

The Jesus-Paul Debate: How do we arrive at the Truth?

This article will examine that misconceptions and misperceptions behind both the assumptions and conclusions that St Paul's teachings are incompatible with those of our Lord Jesus Christ. Typical is this social media post reflecting an arid debate in Protestantism going back centuries:



**INTENSE BIBLICAL
DISCUSSIONS**



Ron Calunod · 18 ώπ. · 🗨️

Why is Christianity disunited? According to Wikipedia, there are more than 40,000 Christian sects and denominations?

The reason Christianity is disunited is because Christians follow the teachings of Paul instead of the Gospel. Jesus said, "xxx. . . whoever does not gather with me scatters." (Mt. 12:30). There cannot be two truths about salvation. According to Jesus, unless the person does good works, that is, doing the will of God, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 7:21 excerpt). For Jesus, no obedience, no salvation. But, according to Paul, man is saved by grace through faith and there is no need for good works so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9 excerpt). For Paul, by faith man is saved. Unfortunately, most Christians follow the teachings of Paul, and only a few follow Jesus. It is written, "But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." (Mt. 7:14). Christianity is just using the name of Jesus to promote the teachings of Paul. Hence, "Come out of her" (Rev. 18:4). Let's proclaim the Gospel of Jesus (Mt. 24:14).

From the vantage point of Orthodox Christianity there is absolutely no incompatibility between the teachings of Christ and St Paul. This assertion of incompatibility has characterised the biblical theology of the German Lutheran tradition, arguably going back to Martin Luther himself who introduced the idea of a canon within the canon; specifically in his case dismissing the authority of the Epistle of St James because of its insistence on the necessity of good works; contrasting this to the Pauline corpus of writings which he (Luther) believed to be opposed to the (alleged) teaching of grace and faith alone in St Paul. Although Luther was opposing St Paul to St James, he might as well have been opposing St Paul to Jesus, which, of course, is precisely what later liberal Protestant traditions have done.

I will deal here with the framing of the question and then apply this to the Jesus-Paul debate. I will not, however, examine any evidence from Scripture and Tradition that Jesus and Paul are indeed to be opposed. A thorough examination of this claim will render it unsustainable. Instead, I shall attempt to show that the Orthodox response to the Jesus-Paul debate takes us one step back from the issue itself to a number of unexamined assumptions in the framing of the question; misconceptions that lead to misperceptions.

Faulty Assumptions (Misconception)

A classic error in logical deduction is “begging the question” where the conclusion is built into the starting point. This leads to selectivity in the assembly of evidence driven by cognitive bias in the analysis. So, in the example of Jesus and Paul, if it is assumed that Jesus, by virtue of his centrality to Christianity, is to be set apart from his disciples and apostles in their teaching, then any difference in emphasis or contextual development of teaching is either regarded with extreme caution or rejected outright. Orthodoxy, however, claims that the apostolic Church comprised those who both followed Christ’s teaching and received him as the crucified and risen Saviour who Himself personified the Kingdom. In the case of St Paul, no other apostle, who unlike him knew Christ in the flesh, rejected Paul’s calling as the apostle to the Gentiles; although St Peter did find his teaching difficult to understand (2 Peter 3:14-16)¹.

The false assumption operating here is a false opposition between, in principle, Christ and *any* of the Apostles. The Protestant Reformation started by making a false opposition between Christ and His Church. However, at the time Protestantism was opposing Christ to the Roman Catholic Church of the 16th century. In the making of this first assumption, the idea was introduced by some Protestant traditions that the Church in the New Testament was not also a reliable guide. The distinction between the so called “Jesus of History” and the

¹ “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation-as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” (NKJV)

“Christ of Faith”, with all of its Nestorian overtones, perfectly describes this false dichotomy characteristic of Protestant scholasticism.

Another example of a faulty assumption or misconception from the same Protestant school is the “criterion of dissimilarity” used when evaluating the words and deeds of Christ. Here the opposition between Jesus and Paul is taken in a more radical direction to a scepticism concerning what Christ truly said rather than what he is reported to have said, as recorded by the Apostles in the New Testament. Briefly, the criterion states that if a saying attributed to Jesus is *different* from both Jewish tradition in his time and the early Church that followed Him, it is likely to come from the historical Jesus rather than the New Testament Church that, allegedly, put the words into His mouth. Astonishingly, this faulty assumption not only claims Jesus and the Church are to be separated but also separates Jesus from his Jewish roots. One cannot help but conclude that there is not only a Protestant bias in this assumption but also an anti-Semitic one as well!

Faulty Misperceptions

If the assumptions we bring to a question are either unexamined or unsustainable then any reasoning that follows will be dubious at best and fatally compromised if built on falsehood. These issues are brought into stark relief when seeking to interpret the significance of historical events in general and texts that reference them, both ancient and modern. Some misperceptions (based on misconceptions) have much greater significance than others. An examination of the causes of the French Revolution for example does not have the same impact on human life as that which responds to the perennial question posed by Christ Himself: “who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

Truth, therefore, isn’t all that it appears to be upon first examination. In assessing the significance of Christ, the assumptions of the seeker, the critic, the biblical theologian, the believer may lead to radically different conclusions. Anyone can have a really thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and miss the point of Christ and his Apostles entirely. Orthodox Christianity insists that an authentic and truthful understanding of these matters can only be

gained by immersing oneself existentially in the living Tradition of the Church, not from the outside looking in but from the inside looking out. This, then, is the assumption from which we start and our perceptions themselves based on that conception, that assumption. Truth in the end, for Orthodox Christians is a Person; neither a concept, nor an idea nor even a belief or doctrine. Christ declared: “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6a) and this also is the Way, the Truth and the Life of the Church.

We know then that Christ and Paul agree because Paul himself adhered to the traditions handed down to him from the Apostles² who indeed taught him and the crucified and risen Christ who taught them all. Seeking to set any part of this living Tradition against any other part is not to have the mind of Christ who is the Truth of our salvation, the Kingdom of God and the Life of both the Church and the World, the Eternal Logos Incarnate.

² 1 Corinthians 11:2; 15:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:15