

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 3)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Is there any trace in the Pauline Epistles of a primitive view of Jesus different from the lofty Christology of Paul?

One such trace has occasionally been found in 2 Cor. v. 16. In that verse, after Paul has spoken of the complete break that comes in a man's life when he accepts the benefits of Christ's death, he says: "Wherefore we henceforth know no man after the flesh: even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more." Some interpreters have discovered in the words, "even though we have known Christ after the flesh," a reference to a fleshly conception of Christ which laid stress upon His Davidic descent, His connection with the Jewish people, and in general His ordinary human relationships, to the neglect of His higher, divine nature. That fleshly conception of Christ might then be regarded as the primitive conception, which Paul himself shared until a mature stage of his Christian life. But this latter suggestion is excluded not only by the whole tenor of the Epistles (in which Paul never displays the slightest consciousness of any such revolution in his idea of Christ), but also especially by the present passage. The passage deals with the complete and immediate break which comes in a man's way of thinking when the death of Christ becomes representative of him—that is, at the beginning of his Christian life. It is therefore entirely out of accord with the context to suppose that Paul is contrasting an immature stage of his own Christian life with the present mature stage. But he is also not alluding to any lower, fleshly conception of Christ as being held by others. The interpretation which finds in the passage a human Messiah in contrast to the divine Christ of Paul, errs fundamentally in making the words "according to the flesh" modify "Christ," whereas as a matter of fact they clearly modify the verb "know." Paul says not, "Even if we have known a Christ according to the flesh, we know such a Christ no longer," but, "Even if we have known Christ with a fleshly kind of knowledge, we know Him in such a way no longer." He is not speaking of two different conceptions of Christ, but of two different ways of knowing Christ. There is in the passage, therefore, not the slightest reference to any primitive conception of the person of Christ different from Paul's conception.

In 2 Cor. xi. 4 Paul speaks of "another Jesus" whom his opponents in Corinth were proclaiming or might proclaim. Was this "other Jesus" the historical Jesus, in distinction from the heavenly Christ of Paul? Does this verse refer to a

primitive, Palestinian conception of Jesus different from the conception held by Paul?

The verse is certainly very difficult; it constitutes a famous *crux interpretum*. But just for that reason, it should not be made the foundation for far-reaching theories. There is not the slightest hint elsewhere in 2 Corinthians that the opponents presented a view of the person of Christ different from that of Paul; indeed what is characteristic of the polemic in this Epistle is that doctrinal questions are absent. There is not even any evidence that the opponents, though apparently they laid stress upon Jewish descent, Palestinian connections, and the like, and so may perhaps loosely be called "Judaizers," insisted upon the keeping of the Mosaic Law. Apparently Paul does not feel required to defend the content of his gospel at all. Certainly he does not feel required to defend his doctrine of the person of Christ. But if the opponents had really proclaimed a human Jesus different from the divine Christ of Paul, it is inconceivable that Paul should not have defended his view. If there is one thing that is fundamental in the religion of Paul, it is his conception of Christ as divine Redeemer. Any denial of that conception would certainly have called forth anathemas at least as severe as those which were hurled against the legalists in Galatia. Yet in 2 Cor. &-xiii, though these chapters contain perhaps the bitterest polemic to be found anywhere in the Pauline Epistles, there is no trace of any defense of the Pauline conception of the person of Christ. The natural suggestion is that such defense is absent because it was not called forth by anything that the opponents said. It is adventurous exegetical procedure to hang a heavy weight upon the very obscure verse, 2 Cor. xi. 4.

As a matter of fact, however, the obscurities of that verse are not hopeless, and rightly interpreted the verse contains no hint of a primitive conception of Jesus different from that which was proclaimed by Paul. The translation of the American Revised Version may first be presented as a basis of discussion, though it is probably incorrect in important particulars. In that version the three verses 2 Cor. xi. 4-6 read as follows: "For if he that cometh preacheth another Jesus, whom we did not preach, or if ye receive a different spirit, which ye did not receive, or a different gospel, which ye did not accept, ye do well to bear with him. For I reckon that I am not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles. 6 But though I be rude in speech, yet am I not in knowledge; nay, in every way have we made this manifest unto you in all things." By a modification of this translation at the end of verse 4, the whole passage might mean: "Bear with me in my boasting. I am 'boasting' or defending myself only in order that you may not be deceived by the opponent who comes to you. For if he comes arrogantly proclaiming another Jesus, another Spirit, and another gospel, ye bear with him only too well. Bear with me then when I defend myself. For I am not a bit behind these 'preeminent' apostles, since despite what they say I have really made the whole truth known to you." Even according to this interpretation there is no real reference to a Jesus of the opponents different from Paul's Jesus. The "other Jesus" of the opponents existed, rather, merely in their own inordinate claims. They had no other Jesus,

no other Spirit, and no other gospel to offer. They asserted, indeed, that the teaching of Paul was insufficient; they asserted that they had fuller information about Jesus, about the Spirit, and about the gospel. They said, "Paul has not made the full truth known to you." Yet they had really nothing new to offer. Paul had really given to the Corinthians the whole Jesus, the whole Spirit, and the whole gospel.

As a matter of fact, however, this interpretation is un-satisfactory. It is obliged to supply a link to connect verse 4 with verse 5—namely, the thought, "Bear with me." That thought is here entirely unexpressed; verse 1, where it is expressed, is too far back to be in view. Thus if the pronoun "him" is supplied with the verb at the end of verse 4, there is no clear connection with verse 5; the "for" of verse 5 is very obscure. If, however, the pronoun "me," not "him," is supplied with the verb at the end of verse 4, all is plain. Since the pronoun does not appear at all in the Greek, the translator is free to supply it as the context demands; and the context apparently demands the pronoun "me." The meaning of the passage is then as follows: "Bear with me in my 'boasting.' My boasting is undertaken to prevent you from being deceived. For if the one who comes to you seeks to commend himself by claiming fuller knowledge of Jesus, the Spirit, or the gospel, then you do well to bear with me in my boasting, you do well to listen to my defense. For I am not afraid of the comparison with the opponent. It is not true that I have concealed from you anything about Jesus, about the Spirit, or about the gospel; on the contrary I have made everything known to you."

The exegetical question is somewhat complicated by a question of the text in verse 4. Manuscript evidence is rather evenly divided between the present tense of the verb at the end of the verse and the imperfect tense.¹ Unquestionably the imperfect tense is the more difficult reading; it is favored therefore by the well-known principle of textual criticism that the more difficult reading is to be preferred to the easier. If the imperfect be read, it may perhaps be explained as the imperfect tense in the apodosis of a condition contrary to fact; there would then be a transition from one form of condition to another. Paul would then say: "If he who comes is preaching another Jesus, another Spirit, and another gospel if such were the case you would do well to bear with my defense of my own preaching." If indeed the pronoun "him" be supplied at the end of verse 4, as is usually done, the imperfect might be taken simply as referring to past time, and the meaning would be: "If he who comes is preaching another Jesus, another Spirit, and another gospel-when that took place ye were bearing with the newcomer only too well." But even so the imperfect is extremely harsh, and on the whole it is more probable that it has crept in by a copyist's error-perhaps in conformity to the same imperfect in verse 1, where the imperfect is used to express a wish.

What has caused the vast majority of commentators to supply "him" rather than "me" at the end of verse 4 is apparently the parallel with 2 Cor. xi. 19, 20, where Paul certainly expresses the thought, "Bear with me, for you bear with my

arrogant opponents only too well." The parallel does indeed constitute the strongest argument in favor of the ordinary view of verse 4 which supplies the pronoun "him," and regards the adverb "well" as sarcastic—"only too well." But the argument is not decisive. The connection with verse 5 really fixes the pronoun which is to be supplied at the end of the preceding verse. Paul is defending himself against the charge, implied in verse 6, that he had not made the full truth known. The opponents had claimed to have further information about Jesus, the Spirit, and the gospel. "But," says Paul, "if that is their claim, ye do well to listen to my defense. For I have made Jesus and the Spirit and the gospel just as fully known to you as they have." The thought is perfectly clear if only the pronoun "me" be supplied at the end of verse 4.

If, however, exegetical tradition be followed, and the pronoun "him" be supplied, the essential implications of the passage are not really different. In no case is anything said about a conception of Jesus really differing from that of Paul. One interpretation, indeed, definitely excludes such an implication. The passage may mean, "If the one who comes to you preaches another Jesus—in that case you would do well to bear with him. But as a matter of fact there is only one Jesus. Therefore you will do well to be content with me. For I have made Jesus fully known to you." According to this interpretation, which has much to be said in its favor, Paul refutes the opponents and their arrogant claims of bringing something superior to Paul's message, by a reference to the obvious fact that there is only one Jesus. "If they had another Jesus," Paul says, "then they might claim to bring you something that I did not bring. But since, unfortunately for them, there is of course only one Jesus, and since I made that Jesus fully known to you, they cannot maintain any superiority." This interpretation is probably to be preferred among all those which supply the pronoun "him" rather than "me" at the end of verse 4.

At any rate, whichever interpretation be adopted, Paul would surely have expressed himself very differently if the opponents had presented an account of Jesus radically contradictory to his own. In that case he could hardly have appealed merely to the completeness of his presentation. Instead, he would have had to establish the truth of his presentation. As it is, the "other Jesus" of the Judaizers existed only in their own inordinate claims. They really had no other Jesus to offer; Paul had made the whole Jesus known. The passage contains no hint, therefore, of a primitive conception of Jesus differing from the lofty conception proclaimed by Paul.

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