

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 6)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

What then does Paul mean in Galatians when he says that he received his gospel directly from Christ? The answer is perfectly plain. He does not mean that when he drew near to Damascus on that memorable day he knew none of the facts about Jesus; he does not mean that after that day his knowledge of the facts was not enriched by intercourse with Jesus' friends. What Jesus really gave him near Damascus was not so much the facts as a new interpretation of the facts. He had known some of the facts before, but they had filled him with hatred. The Galilean prophet had cast despite upon the Law; He had broken down the prerogatives of Israel; it was blasphemous, moreover, to proclaim a crucified malefactor as the Lord's Anointed. Paul had known the facts before; he had known them only too well. Now, however, he obtained a new interpretation of the facts; he obtained that new interpretation not by human intercession, not by refection upon the testimony of the disciples, not by the example of the holy martyrs, but by revelation from Jesus Himself. Jesus Himself appeared to him. He might have appeared in anger, to destroy him for his unspeakable sin. Instead, He appeared in love, to call him into fellowship and into glorious service, to commission him as apostle of the One whose Church he had laid waste. That is what Paul means when he says that he received his gospel directly from the risen Christ.

The truth is, it never occurred to Paul to regard the bare facts about Jesus as constituting a "gospel"; it never even occurred to Paul to reflect upon all the sources of information about the facts. To us the sources of information about Jesus are limited: therefore they are searched out and numbered and weighed. But to Paul the sources of information were so numerous that they could not be catalogued. It never occurred to him to regard with supreme gratitude the particular source from which he derived any particular bit of information about Jesus any more than we regard with special gratitude the newspaper from which we derive our knowledge of current events. If one newspaper had not printed the news, others would have done so; the sources of information are so numerous that we do not reflect upon them. So it was in the case of Paul's information about Jesus. Bare detailed information about the words and deeds of Jesus did not in Paul's mind constitute a "gospel"; they constituted only the materials upon which the gospel was based. When he says, therefore, that he did not receive his gospel from men he does not mean that he received no information from Peter or Barnabas or Mark or James or the five hundred brethren who had seen the risen

Lord. What he does mean is that he himself was convinced of the decisive fact—the fact of the resurrection—not by the testimony of these men, but by the divine interposition on the road to Damascus, and that none of these men told him how he himself was to be saved or what he was to say to the Gentiles about the way of salvation. Materials for the proof of his gospel might come to him from ordinary sources of information, but his gospel itself was given to him directly by Christ.

Thus Paul does not directly attest any indifference on his part toward tradition about the life of Jesus. But is not such indifference revealed by the extreme paucity of references in the Pauline Epistles to what Jesus said and did?

In answer to this question it must be admitted that direct citations in the Pauline Epistles of words of Jesus, and direct references to the details of Jesus' life, are surprisingly few. In 1 Cor. vii. 10, Paul appeals to a command of the Lord about divorce, and carefully distinguishes such commands from what he himself is saying to the Corinthians (verses 12, 25). In 1 Cor. ix. 14, he calls attention to an ordinance of the Lord to the effect that they that proclaim the gospel should live of the gospel. In these passages it cannot be doubted that the commands of "the Lord" are commands that Jesus gave during His earthly ministry; they are certainly not commands given to Paul by the risen Christ. For the words which Paul himself wrote to his churches, by virtue of his apostolic authority, themselves constituted commands of the Lord in the broad sense, in that the authority of the Lord was behind them (1 Cor. xiv. 37); here, therefore, when such apostolic commands are distinguished from commands of the Lord, the commands of the Lord must be taken in a narrower sense. They can only be commands given by Jesus during His earthly ministry.¹

These passages show that Paul was in the habit of distinguishing what Jesus said on earth to His disciples from what the risen Lord said to him directly by revelation. They show, moreover, that Paul was in possession of a fund of information about the words of Jesus. It may be a question why he did not draw upon the fund more frequently; but at any rate, the fund was there.

In 1 Thess. iv. 15, the assurance that those who are alive at the Parousia shall not precede those that have died is grounded in a word of the Lord ("For this we say to you in a word of the Lord").? Here again the "word of the Lord" is probably to be regarded as a word which Jesus spoke while He was on earth, rather than as a revelation made by the risen Lord directly to Paul. If this interpretation be correct, then this passage contains another incidental reference to a fund of information about the words of Jesus.

Most important of all, however, is the report of the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. xi. 23ff. The report is introduced by the words, "For I received from the Lord that which also I delivered unto you." What does Paul mean by the expression "received from the Lord"? Does he mean that the information was

¹ Compare Knowling, *The Witness of the Epistles*, 1892, pp. 319f

given him directly by the risen Christ, or that he received it by ordinary word of mouth from the eyewitnesses? The former interpretation has been favored in the first place by some who occupy a strictly supernaturalistic point of view, to whom therefore it does not seem strange that the risen Christ should give to His apostle even detailed information about past events; it has also been favored by some who start from naturalistic presuppositions, and, regarding Paul as a mystic and a visionary, seek to separate him as far as possible from historical tradition about Jesus. But from either of these two points of view the interpretation is unsatisfactory. Why should the risen Christ give to His apostle detailed information which could be obtained perfectly well by ordinary inquiry from the eyewitnesses? Such revelation would be unlike the other miracles of the Bible. God does not rend the heaven to reveal what can be learned just as well by ordinary word of mouth. But this interpretation is equally unsatisfactory from the naturalistic point of view.

Did Paul really suppose the risen Christ to have given him all this detailed information about the night of the betrayal and the rest? How could such a visionary experience be explained? The only possible answer, on naturalistic presuppositions, would be that the vision merely made use of materials which were already in Paul's mind; Paul already had information from the eyewitnesses about the Supper, but after he had forgotten whence he had received the information it welled up again from his subconscious life in the form of a vision. This explanation involves a psychological absurdity. The area of Paul's consciousness was not so limited as it is represented in modern reconstructions as being. If Paul received information from the eyewitnesses about what Jesus said and did on the night of the betrayal, we can be sure that he remembered the information and remembered where he had got it. It was not necessary for him to receive it all over again in a vision.

There are therefore serious a priori objections against finding in the words "received from the Lord" in 1 Cor. xi. 23 a reference to direct revelation. But this interpretation is not really favored by the words as they stand. The word "from," in the clause "I received from the Lord," is not the only word used for "from" after the word "received"; this word seems to indicate not the immediate but the ultimate source of what is received." Furthermore, the word "received" 2 in 1 Cor. xv. 3 certainly refers to ordinary information obtained from eyewitnesses; it is natural therefore to find a similar usage of the word in 1 Cor. xi. 23. It is natural to interpret one passage after the analogy of the other. In 1 Cor. xv. 3ff. Paul is certainly appealing to ordinary tradition; probably, therefore, he is also doing so in 1 Cor. xi. 23f. The report of the institution of the Lord's Supper is thus to be added to those passages which contain definite citations of the words of Jesus.

This report also belongs with those passages in the Epistles which attest knowledge of the details of Jesus' life. It is sometimes said that Paul is interested only in two facts about Jesus, the death and the resurrection. Yet in 1 Cor. xi. 23 he refers even to such a detail as the betrayal, and fixes the time of its

occurrence "the night in which He was betrayed." Other details about the life of Jesus may be gleaned from the Epistles. Jesus, according to Paul, was a Jew, He was descended from David, He was subject to the Mosaic Law, He had brothers, of whom one is named, He carried on a ministry for the Jews (Rom. xv. 8). With regard to the crucifixion and resurrection, moreover, Paul was interested not merely in the bare facts themselves; he was also interested in the details connected with them. Thus in 1 Cor. xv. 4 he mentions the burial of Jesus as having formed a part of his fundamental missionary preaching; and he also gives in the same connection an extended list of appearances of the risen Christ. It is possible that when Paul writes to the Galatians that Jesus Christ crucified had been pictured or placarded before their eyes (Gal. iii. 1), he is referring, not merely to the forcibleness with which the one fact of Christ's death was proclaimed in Galatia, but also to the vividness with which the story was told in detail. So vivid was the story of the crucifixion as Paul told it in Galatia that it was as though the Galatians had before their eyes a great picture of Jesus on the cross.

Moreover, the references of Paul to Jesus' life concern not merely details; some of them also attest warm appreciation of Jesus' character. The character of Jesus is indeed, according to Paul, exhibited primarily by the great central act of love by which He came to earth to die for the salvation of men. In Phil. ii. 5ff., the unselfishness of Christ, which is held up for imitation by the Philippian Christians, is found no doubt primarily in the incarnation and in the Cross; in Gal. ii. 20, the love of Christ, upon which the faith and the gratitude of believers are based, is found in the one great fact of Christ's death ("who loved me and gave himself for me"). But there are also passages in the Epistles which show that Paul was impressed with the character of Jesus not only as it was manifested by the incarnation and by the atoning death, but also as it appeared in the daily life of Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. The plainest of such passages, perhaps, are 2 Cor. x. 1 and Rom. xv. 2, 3. When Paul speaks of the meekness and gentleness of Christ, he refers evidently to the impression which Jesus made upon His contemporaries; and when he says that Christ "pleased not himself" but bore reproaches patiently, he is evidently thinking not only of the gracious acts of incarnation and atonement but also of the conduct of Jesus from day to day. In 2 Cor. viii. 9 ("though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor"), although the reference may be primarily to the poverty of any human life as compared with the glories of the preexistent Christ, yet the peculiar choice of words is probably due to the details of Jesus' life of hardship; Paul would hardly have spoken in this way if Jesus while He was on earth had lived in the magnificence of an earthly kingdom. Even in Phil. ii. 7, though the "form of a servant refers primarily to human existence as distinguished from the glories of heaven, yet there seems to be also an impression of the special humility and poverty of Jesus' earthly life; and the Cross is put as the climax of an obedience which appeared also in Jesus' life as a whole (verse 8). Back of these passages there lies warm appreciation of Jesus' character as it appeared in the days of His flesh. Imitation of Christ (1 Thess. i. 6; 1 Cor. xi. 1) had its due place in the life and teaching of Paul, and

that imitation was founded not only upon one act, but upon many acts, of the Lord.

When Paul speaks of his own life of constant self-sacrifice, in which he seeks not his own comfort but the salvation of others, as being led in imitation of Christ (1 Cor. x. 32-x1. 1), he has before his mind the lineaments of just that Jesus who is known to us in the Gospels—that Jesus who had not where to lay His head, who went about doing good, and who preached the gospel to the poor.

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