

Mark Twain once noted: “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” One might speculate that as Mark Twain matured, he recognized that it was not his father who had changed. In today’s first reading, Paul is writing to the Galatians. As new Christians, they question Paul’s teaching and authority, in the same way a teenager might question the discipline of his father.

Paul’s missionary journey to Galatia was at a time when he had matured in his own understanding of God. He was the Apostle to the Gentiles who while having a keen understanding of the Jewish Law recognized that it was not essential to the faith of a Christian. In fact, it was very limiting to the spread of the faith. Paul taught the truth and the beauty of the Christian faith, without bringing along all of the requirements of the Jewish Law that he had once learned and so zealously practiced.

After Paul’s mission to the Galatians, other Christian missionaries came and found fault with Paul’s teaching. They stressed observance of the Jewish law, including the rite of circumcision. The individuals may have been Jewish Christians who had a narrow view of Christianity. One could not be saved by Jesus without first practicing all of the disciplines of the Jewish faith. And to bolster their own authority, they attacked the credibility of Paul. They cast doubts on his conversion story saying he could not have been trained by Jesus himself. They attacked Paul for diluting the faith in order to more easily win converts. Paul’s “gospel was thus not the full and authentic one held by “those of repute” in Jerusalem” (Intro, Gal 2:2).

Let us return to Mark Twain for a second. His actual name was Samuel Clemens. And his quote about the wisdom or lack thereof for his father, was entirely fictional. The truth is that his father died when he was 11 years old. At the age of 12, he left school to begin learning a trade. By age 18 he left home for work as a printer in big cities. In his early twenties, he learned to pilot a steamboat. This required a keen understanding of the twists and turns of the river and all that was invisible below the surface of the water that might hinder the movement of a steamboat.<sup>1</sup> So, there is no truth to the amount of learning acquired by his old man between the ages of 14-21. Without a father but with other guides and mentors, Samuel Clemens learned an awful lot during those 7 years.

Now back to the Apostle Paul and the Galatians. The truth is, that the gospel he preached was not something he learned through human origin. “For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:12). He admits his own mistakes in pursuing the law so zealously that he persecuted Christians. “The one who once was persecuting us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (1:23). And he explains how he needed to go to Jerusalem and challenge Peter about the most effective ways for reaching out to the Gentiles, those new to the faith. “I said to Cephas in front of all, ‘If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’” (2:14).

Paul stresses what is key and essential. Christ and his redemptive sacrifice on the cross supersede the old burdens of the law. If we are to be free in Christ, then there is only one law that must be observed, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14). And as Jesus did in contending with the Pharisees and the scribes, Paul points out the hypocrisy of those who are telling the Galatians they must practice the Law. “Not even those having themselves circumcised observe the law themselves; they only want you to be circumcised so that they may boast of your flesh” (6:13).

The issues Paul dealt with 2,000 years ago are present in our own day and age. “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccles 1:19). One political party cites all that is wrong with the other. One faction in the church finds all that is at fault with the pope or a bishop or a priest. When we find fault with the ignorance of another, it might be wise to step back and reflect on where we are at in life. Looking at the twists and turns of a river of thought is also helpful. What is below the surface that might snag you if you are unaware of it?

Is it possible that in asserting your own freedom, you are submitting again to the yoke of slavery? “In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal 5:6).

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<sup>i</sup> [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_Twain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Twain)