

The main objection to my proposal for solving the first basic problem of systematic theology—i.e., its criteriological problem of formally normative witness—is that it is and must be doubtful whether the earliest stratum of Christian witness can be reconstructed with sufficient clarity and reliability to function as a formal norm. I reply to this objection as follows.

That there is indeed room for doubt about this I should not think to deny. But no proposal for solving the problem that I am aware of is wholly free of difficulties. In the case of some of these proposals, including my own, the difficulties in question are, in important part, empirical-historical. If formally normative witness is something historical, as it is, then there is no way to specify what it really is except by empirical-historical inquiry, with whatever clarity and reliability such inquiry allows, given the nature of the available sources and our methods for reconstructing the earliest witness from them. But, then, the appropriate question to put to my proposal, just as to any other, is not whether it leaves room for doubt whether the requisite reconstruction can be successful, which it certainly does, but whether, taken all in all, it is relatively freer of difficulties than the other possible proposals.

Compared with any classical proposal asserting or implying the formal normativeness of some traditional list or collection of New Testament writings:

(1) my proposal is not caught on the horns of the dilemma of either abandoning apostolicity as the principle of the canonicity of these writings or else continuing to claim their formal apostolicity in face of overwhelming evidence that none of them is apostolic in the strict formal sense of being, or being a part of, the earliest, the original and the originating, and therefore constitutive Christian witness, because their authors all make use of sources, oral if not written, earlier than themselves;

(2) my proposal is free of the anomaly of asserting as the formal norm of all Christian witness and theology what neither was nor even could have been thus normative for any of the Christians and churches producing the New Testament writings themselves, or for any other Christian or church prior to at

least the *de facto* closing of the traditional New Testament canon, presumably sometime in the last half of the second century of the Christian era; and

(3) my proposal involves no empirical-historical difficulty that has not always been involved in principle in any attempt to specify the writings that are formally apostolic. Even the difficulties of reconstructing the history of tradition lying behind our extant sources are obviously continuous with the difficulties of determining whether one extant source is earlier than another. And so it is, I venture to think, with any other new (or supposedly new) empirical-historical difficulties that my proposal may involve in fact, as compared with the usual classical alternative. If any such difficulties are not actually conditioned by, they are almost certainly correlated with, the new empirical-historical methods and procedures that are also calculated to deal with them, insofar as they are capable of being dealt with.

On the other hand, the distinct advantage of my proposal, as compared with any revisionary appeal to the historical Jesus, or his witness, as formally normative, is that it is entirely relieved of having to take the single most problematic step in any such appeal. If the formal norm to be specified is not the so-called historical Jesus, but rather the earliest witness of the Christian church, there is no need for any uncontrolled, and, in the nature of our sources, uncontrollable, inference from the church's witness to that of Jesus. Beyond any question, then, specifying the earliest Christian witness as formally normative must always be relatively less doubtful than trying to specify Jesus himself as thus normative. Moreover, any clarity and reliability that may be claimed for the second specification must, in the nature of the case, always be exceeded by what can be claimed for the first. So anyone believing that at least a "new"—or a "third"—quest of the historical Jesus is historically possible as well as theologically necessary can be even more confident about being able to specify the earliest Christian witness with enough clarity and reliability for it to play its irreplaceable role as the formal norm of all Christian witness and theology.