Galatians as a hortatory text

(Iver Larsen, Revised October 2026)

There are different opinions about the chronology of the two sections of Galatians chapter 2. The discussions I have seen in various commentaries do not deal with the crucial matter of how a hortatory text is structured, and many people do not clearly understand the function of the Greek discourse connector DE which occurs in 2:11. So, the question is whether Gal 2:11-21 took place before or after Gal 2:1-10.

A hortatory text is intended to motivate the addressees to change their behaviour, and it is therefore very different from a narrative. In a narrative, the events are usually told in chronological order, but this does not apply to a hortatory text like Galatians. A hortatory text is not linear in structure, but has recursions, that is, it covers the same or similar ground several times in circles. Chronology is not important, but thematic progression is. The backbone of a hortatory text consists of four themes in ascending order of directness:

1. Stating the problem
2: Building motivation for change
3: Positive inducement for change and negative warnings about what happens if change is not forthcoming
4: Commands to change

In addition, the text will usually have an opening and closing.

To illustrate a hortatory text, let me quote a short one I have from an African language, Sabaot, thanks to my friend, Fred Surai:

“My friend, I came early to your home (today) because of something that hurts me a lot. I have heard that they beat you yesterday to the point of bleeding. Well, when you drank beer last year, you got so drunk that you fell into the river. Had someone not seen you fall into the river, you would surely have drowned. Last year again, you beat your elder wife so much that you chased her away. Your home no longer looks like the home of a person. It is just like a deserted home. All your cattle you have sold and then you went to drink beer, and didn’t even buy clothes for the children. And if your wives talk to you, you beat them up.

My friend, you leave beer, please.

Well, the day before yesterday they beat you so much that you lost your teeth. Yesterday again, they beat you till bleeding.

Is this beer not enough for you? Or don’t you see that it is beer which is killing you? But if you think that maybe it is not beer which is doing all these things, then, okay, go on sleeping.

I really feel sorry for you, my friend! If I had had bad intentions against you, I would not have come this far to tell you to leave beer alone.

So, if you hear my words, please, you leave beer alone.

Just take a break for one year so you can see how your home will then develop. But if not, you are close to death. They will beat you to death, and it is beer which will have done it, not a person. I do know that when you are drunk, you don't know what you are doing, and other people seem insignificant to you and you don't care whoever they may be. You have picked a fight with everybody around here. No one has been left out. Is it not like that? Or do you want to say they started the fight? Even if you keep quiet all these deeds are yours. I know that while I am speaking like this right now, you are thinking, "Where can I find beer today to go and drink?" It is that very beer you are thinking of that is going to kill you.

So, my friend, these deeds of yours hurt me greatly. Please leave beer alone. If you are clever, you'll listen to what I have said. But if you are stupid, do what you always do.

Good bye."

Notice how the speaker shows empathy with his friend throughout. He gives several examples of the negative results of beer drinking, and these are not in chronological order. These examples state the problems associated with beer drinking. There are both inducements for change and warnings as well as commands. The request or command to leave beer drinking is repeated 3 times with growing urgency.

I'll now give a brief sketch of some of the elements found in the hortatory text of Galatians:

1:1-5 *Building rapport and trust* (especially 1b). Problem hinted at: the core of the gospel, what Christ paid to give us freedom.

1:6-9 *Stating the problem*: Fanatic Jews have caused you to almost desert the grace of Christ. Indirect warning: Such fanatic false teachers will be punished. (The rebuke of the Galatians is still indirect with focus on rebuking the false teachers.) This happened after Paul and Barnabas had returned to Antioch (Acts 14:26-28).

1:10-24 *Building trust* in Paul, his authority and his message. Paul received his message by revelation from Christ (11-12, 17, expands on 1b). He was not taught by Peter or the other apostles, even though Peter was a friend, who could fill him in on the life of Jesus. Paul builds rapport through his own testimony, and he gives himself as an example of a fanatic Jew. But he has changed now. (This is an indirect motivation for the Galatians not to go back to what Paul has left – sets the stage for 4:12.)

2:1-10 *Building trust* in Paul and his message and also building the case for non-circumcision of Gentile believers. *Problem restated*: Some fanatic Jews had come to Antioch from Jerusalem to preach a different "gospel". *Indirect suggestion*: We did not give in to them for one moment (5), neither should you. Paul's position and message approved by the highest church authority of the time (6). Peter's authority over the Gentiles downgraded, but Paul's authority supported (7-9).

2:11-21 *Problem restated* with Peter as example. Some fanatics came to Antioch. Time not stated, but probably before the "false brothers" who occasioned the trip to Jerusalem. By rebuking Peter, Paul is *indirectly rebuking* the fanatics or false teachers who would not accept Gentile Christians without circumcision. By Paul refusing this teaching he is *indirectly asking the Galatians to do the same*. Up till now, Paul has only stated that this false teaching is in opposition to the good news he has been preaching and that those who teach it will be punished, whoever they are. Now he not only rebukes the great apostle

Peter for aligning himself with this teaching, but he also explains in considerable detail why it is wrong. Paul's speech starts in v. 14 and ends with v. 21. This *long reasoned rebuke* is placed immediately *before Paul goes on to rebuke the Galatians* in a similar way, explaining more about why this teaching is wrong.

3:1-5 *Direct rebuke* of the Galatians for having accepted the teachings of these fanatics. In order to support his refusal of this teaching, Paul explains in great detail the relationship between salvation by grace (Paul's message) and salvation by law/works (the false teaching).

3:6-9 *Inducement* to accept the faith option: You receive the blessings of Abraham.

3:10-12 *Warning*: Judgment if you choose the law/works option.

3:14 *Inducement*: Blessing restated.

3:15-25 *Inducement*: Exposition of the advantages and blessings of the faith option.

3:26-29 *Inducement*: Blessing restated.

4:1-7 *Inducement*: Advantage of position of son over slave.

4:8-11 *Indirect reprimand*. Why have you gone back to slavery?

4:12a *Appeal for change*.

4:12b-16 *Building rapport again* with an indirect reprimand in v. 15.

4:17-18 *Rebuking the fanatics again*.

4:19-20 *Building rapport again*.

4:21-31 *Inducement*: Consider the blessings of freedom over slavery.

5:1 *Command*: Do not turn back to slavery.

5:1-12 *Warning*: By following the false teaching you are leaving the truth and the grace of Christ. You will then come under the same judgment as those false teachers.

5:13-6:10 *Inducement*: Exposition about what the new life in freedom entails. This is also an indirect response to the false teachers.

6:11-18 Conclusion including further *inducement* (16) and *warning* (17).

In this brief overview of the hortatory structure it is clear that **chronology is irrelevant, but building up the case for change is important**. Before Paul can rebuke the Galatians directly, he rebukes the false teachers who came to Galatia recently, he then explains about how he got the highest support for rebuking the false brothers from Jerusalem, friends of James, who had come to Antioch shortly before the Jerusalem meeting as described in Acts 15 and also in Gal 2:1-10, and finally he tells about how he had to rebuke Peter on the same issue. The people being rebuked have progressively higher authority with Peter being the highest, and only after having told about this rebuke of Peter, can Paul proceed to rebuke the Galatians. It is likely

that the visit by Peter to Antioch would have been early in the history of that church. Peter would be curious to see this new development for himself, since he was the one whom God used to “open” the door for Gentiles to become Christians. It probably took place during the extended time that Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch (Acts 11:26). It was common for them to get visits from the main church in Jerusalem. One such visit is mentioned in Acts 11:27. It is unlikely that Peter would have acted as he did in Antioch after the matter had been extensively discussed and sorted out at the Jerusalem meeting. It is also unlikely that Barnabas would have been drawn into it, if it was after the watershed meeting in Jerusalem.

The main reason for many commentators to think that Gal 2:11-21 happened after Gal 2:1-10 is the assumption that things ought to be told in chronological order. But as I have tried to show, such an assumption does not apply to a hortatory text. The problems and admonitions in such a text are rarely told in chronological order, since that would be irrelevant for building up the case for change.

Gal 2:11 reads in Greek:Ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν Κηφᾶς εἰς Ἀντιόχειαν When Kephas came to Ancioch.

Many versions sasy “But when”, however, the Greek word δὲ does not mean “but”. It simply introduces a new topic and new character. The most accurate translation would be “One day (when) Peter came…”