

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 9)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Jesus and Paul present the same view of the Kingdom of God. The term "kingdom of God" is not very frequent in the Epistles; but it is used as though familiar to the readers, and when it does occur, it has the same meaning as in the teaching of Jesus. The similarity appears, in the first place, in a negative feature both in Jesus and in Paul, the idea of the Kingdom is divorced from all political and materialistic associations. That fact may seem to us to be a matter of course. But in the Judaism of the first century it was far from being a matter of course. On the contrary, it meant nothing less than a revolution in thought and in life. How did Paul, the patriot and the Pharisee, come to separate the thought of the Kingdom from political associations? How did he come to do so even if he had come to think that the Messiah had already appeared? How did he come to do so unless he was influenced in some way by the teaching of Jesus? But the similarity is not merely negative. In positive aspects also, the Kingdom of God in Paul is similar to that which appears in the teaching of Jesus. Both in Jesus and in Paul, the implications of entrance are ethical. "Or know ye not," says Paul, "that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. vi. 9). Then follows, after these words, as in Gal. v. 19-21, a long list of sins which exclude a man from participation in the Kingdom. Paul is here continuing faithfully the teaching of Him who said, "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Finally both in Jesus and in Paul the Kingdom appears partly as present and partly as future. In the above passages from Galatians and 1 Corin-thians, for example, and in 1 Cor. xv. 50, it is future; whereas in such passages as Rom. xiv. 17 ("for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"), the present aspect is rather in view. The same two aspects of the Kingdom appear also in the teaching of Jesus; all attempts at making Jesus' conception thoroughly eschatological have failed. Both in Jesus and in Paul, therefore, the Kingdom of God is both transcendent and ethical. Both in Jesus and in Paul, finally, the coming of the Kingdom means joy as well as judgment. When Paul says that the Kingdom of God is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost," he is like Jesus not merely in word but in the whole spirit of the message; Jesus also proclaimed the coming of the Kingdom as a "gospel."

In the second place, Paul is like Jesus in his doctrine of the fatherhood of God. That doctrine, it will probably be admitted, was characteristic of Jesus; indeed the tendency in certain quarters is to regard it as the very sum and substance of all

that Jesus said. Certainly no parallel to Jesus' presentation of God as Father has been found in extra-Christian literature. Even in the Old Testament, it is true, the conception of the fatherhood of God is not without importance. The consciousness of belonging to God's chosen people and thus being under God's fatherly care was immensely valuable for the life of the individual Israelite; it was no mere product of an unsatisfying state religion like the religions of Greece or Rome. There was preparation in Old Testament revelation, here as elsewhere, for the coming of the Messiah. In Jewish literature outside of the Old Testament, moreover, and in rabbinical sources, the conception of God as Father is not altogether absent.¹ But it appears comparatively seldom, and it lacks altogether the true content of Jesus' teaching. Despite all previous uses of the word "father" as applied to God, Jesus was ushering in a new era when He taught His disciples to say, "Our Father which art in heaven."

This conception of the fatherhood of God appears in Paul in just the same way as in Jesus. In Paul as well as in Jesus it is not something to be turned to occasionally; on the contrary it is one of the constituent elements of the religious life. It is no wonder that the words, "God our Father," appear regularly at the beginnings of the Epistles. The fatherhood of God in Paul is not something to be argued about or defended; it is altogether a matter of course. But it has not lost, through repetition, one whit of its freshness. The name "Father" applied to God in Paul is more than a bare title; it is the welling up of the depths of the soul. "Abba, Father" on the lips of Paul's converts was exactly the same, not only in form but also in deepest import, as the word which Jesus first taught His disciples when they said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray."

But the fatherhood of God in Paul is like the teaching of Jesus in even more definite ways than in the fervor of the religious life which it evokes. It is also like Jesus' teaching in being the possession, not of the world, but of the household of faith. If, indeed, the fatherhood of God in Jesus' teaching were like the fatherhood of God in modern liberalism—a relationship which God sustains toward men as men—then it would be as far removed as possible from the teaching of Paul. But as a matter of fact, both Paul and Jesus reserved the term Father for the relation in which God stands to the disciples of Jesus. One passage, indeed (Matt. v. 45; Luke vi. 35), has been quoted as making God the Father of all men. But only by a strange misinterpretation. It is strange how in the day of our boasted grammatico-historical exegesis, so egregious an error can be allowed to live. The prejudices of the reader have triumphed here over all exegetical principles; a vague modernism has been attributed to the sternest, as well as most merciful, Prophet who ever walked upon earth. When Jesus says, "Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust," He certainly does not mean that God is the Father of all men both evil and good. God cares for all, but He is not said to be the Father of all. On the contrary, it may almost be said that the very point of the passage is

¹ Bousset, *Die Religion des Judentums*, 2te Aufl., 1906, pp. 432-434.

that God cares for all although He is not the Father of all. That it is which makes Him the example for those who are to do good not merely to friends or brothers but also to enemies.

This interpretation does not mean that God does not stand toward all men in a relation analogous to that of a father to his children; it does not mean that He does not love all or care for all. But it does mean that however close may be the relationship which God sustains to all men, the lofty term Father is reserved for a relationship which is far more intimate still. Jesus extends to all men those common blessings which the modern preacher sums up in the term "fatherhood of God"; but He extends to His own disciples not only those blessings but infinitely more. It is not the men of the world—not the "publicans," not the "Gentiles"—who can say, according to the teaching of Jesus, "Our Father which art in Heaven." Rather it is the little group of Jesus' disciples—which little group, however, all without exception are freely invited to join.

So it is exactly also in the teaching of Paul. God stands, according to Paul, in a vital relation to all men. He is the author of the being of all; He cares for all; He has planted His law in the hearts of all. He stands thus in a relation toward all which is analogous to that of father to child. The Book of Acts is quite in accord with the Epistles when it makes Paul say of all men, "For we are also His offspring." But in Paul just as in Jesus the lofty term "Father" is reserved for a more intimate relationship. Paul accepts all the truth of natural religion; all the truth that reappears in the vague liberalism of modern times. But he adds to it the truth of the gospel. Those are truly sons of God, he says, who have been received by adoption into God's household, and in whose hearts God's Spirit cries, "Abba, Father."

There was nothing narrow about such a gospel; for the door of the household of faith was opened wide to all. Jesus had died in order to open that door, and the apostle went up and down the world, enduring peril upon peril in order to bring men in. There was need for such service, because of sin. Neither in Jesus nor in Paul is sin covered up, nor the necessity of a great transformation concealed. Jesus came not to reveal to men that they were already children of God, but to make them God's children by His redeeming work.

In the third place, Paul is like Jesus in presenting a doctrine of grace. Of course he is like the Jesus of the Gospels; for the Jesus of the Gospels declared that the Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many. But He is even like the Jesus of modern reconstruction.

Even the liberal Jesus taught a doctrine of grace. He taught, it for example, in the parables of the laborers in the vineyard and of the servant coming in from the field. In those two parables Jesus expressed His opposition to a religion of works, a religion which can open an account with God and seek to obtain salvation by

merit.² Salvation, according to Jesus, is a matter of God's free grace; it is something which God gives to whom He will. The same great doctrine really runs all through the teaching of Jesus; it is the root of His opposition to the scribes and Pharisees; it determines the confidence with which He taught His disciples to draw near to God. But it is the same doctrine, exactly, which appears in Paul. The Paul who combated the legalists in Galatia, like the Jesus who combated the scribes and Pharisees, was contending for a God of grace.

Let it not be objected that Jesus maintained also the expectation of a judgment. For in this particular also He was followed by Paul. Paul also, despite his doctrine of grace, expected that the Christians would stand before the judgment-seat. And it may be remembered in passing that both in Jesus and in Paul the judgment-seat is a judgment-seat of Christ.

In the fourth place, the ethical teaching of Paul is strikingly similar to that of Jesus. It is necessary only to point to the conception of love as the fulfilling of the law, and to the substitution for external rules of the great principles of justice and of mercy. These things may seem to us to be matters of course. But they were not matters of course in the Jewish environment of Paul. Similarity in this field between Jesus and Paul can hardly be a matter of chance. Many resemblances have been pointed out in detail between the ethical teaching of Jesus and that of Paul. But the most important is the one which is most obvious, and which just for that reason has sometimes escaped notice. Paul and Jesus, in their ethical teaching, are similar because of the details of what they say; but they are still more similar because of what they do not say. And they are similar in what they do not say despite the opposition of their countrymen. Many parallels for words of Jesus may have been found in rabbinical sources. But so much more, alas, is also found there. That oppressive plus of triviality and formalism places an impassable gulf between Jesus and the Jewish teachers. But Paul belongs with Jesus, on the same side of the gulf. In his ethic there is no formalism, no triviality, no casuistry—there is naught but "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control." What has become of all the rest? Was it removed by the genius of Paul? It is strange that two such men of genius should have arisen independently and at the same time. Or was the terrible plus of Pharisaic formalism and triviality burned away from Paul when the light shone around him on the way to Damascus and he fell at the feet of the great Teacher?

Points of contact between Jesus and Paul have just been pointed out in detail, and the list of resemblances could be greatly increased. The likeness of Paul to Jesus extends even to those features which appear in the Jesus of modern liberalism. What is more impressive, however, than all similarity in detail is the similarity in the two persons taken each as a whole. The Gospels are more than

² Compare W. Morgan, *The Religion and Theology of Paul*, 1917, p. 155: "The essential import of Paul's doctrine [of justification by faith] is all contained in the two parables of the Pharisee and the publican and the servant coming in from the field."

a collection of sayings and anecdotes; the Pauline Epistles are more than a collection of reasoned discussions. In the Gospels, a person is revealed, and another person in the Epistles. And the two persons belong together. It is impossible to establish that fact fully by detailed argument any more than it is possible to explain exactly why any two persons are friends to-day. But the fact is plain to any sympathetic reader. The writer of the Pauline Epistles would have been at home in the company of Jesus of Nazareth.

What then was the true relation between Paul and Jesus? It has been shown that Paul regarded himself as a disciple of Jesus, that he was so regarded by those who had been Jesus' friends, that he had abundant opportunity for acquainting himself with Jesus' words and deeds, that he does refer to them occasionally, that he could have done so oftener if he had desired, that the imitation of Jesus found a place in his life, and that his likeness to Jesus extends even to those elements in Jesus' life and teaching which are accepted by modern naturalistic criticism as authentic. At this point the problem is left by the great mass of recent investigators. Wrede is thought to be refuted already; the investigator triumphantly writes his Q. E. D. and passes on to something else.

But in reality the problem has not even been touched. It has been shown that the influence of Jesus upon Paul was somewhat greater than Wrede supposed. But that does not make Paul a disciple of Jesus. The true relationships of a man are determined not by things that lie on the periphery of his life, but by what is central³ - central both in his own estimation and in his influence upon subsequent generations. And what was central in Paul was certainly not the imitation of Jesus. At that point, Wrede was entirely correct; he has never really been silenced by the chorus of protest with which his startling little book was received. It is futile, therefore, to point to the influence of Jesus upon Paul in detail. Such a method may be useful in correcting exaggerations, but it does not touch the real question. The plain fact remains that if imitation of Jesus had been central in the life of Paul, as it is central, for example, in modern liberalism, then the Epistles would be full of the words and deeds of Jesus. It is insufficient to point to the occasional character of the Epistles. No doubt the Epistles are addressed to special needs; no doubt Paul knew far more about Jesus than in the Epistles he has found occasion to tell. But there are passages in the Epistles where the current of Paul's religious life runs full and free, where even after the lapse of centuries, even through the dull medium of the printed page, it sweeps the heart of the sympathetic reader on with it in a mighty flood.

And those passages are not concerned with the details of Jesus' earthly life. They are, rather, the great theological passages of the Epistles-the second chapter of Galatians, the fifth chapter of 2 Corinthians, and the eighth chapter of Romans. In these chapters, religion and theology are blended in a union which no critical analysis can ever possibly dissolve; these passages reveal the very center of Paul's life.

³ Wrede, *Paulus*, 1904, p. 93 (English Translation, Paul, 1907, p. 161).

The details of Jesus' earthly ministry no doubt had an important place in the thinking of Paul. But they were important, not as an end in themselves, but as a means to an end. They revealed the character of Jesus; they showed why He was worthy to be trusted. But they did not show what He had done for Paul. The story of Jesus revealed what Jesus had done for others: He had healed the sick; He had given sight to the blind; He had raised the dead. But for Paul He had done something far greater than all these things-for Paul He had died.

The religion of Paul, in other words, is a religion of redemption. Jesus, according to Paul, came to earth not to say something, but to do something; He was primarily not a teacher, but a Redeemer. He came, not to teach men how to live, but to give them a new life through His atoning death. He was, indeed, also a teacher, and Paul attended to His teaching. But His teaching was all in vain unless it led to the final acceptance of His redemptive work. Not the details of Jesus' life, therefore, but the redemptive acts of death and resurrection are at the center of the religion of Paul. The teaching and example of Jesus, according to Paul, are valuable only as a means to an end, valuable in order that through a revelation of Jesus' character saving faith may be induced, and valuable thereafter in order that the saving work may be brought to its fruition in holy living. But all that Jesus said and did was for the purpose of the Cross. "He loved me," says Paul, "and gave Himself for me." There is the heart and core of the religion of Paul.

Jesus, according to Paul, therefore, was not a teacher, but a Redeemer. But was Paul right? Was Jesus really a Redeemer, or was He only a teacher? If He was only a teacher, then Paul was no true follower of His. For in that case, Paul has missed the true import of Jesus' life. Compared with that one central error, small importance is to be attributed to the influence which Jesus may have exerted upon Paul here and there. Wrede, therefore, was exactly right in his formulation of the question. Paul regarded Jesus as a Redeemer. If Jesus was not a Redeemer, then Paul was no true follower of Jesus, but the founder of a new religion. The liberal theologians have tried to avoid the issue.

They have pointed out exaggerations; they have traced the influence of Jesus upon Paul in detail; they have distinguished religion from theology, and abandoning the theology of Paul they have sought to derive his religion from Jesus of Nazareth. It is all very learned and very eloquent. But it is also entirely futile. Despite the numerous monographs on "Jesus and Paul," Wrede was entirely correct. He was correct, that is, not in his conclusions, but in his statement of the question. He was correct in his central contention-Paul was no true disciple of the "liberal Jesus." If Jesus was what the liberal theologians represent Him as being-a teacher of righteousness, a religious genius, a guide on the way to God-then not Jesus but Paul was the true founder of historic Christianity. For historic Christianity, like the religion of Paul, is a religion of redemption.

Certainly the separation of religion from theology in Paul must be abandoned. Was it a mere theory when Paul said of Jesus Christ, "He loved me and gave Himself for me"? Was it merely theological speculation when he said, "One died for all, therefore all died; and he died for all, that they that live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto him who for their sakes died and rose again"? Was it mere theology when he said, "Far be it from me to glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"? Was this mere theological speculation? Surely not. Surely it was religion-warm, living religion.

If this was not true religion, then where can religion ever be found? But the passages just quoted are not passages which deal with the details of Jesus' life; they are not passages which deal with general principles of love and grace, and fatherliness and brotherliness. On the contrary, they deal with just the thing most distasteful to the modern liberal Church; they deal with the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ, by which He took our sins upon Him and bare them in His own body on the tree. The matter is perfectly plain. Religion in Paul does not exist apart from theology, and theology does not exist apart from religion. Christianity, according to Paul, is both a life and a doctrine but logically the doctrine comes first. The life is the expression of the doctrine and not vice versa. Theology, as it appears in Paul, is not a product of Christian experience, but a setting forth of those facts by which Christian experience has been produced. If, then, the theology of Paul was derived from extra-Christian sources, his religion must be abandoned also. The whole of Paulinism is based upon the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Paulinism is based upon the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Thus Paul was a true follower of Jesus if Jesus was a divine Redeemer, come from heaven to die for the sins of men; he was not a true follower of Jesus if Jesus was a mere revealer of the fatherhood of God. Paulinism was not based upon a Galilean prophet. It was based either upon the Son of God who came to earth for men's salvation and still holds communion with those who trust Him, or else it was based upon a colossal error. But if the latter alternative be adopted, the error was not only colossal, but also unaccountable. It is made more unaccountable by all that has been said above, all that the liberal theologians have helped to establish, about the nearness of Paul to Jesus. If Paul really stood so near to Jesus, if he really came under Jesus' influence, if he really was intimate with Jesus' friends, how could he have misinterpreted so completely the significance of Jesus' person; how could he have substituted for the teacher of righteousness who had really lived in Palestine the heavenly Redeemer of the Epistles? No satisfactory answer has yet been given. In the relation between Jesus and Paul the historian discovers a problem which forces him on toward a Copernican revolution in all his thinking, which leads him to ground his own salvation and the hope of this world no longer in millions of acts of sinful men or in the gradual progress of civilization, but simply and solely in one redemptive act of the Lord of Glory.

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