

# **The Reincarnation of Paul**

**A Fictitious Dialogue with the  
New Testament Letter Writer**

**Gene W. Marshall**

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## *Introduction*

I am a reincarnation of Paul. I mean Paul, the Christian apostle, the writer of the earliest documents in the New Testament. By this claim, I do not mean something occult or literal. Yet the reincarnation of Paul in my own flesh is something very actual to me. I know Paul inside and out. I understand the environment in which he lived. I know what he was trying to say. I see the heart and Spirit of his inner being. I identify with him in a very profound way. It seems to me that I can read his words aloud as if they are my own words.

It is for this reason that I am deeply grieved that so many people living in the world today misunderstand Paul. Some reject Christianity altogether because of the foolishness they think they hear Paul saying. Others turn Paul into support for their doctrinaire silliness and their violent bigotries. Still others dismiss Paul as a misguided perverter of the true Christianity that the historical Jesus taught. All these are ways in which Paul is being misunderstood. I feel this personally as if I myself am being misunderstood. So I want to write this imaginative essay in which I, Gene, dialogue with myself as Paul's reincarnation.

The "Paul" I am going to dialogue with is an unusual sort of Paul. In the first place, I intend this "Paul" to be the actual historical Paul made available to me by the best of biblical scholarship. And yet this "Paul" I am dialoguing with is also a literary figure of my own creation. This "Paul" is a time traveler who understands me and my times, a quality which the historical Paul certainly did not possess.

So this entire treatise is actually fiction, a fictitious theological dialogue going on in my own interior being. Yet this fiction has seriousness. It even has historical seriousness about it. My intent is to introduce you to the real Paul--to help you know Paul as I feel I know him.

Perhaps you are asking, "By what authority can you, Gene, introduce anyone to the real Paul?" I am somewhat baffled how to answer. I do not claim to be the foremost among Pauline scholars. I have not read every good book written about Paul. Weird as this may sound, this is my only authority: **I am the reincarnation of Paul.** I actually do know him. I am Paul.

I hope that some of you after reading this dialogue will see yourselves as the reincarnation of Paul as well.

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## The Dialogue

**Gene:** *Paul, most people in our day find your language strange. I want you to tell us in our own language what it was you were actually talking about?*

**Paul:** OK, where shall we begin?

### God?

**Gene:** *Let's start with the elementary question of God. You clearly found great meaning in the word "God." What can I say to my contemporaries who claim that they do not believe in God? Some even say that theism is simply obsolete.*

**Paul:** I would say that every person who experiences their finitude is experiencing what I mean by "God". The beasts of the fields look to God for their food. but since they do not experience their finitude, they do not experience God. But every human being who knows that his or her life is coming to an end is experiencing God. This is what I was getting at when I penned these words in the very first chapter of my letter to the Romans:

It is not that human beings do not know the actuality of God: indeed God has made it quite plain to them. For since the beginning of the world the invisible attributes of God, e.g. God's eternal power and divinity, have been plainly discernible through things which God has made and which are commonly seen and known, thus leaving human beings without a rag of excuse (for rendering God's actuality dumb and inoperative). They knew all the time of God's actuality, yet they refused to acknowledge God or give thanks to God. Hence all their thinking has ended in futility, and their misguided minds are plunged into the dark. They boast of their wisdom, but they have made fools of themselves, exchanging the splendor of the immortal God for an image shaped like mortal men, even for images like birds, beasts, and creeping things.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, all human beings who are not completely unconscious experience this actuality I call "God." For by "God" I mean an actual Presence in our daily lives. When I use personal terms like "Creator," I do not mean something spooky out there in some other world interfering with this world. For me the word "Creator" points to the Actual Mystery of our origin and not simply our origin back at the beginning, but our origin right now. Right now we are being sustained in being by whatever it is that is actually constituting our existence. That constituting actuality is God. Most people do not wish to worship this All-powerful Mysterious actuality as their God. They flee from this Infinite Creative Source and make for themselves some finite creature to be their object of worship.

Many of your modern theologians see God as a high abstraction rather than as an everyday actual Presence. In so doing they are fleeing the Creator and contemplating a creature—in this case, an abstract idea of their own creation. For me, God is not an idea nor an image of any sort. Those who understand God as an image or idea which makes sense of things are "exchanging the splendor of the actual God" for a thing of their own creation. Any sort of image of God is not God. God is the actuality of the Infinite that encounters us in our everyday experience. When people do not understand this, they are not even on the same playing field with me.

**Gene:** *Are you saying that God is the interior experience of our own finitude rather than an outward reality?*

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<sup>1</sup> Romans: 1:19-23 I have borrowed from several translations in order to make clear what Paul was actually saying here.

**Paul:** No, God is an outward reality, as objectively “out there” as this mountain or that lake or yonder tree. God is just there creating each and every event that is happening to us. When I use the word “God,” I mean an actual Presence--the same actual Presence that was being pointed to by Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets. This Presence can be seen by any aware human being. Secondarily, this Presence of God is also a human experience, for this is what I mean by “Presence,” present to we human beings.

**Gene:** *The term “Creator” throws many of us. It makes us think of a Big Person in some far off heavenly place.*

**Paul:** If you don't like the term “Creator” you can use “Ongoing Determiner of our daily destiny.” If that still sounds like a big SOMEONE in some other place interfering with this place, then you might try, “The Infinite Neighbor confronting us in each and every neighboring being.” If you are still tempted to see this Infinite Presence as a literal BIG PERSON in the sky, then just use the term “Reality” or “Awesome Actuality.” God, for me, is not an abstract idea of any sort. God, for me, is not a far-away being. For me, the word “God” indicates a Living Presence in my everyday life and in the everyday life of every human being.

**Gene:** *So what is this Presence? What is the actual human experience of this actual Presence which you are pointing to?*

**Paul:** Let me put it this way. Everything passes away--the stars, the animals, the plants, the earth, our parents, you and I. Everything enters a Great Tomb, a Great Abyss, a Great Void. Everything also emerged from that same Great Void, for that Void is also a Creative Power that issues and sustains everything that exists. Now, that is surely a daily experience in the life of anyone in any century.

In my day, I never heard of Lao Tzu, but I understand from your contemporaries that Lao Tzu called this Great Void the Tao or the Way. That is what I mean by God: The-Way-It-Is, or if you like, The-Way-It-Moves. The-Way-It-Finally-Moves” is present to me in my everyday life as the Ongoing Determiner of my daily destiny. Everything that happens to me is an action towards me of this Invisible Determiner of all things visible and invisible.

**Gene:** *But such a view of God would mean seeing not only the pleasant aspects of our lives but also the tragedy and suffering in our lives as the action of God. Christian-identified people today have been taught that God is loving. Most of us have had difficulty seeing how the origin of everything, including our suffering and death, can also be viewed as a loving Parent. How do you answer these objections?*

**Paul:** Experiencing the Love of God rather than the wrath of God requires a deep and painful transformation. My affirmation of a loving God has nothing whatsoever to do with accepting the comforting idea that a BIG SOMEONE in some other realm is supporting all my finite interests. As long as you or I are committed to seeing our own person as our center of value, we are under the wrath of God. It is only when we have died to our ego and all its self-serving values that we can see God as loving. The death of the ego is the birth of the Spirit Self. Only if you identify with that Spirit Self can you be grateful for that total ongoing activity which I am pointing to with the word “God.” Until then this same ongoing activity is opposed to you. You are under “the wrath of God,” as I put it.

## The Wrath of God?

**Gene:** *Most people today are puzzled, indeed offended, by your phrase "the wrath of God." What do you mean by "the wrath of God"?*

**Paul:** Everyone experiences God as wrathful towards them if they are bent on escaping from this inescapable God. Every person is experiencing wrath who is not trusting the actual Mysterious Determiner of his or her daily destiny. You are probably clear that I place great emphasis upon having "faith." By "faith" I mean trusting God--trusting the actual Determiner of your daily destiny. The most common state of affairs is that human beings live their lives in suspicion of the actual Determiner of their daily destiny. Human beings live their lives in suspicion, not trust. They may indeed expect what they call "the worst" from the Determiner of their daily destiny. And from their ego-centered perspective, they are correct; for everything they hold dear is passing away. This is experienced as wrath unless you trust this Great Tomb into which everything is passing, unless you trust this Great Source out of which everything is coming.

Let me tell you my own story. I was a Pharisee. That is, I was not a Sadducee nor an Essene. I was not an elite member of the Jewish temple. Nor had I retreated to the hills like the Essenes to be some sort of mystical hermit. I was an ordinary member of the synagogue life of the Jewish dispersion. I was trained in the law of Moses and the Prophets. I was strict in my belief that the wrath of God could be avoided by a strict observance of the written codes of this tradition. My conversion to the Christ-way had to do with realizing that the wrath of God could not be avoided in this manner. There is no way to avoid the wrath of God by achieving righteousness through the law.

Quite apart from the law, true righteousness comes through trusting the Determiner of our daily destiny. At first, it seemed to me that those who were following Jesus and were proclaiming right-living through trust were destroying the tradition of Moses and the prophets. Later, I came to realize that Abraham, Moses, and all the prophets were exemplars of right-living through trust. Even they were not righteous because of their obedience to outward observances. Keeping the outward observances can be an expression of faith, but doing outward observances can never create faith. Faith is created by the forgiveness of God--that is, by the realization that the Determiner of our daily destiny does not operate like a legal bookkeeper but rather operates like the waiting parent who is always ready to forgive wayward children. This was a central point in the teachings of Jesus, as well as in my teachings after my conversion. All that is required to avoid the wrath of the Determiner of our daily destiny is to trust the Determiner of our daily destiny.

**Gene:** *So the wrath of God has nothing to do with a divine being having a temper tantrum?*

**Paul:** Of course not. In the first place, God is not "a divine being." God is that totally mysterious non-person, non-thing, non-unthing that is actually constituting us and determining our daily destiny. God cannot be pictured. When I use personal pictures of God, I am talking about my personal relationship with this more-than-personal Final Reality which we all inescapably confront. So when I picture God as wrathful, I am simply talking metaphorically about my own experience of this Mysterious Otherness--that is, about experiencing this actual, mysterious Determiner of our daily destiny as being opposed to me. And this relationship of opposition is not God's fault; it is my fault. We humans are the ones who are out of proper relationship with God. It is not God who is out of proper relationship with us. When we are not trusting this Infinite Non-Person who is our daily Companion and

the determiner of our daily destiny, we are not viewing this Determining Actuality as being in proper relationship with us. Rather, we are demanding that this Determiner behave towards us in those ways which *we* have decided are proper.

To even begin to understand the meaning of a conversion to the Christ-way, we have to die to any understanding of ourselves as the standard by which God is to be judged. God is the judge of us, not we of God. Again, when I pictured this Mysterious Companion as a Judge, I am not talking about a literal judge in the sky. I am talking about the personal experience of being judged wanting. The Infinite Judge finds us wanting because we do not trust the Infinite Judge. If we trusted the Infinite Judge, we would find that our trust is counted by this Judge as right-living no matter what horrors we have committed in the past. This trust is the key to our transformation. Trusting the Infinite Judge to forgive all our failures also means to understand all our failures as a failure to trust the Infinite Judge. This is the rub: most of us, including me for most of my life, believe that we have to achieve right-living by our own efforts in order to be rewarded by the Infinite Judge with the good life we seek. We have everything backwards, and that is why we are “under wrath.” That is why we experience the Determiner of our daily destiny as opposed to us.

### **Trust?**

**Gene:** *Paul, the trust you are describing seems impossible to we modern people who wish to be in control of our lives and who also wish for our lives to be all ups and no downs. Did you actually trust the Mysterious Infinite Determiner of your daily destiny?*

**Paul:** Well, I never claimed to have arrived at the full stature of the trust exemplified by Jesus. My trust was incomplete; however, I did experience trust, and I was devoted to move forward into that full and complete trust which I could envision.

**Gene:** *So how did this trust come about for you?*

**Paul:** Trust was made a living option for me through the life and death of the man named “Jesus,” and through the preaching of those among his earliest followers who proclaimed that he was, in spite of his dismal death, “the first fruits of the resurrection of all persons at the end of time.” That is, God, the Determiner of every daily destiny, was already honoring Jesus as the exemplar of our proper relationship to God.

### **Resurrection?**

**Gene:** *Whoa! Wait, Paul, what did you mean by “the resurrection at the end of time” or by “resurrection” at any time? This has been a real puzzle to me and to most of us in the modern world. Did you believe that a corpse really came back from the dead?*

**Paul:** In my time every Pharisee believed in the resurrection of all humanity at the end of time. Jesus believed this. All the apostles believed this. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. They were content to go on being a worldly compromise with the rulership of Rome. But we Pharisees, including Jesus, believed in the reward of the righteous and the demise of the unrighteous. And this reward and this demise were to take place relatively soon. We did not think in terms of billions of years. I know that current scientific wisdom understands that the cosmos got started with a Big Bang 12 to 15 billion years ago. But our understanding was that all things had begun less than a hundred generations back. When we looked at the stars, we knew that they were passing away. We knew that they had not always been here and that they would not always be here. The day on which they would fall from the sky we did not know, but we certainly did not have your view that they would last

for billions of years. Anyhow, every Pharisee believed that this entire order of things was going out of being and that on that awful and glorious day there would be a final reckoning in which those who were not in right relationship with the Determiner of daily destiny would be resurrected to burn in an everlasting despair and those who were in right relationship with the Determiner of daily destiny would be resurrected to participate in a new heaven and a new earth, a new era characterized by a new quality of being human. These thoughts expanded the view of what we meant by the wrath of God. No one was going to get away with anything. There was a Final Reckoning for everyone.

What made Jesus a unique member of this common Pharisaical perspective was how he understood **who** the righteous were and how he understood **when** this Final Reckoning was going to take place. Strange as this may seem to you modern folk, Jesus asked people to look upon the healed lives that were taking place because of his ministry as signs that the Final Reckoning was already breaking in upon us. The reign of Satan in which humanity was suspicious of God was being replaced by the Reign of God in which humanity was trusting God. When someone died to their suspicion and mistrust of the Determiner of their daily destiny and had faith instead, Jesus said that the Final Reckoning was arriving. The healed person was being delivered from the hell of his or her despair and was being raised up to walk the righteous life of trusting God. Jesus also taught that it was faith that healed these persons; it was faith that was making a person righteous, not his or her good deeds. The person may have been a despicable harlot or a cheating tax collector or a leper or any other form of outcast. Outcast or insider, Jesus offered that person the option of understanding that God is a forgiving "Parent," and that we can become restored offspring in this Infinite Parent's family--that is, we can be righteous right now by simply trusting in the fresh start being offered to us in the preaching of Jesus, and (after his death) in the preaching of Jesus as the Christ.

All this meant that the resurrection at the end of time was breaking loose in the present time. The wicked (that is, all of us) were being judged. The hell in all of us was being smoked out. And from the ashes of this judged humanity, a righteous humanity was being raised up.

**Gene:** *So what exactly does it mean to say that Jesus was raised from the dead?*

**Paul:** Some of the earliest followers of Jesus began to proclaim that the very Jesus whom we humans had crucified, God had raised up. This seemed pretty silly to me the first time I heard it. It was more than silly to me; it was downright offensive, for it accused me of being violently opposed to the righteous humanity that God was supporting.

Also, you have to understand that seeing Jesus as resurrected required a new birth on the part of the person doing the seeing. The resurrection was invisible to physical eyes. When I saw the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus, it knocked me off my horse. I was on the ground. I was out of commission for days. I was undergoing a rebirth. Everything I had ever believed was being destroyed. My entire perspective on life was being transformed into something else.

This vision of the resurrection of Jesus had had a similar effect on Peter and others who were with Jesus, including a large number of women. My vision of the resurrection came rather late in this sequence.

**Gene:** *So none of you actually saw a literal corpse come back from the grave?*



**Paul:** No, we did not. If you had had television cameras trained on the scene you would not have recorded anything unusual. Yet the experience I am talking about with the term "resurrection of Jesus" was an actual experience. The Jesus quality of living actually came alive in the lives of those who were "seeing" that "God had raised Jesus." I certainly never saw any walking corpses. I simply saw a bright light and heard words calling my name. I was not an empirical scientist and neither were Peter and the others. None of us had any qualms about speaking metaphorically about our profound experiences. My rule was to speak with integrity about what I had actually experienced. A Spirit of trust, freedom, hope, and love was being poured into the lives of people who had previously been sheer cowards, mere nobodies, and wicked besides. When we called this new community of amazingly alive folk "the body of Christ," we were still talking about the resurrection. Jesus was indeed still alive in history because he was alive in these actual fleshly lives. We were "little Christs," as Martin Luther was later to put it. We were "in Christ," as I put it.

**Gene:** *I also have a problem with your belief in a resurrection of everyone at the end of time. It is very hard for me to accept that you or Jesus or anyone could seriously hold such a view.*

**Paul:** Well, it was true that we all believed that the end of the world was already happening, and we thought that the stars would begin falling soon. We saw the Roman Empire's days of glory to be severely numbered. And we thought we had no need to fear this Final Reckoning because we were already among the resurrected. We saw our task as calling others to share in this resurrection and thus to be ready for the day of Final Reckoning that was close at hand.

**Gene:** *But the world did not come to an end. Does this mean that your faith was foolishness?*

**Paul:** Those who lived on after I died were certainly surprised that it took the Roman Empire another four hundred years to finish collapsing. And your awareness that the stars will last several billion more years would have been surprising to any member of my culture. But it does not seem to me that anything has changed as far as my faith is concerned. We were focused upon the reality of our relationships with the Infinite. It does not matter to me that our objective scientific pictures of the cosmos proved wrong. The validity of our religious insights should not be dismissed by you because we were not 20th century scientists.

The essence of our experience and of your experience remains the same. Though we conceptualized the objective unfolding of events differently, behind this unfolding we say the same Mystery, the same Infinite Presence that you can see. Both you in your time and I in my time face the very same Mysterious Power determining our daily destinies. You, like me, can trust or not trust that Mysterious Determiner. And you like me can experience that not trusting this Mysterious Determiner of your daily destiny is a life of despair leading to more and more despair. You, like me, can experience that trusting this Mysterious Determiner of your daily destiny is a life of joy and freedom and love leading to still more of all these qualities. So what does it matter that our first century historical predictions were inaccurate? We were never primarily interested in such "fleshly" predictions anyhow. We were interested in our Spirit reality, that is in our relationships with the Mysterious Determiner of our daily destinies in the present time of our actual living.

## Is God Male?

**Gene:** *You have raised so many issues I don't know where to go next. Let me back up and ask another question about God. You spoke of God as "Father." Did you actually think of God as male? Many women and men today are concerned about denigrating the status of women by thinking of God as male.*

**Paul:** To understand me and my first century companions, you have to separate our experience of God from our thinking about God. We did, of course, think of God as Father, not Mother. But the point of our thinking was to express our experience of God as a loving Parent toward us. You must understand that thinking of God as Mother would have carried some misleading overtones in our day. In what many of you now call “the patriarchal system of social organization,” the woman was secondary in authority and power. So for us to call God “Mother” would have implied that the Mysterious Determiner of our daily destinies was in some manner secondary to something else. And this was clearly not what we wanted to communicate. The Determiner we had in mind was not secondary to anything or anyone.

We were also surrounded by a Greek culture that had dualistic understandings of the Final Reality. The stories of a male god mating with a female earth-goddess had nothing to do with the experiences we were striving to express. Furthermore, the pantheon of gods and goddesses spread across the Hellenistic landscape were not celebrating the mysterious Determiner of our daily destinies but various finite components of the human psyche. The Greek gods and goddesses may have represented human powers that transcended the individual human, but these gods and goddesses did not transcend humanity, the earth, the stars, everything. They were not representative of that One Void out of which all things, including all these gods and goddesses, had come. They were not representative of that One Void into which all things, including the human dynamics represented by these gods and goddesses, would return. God, for us, meant something so different from anything anyone in our time was saying about a feminine goddess that the thought of seeing God as feminine never even occurred to us.

Actually, when I think about it now with your culture in my mind, we did not actually see God as male or female. We knew that God was Infinite and that male and female referred to finite dynamics. Jesus had suggested in one of his sayings that the new humanity would be neither male nor female but like angels. Surely if angels (our poetry for specific communicators of Infinite Actuality) have no sexual differentiation, then the “Head” of all the angels is not male in some literal sense. For us, the “head” of something was always pictured as male. This was just the common usage of our culture. I was not trying to put women down by calling God “Father.”

### **Is Sex Bad?**

**Gene:** *Did you view sex as something depraved? Many people in the modern era have accused you of depreciating the human body, including sex. Was “the flesh” as you used that term another word for sin?*

**Paul:** No, this is a big misunderstanding of my perspective. I saw sex as part of “God’s good creation.” The body is good just like the mind is good. All of nature is good. Everything is God’s creation, so everything is good. And by “God” remember, I simply meant that Mysterious Whatever that had actually constituted every finite thing, its coming into being and its going out of being. When I used the term “flesh” in connection with the term “sin,” I meant living after the flesh, that is, making the finite aspects of our life (the creation) our final loyalty. The human spirit is sick when it is enthralled with the finite instead of being dedicated and obedient to the Infinite Source out of which all finite things are arising. You are probably familiar with people who are sexually addicted; people who have turned sex into an obsessive and destructive force in their lives. This does not happen because sex is bad but because a human spirit is misdirected--enthralled with some finite sexual longings rather than liberated in a trusting relationship with the true Wholeness of our lives..

**Gene:** *But you did not marry, and you suggested that others follow your example. Did that mean that you felt sexual relationships were ill advised?*

**Paul:** No, most of the followers of the Christ-way in my time did marry. Peter married, as did most other men and women in the Christ-communities. I taught that it was better to marry than to be burned up with an abiding longing to do so. For myself, it was a very practical choice. I simply felt that I did not have time for wife and children and still have time to travel all over doing my task. Remember, I also felt that the time was short before the end was to come for this entire sin-dominated order of reality. I was putting my emphasis on living in that new era which was dawning. I believed, therefore, that persons of faith who did have wives or husbands should live with them in an unattached fashion. I also taught that wealthy people should be unattached to their wealth. I recommended that the wealthy use their wealth to buy spiritual worth for themselves and others. I recommended that slaves get their freedom if they could, but if they could not, I recommended that they obediently and joyously serve their masters in the knowledge that being part of this order of things was not who they truly were. You see, we saw ourselves as being “**in** this world, but **not of** this world.” We were **of** a world that was yet to come in its fullness. “Not being of this world” meant not being enthralled with the finite order of things. It did not mean any sort of contempt for God’s natural world, or for marriage, or for sex, or for nature. After all I was a Jew, not a Greek, culturally speaking. I spoke Greek, but I did not see myself as a Greek mind trapped in a material body. I was immersed in the Hebraic understanding in which I saw myself as an embodied being in which body, mind, and soul were the ongoing gifts of the Creating God.

When I was asked what kind of body we would have in the world to come, I did not envision that we would not have a body. I simply imagined that we would have a new kind of body; one that was not addicted to the flesh, a body that did not lust for the finite, a body that loved the Infinite. I hope that you can see that these groping expressions to express the unexpressible would not have been the poetry chosen by someone who depreciated the body.

## Women?

**Gene:** *Many modern people have accused you of depreciating women. After all, you did not allow them to speak in your public meetings, and you asked that they cover their heads. You recommended that they take a place of secondary authority in the family structure. Did you feel that men were inherently better than women?*

**Paul:** I was certainly aware that women were as capable as men of receiving the gifts of faith and love and freedom that had been set loose by the Christ message. This spirit-equality was plain to see in our communities in spite of the secondary status of women in the world at large. Every group of Christ-followers was held together by some truly powerful and admirable women. My praise for them in my letters was not just public relations. My mission could not have succeeded without these women. Concerning the customs that we should follow in our communities, I recommended that we follow the basic etiquettes of our era. You see, we never heard of patriarchy. Patriarchy got started hundreds of years before Moses. We swam in patriarchy like a fish swims in water. We never knew there was a time before patriarchy or that there ever would be a time after patriarchy. But in recommending these standard customs, I did not see myself as degrading women. I sought to protect women, recommending that men love their wives as they love their own bodies. I recommended that widows, of which we always had many, be given an honorable and

responsible role in the community organization in spite of the fact that a sexually attractive widow could be a disruptive force if she did not live in a chaste and careful fashion.

Let me put it this way: it simply was not timely for me to end patriarchy as it surely is timely for you modern human beings to end patriarchy. I can see that you have become aware of a new aspect of God's "justice agenda" that was invisible to us. We did not try to end slavery either. We sought to do the timely things for our times. Our agenda centered in building up communities of those who were finding life in the healing message we were teaching. Our purpose was to help more and more people love God and neighbor. We had no idea what contribution this was going to make to the course of history. As it turned out, we made a rather formidable contribution. Who could have anticipated that the religious and ethical life of the entire Greco-Roman world would be so thoroughly transformed by our seemingly meager efforts?

Looking back with your eyes, however, I see that I did participate in the transmission of patriarchy to the next generation of human life. Was patriarchy a weakness in my culture? Yes. Do Christians in the future need to follow the customs I followed? No. My main message was this: "For freedom Christ has set us free." I did not teach that my everyday practical ethical choices should become rigid models for all time. You, following my example of freedom, can simply repent of patriarchy on my behalf. That would be a "Pauline" thing for you to do.

### **Homosexuality?**

**Gene:** *Would this sort of thinking also apply to your teachings on homosexuality? Were those teachings also part of the patriarchal worldview that has become outdated in our modern times?*

**Paul:** It is true that my views on homosexuality were the common views of Jewish teachers in my times. So, I referred to homosexual behavior as a sign of estrangement. Since I never met a homosexual person whose practices did not look obsessive to me, I had no reason to doubt the wisdom of my times on this subject. But truly, I did not focus much attention on this subject, and it was not central to what I had to say. Whether homosexuality is a result of estrangement or simply a biological diversity was not an issue that I ever confronted squarely. I regret that any of my teachings have seemed to provide support for the egoistic hatred I see manifested in some of your heterosexual companions. So it seems to me that you can indeed apply my teachings on freedom to the task of forging a view on homosexuality that is more appropriate for your own era.

### **Freedom?**

**Gene:** *I need to hear more about this freedom. What exactly do you mean by "freedom"?*

**Paul:** I see freedom as the opposite of bondage. In general, humanity is in bondage. The mind, the will, the heart, the body of humanity is in bondage to loving the flesh more than the Infinite Source of the flesh. You certainly understand alcoholism and drug addiction. Those conditions are bondage, not freedom. Similarly, Adolf Hitler and other genocidal racists are in bondage to some narrow, limited aspects of being human. Reducing the scope of your concern to a racial group enslaves the human spirit and results in actions that any sensitive person can see are a form of madness.

I myself, before my conversion, was in bondage to the pride of self-achieved righteousness. I wanted to be in charge of my life. I wanted to achieve by my own efforts a

right standing that would be honored by the Almighty Determiner. This looked like freedom to me at the time, but it was actually an enslavement. I had to follow a set of rules that were sometimes irrelevant. I felt I had to fight to the death those who challenged my moralistic perspective. I was in bondage to being a good person by my own definitions of good. And it did not matter that I attempted to derive my definitions of good from the Scriptures. My entire approach to life was a slavery just as surely as any drug addict or racist.

So freedom means to me freedom from the law, freedom for a surprisingly open ethical creativity in my concrete situations. Not requiring circumcision for our Gentile men is a case in point. Nevertheless, I consider the law of Moses to be holy and good. I see the essence of the Mosaic law as the imperative to love God and neighbor. This did not change for me after my conversion, but I was then free to figure out what love meant in each situation and to do so in a wildly creative fashion.

Freedom also means freedom from sin--that is, freedom from every form of addiction to finite things. Finite things, including sex, food, pleasure, are not evil in themselves. Evil enters when a human being sells out his or her birthright of Spirit freedom for a soup bowl of some passing something or other. Loving the Creator means to me freedom from the bondages I call "sin." And this freedom *from* bondage is also freedom *for* loving all events and persons in my life--including the friends and enemies being sent to me by the continuing actions of the Determiner of my daily destiny.

Freedom also means freedom from death. I do not mean by this that there is some way to "avoid dying." Freedom from death means freedom from the power and control of death over my life. In freedom, I can put my life on the line day after day in a daring and powerful way. In such freedom, I cannot be intimidated by anyone or anything. For me, marching into the jaws of death is marching into the face of God, a God who loves me. This is freedom of a very powerful sort.

**Gene:** *Is such freedom possible for ordinary people?*

**Paul:** However rare and wonderful this freedom may seem, it is not unnatural to the human species. Freedom is just true humanity being recovered. Abraham, Moses, and all the prophets manifested this freedom. Each human being is this freedom, a freedom that has gone astray into some sort of bondage. Being our freedom is simply being our real selves. Any ordinary person is capable of that.

## Original Sin?

**Gene:** *So what do you mean when you say that in Adam's sin we all sinned?*

**Paul:** The story of Adam and Eve is the story of falling away from freedom. Adam's sin was not Eve's fault. And Eve's sin was not the fault of the snakes of nature. Adam's sin was Adam's freedom refusing to be freedom. And Eve's sin was Eve's freedom refusing to be freedom. By making Adam and Eve the exemplars of sinful humanity, neither I nor the old Scriptures meant to imply that human nature was inherently bad. God, not humans, made human nature. Sin or bondage is a human creation--created by human beings with the freedom which is bestowed upon us as human beings. In my mythic way of putting all this, I envisioned humanity as having freedom at our original creation. Then Adam fell by inventing bondage. Your age tends to literalize every myth or to dismiss it. Perhaps you could avoid confusion by replacing such as "original creation" and talk about "human essence." Likewise the fall happens every day as humanity invents ever new forms of

bondage. Sin was not invented once and for all back at some literal beginning. Sin is a process of which Adam is a symbolic figure.

**Gene:** *This raises the whole question of "original sin." You seem to have a very strong view that all of humanity actually lives in this tragic bondage you call "sin."*

**Paul:** To say that sin is widespread is not the same thing as saying that humanity is evil by nature. Concerning "original sin," I did not actually speculate as some later Christians did with how sin is communicated from generation to generation. To use your terms, I did not actually claim that sin was biologically transmitted. Nor did I claim that sin was culturally transmitted, although that makes more sense to me. We are conditioned by our human-made cultures which do carry within them the rebellions and bondages of the ages. But actually, sin is, I believe, replicated by each person in the same manner that Adam and Eve sinned. **We are all frightened of the overwhelming challenge to live in our essential uncertainty before the living God.** We dread living a life of freedom in which no absolute certainties exist. We flee, each of us, from such freedom into some sort of bondage. Each of us does that, but we do in a social situation in which this trend is well established.

In our actual historical lives bondage has become very complex. It takes on the appearance of a social kingdom. "The kingdom of Satan" was a term used in my time. All human beings do live much or all of their lives in the service of this "kingdom"--this organization of human life. "No one does good, no not one," as the Psalmist said. We all participate consciously and unconsciously in patterns of falsification that are larger than our own private lives. The more I experienced in my own life the "new life" of trust, freedom, and love, the more deeply I saw into the vast ocean of sin in which I, along with all humanity, also participate.

The widespread tragedy of sin is, in my view, simple realism. I do not actually have a pessimistic or morbid view of life. It is in fact my optimism, my experience of new life and my hope for its fulfillment and its spread throughout the world that enables me to see as fully as I do the deep tragedy of sin. Before I answered the high calling of moving toward the full stature of this new life, I viewed some people as righteous and others as sinners. My conversion enabled me to see that the "righteousness" of those I considered righteous was mediocre compared to the righteousness into which I was entering. Looking at sin and righteousness from the perspective of that deeper right-living of the Christ-way, I saw the quest for an achieved righteousness through legal observance as no less sinful than criminal actions. All humanity, the culturally righteous and the grossly debauched, I could see as performing a similar flight away from the freedom and trust and love that was being turned loose through what we called "the preaching of Jesus as the Christ."

## Christ?

**Gene:** *I need for you to explain this word "Christ." Some modern scholars claim that the historical Jesus never referred to himself as "the Christ." Some have even accused you of being the real founder of Christianity and that Jesus never intended to start a new religion. What do you mean by "Christ," and who was the real founder of Christianity?*

**Paul:** Neither Jesus nor I intended to start a new religion. We were both concerned with calling Jews back to true Judaism. I never thought of myself as anything other than a true Jew. My entire ministry was to Jews and to God-fearing Gentiles who were attending Jewish synagogues. As far as I know, Jesus never set foot outside of Galilee and Judea.

Actually, I never heard Jesus teach. I received his teachings from others who had heard him. In my letters, I never focused on the teachings of Jesus nor on the question of whether he thought of himself as "the Christ." I understood that Jesus had taught about the immediate dawn of the Kingdom of God. I viewed that as a Messianic sort of preaching. I understood that Jesus had referred to the coming of the "son of man," a term which meant something like "the next humanity." This term also had Messianic meanings. Clearly, Jesus had a sense of identity with this coming "son of man." The quality of life that Jesus was living and the quality of life that he expected to arrive when this "new humanity" arrived were the very same quality of life.

Furthermore, I believed that I was experiencing and teaching the same quality of life that Jesus had lived and taught. Jesus and I were both living and calling others to live a life of loving God and neighbor which I was spelling out with terms like trust, freedom, hope, peace, joy and so forth. I did not see myself as departing in any way from the teachings of Jesus.

Yet I was preaching to a slightly different situation than Jesus, and so I preached a slightly different message. Even though I became a follower of Jesus only a few years after his death, I faced different issues than he faced. The key issue faced by me and the followers of Jesus who immediately preceded me was how best to *interpret* the entire life, teachings, and death of Jesus. Jesus had many admirers and these admirers came up with many different interpretations of his life and death.

First of all, there were those who saw Jesus as no more than an enlightened Jewish teacher doing a better interpretation of the law of Moses. They saw him as one who invited us to *achieve* a better righteousness by our own efforts. From this perspective, following Jesus meant performing a more strict obedience to the law. Many of these persons taught that the male followers of Jesus needed to be circumcised and that the Jewish dietary laws needed to be kept.

Secondly, there were those who saw Jesus as a teacher of secret mystical wisdom. The Gospel of Thomas which your scholars have become excited about was written by persons of this persuasion. The focus of this group was on finding the cosmic truths hidden in Jesus' often cryptic sayings. These persons tended to be very flexible in their loyalty to the Mosaic law and very open to other secret wisdoms flowing in from the Gentile culture.

Neither of these two groups focused on the issue of calling Jesus "the Christ." Neither struggled with the painful paradox that was involved in using this title "Christ" for someone who had met an ignoble and violent death as a common criminal. Death and resurrection became primary symbols for me, but not for either of those other two groups of Jesus' interpreters. Do you see that getting back to what can be known about the historical Jesus only places you in the predicament faced by Peter, Mary Magdalene, and me? How do we interpret Jesus? My writings and all the New Testament writings were one line of interpretation. And there were many others. But it was not possible then, nor is it possible for you who are entering the twenty-first century, to engage in no interpretation at all. Jesus raised questions to which we had to give answers.

It was in this context that you must understand the meaning of our decision to call Jesus "the Christ." The Christ entitlement of Jesus was one of my key theological issues, but I was not the first one who began calling Jesus "the Christ." This remarkable assertion was the inspiration of Peter and others around him. The message that Jesus was God's Christ was a

message that was delivered to me, and this was the message that eventually knocked me off my horse.

**Gene:** *Say some more about how that message knocked you down. What does it mean to you personally?*

**Paul:** For me, the term “Christ” was linked with that Final Reckoning of history we discussed earlier. In the last days, the Messiah (or Christ) would come and usher in the new era, a new humanity. Most of us expected this to mean at least the end of Roman rule. Most of us expected that our personal lives would be vastly enriched by belonging to a whole different world order, one in which Satan did not rule as he so clearly did rule in the order of things we faced. Now we all had our different views about what this reign of Satan actually was and what this new world order would look like when Satan was overthrown.

Many of you who are entering the 21st century have your own sort of “Messianic expectations.” Some of you expect progress in science and technology to cure most ills. Some of you expect electronic communications to put an end to most tyranny. Others of you have vast hopes in the powers of education or in democratic governance. While you do not use the word “Messiah” with respect to these vast hopes, they are not altogether dissimilar from the expectation of that new age which many of us in first century Judaism expected God to initiate at the time of the Final Reckoning.

But with regard to all of our first century Messianic expectations, Jesus was a dud. He did not overthrow Rome, much less the entire Satanic order of wickedness. In other words, any of us whose Messianic expectations were pictured as an outward change in the human condition were disappointed in Jesus. Speaking of a crucified Messiah was a complete contradiction for those who had such expectations.

For us to accept the preaching of a “crucified Christ” meant that we had to have a new view of what the coming of the Christ was all about. We had to see that the coming of the Christ was basically an interior happening. The reign of Satan was indeed overthrown, but this overthrow was a secret overthrow known only in the lives of those in whom this overthrow had taken place. This interior overthrow did have outward manifestations, namely the appearance of a community of people in whom the Spirit of Christ was clearly operative. But this interior essence of the coming of Christ was disappointing even to Jesus’ closest disciples. They wanted some sort of external miraculous proof that everyone could see.

So offensive to me was this new view of the Christ that my first impression of this new sect of Judaism was that it needed to be stamped out, for it undermined the entire purpose of the law and the prophets as I saw them. Furthermore, it implied, as I have already said, that my whole life was a huge mistake, that I was not a true Jew but a person trapped in the Satanic kingdom just as completely as any of those immoral persons I sought to instruct.

So calling Jesus “the Christ” in this particular time and place with these particular meanings swirling in the cultural air meant that I, Paul, had to die to my entire mode of life. As I said later, I was crucified with Christ and raised up with Christ to newness of life.

This new view of the Messianic human also meant that embodying the Messianic quality of life in my own living subjected me to rejection by the world that still remained in the



power of Satan. Living this new life, therefore, entailed suffering my own version of the cross of Jesus. Living the Christ-way meant taking on a controversial quality of life--a life that assaulted the spirit-sick world with a Spirit health that was going to be viewed in the first instance as an offense, a blasphemy, sheer nonsense, or even an evil option that needed to be stamped out. The Christ-way, as I experienced it, was not for cowards.

But I was not attracted to cowardice. It had been the courage of Stephen in living the Christ-way right into the jaws of death itself that had finally convinced me that I was witnessing the sort of courageous life to which I had always been called, the life for which I was made at the dawn of creation.

So, in the final analysis, I saw living the Christ-way as simply being a true Jew. And I saw being a true Jew as simply being a true human being. And I did not think of all this as starting a new religion. In all my life I never called myself a "Christian" as opposed to being a Jew. The Christ-way was the Jewish-way come to complete fruition. The Christ-way was simply God's way, the way God had ordained for humanity at the creation of the cosmos.

### Was Jesus God?

**Gene:** *That reminds me of another question that is often asked in our times. Why did you identify Jesus with God? For a human being to also be God seems completely ridiculous to me and to most people in my times.*

**Paul:** Well, first of all I never departed from saying that Jesus was a human being like every other human being. Just as Adam is you and I in, so Jesus, the Christ, is you and I as persons rescued from sin. Jesus was not only human; he was the head of a restored humanity. In my writings, to be "in Christ" means to be in this proper relationship with God. To be "in Adam" means to be in a fallen relationship with God.

In addition to seeing Jesus, the Christ, as a new humanity, I also saw the coming into our lives of this Christ, as a healing event sent to us by God. In this context, I could say that I saw the face of the invisible God in the face of the visible Jesus. When you see Jesus truly, you see God. That is, when you see the trusting Jesus, you see also the trustworthiness of God. The crucifixion of Jesus seems at first to deny that God is trustworthy. But when we saw that God was trustworthy in forgiving us humans who had crucified Jesus, we saw a whole new vision of God's trustworthiness. We might have seen Jesus as a tragic idiot who trusted in an untrustworthy God. But instead we saw Jesus as the Christ of God, that is as the message of God's forgiveness to all those who are estranged from God. This is what I mean by seeing Jesus truly. And this was always the key issue behind using the Christ title-- *seeing Jesus truly*.

**Gene:** *So Jesus, the human, reveals God while remaining somewhat distinct from God. But how do you reconcile the humanity of Jesus with the following words you spoke about the Christ in your letter to the Colossians?*

He is the image of the invisible God; he is before all created things. In him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible but also the invisible orders of thrones, sovereignties, authorities, and powers; the whole universe has been created through him and for him. And he exists before everything, and all things are held together in him.<sup>2</sup>

**Paul:** I suppose you are asking how could the Christ be present with the Creator at the creation and still be Jesus a particular human being in historical time. What is involved here is

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<sup>2</sup> Colossians 1:15-17 New English translation

the flexibility of the Christ symbol. The Christ is the one who is sent by God at the end of time. I understood that this expression of God at the end of time had to be consistent with the expression of God in constructing all things at the beginning of time. I know this sounds strange to you, but in my day people believed in the existence of many invisible spirit powers--angels, principalities, etc. Some of the people in Colossae were misunderstanding Christ to be one of those spiritual powers. Such a misunderstanding destroys my message entirely. **The Christ Message is a message about the Ultimate, therefore it is prior to all invisible powers and to all visible things and events as well.**

In other words, the Christ manifestation is not a secondary expression of the Eternal Divinity. There may be secondary powers that are invisible and operative in our lives, but the Christ is not one of them. The Christ is the expression of the primary power, the full embodiment of the Final Determiner of our daily destinies. Christ is one with the Creator of all things visible and invisible. And God, the Creator, is not a supreme invisible being alongside other supreme invisible beings. God is not "a supreme being" at all. God is **THE Source** of all beings, visible and invisible. **God is that which holds all things together. So Christ is the expression of that which holds all things together.**

Your new physics has given you some new wisdom about how marvelously all aspects of the cosmos are interconnected. This "holding together" I saw through my own sciences, but I saw the same Mysterious Presence that you can see holding all things together. I pictured this Presence as an Active Power. And this Active Power was expressing its (his/her) nature to us in the Christ breakthrough.

We believed that seeing Jesus as the Christ revealed forgiveness and love toward us from this Active Power that was holding all things together. So the essence of what I was saying with these images was my basic faith that a "Divine" forgiveness and love for you and me is what is holding all things together. To say that Christ holds all things together is to say nothing more and nothing less than this: God's Love for you and me holds all things together. And this is a "cosmic" truth, not just some Sunday morning dogma.

So back to my poem in the Colossian letter. If Christ is the expression of God at the end of time, Christ is also the expression of God at the beginning of time. God has not changed. Christ, the expression of God, is therefore prior to all invisible powers and all visible realities. **Jesus, the Christ, is God in the sense of being God's expression to humanity.** And this expression is the same from the beginning of time to the end of time.

**Gene:** *So let me ask this clearly, does this mean that Jesus, a mere man, is God?*

**Paul:** Well, actually no! To say that Jesus the man is also the Creator would be quite different from what I was attempting to say. To say that a finite man and the Infinite God are synonymous would have been as ridiculous to me then as it is to you now. The scandal of my preaching was not that I was saying something completely nonsensical. The scandal of our preaching was that we had joined the power word "Christ" to an ordinary spirit teacher from Nazareth of Galilee who had been disgraced by crucifixion as a common criminal. As I said, those Greeks who sought an intellectual panacea found the crucified Christ to be sheer nonsense and those Hebrews who sought reward for their self-achieved ethical correctness found the crucified Messiah to be blasphemous. But those of us who were being healed by this union of words were not believing something meaningless. Those of us whose eyes were opened to see Jesus as the Christ found healing entering into our whole lives. The vision of Jesus as the Christ was truly and actually our savior **not because some Scripture said so, but because our lives were indeed healed by this understanding.**

## Spirit Healing?

**Gene:** *I need to hear you say again what this "saving" or "healing" means to you.*

**Paul:** In my day, salvation did not mean that we were going to heaven when we died. And it did not mean that our natural immortality had been reassured. It meant that we were being actually, practically delivered from the reign of Satan in the present moment. Our hope for the future was that this same saving action would happen in every moment of time and would be completed in the Final Reckoning. You do not have to take our belief in a Final Reckoning literally. We were simply saying that this saving action was built into the structure of Reality; therefore, to participate in this saving action is to be on the winning side of history. The reign of Satan is real, but it is a perversion added to the fullness of Reality: therefore, the kingdom of Satan is doomed in the end. The doom of Satan and the victory of Christ are one and the same thing.

**Gene:** *Say some more about what it means to experience this saving action in our personal lives.*

**Paul:** First of all, you have to grasp that the life which most of you modern people call "normal living" I see as "being trapped in the reign of Satan"--that is, being trapped in living from your flesh-addicted ego. By "flesh-addicted" I mean making your finite relationships the meaning and value-centers for your living. Being "saved" or "healed" involved dying to our flesh-addicted ego. We called this "being crucified with Jesus, the Christ." How were we being crucified? Inwardly! Our entire attitude toward living was upended. We had been living in expectation of a Christ whose coming would mean the fulfillment of some or all of our finite dreams. But instead this coming of "Jesus as the Christ" meant an end to all our groundless expectations. Associating the symbol "Christ" with the man Jesus--who had lived well but had died on a cross because he did--**took away all our groundless expectations and left us with nothing but living and dying our actual lives.** We saw that our actual lives were finite lives and that our finite lives were not going to be fulfilled on the finite level. At the same time we saw that our actual lives were capable of detachment from this finite passing world in order to be, in the living Now, a relationship with the Infinite which does not pass away. This always present relationship with Infinity is what we meant by Spirit with a capital "S". To live Spirit positively was to be "in the Spirit of Christ," or "filled with the Holy Spirit." Being **in** the world but **not of** the world, we could love not only our Spirit lives but our entire finite lives as well. Why? Because our finite lives were lives in which the Holy Spirit was being manifest.

So "being crucified with Christ" was the same experience as seeing clearly that every finite aspect of our living was passing away plus seeing clearly that trusting in the finite to give meaning and purpose to our lives had led us and was leading us into futility and despair. Being "crucified with Christ" was a release from this cruel wheel of futility and despair.

Furthermore, we spoke of this "saving" or "healing" experience as "being raised up with Christ to newness of life." This same liberating crucifixion was also the resurrection of our lives into being a very lively type of living. We became those who were living examples of being "an ongoing broken-ego"--one who was humble in his or her willingness to constantly change our lives in order to act as the Determiner of our daily destiny demanded. So, trusting that Jesus was indeed the Christ meant trusting that all that was happening to us was the love of God. And since "God" meant the Determiner of our daily destiny from which there was no escape, nothing could separate us from the love of God.

Trusting that Jesus was indeed the Christ also meant that all our wayward living had been and was being forgiven--that is, we were not being punished for all our foolish and wicked living, even though it certainly deserved punishment. We were being grafted back into a restored humanity, a humanity who now trusted rather than fled from God. So this "forgiveness" did not minimize the horror of our past actions, it only restored us to being, in the living here and now, our true Spirit relatedness. Such forgiveness is just the way it is. The past is past. Accepting such forgiveness makes the guilt of our past irrelevant to our current happiness and to our victorious living of the next moment.

Those of us who accepted this vision saw ourselves as being "in Christ." We were one with Jesus who was the Christ. We were joining Jesus in being "Divine" as well as being human. We were Sons and Daughters of God. We were in our own bodies the Christ--the expression of God to humanity. And this being "in Christ" included all the sufferings which we suffered because we preached this message. We shared in the cross of Christ. And we continued to be this cross as well as this resurrection. Our preaching, our deeds, our very style of life became the expression of God to humanity, the very same expression that Jesus had expressed. We no longer had to ask Moses or Jesus or anyone how to live. We simply lived the lives we had become and were still becoming. **This is how we could be so confident about who Jesus was. We were Jesus. We were "in Christ."** And we did not have to ask anyone what "God" meant. The entire focus of our living was relating moment by moment to that Infinite Determiner of our daily destiny whom we trusted as loving us.

**Gene:** *So what sort of experience of God were you having before this healing--before this saving experience took place for you?*

**Paul:** We who were the first believers in Jesus as the Christ had previously experienced God, for God is inescapable. "God" in the Hebrew Scriptures is the inescapable Determiner of our daily destinies. But we came to see that we were experiencing this Determiner as **wrathful** toward us. God was wrathful because we were living in terms of our own ego and fleeing from our actual relationship with this ever-present Mysteriousness. But now, living in the Christ-way of experiencing God, we trusted this Determiner of our daily destiny as **love** for us--as love acting through all our sufferings and limitations as well as through all our blessings and opportunities. Everything visible and invisible was the love of God for us. Everything visible and invisible was forgiveness for our fallen lives and an opportunity for a fresh start in loving God and neighbor.

**Gene:** *So the very same God that can be experienced as love can also be experienced as wrath.*

**Paul:** Yes, before our conversion to the Christ-way of experiencing God, we experienced God as wrath toward our sin. This is as plain to me as saying that anyone who is trusting God is experiencing the love of God toward sinners. The love of God is manifest in the fact that while we were running away from God and thus despairing over our futile and lying lives, God sent to us the Christ-way of experiencing God. In our flight from God we are the crucifiers of Jesus. But this same Jesus whom we crucified is now seen as the expression of Eternal Love towards us. This love alone is what holds all things together. God forgives those who in their foolishness and wickedness flee away from the actuality of their lives as a relationship with God, the Determiner of our daily destinies. If you can trust this message, you can trust God. If you cannot trust this message, you must hate God, or at least you must steel yourself in some sort of courageous resignation to this Final Determiner which you see as indifferent to you.

**Gene:** *Say again what Jesus has to do with all this.*

**Paul:** The joining of the Christ title with the life of the man Jesus confronts us with an expression of the primary crisis within all human living, namely: are we (1) going to trust God and thus love God and all the persons and events that God is sending us? Or are we (2) going to hate God and thus operate in a defensive fashion toward all the persons and events in our lives? Are we going to defend our self-constructed ego from the action of God or are we going to see all the challenges being sent to us as blessings--as opportunities to continually die to our self-constructed egos, to continually receive forgiveness for all our half-baked defensive living, and thus also to continually receive the freedom to be open to the actuality of God and thus to the actuality of every event in our lives?

Such living is what it means to be "in Christ." Such living proclaims the Message of "Jesus, as the Christ" to the other human beings among whom we live. Our words about Jesus or God or Christ or sin or faith or freedom or anything else are powerless to heal others unless these words are an expression from one life to another life of the actual experience of being "in Christ." And by "in Christ" I mean in the life of actually trusting The Final Determiner, the Awesome Mystery, the Infinite Silence, the Ever-present, the Eternal Companion to be our God, to be our good Parent, to be our Ultimate Source of enduring affirmation and dignity.

**Gene:** *So how do I get from the state of **not trusting** the Infinite to the state of **trusting** the Infinite?*

**Paul:** Leap by leap. Step by step. In this very moment, the opportunity to trust the Infinite is being extended to you in some particular way. You simply take this leap, this step. No one can take it for you. No one can prove to you that the Infinite loves you. You have to trust the Infinite Determiner of your life. You have to learn as you walk the life of trusting the Infinite. You have to trust not knowing whether the Infinite is indeed trustworthy. All your old defensive selves will scream to you that the Infinite is not trustworthy, but you have to oppose those selves, shed those selves as not being the real you. The real you is the you who trusts the Infinite and thus lives your life in the courageous embrace of every person and event that comes your way. The real you is the you who trusts the Infinite Companion and thus throws all the powers of your freedom into the construction of a life that loves the companionship of the Infinite Awesome Mysterious Provider of your life.

## Loving God?

**Gene:** *Talk some more about loving the Infinite. I don't think I always feel loving toward the Infinite giver of all my ups and all my downs. I often feel angry, resentful, discouraged, and many other such feelings.*

**Paul:** Loving the Infinite is not a feeling. Loving the Infinite means being willing to feel whatever you are in fact feeling. It means counting each feeling as instructive and wholesome and without need of being suppressed, feared, or shamed. Feeling is just feeling. But Spirit Love is not one of your feelings: it is your basic attitude of affirmation toward all of life, including all of your feelings.

I did not discuss feelings very much in my letters, because in my day people were more or less in touch with their feelings. We were not as victimized as you are in trying to suppress our feelings or control our feelings. Control is such a big issue for you that I don't know if I can convince you that you are not really in control of your feelings. Whatever you feel is

what you feel. That is just part of your ongoing life. Feelings are not chosen; feelings are given to you by the course of your life--that is, by the Infinite Companion. That is why loving the Infinite is choosing to have the feelings you have. Feelings are a wholesome and basic part of your living. If you do everything you can to have some particular feeling or not to have some other particular feeling, the normal flow of feelings is disrupted. Suppressed feelings continue to operate in unaware or compulsive ways. And in your over-controlled lives, compulsions to act in bizarre ways operate, showing you that you are not in control after all. All of this chaos and confusion around feelings is the result of not trusting the Infinite Companion to be in charge of your feelings. Trusting the Infinite means letting our feelings come and go as they will.

But to the extent you are willing to be your freedom, you do not have to operate compulsively out of any of your feelings. You can choose to use your feelings as the basic and flexible energy which they are. You do not have to act on the basis of your feelings. You do not have to suppress any feeling. You do not have to be in charge of any feeling. You can just let feelings come and go along with the flow of your outward experiences. You can just incorporate the energy of your feelings into your responsible choices. This attitude of trust toward your feelings will change many of your feelings, but not in the directions you might expect. You will perpetually be surprised with how your feelings change. You can to some extent control what you think, and your thoughts do affect your feelings. You can, in your deepest experiences of freedom, choose to be free rather than sell out to some new slavery. And this will affect your feelings. But feelings do not need to be directly controlled. Furthermore, they cannot be.

In this deep sense of being your essential freedom, you do participate in choosing your destiny and thus your feelings. But this does not mean that you have or ought to have a moment by moment control over your feelings. How you will feel about your destiny from moment to moment will be part of the surprise of each moment of your destiny. The Infinite Companion, not you, sends every feeling along with every outward event. And one feeling is not better than another. The feelings you prefer are not, from the faith perspective, better than the feelings you do not prefer.

And the faith perspective itself is not a feeling: it is a basic attitude of trust. Faith is trusting or accepting whatever you are feeling. And Spirit love, like faith, is not a feeling. Spirit love includes the wholehearted affirmation of whatever feelings the Infinite Compassion is sending you to feel. If, for example, "the Infinite" is sending you an enemy toward whom you feel angry or disgusted, loving that enemy includes being angry and disgusted with that person. If you can affirm the experience of being angry and disgusted, you can also affirm the experience of having an enemy and affirming the challenge of figuring out how best to affirm that enemy's life. If you fear that enemy, you fear that enemy. But fear can exist alongside the courage to confront that enemy with whatever tough or gentle action you choose to give to that enemy.

Let us also be clear that freedom is not a feeling. Freedom is the ability to embrace every feeling and yet not be impelled to act on the basis of any feeling. Freedom means the Spirit liberty of not being enslaved to the impulse quality of any feeling. Acting out your anger or fear is not freedom. It is slavery to your finite feelings.

Let me give you an example of this "acting out feeling" issue. Suppose a murderer kills your best friend. Your feelings may include a murderous anger toward that murderer. You may feel like killing that murderer in revenge. But such feelings for vengeance are simply an

expression of your grief over your loss. Acting out such feelings (that is, taking revenge) is not a necessary act. Freedom means liberation from all the compulsive aspects of having feelings. Freedom means the liberty to kill or not to kill as the objective situation warrants. Freedom is the ability to have all our feelings in a fully detached and yet fully engaged manner.

So trusting the Infinite Sender of your life and therefore loving the Infinite Sender and all that is being sent to you is not a feeling; it is a primal act of your freedom. Trusting the Infinite is the primal choice in the human repertoire of choices. In each and every moment of our lives, we have this choice: to despair over our lives or to trust in the goodness of the life that is happening to us. Acting out our feelings in a compulsive fashion is an act of despair. It is surrendering our glorious freedom in exchange for some momentary satisfaction that will pass with the passing of all things. And because such moments are passing, selling out to momentary satisfaction will end in despair. Despair is your modern word for what I meant by being under the wrath of God.

Trusting the Infinite is actually a shrewd choice. It is the choice not to surrender to despair. It is the choice to go on living your actual life--to go on being your actual relatedness to the Infinite Companion who is confronting you in and through whatever is confronting you. Such a choice requires courage, but this sort of courage is not the resignation of the stoic nor the self-congratulation of the daredevil. The courage to love the Infinite is an humble sort of courage, the courage to surrender to being the God-given ability to live the God-given life you have on your hands. And by "God-given," I simply mean that the Infinite Mysterious Actuality is giving you what is being given you including the courage to live what is being given you.

## Despair?

**Gene:** *Talk some more about despair. I am not sure that I always feel terrible when I am fleeing away from living my actual life.*

**Paul:** Despair, too, can be misunderstood as only a feeling. Despair has many bad-tasting feelings that usually go along with it, but despair can also feel quite normal or even gleeful for a time. Despair is simply the futile state you are in when you do not freely trust and love every moment of the life that is being given to you. And this state of despair is a Spirit state not merely a state of feeling. The state of despair is a disrelationship in our relationship with the Infinite Companion. When I said that all humanity is sunk in the state of sin, I did not mean that this sunk humanity feels bad all the time. I mean that humanity is in rebellion from having all the feelings they are having and are therefore idolizing whatever they mean by "feeling good." "Feeling good" is not the opposite of despair. Willingly, tranquilly feeling whatever you are feeling is the opposite of despair. Sin (the despair-ridden life) is the rejection of whatever you are experiencing and thus of whatever you are feeling. Such rejection will result in still other feelings and those next feelings will then be the situation that you have to feel. The state of sin (that is, despair) develops into very horrifying feelings in the end, and surely no one would willingly arrive at such pits of despair. Horrifying experiences of despair are always an unwelcome result, yet this result is one which the Infinite gives you in response to your running away from the realities of your actual life. Nevertheless, this horrific result of consciously despairing over your ongoing states of despair is the pathway back to trusting your actual life.

**Gene:** *So despair is a good thing?*

**Paul:** Being aware of your despair is a good thing, for such awareness is the pathway out of despair, but despair itself is sin. The state of despair is not our essential state: it is our estranged state. Trust, freedom, and love are the precise opposite of the horrific suffering of despair. Nevertheless, self-consciously despairing can be understood as a good event, for it is the passageway back to the essential life of trust, freedom, and love.

## Love?

**Gene:** *Your words on love are still popular today. We need to hear more about what you mean by "love."*

**Paul:** I am glad that my poems on love are so popular with many of you in your generation, but few of you understand the exalted reality I meant by "love." Spirit love, as I understand it, far exceeds in importance and power any understandings of love as friendship, emotional bonding, or sexual mating. These limited understandings of love make what I said about love into nonsense. Consider how inappropriate the following words are if something sexual or emotional is what is meant:

This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience--it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive; it is neither anxious to impress nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. . . . Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. It is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.<sup>3</sup>

Surely these words cannot be said of sexual or emotional bonding. Such bonds frequently give way to being impatient, destructive, anxious, inflated, fading, and they do indeed pass away. All finite things including sexual and emotional bonds pass away. Spirit love is not a finite thing. Spirit love is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit does not pass away.

**Gene:** *You talk about love as the greatest of all the gifts that are poured out upon those who live the Christ-way. But how do I know that I am loving my enemy, or my friend for that matter?*

**Paul:** Love is not a certainty that you are doing the right thing. Love is not a duty you know you have done. Love is the creative actions that you do because you trust and love God. Love affirms others because you affirm the Infinite Source of all the others coming into your life. Love is creative; it presupposes freedom. And freedom is precisely **not knowing** what is the right thing to do in each and every circumstance. Freedom is inventing the right thing to do. Freedom is doing your best as you understand "best" at the time and then, in your freedom delivering your deed up to the Infinite Determiner who will then determine what to do with your deed. If this "God," this Determiner of all historical outcomes, seems to be honoring your deed as an exemplary deed, you can smile if you like, but since, in your freedom, you have given that deed up to a process that is out of your control, that deed is no longer your deed to boast about. Similarly, if God, the Determiner of all historical outcomes, seems to be using your deed as an example of what not to do the next time, you can smile again if you like, for again, in your freedom, you have given that deed up to a process that is out of your control (that is, to God) and thus it is no longer a deed you need to be ashamed about. EVERY DEED ONCE IT IS DONE BELONGS TO GOD. That is what it means to say that God has forgiven your past. Your entire situation to which God is "welcoming you home" is focused on doing the next deed. We can even say that "God" forgives every deed before you do it, as you do it, after you do it, and until the end of time. Indeed God forgives every deed before you even think of it. So think and act in the knowledge that your freedom

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 13:4, 7&8--J.B. Phillips translation



to think and act in a wildly creative fashion is exactly what it means to “love God and neighbor.”

**Gene:** *Wow! That would seem un-Christian to most Christians today. You say that such love is a gift of the Spirit. People today are as confused about Holy Spirit as they are about God and Christ. What did you mean by the Holy Spirit and how does it relate to God and to Jesus, the Christ?*

## Holy Spirit?

**Paul:** When I was talking about freedom, trust, and love, I was talking about Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit is simply our relationship to the Infinite when affirmed and lived. Evil spirit is our relationship with the Infinite when fled or rejected. Evil spirit is a rejection of Awe before the Awesome Infinite Presence: it is a refusal of our natural Awe for a life of aweless self-absorption. Holy Spirit is simply embracing the Awe of our lives. Freedom, love and trust are all states of Awe. Freedom, love, and trust are all qualities of Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit also includes the peace that passes understanding, the joy unspeakable, and many other such things. Even such ecstatic phenomena as speaking in tongues were seen by me and my companions as gifts of the Holy Spirit. I suggested, however, that interpreting the meaning of such outbursts was an even greater gift, but I did not wish to demean any phenomena that genuinely resulted from the transformative event of faith in Jesus as God’s Christ. The Holy Spirit is nothing more and nothing less than the authentic life of humanity. And that authentic life includes, from time to time, ecstatic outbursts--outbursts that your culture finds objectionable because they seem “irrational” by your standards. But human life never fits into what we human beings call “rational.” In my Mediterranean Christian communities I simply found it to be the case that when the authentic life of our humanity broke loose, this sometimes resulted in psychological healings, even physical healings, and also in various sorts of irrational outbursts. But my wisdom about all these phenomena was this: the wind of Spirit may blow wildly through our lives at times, but the real test of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the presence in our ordinary everyday lives of simple acts of loving God and neighbor.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit breathed into humanity in the beginning, eclipsed by the fall of Adam, and restored through the preaching of Jesus as the Christ.

**Gene:** *Say again what you mean by “the fall of Adam.”*

**Paul:** By “the fall of Adam” I simply mean something people do every day: refuse the uncertainty of Holy freedom for a mess of certainty--the right doctrines, the right moralities, some arrogant philosophical position, or whatever other “tree-of-the-knowledge-of-good-and-evil” makes you feel Infinite like God. The restoration that Christ brings is the restoration of Holy freedom, Holy uncertainty, Holy doubt, Holy ambiguity, Holy mysteriousness. Christ restores us to our real lives. Our real lives of freedom, trust, and love are the Holy Spirit.

**Gene:** *And how is this Holy Spirit different from and related to God, the Sovereign Mystery?*

**Paul:** The Holy Spirit is the quality of our restored relationship with God, the Almighty. The Holy Spirit is the power given by this Objective Mystery to freely trust and love this Objective Mystery. The Holy Spirit can be understood as God in the sense that this Almighty Presence is the constituter of the break loose of Spirit in the inward person. The Holy Spirit can also be understood as the Spirit of Jesus, the Christ. The Holy Spirit is trust freedom, and love walking in your shoes or my shoes.

So, as many thoughtful Christians have said in the generations that followed mine, the Holy Spirit is simply part three in any complete experience of God. Part one is the Determiner of our daily destiny seen as our Loving Parent. Part two is Jesus, the Christ, as the event of rescue from despair and the call to see and live in that Love. Part three, the Holy Spirit, is the inward power of this new life, this freedom, this trust, this love. Parent, Offspring and Holy Wind are three parts of the same experience. The unity of these three "faces" of God is found in our actual experience. I never saw these three dynamics as three separate Gods. God is one. Viewed by our puny minds, the experience of the One God is threefold. Actually, in my lifetime, I never thought all this through as clearly as I am stating it now. But Christians after me did. And then Christian-identified persons in still later times turned the triune experience into abstract nonsense. Understandably, many persons in your times have neglected or rejected the triune formula altogether. This heritage can only be recovered by understanding the experience our of which it arose.

### Church?

**Gene:** *Great! That is very helpful. But you have raised for me some more questions. I have not yet asked you much about the church. You said earlier in our discussion that you never intended to start a new religion. What then did you mean by the church?*

**Paul:** "Church" or "ekklesia" was just a word we used for that gathering of believers who were called out of the legalistic Judaism of my times to be "true Jews." The terms "in Christ" and "ekklesia" were basically the same. One might say that "the ekklesia" was an earthly manifestation of that more "cosmic" reality "in Christ." But since "Christ" also meant a bodily, fleshly presence, it is misleading to say that the term "in Christ" was any less physical than the term "ekklesia."

We understood the actual community of those who were being healed of sin and turned loose with the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be an integral part of the new kingdom of God that Jesus, the Christ, had initiated. This community, we felt, could in principle be expanded to include all of humanity. As I have said, Jesus, the Christ, meant for us the dawn of a new humanity. This explains why both Gentiles and Jews were welcomed so easily into these expanding communities. When Spirit is turned loose in someone's life, it does not matter what cultural or religious alignments he or she has or doesn't have.

We used religious ideas of both Hebrew and Greek origin to help us express our experience, but we did not really focus on religion as a separate body of activities apart from politics, economics, education, life style, and everything else. We viewed life as a whole. A person is either living his or her whole life out of the life-understanding that characterizes this new gathering of Christ-humanity, or that person is living out of some other life-understanding.

**Gene:** *But did your communities all agree on what this new humanity was?*

**Paul:** We had our quarrels within and among the various Christ-communities. One of the most basic ones was whether or not to require male Gentile converts to Christ to be circumcised as a sign of their having become the true Jews we understood ourselves to be. I had to fight with Peter and others in order to establish that our experience was teaching us that the circumcision practice was secondary to the breakloose of true faith. The true people of God were being reestablished on the basis of another set of signs. This was very controversial. It actually meant that **all religious practices are secondary to the Spirit they are meant to express.** Our religious creativity was part of the freedom of which I have already spoken. We were indeed inventing new religious practices, but such inventiveness

was like changing this or that to meet a practical need. We never sat down and said, "OK, let's invent a new religion." And it was years after my death before anything like the two religions (Judaism and Christianity) actually emerged.

**Gene:** *So to whom did you see yourself writing when you wrote your letters to the Corinthians and other groups?*

**Paul:** I was writing to gatherings of "saints." And by "saints," I simply meant those members of the Hellenistic Jewish synagogue community who had dedicated their lives to the "Jesus as the Christ" understanding. So for me "a church" was not the same thing as a chapter of some new religion. I did not even think of those folk as Christians. My term "ekklesia" which is often translated "church" simply meant "the called out." We had been called out of the overall Jewish cultural sector of society to gather together in celebration, reflection, and common life. Our gatherings included circumcised Jewish men, uncircumcised Gentile God-fearers who had been attracted to the overall Jewish heritage, and their families as well as numerous single women and men, widows, and some married persons without their spouses. For the most part these people were poor, but we had a few persons of considerable means, and we sometimes met in their houses.

We constructed a few leadership roles and established respectful relations toward traveling ministers like myself, but we had no ordained clergy. Peter was certainly not our pope. And I for one did not consider him infallible. We were not organized as congregations in the modern sense, nor were we a hierarchical religious fabric in the medieval sense. It must simply be said that we were not yet a Christian religion clearly differentiated from Judaism. Furthermore, I did not see Judaism as simply one among the many religious traditions, a religion alongside Hinduism and other world religions. I saw Judaism as a people, a culture, a group who treasured the call to be the people of God. And the essence of being a Jew was not simply being this culture but being a particular Spirit calling. Nevertheless, I did highly respect my Jewish culture. I also respected much of the wisdom that I found in the Gentile culture, but the Hebraic culture provided my main supply of metaphors for talking about my experiences of God both before and after my conversion to the Christ-way.

**Gene:** *What then does your experience of being a community of followers of the Christ-way have to do with my concerns for renewing the Christian religion for the 21st century?*

**Paul:** ~~Again, you are going to have to embrace~~ your own freedom and operate in ways that are appropriate to your times. Follow my example. I simply created "out of nothing," so to speak, the ways in which I chose to operate in my times. You will have to do the same.

I do, however, have a few hints for you about how my example might apply to your times. If people do not understand what you mean by the word "God," you will need to begin there. I can see that most Christian-identified persons in your day do not have the Mosaic and prophetic clarity about God that was simply assumed in my times. We walked and talked daily with God. We never even raised the question of whether God existed or whether God was Almighty. "Whatever is actually Almighty" is what we meant by "God." Almightyness is what we experienced when the sun came up and when the sun went down. Almightyness is what we experienced when a baby was born and when an elder died. Almightyness simply surrounded us on all sides. Our questions centered around whether or not this Almightyness loved us, whether or not and how we were being chosen to be those people who experienced this Almightyness as our unfailing Friend.

Secondly, you might consider fully what I said about not seeing ourselves as a new religion, but as a new humanity. Whatever religious practices we invented, we intended them to be practical means for the purpose of expressing what it means to be this new humanity.

Religion of any sort was simply not our main concern. Our main concern was our relationship to God--a relationship which no religion can ever fully express. When I said that in Christ there is no validity in either circumcision nor uncircumcision but that true living is a matter of faith--faith which expresses itself in love, I meant something very far-reaching. Circumcision was representative of the entire Jewish religion. Uncircumcision was representative of the rest of humanity. So here is the wider sense of what I meant: there is no ultimate validity for our lives in either having a religion or in having no religion. What matters is trust, trust which expresses itself in love. In other words, the new humanity is the thing that matters, religion is secondary. **Religion is a finite means for expressing the inexpressible.** The new humanity is a living reality, the real truth we are struggling to express with our religious words and practices.

So you need not limit yourself to any "Christian religion" you have known. Concern yourself with being and evoking trust in God and love for God and neighbor. Then you can invent whatever religious enablements that will assist you in that purpose.

### Scripture?

**Gene:** *Must I not at least honor the Scripture? Surely being a Christian entails seeing the Scripture as the Word of God.*

**Paul:** The problem with Scripture, including my own writings which you now consider Scripture, is that there are many ways to interpret Scripture. I was a loyal upholder of Scripture before my conversion. After my conversion, I understood Scripture in a vastly different fashion. Basically, I came to understand Scripture from the inside rather than revering Scripture as an outward authority. I found Scripture to be true because I had experienced its truth within my own life.

Similarly, what I wrote was true because it expressed the truth I had seen with my own eyes, felt in my own bones, lived with my own life.

I was a fairly thoughtful person, but I did not construct what you might call "a systematic theology." My "theology" was little more than a semi-organized expression of what had become vividly true for me. The central idea in my theology was that Jesus, the crucified, was the Christ of God. This became the interpreting center for everything I called Scripture and for everything I read or wrote. We have already discussed above the personal meaning I gave to these now overused words: "Jesus," "crucified," "Christ," and "God."

But my theology was not a rational system, a worldview, a thing for the mind only. My theology was an ecstatic expression of the unexpressible--that is, of my own authenticity as a relationship with the Sheer Mystery of God. If you cannot hear the truth of what I was saying with your own ecstatic authenticity, then you are not hearing the meaning that my theology had for me.

**Gene:** *Well did you see what you were putting in your letters as "the Word of God."*

**Paul:** "The Word of God" is first of all an experience in your bones, in your feeling consciousness, in your ego's death and resurrection, and only then is it also an experience in

your mind. I was deeply committed to the importance of right thinking, but I consider the rationalistic overemphasis of your times to be a form of madness. I found myself having to be a corrective to ecstatic overemphasis among my companions in the Christ gatherings. I emphasized doing rational interpretation of any and all ecstatic expressions. But the theology of your era is so utterly out of balance on the rational side, that I am having a hard time even answering your questions about Scripture being the Word of God.

If you cannot hear the Word of God from God's own mouth, so to speak, you cannot hear the Word of God in my letters or in anything else you call "Scripture." I am intrigued with your modern metaphor of calling God "the Infinite Silence." My talk about "The Word of God" is consistent with the fact that God is silent. My God was indeed that Mystery who says nothing whatsoever to humankind. Yet this Silent God is active in all things. The "Message" or "Word of God" within the Scriptures is that this Silent God loves you and me in and through all that is being done.

If the words of Scripture (including my words) really and truly come alive for you, this can be a reassurance that you are indeed hearing the Word of God from God's own Silent Mouth in the living present of your own life.

So back to your first question: I do not see how Scripture needs in any way to be a limitation on your religious creativity. Scripture should be a support, a resource, an enablement for you to be as free and creative as I was. The very idea that my words, which most of you do not even understand in the way I understood them, should become a limitation on your theological creativity is appalling to me. What I, Paul, am appalled about is your lack of ecstatic experience of the living God in your present lives. If my words do not inspire that sort of experience, you do not understand a single thing I was striving to say. Similarly, without such experience, you do not understand a single word in those older Hebrew writings which I called "Scripture."

## Christian?

**Gene:** *Does that mean that we might be so creative that we do not even call ourselves "Christians" anymore?*

**Paul:** Well, who is this "we" you are talking about? I never called myself "a Christian." I was a follower of Jesus whom I called "the Christ." To me this meant being part of a new humanity, not a new religion. So let me rephrase your question: Should those of you, entering the 21st Century, who are experiencing the new humanity indicated by the symbol "Jesus as the Christ" call yourselves "Christians"? If that choice means honoring me and the long historical heritage of those who honored me and the Truth to which I bore witness, I am convinced that such a commitment to me and this heritage would be a meaningful contribution to your century.

But I hope you understand that this new humanity in Jesus, understood as the Christ, is not limited to those who remember Jesus and me and all our interpreters. God has always had and will always have his faithful people in every social group in every time and place. All these faithful people are "in Christ" even though they have never heard of Jesus or me or the Bible.

I am sure that some of you have thought that I was simply nuts when I implied in my letter to the Galatians and elsewhere that Abraham, the exemplar of faith, was "in Christ." But that is because you do not understand what "in Christ" means to me. "In Christ" does not mean to me "in the Christian religion." "In Christ" means to me "in the new humanity"

that God creates when God rescues us from our fallen state and restores us to our normal, ordinary, down-to-Earth, primordial faith, freedom and love. In this regard, I see Abraham, Moses, and all the prophets as being "in Christ."

So, should you call yourselves "Christians"? If you see what we meant when we joined the man Jesus with the title "Christ," and if you are inventing religion to express that vision, then you might as well call the religion you are creating, "Christian." Why should the word "Christian," with its long history, be given over to the children of Satan? Clearly the word "Christian" is being misused in your time as much as the the term "Jewish" was misused in mine. But I did not stop calling myself a Jew. I saw myself as a true Jew. You might say that I still long for the day when all people who call themselves "Jews" or "Christians" will see themselves as the new humanity, as the true Jews and the true Christians who see that the Sovereign, Almighty, Actively-Present God is indeed Love for each of us. This was the message revealed to us through the Christ expression of God in the human being called "Jesus." Just remain true to that message and you will learn from your own experience what you are to do.

**Gene:** *Thanks, Paul.*

**Paul:** It's been a pleasure to talk with you. So few people listen to me anymore.

**Gene:** *Goodbye.*

**Paul:** I'm not going anywhere.

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Gene Marshall, January 2000

## About the Author

**Gene Marshall** has a long history of participation in Christian renewal. He was a leader in the Christian student movements of the early fifties, part of a theological revolution at Perkins School of Theology, a local church pastor, a chaplain in the Army, a founding member of a Christian religious order, and an activist in the civil rights revolution and in inner city renewal. He was for fourteen years on the staff of the Ecumenical Institute. During seven of those years he was dean of an 8-week residential, leadership-training program called "The Academy." He led seven similar programs in Europe, Asia, and Australia. For the past 12 years he has been doing full-time research and training as part of a nonprofit organization for religious and ethical research called "Realistic Living." He is also an ecological activist and an organizer of the bioregional movement.

Educationally, he has a bachelor's degree in mathematics and physics, a master's degree in theology, and has done considerable further studies in Christian theology, non-Christian religions, history, the philosophy of social change, psychology, male/female relations, ecology, and economics. He now lives in the woods on the Red River Flats of Northeast Texas. He is a husband, a father, a grandfather, and an organic gardener.