

Response to “The Place of Jesus’ Death Among First-Generation Believers in Christ: Evidence from Paul’s Letters,” by Jerry L. Sumney

Jennifer Wright Knust
Boston University

As Jerry Sumney insists, and I think rightly, logically there must have been a body of teachings and/or practices that pre-dated Paul’s involvement in the Jesus movement, and therefore, to become a follower of Jesus, Paul had to adopt these teachings and practices, at least to some degree. Paul did not invent Christ centered worship, Sumney reminds us, he joined it, and shortly after Jesus’ death. Though Paul’s letters show that he engaged in controversies with others, and that these controversies were sometimes heated, he and those with whom he argued shared at least one principle: the death of Jesus was a central hermeneutical problem, a founding event—if not the founding event—for the whole community, from which all else must necessarily follow.

Professor Sumney seeks to demonstrate this thesis by returning to two sets of evidence, foundational to the modern study of Paul: (1) the beliefs of Paul’s opponents, reconstructed on the basis of Paul’s charges against them; and (2) statements in Paul’s letters harkening back to traditions he did not invent, but upon which he draws to make particular points to the communities to whom he is writing. In the first section of the paper, the usual suspects are recalled: the Pneumatics in 1 Thessalonians, the Gnostics or proto-Gnostics in Corinth, the Judaizers in Galatia, the libertines in Philippi, and the critics of Paul whose complaints have reached the fledgling Roman *ekklesia*. None of these “opponents”—or perhaps we should say, the opponents re-imagined by historical-critical New Testament scholars—question the centrality of Jesus’ death to their shared movement. Paul can simply assume that all agree that Jesus’ death

is a central element of their faith, whether or not they agree with him about Gentile *torah* observance, ecstatic spiritual worship or the content of Christ-inspired moral behavior.

The turn toward what may be traditional material in Paul confirms this impression: Paul received the proclamation, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephus, then to the twelve” (1 Cor 15:3-5) and Paul received from the Lord the description of Jesus’ actions on the night he was betrayed (1 Cor 11:23-26). Other possible pre-Pauline traditions include Paul’s claim that Christ Jesus was put forward as a sacrifice or place of atonement (Romans 3:23-25), that Jesus was “handed over to death for our trespasses” (Romans 4:25), and the famous Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, depicting Jesus as “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). It is striking that, in each of these cases, Jesus’ death serves as the center of the reflection, from which other conclusions are then drawn.

I am deeply appreciative to Professor Sumney for pointing this out to me, and for asking us to consider what this observation might suggest about those who followed Jesus before Paul entered the scene as one who sought to support rather than suppress the Jesus movement. It does seem difficult, if not impossible, to imagine an early Jesus movement that did *not* take Jesus’ crucifixion seriously and, like Professor Sumney, I think we ought to be suspicious of any approach to the first-century church that suggests otherwise.

That said, I do have a few issues I would like Professor Sumney—and those of us here today—to consider more carefully. At the beginning of the paper, Professor Sumney observes that, before Paul joined up, the Jesus movement had already developed a body of teachings and a set of practices that he inherited rather than invented. But in the paper, the focus is almost

exclusively on beliefs: In this account Paul's opponents are largely guilty of false beliefs, from which bad behavior inevitably flows—a bad eschatology, a bad attitude toward Spirit-filled worship, an incorrect understanding of *torah* observance, and a false sense that those who are “in Christ” ought to be free to live in the world as they had before, “like the Gentiles.” Presumably, the corrective to these false beliefs is a set of true beliefs, particularly rooted in the correct understanding of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I agree that Paul's letters can be read this way, but I wonder what we are missing when we attend to belief over practice, as if beliefs come first and practice later. Is it the case, for example, that following the death and resurrection of Jesus, his remaining followers sat down, figured out a theology that could explain the significance of what they had witnessed, and then, once their Christological statements were in place, they started holding weekly memorial meals that commemorated the death of their savior? Scholars like Catherine Bell, Jonathan Z. Smith and, in our own field, Stanley Stowers, have been urging us to think differently about this sequence, arguing that ritual practices such as the memorial meal Paul recalls in 1 Corinthians do not need their meanings to be effective. One can join the meal, eat the bread and drink the cup without sharing the same meaning as others sharing this same meal. In this account, the fact of the shared meal is what matters, not the precise formulation of what that meal must mean. Paul seems very much aware of this problem, which is why he spills so much ink in 1 Corinthians working to develop a meaning capable of controlling a set of practices with which he disagrees. Still, to him the problem is not simply a wrong belief that is displayed by bad practice but the bad practice itself, which, he suggests, is rooted in bad belief. So is Paul's problem really theological or Christological? Is the problem with his opponents their bad beliefs? Or their bad practices which, he argues, stem from their bad beliefs? Both? And must Christology solve the

problem? Perhaps the very fact of crucifixion—which, I would argue, is first of all a practice and secondarily an object of meaning-making for the followers of Jesus—can challenge our focus on Paul’s opponents and their bad beliefs, calling us to reconsider the order of reflection and development of early Christian rituals and traditions. It seems to me that Professor Sumney’s paper could lead us in this direction, even if he does not fully go there himself.

Which leads me to my next question, which isn’t addressed to Professor Sumney exactly, since he simply takes up and elaborates on what is now a long-standing interpretive tradition in the study of Paul: Who are these opponents anyway? And what do we really know about them? When writing my book on sexualized invective a few years ago, I was struck by the often deep disconnect between what is said about a particular opponent or set of opponents and what we might be able to find out about them if we attend to other evidence, or to their own writings, if we are lucky enough to have them. In some cases, opponents seem to be largely fictional, or even invented outright, stock characters guilty of behavior and/or beliefs that “everyone knows” are wrong. I’m a bit worried, then, about imagining significant factions of libertine Gnostics or Judaizing Christians who are then thought to be battling with Paul for the souls of naïve believers who don’t seem to be able to figure things out for themselves. I’m not saying that Paul doesn’t have opponents—clearly he does—but I do think we ought to be wary of constructing whole communities of opponents with separate, rival theologies, battling with Paul to the bitter end over questions of orthodoxy that, we hope, Paul will eventually win. Indeed, it seems to me highly significant that Paul can simply assume that the crucifixion, baptism and a meal commemorating Jesus’ betrayal are simply accepted facts and known practices, familiar to all those to whom he writes and therefore grounds upon which he can argue a point. Paul, it seems, is further naturalizing what everyone already knows and already does so that he can then

elaborate the symbolic and practical meanings of these ritual facts. Paul does not need real Gnostic opponents to attempt this goal.

Which leads me to my final observation: Professor Sumney's paper, while acknowledging the diversity of the early Jesus movement, also subtly undermines such a view. There may be diversity here, but are there factions? Perhaps there is a great deal more here that is shared than scholars of the last century have usually granted. It seems to me that this is a helpful observation. Realistically, in Paul's day, how many Gentiles in Christ were there? How many Jews who acknowledged Jesus as Messiah? Were there twenty Gentiles in Christ in Corinth? A hundred? Two hundred? I don't know that we can know, but it seems likely that these numbers were small. With this in mind, I then wonder: How many of these Gentiles in Christ could read and write? Enough to create factions of Jesus followers who would no longer meet with one another? Enough to create whole communities of "opponents"? It seems more likely to me that what we are dealing with a set of people who shared a great deal in common and who, in their various ways, sought and argued about the meanings that should be invested in what they already shared.

Professor Sumney, thank you again for your paper and for the stimulating questions you have raised for us today.