

# From Saul to Paul

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## His transformation and our own

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### Note 5. When was the Galatian epistle written?

This is probably the most controversial academic subject from the chronology of Paul's life. There have been a variety of postures concerning the moment in which he wrote the Epistle to the Galatians. Since the epistle itself does not give us an indication, we must base our suppositions on the information that we have about Paul's ministry.

This analysis depends principally on those to whom the epistle was directed. The name Galatia could refer to the official term used for the Roman province of that name or, in a general sense, to the ethnic composition of the Galatian people, embracing also in this case the region to the north of that province.

We are told that Paul visited Galatia on his three journeys. In the first, as we saw, he established the church in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, all cities in the southern part of the province. On his second and third journeys, as mentioned in Acts 16:6 and 18:23, Paul passed through Frigia and Galatia. Some interpret that this reference is to the ethnic region of Galatia, not to the province.

The theory known as "Northern Galatia" indicates that the letter to the Galatians was sent to the churches that were outside the province, in the ethnic region of Galatia (north of the province). According to this theory, the mention of Paul's passing through the region in Acts 16:6 and 18:23 means that he could have founded churches to the north of the region, not mentioned by Luke in Acts, which could be possible since Acts does not present a detailed registry of all that happened. This theory became popular in the 19th century, and is currently maintained by some important students of the subject.

On the other hand, the theory of "Southern Galatia" points out that the letter was sent to the churches established on the first missionary journey (as related by Luke) in the southern part of the province. Following are the arguments for this posture:

1. Paul (in contrast with other biblical authors) normally uses the name of the Roman provinces (not the ethnic regions) in his letters. The Roman province of Galatia existed from the year 25 A.D. (many years earlier).

2. The problems set forth are the consequence of a Jewish context such as that described by Luke when the churches were founded in the south of the province.
3. While it is true that Luke's account does not include all that occurred in the primitive church, it is difficult to imagine that the epistle would be directed to congregations that in the book of Acts, written later, are not even mentioned as having been established.
4. The references to Barnabas in the epistle (Galatians 2:1, 9, 13) would not make sense if the readers did not know him. We know that Barnabas only participated in the first missionary journey and not in the following journeys, when Paul might have founded churches in the north.
5. Students of the subject (Ramsay and others), based on the expressions of the original in Greek used in Acts 16:6 and 18:23, indicate that the reference is to the province and not to the ethnic region.
6. According to his own testimony, Paul focused on founding churches where the Word of God had not already been proclaimed (Romans 15:20). We know that Peter developed part of his ministry in the region that would correspond with the ethnic definition of Northern Galatia (1 Peter 1:1).
7. As we will later show, there are indications in the writing of Galatians that the Council of Jerusalem hadn't yet occurred, while we know that this was before the second missionary journey.

Many recognized sources, including W.M. Ramsay, F.F. Bruce, R. Picirilli, Charles Swindoll, the theological institute FIET and most of the bibliography consulted, coincide with the theory of "Southern Galatia" that we have assumed to be the case in this present work.

The theory that is used will define the date for the writing of the epistle. Those that maintain the Northern theory must place the epistle in a period later than the second or third missionary journey, whether among the intermediate or even among the final epistles written by Paul. Those that maintain the Southern Galatia theory, place it as the first epistle written among those included in the Bible.

In this second case, the more habitual supposition is that it must have been written between the first and second missionary journeys, just prior to the Council in Jerusalem. This would place the epistle in the year 46 or 47 A.D. This posture identifies the visit to Jerusalem mentioned in Galatians 2:1-10 most probably with the visit with help for the needy of Acts 11:27-30. Strong cases for this position (and thus reaffirming the theory of Southern Galatia) are the following:

1. The Epistle to the Galatians does not mention the apostolic decree of the Council of Jerusalem, that would have confirmed on behalf of the most recognized apostles of the church Paul's position, opposed to the judaizers. This reference would have been sufficient to define the principal subject of conflict of the epistle. Therefore, it is most probable that it was written earlier.
2. Peter's error (Galatians 2:11-14) would have made sense before the Council of Jerusalem, but would not be reasonable afterwards. It is hard to imagine Peter supporting with emphasis Paul's posture in the council and then later behaving as described in the epistle.

It is worth mentioning that even if the epistle is assigned a later date, it would not change our understanding concerning the process used by God to transform Paul's life, nor the interpretation of the truths revealed in the epistle itself.