

Who Is Jesus?

1. By its very nature, all Christian faith and witness—including the earliest, constitutive, and therefore formally authoritative Christian witness—are the believing and witnessing response to an *event*—namely, to *the* event of the implicit or explicit assertion of Christian faith as our authentic possibility as human beings. To this event the Christian witness, from the earliest witness on, gives the name "Jesus." But it is just as true that what the Christian witness means by "Jesus" is nothing other than this event of the actual assertion of Christian faith, implicitly or explicitly, as our authentic possibility, i.e., the event to which all Christian faith and witness are and must be the believing and witnessing response and which is itself re-presented, or presented again, a second time, in all Christian witness, insofar, at least, as it is conformed to the formally authoritative, because constitutive witness of the earliest Christian community. In other words, it is as true that Jesus is nothing or no one other than the event to which all Christian faith and witness are the response as that all Christian faith and witness are nothing other than the believing and witnessing response to the event named "Jesus."

2. Therefore, so far as Christian faith and witness are concerned—and hence so far as Christian *theology*, also, is concerned—the relevant question about Jesus is the question about the event that is re-presented in any Christian witness of faith, insofar as it is appropriately Christian. But this is to say, obviously, that the relevant question about Jesus is the question about the event that is itself present again, a second time, in the earliest, constitutive, and therefore formally authoritative witness of the church. It is this event that is attested to be the assertion of our authentic possibility, and it is to this event that all Christian faith and witness are and must be the believing and witnessing response.

3. Presupposed here, of course, is that the Christian community is constituted as such not only by the original event of the assertion of faith, to which the Christian witness gives the name "Jesus," but also by the believing and witnessing response to this event by the earliest community. But just this is what is also evidently presupposed by the New Testament's insistence that

authentically to believe in Jesus and appropriately to bear witness to him is to believe in him *with* the apostles and to conform one's own witness of faith substantially to *theirs*. In other words, the only *Christian* faith in Jesus is *apostolic* faith, and the only *Christian* witness to Jesus is *apostolic* witness.

4. It in no way follows from this, however, that all appropriate Christian witness must be expressed in the concepts and terms of the earliest Christian witness. The New Testament itself makes abundantly clear that, from a very early time, Christians accepted the responsibility implied by their faith to re-express the apostolic witness in new concepts and terms understandable in their own more or less different situations and responsive to the needs and questions of the different persons to whom they were called to bear witness. The critical point in demanding conformity with the apostolic witness, whether in the case of the New Testament writers or in our own case, is not that the concepts and terms conform to the earliest witness, but only that, whatever the concepts and terms, they appropriately re-express substantially the same apostolic witness, thereby re-presenting yet again the event of the assertion of faith as our authentic possibility, to which the name "Jesus" is properly given.

5. All that has been said above is really only an inference from the demand of the Reformers that Christian faith is and must be explicit faith, not merely so-called implicit faith. The Jesus in whom Christians believe and to whom they bear witness has always been the Jesus in whom *they themselves* believe and whose decisive significance for them as well as for those to whom they bear witness is present *in their witness itself*, not in something or someone outside it or beyond it called "the historical Jesus." But true and important as this is, there are good reasons for not saying that all Christian faith and witness are *explicit* belief in or witness to Jesus as the Christ, or as the assertion of our authentic possibility as human beings. One of the striking facts about the earliest Christian witness that is accessible to us only by reconstruction from the New Testament writings is that it appears to be quite lacking in any explicit christology. This is just the reason, of course, that New Testament scholars today generally tend to think that the historical Jesus could not have made any explicit christological claims concerning his own person and work. But as probable as this may be, an even more probable

conclusion is that the earliest layer of the church's own witness of faith is only implicitly, not explicitly, christological, its christology being implicit in the fact *that* it bore witness to Jesus as the assertion of our authentic possibility, rather than in *what* it said about him by way of explicit christological claims. At any rate, what Willi Marxsen speaks of as the "Jesus-kerygma," which is more or less the same as the earliest layer of the synoptic tradition, is notably lacking in any explicit christological claims. To the extent, then, that this stratum of tradition may be most appropriately regarded as "apostolic," the witness of the earliest church cannot be said to have been explicitly christological, although the fact that the witness was borne *as witness to Jesus*, despite his death, attests to a believing response to the originating assertion of faith—a response that, like this assertion itself, was only implicitly christological.

6. But even if it should prove to be the case that either Jesus himself or the earliest community did express an *explicit* christology, it remains that the only Jesus about whom Christian faith and witness, and hence Christian theology as well, are concerned to ask is the Jesus who is attested in the apostolic witness of faith and in all other Christian witness that substantially agrees with the apostles' witness. It is precisely the Jesus discernible in *this* witness of faith who is the explicit primal source of all Christian faith, witness, and theology and of whatever is either formally or substantially normative for them. Therefore, whether or not the christology of Jesus himself or that of the earliest church was explicit or only implicit is a secondary question. The only primary question is whether or not it is the Jesus attested in the apostles' witness who gives the predicates of their witness and of all other Christian witness whatever material meaning they may be supposed to have.

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