

1. The subject of the christological assertion is usually held to be the historical Jesus because it is tacitly assumed that the real Christian canon, in the sense of the primary authority or formal norm of appropriateness, is the historical Jesus. (Significantly, this assumption is made by all parties to the discussion, including those who, failing to find the requisite continuity between the historical Jesus and the church's christology, disavow the second as unauthorized and illegitimate.)

2. Against this assumption, however, are the most weighty objections—theological as well as historical. The historical objection is that, if the canon were to be the historical Jesus, one would be faced with an inescapable dilemma simply because of the nature of our sources, all of which are at best secondary, not primary. Either the canon would be accessible and could actually be applied, in which case it could not possibly be the historical Jesus after all, but, at best, the apostolic witness to Jesus accessible in the earliest stratum of the synoptic tradition; or the canon really would be the historical Jesus, in which case it could not possibly be accessible and applicable because it would be historically *inaccessible*, the earliest witness accessible to any historical quest for Jesus being, not his witness, but the witness of the earliest community. Nor is the theological objection to the assumption any less serious—namely, that it would tacitly assign to Jesus, contrary to the intention of the apostolic witness, the role that rightly belongs to the apostles themselves, thereby denying the claim that the witness of faith makes about Jesus by its christological assertion. The point of that assertion is not that Jesus is *an* authority, even the *primary* authority, and thus the formal norm or canon, but rather that Jesus is the explicit primal ontic *source* of authority, by which *all* witness, including even the formally normative witness of the apostles is and is always to be authorized.

3. But there is an alternative assumption that is entirely free of these objections. On it, the real canon, and thus the primary authority or formal norm of appropriateness, is not the historical Jesus but the witness of the apostles, in the sense of the earliest Christian witness accessible to us. Accordingly, the significant thing is not that Jesus at least implicitly claimed to be what the church explicitly claims him to be, but rather that what the apostolic community understood by Jesus was the one through whom they

and, by means of their witness, also all their hearers were and are confronted with just such a claim. Jesus, they confessed (in one formulation or another), is the one through whom both they and their hearers are decisively confronted with the gift and demand of God's love and thus with the possibility of obedient faith, i.e., unreserved trust in God's love and unqualified loyalty to its cause.

4. But this means that to accept the assertion implied by their confession in no way requires one to assent to the truth of certain *empirical-historical* assertions about Jesus—to the effect that he himself already made or, at least, implied the same christological claim. On the contrary, whatever the truth or falsity of any such assertions, to accept the claim re-presented in the apostolic witness as Jesus' claim is to accept a strictly *existential-historical* assertion—to the effect that, being the gift and demand of God's love become explicit, Jesus is of decisive significance for human existence.

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