

The Origin's of Paul's Religion

Introduction (Part 2)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

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.

Here again, as in the case of the longing for redemption which is attested by the successes of the oriental religions, an important element in the preparation for the gospel must certainly be detected. It is hard to exaggerate the service which was rendered to the Pauline mission by the Jewish synagogue. One of the most important problems for every missionary is the problem of gaining a hearing. The problem may be solved in various ways. Sometimes the missionary may hire a place of meeting and advertise; sometimes he may talk on the street corners to passers-by. But for Paul the problem was solved. All that he needed to do was to enter the synagogue and exercise the privilege of speaking, which was accorded with remarkable liberality to visiting teachers. In the synagogue, moreover, Paul found an audience not only of Jews but also of Gentiles; everywhere the "God-fearers" were to be found. These Gentile attendants upon the synagogues formed not only an audience but a picked audience; they were just the class of persons who were most likely to be won by the gospel preaching. In their case much of the preliminary work had accomplished; they were already acquainted with the doctrine of the one true God; they had already, through the lofty ethical teaching of the Old Testament, come to connect religion with morality in a way which is to us matter-of-course but was very exceptional in the ancient world. Where, as in the marketplace at Athens, Paul had to begin at the very beginning, without presupposing this previous instruction on the part of his hearers, his task was rendered far more difficult. Undoubtedly, in the case of many of his converts he did have to begin in that way; the First Epistle to the Thessalonians, for example, presupposes, perhaps, converts who turned directly from idols to serve the living and true God. But even in such cases the God-fearers formed a nucleus; their manifold social relationships provided points of contact with the rest of the Gentile population. The debt which the Christian Church owes to the Jewish synagogue is simply measureless.

This acknowledgment, however, does not mean that the Pauline mission was only a continuation of the pre-Christian missionary activity of the Jews. On the contrary, the very earnestness of the effort made by the Jews to convert their Gentile neighbors serves to demonstrate all the more clearly the hopelessness of

their task. One thing that was fundamental in the religion of the Jews was its exclusiveness. The people of Israel, according to the Old Testament, was the chosen people of God; the notion of a covenant between God and His chosen people was absolutely central in all ages of the Jewish Church. The Old Testament did indeed clearly provide a method by which strangers could be received into the covenant; they could be received whenever, by becoming circumcised and undertaking the observance of the Mosaic Law, they should relinquish their own nationality and become part of the nation of Israel. But this method seemed hopelessly burdensome. Even before the time of Paul it had become evident that the Gentile world as a whole would never submit to such terms. The terms were therefore sometimes relaxed. Covenant privileges were offered by individual Jewish teachers to individual Gentiles without requiring what was most offensive, like circumcision; merit was sought by some of the Gentiles by observance of only certain parts of the Law, such as the requirements about the Sabbath or the provisions about food. Apparently widespread also was the attitude of those persons who seem to have accepted what may be called the spiritual, as distinguished from the ceremonial, aspects of Judaism. But all such compromises were affected by a deadly weakness. The strict requirements of the Law were set forth plainly in the Old Testament. To cast them aside, in the interests of missionary activity, meant a sacrifice of principle to practice; it meant a sacrifice of the zeal and the good conscience of the missionaries and of the true satisfaction of the converts. One of the chief attractions of Judaism to the world of that day was the possession of an ancient and authoritative Book; the world was eagerly searching for authority in religion. Yet if the privileges of the Old Testament were to be secured, the authority of the Book had to be set aside. The character of a national religion was therefore too indelibly stamped upon the religion of Israel; the Gentile converts could at best only be admitted into an outer circle around the true household of God. What pre-Christian Judaism had to offer was therefore obviously insufficient. Perhaps the tide of the Jewish mission had already begun to ebb before the time of Paul; perhaps the process of the withdrawal of Judaism into its age-long seclusion had already begun. Undoubtedly that process was hastened by the rivalry of Christianity, which offered far more than Judaism had offered and offered it on far more acceptable terms. But the process sooner or later would inevitably have made itself felt. Whether or not Renan was correct in supposing that had it not been for Christianity the world would have been Mithraic, one thing is certain—the world apart from Christianity would never have become Jewish.

But was not the preaching of Paul itself one manifestation of that liberalizing tendency among the Jews to which allusion has just been made and of which the powerlessness has just been asserted? Was not the attitude of Paul in remitting the requirement of circumcision, while he retained the moral and spiritual part of the Old Testament Law— especially if, as the Book of Acts asserts, he assented upon occasion to the imposition of certain of the less burdensome parts even of the ceremonial Law—very similar to the action of a teacher like that Ananias who was willing to receive king Izates of Adiabene without requiring him to be

circumcised? These questions in recent years have occasionally been answered in the affirmative, especially by Kirsopp Lake.¹ But despite the plausibility of Lake's representation he has thereby introduced a root error into his reconstruction of the apostolic age. For whatever the teaching of Paul was, it certainly was not "liberalism." The background of Paul is not to be sought in liberal Judaism, but in the strictest sect of the Pharisees. And Paul's remission of the requirement of circumcision was similar only in form, at the most, to the action of the Ananias who has just been mentioned. In motive and in principle it was diametrically opposite. Gentile freedom according to Paul was not something permitted; it was something absolutely required. And it was required just by the strictest interpretation of the Old Testament Law. If Paul had been a liberal Jew, he would never have been the apostle to the Gentiles; for he would never have developed his doctrine of the Cross. Gentile freedom, in other words, was not, according to Paul, a relaxing of strict requirements in the interests of practical missionary work; it was a matter of principle. For the first time the religion of Israel could go forth (or rather was compelled to go forth) with a really good conscience to the spiritual conquest of the world.

Thus the Pauline mission was not merely one manifestation of the progress of oriental religion, and it was not merely a continuation of the pre-Christian mission of the Jews; it was something new. But if it was new in comparison with what was outside of Christianity, was it not anticipated within Christianity itself? Was it not anticipated by the Founder of Christianity, by Jesus Himself?

At this point careful definition is necessary. If all that is meant is that the Gentile mission of Paul was founded altogether upon Jesus, then there ought to be no dispute. A different view, which makes Paul rather than Jesus the true founder of Christianity, will be combated in the following pages. Paul himself, at any rate, bases his doctrine of Gentile freedom altogether upon Jesus. But he bases it upon what Jesus had done, not upon what Jesus, at least during His earthly life, had said. The true state of the case may therefore be that Jesus by His redeeming work really made possible the Gentile mission, but that the discovery of the true significance of that work was left to Paul. The achievement of Paul, whether it be regarded as a discovery made by him or a divine revelation made to him, would thus remain intact. What did Jesus say or imply, during His earthly ministry, about the universalism of the gospel? Did He make superfluous the teaching of Paul?

The latter question must be answered in the negative; attempts at finding, clearly expressed, in the words of Jesus the full doctrine of Gentile freedom have failed. It is often said that Jesus, though He addressed His teaching to Jews, addressed it to them not as Jews but as men. But the discovery of that fact (whenever it was made) was no mean achievement. Certainly it was not made by the modern writers who lightly repeat the assertion, for they have the benefit of the teaching

¹ *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, 1911, pp. 16-28, especially 24. Compare Lake and Jackson, *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Part I, vol. i, 1920, p. 166.

of Paul and of nineteen centuries of Christian experience based upon that teaching. Even if Jesus did address not the Jew as a Jew, but the man in the Jew, the achievement of Paul in the establishment of the Gentile Church was not thereby made a matter of course. The plain man would be more likely to stick at the fact that however Jesus addressed the Jew He did address the Jew and not the Gentile, and He commanded His disciples to do the same. Instances in which He extended His ministry to Gentiles are expressly designated in the Gospels as exceptional.

But did He not definitely command His disciples to engage in the Gentile work after His departure? Certainly He did not do so according to the modern critical view of the Gospels. But even if the great commission of Matt. xxviii. 19, 20 be accepted as an utterance of Jesus, it is by no means clear that the question of Gentile liberty was settled. In the great commission, the apostles are commanded to make disciples of all the nations.

But on what terms were the new disciples to be received? There was nothing startling, from the Jewish point of view, in winning Gentile converts; the non-Christian Jews, as has just been observed, were busily engaged in doing that.

The only difficulty arose when the terms of reception of the new converts were changed. Were the new converts to be received as disciples of Jesus without being circumcised and thus without becoming members of the covenant people of God? The great commission does not answer that question. It does indeed mention only baptism and not circumcision. But might that not be because circumcision, for those who were to enter into God's people, was a matter of course?

In a number of His utterances, it is true, Jesus did adopt an attitude toward the ceremonial Law, at least toward the interpretation of it by the scribes, very different from what was customary in the Judaism of His day. "There is nothing from without the man," He said, "that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man" (Mark vii. 15). No doubt these words were revolutionary in their ultimate implications. But there is no evidence that they resulted in revolutionary practice on the part of Jesus. On the contrary, there is definite reason to suppose that He observed the ceremonial Law as it was contained in the Old Testament, and definite utterances of His in support of the authority of the Law have been preserved in the Gospels.

The disciples, therefore, were not obviously unfaithful to the teachings of Jesus if after He had been taken from them, they continued to minister only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. If He had told them to make disciples of all the nations, He had not told them upon what terms the disciples were to be received or at what moment of time the specifically Gentile work should begin. Perhaps the divine economy required that Israel should first be brought to an

acknowledgment of her Lord, or at least her obduracy established beyond peradventure. in accordance with the mysterious prophecy of Jesus in the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen,² before the Gentiles should be gathered in. At any rate, there is evidence that whatever was revolutionary in the life and teaching of Jesus was less evident among His disciples, in the early days of the Jerusalem Church. Even the Pharisees, and at any rate the people as a whole, could find nothing to object to in the attitude of the apostles and their followers. The disciples continued to observe the Jewish fasts and feasts. Outwardly they were simply loyal Jews. Evidently Gentile freedom, and the abolition of special Jewish privileges, had not been clearly established by the words of the Master. There was therefore still need for the epoch-making work of Paul.

But if the achievement of Paul was not clearly anticipated in the teaching of Jesus Himself, was it not anticipated or at any rate shared by others in the Church? According to the Book of Acts, a Gentile, Cornelius, and his household were baptized, without requirement of circumcision, by Peter himself, the leader of the original apostles; and a free attitude toward the Temple and the Law was adopted by Stephen. The latter instance, at least, has ordinarily been accepted as historical by modern criticism. Even in founding the churches which are usually designated as Pauline, moreover, Barnabas and Silas and others had an important part; and in the founding of many churches Paul himself was not concerned. It is an interesting fact that of the churches in the three most important cities of the Roman Empire not one was founded by Paul. The Church at Alexandria does not appear upon the pages of the New Testament; the Church at Rome appears fully formed when Paul was only preparing for his coming by the Epistle to the Romans; the Church at Antioch, at least in its Gentile form, was founded by certain unnamed Jews of Cyprus and Cyrene. Evidently, therefore, Paul was not the only missionary who carried the gospel to the Gentile world. If the Gentile work consisted merely in the geographical extension of the frontiers of the Church, then Paul did not by any means stand alone.

Even in the geographical sphere, however, his achievements must not be underestimated; even in that sphere he labored far more abundantly than any other one man. His desire to plant the gospel in places where it had never been heard led him into an adventurous life which may well excite the astonishment of the modern man. The catalogue of hardships which Paul himself gives incidentally in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians shows that the Book of Acts has been very conservative in its account of the hardships and perils which the apostle endured; evidently the half has not been told. The results, moreover, were commensurate with the hardships that they cost. Despite the labors of others, it was Paul who planted the gospel in a real chain of the great cities; it was he who conceived most clearly the thought of a mighty Church universal

² Matt. xxi. 41, and parallels. This verse can perhaps hardly be held to refer exclusively to the rejection of Jesus by the rulers; it seems also to apply to a rejection by the people as a whole. But the full implications of so mysterious an utterance may well have been lost sight of in the early Jerusalem Church.

which should embrace both Jew and Gentile, barbarian, Scythian, bond and free in a common faith and a common life. When he addressed himself to the Church at Rome, in a tone of authority, as the apostle to the Gentiles who was ready to preach the gospel to those who were at Rome also, his lofty claim was supported, despite the fact that the Church at Rome had itself been founded by others, by the mere extent of his labors.

The really distinctive achievement of Paul, however, does not consist in the mere geographical extension of the frontiers of the Church, important as that work was; it lies in a totally different sphere in the hidden realm of thought.³ What was really standing in the way of the Gentile mission was not the physical barriers presented by sea and mountain, it was rather the great barrier of religious principle. Particularism was written plain upon the pages of the Old Testament; in emphatic language the Scriptures imposed upon the true Israelite the duty of separateness from the Gentile world. Gentiles might indeed be brought in, but only when they acknowledged the prerogatives of Israel and united themselves with the Jewish nation. If premonitions of a different doctrine were to be found, they were couched in the mysterious language of prophecy; what seemed to be fundamental for the present was the doctrine of the special covenant between Jehovah and His chosen people.

This particularism of the Old Testament might have been overcome by practical considerations, especially by the consideration that since as a matter of fact the Gentiles would never accept circumcision and submit to the Law the only way to carry on the broader work was quietly to keep the more burdensome requirements of the Law in abeyance. This method would have been the method of "liberalism." And it would have been utterly futile. It would have meant an irreparable injury to the religious conscience; it would have sacrificed the good conscience of the missionary and the authoritativeness of his proclamation. Liberalism would never have conquered the world.

Fortunately, liberalism was not the method of Paul. Paul was not a practical Christian who regarded life as superior to doctrine, and practice as superior to principle. On the contrary, he overcame the principle of Jewish particularism in the only way in which it could be overcome; he overcame principle by principle. It was not Paul the practical missionary, but Paul the theologian, who was the real apostle to the Gentiles.

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.

³ For what follows, compare the article cited in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, pp. 555-557.

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