

What is the real difference between Jesus and the early church (or Paul)?

If Marxsen is right—and I take it that he by and large is—any sharp contrast between Jesus' proclaiming a *future* salvation and the early church's (or Paul's) proclaiming a *present* salvation can hardly be upheld. However much salvation may be (at least implicitly) understood to be already present by the early church (or Paul), they still look forward to a future salvation as yet unrealized. On the other hand, however much Jesus may look forward to a future salvation, he understands the critical decision with respect to that salvation to be the decision that he himself is authorized to thrust upon his hearers here and now in the present.

But, then, what *is* the difference, if there is barely a difference with respect to whether salvation is still future or already present?

The answer, it seems to me, is that, relative to the distinctive possibility of faith that is properly Christian faith, the early church comprises those who *actualize* this possibility and/or bear witness to it, whereas Jesus is the one who—neither actualized nor even *could* actualize *this* possibility, but rather—decisively *re-presents* it. Jesus neither actualized nor could have actualized the possibility of coming to explicit faith in God by experiencing the gift and demand of God's love decisively through Jesus. And yet just *this* is the possibility that the early church actualized and/or attested by bearing witness to Jesus as the one through whom the gift and demand of God's love became and becomes so experienceable as to re-present the possibility of faith. In other words, for the early church (and Paul), Jesus is not the one *with* whom they believe in God (as true as it may be that their believing was also a believing with Jesus); rather, Jesus is the one *through* whom they believe in God—in the sense that they owe to Jesus' prior being and activity the possibility of belief in God that they actualize.

Moreover, this difference remains, no matter how much implicit, or even explicit, christology can be attributed to Jesus' own proclamation. Even if Jesus

explicitly witnessed to his own person as decisive for salvation—in something like the manner, say, of the Fourth Gospel—the continuity that would thereby be established between his witness and that of the early church, so far as it had developed an explicit christology, could in no way eliminate the discontinuity that would exist between the possibility of faith and witness that *could not be* mediated by the prior being and activity of Jesus—namely, Jesus' own—and the possibility of faith and witness that *has to be* so mediated—namely, the early church's (and Paul's).

There's a certain analogy to this difference—although *only* an analogy—in the difference between the always already prior being and activity of the church and the possibility of faith that is mediated by its witness. Although in this case the possibility of faith that the church's witness mediates is not different from but the same as the possibility of faith already actualized by those who bear the church's witness—so that to become a Christian is to believe *with* the church as well as *through* it—still the difference remains between the possibility of faith and witness that *could not be* mediated by the witness of just these or those particular members of the church—namely, their own—and the possibility of faith and witness that *has to be* thus mediated—namely, that of the persons who would not have the possibility they in fact have but for the mediating witness of just these or those same church members.

The significant point, of course, is that this difference—the real difference, I maintain, between Jesus and the early church (as well as Paul)—is thus formulable only from the standpoint of the distinctive possibility of Christian faith. Relative to *this* possibility, Jesus is always and of necessity the one *through* whom all Christians believe, not the one *with* whom they believe—just as the apostles are those Christians through *and* with whom all other Christians believe, or, in other words, the *first* Christians, through whose witness of faith all other Christians alone have the possibility of becoming such. Consequently, there is always something dubious about any interpretation of Jesus simply as one *with* whom we are to believe—just that being, of course, all that “the so-called historical Jesus” could possibly be. Moreover, whatever the difference, so far as

their ideal content is concerned, between Jesus' own belief and witness and those of the early church (or Paul), it has nothing whatever to do with *the* difference that is crucial for Christian faith.

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