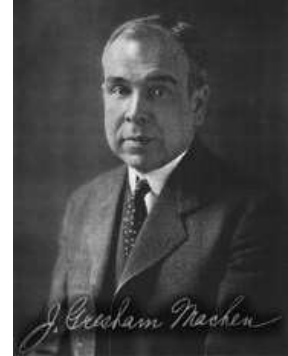




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# The Witness of Paul

by J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)



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*"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)*

## 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.

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."

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.

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.

## 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.

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

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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.

## 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.

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 allsufficiency of the Cross of Christ.

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."

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.

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

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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.

## **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.

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.

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.

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."

## **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

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