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Jesus and Paul*

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EVERYONE, when he turns from the pages of the Gospels to the epistles of St. Paul, is conscious of a change of atmosphere. To many, perhaps we might even say to most readers, it seems as if we had moved from the simple to the complex—from something easy to something excessively difficult to understand. The Gospels may indeed offer us some rather puzzling pictures. They bring us into a world that seems to be populated by devils—devils which enter into a man and make him deaf and dumb, or send him insane, or afflict him with epilepsy; and when Jesus drives out the devils, the dumb speak and the deaf hear, the madmen are restored to sanity and take their places again in normal life, clothed and in their right mind, and the epileptics are healed of their painful and distressing affliction. But if these stories of men possessed by devils, and the miracle-stories generally, appear strange and perhaps wholly incredible to our scientifically conditioned, twentieth century minds, we find it easy to write these things off as reflections of first century ignorance of the nature of mental and bodily disease, or as the queer superstitions of Galilean peasants. But when it comes to the teachings—here, at least, we feel ourselves to be on solid ground. Anyone can appreciate the simple ethical pronouncements of the Sermon on the Mount, or feel himself moved by the parable of the Good Samaritan or the story of the Prodigal Son. In comparison with these things Paul seems to bring us into a rather confusing atmosphere of theological controversy, where our ears are assailed by strange words such as “justification,” and “sanctification,” and “redemption.”

But a good many readers have something more against St. Paul than the mere fact that he seems to be very hard to understand, and to make the Christian faith needlessly difficult, while the Gospels present it so simply and make it so easy to understand. Let me say in passing that this is an entirely false notion, which lasts only as long as we make no serious effort to understand the Gospels. I would say without hesitation that the Gospels are far more difficult writings than the epistles of St. Paul; and that there is nothing in the world more difficult to fathom than the teachings of Jesus. It remains true that the average reader thinks that the Gospels are easy, and the Epistles difficult to understand and to interpret.

The more serious charge against St. Paul is not that he is obscure and difficult, while the Gospels are easy to understand; but that he teaches a

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different gospel from the gospel which was proclaimed by Jesus. Sometimes this difference is expressed as a distinction between "the Gospel of Jesus," and "the Gospel about Jesus"; and it is affirmed that Paul did not preach the Gospel *of* Jesus, but the Gospel *about* Jesus. It is held by such critics—or some of them—that Jesus preached a simple ethic of love, unembarrassed by dogma; while Paul introduced a formidable dogmatic structure, based on the doctrine that the crucified Jesus is the Son of God, who came down from heaven for us men and for our salvation; that his death is the means of our redemption, the expiation for our sins; that God raised him from the dead and exalted him to heavenly glory; and that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and to reign as King on earth, an earth which under his rule is transformed into the Kingdom of God. Along with this, we are told, Paul introduces a mystical sacramentalism strangely resembling the mystery religions of Greece and the Orient with their doctrines of a dying and rising god; a baptism which represents and sacramentally effects the participation of the Christian with Christ in death and in the new life which death cannot touch; and a holy Supper which sustains the new life with the food of immortality, which is the body and blood of Christ. This religion, it is claimed, has very little to do with the religion of Jesus himself, or with the teachings given by him to his disciples, which are preserved in the Gospels. Worst of all, our critic will go on, it is this dogmatic, mystical and sacramental religion taught by Paul which has perpetuated itself as historic Christianity, while the simple religion of Jesus was submerged. Paul has thus become the real founder of Christianity, while Jesus has been by-passed.

Let me deal with the second point first, because it is simpler to settle. The fact is that the Apostle was never in a position to change the character of the Christian faith or to reshape the chief teachings of the Christian community, in any substantial way. People are able to imagine his doing anything of the sort only because they forget the actual historical circumstances of his career. The activity of St. Paul as a Christian extends over a period of not more than thirty years; the part of it best known to us, from the beginning of his work in Macedonia to his death in Rome, extends over only fourteen years. These years were spent in and around seven centres, seven cities of the ancient world: at the first, Damascus and Antioch in Syria and Tarsus in Cilicia; later, Philippi and Thessalonica in Macedonia and Corinth in Greece; and then, Ephesus in Asia Minor. For the last five years of his life he was a prisoner in the hands of the Romans. During these years other Christian teachers who owed nothing to Paul were at work in other parts of the world. Some went to Rome and founded the great Roman church; some brought the gospel to Alexandria in Egypt; some travelled up the valley of the Rhone into the heart of Gaul, the country which we know as France; others made their way with the word of salvation to North Africa and to Spain; and it is likely that some went beyond the limits of the Roman Empire to establish churches in the lands of the Parthian kings, in Meso-

potamia and Iran and regions farther east. These missionaries were not disciples of Paul; many of them had not the slightest idea of what he was doing or teaching. Unfortunately we have no documents telling of their work. The documents which tell of the spread of Christianity in the Apostolic Age are all related to St. Paul. We have his letters, nine or ten of them, written by himself to churches which he had founded or which he intended to visit; and in the book of Acts, we have a colorful sketch of his career as a missionary, his movements from city to city, his adventures, his conflicts, and his successes in establishing churches. We have no letters from other missionaries of the time and no story of their doings; and because we know so much about St. Paul and so little about any other Christians of the time, we form the unconscious impression that he dominated the whole life of the Apostolic Age. This impression is entirely false, and it ought not to take more than a moment's consideration to make anyone realize that it is entirely false. Paul is perhaps the greatest figure of the time (we cannot even say that, for we simply do not know enough about the character and accomplishments of the others); but there certainly were others—many others. Besides the Twelve of the gospel story who are little more than names to us, there were countless others whose very names are unknown; and Paul was not their teacher. Most of them, we may safely say, knew nothing about him; few of them ever had any opportunity to learn anything from him either by word of mouth or by letter. During his own lifetime, his influence was confined to the limited regions in which he himself founded churches; and great areas of Christian activity, including Palestine itself, and Jerusalem the mother church, owed nothing to his teaching. Indeed, even in the regions which he himself evangelized, his authority was constantly being called in question. By some elements of the mother church itself he was bitterly assailed, and they kept sending representatives into his own mission fields to belittle him and to draw away his converts into their own narrow racial and national exclusiveness.

One must not suppose, either, that Paul made his influence felt outside his own missions by means of his letters. They had no printing presses in those days. Every copy of every document had to be written out by hand, on costly writing materials such as papyrus or parchment; and there was no question of making copies of St. Paul's letters and sending them to all the churches everywhere. The churches at Corinth or Jerusalem or Antioch would not be particularly interested in a letter which the apostle wrote to the Christians of Thessalonica or of Philippi; and there is not the slightest reason to suppose that any of his letters circulated during his lifetime beyond the local congregation to which it was addressed. Neither in person nor by his letters was St. Paul ever in a position to change the whole character of Christianity in the way that has been imagined.

Nor would it be true to suppose that his influence made itself felt more widely and powerfully after his death. It is a fact that towards the end of the first century, when Paul had been dead for some thirty years, his letters

were collected and published, and the collection was widely circulated through the churches. Every Christian writer of the second century whose works have been preserved shows acquaintance with the collected epistles of St. Paul. But it must be said that not one of them is a Paulinist. They do not use his epistles as the source of their own theological and religious ideas, but employ them in the service of the common faith. They share his faith in Christ the Son of God, but they by no means echo his theology. Like many of us today, they hardly understand the main lines of his thinking, partly because they are not actively concerned with the controversies over Jewish legalism ("the righteousness which is of the law")—the setting against which most of his theological statements are worked out. They find in his writings many high and magnificent conceptions, many golden phrases in which Christian faith and hope and love are given glorious expression; and these they seize upon, as we still do ourselves, without caring too much about the general structure of his thought. Through the letters the thought of St. Paul enters as one significant element into the complex structure of catholic Christianity, but it is by no means the determining element. Christianity is first of all the faith of a living community, bound in a shared life, worshipping one Lord, animated by one Spirit, serving the one God and Father of all. It continues to be influenced directly by the sayings of Jesus himself, known in part through the Gospels and in part through the oral tradition which (through the second century) lived on independently of the Gospels. It was influenced also, and more strongly as time went on, by the Greek philosophy of the age, especially Stoicism and Platonic mysticism. And it never ceased to be influenced by the Old Testament scriptures, which it interpreted as prophecy and prefiguration of Christ and the church. We must think of historic Christianity, catholic Christianity, as a great river into which flow tributary streams. Jesus and his teachings are the headwaters, which themselves carry rich accumulations from the Old Testament; Paul is one of the main tributaries; but the river receives mighty contributions from other sources as well, and the Pauline tributary never becomes the main stream. Historic Christianity does not in any sense result from a displacement of the religion which Jesus taught by some very different religion which Paul taught. That serious scholars should ever have thought so is one of the eccentricities, let us say rather outright absurdities, of Biblical scholarship.

But now we must come to the main question: is Paul the proponent of a substantially different religion from the religion of the Gospels? Is his "Gospel about Jesus" really something different from the "Gospel of Jesus," the gospel which Jesus himself preached? The answer to this question, I am afraid I must say, cannot be unequivocally "Yes" or "No." It must be rather: "In one sense, Yes—Paul's gospel is different; and in another sense, No—Paul is essentially one with Jesus, his *epigone* and his interpreter." It has been said that "Jesus did not come to preach the Gospel; he came in order that there might be a gospel to preach." Jesus looks forward to the

Cross and the Resurrection; Paul looks back upon them as accomplished facts in which the saving power of God has been revealed.¹ Jesus spoke of God as his Father, out of his unique and direct knowledge and unmediated communion; Paul speaks of God as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," and his own knowledge of God as Father is a knowledge given to him in Christ and through Christ. It will be agreed, therefore, that in some senses the gospel of Paul is different from the gospel which Jesus preached; it is in fact a gospel *about* Jesus.

Yet this contrast can be, and often is, overdrawn. The gospel which Jesus preached is also inseparable from the mystery and the wonder of his own person.² The teaching of Jesus is not truly conceived when it is represented as a simple system of ethics, a doctrine of love to God and love to man. Jesus was not crucified for teaching a simple system of ethics. The ethic which he taught was the way of life *for such as would become his disciples*, for men and women who would follow him along the way which leads to Calvary. His ethical teaching is rooted and grounded in faith, just as certainly as the ethical teaching of St. Paul is rooted and grounded in faith—faith in the God who raises the dead, faith in the heavenly Father who is gracious to the unthankful and to the disobedient and who will not withhold his good gifts from those who ask of him, even though they deserve nothing at his hands, faith in a God to whom all things are possible. The ethic of Jesus is fundamentally a religious ethic, wholly based upon a right relationship with God; and this right relationship with God (which St. Paul calls "justification") is a relationship which Jesus himself creates and makes possible, a relationship into which men enter through fellowship with him. It is to his disciples that he promises the Kingdom: "Fear not, little flock; it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). The gospel of Jesus is simply not to be divorced from Jesus himself. He *is* his own gospel, and it is by following him in personal discipleship that we learn to live the kind of life which he commends to us in the Sermon on the Mount. And that life cannot be lived except in him.

We need not hesitate to affirm that despite all the differences, Paul is essentially one with Jesus in the substance of the gospel which he preaches. The differences are more apparent than real, more superficial than fundamental. Jesus is beyond all question the founder of the religion which Paul propagates. The differences are above all differences in the manner of presentation, and these stem in part from the different background and education of the two men, and partly from the differences in the people for

1. See the admirable discussion by Anton Fridrichsen in his essay, "Jesus, St. John and St. Paul," in *The Root of the Vine: Studies in Biblical Theology*, ed. A. Fridrichsen (London: Dacre Press, 1953), pp. 37 ff.

2. Cf. the remarks of J. Jeremias, in his book *The Parables of Jesus* (tr. S. H. Hooke; London: SCM, 3rd imp., 1956): "In attempting to recover the original significance of the parables, one thing above all becomes evident: it is that all the parables of Jesus compel his hearers to come to a decision about his person and mission. . . . For he has been manifested whose veiled kingliness shines through every word and through every parable—the Saviour" (p. 159).

whom the teaching is designed. Jesus is a man of the village and of the countryside; he draws his illustrations from the wild flowers that bloom in the fields and the birds that make their nests in the shrubs; from the farmer who sows his grain and puts in the sickle when the harvest is ready; from the fisherman bringing his catch to shore and sorting it. Paul is a city man; his illustrations are taken from the boxing ring and the race course and the slave market; even more, he is a man of letters, and he inclines to take his illustrations from literature, from the stories of Abraham and the oracles of Isaiah. He has had the professional training of the Rabbi, and he uses the peculiar methods of interpreting scripture which he had been taught in the rabbinical schools. Jesus has nothing of that at all: the first impression which he made on people was of the great difference between his way of teaching and that of the rabbis. "The people were astonished at his teaching," we read, "for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Mark 1:22).

Again, there was all the difference in the world in the people for whom the teaching was intended. Jesus confined his ministry almost entirely to his own people, the Jews; and he taught in the language spoken by the masses of the people of Palestine, that is to say, in Aramaic. Paul was the Apostle of the Gentiles, and he addressed himself almost entirely to non-Jews, to the Greeks and the Greek-speaking peoples of Asia Minor and the Greek peninsula; and of course the city of Rome. All his letters that have come down to us are written in Greek. Naturally, he sought for ways of making his gospel intelligible to Greeks; he made no bones about borrowing words and phrases and good ideas from the religions and philosophies of the Greek world, if only he could bring them into the service of the gospel. The kingdom of God, of which Jesus spoke so often, meant nothing to a Greek; and so Paul hardly ever makes use of the phrase when he is writing to Greeks. The title Messiah ("Anointed One") meant a great deal to a Jew, but nothing at all to a Greek; consequently in Paul the title Christ ("Messiah") becomes a proper name, and he gives Jesus the cult-title which the Greeks knew well—the title *Kyrios*, "Lord." He speaks to them of "Jesus Christ our Lord." All this, and much more in his teaching is nothing but the transposing of the gospel into the language and the thought-forms of another people, the kind of adjustment that was needed if the gospel of Jesus was to be brought effectually into the Greek world.

In this brief space it is not possible to do more than give a hint of the lines along which the answers to our questions may be sought. Even this is sufficient to justify us in taking St. Paul at his own estimate as Christ's man, Christ's follower, Christ's ambassador to the Gentile world: "an Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God." Certainly he never ceases to affirm his dependence on Christ. This passionate defender of freedom will even call himself "a slave of Christ Jesus"; and will tell his converts: "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your slaves for the sake of Jesus" (2 Cor. 4:5). And in the most moving words he speaks again

and again of what Christ means to him. "To me to live is Christ," he tells us, and "I count all things as loss because of the surpassing excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have suffered the loss of all things" (Phil. 1:21 and 3:8); and again, "I am crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ lives in me; and the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in God and in Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTE

There is nothing whatever to indicate that the primitive church in Jerusalem, or any elements in it, differed from St. Paul either in the matter of Christology or in sacramental practices and ideas. The notion of a non-dogmatic, non-sacramental Christianity, which was nothing more than the ethic of prophetic Judaism brought to its highest and purest expression, is a fantasy of nineteenth century "liberalism" (falsely so-called). The bitter disputes in which St. Paul was engaged with some elements of the primitive church were not over Christology or sacramentalism, but over the demand that Gentile converts to Christianity should be circumcized and charged to keep the law. The challenge to St. Paul is accurately summed up in Acts 15: 1 and 5: "Some men came down from Judaea and were teaching the brethren (at Antioch), 'Except you are circumcized . . . you cannot be saved.' . . . Some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcize them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.'" Against this attempt to keep Christianity in leading-strings, Paul struggled with all the forces of his mind and heart. Such opponents were to him nothing but "false brethren, furtively brought in, who wormed their way into the church to spy on our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might enslave us" (Gal. 2:4). This marks out the area of conflict, and no one today would question that Paul here stood for the truth, in the spirit of Jesus his Master. But there is no suggestion anywhere that his dogmatic and sacramental teachings represented a divergence from the religion of the primitive church.⁸ On the contrary, he explicitly tells us that his account of the institution of the Eucharist came to him through the tradition of the church (1 Cor. 11:23f.); he takes it for granted that the Roman church, which was not indebted to him for its instruction in the faith, will have been taught that Christian baptism brings the believer into mystical union with Christ in death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1 ff.—the phrase "Do you not know?" in v. 3, clearly implies that Paul is not introducing a basically new idea, but is appealing to a commonly accepted Christian position); and when he reminds the Corinthians of what he delivered to them among the things of the first importance (1 Cor. 15:3), he affirms that these belonged to what he himself had received by tradition, and were the

3. *New Testament Theology*, by Ethelbert Stauffer, tr. John Marsh (London: SCM, 1955). "The dogma is as old as the Church herself. . . . Both dogma-making Church and the Church-making dogma are pre-Pauline in origin" (p. 256).

basis of the preaching of the other apostles as well. "Whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed" (v. 11). These things of the first importance were not ethical teachings at all, but were essentially dogmatic in character.

Again, it must be observed that the gospels themselves are far from undogmatic documents; they are not simply biographies of a human Jesus whose chief significance is that he was an ethical teacher. Like St. Paul, they preach Jesus as the Son of the living God; and every one of them is basically the story of his Passion and Death, with an introduction. They are concerned primarily to preach Christ crucified; such teaching as they give is subsidiary to the story of the Cross.

The notion of an undogmatic, non-sacramental faith which Jesus taught and which the early church maintained until St. Paul introduced his complications of sacrament and dogma is not based upon any historical evidence and cannot be scientifically deduced from analysis of the documents. It is a product of the imagination of scholars who hoped to show that Jesus taught the kind of moralistic religion which seemed to them appropriate for an enlightened and sensible person. In a way, it was the transference to a high level of the constant attempts which people make to remould Jesus in their own image, or rather in the image of what they themselves have come to regard as the highest and best. Jesus is not so easily brought into any image that we can form, even the highest and best. Professor H. J. Cadbury, who long ago warned us of *The Peril of Modernizing Jesus*, has more recently reminded us that Jesus himself "is reported as having said, 'No one knows the Son, but the Father.'"⁴

4. *Jesus: What Manner of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 123.