

Who is Jesus?

Jesus is the one through whom God decisively reveals Godself as the gift and demand of love and therefore as authorizing our own existence of faith working through love.

This, at any rate, is the one thing that Jesus is *asserted* to be by the earliest Christian witness, however many the ways in which the assertion is made or implied. And this is *all* that Jesus is asserted to be, whatever else he may be *assumed* to be or to have been by those who make or imply the assertion.

This can also be put by saying that the existential significance of the event of Jesus is that each of us is thereby decisively judged and freed by the liberating judgment of God's love, thereby being called to an existence in faith. Whatever Jesus may have said or done, the meaning of Jesus for us is the decisive gift and demand of God's love and thus the possibility of entrusting ourselves to this love and leading our lives in loyalty to it.

We know for a fact that, as the tradition concerning Jesus grew, one of the ways of expressing his decisive existential significance—or, if you will, one of the ways of asserting him to be what the earliest witnesses asserted him to be—was to attribute words and deeds to him that he can hardly have said and done. Consequently, we have to be sensitive to the possibility that not everything that appears to have been assumed about Jesus really was assumed about him. In many cases, it was rather *asserted* of him as a way of asserting the one thing that the earliest community had to assert—namely, that Jesus is the decisive re-presentation of God through whom both they and all to whom they make the assertion are decisively confronted by God's own gift and demand of love and hence by the possibility of existing in faith in this love.

Speaking of the cross, Bultmann says, "It is precisely not to mythological, but to existential-historical understanding that the empirical-historical event [*sc.* of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth] reveals itself as the salvation event, insofar as genuine existential-historical understanding

understands an empirical-historical event in its significance. All the mythological talk, at bottom, seeks to do nothing other than express the significance of the empirical-historical event. In the significance that belongs to it, the empirical-historical event of the cross has created a new existential-historical situation; and the proclamation of the cross as the salvation event asks the hearer whether she or he will appropriate this meaning, whether she or he will allow her- or himself to be crucified with Christ" (KM, 1: 43).

According to Marxsen and others, however, the earliest Christian witness contains no proclamation of the cross such as Bultmann here presupposes. But even allowing this, by no means insignificant difference, one can still apply what Bultmann says about the Christ-kerygma's proclamation of the cross to the Jesus-kerygma's proclamation of what Jesus is assumed to have said and done. In the significance that belongs to it, the empirical-historical event of Jesus' words and deeds—in its sheer "*that*" as event—has created a new existential-historical situation; and the proclamation of this event as the salvation event asks the hearer whether she or he will appropriate this meaning, and so forth. In short, in the case of the Jesus-kerygma, no less than in the case of the Christ-kerygma, what is asserted, implicitly if not explicitly, is that Jesus is the liberating judgment of God's love and therefore the ground of our own existence in faith. The assertion itself, accordingly, is by way of asking the hearer whether she or he will actualize the possibility of such faith by accepting Jesus as God's liberating judgment.

Of course, if Bultmann's basic view is correct that Jesus' own proclamation already at least implied a christology, one could say that not only the *Jesus-kerygma*, but also *Jesus' own kerygma* can be analyzed in essentially the same way. Jesus at least implied, in other words, that in the significance that belongs to it, the empirical-historical event of his own ministry of word and deed has created a new existential-historical situation; and his implicit proclamation of this event, the event of his own ministry, asks his hearers whether they will appropriate this meaning, whether they will "follow" him.