

Jesus in Paul's Theology - Did Paul change the whole character of Christianity?

Paul Yasutake
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Saint Paul preaching in Athens

The very nature of Christianity lies within the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet the Epistles of Paul are often opposed to the gospels as though they contain rival philosophies. Did Paul change the whole character of Christianity? What was the role of the historic Jesus in Paul's theology? What was the true mission of Jesus?

Paul is responsible for propagating Christianity as a universal religion, and for providing the theology needed to maintain faith in God until the time was right for God to reveal the truth about the true mission of Jesus.

Paul's theology is not a repetition of Jesus' preaching of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Jesus Christ himself and the salvation based on and made available through his death on the cross, his resurrection, and his exaltation as Lord, form the subject of Paul's proclamation. This means that a complete shift came about. Paul turned Jesus' good tidings into a gospel of redemption replete with Jewish ideas and Hellenistic mythologies. It is true that between the preaching of the historical Jesus and the gospel of Paul there is a fundamental difference.

It is difficult to harmonize the picture one might reasonably draw of the historical Jesus with the Jesus of the early church. Jesus had not taught any of the great ontological systems associated with the fundamental dogmas of the church. How, then, could these doctrines have arisen? How had Greek philosophical theology replaced the teachings of Jesus? The simple answer is that Paul was the one responsible for Hellenizing Christianity.

As one moves through the New Testament from the synoptic gospels to the letters of Paul, one finds a decisive shift from Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven to Paul's teachings about Christ. The gospels tell of Jesus' life, teachings and work on earth up to the time of his death and resurrection. But in the apostolic teachings (Epistles, Acts) the death and resurrection are the basis and starting point. Paul virtually said nothing about Jesus' life and teachings, but speaks of him as a divine, pre-existent being, the Son of God, who by his death and resurrection, accomplished the atonement of God and man. The Jesus of history is apparently dismissed. Nowhere does he speak of the Rabbi from Nazareth, the prophet and miracle worker who ate with tax collectors and sinners; or of his Sermon on the Mount, his parables of the Kingdom of God, and his encounter with Pharisees and scribes. His letters do not even mention the Lord's prayer.

Why this shift? This has been a question which has plagued scholars for centuries. One scholar,

Bornkamm, suggests that while Jesus, in his own words and actions, proclaimed the dawning of the Kingdom of God, for the post-Easter church, through Jesus' death, resurrection and exaltation, the turning point of the ages, the establishment of salvation, and God's advent and lordship had become actual fact. The gospel of the primitive church was bound to change and make Jesus himself its subject matter because faith had to be kept with God's word, act and dealings with men in him. Albert Schweitzer suggests that in the mystical redemption-doctrine of Paul the primitive Christian faith discharges the task which it had been given of bringing the belief in the expected Kingdom, and the redemption which goes with the Kingdom, into logical connection with the belief that the Jesus who died was the coming Messiah. This is, according to Paul, necessary in order to convince the believer that in the union with Christ he has already attained the state of a redeemed man, even though the Kingdom is not yet present; and also that, as being in this state of existence, he is freed from the domination of the Law. At the same time, this belief in the redemption already obtained through the death of Jesus was thus connected with the expectation of the Kingdom and made the believer superior, even though the Kingdom had not come.

The shift in these two teachings is seen by Adolph von Harnack: "The Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed it," he declared, "has to do with the Father only and not with the Son." The position is stated emphatically by Stewart. "In Paul we meet with a fully elaborated doctrine of redemption which Jesus can scarcely be said to know anything of at all... So far from hearing Paul's pessimistic estimate of the natural man, he appeals to him with a confidence that is rooted in a splendid optimism... Jesus has no doctrine of adoption. There is nothing in Jesus' teaching to correspond with the Pauline teaching of the Spirit. Human goodness is traced not to the Spirit's supernatural operations, but to the human heart and will."

Moreover, the apostle himself draws attention to the independence of his Gospel. Paul considers himself apart, called and sent forth in order to preach (Rom. 1:1, Gal. 1:15). "I certify you, brethren," he writes, "that the gospel which has been preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1:11) Paul disclaims all intermediaries. "I conferred not with the flesh and blood," he says (Gal. 1:16). Nothing will he preach except what he calls "my Gospel". (Rom. 2:16, II Cor. 4:3) Direct revelation is its source. When Paul, writing out of the fullness of an intensely individual experience, declares to the Corinthians, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12:3), he is virtually reproducing the great words of Jesus to Peter, "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father which is in Heaven." (Mt. 16:17)

Schweitzer, on the other hand, says that "the discovery that Paul takes up an independent attitude towards Jesus is misleading, unless one at the same time recognizes all that he has in common with Him. For Paul shares with Jesus the eschatological world view and the eschatological expectation, with all that these imply. The only difference is the hour in the world clock in the two cases. "To illustrate the difference in analogy, both are looking toward the mountain range, but whereas Jesus sees it as lying before him, Paul already stands upon it and its first slopes are already behind him." Because the period of world time is different, the teaching of Jesus cannot always lay down the lines for Paul. The authority of the facts must outweigh for him on a question of fact the authority claimed by the teachings of Jesus. Truth is for Paul the knowledge of redemption as it results, on the basis of the eschatological expectation, from the fact of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

We can see from Paul's theology how his scheme of salvation required a savior who was crucified. Thus not the Jesus who taught in Galilee, no matter what his message, but the Jesus who on the cross inaugurated a new era, was what Paul needed. So he took what he needed, setting aside the earthly life of Jesus as irrelevant. "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, we know (him) thus no longer." (II Cor. 5:8) Paul believes that for his religious life as one who is "in Christ" he belongs to a higher reality than the earthly existence. Paul even goes further; the whole thing upon which his opponents place so much weight is the superiority of the early apostles' knowledge of Jesus, which to Paul is irrelevant. Paul's authority is that he knows the risen Christ according to spirit. Christ lives in Paul and Paul in him, and by him Paul is filled. How could the earthly Jesus, the "Christ according to the flesh", be important to him? In accordance with Pauline tradition there are some Christians who are not waiting for the second coming because they believe they are already saved.

Schweitzer's explanation is eschatological. To Paul a new era had begun with the resurrection of Jesus. The earthly mission of Jesus had been for the Jews alone, and he went to his death as the Jewish Messiah. In his resurrection God made him a universal Messiah-savior, deliverer of both Jews and Gentiles. Similarly, Jesus in his earthly mission had been "under the law", but when, through his death, the power of sin had been destroyed, the law was fulfilled and superseded. It was not necessary, not desirable to know the earthly Jesus who was a limited person with a limited mission. It was the Lord Jesus Christ from whom these limitations had all been cast off that it was needed to know. This is precisely the point of Paul's misunderstanding of Jesus and his mission. W.D. Davies, in his book, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, points out his error. "I Cor. 15 and elsewhere, Paul bases his Gospel, as well as that of other apostles, on the fact of the resurrection... rests upon the reality of his experience of the Risen Lord whom he has seen. Once the light of the Risen Christ, who is spirit, had broken in upon him, he had no need to confer with flesh and blood as to the essentials of his Gospel. These he knew of himself through the Spirit. It follows that Paul no longer needs to know Jesus after the flesh, the historical Jesus is of no

significance to him. It is the guidance of the spirit that matters and Paul can be independent of the words and teachings of Jesus." However, Paul cannot be independent of the words and teachings of Jesus, nor discard them as irrelevant.

There are two kinds of prophecies in the Bible. In Isaiah 53, the entire chapter is a prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion. And also, Jesus himself prophesied that he would be crucified. Therefore, Jesus must have been destined to be crucified. This is true, but it is only a partial view.

According to the Divine Principle, "Until now, many people have thought that the prophecies in the Bible about Jesus foretold only his suffering. When we read the Bible anew with a knowledge of the Principle, we can understand that, just as the prophet Isaiah foretold in the Old Testament Age (Is. 9, 11, 60) and as the angel of God prophesied to Mary, Jesus was expected to become King of the Jews in his lifetime and establish on earth an everlasting Kingdom of which 'there will be no end' (Luke 1:31-32)".⁶ This is the prophecy of the Lord of Glory.

It was God's portion of responsibility to send the Messiah, but to believe in him was man's responsibility. So the people could either believe in the Messiah according to His will or not believe in him, against God's will. Thus God gave two kinds of prophecy providing for two possible results.

If the people had believed, obeyed and loved Jesus as the Messiah, no one could crucify Jesus. Then Jesus' course would have been the Lord of Glory and he would have been able to establish God's Kingdom on earth. "However, due to the disbelief of the people, Jesus died on the cross, and the prophecy of Isaiah 53 was realized, thus leaving the others to be accomplished after the Lord's Second Coming."

It is on this point that Paul was ignorant. It was God's desire that the first prophecy be realized. God never planned the tragedy of the crucifixion. It is ironic that Paul said in I Cor. 2:8 that Jesus came as the Lord of Glory and he was not to be crucified. The post-Easter church had its foundation in the epistles of Paul, in which he emphasized that faith in Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection was the only way to salvation.

The very nature of Christianity is brought into question when comparing the theologies of Jesus and Paul, and the relationship between them. The result of critical Protestant research, which has followed traditional Pauline Christianity, reveals a deep gulf between Jesus and Paul, and ends by saying that Christianity was founded not by the Jesus of history but by Paul, who turned it into a religion of redemption which spread into the Hellenized world and which still influences us today. For Paul and the primitive church, the significance of Jesus Christ and the events connected with him which decided the destiny of the world was that he was the Crucified and Risen One, the only way to salvation.