

# Christ of Faith vs. Jesus of History

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The distinction between the “Christ of faith” and the Jesus of history is often traced to Martin Kahler (1835-1912), though he probably did not mean by the term what most contemporary critics do. Even before Kahler, Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) laid the ground for the separation of the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. What happened in that separation through the “quests for the historical Jesus” is discussed in the article, “The Quest for the Historical Jesus” (Theological Dictionary, June 2001).

*Lessing’s “Ditch.”* As early as 1778, Lessing viewed the gulf between the historical and the eternal as “the ugly ditch which I cannot get across, however often and however earnestly I have tried to make the leap” (Lessing, 55). This gulf separated the contingent truths of history from the necessary truths of religion. And there is simply no way to span it from our side. Hence, he concluded that no matter how probable one finds the Gospel accounts, they can never serve as the basis for knowing eternal truths.

*Kant’s Gulf.* In 1781, Immanuel Kant spoke in his *Critique of Pure Reason* of a gulf between the contingent truths of our experience and the necessary truths of reason. Hence, he believed it necessary to destroy any philosophical or scientific basis for belief in God. “I have therefore found it necessary” he said, “to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (Kant “Preface,” 29). Kant held that one must approach the realm of religion by faith. It was the realm of practical reason, not of theoretical reason. He set up an impassable gulf between the objective, scientific, knowable realm of facts and the unknowable realm of value (morality and religion). This fact/value dichotomy is at the basis of the later disjunction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history

*Kahler’s Historical/Historic Divide.* The title of Kahler’s book described the dichotomy he saw as necessary: *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (1892). This volume is credited with originating the distinction between “historical” (*historisch*) Jesus and “historic” (*Geschichtlich*) Christ. What Kahler had in mind by “historical,” though, was the reconstructed Jesus of liberal critical scholarship of his time, not the real first-century Jesus.

Kahler did ask: “Should we expect [believers] to rely on the authority of the learned men when the matter concerns the source from which they are to draw the truth for their lives?” He added, “I cannot find sure footing in probabilities or in a shifting mass of details, the reliability of which is constantly changing” (Kahler, 109, 111). While Kahler did not accept an inerrant (errorless) Bible, he did maintain that the Gospels are generally reliable. He spoke of their “comparatively remarkable trustworthiness.” Kahler’s confusion about how to view the Gospels led him to see even the Gospel “legends” as trustworthy, “so far as this is conceivable” (*ibid.*, 79-90, 95, 141-42).

What “we want to make absolutely clear,” said Kahler, is “that ultimately we believe in Christ, not on account of any authority, but because he himself evokes such faith from us” (*ibid.*, 87). He asked the critical question of the church of his day, “How can Jesus Christ be the real object of faith for all Christians if what and who he really was can be ascertained only by research methodologies so elaborate that only the scholarship of our time is adequate to the task?” (see Soulen, 98).

*Kierkegaard's "Leap."* Also setting the stage for the latter disjunction between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus was the Danish iconoclast, Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard asked, "How can something of an historical nature be decisive for an eternal happiness?" (*Concluding Unscientific Postscripts*, 86). Therefore, Kierkegaard downplayed the historical basis of Christianity. Real history was unimportant compared to belief "that in such and such a year the God appeared among us in the humble form of a servant, that he lived and taught in our community, and finally died" (*Philosophical Fragments*, 130). Only a "leap" of faith can place us beyond the historical into the spiritual.

*Christ vs. Jesus.* Rudolph Bultmann made the final definitive and radical disjunction between the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History. The view can be summarized:

**The Historical Jesus**

Not relevant for faith  
 Jesus of scholars  
 Jesus of critical history  
 Uncertain foundation  
 Inaccessible to most Christians  
 The facticity of Jesus  
 The Jesus of the past

**The Historic Christ**

Relevant for faith  
 Christ of believers  
 Christ of the Gospels  
 Certain foundation  
 Accessible to all Christians  
 The significance of Jesus  
 The Christ of the present

The often-drawn implication of this disjunction is that the historical has little or no importance to the spiritual. As Kierkegaard argued, even if you could prove the historicity of the Gospels in every detail, it would not necessarily bring one closer to Christ. Conversely, if the critics could disprove the historicity of the Gospels, save that a man lived in whom people believed God dwelt, it would not destroy the foundations of true faith.

**Evaluation.**

The whole dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is based on highly dubious assumptions. The first has to do with the historicity of New Testament documents.

*What Is Needed for Salvation.* This concept that belief in the facts of the Gospel are historically irrelevant is contrary to the New Testament claim of what is necessary for salvation. The apostle Paul made essential the beliefs that Jesus died and rose bodily from the grave. He wrote that:

**...if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.... And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. [1 Cor. 15:14-19]**

*The Concern of the Writers.* This indifference in historicity also is not shared with the New Testament writers themselves, who seem preoccupied with the details of an accurate account, not a broad-stroke myth. Luke actually tells us his research techniques and his goal as historian:

**Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an**

**orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. [Luke 1:1-4]**

Luke expresses this historical interest by tying the story to persons and events that are part of the public record of history, such as Herod the Great (1:5), Caesar Augustus (2:1), Quirinius (2:2), Pilate (3:1), and many others through Luke and Acts. Note his historical detail in dating John the Baptist's announcement of Christ:

**In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. [Luke 3: 1-2a]**

There is an unjustified assumption that the New Testament, and particularly the Gospels, lack adequate historical support. This is just not true.

*A False Dichotomy.* The separation of historical Jesus from historic Christ is based on a false dichotomy of fact and faith or of fact and value. The historic significance of Christ cannot be separated from his historicity. If he did not live, teach, die, and rise from the dead as the New Testament claims, then he has no saving significance today.

Even after a century of usage, the distinction remains ambiguous and varies in meaning from author to author. Kahler used it to defend "critical pietism." For Bultmann it meant Martin Heidegger's brand of existentialism (Meyer, 27). John Meyer observes that "the Christ of Faith exalted by Bultmann looks suspiciously like a timeless gnostic myth or a Jungian archetype" (ibid., 28). Nearer the other end of the spectrum, such scholars as Paul Althaus (1888-1966) used Kahler's distinction to defend a more conservative approach to the historicity of Jesus. Kahler would have accepted neither Bultmann's nor Althaus's conception. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) is more aware of what Kahler intended. He bitterly denounces those who, in the name of this distinction, have made the historic Christ responsible for every sort of trend from the destruction of ancient culture to the progress of the modern achievements. So the distinction between *historical* and *historic* has become a catch phrase and carrier of all sorts of baggage (ibid.).

## **Sources**

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