

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 1)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The review of Paul's life has prepared the way for the principal subject of investigation.¹ What was the origin of the religion of Paul?

The most obvious answer to that question is that the religion of Paul was based upon Jesus. That is the answer which has always been given in the Church. The Church has always accepted the apostle Paul, not at all as a religious philosopher, but simply and solely as a witness to Jesus. If he was not a true disciple of Jesus, then the authority which he has always possessed and the influence which he has wielded have been based upon a misconception.

But exactly the same answer was given by Paul himself. Paul regarded himself as a servant of Christ, and based his whole life upon what Christ had done and what Christ was continuing to do. "It is no longer I that live," he says, "but Christ liveth in me." Unquestionably this Christ, upon whom Paul based his life, was identified by Paul with Jesus of Nazareth, a person who had lived in Palestine a few years before. A mighty change in the mode of existence of Jesus had indeed, Paul believed, been wrought by the resurrection; a life of humiliation had given place to a life of glory. But it was the same person who lived throughout. There is in the Pauline Epistles not a trace of any distinction between "Jesus" and "Christ," as though the former were the name of the historic personage who lived in Galilee and the latter the name of the risen Lord. On the contrary, the name Jesus is applied freely to the risen Lord, and the name Lord—the loftiest of all titles—is applied to the Jesus who suffered and died. It was "the Lord of glory," according to Paul, who was crucified (1 Cor. ii. 8). The same phenomenon appears everywhere in the Epistles: the Lord of glory lived the life of a servant on earth; and Jesus, the man who had recently lived in Palestine, was to be worshiped by all in heaven and on earth (Phil. ii. 10, 11).

There is, therefore, in the Pauline Epistles not the slightest trace of any gnosticizing separation between Jesus the historic person, and Christ the divine Lord. There is, moreover, as W. Morgan rightly observes,² not the slightest trace of any "adoptionist Christology," by which a man Jesus could be conceived of

¹ In the present chapter there are some coincidences of thought and expression with the paper by the same author entitled "Jesus and Paul" in *Biblical and Theological Studies* by the Members of the Faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary, 1912, pp. 547-578.

² W. Morgan, *The Religion and Theology of Paul*, 1917.

either as growing up gradually into divinity or as received into divinity by a catastrophic event like the resurrection. On the contrary, Paul says expressly that the Jesus who lived in Palestine existed, before His appearance upon earth, in the form of God; and the entrance of that person upon human life is represented as a voluntary act of love. His higher nature, therefore, existed from the beginning; indeed He was, according to Paul, the instrument in the creation of the world.

Finally, there is no trace in Paul of any doctrine of "kenosis," by which the higher nature of Christ might have been regarded as so relinquished while He was on earth that the words and deeds of the historic person would become matter of indifference. Such a representation is refuted not only by what has just been said about the application of the term "Lord" to the historic Jesus, but also by the references of Paul to actual words and deeds of Jesus. These references are few; their scantiness may require explanation. But they are sufficient to show that Paul regarded the words of the historic Jesus as possessing absolute authority and His example as normative for the Christian life.

Thus the testimony of Paul is plain. He regarded Christ as Lord and Master, and he identified that Christ fully with the Jesus who had lived but a few years before. This testimony must be faced and invalidated by those who would find the origin of Paul's religion elsewhere than in Jesus of Nazareth.

Such is the testimony of Paul. But what was the testimony of his contemporaries? In the environment of Paul were to be found some men who had been intimate friends of Jesus; presumably they were acquainted with Jesus' character and teaching. What was their attitude toward Paul? Did they regard him as an innovator with respect to Jesus, or did they admit him to the company of Jesus' true disciples? Since they knew both Jesus and Paul, their testimony as to the relationship between the two is obviously worth having. At this point appears the importance of Baur's work. It is the merit of Baur that however faulty his solution he placed at least in the forefront of interest the problem of the relationship between Paul and the intimate friends of Jesus. That relationship, Baur believed, was fundamentally a relationship of conflict; Paul and Peter, according to Baur, established at best only a *modus vivendi*, an agreement to disagree; really they were separated by a deep-seated difference of principle. But at this point a further problem arises. If Paul and Peter were really in disharmony, how did they ever come to be regarded as in harmony? If there was a deep-seated difference of principle between Paul and Peter, how did it come about that the Catholic Church was founded not upon Paul taken alone, or upon Peter taken alone, but upon Paul and Peter taken together?

Here, again, Baur displayed his true intellectual greatness by detecting and facing the problem. He saw clearly what has seldom been seen with equal clearness since his day, that the historian must explain the transition not only from the historical Jesus to apostolic Christianity, but from apostolic Christianity

to the Old Catholic Church. And for this latter problem he proposed a solution which was not wanting in grandeur. But his solution, despite its grandeur, has succumbed. Baur's reconstruction of the second century, with the supposed gradual compromise between Pauline and Petrine Christianity, resulting finally in the Christianity of the Old Catholic Church. was one of the first elements in his system which had to be abandoned; it was destroyed, in the first place, by the criticism of A. Ritschl, and, in the second place, by the painstaking labors of Lightfoot, Zahn, Von Harnack and others, by which, through a study of second-century documents and their literary relationships, it was shown that the New Testament books cannot be scattered at will anywhere throughout the second century in the interests of a theory of development. Ritschl showed that the importance of specifically Jewish Christianity had been enormously exaggerated by Baur; and the study of patristics tended to place the New Testament books much earlier than the late dating which the theory of Baur required. Thus Baur did not succeed in overcoming the fundamental objection raised against him by the very existence of a Church that appealed both to Peter and to Paul. If Peter and Paul were really in fundamental disharmony, how did the Church come to bring them together so confidently and at such an early time? This question has never been answered. The very existence of the Church is a refutation of Baur; the Church never could have existed unless the apostles had been in fundamental agreement.

But Baur may also be refuted directly, in a purely exegetical way, by an examination of the sources to which he himself appealed. Baur established his hypothesis of a conflict between Paul and Peter on the basis of the Pauline Epistles. Subsidiary evidence, thought to be found in other books of the New Testament, was soon shown to be illusory. Thus Baur and the early Tübingen scholars detected an anti-Pauline polemic in the Book of Revelation, which they attributed to John the son of Zebedee. This use of the Apocalypse was soon abandoned even by Baur's own disciples. The theory of Baur, therefore, stands or falls with his interpretation of the Pauline Epistles, especially 1 and 2 Corinthians and Galatians.

The Corinthian Epistles, as has been observed in the last chapter, afford no real support to the hypothesis of an inter-apostolic conflict. There is not the slightest reason to connect the troublemakers at Corinth with the original apostles or with James; and the whole subject of the "Christ-party" in 1 Cor. i. 12 is now felt to be very obscure. The evidence of an apostolic conflict narrows down, therefore, to the second chapter of Galatians.

Undoubtedly there are expressions in that chapter which if taken alone might indicate ill-will between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders. In Gal. ii. 2, 6, for example, James and Peter and John are called "those who seemed," 1 and in the latter verse the phrase is explained by the fuller designation, "those who seemed to be something." In Gal. ii. 9, the same persons are designated as "those who seemed to be pillars." In themselves these words are capable of an

interpretation which would be derogatory to the persons so designated. The meaning might conceivably be that the Jerusalem leaders only "seemed" or "were thought" to be something, or only thought themselves to be something (compare Gal. vi. 3), whereas they really were nothing. But this interpretation is, of course, quite impossible, since Paul certainly recognized Peter and John as genuine apostles and James the brother of the Lord as a man of real authority in the Church. The most that may be maintained, therefore, is that the choice of the peculiar phrases indicates a certain irritation of Paul against the Jerusalem leaders; instead of calling them pillars (which certainly he recognized them as being) he shows his irritation, it is said, by calling them "those who were thought to be pillars."

The presence of indignant feeling in the passage must clearly be admitted; but the question is whether the indignation is directed against the Jerusalem leaders themselves or only against the Judaizers who falsely appealed to them. The latter view is correct. It must be remembered that what Paul in Gal. ii. 1-10 desires most of all to prevent is the impression that he is appealing to the Jerusalem apostles as to a higher instance. He is not basing the authority of his preaching upon any authorization that the apostles gave him; he is not saying that he has a right to be heard because those who were the pillars of the Church endorsed his message. Such a representation of the conference would have cast despite upon all the work which he had done before, and would have made it necessary for him in the future to prove constantly against all Judaizers and other opponents his agreement with the Jerusalem authorities. The profound consciousness which he had of his apostolic authority did not permit any such course of action; and such restrictions would have hindered his work wherever he went. It was absolutely essential in the economy of God that the leader of the Gentile work should have independent authority and should not be obliged to appeal again and again to authorities who were far away, at Jerusalem. Hence what Paul desires to make clear above all in Gal. ii. 1-10 is that though he appealed to the Jerusalem authorities it was not necessary for his own sake for him to appeal to them. They were great, but their greatness had absolutely nothing to do with his authority; for they added nothing to him. It was therefore not the real greatness of the original apostles which caused him to appeal to them (for he needed no authorization from any man no matter how great), but only the greatness which was attributed to them by the Judaizers. They really were great, but it was only the false use which had been made of their greatness by the Judaizers which caused him to lay his gospel before them. The Judaizers were to be refuted from the lips of the very authorities to whom they appealed. It should be observed that the terms which are now under discussion are incapable of real translation into English. The equivalent English words might seem to imply that the reputed greatness of the Jerusalem leaders was not also a real greatness. There is no such implication in the Greek. The shortest of the phrases, which may be paraphrased "those of repute," was used in Greek sometimes in a way thoroughly honorable to the persons designated. Possibly the repetition of the phrases, which seems somewhat strange, was due to the

employment of the same phrases by the Judaizing opponents. The peculiarities of the passage may perhaps be due partly to the fact that Paul is here using catchwords of his adversaries.

At any rate, if the reader refuses to interpret these expressions in a way derogatory to the original apostles, such refusal is not due merely to a pious desire to preserve harmony in the apostolic college; it is due rather to the way in which Paul himself everywhere speaks of the apostles, and to the "right hand of fellowship" which according to this very passage they extended to him. It is good exegetical method to interpret things that are obscure by things that are plain; but what is plainest of all in this passage is that the very authorities to whom the Judaizers appealed against Paul recognized the hand of God in his work and bade him Godspeed.

If Gal. ii. 1-10 affords no support to the theory of Baur, the latter part of the same chapter (Gal. ii. 11-21) is not really any more favorable. This passage does indeed attest a rebuke which Paul administered to Peter at Antioch. Peter is even accused of "hypocrisy." The Greek word is indeed not quite so harsh as the English word derived from it; it means the "playing of a part" and so here the concealment of true convictions. Nevertheless, the incident remains regrettable enough; evidently real moral blame was attached by Paul to Peter's conduct. But what is really significant is that in the very act of condemning Peter's practice Paul commends his principles; he appeals to a great fund of Christian conviction which he and Peter had in common (Gal. i. 14-21). It will not do to say that in this passage Paul is giving no report of what he said to Peter, but is expounding his own views to the Galatians. For in Gal. ii. 14 he begins to tell what he said to Peter "before them all"; and there is not the slightest indication of a break before the end of the chapter. Certainly the break cannot come after verse 14; for the thought of that verse is quite incomplete in itself and becomes intelligible only when explained by what follows. The passage is best explained, therefore, if it be taken as embodying the substance of what Paul said to Peter at Antioch, though doubtless there is no attempt at verbal reproduction of the language. At any rate, however much of Gal. ii. 14-21 be a report of what was said at Antioch, and however much be what Paul now wishes to say to the Galatians, one thing is clear-when Paul begins in verse 14 to report what he said to Peter, he means to call attention to something in which he and Peter were agreed; he means to say: "You and I, though we had all the advantages of the Law, relinquished such advantages, in order to be justified by faith in Christ. How then can we force the Gentiles to seek salvation by a way which even in our own case was futile?" Whatever else Paul said to Peter, this much he certainly said. The context makes the matter perfectly clear. It must always be remembered that Paul blames Peter not for false opinions, but for "hypocrisy"-that is, for concealment of true opinions. In verse 14, moreover, he says expressly that Peter was living after a Gentile manner. The verb is in the present tense "if thou being a Jew livest as do the Gentiles and not as do the Jews." Paul means to say that a principle essentially similar to that of the Gentile Christians, according to which in their case the

keeping of the Mosaic Law was relinquished, was the fixed basis of Peter's life. Peter's present withdrawal from the Gentiles was a mere temporary aberration. Before the coming of the men from James, he had seen clearly that the great new principle of faith in Christ took precedence of the Law, even for Jewish Christians; and after the departure of the men he would presumably revert to his old freedom. Indeed even now, even while he was withdrawing himself from his Gentile brethren, the real principle of his life had not been changed; he was still "living as do the Gentiles." But he was concealing his real life for fear of men. The very nature of the charge which Paul brought against Peter, therefore, attests a fundamental unity of principle between the two apostles. Paul condemned Peter for "hypocrisy"; not for false principles, but for concealment of true principles. In principle, therefore, Paul and Peter were agreed.

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.

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