

Fall Meeting 2006

Report from the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins

Stephen J. Patterson, Chair, Steering Committee

Did Christianity begin with the resurrection? No. Did Christianity begin with Pentecost? No. Did it begin with Paul, then? No. Did it begin with Jesus? No. As the first meeting of the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins unfolded it soon became apparent that the search for the beginnings of Christianity might turn out to be every bit as elusive as the quest for Jesus himself.

In the first session of the new seminar, fellows began by testing the proposition, favored by many theologians

Ballot One Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins Did Christianity Begin with Resurrection? Daniel A. Smith/Joe Bessler-Northcutt		Vote	%R	%P	%G	%B
Q1 Christianity began with the resurrection of Jesus. (Basic Proposition)	Fellows	.08 Black	0	3	16	81
	Associates	.18 Black	4	5	30	60
Q2 It is impossible to imagine the emergence of Christian faith following Jesus' death without positing the physical resurrection of Jesus. (Smith)	Fellows	.09 Black	3	0	16	81
	Associates	.21 Black	7	12	20	61
Q3 Resurrection is the central claim of all forms of early Christian faith. (Smith)	Fellows	.02 Black	0	0	6	94
	Associates	.09 Black	1	5	12	81
Q4 Claims about Jesus' resurrection, translation, ascension, or other forms of divine vindication were expressions of faith in Jesus, but not the origin of that faith. (Smith/Bessler-Northcutt)	Fellows	.85 Red	58	39	3	0
	Associates	.79 Red	48	42	7	3
Q5 Since Jesus' words and deeds were not primarily self-referential, his personal demise at the hands of the Romans would not have constituted a "crisis of faith" for his friends and followers. (Bessler-Northcutt)	Fellows	.56 Pink	26	29	32	13
	Associates	.53 Pink	18	38	27	16
Q6 In Christian theology, the resurrection has functioned to authorize Christian faith and practice by connecting it to the transcendent world, not as an account of how Christianity began. (Bessler-Northcutt)	Fellows	.82 Red	52	42	6	0
	Associates	.76 Red	44	43	10	3
Q7 Christianity began as a movement within Judaism; it would not become recognizable as a distinct new religion until many years later, after the first generation of Jesus' followers had passed from the scene. (General Issue)	Fellows	.84 Red	67	27	0	7
	Associates	.85 Red	60	36	04	0
Q8 Resurrection is the central claim of some forms of early Christian faith.	Fellows	.87 Red	71	18	11	0
	Associates	.84 Red	60	35	3	2
Q9 Resurrection is the central claim of many forms of early Christian faith.	Fellows	.70 Pink	37	37	26	0
	Associates	.59 Pink	17	48	30	5

of the twentieth century, that Christianity began with the resurrection. More recently, scholars like N.T. Wright and James Dunn have argued that, apart the physical resurrection of Jesus, it is scarcely possible to imagine the continuation of the movement Jesus created. His death would have constituted a crisis of faith of insurmountable proportions. But the Fellows of the seminar roundly rejected these ideas. Responding positively to position papers by Daniel Smith of Western Ontario University and Joe Bessler-Nothcutt of Phillips Seminary in Tulsa, they agreed that resurrection claims were a way for early followers of Jesus to express their faith in him, but were not the origin of that faith. Moreover, they agreed that Jesus' preaching was not focused primarily on himself—say, his status as messiah or Son of God. He spoke, rather, of a new kingdom—or empire—of God, as a way of life to be pursued. His death, then, would have been understood not as the embarrassing defeat of a failed messiah, but as the noble death of a martyr who died in devotion to the cause he espoused, the kingdom of God. If this was so, then his death, far from creating a crisis of faith, might well have given the Jesus movement new energy, a phenomenon often associated with the death of a hero. The claim that Jesus was raised from the dead could well have originated among those who regarded Jesus as a martyr to the cause and purposes of God.

In the next session, Fellows took up a central feature in the story of Christian beginnings, the miraculous event of Pentecost, as depicted in Acts 2, where dozens of followers of Jesus suddenly begin to speak in foreign languages, so that those gathered from distant lands can all hear the gospel in their own tongue. Following the lead of position papers offered by Shelly Matthews of Furman University and Todd Penner of Austin College, the Fellows endorsed the position of most critical scholars studying Acts today, that the story of Pentecost was created by Luke (the author of Acts) in an effort to write a story of Christian origins that would inspire his readers to emulate the great deeds of founder figures like Peter, Stephen, and Paul. Fellows agreed that charismatic gifts like glossalalia (speaking in tongues) were common among the first Christians. But they also recognized that Luke's account in Acts 2 is a highly stylized and circumscribed presentation of that phenomenon. For example, one may infer from Paul's references to glossalalia in First Corinthians that this was phenomenon that involved both men and women, and perhaps even slaves. But Matthews called attention to the fact that, in Luke's story of Pentecost, women and slaves are not among the prophets. A vestige of the older tradition may still be seen in the prophecy from Joel preserved in the traditional speech of Peter in Acts 2:17-21. But in Luke's

story all the lead characters are men. Fellows agreed with Matthews, that the resulting heroic narrative was designed to appeal to elite Roman men, and to create a Christian story in which they would feel at home and important.

On the second day of the Seminar the Fellows focused on Paul. Did Paul create Christianity, as Nietzsche famously argued—a view common among nineteenth-century scholars as well? The assertion implies that Paul did not really understand or accept the simple views of

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Jesus and the Jesus movement, and so created the complex theology we have come to know as Christianity today. But it turns out that this old hypothesis no longer commands the assent of scholars. To the propositions, "Paul was the founder of Christianity" and "Paul was

intent on constructing a new religion" the Fellows agreed with the recommendation of Arthur Dewey of Xavier University, and voiced a resounding "no." Instead, they generally embraced a growing consensus among contemporary scholars that places Paul closer to the views of Jesus and the early Jesus movement. While dividing over the controversial issue of Paul's view of women—the texts involved are of questionable authenticity—they tended to endorse the position that like Jesus, Paul was a dissident voice in his culture, and advocated a community life in which differences in social rank and ethnicity were to be overcome.

In this session Fellows also considered the question of when Christianity would have been recognizable as a new and distinct religion in the ancient world. They agreed overwhelmingly with the proposition, "Christianity began as a movement among Jews; it would not become

Ballot Two Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins/Acts Seminar Did Christianity Begin with Pentecost? Shelly Matthews/Todd Penner		Vote	%R	%P	%G	%B
Q1 Christianity began with the evenst of Pentecost described in Acts 2. (Basic proposition)	Fellows	.02 Black	0	0	7	93
	Associates	.15 Black	4	7	21	68
Q7 Christianity began as a movement within Judaism; it would not become recognizable as a distinct new religion until many years later, after the first generation of Jesus' followers had passed from the scene. (General Issue)	Fellows	.84 Red	59	37	0	4
	Associates	.75 Red	44	40	14	2
Q3 Like other ancient writers, the author of Acts is concerned primarily with the establishment of the character or ethos of the group when he utilizes the motif of beginnings. (Penner)	Fellows	.76 Red	43	46	7	4
	Associates	.72 Pink	36	48	13	4
Q4 The motif of xenoglossy in Acts 2 functions rhetorically to display numinous power in this birthing moment without necessary connection to any actual early Christian charismatic experiences. (Penner)	Fellows	.71 Pink	36	50	7	7
	Associates	.64 Pink	32	38	21	9
Q5 Charismata such as tongues and prophecy were significant aspects of early Christian experience. (Matthews)	Fellows	.79 Red	54	32	11	4
	Associates	.61 Pink	29	32	32	7
Q6 The authority of slaves and women to speak for God was bound up with the question of the legitimacy of spiritual gifts. (Matthews)	Fellows	.77 Red	43	50	4	4
	Associates	.64 Pink	30	43	19	9
Q7 Luke's efforts to write history suitable for "Theophilus" required that he erase the agency and contributions of slaves and women from his historical narrative. (Matthews)	Fellows	.70 Pink	28	55	17	0
	Associates	.66 Pink	29	45	19	7
Q8 Elite male privilege is one of the essential building blocks of the Christianity Luke attempts to construct. (Matthews)	Fellows	.78 Red	52	34	10	3
	Associates	.67 Pink	43	28	17	12
Q9 A totalizing vision, modeled on the Roman quest for world domination, is one of the essential building blocks of the Christianity Luke attempts to construct. (Matthews)	Fellows	.78 Red	48	41	7	3
	Associates	.69 Pink	42	32	16	10
Q10 While he did not have precise language to describe the split he imagines, Luke asserted that his social group was distinct from "the Jews." (Matthews)	Fellows	.80 Red	45	52	3	0
	Associates	.74 Pink	38	51	6	6
Q11 The fusion of the categories "morally depraved" and "non-believing Jew" is one of the essential building blocks of the Christianity Luke attempts to construct. (Matthews)	Fellows	.72 Pink	34	52	10	3
	Associates	.65 Pink	33	37	20	9

Ballot Four Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins Did Christianity Begin with Paul? Arthur J. Dewey		Vote	%R	%P	%G	%B
Q1 Paul argues for communal practice that recognizes and affirms difference.	Fellows	.61 Pink	40	13	37	10
	Associates	.59 Pink	24	41	22	13
Q2 What was at stake for Paul was the re-envisioning of the basic categories of social life.	Fellows	.66 Pink	30	40	27	3
	Associates	.72 Pink	37	44	17	2
Q3 This vision countered the gospel of the Empire.	Fellows	.83 Red	67	20	10	3
	Associates	.87 Red	63	35	0	2
Q4 The perspective of the historical Paul was greatly lost or revised by later tradition.	Fellows	.90 Red	73	23	3	0
	Associates	.82 Red	57	38	0	6
Q5 Paul was the founder of Christianity.	Fellows	.07 Black	0	3	13	83
	Associates	.19 Black	11	4	18	67
Q6 The historical Paul was intent on constructing a new religion.	Fellows	.09 Black	0	3	20	77
	Associates	.29 Gray	9	15	28	47
Q7 Paul argues for communal practice that recognizes and affirms some difference.	Fellows	.86 Red	62	34	3	0
	Associates	.86 Red	69	20	10	0
Q8 Christianity began as a movement among Jews. It would not become recognizable as a distinct new religion until many years later, after the first generation of Jews' followers had passed from the scene.	Fellows	.88 Red	77	17	0	7
	Associates	.87 Red	76	16	2	6

recognizable as a distinct new religion until many years later. . . .” Exactly how much later was left open for further investigation. Nevertheless, to speak of “Christianity” in the generation following Jesus’ death was quickly recognized as an anachronism, and Fellows struggled to arrive at language that would correctly characterize the situation.

In the final session the Fellows considered the proposition: Christianity began with Jesus. Throughout the twentieth century it was a theological commonplace to regard Jesus and his ideas as the presupposition to Christian

faith, but not central to that faith itself. Christian faith was not the faith *of* Jesus, but faith *in* Jesus. Testing this older idea produced one of the most lively and contentious discussions of the weekend. The Fellows rejected the simple proposition that “Christianity began with Jesus,” but also seemed to reject the older notion that Christian faith was necessarily faith *in* Jesus. They endorsed, by a very narrow margin, the thesis presented in a posthumous paper by Robert W. Funk, the founder and first chair of the Jesus Seminar, that “Christianity began when Jesus used

Ballot Five Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins Did Christianity Begin with Jesus? Robert W. Funk/Brandon Scott — Philip E. Devinish		Vote	%R	%P	%G	%B
Q1 Christianity began with Jesus. (Basic Proposition)	Fellows	.28 Gray	14	17	7	62
	Associates	.34 Gray	19	11	23	47
Q2 Christian experience, or faith, began when some people encountered Jesus positively as ultimately decisive for their lives. (Devenish)	Fellows	.47 Gray	31	7	34	28
	Associates	.67 Pink	45	26	13	15
Q3 Christian witness began with the Jesus-kerygma (i.e., the re-presented words and deeds of Jesus), not the Christ-kerygma (i.e., confessional claims made about Jesus' person). (Devenish/Funk)	Fellows	.59 Pink	38	24	14	24
	Associates	.62 Pink	31	37	21	12
Q4 Christianity began when Jesus used imaginative language to call into question his received life world in favor of the life world that emerges in his parables and aphorisms. (Funk)	Fellows	.55 Pink	34	21	21	24
	Associates	.57 Pink	28	32	21	19
Q5 Christianity began when the followers of Jesus adjusted the Jesus tradition to fit more comfortably within the received life world of his/their time and place. (Funk)	Fellows	.47 Gray	14	41	17	28
	Associates	.55 Pink	26	30	26	17
Q6 Christianity began in Galilee. (Devenish)	Fellows	.70 Pink	55	21	3	21
	Associates	.67 Pink	43	28	17	13
Q7 Jesus of Nazareth should be included in the discussion of Christian origins.	Fellows	.86 Red	82	4	4	11
	Associates	.95 Red	90	6	4	0

imaginative language to call into question his received life world in favor of the life world that emerges in his parables and aphorisms.” In other words, Christianity began with the preaching of Jesus. Philip Devenish’s formulation: Christianity began with the Jesus-kerygma (that is, the repeated words and deeds of Jesus) not the Christ-kerygma (that is, preaching *about* Jesus), received a slightly stronger endorsement, with most objections having to do with the anachronistic use of the word “Christianity.” When polled on the proposition “Jesus of Nazareth should be included in the discussion of Christian origins,” more than 80% of the Fellows strongly agreed, signally a new approach to this old question.

The origins of Christianity—understood now as a movement among Jews, *not* a new religion—lay not in the mystery of the resurrection or the miracle of Pentecost, or even in the creative imagination of Paul the Apostle, but in the ideas and practices of Jesus and his first followers.

The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins seem to have shied away from the idea of a “big bang” account of Christian beginnings. Christianity emerged slowly, and in many places, as the convictions of Jesus and his followers took root and developed. In the coming years, the Jesus Seminar on Christian Origins aims to investigate how those ideas and practices took shape in particular places and over time.

Spring 2007

At its Spring 2007 meeting, the Jesus Seminar on Christians Origins will begin its work in earnest by asking what we can know about the character and claims of the earliest Jesus Movement in Galilee. On the docket will be early texts like Q, or traditions shared by Q and Thomas, or Mark and Q. What do these texts and traditions sound like when placed in the concrete cultural context of first century Galilee?