

What is the ground of faith?

For Wilhelm Herrmann, who has much to say on this question that still repays attention, the ground of faith can only be something that believers themselves experience, as distinct from something about which they are informed only by the reports of others. Consequently, the resurrection of Jesus does not belong to the ground of faith, but is merely a more or less necessary idea of faith. The ground of faith, on the contrary, is the historical person of Jesus, or, more exactly, his moral-religious personality, which Herrmann has in mind in speaking of "the inner life of Jesus." By this phrase he refers to the clear and incomparable power of Jesus' moral knowledge and moral will and his overriding conviction of and confidence in God's love for him, which requires him to see in his own person and work the aim of creation, or to see himself as the Messiah through whom God's kingdom comes.

The problem, of course, is that we have no immediate access to the historical Jesus so understood, either, because we are dependent on the picture of him in the gospels, which is presented from the standpoint of Easter. We are given to see Jesus only through the eyes of believing witnesses, through the picture they paint of him. Herrmann agrees with Martin Kähler that faith ought not to be made dependent on the more or less well-founded hypotheses of historians and seekers of the "life of Jesus," who try to get behind the picture of Jesus in the gospels to Jesus himself. And yet he also believes that, independently of what may otherwise be knowable about Jesus, his moral-religious personality stands out beyond any doubt in the gospels' picture.

It is perfectly clear to anyone who studies them, however, that the gospels and the apostolic witness generally have no interest in Jesus as a moral-religious personality, but everywhere understand him as the eschatological emissary of God, whose uniqueness is also revealed precisely by his resurrection. Jesus allows no view of his inner life, but shows himself as the one who, through word and accompanying signs, authoritatively carries out the mission assigned to him. Not a single New Testament witness thinks to ground faith in Christ on the

historical Jesus in abstraction from his resurrection and exaltation, and the same is true of the church's subsequent proclamation down through the centuries. So far as the New Testament witnesses are concerned, resurrection and exaltation unquestionably belong to the ground of faith, not merely to the ideas of faith. The historical Jesus, his moral-religious personality, is incapable of grounding the faith that they attest. Nor can it ground our faith today, as true as it is that real faith is an act of personal trust. For it is not trust in the moral-religious personality of Jesus, but trust in God, who personally acts toward us for our salvation through Jesus Christ.

At the same time, Kähler's position, which he sets forth over against Herrmann's, has its limits. As true as it is that God's revelation takes place through the word, Herrmann's point is nevertheless sound that the word is also the expression of experienced revelation and, often enough, a highly time- and situation-conditioned expression at that, which can become word for us today only by being critically interpreted. Still, Kähler is undoubtedly right over against Herrmann that it is a forced abstraction to want to ground faith on the historical Jesus apart from his being the risen and exalted one. But when Kähler, in opposition to Herrmann's isolation of the historical Jesus, explains that the ground of faith is the whole biblical Christ, i.e., the whole New Testament witness to Christ, this, also, is not without difficulties. For aside from the time-conditioned form of the New Testament witness, it contains elements about which one must indeed ask whether they really belong to the ground of faith or whether they aren't merely ideas of faith—such as, for example, the *natus ex virgine* and the ascension. The slogan, "the whole biblical Christ," only too easily becomes a license for an uncritical biblicism and a massive orthodoxy in which the heteronomous moment of faith is unbearably enlarged.

But if the resurrection must be unconditionally reckoned to belong to the ground of faith—simply because it belonged to this ground from the beginning and, what's more, is the real ground of the whole New Testament witness to Christ—the question as to how it can be appropriated by faith becomes all the more urgent. And at this point, Bultmann's formulations are not entirely happy,

with their appeal to the authoritative character of the witness and the obedience- or risk-character of faith. One ought not to overlook, to be sure, that Bultmann typically embeds these formulations in a context that makes clear that, in calling us to believe in the death and resurrection of Christ as the eschatological event, the kerygma at the same time opens up a possibility for understanding ourselves. In other words, Bultmann is not content to speak only of the claim of the witness, but goes on to speak of the person on whom the claim is made.

In any case, I should say that the ground of faith is neither the moral-religious personality of Jesus (Herrmann) nor the whole biblical Christ (Kähler), nor even the eschatological emissary of God, whose uniqueness is also revealed by his resurrection (Grass). The ground of faith, rather, is the Jesus who is experienced already during his own ministry as himself God's word, in that the event of his speaking and of the earliest witnesses' hearing him is experienced as God's decisive act of salvation. This, of course, is Bultmann's answer, especially as he develops it in *Glauben und Verstehen* 1: 204 f. But, unfortunately, Bultmann sometimes so expresses it that its difference from Herrmann's is not entirely clear, beyond the obvious difference that, for Herrmann, the resurrection is only a more or less necessary idea of faith, whose ground is the inner life of Jesus, whereas, for Bultmann, the resurrection expresses the significance of the cross experienced in the light of the disciples' earlier experience of the historical Jesus.

The problem here is the term, "the historical Jesus" (*der historische Jesus*); and this is why I hold that it is necessary to distinguish more clearly and systematically than Bultmann does between the *empirical-historical* Jesus who could at most be the primary authority for Christian faith, witness, and theology and the *existential-historical* Jesus who can be and is their explicit primal ontic source. By clearly and consistently employing this distinction, one can argue that the ground of faith—of the apostles' faith as well as our own—is the existential-historical Jesus in this sense, Easter being the moment when he was experienced anew as faith's ground, notwithstanding his crucifixion.

The uniqueness of the apostles, however, lies in the fact that it is solely through their witness that we today, like all of their other successors before us, can be related to Jesus as the ground of faith. On the other hand, their witness, although authoritative for us, and formally authoritative at that, is not authoritarian. This it isn't both because it itself is authorized, in turn, by the existential-historical Jesus whom it proclaims and because the possibility of self-understanding that it thereby opens up for us is, as Bultmann rightly says, our own authentic possibility for understanding ourselves, and can be shown to be so by religious and philosophical (including moral and metaphysical) reflection.

20 July 1983; rev. 9 October 2003