

Galatians 3:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto.

Analysis

Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto.

Paul shifts to a human analogy, addressing them as 'brethren' (adelphoi, ἀδελφοί) —a warm term despite his sharp rebukes. 'I speak after the manner of men' (kata anthrōpon legō, κατὰ ἄνθρωπον λέγω)—'I use a human example.' The word 'covenant' (diathēkēn, διαθήκην) can mean 'will, testament' or 'covenant'—both apply here. The perfect participle 'confirmed' (kekyrōmenēn, κεκυρωμένην) means 'ratified, validated'—a legally binding agreement.

The point: once a human covenant/will is ratified, 'no man disannulleth' (oudeis athetei, οὐδεὶς ἀθετεῖ—'no one invalidates') or 'addeth thereto' (epidiatassetai, ἐπιδιατάσσεται—'superimposes additional stipulations'). Roman and Greek law prohibited altering ratified wills or covenants without the original parties' consent. Paul's logic: if human covenants are inviolable, how much more God's covenant with Abraham? The Law, coming 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant (v. 17), cannot alter the original terms—faith-based blessing.

This verse introduces the covenant argument of verses 15-18. The Judaizers implicitly claimed the Mosaic Law altered the Abrahamic covenant, adding circumcision and Law-works as requirements. Paul insists this is impossible—God's covenant with Abraham, ratified by divine oath, cannot be modified by later legislation. The gospel of grace predates the Law and remains unaltered.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern covenants, once ratified with oaths and ceremonies (Genesis 15:8-21), were legally binding and irrevocable. Greek and Roman law similarly protected wills—once sealed, they could not be changed. Paul appeals to universally understood legal principles: covenants/wills are inviolable. God's covenant with Abraham, confirmed by oath (Genesis 22:16-18, Hebrews 6:13-18), is therefore permanent and unalterable. The Law's later introduction cannot modify Abraham's covenant terms—promise and faith, not Law and works.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does the legal principle of inviolable covenants (v. 15) support Paul's argument that the Law cannot alter the Abrahamic promise?
2. What does it reveal about God's character that His covenant with Abraham cannot be 'annulled or added to' by later developments?
3. In what ways might Christians today try to 'add to' the gospel covenant of grace through faith, and why is this illegitimate?

Interlinear Text

Ἄδελφοί κατὰ ἀνθρώπου λέγω· ὅμως
Brethren after the manner of a man's I speak Though it be but
G80 G2596 G444 G3004 G3676

ἀνθρώπου κεκυρωμένην διαθήκην οὐδεὶς ἀθετεῖ ἢ
a man's yet if it be confirmed covenant no man disannulleth or
G444 G2964 G1242 G3762 G114 G2228

ἐπιδιατάσσεται
addeth thereto
G1928

Additional Cross-References

Hebrews 9:17 (Covenant): For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.

Romans 6:19 (Parallel theme): I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.