

The Origin's of Paul's Religion

Introduction (Part 3)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

In Paul's theology he avoided certain errors which lay near at hand. He avoided the error of Marcion, who in the middle of the second century combated Jewish particularism by representing the whole of the Old Testament economy as evil and as the work of a being hostile to the good God.

That error would have deprived the Church of the prestige which it derived from the possession of an ancient and authoritative Book; as a merely new religion Christianity never could have appealed to the Gentile world. Paul avoided also the error of the so-called "Epistle of Barnabas," which, while it accepted the Old Testament, rejected the entire Jewish interpretation of it; the Old Testament Law, according to the Epistle of Barnabas, was never intended to require literal sacrifices and circumcision, in the way in which it was interpreted by the Jews. That error, also, would have been disastrous; it would have introduced such boundless absurdity into the Christian use of the Scriptures that all truth and soberness would have fled.

Avoiding all such errors, Paul was able with a perfectly good conscience to accept the priceless support of the Old Testament Scriptures in his missionary work while at the same time he rejected for his Gentile converts the ceremonial requirements which the Old Testament imposed. The solution of the problem is set forth clearly in the Epistle to the Galatians. The Old Testament Law, according to Paul, was truly authoritative and truly divine. But it was temporary; it was authoritative only until the fulfillment of the promise should come. It was a schoolmaster to bring the Jews to Christ; and (such is the implication, according to the Epistle to the Romans) it could also be a schoolmaster to bring every one to Christ, since it was intended to produce the necessary consciousness of sin.

This treatment of the Old Testament was the only practical solution of the difficulty. But Paul did not adopt it because it was practical; he adopted it because it was true. It never occurred to him to hold principle in abeyance even for the welfare of the souls of men. The deadening blight of pragmatism had never fallen upon his soul. The Pauline grounding of the Gentile mission is not to be limited, however, to his specific answer to the question, "What then is the law?" It extends rather to his entire unfolding of the significance of the Cross of Christ. He exhibited the temporary character of the Old Testament dispensation

by showing that a new era had begun, by exhibiting positively the epoch-making significance of the Cross.

At this point undoubtedly he had precursors. The significance of the Cross of Christ was by no means entirely unknown to those who had been disciples before him; he himself places the assertion that Christ "died for our sins according to the Scriptures" as one of the things that he had "received." But unless all indications fail Paul did bring an unparalleled enrichment of the understanding of the Cross. For the first time the death of Christ was viewed in its full historical and logical relationships. And thereby Gentile freedom, and the freedom of the entire Christian Church for all time, was assured.

Inwardly, indeed, the early Jerusalem disciples were already free from the Law; they were really trusting for their salvation not to their observance of the Law but to what Christ had done for them. But apparently they did not fully know that they were free; or rather they did not know exactly why they were free. The case of Cornelius, according to the Book of Acts, was exceptional; Cornelius had been received into the Church without being circumcised, but only by direct command of the Spirit. Similar direct and unexplained guidance was apparently to be waited for if the case was to be repeated. Even Stephen had not really advocated the immediate abolition of the Temple or the abandonment of Jewish prerogatives in the presence of Gentiles.

The freedom of the early Jerusalem Church, in other words, was not fully grounded in a comprehensive view of the meaning of Jesus' work. Such freedom could not be permanent. It was open to argumentative attacks, and as a matter of fact such attacks were not long absent. The very life of the Gentile mission at Antioch was threatened by the Judaizers who came down from Jerusalem and said, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." Practical considerations, considerations of church polity, were quite powerless before such attacks; freedom was held by but a precarious tenure until its underlying principles were established. Christianity, in other words, could not live without theology. And the first great Christian theologian was Paul.

It was Paul, then, who established the principles of the Gentile mission. Others labored in detail, but it was he who was at the heart of the movement. It was he, far more than any other one man, who carried the gospel out from Judaism, into the Gentile world.

The importance of the achievement must be apparent to every historian, no matter how unsympathetic his attitude toward the content of Christianity may be. The modern European world, what may be called "western civilization," is descended from the civilization of Greece and Rome. Our languages are either derived directly from the Latin, or at any rate connected with the same great family. Our literature and art are inspired by the great classical models. Our law and government have never been independent of the principles enunciated by

the statesmen of Greece and put into practice by the statesmen of Rome. Our philosophies are obliged to return ever anew to the questions which were put, if not answered, by Plato and Aristotle.

Yet there has entered into this current of Indo-European civilization an element from a very diverse and very unexpected source. How comes it that a thoroughly Semitic book like the Bible has been accorded a place in medieval and modern life to which the glories of Greek literature can never by any possibility aspire? How comes it that the words of that book have not only made political history—moved armies and built empires—but also have entered into the very fabric of men's souls? The intrinsic value of the Book would not alone have been sufficient to break down the barriers which opposed its acceptance by the Indo-European race. The race from which the Bible came was despised in ancient times and it is despised to-day. How comes it then that a product of that race has been granted such boundless influence? How comes it that the barriers which have always separated Jew from Gentile, Semite from Aryan, have at one point been broken through, so that the current of Semitic life has been allowed to flow unchecked over the rich fields of our modern civilization?

The answer to these questions, to the large extent which the preceding outline has attempted to define, must be sought in the inner life of a Jew of Tarsus. In dealing with the apostle Paul, we are dealing with one of the moving factors of the world's history.

That conclusion might at first sight seem to affect unfavorably the special use to which it is proposed, in the present discussion, to put the examination of Paul. The more important Paul was as a man, it might be said, the less important he becomes as a witness to the origin of Christianity. If his mind had been a blank tablet prepared to receive impressions, then the historian could be sure that what is found in Paul's Epistles about Jesus is a true reflection of what Jesus really was. But as a matter of fact Paul was a genius. It is of the nature of genius to be creative. May not what Paul says about Jesus and the origin of Christianity, therefore, be no mere reflection of the facts, but the creation of his own mind?

The difficulty is not so serious as it seems. Genius is not incompatible with honesty—certainly not the genius of Paul. When, therefore, Paul sets himself to give information about certain plain matters of fact that came under his observation, as in the first two chapters of Galatians, there are not many historians who are inclined to refuse him credence. But the witness of Paul depends not so much upon details as upon the total fact of his religious life. It is that fact which is to be explained. To say merely that Paul was a genius and therefore unaccountable is no explanation. Certainly, it is not an explanation satisfactory to modern historians. During the progress of modern criticism, students of the origin of Christianity have accepted the challenge presented by the fact of Paul's religious life; they have felt obliged to account for the emergence of that fact at just the point when it actually appeared. But the

explanations which they have offered, as the following discussion may show, are insufficient; and it is just the greatness of Paul for which the explanations do not account. The religion of Paul is too large a building to have been erected upon a pinpoint.

Moreover, the greater a man is, the wider is the area of his contact with his environment, and the deeper is his penetration into the spiritual realm. The "man in the street" is not so good an observer as is sometimes supposed; he observes only what lies on the surface.

Paul, on the other hand, was able to sound the depths. It is, on the whole, certainly no disadvantage to the student of early Christianity that that particular member of the early Church whose inner life stands clearest in the light of history was no mere nonentity, but one of the commanding figures in the history of the world.

But what, in essence, is the fact of which the historical implications are here to be studied? What was the religion of Paul? No attempt will now be made to answer the question in detail; no attempt will be made to add to the long list of expositions of the Pauline theology. But what is really essential is abundantly plain, and may be put in a word-the religion of Paul was a religion of redemption. It was founded not upon what had always been true, but upon what had recently happened; not upon right ideas about God and His relations to the world, but upon one thing that God had done; not upon an eternal truth of the fatherhood of God, but upon the fact that God had chosen to become the Father of those who should accept the redemption offered by Christ. The religion of Paul was rooted altogether in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. Jesus for Paul was primarily not a Revealer, but a Saviour.

The character of Paulinism as a redemptive religion involved a certain conception of the Redeemer, which is perfectly plain on the pages of the Pauline Epistles. Jesus Christ, Paul believed, was a heavenly being; Paul placed Him clearly on the side of God and not on the side of men. "Not by man but by Jesus Christ," he says at the beginning of Galatians, and the same contrast is implied everywhere in the Epistles. This heavenly Redeemer existed before His earthly life; came then to earth, where He lived a true human life of humiliation; suffered on the cross for the sins of those upon whom the curse of the Law justly rested; then rose again from the dead by a mighty act of God's power; and is present always with His Church through His Spirit.

That representation has become familiar to the devout Christian, but to the modern historian it seems very strange. For to the modern historian, on the basis of the modern view of Jesus, the procedure of Paul seems to be nothing else than the deification by Paul of a man who had lived but a few years before and

had died a shameful death.¹ It is not necessary to argue the question whether in Rom. ix. 5 Paul actually applies the term "God" to Jesus - certainly he does so according to the only natural interpretation of his words as they stand— what is really important is that everywhere the relationship in which Paul stands toward Jesus is not the mere relationship of disciple to master but is a truly religious relationship. Jesus is to Paul everywhere the object of religious faith.

That fact would not be quite so surprising if Paul had been of polytheistic training, if he had grown up in a spiritual environment where the distinction between divine and human was being broken down. Even in such an environment, indeed, the religion of Paul would have been quite without parallel. The deification of the eastern rulers or of the emperors differs in toto from the Pauline attitude toward Jesus. It differs in seriousness and fervor; above all it differs in its complete lack of exclusiveness. The lordship of the ruler admitted freely, and was indeed always accompanied by, the lordship of other gods; the lordship of Jesus, in the religion of Paul, was absolutely exclusive. For Paul, there was one Lord and one Lord only. When any parallel for such a religious relationship of a notable man to one of his contemporaries with whose most intimate friends he had come into close contact can be cited in the religious annals of the race, then it will be time for the historian to lose his wonder at the phenomenon of Paul.

But the wonder of the historian reaches its climax when he remembers that Paul was not a polytheist or a pantheist, but a Jew, to whom monotheism was the very breath of life.² The Judaism of Paul's day was certainly nothing if not monotheistic. But in the intensity of his monotheism Paul was not different from his countrymen. No one can possibly show a deeper scorn for the many gods of the heathen than can Paul. "For though there be that are called gods," he says, "whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him." (I Cor. viii. 5, 6.) Yet it was this monotheist sprung of a race of monotheists, who stood in a full religious relation to a man who had died but a few years before; it was this monotheist who designated that man, as a matter of course, by the supreme religious term "Lord," and did not hesitate to apply to Him the passages in the Greek Old Testament where that term was used to translate the most awful name of the God of Israel! The religion of Paul is a phenomenon well worthy of the attention of the historian.

In recent years that phenomenon has been explained in four different ways. The four ways have not always been clearly defined; they have sometimes entered into combination with one another. But they are logically distinct, and to a certain extent they may be treated separately.

¹ H. J. Holtzmann (in *Protestantische Monatshefte*, iv, 1900, pp. 465f., and in *Christliche Welt*, xxiv, 1910, column 153) admitted that for the rapid apotheosis of Jesus as it is attested by the epistles of Paul he could cite no parallel in the religious history of the race.

² Compare R. Seeberg, *Der Ursprung des Christusglaubens*, 1914, pp. 1f.

There is first of all the supernaturalistic explanation, which simply accepts at its face value what Paul presupposes about Jesus. According to this explanation, Jesus was really a heavenly being, who in order to redeem sinful man came voluntarily to earth, suffered for the sins of others on the cross, rose from the dead, ascended to the right hand of God, from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. If this representation be correct, then there is really nothing to explain; the religious attitude of Paul toward Jesus was not an apotheosis of a man, but recognition as divine of one who really was divine.

The other three explanations are alike in that they all reject supernaturalism, they all deny the entrance into human history of any creative act of God, unless indeed all the course of nature be regarded as creative. They all agree, therefore, in explaining the religion of Paul as a phenomenon which emerged in the course of history under the operation of natural causes.

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