

Why can't Christian witness be legitimated by appealing to the empirical-historical Jesus?

1. There are two different senses in which one might reasonably speak of legitimating Christian witness by appealing to the empirical-historical Jesus: (1) in the sense of thereby establishing it as credible in terms of common human experience and reason; and (2) in the sense of thereby establishing it as appropriate according<sup>to</sup> what is the primary authority for Christian witness.

2. It lies in the very logic of the case that the existential-historical assertions comprising Christian witness could never be legitimated, in the first sense of being established as credible, by appealing to empirical-historical assertions about Jesus. If they were, in fact, credible, this could only be because of their *existential*-historical truth, and that no empirical-historical assertions could any more establish than disestablish. Therefore, the most that appealing to such assertions could even conceivably establish is some degree or other of empirical-historical continuity between Christian witness and the witness of Jesus himself.

3. But neither could establishing such empirical-historical continuity between Christian witness and Jesus' own witness ever legitimate the former in the sense of establishing it as appropriate. Christian witness does not consist simply in reproducing Jesus' witness, so as thereby to appeal to Jesus merely as an authority, even the primary authority, that has to legitimate it. Rather, Christian witness consists in asserting Jesus himself to be the decisive act of God, so as thereby to appeal to Jesus, not as a mere authority, not even the primary authority, but as the explicit, primal, ontic *source* of authority by which all Christian authorities are and are always to be authorized. For this reason, the primary authority for Christian witness, by which alone it can be legitimated as appropriate, is not the empirical-historical Jesus, but the earliest Christian witness to the *existential*-historical Jesus, and, in this sense, "the apostolic witness."