

Who were “the Galatians”?

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There has been some debate about who the letter of Galatians was originally sent to. That is, who were the Galatians (3:2) ... or more precisely, where were the churches of Galatia (1:2)?

In Paul's day, Galatia referred to a Roman province that ran through the middle of what was then Asia Minor and what is now Turkey. The term is derived from the name for a migratory people known as either Celts or Gauls. These people migrated both east and west. It was their eastern move that eventually brought them to central Asia Minor.

In 278 B.C., they moved into Asia Minor to fight as mercenaries for Nicomedes, king of Bithynia. They continued to fight many of the local peoples until they finally were defeated in 232 B.C. and confined to an area in central Asia Minor. They designated this area by their name--Galatia (from Gauls).

In the course of history they came under Roman control and eventually found it wise to cooperate with Rome. This cooperation led Rome to grant more and more territory to Galatia. When Amyntas, king of the Galatians, was killed in 25 B.C., Augustus reorganized Galatia as Roman province, no longer using the term to describe only the ethnic area of the Gauls (who were very much intermarried by this time). Thus by Paul's day, Galatia referred to a political province of Rome which stretched from Pontus on the north to Pamphylia on the south, right through the heart of Asia Minor.



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So why the debate about who the letter was written to?

Because from the time of the church fathers until the 1800's it was universally accepted that the letter was written to churches in the northern portion of the red area on the map above. But there is no record of Paul ever planting churches there. Here's what happened.

Boundary lines were pretty fluid in the ancient world, so by the time of the church fathers "Galatia" only referred to the northern portion. Thus, the church fathers assumed

that's who the letter was written to since that was Galatia as far as they knew. And so throughout church history, teachers in the church followed the church fathers, until historians and archeologists realized that the southern portion was part of Galatia in Paul's day.

Now that we know that, it makes far more sense to see the "churches of Galatia" as the ones Paul started on his first missionary journey: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (you can read about them in Acts 13-14). Paul also spent more time with the churches in this area on the second and third missionary journeys (Acts 16:1-6; 18:23).



See below for pictures of the region.



These are the ruins of an elaborate temple built in honor of Caesar Augustus. Psidian Antioch was deemed a Roman colony by Augustus and it was this honor that made the city prominent.

The remains of a Roman aqueduct at Psidian Antioch.



The ruins of Lystra lie under this mound. Lystra was likely the hometown of Timothy.

