

Why is the earliest Christian witness uniquely authoritative?

The earliest Christian witness is distinguished from all other Christian witness by virtue of two characteristics: (1) it is nearer to the historical event that it attests as the decisive event of salvation than any other (later) Christian witness; and (2) it is the original and originating and therefore constitutive Christian witness by which all other (later) Christian witness is and is to be authorized.

Clearly, the earliest Christian witness cannot be uniquely authoritative simply because of the first of these characteristics, i.e., simply because it is nearer to the historical event to whose decisive significance it bears witness. Nearness to an event in no way guarantees correctly understanding it or appropriately responding to it. Those who crucified Jesus because they misunderstood his claim or responded to it inappropriately were just as near to him as those who understood him and accepted his claim. Therefore, being nearer to his claim than other responses that are further removed from it cannot be the reason for the earliest witness's unique authority. For if nearness as such were the reason for the unique authority of the positive witness to Jesus borne by the earliest Christian community, one would have to allow, self-contradictorily, that the negative witness borne by those responsible for his crucifixion is also uniquely authoritative.

It is because of the second of its distinguishing characteristics, therefore, that the earliest Christian witness is uniquely authoritative, i.e., it is thus authoritative because it is the original and originating and therefore constitutive Christian witness by which all other (later) Christian witness is and is to be authorized. If the Christian witness is constituted explicitly as such by the claim expressed or implied by the original and originating and therefore constitutive Christian witness, then this earliest witness is uniquely authoritative for all Christian witness. For even if it, in turn, is authorized by a source beyond itself—namely, by the historical event that it attests as the decisive event of salvation—it is just as true that the only necessary and therefore sufficient

condition of any Christian witness's being authorized by this same primal source is that it agree in substance with this earliest Christian witness.

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