

Is Jesus Christ available only in the Christian witness?

The Christian witness to Jesus Christ is not an accidental and secondary mediation, but rather itself belongs to the decisive saving event as the witness authorized by that event. In this sense, the decisive saving event is not what it is without the witness to it. There is no way behind the witness to a decisive saving event that can be separated from it, be it a "historical Jesus" or a figure in some cosmic drama of salvation. Yes, Jesus Christ is available only in the Christian witness.

But, surely, as true as this may be for all Christians after the first—all "disciples at second hand," as Kierkegaard calls them—it can hardly be true of those in whose responding faith the Christian witness itself originated. No, indeed, it cannot. The first Christians, properly called apostles, responded immediately to the decisive saving event itself, not to the witness of faith authorized by it. How so? The witness borne by the earliest community that Jesus has been made Messiah by God's raising him from the dead and will soon come as such, reflecting as it does their self-understanding as the eschatological community of the called, makes clear that, for them, the decisive saving event has already occurred in their encounter with the historical person of Jesus. They understand Jesus' word—not "*what*" it says, in its timeless ideal content, but "*that*" he says it and says it now, his having spoken it and their having been addressed by it—as the decisive saving act of God.

To what extent Jesus himself so understood his word and stressed the fact of his person as significant, even decisive, in that he wanted to be the bearer of the decisive word of God in the last hour, is harder to say. What our sources permit us to speak about is how Jesus was understood by those who responded to him, not how he understood himself. Certainly, as he was understood by the earliest witnesses now accessible to us (those who, by our standards, are "apostles," if anyone is), his own witness of faith implied the claim for the decisive significance of his person that their witness to him as Messiah made explicit. Thus they understood their explicit understanding of him as Messiah to

be their answer to his own implicit question whether they were willing so to understand him, although the force of their witness that he *is* the Messiah is due to their conviction that the question he raised is really *God's* question to them.

In any case, so far as the first witnesses are concerned, the ground of their faith is not an already existing witness of faith to Jesus Christ but the witness of faith of Jesus himself—understood, however, in its “*that,*” rather than in its “*what,*” as the decisive saving event by which both their faith and their witness of faith are authorized.

For all Christians after the first, however, the claim can be made that the Christian witness itself is the saving event, not, indeed, either as the bearer of certain timeless ideal contents or as the mediator of historical knowledge, but as the witness of faith legitimated by the person of Jesus Christ, who is himself present in it and available as such only therein.

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