

# Bounded or Centered?

## The Book of Galatians

by Mark D. Baker

The sun beat down on the tin-roofed building on a dirt street in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. In the midst of a Saturday workshop I was leading on Bible study methods a woman said, “My friend told me that since I cut my hair I am no longer saved. Is she right?” After offering a compassionate word I said, “read Galatians and you will find the answer to your question.” Immediately three others asked similar questions. In an effort to rescue the planned agenda and take advantage of their interest in the topic I said, “Let’s study Galatians next Saturday.”

I suggested Galatians because it addresses the question of salvation by works and affirms that we are saved by God’s grace. I already knew that, and did not expect to be transformed through the study. I was wrong. Seventeen years later, after having led

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many workshops and courses on Galatians and written a book focused on Galatians, I continue to learn from this letter and God continues to use it to challenge and transform my life.

While preparing for the next Saturday’s study of Galatians, I read an essay by Richard Hays that began my passionate engagement with this Pauline epistle. Hays’ essay invited me to put aside Luther’s experience and let the letter itself shape my understanding of why Paul wrote it. I observed Paul’s deep concern that the unity of the Christian community was being threatened by confusion over who belonged to the church and what they had to do to maintain that identity. I still saw Paul proclaiming that individuals are saved by grace not works, but I now saw he proclaimed so much more—that Jesus has rescued us from the present evil age and its distorted understandings of God and the church (Gal. 1:4).



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Galatians critiques one way of defining Christian community and offers another. When talking about Galatians I often use terminology that I borrow from the late Paul Hiebert, an MBBS alumnus and missionary anthropologist. He wrote that a bounded group creates a list of essential characteristics and uses them to draw a line that determines whether a person belongs to that group or not. A centered group is created by defining a center and observing a person’s relationship to the center. The group is made up of all people moving toward the center. In terms of Galatians, Paul’s opponents display a bounded group approach by asking questions like: “Have you been circumcised? Are you believing the right thing and eating with the right people?” A centered group, rather than concentrating on the boundary line, focuses on the center—God. Therefore, the critical question is: To whom does the person offer his or her worship and allegiance? In terms of Galatians we might imagine Paul asking centered questions like: “Are you living according to the new creation reality created by God’s action through Jesus Christ? Are you trusting God for your security, rather than placing your security in certain rituals and beliefs? In which direction are you heading?”

I thank God for the privilege I have had to study Galatians with churches, students and church leaders. I have seen God use this letter to free them from the enslaving and alienating ways of a bounded group approach.

Attempting to do church in a centered group way, however, brings new challenges and questions. Do we stop talking about ethics? Paul tells us no, definitely not (5:13). Thankfully in the last chapters of the letter Paul models for us how to give behavioral exhortation in a centered group way and how to confront others when they have turned away from the center—Jesus.

The gospel of freedom proclaimed in Galatians is more radical than I thought on that Saturday seventeen years ago, and the implications and challenges for individuals and churches are much deeper and broader.

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