

What do I mean, exactly, by "the existential-historical Jesus"?

I mean the Jesus who simply as a person or event of the past—in his sheer "*that*," as distinct from his "*what*"—is of decisive existential significance for us.

Thus, although I do not dispute that what Jesus thought, said, and did might very well be existentially significant for us if only we could determine it empirical-historically and interpret it existentially, this is not what *I* mean by "the existential-historical Jesus," although I recognize that the term itself hardly suffices to make this clear. Nor do I mean even what Rudolf Bultmann means by the Jesus with whom, as he argues, it *is* possible to have an existential encounter and whose proclamation *can be* subjected to existentialist interpretation, provided one identifies the subject of this encounter with the bearer of "the complex of ideas" expressed in the earliest accessible stratum of the synoptic tradition, and his proclamation with these ideas. In other words, what I mean by "the existential-historical Jesus" is no more the empirical-historical Jesus of the new quest (or "the third quest"!), who is identified by what he is *represented* as having thought, said, and done than it is the empirical-historical Jesus of the old quest, who is identified by what he *in fact did* think, say, and do.

No, "the existential-historical Jesus," as I understand the phrase, is not identified either by what *Jesus* thought, said, and did, or by what he is represented as having thought, said, and done, but rather by what *God* ever and again thinks, says, and does through him. And I mean "through *him*," not through what he thought, said, and did, considered in its "*whatness*," as distinct from its "*thatness*," or sheer occurrence. Whatever Jesus may have thought, said, and done, God ever and again thinks, says, and does through him himself, simply as historical person or event, what God has to think, say, and do toward us.

Of course, "God" here is simply a way of referring to the strictly ultimate reality necessarily presupposed by my own existence and any other existence that is so much as possible. And any talk about what God "thinks," "says," or "does" is merely a symbolic or metaphorical way of talking about

the meaning of this strictly ultimate reality for us, in the sense of the understanding of ourselves and others in relation to this reality that is appropriate to it or authorized by it. Therefore, one could also say that "the existential-historical Jesus" is identified by what strictly ultimate reality is represented as meaning for us through Jesus in his meaning for us here and now in the present.

Just what does thus identify the existential-historical Jesus can be known by us today only through the witness of the Christian community in which his meaning for us is expressed. According to this witness, Jesus means love—in the first instance, the "all-compassion," the "pure unbounded love" of God Godself; and then, secondly, the possibility of our faith in God's love and so our own returning love for God and for all whom God loves. But there is all the difference between thus saying that Jesus *means* love and saying that he *meant* love, however probable it may be empirical-historically that what he actually did think, say, and do during his life and ministry was all by way of bearing witness to the prevenient love of God for all of us and the possibility, consequently, of our returning love for God and for all things in God. In other words, the existential-historical Jesus is not simply one more witness among others to the gift and demand of God's love, not even the first and foremost such witness; that, on the contrary, is the role proper to the empirical-historical Jesus who is the object of the quest of the historical Jesus, either old or new. No, the existential-historical Jesus is himself, in his very person or simply as an event of the past, the gift and demand of God's love itself now become explicitly an event for us.

Of course, the very Christian witness that so represents Jesus to us is sufficient evidence that it is as identified in this way that he must have already been experienced by those to whom we owe this witness but whose own experience of him neither was nor could have been mediated by some still earlier witness. Therefore, although we today can experience the existential-historical Jesus only through the Christian witness, this was not so for the first witnesses whose experience of him existentially was immediate. Moreover, the purpose of their witness, as of all other Christian witness in communion with it is in no way to substitute itself for the Jesus whom it attested. On the contrary, its sole purpose, and the sole purpose of any other

Christian witness that is at all valid, is to mediate an experience of Jesus himself—not, indeed, the empirical-historical Jesus in his being in himself then and there in the past, but the existential-historical Jesus in his meaning for us here and now in the present.

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