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“May this New Testament ‘ocean of truth,’ upon whose depths we have tossed and floated just a little, remain a favorite for you and may it give up over the years more and more of its treasure which this study has only begun to plumb.”

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GALATIANS 6:11-18

The mood at the end of Paul's epistle reminds us of what we went through at the beginning. Then, Paul seemed under constraint and in a hurry to get the letter posted. Here, too, Paul was forever insinuating new thoughts and ideas, but an end has got to be made somewhere. Finally, he seals it all and sends it on its way. You get the feeling, nonetheless, that in two days he will be kicking himself for not having included this idea or for having forgotten to explain a point. At the end he does bring in a totally new notion. He doesn't develop it for fear, one might suppose, that he might miss the mid-morning mail pickup. Still he squeezes it in, and it is interesting. He says the Judaizers motive is sheer cowardice.

You wonder if there was any substance to the charge, or whether Paul, in one last spasm of anger and disgust, lets them have it with a final blast. Here is the logic. The Jewish religion was one non-pagan religion which was tolerated by the Roman tyrant. Religions which were not tolerated suffered a terrible fate and their followers were viciously persecuted. If Christianity were to be regarded as a benign branch of the Jewish religion, Rome, likely as not, would pay it little heed. The rite of circumcision, if the Christians would simply include it as an integral part of their ecclesiastical system, would automatically mark it as being in the Jewish, and thus the tolerated realm.

If Rome saw Christianity as different from the Jewish faith, a breakaway sect, it would, without doubt, subject Christianity to its unique and highly effective style of cruelty and persecution. Rome did, in fact, see Christianity as distinct from Judaism and did most cruelly persecute the Early Church of Jesus Christ. All part of the commitment, says Paul. But those cowards, the Judaizers, who really aren't so interested in circumcision or Old Testament law as they would have you think, want you to look as much like regulars of the Jewish faith as possible so that you (and they) can escape persecution.

Interesting. Paul's charge may have had some element of truth in it. After all, Galatia wasn't the only place Paul tilted with the Judaizers, and he certainly knew them as well as anyone. What is most certainly true, and obvious, is that cowardice and accommodation of commitment to assure acceptance is not exclusively a first century malady. It's just as modern as electric blankets or computers. If ever you wonder where the overriding convictions of fifty years ago have gone, along with the spirit of Martin Luther and his well-known "Here I stand," look no further. We have become past masters at accommodation for acceptance sake in our day.

The postman is coming. So, Paul quickly throws in another call to be true to the cross, another flat statement that circumcision is a non-issue, and a reminder that he is the final authority in these matters and that he expects no more nonsense from them on this score and, oh yes, just one more thing: Grace, not law, or works, or bondage, *Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.* Amen. (Not the kind of sentence you set to music; the kind you deliver with a fist to the table.) Amen. So let it be. Through God's inspiration Paul has completed his letter to the Galatians.

People like to identify this or that book of the Bible as their favorite: the Song of Solomon for its beauty, or the Psalms for their poetic intensity; 1 and 2 Kings for their fascinating history; Ruth for its sentiment. Somewhere in there you have to give Paul's epistle to the Galatians some consideration. It ought to be in the running for its remarkable revelation of the personality of Christianity's most flamboyant saint, Paul, and for its matchless and emphatic statement of the Gospel of grace which is the very heart of our religion, and for its practical instruction developed in a "father knows best" style. May this New Testament "ocean of truth," upon whose depths we have tossed and floated just a little, remain a favorite for you and may it give up over the years more and more of its treasure which this study has only begun to plumb.



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