insecurity.

Trust God to run His creation. Relax; let God be God.

In my experience, it often feels like He's teaching patience even while granting our requests. One prayer group I'm involved with has become quite familiar with God answering prayer in baby steps. Quick answers happen, but only in situations where slow answers don't fit.

Trials happen, and they often last a long time. We want them to end, and we pray for them to end, but they rarely end quickly. Instead, they seem to linger and evolve. Then, finally, the endpoint is reached.

But if trials have a purpose, this sequence makes perfect sense.

5 Galatians 2:2–10 (ESV)

I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not forced to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. And from those who seemed to be influential (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who seemed influential added nothing to me. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles), and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Now we get to the point—circumcision. Paul’s goal in this section (and in the whole epistle) is to convince his readers that circumcision isn’t needed. The “*gospel contrary to the one you received*” mentioned in chapter one is that circumcision is required for salvation. That’s the “*different gospel*” that Paul is so upset about.

And for good reason. The true gospel is the gospel of grace; requiring circumcision mangles that.

So, Paul makes a clever case against requiring circumcision. He doesn’t use his usual style either. Typically, Paul uses logical argument to make his case, like when he used “*doulos*” earlier.

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ. — Galatians 1:10 (ESV)

But this time Paul makes an appeal to authority, and he does it shrewdly. Three times he mentions communicating with senior Christians (*those who seemed influential*). Then Paul mentions *James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars*. In other words, they *seemed to be* the most senior Christians (the leaders of the church). Paul’s use of the word, “*seemed*,” is an apologetic trick to make people think.

James and Cephas and John most definitely are the leaders of the church. It’s a safe bet that the Galatians know this too. So Paul seals the deal when he goes on to say that these three *gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised*.

Paul’s mission to the uncircumcised has been ratified at the highest levels.

The points that Paul makes are great enough by themselves, but how he makes them is a treasure too.

Don’t just study Paul’s epistles for their doctrine. Each one also gives a clinic on apologetics.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Which doctrines are essential and which aren't?
2. What are your mentoring relationships?
3. When have you learned much from being wrong?
4. When has God answered a prayer frustratingly slowly?
5. What's your favorite apologetic trick?

Items for prayer: