

Christianity & Liberalism

Christ (Part I)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Three points of difference between liberalism and Christianity have been noticed so far. The two religions are different with regard to the presuppositions of the Christian message, the view of God and the view of man; and they are also different with regard to their estimate of the Book in which the message is contained. It is not surprising, then, that they differ fundamentally with regard to the message itself. But before the message is considered, we must consider the Person upon whom the message is based. The Person is Jesus. And in their attitude toward Jesus, liberalism and Christianity are sharply opposed.

The Christian attitude toward Jesus appears in the whole New Testament. In examining the New Testament witness it has become customary in recent years to begin with the Epistles of Paul.¹ This custom is sometimes based upon error; it is sometimes based upon the view that the Epistles of Paul are "primary" sources of information, while the Gospels are considered to be only "secondary." As a matter of fact, the Gospels, as well as the Epistles, are primary sources of the highest possible value. But the custom of beginning with Paul is at least convenient. Its convenience is due to the large measure of agreement which prevails with regard to the Pauline Epistles. About the date and authorship of the Gospels there is debate; but with regard to the authorship and approximate date of the principal epistles of Paul all serious historians, whether Christian or non-Christian, are agreed. It is universally admitted that the chief of the extant epistles attributed to Paul were really written by a man of the first Christian generation, who was himself a contemporary of Jesus and had come into personal contact with certain of Jesus' intimate friends. What, then, was the attitude of this representative of the first Christian generation toward Jesus of Nazareth?

The answer cannot be at all in doubt. The apostle Paul clearly stood always toward Jesus in a truly religious relationship. Jesus was not for Paul merely an example for faith; He was primarily the object of faith. The religion of Paul did not consist in having faith in God like the faith which Jesus had in God; it consisted rather in having faith in Jesus. An appeal to the example of Jesus is not indeed absent from the Pauline Epistles, and certainly it was not absent from Paul's life. The example of Jesus was found by Paul, moreover, not merely in the acts of incarnation and atonement but even in the daily life of Jesus in Pales-tine.

¹ This method of approach has been followed by the present writer in *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1921.

Exaggeration with regard to this matter should be avoided. Plainly Paul knew far more about the life of Jesus than in the Epistles he has seen fit to tell; plainly the Epistles do not begin to contain all the instruction which Paul had given to the Churches at the commencement of their Christian life. But even after exaggerations have been avoided, the fact is significant enough. The plain fact is that imitation of Jesus, important though it was for Paul, was swallowed up by something far more important still. Not the example of Jesus, but the redeeming work of Jesus, was the primary thing for Paul. The religion of Paul was not primarily faith in God like Jesus' faith; it was faith in Jesus; Paul committed to Jesus without reserve the eternal destinies of his soul. That is what we mean when we say that Paul stood in a truly religious relation to Jesus.

But Paul was not the first to stand in this religious relation to Jesus. Evidently, at this decisive point, he was only continuing an attitude toward Jesus which had already been assumed by those who had been Christians before him. Paul was not indeed led to assume that attitude by the persuasions of the earlier disciples; he was converted by the Lord Himself on the road to Damascus. But the faith so induced was in essentials like the faith which had already prevailed among the earlier disciples. Indeed, an account of the redeeming work of Christ is designated by Paul as something that he had "received"; and that account had evidently been accompanied already in the primitive Church by trust in the Redeemer. Paul was not the first who had faith in Jesus, as distinguished from faith in God like the faith which Jesus had; Paul was not the first to make Jesus the object of faith.

So much will no doubt be admitted by all. But who were the predecessors of Paul in making Jesus the object of faith? The obvious answer has always been that they were the primitive disciples in Jerusalem, and that answer really stands abundantly firm. A strange attempt has indeed been made in recent years, by Bousset and Heitmüller, to cast doubt upon it. What Paul "received," it has been suggested, was received, not from the primitive Jerusalem Church, but from such Christian communities as the one at Antioch. But this attempt at interposing an extra link between the Jerusalem Church and Paul has resulted in failure. The Epistles really provide abundant information as to Paul's relations to Jerusalem. Paul was deeply interested in the Jerusalem Church; in opposition to his Judaizing opponents, who had in certain matters appealed to the original apostles against him, he emphasizes his agreement with Peter and the rest. But even the Judaizers had had no objection to Paul's way of regarding Jesus as the object of faith; about that matter there is not in the Epistles the least suspicion of any debate. About the place of the Mosaic law in the Christian life there was discussion, though even with regard to that matter the Judaizers were entirely unjustified in appealing to the original apostles against Paul. But with regard to the attitude toward Jesus the original apostles had evidently given not even the slightest color for an appeal to them against the teaching of Paul. Evidently in making Jesus the object of religious faith — the thing that was the heart and soul of Paul's religion - Paul was in no disagreement with those who had been

apostles before him. Had there been such disagreement, the "right hand of fellowship," which the pillars of the Jerusalem Church gave to Paul (Gal. ii. 9), would have been impossible. The facts are really too plain. The whole of early Christian history is a hopeless riddle unless the Jerusalem Church, as well as Paul, made Jesus the object of religious faith. Primitive Christianity certainly did not consist in the mere imitation of Jesus.

But was this "faith in Jesus" justified by the teaching of Jesus Himself? The question has really been answered in Chapter II. It was there shown that Jesus most certainly did not keep His Person out of His gospel, but on the contrary presented Himself as the Saviour of men. The demonstration of that fact was the highest merit of the late James Penney. His work on "Jesus and the Gospel" is faulty in some respects; it is marred by an undue concessiveness toward some modern types of criticism. But just because of its concessiveness with regard to many important matters, its main thesis stands all the more firm. Penney has shown that no matter what view be taken of the sources underlying the Gospels, and no matter what elements in the Gospels be rejected as secondary, still even the supposed "historical Jesus," as He is left after the critical process is done, plainly presented Himself, not merely as an example for faith, but as the object of faith.

It may be added, moreover, that Jesus did not invite the confidence of men by minimizing the load which He offered to bear. He did not say: "Trust me to give you acceptance with God, because acceptance with God is not difficult; God does not regard sin so seriously after all." On the contrary Jesus presented the wrath of God in a more awful way than it was afterwards presented by His disciples; it was Jesus - Jesus whom modern liberals represent as a mild-mannered exponent of an indiscriminating love — it was Jesus who spoke of the outer darkness and the everlasting fire, of the sin that shall not be forgiven either in this world or in that which is to come. There is nothing in Jesus' teaching about the character of God which in itself can evoke trust. On the contrary the awful presentation can give rise, in the hearts of us sinners, only to despair. Trust arises only when we attend to God's way of salvation. And that way is found in Jesus, Jesus did not invite the confidence of men by a minimizing presentation of what was necessary in order that sinners might stand faultless before the awful throne of God. On the contrary, he invited confidence by the presentation of His own wondrous Person. Great was the guilt of sin, but Jesus was greater still. God, according to Jesus, was a loving Father; but He was a loving Father, not of the sinful world, but of those whom He Himself had brought into His Kingdom through the Son.

The truth is, the witness of the New Testament, with regard to Jesus as the object of faith, is an absolutely unitary witness. The thing is rooted far too deep in the records of primitive Christianity ever to be removed by any critical process. The Jesus spoken of in the New Testament was no mere teacher of

righteousness, no mere pioneer in a new type of religious life, but One who was regarded, and regarded Himself, as the Saviour whom men could trust.

But by modern liberalism He is regarded in a totally different way. Christians stand in a religious relation to Jesus; liberals do not stand in a religious relation to Jesus - what difference could be more profound than that? The modern liberal preacher reverences Jesus; he has the name of Jesus forever on his lips; he speaks of Jesus as the supreme revelation of God; he enters, or tries to enter, into the religious life of Jesus. But he does not stand in a religious relation to Jesus. Jesus for him is an example for faith, not the object of faith. The modern liberal tries to have faith in God like the faith which he supposes Jesus had in God; but he does not have faith in Jesus.

According to modern liberalism, in other words, Jesus was the Founder of Christianity because He was the first Christian, and Christianity consists in maintenance of the religious life which Jesus instituted.

But was Jesus really a Christian? Or, to put the same question in another way, are we able or ought we as Christians to enter in every respect into the experience of Jesus and make Him in every respect our example? Certain difficulties arise with regard to this question.

The first difficulty appears in the Messianic consciousness of Jesus. The Person whom we are asked to take as our example thought that He was the heavenly Son of Man who was to be the final Judge of all the earth. Can we imitate Him there? The trouble is not merely that Jesus undertook a special mission which can never be ours. That difficulty might conceivably be overcome; we might still take Jesus as our example by adapting to our station in life the kind of character which He displayed in His. But another difficulty is more serious. The real trouble is that the lofty claim of Jesus, if, as modern liberalism is constrained to believe, the claim was unjustified, places a moral stain upon Jesus' character. What shall be thought of a human being who lapsed so far from the path of humility and sanity as to believe that the eternal destinies of the world were committed into His hands? The truth is that if Jesus be merely an example, He is not a worthy example; for He claimed to be far more.

Against this objection modern liberalism has usually adopted a policy of palliation. The Messianic consciousness, it is said, arose late in the experience of Jesus, and was not really fundamental. What was really fundamental, the liberal historians continue, was the consciousness of sonship toward God - a consciousness which may be shared by every humble disciple. The Messianic consciousness, on this view, arose only as an afterthought. Jesus was conscious, it is said, of standing toward God in a relation of untroubled sonship. But He discovered that this relation was not shared by others. He became aware, therefore, of a mission to bring others into the place of privilege which He Himself already occupied. That mission made Him unique, and to give

expression to His uniqueness He adopted, late in His life and almost against His will, the faulty category of Messiahship.

Many are the forms in which some such psychological reconstruction of the life of Jesus has been set forth in recent years. The modern world has devoted its very best literary efforts to this task. But the efforts have resulted in failure. In the first place, there is no real evidence that the reconstructed Jesus is historical. The sources know nothing of a Jesus who adopted the category of Messiahship late in life and against His will. On the contrary the only Jesus that they present is a Jesus who based the whole of His ministry upon His stupendous claim. In the second place, even if the modern reconstruction were historical it would not solve the problem at all. The problem is a moral and psychological problem. How can a human being who lapsed so far from the path of rectitude as to think Himself to be the judge of all the earth how can such a human being be regarded as the supreme example for mankind? It is absolutely no answer to the objection to say that Jesus accepted the category of Messiahship reluctantly and late in life. No matter when He succumbed to temptation the outstanding fact is that, on this view, He did succumb; and that moral defeat places an indelible stain upon His character. No doubt it is possible to make excuses for Him, and many excuses are as a matter of fact made by the liberal historians. But what has become then of the claim of liberalism to be truly Christian? Can a man for whom excuses have to be made be regarded as standing to his modern critics in a relationship even remotely analogous to that in which the Jesus of the New Testament stands to the Christian Church?

But there is another difficulty in the way of regarding Jesus as simply the first Christian. This second difficulty concerns the attitude of Jesus toward sin. If Jesus is separated from us by his Messianic consciousness, He is separated from us even more fundamentally by the absence in Him of a sense of sin.

With respect to the sinlessness of Jesus modern liberal historians find themselves in a quandary. To affirm that He was sinless means to relinquish much of that ease of defending liberal religion which the liberal historians are anxious to preserve, and involves hazardous assumptions with regard to the nature of sin. For if sin is merely imperfection, how can an absolute negation of it be ventured upon within a process of nature which is supposed to be ever changing and ever advancing? The very idea of "sinlessness," much more the reality of it, requires us to conceive of sin as transgression of a fixed law or a fixed standard, and involves the conception of an absolute goodness. But to that conception of an absolute goodness the modern evolutionary view of the world properly speaking has no right. At any rate, if such absolute goodness is to be allowed to intrude at a definite point in the present world-process, we are involved in that super-naturalism which, as will be observed later, is the very thing that the modern reconstruction of Christianity is most anxious to avoid. Once affirm that Jesus was sinless and all other men sinful, and you have entered into irreconcilable conflict with the whole modern point of view. On the

other hand, if there are scientific objections, from the liberal point of view, against an affirmation of the sinlessness of Jesus, there are also very obvious religious objections against an opposite affirmation of His sinfulness - difficulties for modern liberalism as well as for the theology of the historic Church. If Jesus was sinful like other men, the last remnant of his uniqueness would seem to have disappeared, and all continuity with the previous development of Christianity would seem to be destroyed.

In the face of this quandary the modern liberal historian is inclined to avoid rash assertions. He will not be sure that when Jesus taught His disciples to say, "Forgive us our debts," He did not pray that prayer with them; on the other hand he will not really face the results that logically follow from his doubt. In his perplexity, he is apt to be content with the assertion that whether Jesus was sinless or not He was at any rate immeasurably above the rest of us. Whether Jesus was "sinless" is an academic question, we shall probably be told, that concerns the mysteries of the absolute; what we need to do is to bow in simple reverence before a holiness which compared with our impurity is as a white light in a dark place.

That such avoidance of the difficulty is unsatisfactory hardly requires proof; obviously the liberal theologian is trying to obtain the religious advantages of an affirmation of sinlessness in Jesus at the same time that he obtains the supposed scientific advantages of its denial. But just for the moment we are not concerned with the question at all; we are not concerned to determine whether as a matter of fact Jesus was sinless or no. What we need to observe just now is that whether Jesus was sinful or sinless at any rate in the record of His life which has actually come into our hands He displays no consciousness of sin. Even if the words "Why callest thou me good?" meant that Jesus denied the attribute of goodness to Himself -- which they do not -- it would still remain true that He never in His recorded words deals in any intelligible way with sin in His own life. In the account of the temptation we are told how He kept sin from entering, but never how He dealt with it after its entrance had been effected. The religious experience of Jesus, as it is recorded in the Gospels, in other words, gives us no information about the way in which sin shall be removed.

Yet in the Gospels Jesus is represented constantly as dealing with the problem of sin. He always assumes that other men are sinful; yet He never finds sin in Himself. A stupendous difference is found here between Jesus' experience and ours.

That difference prevents the religious experience of Jesus from serving as the sole basis of the Christian life. For clearly if Christianity is anything it is a way of getting rid of sin. At any rate, if it is not that it is useless; for all men have sinned. And as a matter of fact it was that from the very beginning. Whether the beginning of Christian preaching be put on the day of Pentecost or when Jesus first taught in Galilee, in either case one of its first words was "Repent."

Throughout the whole New Testament the Christianity of the primitive Church is represented clearly as a way of getting rid of sin. But if Christianity is a way of getting rid of sin, then Jesus was not a Christian; for Jesus, so far as we can see, had no sin to get rid of.

Why then did the early Christians call themselves disciples of Jesus, why did they connect themselves with His name? The answer is not difficult. They connected themselves with His name not because He was their example in their ridding themselves of sin, but because their method of ridding themselves of sin was by means of Him. It was what Jesus did for them, and not primarily the example of His own life, which made them Christians. Such is the witness of all our primitive records. The record is fullest, as has already been observed, in the case of the Apostle Paul; clearly Paul regarded himself as saved from sin by what Jesus did for him on the cross. But Paul did not stand alone.

"Christ died for our sins" was not something that Paul had originated; it was something he had "received." The benefits of that saving work of Christ, according to the primitive Church, were to be received by faith; even if the classic formulation of this conviction should prove to be due to Paul, the conviction itself clearly goes back to the very beginning. The primitive Christians felt themselves in need of salvation. How, they asked, should the load of sin be removed? Their answer is perfectly plain. They simply trusted Jesus to remove it. In other words they had "faith" in Him.

Here again we are brought face to face with the significant fact which was noticed at the beginning of this chapter; the early Christians regarded Jesus not merely as an example for faith but primarily as the object of faith. Christianity from the beginning was a means of getting rid of sin by trust in Jesus of Nazareth. But if Jesus was thus the object of Christian faith, He Himself was no more a Christian than God is a religious being. God is the object of all religion, He is absolutely necessary to all religion; but He Himself is the only being in the universe who can never in His own nature be religious. So it is with Jesus as related to Christian faith. Christian faith is trust reposed in Him for the removal of sin; He could not repose trust (in the sense with which we are here concerned) in Himself; therefore He was certainly not a Christian. If we are looking for a complete illustration of the Christian life we cannot find it in the religious experience of Jesus.

This conclusion needs to be guarded against two objections.

In the first place, it will be said, are we not failing to do justice to the true humanity of Jesus, which is affirmed by the creeds of the Church as well as by the modern theologians? When we say that Jesus could not illustrate Christian faith any more than God can be religious, are we not denying to Jesus that religious experience which is a necessary element in true humanity? Must not Jesus, if He be true man, have been more than the object of religious faith; must

He not have had a religion of His own? The answer is not far to seek. Certainly Jesus had a religion of His own; His prayer was real prayer, His faith was real religious faith. His relation to His heavenly Father was not merely that of a child to a father; it was that of a man to his God. Certainly Jesus had a religion; without it His humanity would indeed have been but incomplete. Without doubt Jesus had a religion; the fact is of the utmost importance. But it is equally important to observe that that religion which Jesus had was not Christian-ity. Christianity is a way of getting rid of sin, and Jesus was without sin. His religion was a religion of Paradise, not a religion of sinful humanity. It was a religion to which we may perhaps in some sort attain in heaven, when the process of our purification is complete (though even then the memory of redemption will never leave us); but certainly it is not a religion with which we can begin. The religion of Jesus was a religion of untroubled sonship; Christianity is a religion of the attainment of sonship by the redeeming work of Christ.

But if that be true, it may be objected, in the second place, that Jesus is being removed far from us, that on our view He is no longer our Brother and our Example. The objection is welcome, since it helps us to avoid misunderstandings and exaggerations.

Certainly if our zeal for the greatness and uniqueness of Jesus led us so to separate Him from us that He could no longer be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, the result would be disastrous; Jesus' coming would lose much of its significance. But it ought to be observed that likeness is not always necessary to nearness. The experience of a father in his personal relation to his son is quite different from that of the son in his relation to his father; but just that very difference binds father and son all the more closely together. The father cannot share the specifically filial affection of the son, and the son cannot share the specifically paternal affection of the father; yet no mere relationship of brotherhood, perhaps, could be quite so close. Fatherhood and sonship are complementary to each other; hence the dissimilarity, but hence also the closeness of the bond. It may be somewhat the same in the case of our relationship to Jesus. If He were exactly the same as ourselves, if He were merely our Brother, we should not be nearly so close to Him as we are when He stands to us in the relationship of a Saviour.

Nevertheless Jesus as a matter of fact is a Brother to us as well as a Saviour — an elder Brother whose steps we may follow. The imitation of Jesus has a fundamental place in Christian life; it is perfectly correct to represent Him as our supreme and only perfect example.

Certainly so far as the field of ethics is concerned, there can be no dispute. No matter what view may be taken of His origin and His higher nature, Jesus certainly led a true human life, and in it He came into those varied human relationships which provide opportunity for moral achievement. His life of perfect purity was led in no cold aloofness from the throng and press; His unselfish love

was exercised not merely in mighty deeds, but in acts of kindness which the humblest of us has the power, if only we had the will, to imitate. More effective, too, than all detail is the indefinable impression of the whole; Jesus is felt to be far greater than any of His individual words or deeds. His calmness, unselfishness and strength have been the wonder of the ages; the world can never lose the inspiration of that radiant example.

Jesus is an example, moreover, not merely for the relations of man to man but also for the relation of man to God; imitation of Him may extend and must extend to the sphere of religion as well as to that of ethics. Indeed religion and ethics in Him were never separated; no single element in His life can be understood without reference to His heavenly Father. Jesus was the most religious man who ever lived; He did nothing and said nothing and thought nothing without the thought of God. If His example means anything at all it means that a human life without the conscious presence of God - even though it be a life of humanitarian service outwardly like the ministry of Jesus - is a monstrous perversion. If we would follow truly in Jesus' steps, we must obey the first commandment as well as the second that is like unto it; we must love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. The difference between Jesus and ourselves serves only to enforce, certainly not to invalidate, the lesson. If the One to whom all power was given needed refreshment and strengthening in prayer, we more; if the One to whom the lilies of the field revealed the glory of God yet went into the sanctuary, surely we need such assistance even more than He; if the wise and holy One could say "Thy will be done," surely submission is yet more in place for us whose wisdom is as the foolishness of children.

Thus Jesus is the supreme example for men. But the Jesus who can serve as an example is not the Jesus of modern liberal reconstruction, but only the Jesus of the New Testament. The Jesus of modern liberalism advanced stupendous claims which were not founded upon fact — such conduct ought never to be made a norm. The Jesus of modern liberalism all through His ministry employed language which was extravagant and absurd — and it is only to be hoped that imitation of Him will not lead to an equal extravagance in His modern disciples. If the Jesus of naturalistic reconstruction were really taken as an example, disaster would soon follow. As a matter of fact, however, the modern liberal does not really take as his example the Jesus of the liberal historians; what he really does in practice is to manufacture as his example a simple exponent of a non-doctrinal religion whom the abler historians even of his own school know never to have existed except in the imagination of modern men.

Very different is the imitation of the real Jesus - the Jesus of the New Testament who actually lived in the first century of our era. That Jesus advanced lofty claims; but His claims, instead of being the extravagant dreams of an enthusiast, were sober truth. On His lips, therefore, language which in the reduced Jesus of modern reconstruction would be frenzied or absurd becomes fraught with blessing for mankind. Jesus demanded that those who followed Him should be

willing to break even the holiest ties — He said, "If a man cometh to me and hateth not his father and mother... he cannot be my disciple," and "Let the dead bury their dead." Coming from the mere prophet constructed by modern liberalism, those words would be monstrous; coming from the real Jesus, they are sublime. How great was the mission of mercy which justified such words! And how wonderful the condescension of the eternal Son! How matchless an example for the children of men! Well might Paul appeal to the example of the incarnate Saviour; well might he say, "Let the same mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." The imitation of the real Jesus will never lead a man astray.

But the example of Jesus is a perfect example only if He was justified in what He offered to men. And He offered, not primarily guidance, but salvation; He presented Himself as the object of men's faith. That offer is rejected by modern liberalism, but it is accepted by Christian men.

There is a profound difference, then, in the attitude assumed by modern liberalism and by Christianity toward Jesus the Lord. Liberalism regards Him as an Example and Guide; Christianity, as a Saviour: liberalism makes Him an example for faith; Christianity, the object of faith.

This difference in the attitude toward Jesus depends upon a profound difference as to the question who Jesus was. If Jesus was only what the liberal historians suppose that He was, then trust in Him would be out of place; our attitude toward Him could be that of pupils to a Master and nothing more. But if He was what the New Testament represents Him as being, then we can safely commit to Him the eternal destinies of our souls. What then is the difference between liberalism and Christianity with regard to the person of our Lord?

The answer might be difficult to set forth in detail. But the essential thing can be put almost in a word - liberalism regards Jesus as the fairest flower of humanity; Christianity regards Him as a supernatural Person.

The conception of Jesus as a supernatural Person runs all through the New Testament. In the Epistles of Paul, of course, it is quite clear. Without the slightest doubt Paul separated Jesus from ordinary humanity and placed Him on the side of God. The words in Gal. i. 1, "not from men nor through a man but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead," are only typical of what appears everywhere in the Epistles. The same contrast between Jesus Christ and ordinary humanity is everywhere presupposed. Paul does indeed call Jesus Christ a man. But the way in which he speaks of Jesus as a man only deepens the impression which has already been received. Paul speaks of the humanity of Jesus apparently as though the fact that Jesus was a man were something strange, something wonderful. At any rate, the really outstanding fact is that in the Epistles of Paul, Jesus is everywhere separated from ordinary humanity; the deity of Christ is everywhere presupposed. It is a matter of small consequence whether Paul ever applies to Jesus the Greek word

which is translated "God" in the English Bible; certainly it is very difficult, in view of Rom. ix. 5, to deny that he does. However that may be, the term "Lord," which is Paul's regular designation of Jesus, is really just as much a designation of deity as is the term "God." It was a designation of deity even in the pagan religions with which Paul's converts were familiar; and (what is far more important) in the Greek translation of the Old Testament which was current in Paul's day and was used by the Apostle himself, the term was used to translate the "Jahwe" of the Hebrew text. And Paul does not hesitate to apply to Jesus stupendous passages in the Greek Old Testament where the term Lord thus designates the God of Israel. But what is perhaps most significant of all for the establishment of the Pauline teaching about the Person of Christ is that Paul everywhere stands in a religious attitude toward Jesus. He who is thus the object of religious faith is surely no mere man, but a supernatural Person, and indeed a Person who was God.

Thus Paul regarded Jesus as a supernatural Person. The fact would be surprising if it stood alone. Paul was a contemporary of Jesus. What must this Jesus have been that He should be lifted thus quickly above the limits of ordinary humanity and placed upon the side of God?

But there is something far more surprising still. The truly surprising thing is that the view which Paul had of Jesus was also the view which was held by Jesus' intimate friends.² The fact appears in the Pauline Epistles themselves, to say nothing of other evidence. Clearly the Epistles presuppose a fundamental unity between Paul and the original apostles with regard to the Person of Christ; for if there had been any controversy about this matter it would certainly have been mentioned. Even the Judaizers, the bitter opponents of Paul, seem to have had no objection to Paul's conception of Jesus as a supernatural Person. The really impressive thing about Paul's view of Christ is that it is not defended. Indeed it is hardly presented in the Epistles in any systematic way. Yet it is everywhere presupposed. The inference is perfectly plain — Paul's conception of the Person of Christ was a matter of course in the primitive Church. With regard to this matter Paul appears in perfect harmony with all Palestinian Christians. The men who had walked and talked with Jesus and had seen Him subject to the petty limitations of earthly life agreed with Paul fully in regarding Him as a supernatural Person, seated on the throne of all Being.

Exactly the same account of Jesus as that which is presupposed by the Pauline Epistles appears in the detailed narrative of the Gospels. The Gospels agree with Paul in presenting Jesus as a supernatural Person, and the agreement appears not in one or two of the Gospels, but in all four. The day is long past, if there ever was such a day, when the Gospel of John, as presenting a divine Jesus, could be contrasted with the Gospel of Mark, as presenting a human Jesus. On the contrary, all four Gospels clearly present a Person lifted far above the level of ordinary humanity; and the Gospel of Mark, the shortest and according to

² Compare *The Origin of Paul's Religion*, 1921, pp. 118-127.

modern criticism the earliest of the Gospels, renders particularly prominent Jesus' superhuman works of power. In all four Gospels Jesus appears possessed of a sovereign power over the forces of nature; in all four Gospels, as in the whole New Testament, He appears clearly as a supernatural Person.³

But what is meant by a "supernatural Person"; what is meant by the supernatural?

John Gresham Machen (1881-1937) was an American Presbyterian New Testament scholar, who led a revolt against modernist theology at Princeton, and founded Westminster Theological Seminary as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He wrote Christianity & Liberalism in 1923 as an answer to the controversies of his day.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).

³ Compare *History and Faith*, 1915, pp. 5f