

What do we learn from the earliest stratum of Christian witness?

1. We learn that the earliest Christians seem to have understood themselves as the promised eschatological congregation of God, which God had already called into being through the decisive event of sending Jesus as the Christ. Because of this event, eschatological existence—existence as human beings will live it in the eschaton, seated around God's table, and so on—is already possible here and now. Thus the earliest community bore witness to Jesus as the Messiah, or the Christ, of God, whom God had appointed to this office by raising him from the dead. No doubt the full christological implications of their self-understanding and witness dawned on them only gradually. But implicit in their understanding of themselves as the elect community of the last days, and hence the true Israel of God, was an understanding of Jesus as well as of themselves as eschatological phenomena.

2. If we ask now how the earliest community came to this understanding, the most reasonable answer is that they came to it by accepting the claim for Jesus' decisive significance and for their own status as already accepted by God through him that was at least implicit in his own witness—if not in its "*what*," or content, then certainly in its "*that*" as actual event. Whether or not Jesus taught anything in the way of an explicit christology, it is only reasonable to conclude that he did point to the fact of his own presence as decisive for his hearers, in that, through him, they already had the possibility of living eschatologically. The actual event of his bearing witness to them as prophet and teacher, and of their being addressed by his witness, was itself the decisive event of God's salvation, already anticipating in the present the final judgment of the coming Son of Man. In any event, it seems clear that Jesus' own witness of faith was simply pure Judaism, or, as we may also say, radical Judaism. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he came demanding obedience to God's will, consistently understood as a moral will, and hence as demanding obedience to God's moral law. The difference between Jesus' view and that of the prophets is that he utterly and completely radicalized the moral law, as demanding *radical* obedience—not

simply the doing of right things, but the doing of right things rightly, not simply justice, but love.

3. Of course, this answer to the question of how the earliest community came to understand itself and Jesus could be historically incorrect. Since we have no primary sources from Jesus himself, whether he in fact said and did what he is represented as saying and doing in the earliest stratum of Christian witness cannot be certainly determined. There seems little question, however, that it is in this way that the earliest church understood him. For them, the prophet of God's rule and the teacher of radical obedience to God's law is himself, as actual occurrence, God's own act of giving and demanding obedient faith, i.e., unreserved trust in God's love and unqualified loyalty to its cause in the world. This is the claim that the earliest community implicitly affirms by following Jesus and then makes explicit, in face of his crucifixion, by asserting that God has declared him to be Messiah by raising him from the dead.

4. If this is so, however, it is clear that, from its earliest beginnings, the Christian witness has represented Jesus as more—indefinitely, if not infinitely, more—than merely another prophet and teacher. Correspondingly, Christians have understood themselves more or less clearly and consistently as something qualitatively different from yet one more historical movement oriented to a certain founder or leader—as something indefinitely, if not infinitely, other and more than a Jewish sect or denomination made up of those who follow Rabbi Jesus.

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1. Jesus' own witness, considered in its "what," or content, is, in its metaphysical aspect, a witness to the reality of God's coming reign and, in its moral aspect, a witness to love of God and love of neighbor as oneself as the demand as well as the gift of God's rule. In this sense, we may well say, with Bultmann, that Jesus' witness is "pure Judaism, pure prophetism." We may also

say that Jesus' witness expresses, in its full radicality, the promise and demand of God already attested in the Old Testament.

2. But Jesus himself, as distinct from his witness (or the "*that*" of Jesus' witness, as distinct from its "*what*," or content, morally as well as metaphysically), is the decisive event of God's prevenient grace, the gift of God's love already enabling obedience to God's demand and already fulfilling God's promise here and now in the present. As such, Jesus decisively re-presents God's already doing all that could conceivably be done by anyone to fulfill human life short of its final transformation in the eschaton.

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