


# An existential phenomenological understanding of early church diversity

**Author:**Gert J. Malan<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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**Corresponding author:**

Gert Malan,  
gertmalan@telkomsa.net

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The New Testament documents represent a variety of perceptions about the church, showing that the early church was not unitary in practise or theology. How do we explain the diversity in the early church? Existential phenomenological hermeneutics can shine insightful light on this question by utilising Heidegger's concept of Dasein in an interpretation model. The model used the pre-structure of Dasein (pre-understanding, presuppositions and prejudice) and its interactive circular dynamic with the hermeneutical concepts of world and phenomena to table aspects of the hermeneutic situation and the resultant Dasein types as self-understanding developed from various groups' interpretations of Jesus. In this way, the hermeneutic dynamic explains the variety of pre- and post-Easter groups. The results show that there is no objective, standard view of Jesus and no objective set of Jesus' teachings available; no ideal Dasein type is presented for faith communities. The kerygma of the Crucified and Risen One as God's act of salvation is the central presupposition of the church's Dasein. The historical nature of hermeneutics cannot be denied. Historical-critical exegesis and its circular dynamic of understanding is a legitimate and sound hermeneutic model. Unhistorical hermeneutics have definite limitations and should be deemed insufficient. There is no plain meaning of any phenomenon or text, only the text or phenomenon as it is understood. Faith communities consciously partake in the hermeneutic dynamic and recognise the influence of their pre-understandings, presuppositions and prejudices which constantly be questioned and adjusted to facilitate their authentic Dasein.

**Contribution:** This historical hermeneutical study explains that different hermeneutical situations lead to different Dasein types as various self-understandings developed according to Jesus groups' interpretations of Jesus varied. No ideal Dasein type for faith communities is presented. These findings resonate with *HTS Theological Studies* focus and scope regarding historical thought in research.

**Keywords:** hermeneutics; early church diversity; existential; phenomenological; historical.

## Church diversity

One should not speak of *the* church as if there is no diversity within the church (Dreyer 2016:36). Even the New Testament documents represent a variety of perceptions about the church, showing that the early church was not unitary in practise or theology. Pelser (1995:645–674) identified 12 archetypes or *Grundtypen* (Käsemann 1964:262) of the church reflected in the New Testament documents. More may be identified, for instance from Q (see Kloppenborg 1999:89–32; Malan 2007:712–713). Furthermore, a variety of metaphors express church perceptions in the New Testament (Minnear 1960). Different Christological titles applied with varied nuances were awarded to Jesus as sectors of the earliest church represent different theological traditions such as the Palestinian-Jewish, Palestinian-Gentile and Hellenistic-Gentile churches (Hahn [1963] 1969). Historical-critical Theologies of the New Testament separate the message of Jesus from the kerygma of the earliest Palestinian church and Hellenistic churches (see for example the theologies by Bultmann [1948] 1980; Kümmel 1973; Hahn 2005; Strecker 2000; see also Marshall [1976] 1982) and reveal definite differences in the earliest church's theology across the spectrum of themes such as soteriology, eschatology, anthropology and the church offices (Pelser 1995:646). These communities developed their own identities and self-understandings according to their understandings of Jesus. Their perception and proclamation of Jesus and what discipleship meant were at times rather similar and often opposing (Käsemann 1970:131). Christian faith and churches did not exist before the Christian kerygma, namely, of Jesus Christ, the Crucified and Risen One as God's act of salvation. Jesus' own message was not Christian kerygma but was the presupposition for it (Bultmann [1948] 1980:2).

Why this diversity and why understanding it is important? What can be gained by acknowledging and understanding the diversity? Why is a grasp of the dynamics of the process of understanding necessary? These are the questions addressed in this study by utilising a model constructed of the basic concepts of existential phenomenological hermeneutics to the subject matter. This approach can shine insightful light on these questions and illuminate the essence of being church in an

authentic way even within such diversity today by focusing on the dynamics of understanding, especially from Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* as understanding. This undertaking is important, as kerygma is the essence of the church. It constitutes and legitimises the church as its symbolic universe (Berger & Luckmann 1975:91–120). The essence of the kerugma is Jesus Christ (Bultmann [1948] 1980:1–2). The intelligibility and relevance of the kerugma is in dire straits, as is shown by shrinking membership of traditional churches (Dreyer 2015). To understand and formulate anew, the existential meaning of Jesus Christ belongs to the essential *Dasein* of the church. The church as *Dasein* is an existential hermeneutical phenomenon and its authentic *Dasein* may be at stake.

The concept of *Dasein* is part of a complex hermeneutical process which is briefly explained before applying it as a model for understanding the diversity of the earliest church, after which conclusions will be drawn.

## Existential phenomenological hermeneutics

To coin a label for the extremely complex Heideggerian approach is almost impossible. His work was influenced by different philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Husserl, Nietzsche and Jaspers. Various labels were therefore attached to his work: existentialism (Macquarrie 1973:6), ontology (Grene 1957:12), pre-Socratic (Seidel 1964:2), existential analytic (Langan 1959:152–161), phenomenology (King 1964:149) and hermeneutical phenomenology (Gadamer [1965] 1985:229), all of which present shortcomings (Thiselton 1980:143–146). The label *existential phenomenology* includes the most prominent traits of Heidegger's approach (Luijpen 1969:31–35), to which is added the concept of *hermeneutics*, because of the eminence of understanding in Heidegger's description of Being and his defining of *Dasein* as understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer crafted Heidegger's approach to be more systematic and less elusive and although not identical to it (Thiselton 1980:293), can still be labelled in the same way.

What is existential phenomenological hermeneutics about? The existential orientation has its beginning in the work of Søren Kierkegaard, whilst phenomenology has developed from the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Kierkegaard regarded man as existence, which is absolutely original, unrepeatable, radically personal and unique. Husserl viewed consciousness as intentionality always intent on an object or phenomenon, which should be allowed to speak for itself. Consciousness is an act of revealing and is therefore open for adaptation. Both rejected the reductionistic tendencies of natural science and denied that man can be understood atomistically and opposed Hegelian philosophy's approach to the totality of human reality. Martin Heidegger explained that if existence was not absolute, existence is not experienced within oneself but is directed towards the world. If consciousness is active revealing, the encapsulated view of being human must fall away. With Heidegger's philosophy, existential and phenomenological understanding of *being* was

joined together. Heidegger characterised *being* as a kind of forgetfulness present since the philosophy of Socrates, because humanity was prevented from seeing the world as something that is there for them. In this sense, the world is stripped of meaning, and *being* is impoverished by rationalism. The task of philosophy is to rescue the consciousness of *being* out of forgetfulness and to explicate it again for our time (Kruger 1988:1–3, 28–29). 'Hermeneutics', derives from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* [to understand] and from the noun *hermeneia* [interpretation]. Related words are *hermeios* for the priest at the Delphi oracle and *Hermes*, the mythical messenger of the gods, credited with the discovery of language and writing. Martin Heidegger views philosophy as essentially 'interpretation'; as the laying open of something or of a message, as Hermes did with the messages from the gods. Hermeneutics is the process of bringing to understanding and involves language as its primary medium (Palmer [1969] 1982:12–13).

Hermeneutics originates in the breaches of inter-subjectivity. It is applied in every situation where meaning is not immediately discerned but requires interpretative effort (Linge 1977:xii). It is perhaps the most basic act of human thought, to the extent that existing is in itself a constant process of interpretation (Palmer [1969] 1982:9). However, it is not unproblematic, as misunderstanding arises more naturally than understanding, so that understanding must be intended and sought at every point (Schleiermacher [1838] 1959:86). Wilhelm Dilthey reiterated the importance of historical consciousness in the hermeneutic process: both the possibilities and problems of understanding are rooted in historical consciousness as it provides a link with the past and simultaneously an experience of alienation. To overcome this historical distance requires conscious effort. The method of understanding applied in the humanities is *Verstehen* [understanding] in contrast to *Erklären* [explaining] used in the natural sciences (Lategan 2009:15–16). Both the text and its interpreters are historically conditioned by their context and tradition, and interpreters should be consciously aware of this (Thiselton 1980:11). The solution does not lie with interpreters trading their own historical position for that of authors, thus seeking the author's original intentions from their lifeworld by a process of self-transposition or imaginative projection, as if the interpreters' own situations were of negative value. Historicism's naive assumption was to regard temporal distance as something to be overcome and that interpreters should set themselves within the spirit of a certain age, thinking its ideas and thoughts rather than their own, thus advancing towards historical objectivity. Time is not a gulf to be bridged, but the supportive ground of the process in which the present is rooted (Gadamer [1965] 1985:264). The interpreter's own stance in time is the horizon that makes understanding possible and includes the interpreter's presuppositions, which should be clarified and invariably questioned (Heidegger [1926] 1996:214–217). Understanding is not a reconstruction but a mediation event, like a dialogue or a game, with active back and forth participation from both partners, culminating in a fusion of horizons opening new possibilities (Gadamer [1965] 1985:150,

271–274). It involves an element of buoyancy, which moves both partners past their original horizons of understanding to a point where something different comes into being (Gadamer 1977b:58). Objective understanding, therefore, is not possible (Heidegger [1926] 1996:267). This does not mean that interpretation is partisan in the sense that its results may be presupposed and are determined by what the interpreter wants the text to mean but is a historically conscious endeavour using the rules of grammar and historical science (Bultmann [1957] 1985:146–147).

Hermeneutics, however, is not limited to the formulation of rules and the use of linguistic and historical methods to ensure accurate understanding as was previously thought. Since Schleiermacher, hermeneutics addresses the question of how any understanding, even a preliminary one, is at all possible (Thiselton 1980:5). Schleiermacher viewed understanding as more than the application of rules to a text but also as an interpretation of a moment in an individual's life (Bultmann [1950] 1985:71). Heidegger expanded this insight by describing hermeneutics as fundamentally ontological, namely, that interpretation is the modus in which reality appears and is thus constitutive of being (*Dasein*) itself: one's existence comes into being as an act of interpretation (Lategan 2009:16). The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all but is part of the total human experience, although the hermeneutical process includes methodology. Regarding the interpretation of written texts, hermeneutics includes the whole range of historical-textual and literary methods (Thiselton 1980:10). There is no difference between the interpretation of sacred and secular writings, and hence only one hermeneutics, involving the 'whole business of historical research' (Gadamer [1965] 1985:156). Biblical texts should not be approached with any methods different from those used for any other literary texts, especially historical texts (Conzelmann & Lindemann 1980:3).

## ***Dasein* and other essential aspects of the hermeneutical process**

Attention will now be given to the existential phenomenological understanding of hermeneutics by briefly focusing on aspects essential to this study.

### ***Dasein***

Human being implies more than existing but is also having a relationship with oneself. Only human beings reflect on, care about and question their being. Human being is called *Dasein* [being here or there] instead of the traditional terms such as subject, consciousness, ego or human organism. *Dasein* is always unique and is thus characterised by a 'mineness'. It is potential in the sense that *Dasein* must always choose and in choosing for itself should recognise its existence as its particular own existence; it is authentic when it becomes a truly independent self not lost in the anonymous mass, by not choosing for itself and thus losing itself in inauthenticity (Kruger 1988:30–31).

There is an inseparable interconnectedness between understanding and *Dasein*. When Heidegger uses the term *Verstehen* for understanding, he does not mean objective knowledge but the participation in the thing understood (Palmer [1969] 1982:130). Understanding is not a resigned ideal of human experience or a philosophical method. Understanding is the original form of the realisation of *Dasein* as being in the world. Understanding is *Dasein's* essential mode of being because it is potentiality-for-being and possibility (Gadamer [1965] 1985:230). Hermeneutics is therefore the interpretation of the being of *Dasein*; an analysis of the existentiality of *Existenz* (Palmer [1969] 1982:129–130). Any form of understanding involves more than a grasp of meaning. Understanding means to know your way in it, whether it is to understand and use a machine or understanding a text. People who thus understand in effect understand themselves, projecting themselves according to their possibilities. In this way, understanding is ultimately self-understanding (Gadamer [1965] 1985:231).

Understanding therefore is not something to be possessed but a mode of being in the world. 'Understanding is thus ontologically fundamental and prior to every act of understanding' (Palmer [1969] 1982:131).

*Dasein* as understanding always operates within a set of already interpreted relationships, a relational whole (*Bewandnisganzheit*), a hermeneutical context which includes 'world' and 'meaningfulness'. For Heidegger, 'world' is always one's own personal world and not one's environment as objectively observed. World is the whole in which one finds oneself already immersed, surrounded by its presence as revealed through understanding. World is therefore inseparable from self and is presupposed in every act of interpreting a phenomenon, thus no phenomenon can be known in its own manifestness without it. Understanding is always through world. It is fundamental to understanding. 'World and understanding are inseparable parts of the ontological constitution of *Dasein's* existing (Palmer [1969] 1982:131–133)'. World is the realm in which being shapes understanding; where the temporality and historicity of being is radically present and where being translates itself into meaningfulness, understanding and interpretation. World is the realm of the hermeneutical process where being becomes explicated as language. As understanding takes place within a network of relationships, 'meaningfulness' designates the ontological ground for the intelligibility of that network of relationships. Meaningfulness is therefore deeper than the logical system of language and is embedded in the world as relational whole prior to language. Language expresses meaning but points beyond itself to a system of meaningfulness already present in the relational whole of world. Meaningfulness is not given by someone to an object. Meaningfulness is something an object gives to someone by supplying the ontological possibility of words and language. Understanding is embedded within this context and interpretation is the rendering explicit of understanding. Interpretation is not like labelling phenomena but rises

from particular relationships. Understanding views the phenomena in the world *as* this or *as* that and interpretation renders explicit this word *as* (Palmer [1969] 1982:134). To my mind, this designates the metaphoricality inherent to understanding and interpretation.

The basis for language and interpretation is understanding and meaningfulness. Understanding has a certain 'pre-structure' which will now be discussed.

### Pre-understanding

Every understanding is historical and is guided by a pre-understanding: a certain interest, a specific question made possible by an actual life relation (*Lebensverhältnis*) the interpreter has with the matter expressed because of the shared worldliness (Bultmann [1957] 1975:113). Such a *Lebensverhältnis* is grounded in *a priori* knowledge which prescribes to our experience of phenomena. This was illustrated by Kant ([1787] 1984:14) referring to Copernicus' explaining the apparent movement of the stars partly because of the movement of the observer. In the same way, objects seem to conform to the mind's *a priori* knowledge. Heidegger ([1926] 1996:139, 141–142) calls interpretation the development of understanding; or the development of possibilities projected in understanding; or the interpretation of something as something, possible because as inner worldly phenomena they were discovered have come to be understood and thus already have meaning. Interpretation is essentially grounded in fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception. It is never a presuppositionless grasping of something previously given. Interpretation can therefore be described as always contextual: it is made within a horizon of already granted meanings, of assumed understanding (pre-understanding). Such partial understanding is used in a dialectical process to understand even further, like using pieces of a puzzle to determine what is missing. A certain pre-understanding is necessary or no communication is possible (Palmer [1969] 1982:24). Interpretation demands a very personal aliveness, an excitement about the unfolding of the interpreter's individuality within the process of understanding, an openness towards the future while at the same time taking responsibility for the future. In this sense, the most subjective interpretation is the most objective and only then will the claim of what is to be understood be heard (Bultmann [1957] 1975:122).

### Presuppositions

Meaning derived from a text hinges on the situation in which the interpreter stands. Meaning is always a matter of relationship (cohesion) and context (horizon) in terms of which it is derived. There can thus be no understanding without presuppositions (Palmer [1969] 1982:119–121). An exegete is not a *tabula rasa* but approaches the text with specific questions which reveal that certain ideas about the subject matter in the text already exist in the interpreter's thoughts. What is meant is not exegesis guided by dogmatic prejudices, because then the text will not be heard (Bultmann [1957] 1985:145–146). Presuppositions, in Bultmann's approach, refer to the method of historical-critical research, and the life

relation exegetes have with the subject matter concerned in the text. Regarding biblical texts, 'life relation' refers to the existential question about God. Presuppositions, as a form of pre-understanding remain open to the encounter with the text and await an existential decision. The understanding of a text is therefore never definitive but remains open. As exegetes are historically situated, the text will be heard anew in each specific context (Bultmann [1957] 1985:151–152). Understanding is thus a process of continuous revision, as interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are questioned and replaced by more suitable ones. Interpreters should therefore explicitly examine the legitimacy (the origin and validity) of these presuppositions and so rid the hermeneutic process of any arbitrariness through radical and continuous questioning (Gadamer [1965] 1985:236–238). The origin of interpreters' presuppositions is the tradition in which they stand. Tradition supplies the pool of conceptions within which we think, and should be critically examined to distinguish what is fruitful to understanding and what prevents openness to understanding and free thought. Interpreters' tradition does not stand over against their thinking as an object of thought but forms part of their horizon, the structure within which they think. This horizon, however, is more than their tradition as it is part of the ongoing dialectical interaction of self-understanding, tradition and text (Palmer [1969] 1982:182–183). Such a horizon is neither closed nor static, as it constantly moves with people and their changing circumstances and views and develops as time passes and contexts shift (Gadamer [1965] 1985:270–271). Therefore, understanding can be compared to playing a game which draws players into it, freeing them from self-possession as they are absorbed into the game and they themselves become 'played' (Gadamer [1965] 1985:446).

### Prejudice

In German legal terminology, prejudgement (*Vorurteil*) is a provisional legal verdict before the final verdict is pronounced. Hermeneutical prejudice is in this positive sense an indispensable part of interpretation and more influential than conscious cognitive acts, because people's prejudices constitute the historical reality of their being situated in a specific context and tradition, rather than their conscious judgements. Prejudice is responsibly dealt with when the interpreter remains open to the encounter with the text, so that prejudices are questioned and thus brought into risk. In such a way, truly historical understanding is reached because the interpreter's own historicity is taken into account (Gadamer [1965] 1985:240–267).

When following the criterion of intelligibility, we find that the other presents itself so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other. The effect of historicity remains, in defiance of method, and should therefore be brought to consciousness. Effective-historical consciousness means to be conscious specifically of the hermeneutical situation. It is the difficult realisation of not standing outside of a situation, therefore not being able to have an objective cognition thereof (Gadamer [1965] 1985:269). The interpreter is influenced by prejudice through tradition

and the acceptance of certain values, attitudes or institutions as authoritative. Such prejudice need not be blind or irrational but may manifest as the rational yearning for knowledge past own limitations (Thiselton 1980:305). The hermeneutical situation is determined by the prejudgments we bring with us and they constitute the horizon of a *particular* present, as horizons change with time as the interpreter's stance changes. True understanding takes place when a fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) occurs, namely, of text and interpreter. The interpreter's present horizon is thus continually formed as prejudices are continually tested and altered. The fusion of horizons does not entail the total disappearance or negation of the distance and tension between text and interpreter, but rather its conscious revealing, so that what is understood can be applied anew (*Anwendung*). Understanding always includes seeing how it applies in every new situation (Gadamer [1965] 1985:272–274).

### The hermeneutic circle

Initially, the concept of the hermeneutic circle was part of hermeneutic methodology. In the hermeneutic work of Friedrich Ast (1778–1841), the hermeneutic circle referred to the relationship between the whole and all its parts. The circle, which is made up of and is defined by the parts, refers to the whole, which again defines the parts. The meaning of a part can only be understood from the whole; from the context of all the parts. The *Geist* of the whole cannot be grasped without insight into all the parts (Palmer [1969] 1982:77). Schleiermacher (1768–1834) concurred and added that there is actually a series of hermeneutic circles present, as continued engagement is required for better interpretation (Vial 2013:49–50). Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) added that the meaning formed by the relationship of the parts to the whole is grasped by understanding the reciprocal interaction of the whole and the parts. Meaning is therefore always historical and is viewed from a specific viewpoint at a given time. Meaning is contextual and the hermeneutical circle is always historically defined (Palmer [1969] 1982:118).

In the phenomenological tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer, the hermeneutical circle becomes a fundamental principle of understanding one's own nature and situation. Understanding, in its hermeneutical circularity, becomes a condition for the possibility of human experience and inquiry (Hoy 1982:vii). For Heidegger, the concept of the hermeneutic circle belongs to the foundations of hermeneutic theory. It specifically legitimises how hermeneutics, freed from the constraints of the natural sciences' concept of objectivity, can do justice to the historicity of understanding (Gadamer [1965] 1985:235). Heidegger derived this construct from his understanding of the temporality of *Dasein*. When asking about the meaning of being, there is a notable relatedness of 'backward and forward' of what is asked about, as what is interrogated is pre-given, thus as part of the fore-structure of understanding (Heidegger [1926] 1996:6–7). Heidegger's hermeneutic circle was not intended as a method to be followed but as a description of how understanding is attained (Gadamer [1965] 1985:236).

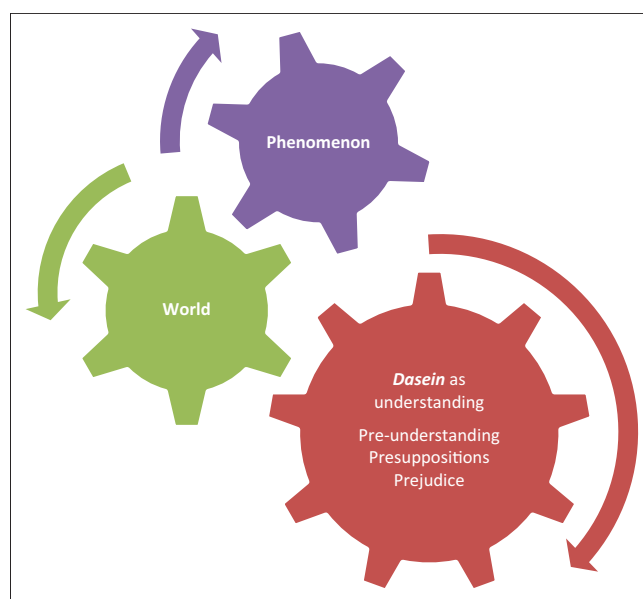
The discussion above about the fore-structure of *Dasein's* task of understanding is important. Understanding departs from a certain set of pre-understandings, presuppositions and prejudices, which function as lenses or filters for interpretation. However, this set of fore-having is constantly questioned and reshaped by the hermeneutic process, forming a repetitive circular movement eventually representing a spiral (Gadamer [1965] 1985:236; Thiselton 1980:104) and to my mind suggests a *plurality* of fusions of hermeneutical horizons. The circularity of the hermeneutic process is integral and should not be regarded negatively or something to escape (Heidegger [1926] 1996:143).

The functioning of the hermeneutical circle as interlocking the hermeneutical situation is shown in Figure 1. *Dasein*, with its pre-structure of pre-understanding, presuppositions and prejudice is in constant circular interaction with the world and phenomena to be interpreted. One does not function without affecting the other, demonstrating the uniqueness of *Dasein* and therefore the individuality of understanding and the continuous fusion of horizons.

This basic model of *Dasein* as understanding will be utilised to investigate the *Dasein* types developed in the earliest church.

### The earliest church

What is meant when speaking about the earliest church or primitive Christianity? The distinction between an earliest Palestinian-Jewish church and pre-Pauline Hellenistic-Gentile church has prevailed for long (Bousset [1921] 1967:1–22, 75–104). A further distinction was made within Hellenistic Christianity, namely, a Hellenistic-Jewish church showing Hellenistic tendencies and adherence to early Jewish conceptions, and a Hellenistic-Gentile church without them



**FIGURE 1:** Hermeneutical dynamics model: *Dasein* as existential understanding in constant circular interaction with the world and phenomena, forming a perpetual hermeneutical circularity.

(Bultmann 1963:368–370). This distinction was further refined by Ferdinand Hahn’s historical study of Jesus’ Christological titles (Hahn [1963] 1969:12). These distinctions were met with doubt by several scholars. Werner Georg Kümmel was convinced that it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the theology of the Hellenistic-Jewish and Hellenistic-Gentile churches and even found it difficult to distinguish between the theology of the earliest church and the Hellenistic church (Kümmel 1973:105vv, 118vv). Oscar Cullmann similarly dismissed these distinctions (Cullmann 1959:323). In spite of these doubts, Eduard Schweizer (1971:52–168) and others still continued with these distinctions (Conzelmann & Lindemann 1980:394–422). This article accepts these distinctions as historically sound and will utilise them in conjunction with several early Jesus groups Burton Mack identified apart from earliest church (Mack 1996:43–96).

These groups and churches will be divided into pre- (or non-) Easter and post-Easter, as some of them did not understand Jesus as the risen Christ as others did. Although the message of pre-Easter understandings of Jesus cannot be typified as kerygma and the groups not labelled as churches, the contents of their messages about Jesus still reflect legitimate *Dasein* types for Jesus groups, and these groups can thus not be ignored. They may however be called pre- or non-Easter proto-types of churches or proto-churches.

### The *Dasein* of pre- or non-Easter proto-churches

Non-Easter proto-churches did not include the reports about Jesus’ crucifixion and his resurrection but focused on his teachings. Amongst these are the Q1 group identified from the first layer of Q material (Malan 2007), which developed into the Q2 group who were responsible for the first layer of Q redaction and Q3 added another layer of redaction after the Jewish war; a pre-Markan Cynic-style wisdom group who focused on the pronouncement stories; the True Disciples of Jesus, a Gnostic group responsible for the sayings Gospel of Thomas; the Congregation of Israel producing the two parallel sets of five pre-Markan miracle stories; and the Pillars in Jerusalem led by Peter and James, the brother of

Jesus and referred to by Paul in his letter to the Galatians around 55 CE (Mack 1996:51–70).

These groups differed in their pre-understanding, presuppositions and prejudice formed by the interaction of their *Dasein* with their world and resulted in different approaches to their understanding of Jesus. This resulted in a variety of *Dasein* types. Some of these groups developed over time such as the Q community and the True Followers of Jesus group, as can be deduced from the redactional layers reflected in their documents. Only the Q3 group at this stage developed into what may be termed ‘church’. The geographical regions of origin were concentrated mostly northern Palestine and Syria, with only one southward, in Jerusalem. All of them came to an end before the end of the first century and was therefore outlived by the churches. Their *Dasein* and hermeneutic stance towards Jesus can be illustrated as in Figure 2. Their pre-understanding,

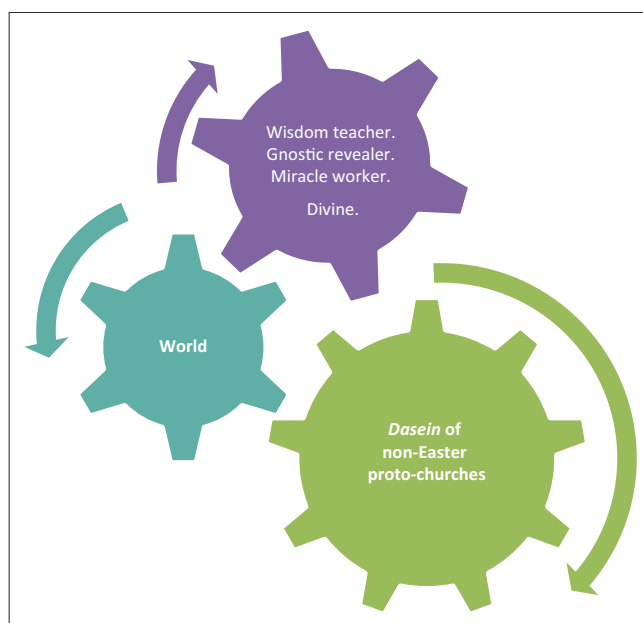


FIGURE 2: Hermeneutic dynamics of non-Easter proto-churches.

TABLE 1: The hermeneutical situations of the non-Easter proto-churches can be summarised as follows.

| Pre-Easter proto-church    | Lifeworld   | Area                                    | Date CE | Texts                      | View of Jesus  | <i>Dasein</i> as self-understanding  |
|----------------------------|---|---|---------|----------------------------|--|--|
| Q1                         | Hellenistic-Jewish: network of small house groups | Galilee                                 | 20–50   | Q1                         | Cynic style Jewish wisdom founder-teacher  | Cynic countercultural wisdom school viewed as Kingdom of God   |
| Q2                         | Hellenistic-Jewish: network of small house groups | Northern Palestine                      | 50–70   | Q2                         | Cynic style Jewish wisdom founder-teacher and apocalyptic prophet                        | Cynic countercultural wisdom with prophetic and apocalyptic warnings   |
| Q3                         | Hellenistic-Jewish: network of small house groups | Northern Palestine                      | 70–90   | Q3                         | Divine being calling God his Father  | Retreat from public encounter; patience and piety whilst awaiting the end of history   |
| Pre-Markan School of Jesus | Hellenistic-Jewish                                | Northern Palestine; South-Western Syria | 50–70   | Pronouncement stories      | Cynic style Jewish wisdom founder-teacher  | Anti-society; anti-Pharisaic; disciples of the wisdom school of Jesus  |
| True Disciples of Jesus    | Hellenistic-Jewish; Gnosticism                    | Northern Syria                          | 80–90   | Sayings Gospel of Thomas   | Revealer of Gnostic enlightenment; symbol of incarnate light                             | Detach from society to an imaginary kingdom of light. Against apocalypticism and rituals   |
| Congregation of Israel     | Hellenistic-Jewish                                | Northern Palestine                      | 40–50   | Pre-Markan miracle stories | Miracle working prophet like Moses, Elijah as founder: movement for Israel’s restoration | Movement for restoration of Israel; socially marginal; ‘new’ Israel; ethnically mixed; self-sufficient; legitimised by Jesus’ miracles |
| Pillars in Jerusalem       | Palestinian-Jewish Galileans                      | Jerusalem, Southern Palestine           | 30–70   | None                       | Unsure   | Jewish sect; adhere to Jewish purity codes; possible political agenda  |

Source: Adapted from Mack, B.L., 1996, *Who wrote the New Testament? The making of the Christian myth*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, CA

presuppositions and prejudice towards Jesus and society were embedded in aspects of their lifeworld, which became clear in their different views of Jesus and their resultant self-understanding.

Similarities may be noted (Mack 1996:70–71):

- Jesus was portrayed as a Jewish religious wisdom teacher.
- Jesus' message of the kingdom of God initiated the formation of such groups.
- Each group recast Jesus and his teachings in their own image.
- They legitimated their view of Jesus in terms of Israel's epic history and its leaders, enhancing his stature and authority thus legitimating their *Dasein*.

## The *Dasein* of the earliest post-Easter Jesus groups

### The *Dasein* of the Christ cults

The Christian churches had their inception with the kerygma about the salvific meaning attributed to the crucifixion of Jesus and the proclamation of his resurrection, by which the historical Jesus became the vindicated saviour and was revered as God. Some pre-Easter proto-churches developed their symbolic legitimisation by casting the historical Jesus as founder figure in a mythical role (Mack 1996:75). Their teachings thus received a much needed protective symbolic universe (Berger & Luckmann 1975:122–129). Before this metamorphosis, there were not yet any churches or Christian kerygma.

The sudden birth of the church at Pentecost and its exponential growth described in the Acts of the Apostles is not historically reliable as it is mostly legendary, of late composition and Acts was not accepted as authoritative until the mid-second century (Haenchen 1982:9, 14–39). Rather, the non-Easter proto-churches spread gradually through cities of Syria, Asia Minor and Greece where they functioned as associations of Jews and gentiles, gathering around meals in the name of their patron deity, to speak about the kingdom of God. Participating was soon regarded as belonging to the kingdom of God. Traces of their convictions is evident in pre-Pauline liturgical fragments such as creedal formulas, hymns, prayers, acclamations and doxologies of the Christ cults extant as quotes in Paul's letters (Mack 1996:76–79).

Figure 3 shows the change in hermeneutical dynamics of the Christ cults, and Table 2 illustrates their hermeneutic situation. Not the historical Jesus as wisdom teacher, but the

divine Christ is viewed as their founder figure. They are no longer a wisdom school but a cult worshipping Christ as their God and Saviour. The interplay between world, the structure of their *Dasein* (pre-understanding, presuppositions and prejudice) and Jesus results in a different and new horizon from non-Easter proto-churches, as the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection is now in central, not the teachings of the historical Jesus.

Christ cults seem to have developed into congregations of the earliest Christian churches.

### The *Dasein* of the earliest Christian churches

What was the essential content of the earliest kerygma and what are the most reliable sources available to us about the earliest kerygma? As the Acts of the Apostles offers an incomplete and legend-tinted picture, historically speaking the most reliable sources are as follows (Bultmann [1948] 1980:34):

- Traditions used in Acts, which can be critically ascertained
- Data from the Pauline letters
- The synoptic tradition shaped within the earliest church

They provide only glimpses from which a broad outline of their preaching can be reconstructed and with a measure of uncertainty. The primitive church undoubtedly did not exhibit a unity as there were initially a Greek and an Aramaic community in Jerusalem and soon after, a Gentile Christian community (Kümmel 1973:105). Non-Christian sources,

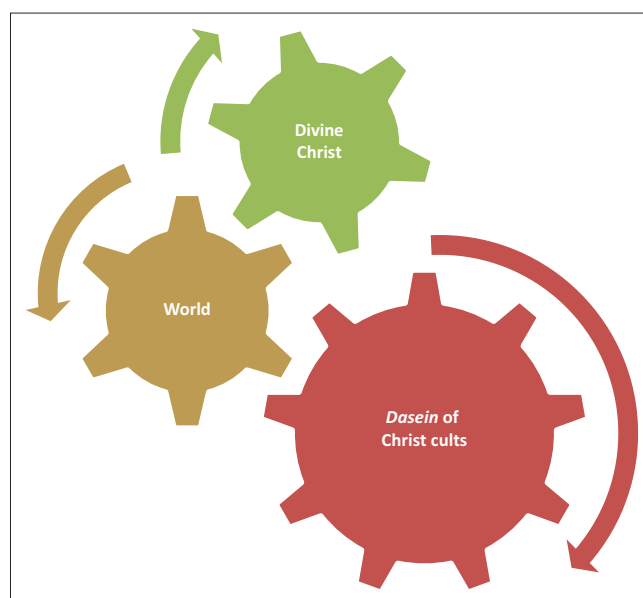


FIGURE 3: The hermeneutic dynamics of the post-Easter Christ cults.

TABLE 2: The hermeneutic situation of the post-Easter Christ cults.

| Post-Easter Christ cults                          | Lifeworld   | Area  | Date CE | Texts                                   | View of Jesus            | <i>Dasein</i> as self-understanding   |
|---|---|---|---------|---|--------------------------|---|
| Random development from non-Easter proto-churches | Hellenistic-Jewish cults gathering in houses of patrons | Cities of Palestine, Syria, Asia-Minor and Greece | 35–50   | Liturgical fragments in Pauline letters | Divine Christ as Saviour | Cult talking about the Kingdom of God at meals in honour of Christ their patron divinity; worship |

Source: Adapted from Mack, B.L., 1996, *Who wrote the New Testament? The making of the Christian myth*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, CA

however, are of very little value, for instance the works of Josephus, Tacitus and Plinius (Conzelmann & Lindemann 1980:398).

What do we learn from the above sources? The earliest church understood themselves as eschatological congregations of the last days (Bultmann [1948] 1980:39–40). Their kerygma was eschatological: a call to repentance, proclamation of forgiveness of sins, salvation and preaching of the kingdom of God. However, the church’s rendering of Jesus’ preaching was altered by the confession: ‘Jesus has risen!’ (Conzelmann 1978:30). They did not view themselves as a new religion or religious community apart from Israel, like the Qumran community. They were Jews and remained Jews. They believed in the God of Israel. The Old Testament contained their holy scriptures. They accepted the Jewish apocalyptic view of the end of the world, the rising of the dead, God’s judgement and the culmination of God’s kingdom. The current three-tiered worldview was still theirs, and they used the Jewish titles for the saviour, namely, Messiah and Son of man. But all these views were radically reconsidered and reformulated according to the centre of their faith: the concentration on the person of Jesus and in service of their

understanding of Jesus as the Son of God, as the new way in which the God of Israel was experienced: Jesus’ death was the sacrifice that promised forgiveness of sins to the faithful (Conzelmann 1978:31). Jesus, who formerly bore the message, became its essential content. The proclaimer became the proclaimed (Bultmann [1948] 1980:35). ‘Die Verkündigung Jesu gehört zu die Voraussetzungen der Theologie des Neuen Testaments und ist nicht ein Teil dieser selbst’ (Bultmann [1948] 1980:1). This presupposition differentiated them from mainstream Judaism, especially as reflected in its confessional sayings and rites, for example:

- ‘Jesus is the Messiah’ (Mk 8:29).
- ‘God raised Jesus from the dead’ (Rm 10:9).
- ‘Christ died for our sins and was raised to life’ (1 Cor 15:3).

These sayings were not abstract, timeless definitions but proclamational pronouncements towards the congregation and society, to communicate what became new after Jesus’ resurrection. The focus was not on the precise wording of formulas and none were prescribed, but on proclaiming the salvation occurrence. However, the Christians stayed within the Jewish faith and society and did not become a sect but a way within Judaism. Their otherness and newness in self-understanding become apparent through their apocalyptic style self-designations: holy ones/saints (αγίοι) (Rm 15:25), the chosen (ἐκλεκτοί) (Mk 13:22) and congregation (ἐκκλησία) (Mt 16:18; 18:17) (Bultmann [1948] 1980:40; Conzelmann 1978:32–35).

Baptism was the rite of initiation for all Christians into the eschatological congregation as it was a bath of purification connected with repentance in preparation for the coming kingdom of God (Bultmann [1948] 1980:41–42) and as imparting forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Conzelmann 1978:36–37).

Assemblies without binding forms of liturgy were held on the first day of the week in the name of Jesus to commemorate his resurrection. Certain offices held by leaders such as apostles, prophets and teachers reveal elements of their assemblies, namely, preaching, prayer and catechism, following the example of synagogue services. Early formulae pronounced during assemblies were *amen*, *hallelujah* and *maranatha* (Conzelmann 1978:37–38). The Old Testament as their Scripture was often used as predictions fulfilled in Jesus’ ministry or as predictions of an apocalyptic end,

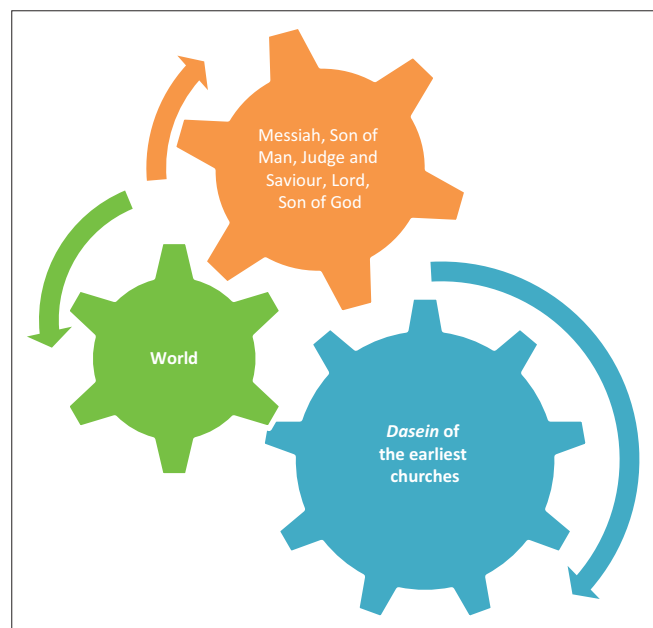


FIGURE 4: Hermeneutic dynamics of the earliest churches.

TABLE 3: Hermeneutic situation of the earliest churches.

| Post-Easter early churches | Lifeworld   | Area                               | Date CE | Texts   | View of Jesus  | Dasein as self-understanding   |
|----------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---------|---|--|--|
| Aramaic-speaking Jewish    | Palestinian-Jewish community                                  | Jerusalem                          | 30+     | Data from older strata of Synoptic gospels, Acts, Pauline letters   | Messiah, Son of Man  | Eschatological congregation, group within Jewish religion; house assemblies and Jerusalem cult attendance; baptism and common meals  |
| Greek speaking             | Hellenistic- Jewish community                                 | Jerusalem                          | 30+     | Data from older strata of Synoptic gospels, Acts, Pauline letters   | Messiah, Son of Man  | Eschatological congregation, group within Jewish religion; house assemblies and Jerusalem cult attendance; baptism and common meals  |
| Greek speaking             | Diverse pre- and peri-Pauline Hellenistic-Jewish communities; | Galilee, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece | 45+     | Antiochene tradition in Acts, inferences in Paul’s letters, inferences in later documents: Hebrews, Barnabas, 1 Clement, James, Kerygma Petri | Judge and Saviour; Lord, Jesus Christ as proper name, risen Lord is the Son of David; the Son of God | Eschatological congregation of believers; self-designation: holy ones, chosen ones, church; diverse influences according to synagogues: Jewish, Gnostic or Greek philosophic ideas, e.g. Stoa, impending Judgement Day; church conscious; ascetic; worship services, sacraments; baptism Lord’s Supper |

Source: Adapted from Mack, B.L., 1996, *Who wrote the New Testament? The making of the Christian myth*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, CA



proving their eschatological consciousness (Bultmann [1948] 1980:44).

Meals ('the Lord's supper' (Bultmann [1948] 1980:150–155) were characteristic of the earliest church and resembled Jesus' open commensality. There were different meals: agape and communion and in the beginning they were held together so that it was difficult to differentiate between them. It seems that communion might have been served first, followed by the agape (Conzelmann 1978). Later, in the Hellenistic communities, under the influence of mystery cults they were used to describe the salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and were understood as participation therein (Bultmann [1949] 1956:196).

## Conclusion

The results reveal that because of the hermeneutic situation of each group, a distinct view of Jesus was formed, a specific style and content for their texts was selected; and each group had its own character (*Dasein* type). The results show that:

- There was and is no objective, standard view of Jesus available or possible.
- There is no objective, canonical set of Jesus' teachings available.
- No ideal *Dasein* type is presented for faith communities
- The hermeneutic dynamics shape the understanding and representation of Jesus.
- The hermeneutic dynamics shapes *Dasein* of groups of followers accordingly.
- Non-Easter following of Jesus was prevalent in the first century CE.
- Texts produced by non-Easter groups became part of post-Easter Christian kerygma.
- All representations of Jesus and his teachings formed the symbolic universes which legitimated these social groups.
- Non-Easter groups may or may not have become part of the post-Easter churches.
- Their becoming extinct may reflect on continued shifts in horizons which may have eventually displaced the initial *Dasein*, causing groups to dissolve or assimilate.

Conclusions to be drawn for faith communities today are:

Regarding hermeneutics:

- The historical nature of the hermeneutic dynamic cannot be denied.
- Historical-critical exegesis and its circular dynamic of understanding are the legitimate and sound hermeneutic model.
- Unhistorical approaches to understanding have definite limitations and should be deemed insufficient.
- There is no plain meaning of any phenomenon or text, only the text or phenomenon as it is understood.
- Faith communities should be aware of the hermeneutic dynamic and consciously partake in it.
- Faith communities should recognise the influence of their pre-understandings, presuppositions and prejudices in

the shaping of their interpretations and proclamations of Jesus and the kerygma.

- All pre-understandings, presuppositions and prejudices should constantly be questioned in the hermeneutical interaction with the texts and adjusted.
- Acceptable hermeneutic practice and standards should be implemented for exegesis.

Regarding the kerygma:

- There is no normative representation of Jesus, only a wide variety.
- The kerygma of the Crucified and Risen One as God's act of salvation is the central presupposition of the church's *Dasein*.

Regarding the *Dasein* of faith communities:

- There is a variety of *Dasein* types possible for faith communities.
- Non-Easter following of Jesus is a legitimate *Dasein* type.
- There should be tolerance for diversity and humility about own views.
- There is no ideal *Dasein* type for faith communities.

The study shows that the hermeneutical dynamics and ever changing hermeneutical situations result in the variety of images of Jesus, kerygmas and *Dasein* types. The variety and constant flux of hermeneutical situations will lead to further image varieties of Jesus, kerygmas and *Dasein* types. The challenge is to consciously engage in the hermeneutical dynamics, so that each interaction with the texts becomes a questioning of the Faithful's *Dasein*, resulting in authentic *Dasein* as followers of Jesus as He becomes known each time, makes his claim on believers and they chose to let their lives be determined by Him. Such constant hermeneutical interaction will necessitate constant revision of the kerygma, liturgy, confessions and practice and will guarantee authenticity in the churches' *Dasein*.

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