Paul’s Opponents in Galatia
Joe Valenti

It is a consistent battle for many Christians to balance faith and works. We are so often convinced or driven by guilt to think that we can or need to do things in order to gain God's favor. The Gospel that Paul communicates, however, is a message of salvation by grace through faith. The Galatians, while gaining a foundation in their newly found faith in Jesus Christ, were also being indoctrinated by Judaizers that dismissed Paul’s teaching of justification by faith alone and replaced it with justification that was attained by adhering to the law. Because of this false teaching Paul was forced to write a defense in three main areas: justification by faith alone, his apostolic authority, and that true life in the Spirit was congruent with God's requirement for holy living (Kostenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 420).

The defense of the aforementioned things came in the form of the letter to the Galatians. Paul authored Galatians, assuming the South Galatian theory, around 48 or 49 AD shortly after his first missionary journey. The primary issue that was being pushed on the Galatians was the necessity to be circumcised. The argument that these agitators made was that God had promised His Kingdom to the members of Abraham's family (Gen 17). In order to be partakers in the messianic Kingdom you must be party of Abraham's family via circumcision (Drane 2000, 298). The Christian leaders in Jerusalem, in addition to following Christ, were still observing the law. This gave the many Jews grounds to believe that Paul, after he left his time with the Apostles in Jerusalem, had "struck out on a line of his own, omitting circumcision and other ancient observances from the message he preached, and thus he betrayed his ancestral heritage" (Bruce 1982, 26).

The names exact opponents or group of opponents that Paul was facing are unknown. We can see in several places throughout the letter that Paul is unaware of who, exactly, is teaching this false doctrine. In 3:1 Paul asks the question, "Who has bewitched you?" Again, in 5:7, he asks "who hindered you from obeying the truth?" Finally, just a few verses later in 5:10 Paul says, "I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is." We can assume from these statements, and the fact that Paul never names the agitators, that he was unaware of exactly who they were. It can be accurately assumed, however, that Paul's opposition was a group of Jewish Christians that wanted the Galatians to continue to follow the ritual-laden law (Witherington 1998, 23-24). Paul is so frustrated and disgusted by the claims of justification through ritual that these people have made that he wishes them to emasculate themselves!
The book of Galatians is broken up based on the 3 purposes of the letter. Paul begins by making the case for his authority to preach the Gospel. This is important if the rest of the letter is to be taken seriously. He explains his meeting in Jerusalem with Peter, James, and John, the fact that Titus was not asked to be circumcised, and concludes that "when [they] 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" (Gal 2:9, ESV). He then moves on to the second issue at hand, namely, the rebutting of justification by any other means than faith. Paul makes an excellent argument in verses 15-29 where he explains that the law came after Abraham and that God's promise supersedes the law. He fights against the idea that circumcision has any part in justifying us before God so far that he says that if they accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to them. Finally, Paul closes by reminding the Galatian Christians that life as a follower of Christ is a life lead by the Spirit; it is a life that puts to death the desires of the flesh. There were suspicions that having faith without it being connected to the law would lead to immoral living (Kostenberger, Kellum, and Quarles 2009, 424). Paul's answer is yielding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit which is evidenced by the fruit listed in verses 22 and 23.

Almost 2000 years later we need the same reminder. We tend to err in one of these areas or another. On the one hand, we get caught up in the devil's scheme that causes us to think that we can earn God's favor by working hard. On the other hand it can be so easy to rely on God's grace apart from the law that we neglect the call to holiness. Paul's letter to the Galatians not only served them, but it also serves us and reminds us daily that the only reason we can look forward to anything is because of the great grace that God has extended to us so that we might have faith and be rescued. And the enormity of that rescuing should draw us to our knees and to the Spirit from whence true life comes.
WORKS CITED


