

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 5)

By John Gresham Machen

On the third missionary journey Paul was accompanied by Silas (the "Silvanus" of the Pauline Epistles). According to the Book of Acts, Silas, like Barnabas and Mark, came originally from the Jerusalem Church, though his connection with Jerusalem is not traced so far back. He is said to have been one of the two men who accompanied the Apostolic Decree from Jerusalem to Antioch (Acts xv. 27). This assertion of course will not escape unchallenged. It shares no doubt to some extent the criticism which has been directed against the Decree itself. But the tendency in recent years is to find a larger and larger historical basis for the concrete assertions of the author of Acts. So the mention of Judas and Silas as coming from Jerusalem creates a favorable impression. It cannot be ruled out merely because it stands only in Acts, or merely because it is connected with the Decree. Even the Decree, it will be remembered, is now often admitted to be a Decree of the Jerusalem Church or to represent the substance of such a decree, even by those scholars who suppose that Acts is wrong in representing Paul as being present when the Decree was passed. The tradition which lies back of Acts xv, therefore, cannot lightly be rejected. There is certainly some evidence, therefore, for connecting Silas with the Jerusalem Church. Of course, if the narrative in Acts be accepted as it stands, as it is being accepted more and more generally to-day, then the connection of Silas with the Jerusalem Church is firmly established. That connection is not without its importance. It shows that even when engaged in his specifically Gentile work, Paul had not shut himself off from the sources of information about Jesus.

The mention of Andronicus and Junias in Rom. xvi. 7 is not without interest. According to the most natural interpretation of the verse, Andronicus and Junias are declared to have been in Christ before Paul was in Christ. They were, therefore, primitive disciples. Certain other details are more obscure. Does Paul mean that Andronicus and Junias were themselves "apostles," the word "apostle" being used here in a broad sense? In that case, the verse may be translated, "Salute Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and fellow-prisoners, who are noteworthy among the apostles who were before me in Christ." Or is it merely said that Andronicus and Junias were regarded highly by the apostles, had a good reputation among them? In that case, the relative pronoun is no doubt to be taken with the words "Andronicus and Junias" rather than with the word "apostles"; and two details are mentioned:

(1) that Andronicus and Junias had a good reputation among the apostles, and (2) that they were converted earlier than Paul. Also the meaning of the word translated "kinsmen" is doubtful. The word may mean merely "members of the same race," that is, "Jews"; or it may mean "members of the same family," that is, "relatives." Still another interpretation is favored by Böhlig, who thinks that the word designates Andronicus and Junias as members of the Jewish colony at Tarsus, the boyhood home of Paul.¹ But however the interesting exegetical problems may be solved, it seems evident that Andronicus and Junias had become Christians earlier than Paul, and that they were therefore representatives of primitive Christianity. The presence of such men in the Church at Rome or in the Church at Ephesus, if the common separation of Rom. svi. from the rest of Romans (on insufficient grounds) be adopted—is interesting. It exemplifies the kind of personal connection that was undoubtedly maintained between primitive Christianity and the Gentile churches. Even far away in the Gentile world Paul was not altogether removed from contact with those who had been Christians before him. Wherever and however Andronicus and Junias had become disciples, whether in Jerusalem or elsewhere, whether by the instrumentality of Jesus Himself or by the instrumentality of His apostles, in any case they had become disciples in the very earliest days of the Church's life. It is hardly to be supposed that they were ignorant of the facts about Jesus, and in all probability there were other such persons, even in Pauline churches.

But it is not necessary to lay stress upon Andronicus and Junias, when Peter and James and Barnabas and Mark all came into close contact with Paul. Paul had abundant opportunity for acquainting himself with the words and deeds of Jesus.

Three important facts have thus far been established;

(1) Paul regarded himself as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, (2) he was so regarded by the intimate friends of Jesus, (3) he had abundant sources of information about Jesus' life. The natural conclusion is that Paul was a true disciple of the real Jesus.

This conclusion is thought to be overthrown by two considerations. In the first place, it is said, Paul himself attests his own indifference to historical information about Jesus; and in the second place, such indifference is confirmed by the paucity of references in the Epistles to Jesus' words and deeds. These two considerations lead into the heart of the problem, and must be examined with some care.

The indifference of Paul toward historical information about Jesus is thought to be attested chiefly by 2 Cor. v. 16 and by the Epistle to the Galatians. In 2 Cor. v. 16 Paul says, "Even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more." What can these words mean, it is asked, except that ordinary information about Jesus, dealing with the details of His earthly life, the

¹ Böhlig, *Die Geisteskultur von Tarsos*, 1913, pp. 140-142.

kind of information that one man can obtain of another by sight and hearing, has become valueless for the Christian? The Christian, Paul says, is interested not at all in what eyewitnesses may say or in what he himself may remember about the earthly life of Jesus; he is interested only in the direct contact which he has at present with the risen Lord.

This interpretation ignores the fact that the assertion in 2 Cor. v. 16 about the knowledge of Christ is only an application of the general assertion at the beginning of the verse about the knowledge of persons in general. "So that," says Paul, "we from now on know no one after the flesh." Paul says, therefore, not only that he does not know Christ after the flesh, but also that he does not know any man after the flesh, and the two assertions must obviously be interpreted in the same way. Therefore the interpretation which has been proposed for the knowledge of Christ, if it is to commend itself, must also be applied to the knowledge of every man.

But when it is so applied it results in absurdity. It would make Paul indifferent not only to ordinary information about Jesus, but also to ordinary information about men in general. But as a matter of fact Paul was not indifferent to ordinary information about men in general. On the contrary, he was exceedingly careful about getting information just as accurate as could possibly be secured. Was Paul a visionary, with his head always in the clouds, indifferent to the concrete problems of individual men, indifferent to what men had to tell him about their various earthly relationships, indifferent to their bodily needs?

The First Epistle to the Corinthians is a magnificent refutation of such a caricature. That Epistle represents Paul as a pastor of souls, unsurpassed in his insight into the practical problems of his converts, unsurpassed in the tact with which he applied great principles to special circumstances. But the same characteristics appear everywhere in Paul. Everywhere Paul is the true friend, the true patriot, and the true man; everywhere he exhibits that careful attention to detail, that careful recognition of special relationships, which is lacking in genuinely mystical piety. Some pastors are accustomed to say the same thing no matter what questions are laid before them; they can only enunciate general principles without applying them to special problems; they are incapable of special friendships and incapable of analyzing actual situations. It is not so in the case of Paul. In the Pauline Epistles special problems are solved in the light of eternal principles; but the special problems as well as the eternal principles are subjected to the most careful examination. Paul was not indifferent to ordinary knowledge of his fellow-men.

Thus when Paul says that he knows no man after the flesh he does not mean that he ignored the ordinary knowledge which comes through sight and hearing. But if that kind of knowledge is not excluded from the relations between Paul and men in general, it is also not excluded from the relations between Paul and Christ; for the latter part of the verse is evidently placed in parallel with the former

part. It is evidently the same kind of knowledge which is excluded in both cases. Paul does not mean, therefore, that he was indifferent to ordinary sources of information about Christ.

What he does mean is that he regarded those ordinary sources of information not as an end in themselves, but as a means to an end. The natural man according to Paul does not understand the true significance of the words and deeds of his fellow-men; he does not use them to attest spiritual facts. The man who is in Christ, on the contrary, even when he uses ordinary means of information, is acquiring knowledge of spiritual relationships, relationships which exist in the new world. So it is also with the knowledge of Christ. The natural man may acquire a certain knowledge of Christ; he may learn what Christ said and did and what were the worldly circumstances of His life. But such knowledge is a knowledge according to the flesh; it does not attain to the true significance even of those facts which are learned. The man who is in Christ, on the other hand, may operate partly with the same materials; but even when he is operating with the same materials, even when he is obtaining by sight or by hearsay knowledge of the words and deeds of Jesus, these facts now are invested with a higher significance. The natural man detects only the outward appearance of the words and deeds of Jesus; the man who is in Christ makes them attest facts that have significance in the new world. No doubt the higher knowledge of Christ of which Paul is speaking is not limited to this spiritual use of ordinary sources of information; no doubt there is also a direct intercourse between the believer and the risen Lord. But the spiritual use of the ordinary sources of information is certainly not excluded. Paul does not mean that he was indifferent to what Jesus said and did.

Thus 2 Cor. v. 16, rightly interpreted, does not attest any indifference on the part of Paul toward the information about Jesus which came to him through contact with Jesus' disciples. Such indifference, however, is also thought to be attested by the Epistle to the Galatians. In Gal. i, ii, Paul emphasizes his complete independence over against the original disciples. He received his gospel, he says, not by the instrumentality of men, but by direct revelation from the risen Christ. Even after the revelation he felt no need of instruction from those who had been apostles before him. It was three years before he saw any of them, and then he was with Peter only fifteen days. Even when he did finally have a conference with the original apostles, he received nothing from them; they recognized that God had already entrusted him with his gospel and that they had nothing to add. What can this passage mean, it is asked, except that Paul was indifferent to tradition, and derived his knowledge of Christ entirely from revelation?

In answer, it is sufficient to point to 1 Cor. xv. 1-11. Was Paul indifferent to tradition? In 1 Cor. xv. 3 he himself attests the contrary; he places tradition something that he had received-at the very foundation of his missionary preaching. "For I delivered unto you among the first things," he says, "that which I

also received." The word "received" here certainly designates information obtained by ordinary word of mouth, not direct revelation from the risen Christ; and the content of what was "received" fixes the source of the information pretty definitely in the fifteen days which Paul spent with Peter at Jerusalem. It is almost universally admitted that 1 Cor. xv. 3ff. contains the tradition of the Jerusalem Church with regard to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The comparison with 1 Cor. xv. 1-11 thus exhibits the danger of interpreting the Epistle to the Galatians in one-sided fashion. If Galatians stood by itself, the reader might suppose that at least the resurrection of Christ, the central fact of Paul's gospel, was founded, in Paul's preaching, upon Paul's own testimony alone. In Galatians Paul says that his gospel was not derived from men. But his gospel was grounded upon the resurrection of Christ. Surely, it might be said, there-fore, he based at least the resurrection not at all upon the testimony of others but upon the revelation which came to him from Christ. Is it possible to conceive of the author of Galatians as appealing for the foundation of his gospel to the testimony of Peter and the twelve and other brethren in the primitive Church-to the testimony of exactly those men whose mediatorship he is excluding in Galatians? Yet as a matter of fact, that is exactly what Paul did. That he did so is attested not by the Book of Acts or by any source upon which doubt might be cast, but by one of the accepted epistles. The Epistle to the Galatians must always be interpreted in the light of 1 Cor. xv. 1-11.

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.

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](#).