



THE HISTORICAL JESUS XII:

The Pauline Gospel¹⁻⁴

THE APOSTLE PAUL (ca. 5-67 CE), first known as Saul, was born and raised as a Jew of the Diaspora in the city of Tarsus, near the Mediterranean coast in Cilicia — now southern Turkey. As a young man, Saul was educated in Jerusalem at the feet of the great Jewish scholar,

Gamaliel. Here he became a devout Pharisee and a fierce opponent of those who followed Jesus. He witnessed the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:58) and later received authority to arrest the followers of Jesus in the city of Damascus, Syria (Acts 9:1, 2). As he was en route to Damascus,

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suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: and he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest . . . And he trembling . . . said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do. — Acts 9:3-6.

Thus occurred the conversion and thus began the ministry of Paul the apostle (ca. 34 CE). For the next 33 years Paul “preached Christ in the synagogues [and in the marketplaces and elsewhere], that he is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20).

Unlike his fellow apostles, Paul contended that Jesus Christ was fully human — that he lived, died and rose from the dead as an embodied human being. Furthermore, Paul differed from his apostolic colleagues in his understanding of the Christological nature of Jesus. While they assumed that Jesus possessed an adamic or angelic spirit called Christ, Paul contended for a strict Jewish monotheism. For Paul the One-and-Only God existed in the triune and reciprocal relationality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Thus, Paul addressed Jesus Christ as “the Son of God” (Romans 1:4), as “the form of God” (Philippians 2:6), as “the Lord . . . the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:17, 18), etc.

However, for Paul the internal relationality of the One-and-Only God tended to be vertical — heavenly and earthly, above and below — and thus a dominant and subordinate relationship. This concept is explicitly conveyed in the poetic hymn:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. — Philippians 2:5-11.

Paul and his followers subsequently extended this concept of vertical relationality to the hierarchical organization of the church and its members. For example:

Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. — Ephesians 5:24.

Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ . . . — Ephesians 6:5.

Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (ca. 35-117 CE), followed in the footsteps of Paul when he strenuously held to the hierarchical concept of the church:

Ignatius never tires of laying his finger on the hierarchical constitution of the Church. The function which by Christ's institution belonged to the distinct group called "the Apostles" passed on in due time to another distinct group called "the presbyters of the Church."⁵

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Endnotes

1. See Michael Goulder, *St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994). Although Paul did not write a "Gospel," he had profound convictions about the "good tidings" of Jesus Christ.
2. See N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).
3. See "Pauline Christology," at www.abu.nb.ca/courses/pauline/Jesus.htm.

4. The Episcopal bishop, John Shelby Spong, strongly disagrees with the bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ: “There is no sense at all in Paul of a physical resurrection of Jesus back into the life of this world. God did not, for this apostle, raise Jesus from the grave back to life on this earth. Rather, for Paul, God raised Jesus from death into God’s presence; from the grave to God’s right hand. Christ, for Paul, was the first fruits of the final resurrection that would occur at the end of the age. It was not a ‘flesh and blood’ body fit to inhabit this earth. It was rather a ‘spiritual body’ designed for life in the kingdom of God” (John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? — A Bishop’s Search for the Origins of Christianity* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994], p. 50).
5. James A. Kleist, *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch* (New York: Paulist Press, 1946), p. 137.

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