

ECC Growth Groups – Term 2, 2014
Study 4 – Galatians 3:1-18

Big Idea: The Galatians have been bewitched and Paul responds to their foolishness by showing that they are to continue how they started – by believing the Gospel message they heard rather than by observing the law

Study Aim: That group members will realise and live out that the Christian life is all about faith in the Gospel and not about relying on what we do

Sharing

Have one/two people share their story of how the Gospel changed their life and how they've been challenged and encouraged in their Christian life to stick with the Gospel.

Discussion Starter

What are some rules and regulations that people say we should follow in order to be a 'real' or a 'serious' Christian?

Bible Reading

Read Galatians 3:1-18.

Passage Questions

What words does Paul use to describe what has happened to the Galatians?

“Foolish”; “Bewitched” (v 1)¹.

¹ Paul also says in this same verse that *“Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified”* before their eyes. If this happens to confuse some people it might be helpful to know that the Galatians had indeed not been in Jerusalem when Jesus died on the cross but rather that Paul makes use of this vivid language to describe his sharing of the Gospel with the Galatians. It was through his preaching that Jesus was presented before them as crucified.

Activity

Split your group into three smaller groups. Have each group complete one column (relating to one verse) from the table below².

	Verse 2	Verse 3b	Verse 5
What is the question?	<i>Did the Galatians receive the Spirit by observing the law or by believing what they heard?</i>	<i>After beginning with the Spirit are the Galatians now trying to attain their goal by human effort?³</i>	<i>Does God give his Spirit to the Galatians, and work miracles among them, because they observe the law or because they believe what they have heard?</i>
What is being contrasted?	<i>Observing the law vs believing the message/Gospel that they heard</i>	<i>Spirit vs human effort/flesh</i>	<i>Observing the law vs believing the message/Gospel that they heard</i>
What is the expected answer?	<i>The Galatians received the Spirit by believing what they heard (the Gospel)</i>	<i>Paul is concerned that they may have shifted from continuing as they began (by the Spirit) and have now begun to rely on human effort/flesh⁴</i>	<i>God gives his Spirit and works miracles because of belief in what they heard (the Gospel)</i>

Bring the groups back together and have each one share their responses from the table.

² You will need to copy the table from the Word document that is able to be edited and then print out enough copies for each group to complete.

³ The ESV, being more literal than the NIV, is more helpful in its translation of this verse because it retains the Spirit vs flesh contrast of the original Greek. The NIV has captured the thought of the verse well but it misses this contrast between flesh and Spirit – a contrast which is so prominent in the rest of the book and in other writings of Paul (e.g. Romans). There are two dominant realms that we find ourselves in – either the realm of the Spirit or the realm of the flesh. Verse 3 (ESV) – “*Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?*”

⁴ This is a direct result of the false Gospel that has been introduced to these Galatian churches. The message of the false teachers was that the way you continued in the Christian life was different to the way you began – you continue by human effort/observing the law/works.

Passage Questions cont.

In verses 6-9 Paul calls on his readers to consider Abraham. What does Paul say about Abraham?⁵

Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6) – i.e. he was justified by faith. God, through his word (the Scriptures) announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham. Abraham was a man of faith.

Why do you think Paul refers to Abraham here?⁶

There are at least two aspects to this but if your group only gets one of them that is OK.

Firstly, Abraham's experience demonstrates that people are, and always have been, justified/made righteous by faith. This is against the alternative of being justified/made right by observing the law/works – the message proclaimed by the false teachers to the Galatians. Therefore, following the flow of Paul's argument, Abraham forms a key component in his opposition of the false teachers and their false gospel.

Secondly, and more related to the situational context of the letter, Abraham is particularly pertinent because these false teachers are saying that if the Galatians want to be real Christians they have to follow the Old Testament law. In response, Paul refers to one of the key figures of the very Old Testament they are appealing to and contends that he was actually a "man of faith", showing that it is "those who believe" who "are the children of Abraham". This in contrast to Abraham being a man of law-keeping and those who observe the law being his children.

Activity

In verses 10-14 Paul switches from talking about blessing to talking about curse (note the contrast between verse 9 and verse 10).

Split the group into the same three smaller groups from the first activity⁷. You can either assign one of the following activities to each group (i.e. each group does a different activity) or have all the groups do the same activity for the particular section they are given.

⁵ You may want to give people some time to read over the verses again for themselves before answering the question. The question is not necessarily complicated but in order to properly digest what Paul is saying your group members may benefit from some time to mull it over individually before feeling the pressure of being asked a question. (You could say, "Have a look over verses 6-9 on your own for a moment and then I'll ask a question to help us think about them together")

⁶ These "why" questions are useful because they move people beyond mere comprehension ("what") and help people gain the insights necessary to push them towards the purpose and main thrust of the passage. "Why does Paul refer to Abraham here?"

⁷ Sometimes retaining the same sub-groups for the duration of a study can make group members gradually feel more comfortable through familiarity. They get more used to being with those two or three other people (as compared to the ten or dozen others). It could become tedious doing it week after week, and counter-productive for the group as a whole to get to know each other, but on occasions it is useful to make use of this group dynamic technique.

Group 1 – Verse 10; Group 2 – Verses 11-12; Group 3 – Verse 13.

- (i) Paraphrase the verse(s) into your own words; or
- (ii) Create a drawing of the verse(s); or
- (iii) Produce a newspaper headline from the verse(s).

Allow the groups sufficient time to complete the activity and then have them come together and share with the other groups.

Passage Questions cont.

Why do you think Paul refers to the Old Testament so much here?⁸

Again, Paul is using the very Old Testament that the false teachers were using to show the Galatians the implications of accepting this false Gospel. It means that, verse 10, unless they can obey all of the Old Testament law they are under a curse (Deuteronomy 27:26). Additionally, verses 11-12, those who are justified/the righteous live by faith (Habakkuk 2:4), which is a different system to observing the law (Leviticus 18:5). Finally, Christ has actually redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (as promised in Deuteronomy 21:23).

How does verse 14 act as a good conclusion to this first section of Chapter 3?

Note the occurrences through verses 1-14 of “redeemed”; “blessing”; “Abraham”; “Gentiles”; “Christ Jesus”; “faith”; “Spirit”. All of these words are included in this verse.

Verses 15-18 sound quite complicated⁹ but how does this human example further strengthen Paul’s argument?

The law came many centuries after God’s covenant/promise to Abraham and does not cancel out that covenant/promise (like human covenants, it cannot be altered, and additionally it has precedence given that it was earlier). Therefore the inheritance still depends on the earlier promise and not the later law¹⁰.

⁸ Again, refer to the earlier footnote regarding the use of “why” questions in Bible studies.

⁹ You may find it helpful to re-read these verses. Try not to get too bogged down in the various details but rather focus on the way in which this section contributes to the overall argument.

¹⁰ Your group may want to explore matters regarding the law further but resist the temptation to do so in this week’s study. Paul himself anticipates such questions and it is to this that his attention turns next (see his question in verse 19 – “*What, then, was the purpose of the law?*”). Better to wait and see what he says in the following week’s study rather than spend time speculating in (relative) ignorance now.

Split your group again into the same three groups as earlier. Have them revisit the table that they filled out in the first activity and discuss the following¹¹:

Having now looked at the whole passage, how has Paul responded to the questions that he raised at the beginning?¹²

Application Questions

Bring the group back together.

What do we find attractive about relying on what we do for acceptance with God?

What do we find offensive about needing to trust the Gospel for acceptance with God?

How has this passage helped you to see that continuing to live by faith is the right move?

Prayer Points¹³

Praise God that the Christian life begins, and continues, by believing the Gospel message and not on the basis of the things that we do.

Praise God that we become children of Abraham, and receive the promise of the Spirit and the inheritance, simply by faith.

Ask God to help us to see the folly and danger of relying on what we do.

¹¹ Have each group focus only on the particular question they were looking at in that earlier activity. For example, the group looking at verse 2 – ‘Did they receive the Spirit by observing the law or by believing what they heard?’ – would restrict its discussion to how Paul responds to that particular question in the rest of the passage. On this occasion you don’t need to have all the groups share their responses when they come back together.

¹² This is another version of a summary question (mentioned in the footnotes of previous leader’s notes). They helpfully draw the passage and the study to a conclusion for group members.

¹³ You may like to split your group into the three sub-groups from earlier in the study for this prayer time. It’s good to pray as a large group but it’s also good to have some variety and have people pray in twos and threes as well. Sometimes this helps make those who are less comfortable with praying out loud more willing to do so. This would especially be the case on this occasion, given that they’ve spent such a large portion of the study with those same people. Their prayers can focus more specifically on what they have learnt together as a group from the passage.