

Baptists *and*
Their Contribution
to the Shaping of
Jesus

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PROLOGUE

The Baptist Vision

Persistent Questions about Christ

Christians in general have understood and shaped Jesus in different fashion with different results. They have shaped Jesus with metaphysical and theological speculation and affirmation, through historical-critical investigation and judgment, and by artistic and literary imagination. One particular way of shaping Jesus does not validate or invalidate other ways of shaping Jesus. Different shapings allowed different ways of mapping Jesus to the world, different ways of mapping human experience to the divine, and different ways of confessing Jesus as Lord. In these different shapings Jesus may become a parable of God, an iconic representation of God as the divine is experienced in the story of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, and the claims made in the name of Jesus.

This prologue provides a framework for understanding the peculiar way Baptists and free-church Christians have contributed to the understanding of Jesus as the Christ. What contribution to thought about Jesus is offered today by the Baptist vision and the Baptist answer to persistent questions about the identity of Jesus Christ? The Baptist vision provides a focus and gives a distinct flavor to the dynamic Baptist contribution to the shaping of Jesus.

The study has a historical focus going back to the earliest Baptists in England four centuries ago. But it has a contemporary focus also, suggesting satisfying ways of mapping *our* story of Jesus to *our* story of God. In this satisfying mapping, contemporary and ancient understanding of Jesus' humanity and divinity are correlated. Jesus is mapped in terms of our understanding of God, and our understanding of God is mapped in terms of Jesus.

Five interrelated elements are a part of the total Baptist vision according to the Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon. These elements are biblicism, mission, liberty, discipleship, and community.

Biblicism . . . understood . . . as humble acceptance of the authority of Scripture for both faith and practice . . . Mission (or evangelism), understood . . . as the responsibility of witness to Christ . . . Liberty, or soul competency, understood as the God-given freedom to respond to God without the intervention of the state or other powers . . . Discipleship, understood . . . as life transformed into service by the lordship of Jesus Christ . . . Community, understood . . . as sharing together in a storied life of obedient service to and with Christ.¹

These emphases may be seen in Baptist life beginning with the earliest Baptist congregations in England and extending to modern-day Baptist groups throughout the world. Central for the various forms and expressions of Baptist life is “believing in Jesus.” Emphasis upon personal experience and relationship plays a vital part for Baptists in the mapping from the Jesus of the Gospels and his disciples to the life of the believer and the mapping from Jesus to the being of God.

The Baptist vision and emphasis on believing in Jesus may be correlated with the Baptist take on both the classical two natures model and the more contemporary historical model of Christology. In the church during the classical period of the shaping of Jesus Christ (the two natures model), the divinity of Jesus was basic and the emphasis was on the way the divine could become human without a diminution of the divine. The two natures model of Christology focused not upon mapping from the human to the divine but upon mapping from the divine to the human. Christologies founded on this model were always in danger of docetism (from the Greek word *dokeō*, to seem)—a view that Jesus only *seemed* to be human. The intellectual tools used in the two natures model allow and validate a Jesus who is divine but whose humanity is problematic. The historical model of Christology, on the other hand, asks how movement may be made from the human to the divine. The historical elements of the story of Jesus provide assistance in shaping a Jesus worthy of discipleship. When the historical elements are emphasized, however, there is always the tendency toward Unitarianism (Socinianism).

In his helpful analysis of the distinct values of historical Christology in relation to the two natures model of Christology, McClendon moves from the models themselves to the underlying and persistent questions faced by Christian thinkers throughout all of the changes in Christological

thought. These questions and their answers provide a template against which we can appreciate the Baptist contribution to Christological thought. The first question grows out of the presumptuous or even blasphemous nature of intersecting the identity of Jesus with the identity of God. McClendon poses the question in moral terms: “[W]hat right has Jesus Christ to absolute lordship—the lordship that scripture assigns to God alone?”² A satisfactory answer is necessary to guard against faithfulness to Christ being necessarily fanatical or necessarily limited.

The second question is related to the first. It asks how we can answer the first question and intersect the identity of Jesus with the identity of God without offending the teaching of monotheism that God alone is God. How can those who believe in one God tell the Jesus story as their own.

The third question has to do with the uniqueness of Jesus’ human life and its relation to the lives of others. What does the full humanity of Jesus of Nazareth imply about the spiritual possibilities of human life in general? Can Jesus’ kind of life be ours also? An answer may take one of two divergent paths. It can hold that in contrast to all others who share human nature, Jesus’ unique relation to God issued in a life that was both unsurpassable and unapproachable. This expresses the reverence that Christians feel for the earthly life of their Lord. Contrariwise, an answer can hold that exactly because of Jesus’ unique relation to God he entered upon a road that each of us must travel. That seems to express well the appeal to discipleship in the Gospels. In summary fashion, McClendon poses the third question: “[H]ow Christlike, how like the Master, are disciples’ lives to be?”³

The two natures model affirmed a transcendental ground for Christ’s lordship (question one). But, according to McClendon, it violated even ancient rationality and seemed indifferent to concern for the Jesus story as a viable model of conduct for disciples.⁴ The historical model makes historical research the seat of authority. But by definition, historical research is unable to answer the first question. In reaction to the introduction of historical criticism, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing posited the challenge of historical study to faith in his perception of a “wide, ugly ditch” between the “accidental truths of history” and the “necessary truths of reason.”⁵ Historical study places humankind in a system of ceaseless change on the historical level. This is in absolute contrast to the biblico-theological view of late antiquity. Historical research, however, has provided a very successful way of answering the third question as to how Christlike disciples’ lives are to be. The historical model (citing McClendon’s summary of Donald Baillie’s assessment of

“the harvest of liberal theology”) brought a new appreciation of the human Jesus, so that . . .

[I]t seemed to students they were as near as yesterday to the one who walked and taught in Galilee and Judaea. For them this entailed the full humanity of Jesus’ personal existence—a human body, a human mind, a human self. These in turn entailed the humanity of his psychic makeup . . . His knowledge was limited. The insights he displayed were fully human insights; his emotions were human emotions; his moral life developed as do human moral lives; his temptations were real temptations; his faith was human faith; the miracles or signs he worked were done with human faith, and he said the disciples would do even more than he.⁶

Although the historical model in and of itself left much to be desired, we can only celebrate its real gains: “It brought the confession of Christ’s humanity into its own day.”⁷

The story of the development among Baptists of historical and critical approaches to the study of the Bible and to the confession of Jesus is not simply an account of activities in a particular place and period in intellectual and cultural history. It is a story with contemporary relevance. The Baptist tradition supports a shaping of Jesus Christ in line with the two natures model of the ancient creeds. But the historical approach to the Bible in general and to Jesus of Nazareth in particular challenges a simplistic affirmation of those creeds. How did a voice for historical-critical approaches develop and continue to be heard in a denominational tradition that historically valued the authority of Scripture, the piety of Christian experience, and the supernatural nature of faith? The resources and tools that have been developed and used in the Baptist shaping of Jesus may be related to developments in philosophy, theology, and social thought, to be sure. But the history of Christological shaping by Baptists is not just a series of responses to those developments. The shaping of Jesus is not simply an intellectual exercise. It is a creative effort to relate God’s Word to the world. And this must be the criterion for the validation of the different shapings in the story of Baptists.

In the following pages we will examine the shaping of Jesus, beginning with a chapter that introduces the origins of modern Baptists in England in the beginning of the seventeenth century and compares and contrasts those

early “sects” (General Baptists and Particular Baptists) with the “church” (the Church of England), and the Jesus shaped by those Baptist sects is compared with the sacramental shaping of Jesus by the Church of England. The number and nature of the sacraments distinguish Baptists from the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England. For Catholics the seven sacraments of the church (Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Penance, Extreme Unction, and Matrimony) are salvific-conveying events. For Baptists the two ordinances (not sacraments) of baptism and the Lord’s Supper are outward signs or symbols of a salvation previously effected.

Following an examination of how General Baptists and Particular Baptists shaped the church, two chapters are devoted to the resources drawn upon by early Baptists and other Christians for their shaping of Jesus: the New Testament witness to Jesus and the two natures model of the early creeds. The difference between today and the function and ambience of the New Testament and early creeds cautions us against a credulous and literal appropriation of the divine titles and attributes found helpful by the early church.

In chapters four through eight, the historical revolution in Jesus studies and in Christological argumentation among Baptists is introduced and given detailed treatment in a discussion of “seminal” figures in Southern Baptist and American (Northern) Baptist scholarship. These seminal figures include the Southern Baptists John A. Broadus and A. T. Robertson and the Northern (American) Baptists William Newton Clarke, Shailer Mathews, and Shirley Jackson Case. Different ways of relating the new historical learning (higher criticism) to the faith are examined—namely, evangelicalism, liberalism, modernism, conservative evangelicalism, strict conservatism, and fundamentalism—with a dramatic challenge to inherited orthodoxy on the part of Southern Baptists as well as Northern (American) Baptists.

A chapter on the Christological controversy of the early 1970s in England provides an opportunity to appreciate both the attempt to restate the position of the classical creeds in contemporary language and the spirited defense of the biblical witness to and contemporary relevance of incarnational language. A final chapter argues that the language and religious argumentation relating Jesus to the divine may be seen as parabolic. It requires readers and hearers to find and complete the meaning. The kind of knowledge involved in this transactive process is not only historical knowledge (authenticated by historical-critical tools and approaches) but also historic and faith knowledge. The result of this transactive relationship is that God is experienced in Jesus Christ. The earliest disciples experienced God in Jesus Christ, and the

witness they gave to this experience and meaning is capable of engendering the same experience today. This experience of God enables contemporary validation of the ancient understanding and testimony of incarnation.

Notes

¹James Wm. McClendon, *Ethics, Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) 28.

²_____, *Doctrine, Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 194.

³Ibid., 195.

⁴Ibid., 256.

⁵Ibid., 257.

⁶Ibid., 262.

⁷Ibid., 263.