

Three Major Points for Understanding Galatians

BLOGCAST

J.K. McKee

How can today's Messianic movement widely advocate that the Torah is still valid, when Galatians is clear that the Law of Moses was a thing of the past?

Paul's letter to the Galatians is undeniably one of the most difficult texts of the Bible for Messianic Believers to understand. Yet, I often do wonder why this letter often seems so difficult to understand. From a Messianic, pro-Torah perspective, Paul's comments are actually not that difficult to comprehend when placed into their proper ancient context. Paul refutes the idea that circumcision is the entryway into a covenant relationship with God—instead faith is the entryway into a covenant relationship with Him, as it always has been since the Patriarch Abraham (Galatians 3:6-9). What is difficult to often understand about Paul is *not* Paul himself, but rather what can appear to be longwinded opinions surrounding him. Indeed, as I conducted a lengthy study on Galatians years ago, with the commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*, much of the discussion that I had to work through on Galatians, largely involved these opinions. Particularly, I had to address how we are to confront, analyze, answer, and in some cases even deconstruct them as Messianic Believers. Paul is not the one that is difficult to understand—Pauline commentators often are.

The Apostle Peter wrote in the First Century, Paul's "letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16, NIV). Some people do not want to see that Paul, even in Galatians, actually values the role of God's Torah in the lives of human beings, as he certainly has to appeal to people relying on the accounts of Abraham (Galatians 3:6ff, 14, 16, 18; 4:22), Hagar (Galatians 4:24f), and Isaac (Galatians 4:28) *all mentioned by name*, much less all of the other Tanach individuals Paul refers to by implication. Some people want there to be a contrast between the Law of Moses and the "Law of Christ" (cf. Galatians 6:2) as though the two are totally separate or even divorced. Some people want Believers today to only be concerned with love and faith, and not see love and faith demonstrated by God's people throughout the rest of His Word, via tangible, physical actions. As Peter says, their problem is not just with Paul, but it is with the entire Bible as well.

Are some commentators of Galatians guided by an hermeneutic of NOT wanting to obey God? Or do they have a great sense of holiness and reverence for the Almighty, and what today's fallen world has become because of disobedience to His commandments? I am certainly guided by an hermeneutic where I desire to obey my Heavenly Father to the fullest extent, and believe that today's Messianic people have a great opportunity to right some of the misconceptions of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians. I do not want to see God's people punished by Him because of disobedience, but live out the Torah ethos of being a blessing to all (Genesis 12:2-3; Deuteronomy 4:5-8)! As Paul puts it, "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you'" (Galatians 3:8, NRSV).

Being Messianic people, who also obey God's Torah, *and* who actually heed Paul's message to the Galatians—is by no means going to be easy. In the present season of Messianic development, there is a great deal of theological and spiritual tension, particularly as it relates to where we will be in the future. The enemy does not want us to be a mature people, and wants us to be considered "fringe." The enemy wants us to be secluded and ineffective. The enemy wants us to be "proven wrong" from Galatians, and that faith in Yeshua cannot be properly balanced with an obedience to God's Instruction. The enemy wants us to remain sidelined so we cannot be effective in showing people true righteous living via the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is certainly sad for me to report that too much of the Messianic community only reinforces common Christian views of Galatians—***and we clearly have to do better!*** Richard N. Longenecker asserts, "today, how one understands the issues and teaching of Galatians determines in large measure what kind of theology one espouses, what kind of message one proclaims, and what kind of lifestyle one lives."¹ What is the proper grid by which we should view a text like Galatians? Furthermore, how do we properly engage with contemporary Galatians scholarship?

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), 301.

My commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic* does dialogue with respected Christian commentators such as Longenecker, F.F. Bruce, James D.G. Dunn, Hans Dieter Betz, and Ben Witherington III among others. They do have things to add to the discussion, lest we find ourselves interjecting ahistorical or pseudo-theological ideas that have little basis in fact—as can frequently happen in the Messianic world today. These are certainly teachers who have added some positive things to the conversation, and we need to be able to demonstrate areas of *both* agreement and disagreement. Where we disagree, we have to offer solutions to the problems that today's evangelical Protestantism is currently facing, having incorrectly interpreted Paul's words.

When I view Galatians, I am guided by an emerging and progressing Messianic theology, a message that places Messiah Yeshua at the center, and desires all of God's people to live in obedience to His Word. I know that there is a need to tackle the difficult questions that Galatians poses in relation to the continued validity of the Torah, while at the same time we need not hesitate to be self-critical of a Messianic movement that is experiencing growing pains. We need to know the mission we must perform in encountering either antinomianism or neonomianism: Has today's evangelicalism truly benefited from its widescale abandonment of the Torah and its principles?

Paul's letter to the Galatians is often completely removed from its ancient setting by the Christian layperson, and frequently Messianic teachers do no better. It is actually not that difficult to understand Paul's message, provided we look at his letter as a whole, and place ourselves back into the actual situation he addressed. When we do this, we actually find that Paul's letter to the Galatians has **unbelievable relevance** for the Messianic community and what we are presently facing. Rather than simply "responding" to supposed Pauline claims against the Torah, we can actually find unbelievably valuable instruction on how to confront issues of inclusion and equality in a Messianic movement that can have difficulty balancing its mission of Jewish evangelism, while welcoming in non-Jewish Believers who are genuinely called by God to be a part of it.

Do we suffer from those truly trying to "Judaize," i.e., force proselyte conversion onto non-Jewish Believers (cf. Galatians 2:11-14)? Is inclusion in the family of God truly contingent on one's ethnicity, or one's faith in God? Does the gospel message of liberation truly allow all people of all ethnicities—and even men and women (Galatians 3:27-28)—to be equal members of the *ekklēsia*? What is the mission that we are to achieve? These, and other questions, are raised from a detailed reading of Galatians.

Galatians is not a difficult text to understand, provided you know what the **three "silver bullets"** are for viewing it in a pro-Torah, Messianic light:

- **"Righteousness" in Galatians can include a corporate status as a member of God's people, every bit as it regards personal justification and remission of sin.** As a direct result of expressing faith in Yeshua the Messiah, individual Believers are made a part of God's corporate people. One's righteousness is to come via *faith and trust* in the good news.
- **"Circumcision" in Galatians is not so much an emphasis on a physical operation, but instead is more of an emphasis on the ritual of becoming a proselyte to Judaism.** In undergoing "circumcision," the non-Jewish Galatians would have discounted the power of the good news and faith in Yeshua as being the entryway to God's people, but instead an act of the flesh.
- **"Works of the Law" do not concern obedience to God's Torah, as much as they concern a specific way of following the Torah as determined by a sectarian Jewish community.** By Paul asserting that righteousness does not come via "works of law" (cf. 4QMMT in the Dead Sea Scrolls) while right to conclude that one's personal forgiveness does not come by human action, he is more specifically stating that inclusion among God's people does not come by following the Torah according to a specific group's set of values.

If you can understand these three things, then your own study of Galatians should go very well. Not only will you be able to have a fuller grasp on the ancient context of Galatians, but also its great importance for the growth and maturation of the Messianic community in the years ahead!