

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 7)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The paucity of references in the Pauline Epistles to the teaching and example of Jesus has sometimes been exaggerated. The Epistles attest considerable knowledge of the details of Jesus' life, and warm appreciation of His character.

Undoubtedly, moreover, Paul knew far more about Jesus than he has seen fit, in the Epistles, to tell. It must always be remembered that the Epistles do not contain the missionary preaching of Paul; they are addressed to Christians, in whose case much of the primary instruction had already been given. Some things are omitted from the Epistles, therefore, not because they were unimportant, but on the contrary just because they were fundamental; instruction about them had to be given at the very beginning and except for special reasons did not need to be repeated. Except for certain misunderstandings which had arisen at Corinth, for example, Paul would never have set forth in his Epistles the testimony by which the fact of the resurrection of Jesus was established; yet that testimony, he says, was fundamental in his missionary preaching. If it were not for the errorists at Corinth we should never have had the all-important passage about the appearances of the risen Christ. It is appalling to reflect what far-reaching conclusions would in that case have been drawn by modern scholars from the silence of Paul. So it is also with the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. xi. 23ff. That account is inserted in the Epistles only because of certain abuses which had happened to arise at Corinth. Elsewhere Paul says absolutely nothing about the institution of the Supper; indeed, in the Epistles other than 1 Corinthians he says nothing about the Supper at all. Yet the Lord's Supper was undoubtedly celebrated everywhere in the Pauline churches, and no doubt was grounded everywhere in an account of its institution.

Thus the resurrection appearances and the institution of the Lord's Supper, despite the fact that they were absolutely fundamental in Paul's teaching, appear each only once Epistles. May there not then have been other things just as prominent in Paul's teaching which are not mentioned at all? These two things are mentioned only because of the misunderstandings that had arisen with regard to them. Certain other things just as important may be omitted from the Epistles only because in their case no misunderstandings had happened to arise. It must always be remembered that the Epistles of Paul are addressed to special needs of the churches. It cannot be argued, therefore, that what is not mentioned in the Epistles was not known to the apostle at all.

Thus the incidental character of Paul's references to the life and teaching of Jesus shows clearly that Paul knew far more than he has seen fit in the Epistles to tell. The references make the impression of being detached bits taken from a larger whole. When, for example, Paul says that the institution of the Lord's Supper took place on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, he presupposes on the part of his readers an account of the betrayal, and hence an account of the traitor and of his position among the apostles.

So it is in other cases where Paul refers to the life and teaching of Jesus. The references can be explained only as presupposing a larger fund of information about the words and deeds of Jesus.

Unquestionably Paul included in his fundamental teaching an account of what Jesus said and did. Indeed, if he had not done so, he would have involved himself in absurdity. As J. Weiss has pointed out with admirable acuteness, a missionary preaching which demanded faith in Jesus without telling what sort of person Jesus was would have been preposterous.¹ The hearers of Paul were asked to stake their salvation upon the redeeming work of Jesus. But who was this Jesus? The question could scarcely be avoided. Other redeemers, in the pagan religion of the time, were protected from such questions; they were protected by the mists of antiquity; investigations about them were obviously out of place. But Paul had given up the advantages of such vagueness. The redeemer whom he proclaimed was one of his own contemporaries, a Jew who had lived but a few years before and had died the death of a criminal. Investigation of this Jesus was perfectly possible; His brothers, even, were still alive.

Who was He then? Did He suffer justly on the cross? Or was He the Righteous One? Such questions could hardly be avoided. And as a matter of fact they were not avoided. The incidental references in the Epistles, scanty though they are, are sufficient to show that an account of the words and deeds of Jesus formed an important part of the teaching of Paul. The presumption is, therefore, that Paul was a true disciple of Jesus. He regarded himself as a disciple; he was so regarded by his contemporaries; he made use of Jesus' teaching and example. But is this presumption justified? Was the real Jesus whom Paul followed? The question can be answered only by a comparison of what is known about Paul with what is known about Jesus.

But at the very beginning of the comparison, a fundamental difficulty arises. How may Jesus be known? Paul is known, through his own letters. But how about Jesus? The sources of information about Jesus are the four Gospels. But are the Gospels trustworthy?

¹ J. Weiss, *Das älteste Evangelium*, 1903, pp. 33-39.

If they are trustworthy, then it will probably be admitted that Paul was a true disciple of Jesus. For the Gospels, taken as a whole, present a Jesus like in essentials to that divine Lord who was sum and substance of the life of Paul. The Jesus of the Gospels is no mere prophet, no mere inspired teacher of righteousness, no mere revealer or interpreter of God. He is, on the contrary, a supernatural person; a heavenly Redeemer come to earth for the salvation of men. So much is usually being admitted to-day. Whatever may have been the real facts about Jesus, the Gospels present a supernatural Jesus.

This representation is contained not merely in one of the Gospels; it is contained in all of them. The day is past when the divine Christ of John could be confronted with a human Christ of Mark. On the contrary, Mark and John, it is now maintained, differ only in degree; Mark as well as John, even though it should be supposed that he does so less clearly and less consistently, presents a Jesus similar in important respects to the divine Redeemer of the Epistles of Paul.²

Thus if Paul be compared with the Jesus of the Gospels, there is full agreement between the two. The Jesus of all the Gospels is a supernatural person; the Jesus of all the Gospels is a Redeemer. "The Son of Man," according to the shortest and if modern criticism be accepted the earliest of the Gospels, "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk. x. 45). But it is not necessary to depend upon details. The very choice of material in the Gospels points to the same conclusion; the Gospels like the Epistles of Paul are more interested in the death of Jesus than in the details of His life. And for the same reason. The Gospels, like the Epistles of Paul, are interested in the death of Jesus because it was a ransom from sin.

But this similarity of the Jesus of the Gospels to the Christ of the Pauline Epistles has led sometimes, not to the recognition of Paul as a disciple of Jesus, but to the hypothesis that the Gospels are dependent upon Paul. If the Gospels are introducing into their picture of Jesus elements derived not from the real Jesus but from the mythical Christ of the Epistles, then of course they will display similarity to the Epistles; but such similarity will scarcely be very significant. In comparing the Epistles with the Gospels, the historian will then be comparing not Paul with Jesus, but Paul with Paul.

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.

² See, for example, J. Weiss, *Das Urchristentum*, 1914-1917, pp. 540, 547, 548.

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