

Some Background to Galatians

We live in a world of divisions, where insiders decide who is to be accepted.

It was ever thus. Many in the Jewish community felt cut off from God. When Jesus set about bringing them in, he was opposed and crucified. But his disciples became convinced that, in Jesus, God was unilaterally ending division, by putting himself where they were.

This challenged many Jews. But Saul, a zealous Jew, dramatically changed his mind and joined the Jewish Jesus-followers at Antioch. When they sent him to share the gospel around the Jewish communities in Asia Minor, he quickly discovered that Gentiles welcomed the gospel.

But to become Christians, should they not become Jews... with all that implied?

For several years, the issue was kept below the radar. That could not go on. Saul had been commissioned by Antioch, who followed Jerusalem. The insiders told him to get back in line. Christians were Jews.

Saul, now calling himself by the Gentile name Paul, upped sticks to Corinth and then Ephesus. In a sort of truce, he would preach to Gentiles, leaving the Jews to others.

The truce broke down when some Jewish Christians tried to bring into line Paul's Gentile converts in Galatia, which was quite close to Antioch.

Paul erupted. If Gentile men were obliged to be circumcised, along with other Jewish 'works of the law', such as food laws, they would never join.

His letter to the Galatian churches went to the heart of the crisis. He developed powerful and creative arguments. He could be shocking, some of his reasoning could be bumpy. But, convinced that he was right, he took the argument all the way, memorably declaring that in Jesus, all divisions were brought to an end.

The battle for the direction of Christianity was not won quickly. Happily, Paul persisted. His view eventually prevailed that the gospel of God's love and blessing is for Gentiles as well as for Jews.

For two thousand years, Christians have led the battle to break down the barriers that shut people out from enjoying God's blessing. Yet divisions remain.

Paul's arguments, how he used them and his sheer determination still inspire us to challenge injustice and exclusion. That is the work of the gospel. It is why Galatians is worth studying.