

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 2)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The very chapter which attests the appeal of Paul's bitter opponents to the original apostles, and records a sharp rebuke which Paul administered to Peter, really furnishes the best evidence of apostolic unity. It is the second chapter of Galatians which mentions the right hand of fellowship extended to Paul by James and Peter and John, and it is the second chapter of Galatians which represents the divergence between Paul and Peter as divergence of practice, not of principle. Even if the Epistle to the Galatians stood alone, it would establish the fundamental unity of the apostles.

But as a matter of fact, the Epistle to the Galatians does not stand alone; it must be interpreted in the light of other sources. The one-sided interpretation of Galatians, with neglect of other epistles of Paul and of the Book of Acts, has been one of the most fruitful causes of error in the study of the apostolic age. For example, Gal. ii should never be read except in the light of 1 Cor. xv. 1-11. The two passages emphasize two different aspects of Paul's relation to those who had been apostles before him; and only when both the two aspects are considered is the full truth attained. Gal. ii emphasizes the independence of Paul's gospel; Paul had not received it through the instrumentality of men. 1 Cor. xv. 1-11 emphasizes the harmony of Paul's gospel with that of the original apostles, whom Christ had commissioned as directly and as truly as He had commissioned Paul. Both passages are contained in sources admitted by all to be sources of primary importance; yet either passage might be misunderstood if it were taken alone.

Thus the danger of interpreting Gal. ii entirely without reference to anything else is signally manifested by a comparison with 1 Cor. xv. 1-11. The First Epistle to the Corinthians must be allowed to cast light upon Galatians. But if so, may not the same privilege be granted to the Book of Acts? As a matter of fact, the privilege is being granted to the Book of Acts by a larger and larger number of modern scholars. Baur demanded that the Pauline Epistles should be interpreted by themselves, entirely without reference to Acts. But as J. Weiss pertinently remarks, such interpretation is quite impossible; the Epistles taken by themselves are unintelligible; they can be interpreted only when placed in the biographical outline provided by the historian. Of course, that outline might be discredited by a comparison with the Epistles; the divergences might really be contradictions. Comparison

of Acts with the Epistles is therefore a matter of fundamental importance. But that comparison, as it has been undertaken at some length in the two preceding chapters of the present discussion, has resulted favorably to the Book of Acts. The divergences between Acts and Pauline Epistles are no more to be regarded as contradictions than are the divergences between various passages in the Epistles themselves; and at many points the historical work casts a flood of light upon the words of Paul.

Thus the imposing construction of Baur was erected by neglecting all sources except Galatians and Corinthians, and then by misinterpreting these. When all the available sources are used, and estimated at their true value, the hypothesis of a fundamental conflict between Paul and the original apostles disappears. There was indeed a bitter conflict in the apostolic age, but, as Ritschl observed against Baur, it was a conflict not between Paul and the original apostles, but between all the apostles, including both Paul and Peter, on the one side, and an extreme Judaizing party on the other. The extreme Judaizing party, not having the support of the original disciples of Jesus, soon ceased to be influential. The various sects of schismatic Jewish Christians which appear in the second century—"Ebionites" and the like if they had any roots at all the apostolic age (which is more than doubtful), could trace their spiritual descent not from the original apostles, but from the Judaizers. It is no wonder then that they were left behind in the march of the Church. They were left behind not because Peter was left behind—for Peter appears as at least one of the foundations upon which the Old Catholic Church was built—but because Peter had left them behind, or rather because Peter had never given them his support at all. They were left behind because from the beginning their spiritual ancestors in the apostolic age had not really belonged with apostolic Christianity, but had been "false brethren privily brought in."

One fact, indeed, still requires explanation. If Paul and the original apostles were in such perfect agreement, how is it that the Judaizers in the apostolic age could appeal to the original apostles against Paul? The existence of that appeal cannot altogether be denied. The exact nature of the appeal is not indeed altogether clear. It is by no means clear that the Judaizers appealed to the original apostles in support of the content of the Judaizing message; it is by no means clear that they made Peter or James teach the necessity of the Mosaic Law for salvation. What is clear is only that they appealed to the original apostles in their personal attack against Paul; they contrasted Paul, who had become a disciple only after the crucifixion, with those who had been intimate with Jesus. They used Peter to discredit the apostolic authority of Paul, but it is not so clear that they used Peter to discredit the content of Paul's message.

If, however, they did appeal to Peter in this latter way, if they did appeal to Peter in support of their legalistic contentions, such an appeal does not overthrow the conclusions which have just been reached about the harmony of Peter and Paul;

it does not really make Peter an advocate of legalism. For even if Peter was not an advocate of legalism the appeal of the Judaizers to him can be explained. It can be explained not by the principles of Peter, but by his practice. The early disciples in Jerusalem continued to observe the Jewish fasts and feasts; they continued in diligent attendance upon the Temple services. Outwardly, they were simply devout Jews; and the manner of their life might therefore have given some color to the Judaizing contentions.

Inwardly, it is true, the early disciples were not simply devout Jews; they were really trusting for their salvation no longer to their observance of the Law but to Jesus their Saviour. The whole spirit of their lives, moreover, was quite different from that which prevailed in legalistic Judaism; anxious thought for the morrow, gloomy contemplation of the triumphs of the oppressor, had given place to exultant joy. The early disciples, indeed, like the Jews, were still waiting for the establishment of the kingdom of God. But their waiting was no longer full of sorrow. The Messiah was taken from them for a time; but He had already appeared and had brought salvation.

Thus the early Jerusalem Church was really quite distinct from contemporary Judaism; the real principle of its life was fresh and new. But to a superficial observer, on account of the continuance of old customs, the new principle might not appear; to a superficial observer, the observance of Jewish customs on the customs on the part of the early disciples might seem to be legalism. And certainly the Judaizers were superficial. Apparently they had come into the Church in the period of quiet that followed the persecution of Stephen; they had come in from the sect of the Pharisees, and they continued to be Pharisees at heart. As Pharisees they welcomed the coming of the Messiah, but they did not understand the teaching of this Messiah. They looked for a continuance of the prerogatives of Israel. Jesus was the Messiah, but was He not the Jewish Messiah, would He not bring about the triumph of the chosen people? Would not all the peoples of the earth come to do obeisance to Israel by submitting to Israel's Law? To such observers, the Jewish practice of the original apostles would furnish welcome support; these observers would not care to look beneath the surface; they would say simply to the Gentile Christians of Galatia: "The original disciples of Jesus obey the Mosaic Law; must not you do likewise?"

At a later time such an appeal could not have been made; at a later time even the practice of the original apostles ceased to conform to Jewish custom. The tradition according to which the apostle Peter finally went to Rome is emerging triumphant¹ from the fires of criticism; and if Peter went to Rome, it is inconceivable that he separated himself from Gentile Christians. Even in the early days, in Antioch, he had begun to abandon his Jewish manner of life; surely he must have abandoned it more fully when he went to the capital of the Gentile world. The tradition as to the Ephesian residence of the apostle John also points to the abandonment of the Law on the part of the original apostles, and to their

¹ See, for example, Lietzmann, *Petrus and Paulus in Rom*, 1915.

definite entrance upon the Gentile mission. That tradition has been rejected only by attending to late and dubious evidence to the neglect of what is plain. But it is not necessary to appeal to details. All that has been said above about the position of Peter in the mind of the Church shows that even the practice of the original apostles finally adapted itself to the needs of the expanding Gentile work.

But in the early period, in Jerusalem, before it had become evident that the Jewish people as such was to reject the gospel message, the apostles continued to observe the Law. And by doing so, they gave the Judaizers some color of support. Thus if the Judaizers did appeal to the original apostles in support of their legalistic claims, the appeal does not establish any real unity of principle between them and the original apostles, or any divergence of principle between the original apostles and Paul. But as a matter of fact it is by no means perfectly clear that the appeal was made; it is by no means clear that the Judaizers appealed to the original apostles for the content of their legalistic message rather than merely for their attack upon the independent apostleship of Paul. It is possible that they said no more than this: "Paul was not one of the original disciples of Jesus; his authority is merely a derived authority; he is, therefore, no more worthy to be heard than we; and we can tell you something new—the followers of the Messiah must unite themselves with the chosen people and obey the Law of God."

At any rate, even if the Judaizers did appeal to the original apostles for the content of their message, the appeal was a false appeal; the original apostles repudiated the Judaizers, and recognized Paul as a true apostle, with authorization as direct as their own.

Thus Baur was wrong. But suppose Baur were right about the point which has just been discussed; suppose even the most impossible admissions be made; suppose it be granted that the original apostles differed fundamentally from Paul. Even then the testimony of the original apostles to the true connection between Paul and Jesus is not invalidated. For even if the original apostles differed fundamentally from Paul, the difference concerned only the place of the Mosaic Law in the Christian economy, and did not concern the Pauline conception of the person of Christ. So much at least must be insisted upon against Baur. The really astounding fact, which emerges from all discussion of the apostolic age, is that the Pauline conception of the person of Christ, whatever may be said of the Pauline doctrine of Gentile freedom, was never criticized by the original apostles. Indeed, so far as can be seen, it was never criticized even by the Judaizers themselves. Apparently it never occurred to Paul that his conception of the heavenly Christ required defense. About other things there was controversy; the doctrine of Christian freedom, for example, had to be defended against all sorts of objections and by the use of all sorts of evidence. But about the person of Christ there was not one word of debate. "Not by man but by Jesus Christ," Paul says at the beginning of Galatians. Evidently the Judaizers said, "Not by Jesus Christ but by man." But apparently it never occurred to Paul that anyone might

say, "By Jesus Christ and therefore by man." The Judaizers, apparently, as well as Paul, recognized the alternative between Jesus Christ and man; like Paul they separated Jesus Christ from ordinary humanity and placed Him on the side of God. The same phenomenon appears everywhere in the Pauline Epistles-the tremendous doctrine of the person of Christ is never defended, but always assumed. Indeed, in the earlier epistles the doctrine is never even set forth in any systematic way; it is simply presupposed. In Colossians, indeed, it is more definitely set forth, and apparently in opposition to errorists who failed to recognize its full implications. Even in Colosse, however, the doctrine does not seem to have been denied; the errorists apparently did not deny the supreme place of Jesus in the scale of being, but merely erred in attaching undue importance to other beings. What is really significant in Colossians is the character of the errorists. Evidently they were not conservative disciples, who appealed against the heavenly Christ of Paul to the facts about the historic Jesus. On the contrary, they were Gnostics, engaged in unhistorical speculations, and as far removed as possible from anything that primitive Palestinian Christianity might conceivably have been. So when Paul first has to defend his doctrine of the exclusive and supreme importance of Christ, he defends it not against conservative disciples, who could appeal either with or without reason to the original apostles, but against gnostic speculation. With regard to the person of Christ Paul appears everywhere in perfect harmony with all Palestinian Christians.

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