

# The Witness of Paul

by J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

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HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY: Selections from the Writings of J. Gresham Machen, Page 32

*"Paul an Apostle, not from men nor through a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead, and all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia..." (Gal. 1: 1-2, in a literal translation)* p. 32, par. 1, [PAUL]

## Human Merit vs. the Grace of God

The enemy against which Paul is fighting in the Epistle can be reconstructed fairly well from the Epistle itself. Paul was fighting against the doctrine that a man can earn a part, at least, of his salvation by his own obedience to God's law; he was fighting against the doctrine that a man is justified not by faith alone, but by faith and works. p. 32, par. 2, [PAUL]

That doctrine was being propagated by certain teachers who had come into the Galatian churches from the outside. These teachers were men of Jewish race; and since they sought to induce Gentile people to "Judaize" — that is, to adopt the Jewish manner of life — they are commonly called "Judaizers." p. 32, par. 3, [PAUL]

The Judaizers agreed with Paul about many things: they agreed in holding that Jesus was the Messiah; they seemed to have no quarrel whatever with Paul's lofty doctrine of the deity of Christ; they believed in the resurrection of our Lord from the dead. Moreover, they even held, no doubt, that a man must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ if he is to be saved. p. 32, par. 4, [PAUL]

But their error lay in holding not only that a man must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ if he is to be saved, but that he must also do something else namely, keep at least a part of the law of God. Salvation according to those Judaizers, in other words, is attained partly by the grace of God and partly by the merit of man. p. 32, par. 5, [PAUL]

## The Modern Judaizers

**The particular form of merit which they induced men to seek was the merit of keeping the law of Moses, particularly the ceremonial law. At first sight, that fact might seem to destroy the usefulness of the Epistle for the present day; for we of today are in no danger of desiring to keep Jewish fasts and feasts. But a little consideration will show that that is not at all the case. The really essential thing about the Judaizers' contention was not found in those particular "works of the law" that they urged upon the Galatians as being one of the grounds of salvation, but in the fact that they urged any works in this sense at all. The really serious error into which they fell was not that they carried the ceremonial law over into the new dispensation whither God did not intend it to be carried, but that they preached a religion of human merit as over against a religion of divine grace. p. 32, par. 6, [PAUL]**

**So the error of the Judaizers is a very modern error indeed, as well as a very ancient error. It is found in the modern Church wherever men seek p. 32, par. 7, [PAUL]**

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**HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY: Selections from the Writings of J. Gresham Machen, Page 33**  
**salvation by "surrender" instead of by faith, or by their own character instead of by the imputed righteousness of Christ, or by "making Christ master in the life" instead of by trusting in His redeeming blood. In particular, it is found wherever men say "the real essentials" of Christianity are love, justice, mercy and other virtues, as contrasted with the great doctrines of God's Word. These are all just different ways of exalting the merit of man over against the Cross of Christ, they are all of them attacks upon the very heart and core of the Christian religion. And against all of them the mighty polemic of this Epistle to the Galatians is turned. p. 33, par. 1, [PAUL]**

## **The Authority of Paul**

**But it is time to return to our word "not" in the first verse of the Epistle. We have seen that that word is typical of the whole Epistle, since this letter is a polemic from beginning to end. But the particular reference of the word in this verse is not directly to the false gospel of the Judaizers, but to their personal attack upon Paul. The Judaizers had not been able to gain an entrance for their false teaching so long as the authority of the great Apostle remained beyond dispute. So they had proceeded to undermine that authority as best they could-, they had said that Paul was at best an apostle of the second rank — that he had not been with Jesus in Galilee as had Peter and the others of the original Twelve, and that consequently whatever authority he possessed had come to him only through them. p. 33, par. 2, [PAUL]**

**It is against this attack that Paul utters the "not" in this first verse; in this verse he defends his apostolic authority, not his gospel. But of course the defense of his apostolic authority was altogether for the sake of his gospel-, he is not interested in his apostolic prerogatives for their own sake, but only for the sake of the message which those prerogatives had been given him to proclaim. Hence the "not" of this verse is a very weighty word indeed; it involves, indirectly at least, the whole mighty conflict between pride in human goodness and the all-sufficiency of the Cross of Christ. p. 33, par. 3, [PAUL]**

**With this understanding, let us see how Paul defends his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He is "an apostle," he says, "not from men nor through a man." p. 33, par. 4, [PAUL]**

**When he says that he is not an apostle from men, he denies that the source of his apostleship was found in men. So far, perhaps, even the Judaizers may have agreed with him, they may perhaps have admitted that ultimately his authority to preach came from Christ. p. 33, par. 5, [PAUL]**

**But the real point of his defense comes in the following words. "My apostleship not only did not come from men," he says — so much perhaps even his opponents admitted — "but it did not come even through a man." There is where the dispute arose. The Judaizers said that if Paul had any authority at all it came through those who had been apostles before him, but Paul says that it came to him directly from Christ without any human intermediary at all: not only was the source of his apostleship divine, but also the channel through which it p. 33, par. 6, [PAUL]**

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**HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY: Selections from the Writings of J. Gresham Machen, Page 34**  
**came to him; the Lord Jesus Christ did not use any intermediary to give him his commission as an apostle, but appeared to him directly on the road to Damascus. p. 34, par. 1, [PAUL]**

## **Paul's Commission and Ours**

**Thus in the words, "nor through a man," Paul refers to a prerogative that differentiates him sharply from ordinary Christians. p. 34, par. 2, [PAUL]**

**Every humble Christian can in a certain sense go with Paul in the former of the two phrases that we have just discussed. Every humble Christian can say: "My commission comes to me not from men but from Christ." Of course, the ordinary Christian cannot say, as Paul could say, that his commission is an apostolic commission; for by the term "apostle" is designated a high function**

that has not been continued in the Church. Nevertheless, even the very humblest Christian can say that he has a commission which has come to him not from men but from God. That is true of a preacher, and it is just as true of the sexton who sweeps out the church and of the treasurer who takes care of the funds. p. 34, par. 3, [PAUL]

But we ordinary Christians, whether preachers or sextons or treasurers, cannot go with Paul in the second of the two phrases; we cannot say that our commission did not come to us through a man; for as a matter of fact it did come to us through some true evangelist who preached the gospel to us, or through some faithful pastor or teacher, or through some godly parent. Christ gave us our commission, but He used human emissaries in doing so; we are not eyewitnesses of the risen Christ. But in the case of Paul there was no such human emissary; to him Christ appeared on the road to Damascus and gave him directly his high commission. p. 34, par. 4, [PAUL]

The reference to Paul's conversion is plain in the words that immediately follow those with which we have just dealt. I am an apostle," says Paul, "not from men nor through a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead." The reference to the resurrection of Christ is not, at this point, a mere general reference to something that was fundamental in the Christian faith, but Paul is thinking specifically of the fact that his apostleship came to him from the risen Christ. I am an apostle," he says, "through Jesus Christ — yes, and through God the Father, since God the Father raised Christ from the dead and is concerned in all that the risen Christ does, including that call to me that came on the Damascus road." p. 34, par. 5, [PAUL]

## **The Contrast Between Christ and Man**

So far we have explained the words that Paul uses in this verse. But it is to be wondered whether all readers are aware of the stupendous implications of those words. When Paul says, "Not through a man but through Jesus Christ," has it struck the reader that that is a very strange contrast; does it seem at all strange that the Apostle should set Jesus Christ sharply over against humanity p. 34, par. 6, [PAUL]

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**HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY: Selections from the Writings of J. Gresham Machen, Page 35**

in this way, as though He belonged in an entirely different category, as though of a man" and "Jesus Christ" were two entirely distinct things? p. 35, par. 1, [PAUL]

**If it does not seem strange to us, that is simply because our Christian conviction about Jesus Christ has become so ingrained in us that the wonder of it has been lost from view. Thank God that it does not seem strange to us! But to most modern historians, both within and without the Church, it seems very strange indeed. p. 35, par. 2, [PAUL]**

## **A Contemporary Witness**

**Who was this "Jesus Christ" who is separated thus by Paul so sharply from ordinary humanity and is placed on the side of God? Who was this person who is treated thus as a stupendous heavenly being to whom divine honors were to be paid, along with the honors paid to the eternal God, the Maker of heaven and earth? Was He a mythical personage of remote antiquity, around whom the legends of the ages would have been free to grow? p. 35, par. 3, [PAUL]**

**Not at all. He was a Jewish teacher, a contemporary of Paul, who lived in Palestine and had died a shameful death only a few years before this Epistle was written. He was a person one of whose brothers Paul had actually met (Gal. 1: 19). The genuineness of the Epistle to the Galatians is admitted by all serious historians, whether friends or foes of Christianity. The Epistle was admittedly written, then, by Paul; and the date of it can be fixed within rather narrow limits. It was written not later than about A. D. 55, only some twenty-five years after the death of this Jesus of whom Paul speaks. When, therefore, Paul speaks of Jesus Christ as in such contrast with humanity and as standing so clearly on the side of God, he is not speaking about a personage of the dim and distant past, but about one of his own contemporaries. How shall so strange a phenomenon be explained? p. 35, par. 4, [PAUL]**

**The real Christian will have no difficulty in explaining it. "Paul speaks of Jesus as God," he will say, "because as a matter of fact Jesus was God, because He was the eternal Son of God who came voluntarily to this earth for our salvation, worked redemption for mankind, rose from the dead, and is now seated on the throne of all being to be worshiped and glorified by all who are His." p. 35, par. 5, [PAUL]**

**But to most modern historians, who regard Jesus as a mere man, the first verse of Galatians, together with all the rest that Paul says, presents a very strange problem indeed. How did a mere man, a Jewish teacher, come to be regarded thus as God, not by later generations but by one of His own contemporaries? p. 35, par. 6, [PAUL]**

## **One God, Yet Christ is God**

**The thing would not be quite so strange if Paul, who attests this strange view of Jesus, had been a man of polytheistic training and belief. Had he p. 35, par. 7, [PAUL]**

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**HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY: Selections from the Writings of J. Gresham Machen, Page 36**

**believed in many gods, the adding of one more would not be quite so difficult to understand. But as a matter of fact Paul was a monotheist of the monotheists. Pharisaic Judaism of the first century was nothing if not monotheistic; it held with heart and soul to the doctrine that there is but one God. Paul shared that doctrine, both before and after his conversion, to the full. How could such a monotheist, such a believer in the awful separateness between the one God and the world that He had made, possibly come to exalt a mere man, Jesus, to the godhead and pay to him the reverence which belongs only to God? p. 36, par. 1, [PAUL]**

**That Paul does just that is attested not only by our verse but by his Epistles from beginning to end. He does, indeed, in certain passages, speak of Jesus as a man. In Rom. 5:15, for example, he contrasts the one man, Adam, with "the one man, Jesus Christ"; and a similar contrast between "the first man" and "the second man" occurs in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. So also in 1 Tim. 1-5, Paul speaks of the "one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." But in these passages the careful reader receives somewhat the impression that the Apostle regards it as a strange thing, worthy of special note, that Jesus Christ should be a man as well as something other than man. At any rate, these passages do not in the slightest invalidate the fact that in the Epistles as a whole, as in our verse in Galatians, Jesus Christ is separated sharply from ordinary humanity and placed clearly on the side of God. Everywhere Paul stands in a truly religious relationship to Christ. Christ is for him not primarily an example for faith but the object of faith; his religion does not consist merely in having faith in God like the faith which Jesus had in God, but in having faith in Jesus. p. 36, par. 2, [PAUL]**

**That fact is enough to give the thoughtful historian pause. Who was this Jesus who could be exalted to the throne of God not by later generations but by a man of His own generation, only a few years after His shameful death? p. 36, par. 3, [PAUL]**

**But we have not yet mentioned what is perhaps the most surprising thing of all. The surprising thing is not merely that Paul holds this stupendous view of Jesus, but that he does not argue about it, that he seems to be under no**



necessity whatever of defending it against attack within the Church. Even the Judaizers, so far as we can see, had no quarrel with Paul's lofty view of Christ. Paul said: "I am an apostle not through a man but through Jesus Christ"; the Judaizers said: "No, you are an apostle not through Jesus Christ but through a man"; but it never seems to have occurred to anyone in the Church to say: "You are an apostle through Jesus Christ and therefore you are an apostle through a man, since Jesus Christ was a mere man." p. 36, par. 4, [PAUL]

Certainly, at any rate, whatever may have been the attitude of the Judaizers, it is perfectly clear that even if they did differ from Paul about the person of Christ, the original apostles - Peter and others of the Twelve — gave them no slightest color of support on this point. The Judaizers may possibly have appealed to those original apostles on another point — namely, the attitude that was to be assumed in the Church toward the Mosaic law. Even that appeal — supposing they did make it, which is by no means perfectly certain — p. 36, par. 5, [PAUL]

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**HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY: Selections from the Writings of J. Gresham Machen, Page 37**

was, as we shall see, an utterly unjustified appeal. But with regard to the person of Christ, at any rate, they did not venture to make any appeal to the original apostles at all. p. 37, par. 1, [PAUL]

Here, then, we have the truly amazing thing. Not only does Paul hold to his stupendous view of the person of Christ, but he assumes that everyone agrees with him about it; in particular, he assumes that Peter agrees with him, and others of the intimate friends of Jesus. Those men had seen Jesus subjected to all the petty limitations of human life, as He had walked with them on the Galilean hills; and yet they agreed perfectly with the lofty view, which Paul presents in his Epistles, of Jesus as the Son of the living God. p. 37, par. 2, [PAUL]

That fact presents to the modern naturalistic historians, who reject the picture of Jesus which the New Testament contains, a serious problem. According to those historians, Jesus was a mere man, and His first disciples regarded Him at first as such. That, then, according to these historians, was the original, the "primitive," view of Jesus; Jesus presented Himself and was first regarded as a mere prophet of righteousness, or at most as a purely human Messiah. Yet the plain fact is — a fact which no historian can deny — that if that was the original view of Jesus it gave place to a totally different view not in some later generation but, as attested by the Epistles of Paul, in

**the very first Christian generation, when the intimate friends of Jesus were leaders in the Church. p. 37, par. 3, [PAUL]**

**The rapidity of the transition is very strange. But still more strange is the utter absence of any conflict at the time when the change was produced. The absence of conflict, the absence of any throes of transition, Is eloquently attested by the Epistles of Paul. What we are asked by naturalistic historians to believe is that the true, the original, the "primitive," view of Jesus as just a great religious teacher, proclaiming the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, suddenly gave place, just after His shameful death, to a totally different, a totally incongruous, view, and that that mighty transition was effected without the slightest trace of any conflict in the Church! p. 37, par. 4, [PAUL]**

**That is really too much to believe. No, the matter-of-course way in which Jesus, as the Epistles of Paul attest, was regarded as a supernatural person in the earliest apostolic Church shows that there was something in His person from the very beginning that justified such a view. p. 37, par. 5, [PAUL]**

**Such is the witness of Paul to Christ. It is not dependent upon details in the Epistles, but is involved, rather, in the total phenomenon which the Epistles present. It has not been invalidated in the slightest by modern research. p. 37, par. 6, [PAUL]**