

*Which Jesus?\**

The following are "the most important areas of broad consensus" discovered by the interdisciplinary group of biblical scholars and theologians, the results of whose work are published as a collection of essays in the book, *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Eerdmans, 2008), edited by Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays.

1. "Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew."
2. "The identity of Jesus is reliably attested and known in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments."
3. "The entirety of the canonical witness is indispensable to a faithful rendering of the figure of Jesus."
4. "In order to understand the identity of Jesus rightly, the church must constantly engage in the practice of deep, sustained reading of these texts." (The immediately following sentence reads, significantly—and very differently!—"If Jesus is to be known through the testimony of the apostolic witnesses, one primary means of access to him will be through disciplined, faithful engagement with the texts through which that testimony is mediated" [30].)
5. "To come to grips with the identity of Jesus, we must know him as he is presented to us through the medium of narrative."
6. "The trajectory begun within the New Testament of interpreting Jesus' identity in and for the church has continued through Christian history."
7. "Jesus is not dead; he lives."

8. "Because Jesus remains a living presence, he can be encountered in the community of his people, the body of Christ."

9. "The identity of Jesus is something that must be learned through long-term discipline."

\*Beverly Roberts Gaventa & Richard B. Hays, "Which Jesus? The Search for a Scholarly Consensus," *The Christian Century*, 125, 22 (4 November 2008): 27-32.

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Response:

*Ad 1.* Yes, Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, just as he was a male human being, a member of a certain social class living in an occupied country of the Roman Empire, a rabbi, an eschatological prophet, and so on. But the relevance of any such facts to rightly understanding his identity *Christianly*, both religiously and theologically, remains to be determined.

*Ad 2.* "Reliably attested" *how?*—empirical-historically, existential-historically, or? And how, in the nature of the case, could "the identity of Jesus of Nazareth" be reliably attested and known in the scriptures of the *Old Testament*?

*Ad 3.* Hardly! If "the entirety of the canonical witness" were indispensable to "a faithful rendering of the figure of Jesus," then neither Paul nor John, not to mention Mark or the author(s)/editor(s) of *Q* could have provided such a faithful rendering. In fact, the evidence is clear that none of the earliest witnesses to Jesus—none of the apostles themselves!—could have faithfully rendered him as a figure if the condition stipulated by this statement had been the *sine qua non* of their doing so.

*Ad 4.* That the church must indeed constantly engage in the practice of deep, sustained reading of "the testimony of the apostolic witnesses" if it is to understand the

identity of Jesus rightly is not the least reason to make this statement. Moreover, the first step prior to any deep, sustained reading of the apostles' testimony is the empirical-historical task of reconstructing it, since it is not identical with the "canonical witness," but is rather a canon *before* the scriptural canon.

*Ad 5.* This statement is true if, and only if, what is meant by "narrative" is something rather different from what is now commonly meant by the term, especially by so-called post-liberal theologians for whom it has become a shibboleth. The difference is well brought out by Luther: "Wenn Christus soll in uns gebildet sein, so dürfen wir nicht nur die Geschichte hören, sondern das Herz muß den Schluß machen: ich hör nicht nur eine Geschichte, sondern mein Geschenk." And also by Wittgenstein: "Das Christentum gründet sich nicht auf eine historische Wahrheit, sondern es gibt uns eine (historische) Nachricht und sagt: jetzt glaube! Aber nicht, glaube diese Nachricht mit dem Glauben, der zu einer geschichtlichen Nachricht gehört,—sondern: glaube, durch dick und dünn und das kannst Du nur als Resultat eines Lebens. Hier hast Du eine Nachricht,—*verhalte Dich zu ihr nicht, wie zu einer anderen historischen Nachricht!* Lass sie eine ganz andere Stelle in Deinem Leben einnehmen.—Daran ist nichts Paradoxes!"

*Ad 6.* The trajectory of interpreting Jesus' identity in and for the church didn't begin "within the New Testament," but before it—in the apostolic witness that is accessible to us today only by way of empirical-historical reconstruction, working from the extant New Testament writings and relying on our own contemporary methods and knowledge.

*Ad 7.* Jesus does indeed live—everlastingly in God, and in the hearts and lives of his own.

*Ad 8.* And because he remains a living presence to all who receive him through obedient faith, he can indeed be encountered in "the community of his people, the body of Christ," through their valid witness, which is to say, through the ministry and word of reconciliation that God has entrusted to them through Christ (2 Cor 5:18 ff.).

*Ad 9.* Yes, but "something that must be learned through long-term discipline" is ambiguous as between something that must be learned through the long-term discipline proper to Christian theology as critical appropriation of Christian witness and something that can only be learned through the long-term discipline proper to the Christian life itself as—in Wittgentstein's words—"Resultat eines Lebens." The two kinds of learning and discipline are significantly different and not to be confused.

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