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## The Trinity & The Nations: Insights From Galatians<sup>1</sup>

Along with the Northern/Southern Galatia debate,<sup>2</sup> whether Galatians should be read through Lutheran-colored glasses (e.g. works vs. law) or Sanderian spectacles (e.g. nationalism vs. inclusivism),<sup>3</sup> much of the scholarly argument surrounding Galatians has focused on the identity of Paul's opponents (e.g. insiders vs. outsiders, Judaizers or zealots, etc.).<sup>4</sup> In this brief essay, I will articulate my view of who Paul's opponents are. I should note from the beginning, though, that I will not attempt to rehash the debate at any great length whatsoever nor will I offer extensive arguments regarding my position—I have done that elsewhere and so have others.<sup>5</sup>

Following the “opponents” discussion, I will submit a few insights from the field of the social-sciences and how they figure into and help us understand the Galatian situation. This will lead into some discussion about Paul's view of God and ministry—a view, which, as we shall see, contains Trinitarian content. The next step will be to wed my views on the “opponents” and my findings from the “social-sciences” together. After

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<sup>2</sup> For a good discussion of this, see the introduction section of Ben Witherington's, *Grace in Galatia: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Of course, much has been written on this topic. For a short but very practical and detailed discussion of the subject, though, see James D. G. Dunn's, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Immediately, one thinks of the works of Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), or even more, Jerry Sumney, *Servants of Satan, False Brothers, And Other Opponents of Paul* (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1999) and *Identifying Paul's Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Two of my works on this subject are: “The Role of Change in Galatians: Examining the Exordium,” Annual Meeting of the Stone-Campbell Journal, Cincinnati, OH, March 2007 and “Innovation & Galatians: A Comparative Case Study,” Annual Meeting of the Stone-Campbell Journal, Cincinnati, OH, April 2008 (forthcoming). Again, see also the works of Dunn and Sumney.

this synthesis, I will address Paul’s view of sharing The Good News as found in Galatians and discuss both the implication(s) and application(s) that stem from this.

### Regarding Paul’s Opponents

As I noted in the introduction above, I will not rehash the “opponents” debate here but merely state my view—and of course, this view has some bearing on the conclusions I arrive at in this paper. The position I hold concerning Paul’s opponents in Galatians is as follows:<sup>6</sup> they are (1) a group of Judeans—in the socio-religious sense of the term—most likely connected to the Pharisees, (2) connected to the congregation in Jerusalem, which they see as “the” mother city and “the” mother Church and (3) a group who believes that Paul threatens the socio-religious structure of the Church with his innovative teachings. Again, because it is way too easy to get swept away in the “identity of the opponents” debate, it is probably beneficial that whether one agrees or disagrees with my suppositions on the subject, in order to get to the point of this paper, one should simply acknowledge them—not necessarily accept them—and move on.<sup>7</sup>

It is also my contention that (1) Paul knew a number of persons involved in the opposing group, (2) that the group came behind Paul after he had already evangelized the Southern Galatia territory, in an attempt to undo his work, (3) at least one of Paul’s converts contacted Paul and either directly or indirectly informed him of what the Judaizers<sup>8</sup>—yes, I think that is a valid term—were up to, and (4) Paul, on learning of

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<sup>6</sup> I am assuming that my readers are familiar enough with Galatians that I do not need to cite a multitude of verses. Thus, in this essay, I will only offer verse markers when absolutely necessary.

<sup>7</sup> Given the nature of the “summit”, that is, as an unofficial academic event, this paper is not nearly as thorough in citation or length as would normally be the case. That is not to say that the summit and the paper are un-scholarly in content or nature, it is to simply make the point that in a more formal academic setting—not the blogosphere—a more decorous paper would be offered.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Ukwuegbu is surely right concerning this term. See his work: *The Emergence of Christian Identity in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians: A Social-Scientific Investigation into the Root Causes for the Parting of the Way between Christianity and Judaism*, (Germany: Bonn, 2003), esp. 102-14. In my

these things, writes his letter—what we refer to as Galatians—addressing the matter(s). In a nutshell, this is my reconstruction of the Galatian situation. This is not a protracted description of the issue and should not be read as such. The purpose of stating these details is to simply inform the reader of my presuppositions—based on research—and to set the stage for discussion of some of the social factors at work in the situation.

Before I move on, though, I also want to point out that, in my estimation, the most significant factor at play here has to do with how Paul and his opponents perceive one another. In short—again, I have argued this at length elsewhere<sup>9</sup>—each side perceives the other as deviant.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the reason they perceive one another this way—and this is where I differ from P. Esler, who has also noted elements of deviance in Galatians—has to do with the fact that each side believed the other was attempting to be innovative. At this juncture, I will offer a few thoughts on this topic.

#### Regarding Social Factors

From a personal standpoint, much of my research within the fields of anthropology, social-sciences and the New Testament has dealt with innovation. Simply put, I have spent a lot of time—and will continue to do so—attempting to show how understanding processes of innovation and change can contribute to things such as community disruption, community benefit, social disequilibria, communal conflict, personal conflict, etc. Sometimes change or innovation can be offered to a community

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opinion, this is one of the best works on Galatians to-date. Sadly, it has not been given much acclaim and has somehow, slipped under the radar screen of many scholars.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example my: “The Role of Change in Galatians”.

<sup>10</sup> For a good discussion of deviance in the context of Galatians, see the works of Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* NTR (New York, NY: Routledge 1998) and John M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Pub., 1988).

and once accepted and adopted, the community will be better off.<sup>11</sup> However, it is often the case that the exact opposition occurs: innovation results in opposition.<sup>12</sup>

Pertaining to the Galatian situation, Paul's opponents challenge him because they perceive him to be an innovator, that is, someone who is offering unhealthy change to the Galatian communities. They believe that Paul's novel ideas not only bring imbalance to the community but also spiritual pollution.<sup>13</sup> Further, in a world where "new" was out and "old" was in, Paul's seemingly unorthodox teachings were nothing but trouble. So, to make Paul look bad, the Judaizers appeal to the fact that Paul has changed the teachings of Moses.<sup>14</sup> For extra support, they try to point out that Paul himself has been through a number of changes.<sup>15</sup> Thus, by painting Paul as an innovator and unstable character, the opponents believe they can sabotage Paul and his work.

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<sup>11</sup> For more on innovation, see Everett M. Rogers' monumental study, *The Diffusion of Innovations*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003). Be sure to access his great bibliography for more sources.

<sup>12</sup> See: *Blackwell Handbook of Social Psychology: Group Processes* (Blackwell Handbooks of Social Psychology) eds. Michael A. Hogg and Scott Tindale Blackwell, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2001) and Carsten K. W. De Dreu, *Group Consensus and Minority Influence: Implications for Innovation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001). There are many case studies on this phenomenon. See each of these extensive bibliographies for more resources.

<sup>13</sup> See the work of Mary T. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge Classics Ed.), (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002) and some of the New Testament scholars who have applied her concepts: David A. DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2000) or Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2001), J. Neyrey & B. Malina, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 1996) and B. J. Malina & J. J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> For example, Paul's incorporation of first-person plural rhetoric into the *exordium* at two junctures (e.g. Gal. 1.8, "we are cursed" and 1.9, "Now, and even as we stated earlier"—emphases mine) should be read as defense mechanisms. Both involve Paul and the community of believers that surround him as he writes the letter, namely, those that are mentioned in 1. 2. If he can show that not only he, but also that the community of believers with him hold the view that both those who preach and those who accept a false gospel are under a curse, then in opposing Paul, the Galatians are also opposing the Antiochene Christians.

<sup>15</sup> Again, the fact that Paul speaks in first-person in the opening verses, using phrases such as, "I am surprised," "If I or an angel," "I say to you," "Do I now rely on the favor of men or do I still seek the favor of God" and "If [I rely on] men, I am not a servant of Christ" all show that Paul sees himself as both one being attacked and one who needs to defend himself. Later in the epistle, at 5.11, Paul's argument is

Paul, however, writes back to the Galatians defending himself and his ministry. He argues, for instance, that his “change” should not be viewed as bad because it was God Himself who enacted the change.<sup>16</sup> Yet, this is not his trump card. More than anything else, Paul attempts to show how, if anything, it is his opponents who have changed things. It is at this point that Paul goes back to the story of God’s covenant with Abraham.<sup>17</sup>

In citing this story, Paul is attempting to make the following point: When God made His covenant with Abraham, God said that He would bring all nations together in Him, to be one. Paul’s belief is that through Christ, this is happening. In other words, Paul sees God’s covenant promise with Abraham being fulfilled through Christ who will unite Jew and Gentile together. This is what, at least in part, the Judaizers were railing against. They acknowledge that Gentiles could come into the fold but only by donning the nationalistic cloak or badge of the Mosaic Law. In my opinion—once again, I shall not mine the depths here—not only is this at the heart of Paul’s correspondence to the Galatians, this is at the very heart of both Paul’s understanding of who God is and the ministry that His people are to do.

#### Regarding Paul’s View of God & Ministry

If I am correct that Paul’s view of God and ministry are based on God’s covenant with Abraham—which is being fulfilled in Christ—then this implies a number of things. Firstly, it lends credence to the fact that Paul is not the “innovator” in Galatians but in fact, the Judaizers are. To put it differently, Paul used to have a similar mindset to his

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that if he were still preaching circumcision, he would not be facing persecution. However, the very fact that he is still being persecuted is proof that the Judaizers are lying; Paul had not changed his message.

<sup>16</sup> See Gal. 1.15-6 and 1.24.

<sup>17</sup> See Gal. 3.1-14 and Gen. 12.1-9 and 15.1-21.

opponents. He used to think that it was God's plan to keep Jews and Gentiles separate. After encountering God through the Spirit and Christ, though, his thinking changed. In fact, his exegesis, we might say, of the Abrahamic covenant changed dramatically; he realized that he had been reading it erroneously all along—as his opponents are. With this in mind, Paul makes much of the fact that if he were to hold on to his old view—the view of his opponents—he would be the innovator, for, he would be making a new or novel reading of the text. However, he now realizes that he was simply misreading it all along. Thus, he is not the innovator, his opponents are. His reading is more orthodox than theirs.

Secondly, if Paul's understanding of God is based on the Abrahamic covenant, then we can expect that this would also influence Paul's understanding of ministry. At the risk of being simplistic, I shall state my case in the following way: After meeting Christ, Paul's realized that God's plan was not to exclude but include people, that is, to unite all peoples (and creation) together via Christ. To employ a couple of popular phrases: “out of the many, one” or “God shall be all in all”. Out of the many nations of the world (that is, all of them), in Christ, God will make one, united people.

Thirdly, it may be here that the foundations of Paul's Trinitarian thinking came into play.<sup>18</sup> For Paul, God's mission could not help but reflect God's character and

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<sup>18</sup> I went through Galatians, chapter-by-chapter, and totaled Paul's references to the member of the Godhead. Clearly, as you can see from the results in the table of footnote 19, Paul has a Trinitarian theology in the works. Given the sheer number of terms and their usage by Paul, this cannot simply all be coincidence or happenstance:

nature. And if God’s mission were to form “one out of the many”, that is to say, if God’s mission was concerned with community, then His character and nature surely would reflect that. God, then, for Paul, became a communal God or the “one and the many”. To put it in modern terms, it is not difficult to see how Paul’s Trinitarian theology<sup>19</sup>—though not explicitly stated—existed and influenced how he now thought about, viewed and lived in the world. Paul’s view of ministry or missions was built on and flowed from the foundation of God’s nature—God is the one and the many or the one and the three.

#### Regarding Conclusions of the Matter

Some may not be convinced by what I’ve offered here. Others may well be convinced. Still others may perceive places where I may have stopped too short or gone too far. Needless to say, there are many gaps to be filled in this short essay. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, I was not attempting to say all that I could or all that needed to be said—I was aiming to be concise. I began by noting my position on the “opponents” debate, then I moved into the social context of the situation and from there I attempted to offer some thoughts on Paul’s theology of God and ministry. To conclude, it is clear to me that Trinitarian elements were at work in Paul’s letter to the Galatians—his earliest letter. Further, in my view, this all has implications not only for how we read

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Paul’s References to the Members of the Godhead in Galatians ©Michael Halcomb				
	Father	Jesus Christ	Holy Spirit	=
Chapter 1	8	9		<b>17</b>
Chapter 2	4	10		<b>14</b>
Chapter 3	9	12	4	<b>25</b>
Chapter 4	8	4	3	<b>15</b>
Chapter 5	1	6	8	<b>15</b>
Chapter 6	2	5	3	<b>10</b>
=	<b>32</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>96</b>

Paul's earliest epistle but, because Trinitarian theology is already at play, it also affects how we read portions of Paul's other works (e.g. 1 Cor. 15 among others).

As a pastor/minister, I often encounter persons who struggle to understand the Trinity. While I believe it is a complex mystery, I also believe that when we realize the fact that God's nature reflects His mission, it is not that hard to understand. Thus, when people ask me to explain it to them, instead of giving metaphors like many of the earlier Fathers did, I turn to Galatians and explain that in the same way that God's plan is for us to gather multiple persons to be one people, so God is multiple persons but one Godhead. In my thinking, this is the most helpful and beneficial way to understand and explain both the Trinity and God's plan. Paul's view of God's nature is the basis of his view of ministry: the one and the many. God's nature reflects His plan.

Another implication that this has is that it might influence and broaden our perspective on both early Trinitarianism as well as Christian mission. As far as application, then and now, we might do well to reiterate the notion of "the one and the many". Just as well, we might also think more about inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, Christianity, like all other religions is exclusive but the one thing that makes Christianity quite different is that there is always an open invitation—despite gender, status, nationality, etc. as Paul affirms in Gal. 3.28. In fact, it might be good to close on that passage that has been dubbed Paul's "Emancipation Proclamation", a passage which reminds us that, as the many, "we are all one in Christ" (Gal. 3.28).