

A Prayer
of Jesus

I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will.

Paul

THE STRANGER

INTRODUCTION

Saul of Tarsus, or Paul to use his Greek name, is the primary focus of this study. It seeks to display the man in his true colors – a charlatan, a self-deceived deceiver of others, a self-called apostle, a wolf in sheep's clothing that misrepresented his apostleship as coming directly from the Lord Jesus.

The process of coming to see him in this light was excruciatingly difficult for me. Like most Baptists (or Christians of whatever stripe), I had been thoroughly indoctrinated with Paulinism and considered him to be among the godliest of men and the perfect witness to the gospel of Jesus. The key to my deliverance from this fraud was the eventual recognition and acknowledgment of the gospel as Jesus preached it, and I could not thereafter suppress the truth – that Paul's word was not God's word, that his gospel was a different gospel, his Jesus a different Jesus. I took a careful look at Paul as revealed in his epistles and the Acts, with my eyes at last opened, and I could come to no other conclusion.

When I speak of the gospel of Jesus, I mean the good news that Jesus proclaimed in the world. This finds expression in his utterances as recorded in the four canonical Gospels. From the beginning of my commitment to Jesus there was recognition of seeming contradictions when comparing the gospels with Paul. At the very least, it seemed to the young convert that Paul omitted significant portions of the message of Jesus. The church perpetuated his errors, for there I found nothing for Paul but unmixed admiration and adulation from both ministry and laity.

I remember so clearly one incident that illustrates this point. One sunny Sunday morning in the autumn of 1948, soon after I matriculated at Southern Baptist Seminary, I went with a small group to visit a large rural congregation a few miles from Louisville, Ky. We were to teach Sunday School classes there, but the thing etched on my memory is a single encounter with one of their aged laymen, a crusty old farmer who had long before given his life to the Lord through service to his church. We were gathered in the churchyard under a shady tree waiting for services to begin and he said to me of Paul, "He was surely the most godly man ever to live, apart from Jesus himself, and he was a genius to boot. What a man!" Here was a patriarch of the faith grasping an opportunity to make a proper impression on the young preacher, and it had its intended effect. Such influences contributed to the prolongation of my terrible frustration in the ministry during which I was seeking to do the impossible, that is, to reconcile Paul to Jesus. And so for many years I suppressed my reservations and trusted my mentors. It was a terrible mistake.

But Jesus would not let me go! I praise him for that as I consider the wonder of how he has been patient with me through all the years when I allowed dissident voices to cloud his image and

PROMINENT FEATURES OF JESUS' GOSPEL

message. You will not be able to understand the significance of this unless you have likewise become truly acquainted with the Jesus of the gospels. Nor will you be able to correctly evaluate the character of Paul. Therefore it is necessary for us first to examine the gospel according to Jesus. Once you know Jesus as he has revealed himself in the gospels, you should be able to see Paul in his true character.

I say this from conviction grounded in personal experience. I was unable to know Paul well until I had experienced a complete reconstruction of my conceptions of Jesus and his doctrine. This getting to know Jesus required about twenty-five years, and many more years thereafter reconciling my views with this new vision of Jesus. It was a long, frustrating and tenuous process because I had at first accepted the false vision presented by the church. I had made a strong commitment to the Jesus of church doctrine, and had developed a strong bond of affection for the church and for my brothers and sisters who shared with me in the ministry of the church. The process of separation was exceedingly painful, fraught with disappointment, grief, and no little heartbreak. The impetus for this process was the growing conviction within me of sin, both in me and in the church, in the matters of war, nationalism, and racism. It was not, initially, a contention about the character of either Jesus or Paul. At the time I felt sustained in my convictions by both men and only later, free of the church, did I come to know Jesus and his Truth. This confirmed me in every way, and cleared my vision so that I could no longer accept Paul unqualifiedly. I published my book on Jesus in 1995 and then was compelled to study Paul to reconcile the growing dissension between Paul as I knew him and Jesus as I had finally learned to honor and love him.

I learned that the church has a terribly distorted view of Jesus and, without regard to sect or denomination, presents this faux Jesus to the world as the true one, as it did to me. Jesus and his gospel differ radically from that presented by the churches so that it will likely be necessary for you, my reader, to conduct a painful reappraisal of your view of Jesus before you can see Paul clearly. I have decided to devote the first part of this volume to Jesus, not only so that you can see Paul clearly, but also that you may be greatly blessed by our Lord.

I have come to believe that what has happened in Christendom, historically, is as follows:

- 1. Jesus and his gospel are exceedingly radical from any human point of view. The apostles and earliest disciples of Jesus therefore remained uncertain about the nature of the gospel and just what Jesus had accomplished in the world. Nevertheless they were intensely committed to him personally and therefore were exceedingly careful to see that his teachings were perpetuated as accurately as possible. In this they were carefully shepherded by the Holy Spirit. We have as a result a true repository of his words in the gospels, from which it is possible to recover both Jesus and his true gospel.
- 2. Paul and his associates stepped into the breach created by the uncertainty of the apostles. They had a great advantage because Paul's message was precise and certain and he preached it with great conviction. By blending portions of paganism, Judaism, and the unique doctrine of Jesus, Paul created a faith that had a powerful appeal to the gentile world. Not wanting a fight with the apostles, he shrewdly pitched his mission to the Gentiles, where he claimed apostolic support without admitting indebtedness to them. He was careful to see that his message was recorded for posterity in the writing of his epistles.
- 3. Generations and centuries passed during which the Pauline wing with its powerful appeal to the Roman world gained ascendancy over the apostolic wing. The apostolic wing with its primarily Jewish flavor lost influence and was caught between the dual jaws of history – the Gentile church and the increasing hostile Jewish synagogue. We may possibly see their record in the brief references of early writers to the Ebionites, Jewish Christians who persisted for maybe four hundred years

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- 4. Paul heavily influenced the resulting church due to the preservation of his writings, especially after the church canonized his epistles. Christianity became a Gentile religion that, following Paul, blended elements of paganism, Judaism, and Jesus. This constituted a vast deception in that the church came to see Jesus as Paul saw him, and it is Paul's Jesus that has come down to us through the church. The reformers reformed Paulinism, not the faith of Jesus.
- 5. Jesus of Nazareth therefore is to be carefully distinguished from the Jesus or Christ of Paul. The churchmen, while preserving Jesus of Nazareth in the gospels, have not noticed the distinction because, seeing Jesus through the eyes of Paul, the shadow of Paul's Jesus lies over the gospels and darkens their hearts and minds when they read. Nevertheless, through the centuries, there have been a few individuals who have known Jesus as he truly is, and their existence provides an unbroken chain of witnesses. This is the situation as it continues today.
- 6. Understanding this distinction is vital, as our eternal salvation depends upon it.