

Why is the earliest (= apostolic) witness normative?

I should suppose the answer to this question is not simply because it is closest to Jesus, and hence closest to the locus of revelation, because there is always the possibility that those who are closest to an event understand it, or its significance, less adequately than some who stand further away from it. What but some supernatural overriding of natural conditions could rule out this possibility? Precluding such supernatural intervention, however, one must allow for this possibility, and hence concede that the earliest witness can at best be contingently normative.

But there is another answer. The earliest witness is normative because the Christian community is the community constituted by this earliest witness and/or conformed to it, in substance if not also in form. Consequently, to be a Christian in the sense of belonging to the Christian community is eo ipso to accept the earliest, hence constitutive, Christian witness as uniquely normative.

Of course, to accept the earliest witness as thus normative at best accounts for its de facto normativeness for those who accept it. But why is it also normative de iure if not precisely because of its proximity to the event of revelation by which it is authorized? Once more, however, being proximate to a putative source of authority is one thing, being authorized by this source, something else; for there is always the possibility that even those closest to the source misunderstand it, and, therefore, are not authorized by it at all.

The only way to avoid the difficulty, then, is to define the source of authority and the authority it authorizes correlatively, in relation to one another--as follows: If Christians are all those who belong to the community constituted by and/or conformed to the earliest Christian witness, this witness is eo ipso uniquely normative for Christians. It is so, however, de iure as well as de facto, because, or insofar as, it is authorized by the Jesus Christ to whom it bears witness. Conversely, the Jesus Christ who authorizes the earliest Christian witness de iure is none other than the one to whom it bears more or less adequate witness.

Thus the reason the earliest Christian witness is uniquely normative, so far as its normativeness is understood to be de iure as well as de facto, is the Jesus Christ to whom it bears witness. This Jesus Christ is the explicit primal source of all properly Christian authority; and the unique normativeness of the earliest (= apostolic) witness is that it is the original and originating witness to this Jesus Christ.