

The Origin's of Paul's Religion

Introduction (Part 1)

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The following discussion is intended to deal, from one particular point of view, with the problem of the origin of Christianity. That problem is an important historical problem, and also an important practical problem. It is an important historical problem not only because of the large place which Christianity has occupied in the medieval and modern world, but also because of certain unique features which even the most unsympathetic and superficial examination must detect in the beginnings of the Christian movement. The problem of the origin of Christianity is also an important practical problem. Rightly or wrongly, Christian experience has ordinarily been connected with one particular view of the origin of the Christian movement; where that view has been abandoned, the experience has ceased.

This dependence of Christianity upon a particular conception of its origin and of its Founder is now indeed being made the object of vigorous attack. There are many who maintain that Christianity is the same no matter what its origin was, and that therefore the problem of origin should be kept entirely separate from the present religious interests of the Church. Obviously, however, this indifference to the question as to what the origin of Christianity was depends upon a particular conception of what Christianity now is; it depends upon the conception which makes of Christianity simply a manner of life. That conception is indeed widespread, but it is by no means universal; there are still hosts of earnest Christians who regard Christianity, not simply as a manner of life, but as a manner of life founded upon a message—upon a message with regard to the Founder of the Christian movement. For such persons the question of the origin of Christianity is rather to be called the question of the truth of Christianity, and that question is to them the most important practical question of their lives. Even if these persons are wrong, the refutation of their supposed error naturally proceeds, and has in recent years almost always proceeded, primarily by means of that very discussion of the origin of the Christian movement which is finally to be shorn of its practical interest. The most important practical question for the modern Church is still the question how Christianity came into being. In recent years it has become customary to base discussions of the origin of Christianity upon the apostle Paul. Jesus Himself, the author of the Christian movement, wrote nothing—at least no writings of His have been preserved. The record of His words and deeds is the work of others, and the date and authorship and historical value of the documents in which that record is contained are the subject

of persistent debate. With regard to the genuineness of the principal epistles of Paul, on the other hand, and with regard to the value of at least part of the outline of his life which is contained in the Book of Acts, all serious historians are agreed. The testimony of Paul, therefore, forms a fixed starting-point in all controversy.

Obviously that testimony has an important bearing upon the question of the origin of Christianity. Paul was a contemporary of Jesus. He attached himself to Jesus' disciples only a very few years after Jesus' death; according to his own words, in one of the universally accepted epistles, he came into early contact with the leader among Jesus' associates; throughout his life he was deeply interested (for one reason or another) in the affairs of the primitive Jerusalem Church; both before his conversion and after it he must have had abundant opportunity for acquainting himself with the facts about Jesus' life and death. His testimony is not, however, limited to what he says in detail about the words and deeds of the Founder of the Christian movement. More important still is the testimony of his experience as a whole. The religion of Paul is a fact which stands in the full light of history. How is it to be explained? What were its presuppositions? Upon what sort of Jesus was it founded? These questions lead into the very heart of the historical problem. Explain the origin of the religion of Paul, and you have solved the problem of the origin of Christianity.

That problem may thus be approached through the gateway of the testimony of Paul. But that is not the only way to approach it. Another way is offered by the Gospel picture of the person of Jesus. Quite independent of questions of date and authorship and literary relationships of the documents, the total picture which the Gospels present bears unmistakable marks of being the picture of a real historical person. Internal evidence here reaches the point of certainty. If the Jesus who in the Gospels is represented as rebuking the Pharisees and as speaking the parables is not a real historical person living at a definite point in the world's history, then there is no way of distinguishing history from fiction. Even the evidence for the genuineness of the Pauline Epistles is no stronger than this. But if the Jesus of the Gospels is a real person, certain puzzling questions arise. The Jesus of the Gospels is a supernatural person; He is represented as possessing sovereign power over the forces of nature. What shall be done with this supernatural element in the picture? It is certainly very difficult to separate it from the rest. Moreover the Jesus of the Gospels is represented as advancing some lofty claims. He regarded Himself as being destined to come with the clouds of heaven and be the instrument in judging the world. What shall be done with this element in His consciousness? How does it agree with the indelible impression of calmness and sanity which has always been made by His character? These questions again lead into the heart of the problem. Yet they cannot be ignored. They are presented inevitably by what every serious historian admits.

The fundamental evidence with regard to the origin of Christianity is therefore twofold. Two facts need to be explained - the Jesus of the Gospels and the religion of Paul. The problem of early Christianity may be approached in either of these two ways. It should finally be approached in both ways. And if it is approached in both ways the investigator will discover, to his amazement, that the two ways lead to the same result. But the present discussion is more limited in scope. It seeks to deal merely with one of the two ways of approach to the problem of Christianity. What was the origin of the religion of Paul?

In discussing the apostle Paul, the historian is dealing with a subject important for its own sake, even aside from the importance of what it presupposes about Jesus. Unquestionably, Paul was a notable man, whose influence has been felt throughout all subsequent history. The fact itself cannot be called in question. But since there is wide difference of opinion about details, it may be well, in a brief preliminary word, to define a little more closely the nature and extent of the influence of Paul.

That influence has been exerted in two ways. It was exerted, in the first place, during the lifetime of Paul; and it has been exerted, in the second place, upon subsequent generations through the medium of the Pauline Epistles.

With regard to the second kind of influence, general considerations would make a high estimate natural. The Pauline Epistles form a large proportion of the New Testament, which has been regarded as fundamental and authoritative in all ages of the Church. The use of the Pauline Epistles as normative for Christian thought and practice can be traced back to very early times and has been continuous ever since. Certain considerations have been urged on the other side as indicating that the influence of Paul has not been so great as might have been expected. For example, the Christianity of the Old Catholic Church at the close of the second century displays a strange lack of understanding for the deeper elements in the Pauline doctrine of salvation, and something of the same state of affairs may be detected in the scanty remains of the so-called "Apostolic Fathers" of the beginning of the century. The divergence from Paul was not conscious; the writers of the close of the second century all quote the Pauline Epistles with the utmost reverence. But the fact of the divergence cannot altogether be denied.

Various explanations of this divergence have been proposed. Baur explained the un-Pauline character of the Old Catholic Church as due to a compromise with a legalistic Jewish Christianity; Ritschl explained it as due to a natural process of degeneration on purely Gentile Christian ground; Von Harnack explains it as due to the intrusion, after the time of Paul, of Greek habits of thought. The devout believer, on the other hand, might simply say that the Pauline doctrine of grace was too wonderful and too divine to be understood fully by the human mind and heart.¹

¹ Compare "Jesus and Paul," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* by Members of the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1912, pp. 553 f.

Whatever the explanation, however, the fact, even after exaggerations have been avoided, remains significant. It remains true that the Church of the second century failed to understand fully the Pauline doctrine of the way of salvation. The same lack of understanding has been observable only too frequently throughout subsequent generations. It was therefore with some plausibility that Von Harnack advanced his dictum to the effect that Paulinism has established itself as a ferment, but never as a foundation, in the history of doctrine.²

In the first place, however, it may be doubted whether the dictum of Von Harnack is true; for in that line of development of theology which runs from Augustine through the Reformation to the Reformed Churches, Paulinism may fairly be regarded as a true foundation. But in the second place, even if Von Harnack's dictum were true, the importance of Paul's influence would not be destroyed. A ferment is sometimes as important as a foundation. As Von Harnack himself says, "the Pauline reactions mark the critical epochs of theology and of the Church. ... The history of doctrine could be written as a history of the Pauline reactions in the Church."³ As a matter of fact the influence of Paul upon the entire life of the Church is simply measureless. Who can measure the influence of the eighth chapter of Romans?

The influence of Paul was also exerted, however, in his own lifetime, by his spoken words as well as by his letters. To estimate the full extent of that influence one would have to write the entire history of early Christianity. It may be well, however, to consider briefly at least one outstanding aspect of that influence—an aspect which must appeal even to the most unsympathetic observer. The Christian movement began in the midst of a very peculiar people; in 35 A.D. it would have appeared to a superficial observer to be a Jewish sect. Thirty years later it was plainly a world religion.

True, the number of its adherents was still small. But the really important steps had been taken. The conquest of the world was now a mere matter of time. This establishment of Christianity as a world religion, to almost as great an extent as any great historical movement can be ascribed to one man, was the work of Paul.

This assertion needs to be defended against various objections, and at the same time freed from misinterpretations and exaggerations.

In the first place, it might be said, the Gentile mission of Paul was really only a part of a mighty historical process—the march of the oriental religions throughout the western world. Christianity was not the only religion which was filling the void left by the decay of the native religions of Greece and Rome. The Phrygian religion of Cybele had been established officially at Rome since 204

² Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, 4te Aufl., i, 1909, p. 155. (English Translation, *History of Dogma*, i, 1895, p. 136.)

³ Harnack, *loc. cit.*

B.C., and after leading a somewhat secluded and confined existence for several centuries, was at the time of Paul beginning to make its influence felt in the life of the capital. The Greco-Egyptian religion of Isis was preparing for the triumphal march which it began in earnest in the second century. The Persian religion of Mithras was destined to share with Isis the possession of a large part of the Greco-Roman world. Was not the Christianity of Paul merely one division of a mighty army which would have conquered even without his help?

With regard to this objection a number of things may be said. In the first place, the apostle Paul, as over against the priests of Isis and of Cybele, has perhaps at least the merit of priority; the really serious attempt at world-conquest was made by those religions (and still more clearly by the religion of Mithras) only after the time of Paul. In the second place, the question may well be asked whether it is at all justifiable to class the Christianity of Paul along with those other cults under the head of Hellenized oriental religion. This question will form the subject of a considerable part of the discussion which follows, and it will be answered with an emphatic negative. The Christianity of Paul will be found to be totally different from the oriental religions. The threat of conquest made by those religions, therefore, only places in sharper relief the achievement of Paul, by showing the calamities from which the world was saved by his energetic mission. If except for the Pauline mission the world would have become devoted to Isis or Mithras, then Paul was certainly one of the supreme benefactors of the human race.

Even apart from any detailed investigation, however, difference between the religion of Paul and the oriental religions is perfectly obvious. The oriental religions were tolerant of other faiths; the religion of Paul, like the ancient religion of Israel, demanded an absolutely exclusive devotion. A man could become initiated into the mysteries of Isis or Mithras without at all giving up his former beliefs; but if he were to be received into the Church, according to the preaching of Paul, he must forsake all other Saviours for the Lord Jesus Christ. The difference places the achievement of Paul upon an entirely different plane from the successes of the oriental mystery religions. It was one thing to offer a new faith and a new cult as simply one additional way of obtaining contact with the Divine, and it was another thing, and a far more difficult thing (and in the ancient world outside of Israel an unheard-of thing), to require a man to renounce all existing religious beliefs and practices in order to place his whole reliance upon a single Saviour. Amid the prevailing syncretism of the Greco-Roman world, the religion of Paul, with the religion of Israel, stands absolutely alone. The successes of the oriental religions, therefore, only place in clearer light the uniqueness of the achievement of Paul. They do indeed indicate the need and longing of the ancient world for redemption; but that is only part of the preparation for the coming of the gospel which has always been celebrated by devout Christians as part of the divine economy, as one indication that "the fullness of the time" was come. But the wide prevalence of the need does not at all detract from the achievement of satisfying the need. Paul's way of satisfying the need, as it is hoped the later chapters will show, was unique; but what should

now be noticed is that the way of Paul, because of its exclusiveness, was at least far more difficult than that of any of his rivals or successors. His achievement was therefore immeasurably greater than theirs.

But if the successes of the oriental religions do not detract from the achievement of Paul, what shall be said of the successes of pre-Christian Judaism? It must always be remembered that Judaism, in the first century, was an active missionary religion. Even Palestinian Judaism was imbued with the missionary spirit; Jesus said to the Pharisees that they compassed sea and land to make one proselyte. The Judaism of the Dispersion was no doubt even more zealous for winning adherents. numberless synagogues scattered throughout the cities of the Greco-Roman world were not attended, as Jewish synagogues are attended to-day, only by Jews, but were also filled with hosts of Gentiles, some of whom had accepted circumcision and become full Jews, but others of whom, forming the class called in the Book of Acts "God-fearers" or "God-worship-ers," had accepted the monotheism of the Jews and the lofty morality of the Old Testament without definitely uniting themselves with the people of Israel. In addition to this propaganda in the synagogues, an elaborate literary propaganda, of which important remnants have been preserved, helped to carry on the missionary work. The question therefore arises whether the preaching of Paul was anything more than a continuation, though in any case a noteworthy continuation, of this pre-Christian Jewish mission.

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