It is often claimed that the Founder of Christianity was the apostle Paul – or at least that he was the co-Founder, along with Jesus.

The idea behind this claim is that Christianity is not really about the historical Jesus.

Yes, his words are hugely important, and yes it is also important to know that he did all those miraculous deeds. But his public ministry is not the core of Christian belief. Instead, the core of Christianity is the belief in his death and resurrection.

And this is what Paul preached, not what Jesus preached.

So that even if Jesus’ life and teachings are important, they are not really what Christianity is about. Christianity is about believing in his death and resurrection for salvation. And since, in this view, it was Paul who first formulated that belief, he is the founder (or co-founder) of the Christian religion.

Paul vs. Jesus: Who Founded Christianity?

I have never found this line of argument convincing, for two reasons. The first is that it contradicts some rather important facts of history and the second is that it contradicts what Paul himself says.

I’ll discuss both contradictions (the first in this post, the second in the next), but before doing so let me be clear and emphatic: I do NOT think that Paul and Jesus delivered the same message in their preaching, or that they did so in the same way. There was an enormous difference between what they taught.

There are points of contact and continuity, to be sure. But the differences are stark and need to be borne in mind constantly.

Comparing Paul’s and Jesus’ Teachings

Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God was soon to arrive with the appearance from heaven of the Son of Man. People needed to prepare for that imminent catastrophic event by turning to God and living in the ways that he decreed through the proper observance of the Torah, principally by loving (and trusting) God above all else and by loving their neighbors as themselves. Those who did so would survive the coming onslaught and would be brought into the Kingdom.

Paul agreed that there was an imminent disaster to take place. But in his view, that would happen when Jesus himself arrived from heaven in judgment. The way a person would survive the onslaught was not by obeying the Law of God or by loving their neighbors as much as themselves. Salvation would come only by believing in Christ’s death and resurrection.

(Click here to learn more about Paul’s importance to Christianity.)

In other words, Jesus preached about God and his coming Kingdom; Paul preached about Christ and his death and resurrection. Important similarities, yes; but also fundamental and crucial differences.
If that’s the case, and what became Christianity was not the Jewish religion Jesus propounded but the religion Paul advocated – the religion about Jesus rather than the religion of Jesus – then what’s the problem with saying that it was Paul who founded Christianity?

Why Paul Was Not Christianity’s Founder

As I indicated, saying so contradicts both the facts of history and the statements of Paul himself.

First, facts of history.

As we saw in earlier posts, Paul was originally antagonistic toward the Christians and worked hard to “destroy” (his word) the church. Thus both Paul and the book of Acts insist strongly that he started out not as a follower of Jesus but as a persecutor of his followers.

(In a later post, I’ll talk about what it was about the Christians and their claims that incensed Paul and made him want to oppose them with violence. *Update: here’s the article.*)

But for now, I want to focus on the fact that prior to Paul there were Christians who were already making bold claims about Christ. Where did these Christians come from? Obviously from another founder of Christianity (not named Paul). Again, both Paul and Acts are clear on the point: these were people who believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead for salvation.

If Paul had founded Christianity, there would have been no one for him to...

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The Core of Paul’s Gospel
Paul as a Persecutor of the Church