

What Was Paul's Gospel ?

From "Paul and Jesus: How the Apostle Transformed Christianity" By James D. Tabor

Based on Paul's authentic letters there are six major elements in Paul's "New Judaism" that shape the central contours of his thought. This is the best summation I have found about Paul's beliefs for his new religion based on "The Christ".

1. A New Spiritual Body.
2. A Cosmic Family and a Heavenly Kingdom.
3. A Mystical Union with Christ.
4. Already but Not Yet.
5. Under the Torah of Christ.
6. The Battle of the Apostles.

1. For Paul the belief that Jesus had been raised from the dead was a primary and essential component of the Christian faith. He states emphatically: "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:14). His entire understanding of salvation hinged on what he understood to be a singular cosmic event, namely Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Paul's understanding of the resurrection of Jesus, however, is not what is commonly understood today. It had nothing to do with the resuscitation of a corpse. Paul understood Jesus' resurrection as the transformation—or to use his words—the metamorphosis, of a flesh-and-blood human being into what he calls a "life-giving spirit" (1 Corinthians 15:45). So transformed, Jesus was, according to Paul, the first "Adam" of a new genus of Spirit-beings in the universe called "Children of God," of which many others were to follow. What is often overlooked is that Paul is our earliest witness, chronologically speaking, to claim to have "seen" Jesus after his death. And his is the only first-person claim we have.

2. According to Paul this new genus of Spirit-beings of which Jesus was the “firstborn” is part of an expanded cosmic family (Romans 8:29). Paul believed that Jesus was born of a woman as a flesh-and-blood human being, descended from the royal lineage of King David, so he could qualify as an “earthly” Messiah in Jewish thinking. Paul describes it thus: **“The gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh but appointed Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness through the resurrection of the dead” (Romans 1:4)**. What this means is that God, as Creator, has inaugurated a process through which he is reproducing himself—literally bringing to birth a “God-Family.” To Paul, Jesus was a normal human being while he lived, however his resurrection brings Jesus “The Christ” into a divine union with God. The destiny of this cosmic heavenly family is to rule over the entire universe. Everything is to be put under their control, including things visible and invisible. At the center of the message of Jesus was the proclamation that the kingdom of God had drawn near. Paul understood the kingdom as a “cosmic takeover” of the entire universe by the newly born heavenly family—the many glorified children of God with Christ, as firstborn, at their head. Paul taught that when Christ returned in the clouds of heaven, this new race of Spirit-beings would experience its heavenly transformation, receiving the same inheritance, and thus the same level of power and glory, that Jesus had been given (Romans 8:17; Philippians 3:20–21). The group of divinized, glorified Spirit-beings would then participate corporately, with Christ, in the judgment of the world, even ruling over the angels (1 Corinthians 6:2–3).

3. Paul completely transformed the practice and understanding of baptism and the Eucharist to his Greek-speaking Gentile converts. Paul’s adaptation of baptism moved beyond ceremonial signification. Baptism brought about a mystical union with what Paul called the “spiritual body” of Christ, and was the act through which one received the impregnating Holy Spirit. Sacred meals involving the blessings of bread and wine were also common in Judaism, and were thus part of the communal meals of the early followers of Jesus. Paul’s innovation, that one was thereby eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in the form of bread and wine at the Eucharist or Holy Communion, has no parallels in any Jewish sources of the period. Three of our New Testament gospels record Jesus’ Last Supper, in which he tells his disciples over bread and wine: “This is my body,” and “This is my blood,” and in the gospel of John, Jesus speaks of “eating my flesh” and “drinking my blood.” These writers based their accounts of Jesus’ final meal on Paul, directly quoting what he had written in his letters almost word for word (Mark 14:22–25; Matthew 26:26–29; Luke 22:15–20; John 6:52–56; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). As a Jew living in a Jewish culture, Jesus would have considered this sort of language about eating flesh and drinking blood, even taken symbolically, as utterly reprehensible, akin to magic or ritual cannibalism. Despite what Paul asserts, it is extremely improbable that Jesus ever said these words. This meal connected those who eat and drink through the Spirit with the embryonic nurturing life they needed as developing offspring of God (1 Corinthians 10:16).

4. Paul operated with a strongly apocalyptic perspective that influenced all he said or did. He was quite sure that he and his followers would live to see the return of Christ from heaven. Life in the world would go on, but not for long. Everything was soon to be transformed. Right up until the end of his life he expected to live to see the great event—what he called the “Arrival” (Greek *parousia*)—the visible appearance of the heavenly Christ in the clouds of heaven to usher in the events of the final Judgment. He tried to inspire his followers to live as if the new spiritual transformation had already arrived, all the time knowing that its full realization was not yet.

5. As a Jew Paul decisively turned his back on the Torah revelation given to Moses on Mount Sinai, with all of its laws, customs, and traditions. In other words, Paul abandoned his Judaism. He would have never put it that way, though, since what he advocated he called a new and true Judaism, making the first version obsolete. He maintained that the Torah had now been replaced and superseded by the new Torah of Christ (Galatians 3:23–26). For Paul there was no comparison between what the Torah of Moses promised the nation of Israel—physical blessings of prosperity, well-being, and peace—and the incomparable spiritual glory now promised to those destined to be part of the new cosmic heavenly family of glorified children of God. This process of cosmic birthing constituted a new spiritual “Israel,” a new covenant, and a new Torah, replacing the old. Paul put his own “life in the Spirit” forward as the model for his followers to imitate and was often disappointed in their seeming inability to “walk in the Spirit,” since they failed to exhibit even the minimum standards of righteous behavior.

6. Paul understood his own role as an apostle, "last but not least," as he put it, as the essential and pivotal element in God's cosmic plan to bring about the salvation of the world through Christ. Unlike the other apostles, who had been chosen by Jesus at the beginning of his preaching in Galilee, Paul believed that he had been set apart and called before he was even born—while still in his mother's womb (Galatians 1:15). As Paul puts it: God chose to "reveal his Son to me" (Galatians 1:16). This places him in a rather extraordinary position with reference to the original apostles, since he understood that his singular position as the "Thirteenth Apostle" was to take the message about Christ to the non-Jewish world. This special mission, he believed, was essential for him to complete before the end of the age could arrive. Paul's relationship with the original apostles was sporadic and minimal. He is emphatic about this point, swearing with an oath to his followers that the gospel message he received directly from Christ came as a heavenly revelation and was not in any way derived from consulting with, or receiving authority from, the original Jerusalem apostles (Galatians 1:16–18). Paul spoke of the Jerusalem leadership sarcastically, referring to James, Peter, and John as the "so-called pillars," and "those reputed to be somebody," but adds, "what they are means nothing to me" (Galatians 2:6, 9). Sometime in the mid to late 50s A.D., Paul made a clear and decisive break with the Jerusalem establishment. In one of his last writings, an embedded fragment of a letter now found in 2 Corinthians, he declares "I am not the least inferior to these super-apostles," and ends up calling them "false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:5, 13). He had also become terribly bitter against his fellow Jewish Christians who maintained their Jewish faith: "Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh," sarcastically referring to the practice of circumcision (Philippians 3:2). Tradition has it that Paul ended up in prison in Rome alone, with few supporters (2 Timothy 4:16).

What Paul most expected to happen never came about and his grand vision of the imminent transformation of the world, and his pivotal role therein, utterly failed. The Paul who was appropriated over the centuries was a theological Paul, particularly as understood by Augustine and Luther. Paul was removed from his historical context and recast in terms of the great doctrines of Christianity, namely, predestination, justification by grace through faith, reconciliation, redemption, sanctification, and eternal life. Jesus will always be the center of Christianity, but the "Jesus" who most influenced history was the "Jesus Christ" of Paul, not the historical figure of Jesus. There is a double irony here. Paul became the most influential defining figure for later Christianity, even beyond the historical Jesus, but he is also a man waiting to be discovered, even after nearly two thousand years. Paul transformed Jesus himself, with his message of a messianic kingdom of justice and peace on earth, to the symbol of a religion of otherworldly salvation in a heavenly world.