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Resource Reading Guide

Galatians

by
Ronald L. Tyler

Galatians has had an immense influence on the history of Christianity. Marcion (d. 160 A.D.) placed it at the head of his list of books by apostles, and it has been preferred by many in subsequent centuries. During the early church period, more commentaries were written on Galatians than any other Pauline book.¹ Martin Luther, in the sixteenth century, wrote a large commentary on the letter, of which he said, "it is my epistle; I have betrothed myself to it; it is my wife." Read Luther on the opening verses of Galatians where Paul wishes them "grace and peace," and remember that the order is important. First comes God's grace and then peace. In our own century, Galatians has become the center for discussion about justification by faith, and other Pauline themes, along with Paul's view of ancient Judaism and the law of Moses. It can be understood from various disciplines: historical studies, theological studies, and ethical studies with the theological and ethical ones being the most profitable for the serious student.

Dictionary Articles

Orientation to Galatians can be found in a good dictionary or encyclopedia article. Though quite old now, Marcus Dods wrote the essay on Galatians in the **Dictionary of the Bible** edited by James Hastings (5 volumes, 1889), and it provides a good overview. The original **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia** (5 volumes, 1939), has a marvelous article by George Findlay which retains its value because he was a leading Pauline scholar of a previous generation. Findlay wrote:

This is a letter of expostulation. Passion and argument are blended in it. Hot indignation and righteous scorn, tender, wounded

affection, deep sincerity and manly integrity united with the loftiest consciousness of spiritual authority, above all a consuming devotion to the person and cross of the Redeemer, fill these few pages with an incomparable wealth and glow of Christian emotion. The power of mind the epistle exhibits matches its largeness of heart. Romans indeed carries out the argument with greater breadth and theoretic completeness; but Galatians excels in pungency, incisiveness, and debating force.

The recent revision of **The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia** edited by G. Bromiley (4 volumes, 1982), contains an article on Galatians by H. N. Ridderbos which is filled with learning. The **Anchor Bible Dictionary** edited by J. N. Freedman (6 volumes, 1992), has Hans Dieter Betz doing the article on Galatians in which he discusses current introductory issues such as literary analysis, Paul's opponents, the theological nature of Galatians, and its literary influence. Betz is especially noteworthy for his rhetorical approach to Galatians. The dictionary article by G. W. Hansen on Galatians in the **Dictionary of Paul and His Letters** edited by G. Hawthorne, R. Martin, and D. Reid (1993), will also give a current entry into contemporary concerns.

Introductions to the New Testament

There are various "standard" introductions to the New Testament, and the serious student should own at least one. W. G. Kümmel's work, **Introduction to the New Testament** (1975), remains the standard handbook though it is in serious need of revision. Brevard Childs' study, **The New Testa-**

ment as Canon: An Introduction (1984), contains a good bibliography to Galatians and is noteworthy for his discussion of its canonical function. Luke T. Johnson's work, **The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation** (1986), is one of the more stimulating of the introductions because of his independent reading of the problems and his excellent bibliographical summaries for each book of the New Testament. Donald Guthrie's introduction, **New Testament Introduction** (1990), is an exhaustive work giving major options and bibliography for most problems.

Three Contemporary Issues

There are three modern issues in the study of Galatians that the serious interpreter must know. The first is the changing views regarding ancient Judaism. No longer can Judaism be called a religion of legalism and "works-righteousness," which Jesus came to fight and which Paul rejected. The interpreter is encouraged to read E. P. Sanders, **Paul and Palestinian Judaism** (1977), for a book that has changed Pauline studies.

The second issue is the debate regarding Paul's view of the law. The best secondary source is Stephen Westerholm's investigation, **Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters** (1988). There is a fine survey article by Thomas Geer, "Paul and the Law in Recent Discussion," in **Restoration Quarterly**, Volume 31, Number 2 (1989), which relates the major books written on the subject and the varied viewpoints among scholars.

The third issue is the contemporary conversation about whether Paul believes we are saved by "our faith" or by the "faith of Christ." Opinions are strongly polarized on this topic since it can be interpreted either way grammatically. You are encouraged to read the excellent article by Douglas Campbell, "Romans 1:17—A Crux Interpretum for the *Pistis Christou* Debate," in **The Journal of Biblical Literature**, Volume 113, No. 2 (Summer, 1994). A leading scholar who argues for "our faith" rather than the "faith of Christ" is James Dunn while a leading scholar in favor of the "faith of Christ" is Richard Hays, both of whom are discussed in Campbell's article. When the dust settles, a likely discovery may be that it is a passage by passage issue and that in some verses the "faith of Jesus Christ" fits the context best.

One Volume Commentaries

One-volume commentaries, while too brief for serious study, do give a good overview. Two stand out on Galatians: William Baird's coverage in the

Harper's Bible Commentary (1988) provides a fine brief overview, while Joseph Fitzmyer's longer study in **The New Jerome Biblical Commentary** (1990) gives a fairly complete study of Galatians (for a one-volume commentary).

Commentaries on the Greek Text

For those who can use the Greek text, there are some excellent choices. **The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians** by J. B. Lightfoot, although written 129 years ago, remains of permanent value for its examination of the language. Although some reject it for its age, the volume on Galatians by E. Burton in the **International Critical Commentary** series (1929) remains an encyclopedia of information, especially some of its word studies. The recent volume by F. F. Bruce in the **New International Greek Testament Commentary** series (1982) is a traditional commentary filled with helpful information and an excellent bibliography.

Commentaries on the English Text

The classic volume by William Ramsey, **A Historical Commentary on Galatians** (1900), gives the most thorough study of the background available. Ramsey was a great classicist, and his books on Paul remain of value. He can be updated with the recent Bible dictionaries.

The Galatians volume by George Duncan in the **Moffatt Commentary** series (1934) remains the best theological commentary on Galatians. Clearly written and easy to read, it is filled with surprises such as his comments on the Galatians 6:6 text traditionally used to justify ministerial salaries. Duncan reminds the reader that Paul is talking about supporting the teacher/preacher by "sharing all good things" such as encouragement for one who shares the word of God with others.

William Neil's small volume in the **Cambridge Bible Commentary** (1967) drives straight to the point of Paul's argument and gives one a quick survey of the argument of Galatians following the text of the **New English Bible**. Included at the end of the book is a perceptive study of the message of Galatians for today. Neil, correctly in my opinion, dates Galatians prior to the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, making it one of the earliest of the New Testament writings.

The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians (1969) by Robert Johnson is a clear handling of the text of Galatians in a brief and popularly written commentary. It is much more historically than theologically oriented although some theological exegesis is present.

Studies in the rhetoric of Galatians was given impetus by the magisterial commentary by H. D.

Betz in his contribution to the prestigious **Hermeneia** series in 1979. Betz interprets Galatians in light of Roman rhetoric and structures the letter accordingly. It is a thorough commentary using modern philological and rhetorical tools. The introduction's treatment of letter writing and rhetoric in the first century is stimulating. However, its lack of full use of Hebrew or Jewish background materials is a major weakness. Thomas H. Olbricht has convincingly argued in a regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature that Betz's use of Roman rhetoric is not the best approach. Instead, Olbricht argues that Greek rhetoric and Aristotle are more appropriate perspectives for a Hellenistic setting.²

The volume by Charles Cousar on Galatians in the **Interpretation** series (1992) is solidly helpful for the minister as a homiletic text for today and is one of the better New Testament volumes in that series.

Richard Longenecker's treatment of Galatians in the **Word Biblical Commentary** series (1990) is excellent on philology and traditional materials, especially as he reads between the lines.

Dieter Luhrmann's **Galatians** (1992), in the **Continental Commentary** series, is a translation of an earlier German work and forms one of the better volumes now available. Luhrmann is ever aware of the main points of Paul's theological argument. In addition, helpful discussions of Paul's opponents and their theology make this an outstanding commentary.

Galatians (1992) by Frank Matera, in the **Sacra Pagina** series, is a solid reading of Galatians. However a serious weakness is Matera's position that in Galatians 1-2 Paul is not responding to a criticism against his apostleship but rather is seeking to establish rapport with his readers.

J. D. G. Dunn has written a remarkable commentary in the **Black's New Testament Commentary** series (1993). It is current and one of the most helpful English commentaries for the serious teacher/preacher/student. Dunn's earlier and massive two-volume commentary on Romans has undoubtedly contributed to the worth of the Galatians volume.

Others

John Bligh's **Commentary on Galatians** (1961) is a theological commentary which the minister will find useful, although it contains a heavy literary and structural analysis which is often forced.

William Barclay's small volume, **Flesh and Spirit: An Examination of Galatians 5:19-23** (1962), can be very suggestive to the student since Barclay used his vast knowledge of classical language and literature to interpret the words relating

to flesh and spirit. No knowledge of Greek is necessary for the reader since Barclay was a great popularizer.

Although not a commentary, an older work, **Galatians in The Living Word** series (1965) by K. C. Moser deserves mention. Moser succeeds in holding up the cross and the theme of grace before the reader's eyes. The church constantly needs to hear this.

The American Bible Society prints a **Helps For Translators** series, and the volume on **Galatians** (1976) is solidly helpful as it takes one through the text of Galatians line by line, word by word, forming an exegetical commentary. The text of the **Revised Standard Version** and **Today's English Version** are printed along with the comments.

G. Ebeling's study, **The Truth of the Gospel: An Exposition of the Gospel** (1984), functions as a treatise in systematic theology and as a commentary on Galatians. It is based on the Greek text and has a clearly Lutheran emphasis. Ebeling provides help and stimulation for the serious student.

Pauline Theology

Since Galatians is such an influential book regarding studies of Paul's thought, a helpful theological wordbook is necessary. Alan Richardson's **A Theological Wordbook of the Bible** (1950), along with J. J. Von Allmen's **A Companion to the Bible** (1958), remains at the top of the list. Both books contain helpful articles on most Pauline themes. The Richardson volume has many shorter articles whereas the Von Allmen book has longer articles, though fewer topics. Ministers will find the series edited by Colin Brown, **Dictionary of New Testament Theology**, 4 volumes (1986), serviceable, especially since volume 4 is a complete index to the set.

Joseph Fitzmyer's study of "Pauline Theology," in **The New Jerome Biblical Commentary** (1990), is a minor classic which was first published in the earlier **Jerome Biblical Commentary** (1968). John Reumann's book, **Righteousness in the New Testament** (1982), is monumental and contains responses by two leading Roman Catholic scholars. Every preacher/teacher should read Reumann's remarks and the responses even though it is heavy reading.

There is an amazing wealth of secondary literature to stimulate and guide the reader/interpreter of Galatians. These will aid you whether your task is personal study or preparation for teaching or preaching.

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