

Jesus: Messiah not God

MITCHELL BROWN*

One of the problems facing contemporary theology is the status of the Trinity. Too often the centrality of the Trinity is simply assumed, despite the fact that it is manifestly a later theological development and has little relevance for understanding the life of Jesus. Even more troubling is the tendency simply to dismiss nontrinitarian thought as not authentically Christian. In his recent article, Tom Finger does exactly this.¹

He begins with a quite inaccurate statement linking adoptionist christology and humanism (234). Quite to the contrary, adoptionism is an important theological statement not because it is modern and liberal but because it is biblical. A further argument could be made that it is also amenable to contemporary humanism and while this would be an important secondary effect, it is not the ground upon which adoptionism need be defended. If one is to argue from biblical precedent, adoptionism would be a clear choice over the later “innovation” of Nicea. This point has been well stated by Martin Werner:

Moreover, even without compromise Arianism was doomed to fail. The time for the old Angel-Christology in the church was finally over. The reason was not that, as a stunted and faded remnant of the original and fervent eschatological doctrine of Christ, it could no longer compete with the new transcendent Christology of neo-orthodoxy. But it was because that in every respect it was essentially unsuitable as the presupposition of the Church’s new doctrine of redemption. For Athanasius in his struggle against Arianism this consideration was in truth the really significant and

**Mitchell Brown is pastor of Hyde Park Anabaptist Fellowship and Ph.D. candidate in theology at the University of Notre Dame.*

¹ Thomas N. Finger, “The Way to Nicea: Reflections From a Mennonite Perspective,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 3, Fall 1985, 231-250.

©1993, A Journal from the Radical Reformation, Summer 1993, Vol. 2, No. 4.

decisive motive. An angelic-being could no more redeem mankind than could a human being. The true Redeemer must be God, because, according to the new doctrine of the Church, redemption implied “deification.”²

It is clear that Finger follows this Athanasian line with his comment that:

... if Jesus is simply one prophet or teacher among others—if he does not reveal himself and is not the highest reality in the universe—then his way is not worth following amidst suffering, ostracism, and persecution and his salvation will fail in ultimate confrontation with evil and death.³

I find this an incredible statement, one which epitomizes all that is wrong with Trinitarian theology.

Adoptionism does not make Jesus simply one prophet or teacher among many: adoptionism calls him Son of God, Messiah, High Priest, and Lord. All these titles express the cosmic significance that Finger seeks, but they express this significance without calling Jesus God. In fact, a Trinitarian hermeneutic makes these titles almost unintelligible. This notion, that if Jesus is not God incarnate then Christian discipleship is worthless, is found nowhere in the New Testament. Instead, it represents Nicean neo-orthodoxy and thus has no particular claim on Mennonites.

The sentiment expressed in Finger’s statement is not only devoid of a biblical basis but indeed hinders the pursuit of a biblical christology. Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. As such he is an agent of God active on earth for the bringing of salvation. The Messiah is not God, he is the Messiah. His actions point away from himself towards God and the dawning of the kingdom of God. This aspect of New Testament christology has been noted by J. Christiaan Beker:

Paul’s Christology is bifocal and not unifocal; Christ is not so much the fulfilment of God’s promises as the guarantee or confirmation of these promises (Rom. 4:16, 15:8; 2 Cor. 1:21). In an environment that threatened to collapse eschatology into Christology and to celebrate life in Christ as the epiphany of the divine presence on earth, so that historical life is absorbed into Christ mysticism, Paul emphasizes the “not yet” of the

² Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma*, trans. S.G.F. Brandon, Boston: Beacon Press, 1962, 161. Werner has much to say about the problems that the newly arisen Trinitarian schema had with traditional christological imagery. See particularly 125, 131.

³ Thomas Finger, “The Way to Nicea,” 234.

Christian life and stresses the need for ethical responsibility in light of both the Christ-event and the last judgement.⁴

I find one final aspect of Finger's article upsetting, that is his implied (albeit unconsciously) criticism of Judaism. By saying that suffering discipleship is not worth it unless Jesus is God, Finger implies that the suffering witness of Judaism is flawed. Judaism has shown faithful witness to God without the prop of incarnation. If Christianity is to be faithful to the same God it need require no more "evidence" than Judaism has required over the centuries for the faithfulness of God. This common belief of Judaism and Christianity has been described by H. Richard Niebuhr as radical monotheism. Trinitarianism tends to weaken such radical monotheism, in the end making Jesus, the messiah of that God, unknowable.

With this preface, I would now like to turn to a presentation of what I take to be the theological advantages of adoptionism.

I. THE CASE FOR ADOPTIONISM

In arguing for an alternative to Trinitarian imagery I will appeal to a traditional christological formulation that was early on deemed heretical: adoptionism. Since traditional notions of orthodoxy and heresy, with their assumption of a monolithic Christian faith, have been increasingly called into question by historical research, adoptionism can again claim to be a faithful Christian theological position.⁵ Indeed, Krister Stendahl has suggested the possibility of such a position:

If we were to take an extreme example of what this could imply, we could return to the area of Christology. We saw how in the NT "adoptionism" stands as an equal, side by side with other types of Christology, and how the reasons for its downfall were found, not in the NT, but in the framework

⁴ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980, 345. Note how Beker in a way quite similar to Werner sees the problem with Trinitarian christology being its failure to account for the eschatology of the New Testament, an eschatology that is decisive for understanding Pauline christology.

⁵ For the classic work on this subject see Walter Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971. For a more contemporary treatment see Robert Lewis Wilken's *The Myth of Christian Beginnings*, Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980.

of later philosophical presuppositions. If the ontology which caused its downfall in the theology of the church were not anymore a live option to the philosophical structure of a systematic theology of our time, it would be quite possible to speak meaningfully and in a most orthodox manner about Christ in "adoptionist" terms when witnessing to his function and his reality.⁶

I find persuasive arguments in three areas of contemporary thought that would be best served by an adoptionistic christology. In this paper I will discuss these three areas in detail showing how adoptionism best serves the problem that each area addresses. The three areas considered will be biblical studies, theology, and epistemology.

In brief, adoptionism means the following: Jesus is a man adopted by God, this adoption being marked by his exaltation to the heavens. It holds that he was a man beloved by God and chosen by God to be his Messiah.⁷ This view in no way diminishes Jesus' stature; indeed, its relevance is that it helps us to understand Jesus better and to follow him.⁸ In this paper I will defend a radically adoptionistic position. My concern is not to enter into dialogue with other contemporary christological expressions, many of which have moved in an adoptionistic direction; rather I am interested in showing the relevance of the most extreme form of adoptionism in which a fully human Jesus is exalted to heavenly status. I am taking this

⁶ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, New York: Abingdon Press, 1962, s.v. "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," by Krister Stendahl, 430.

⁷ Adoptionism must be distinguished from subordinationism as the latter is far more "orthodox" in that Jesus is accepted as substantially divine (uncreated) with the disagreement being over status in the Godhead. For an excellent discussion of the nuances of subordinationism see Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, 2nd revised ed., trans. John S. Bowden, London: Mowbray, 1975. The point of view expressed in this thesis then is more in line with the early Arian position than with the subordinationist one. [The point of view of this journal differs slightly from the definition given here. We hold that Jesus was conceived as "Son of God." Our understanding may be termed "conception christology"—eds.]

⁸ The "high" place given Jesus in adoptionism is noted by Gregg and Groh: "Everyone familiar with the early Arian writings knows the large claims made by them for the redeemer. He is *monogenes theos* or just *monogenes*; he is a 'strong god,' a god from above, unchangeable and unalterable, the 'power' of God, the word of God, wisdom of God, and so forth. But if all the criticism leveled at the Arian representation of Christ by Bishops Alexander and Athanasius, both of Alexandria, could be reduced to a single line, it would read like this: no matter how the Arians huff and puff, what they preach is a creature promoted to the status of a god. The Alexandrian bishops had it exactly right" (Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981, 1.)

radical approach because I believe that Trinitarian assumptions are so fundamental to the contemporary christological debate that adoptionism cannot be adequately appreciated. Thus my radical approach is an attempt to do christology “from before” the time that christology proper came into existence. A christology “from before” has the potential for helping us to understand Jesus in the images and implicit epistemology of the biblical writers. By throwing off the Trinitarian constraint new areas will be opened up for theological reflection. This paper is not an attempt to produce such a christology; it is merely an attempt to suggest its possibility and, for Mennonites in particular, its desirability.

SCRIPTURAL WARRANTS FOR ADOPTIONISM

The Bible offers ample warrants for a nontrinitarian approach. Two major New Testament scholars almost offhandedly make the case for a nontrinitarian christology. In his foundational work on Luke, Hans Conzelmann writes:

The part played by Jesus in redemptive history and his status have no metaphysical basis, but are entirely the gift of God. God proclaimed or "anointed" him as Son at the Baptism. If the Son can baptize with the Spirit (Luke iii, 16) or, to be more exact, can pour out the Spirit (Luke xxiv, 49)—after his exaltation and not before—it is only because he has received the Spirit from the Father for this very purpose (Acts ii, 33).⁹

Similarly, commenting upon Paul, Marxsen says:

Paul never identified the Son with the Father, not even in Rom. 9:5. The exegesis of the verse is disputed, but even so the context shows that there is no intention of expressing an equality of nature in the sense of later metaphysics. The road to the description of Christ as God leads “backward” by way of the Fathers, and if one wishes to work with the speculative christological categories of the early church, it is necessary, with reference to Paul, to speak unequivocally of a subordination of the Son to the Father (I Cor. 15:27-28).¹⁰

⁹ Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell, London: Faber and Faber, 1960, 174.

¹⁰ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, supplementary vol., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976, s.v. “Christology in the NT,” by Willi Marxsen.

Without arguing the exegetical case for adoptionism, I simply point to the ample support among New Testament scholars for this nontrinitarian position. Perhaps the clearest presentation of the position is found in F.C. Grant's book, *The Earliest Gospel*. Grant approvingly cites *Galilaea und Jerusalem*, by Ernst Lohmeyer:

Thus a common Christology underlies all these fragments of old tradition regarding the martyr James, the Nazoreans, and the descendants of the family of Jesus. . . . Jesus is the eschatological Teacher, who upon the foundation of the sacred Jewish Law but with special commandments (relating to poverty and obedience) and with divine power leads his followers to the gates of the Kingdom of God; he is now exalted at the right hand of God, and is soon to come “on the clouds of heaven” as the judge of all mankind.¹¹

This tradition, Grant comments, lies behind the Gospel of Mark and contrasts with the more developed “Jerusalem” christologies.

THEOLOGICAL GROUNDS FOR ADOPTIONISM

The exegetical evidence cited thus far is theologically neutral. In this section I will go on to show the positive use to which these exegetical insights can be put, for the position that I am attempting to develop is a positive one; my intent is not to say that traditional christology is wrong but to offer an alternative. While I am critical of the Trinitarian position, it is because I feel that an adoptionist position is better suited to the contemporary intellectual climate. Geza Vermes expresses this view:

Yet it occurs to the historian, as he reaches the end of his presentation of the gospel of Jesus the Jew, that the world may not have heard the last of the holy Galilean. In this so-called post-Christian era, when Christ as divine form seems to ever-increasing numbers not to correspond, either to the ages notion of reality, or to the exigencies of the contemporary human predicament, is it not possible that Jesus the healer, teacher, and helper may

¹¹ Ernst Lohmeyer, *Galilaea und Jerusalem*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1936, 74, quoted in Frederick C. Grant, *The Earliest Gospel: Studies of the Evangelic Tradition at its Point of Crystallization in Writing*, New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1943, 139-140.

yet be invited to emerge from the shadows of his long exile?¹²

In moving to a more “historical” christology, I believe that I am being true to the Protestant tradition. In part then, my thesis is a criticism of the various Protestant traditions for failing to be Protestant enough. Too often merely lip service has been paid to the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Instead of reading scripture with an eye to seeing what it actually says, Scripture has been read through the spectacles of a theological tradition that was not grounded in those scriptures. James Barr has well described the situation:

When one looks at the various "conservative," "orthodox," or "evangelical" schemes of doctrine which are so influential today, and all of which energetically proclaim the authority of Scripture as their first principle, it requires no great insight to see that in many cases it is "conservatism," or "Calvinism," or "evangelicalism" that is the actual authority, and that the authority of the Bible is used and maintained simply because it is supposed to provide the necessary support for the doctrinal authority, which is the real dominant power. The Bible is fully authoritative, but it does not have authority to question the accepted doctrinal tradition. . . . Biblical authority on Protestant terms (on Catholic or Orthodox terms it may be otherwise) exists only where one is free, on the ground of Scripture, to question, to adjust, and if necessary to abandon the prevailing doctrinal traditions.¹³

My argument for a nontrinitarian Christianity is a response to the type of situation that Barr has described.

¹² Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, 57. Vermes' position is strikingly similar to that of Albert Schweitzer: "This dogma [the two natures] had first to be shattered before men could once more go out in quest of the historical Jesus, before they could even grasp the thought of His existence. That the historic Jesus is something different from the Jesus Christ of the doctrine of the Two Natures seems to us now self-evident. We can, at the present day, scarcely imagine the long agony in which the historical view of the life of Jesus came to birth. And even when He was once more recalled to life, He was still, like Lazarus of old, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes—the grave-clothes of the dogma of the Dual Nature" (Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948, 3). The lack of development in this area during this century reflects the influence of neo-orthodoxy over christology. Perhaps the time has finally come for a full appreciation of thinkers like Troeltsch, Schweitzer, and Martin Werner, and the positive significance of their thought.

¹³ James Barr, *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983, 31.

Trinitarianism has become the accepted “doctrinal” tradition. Unfortunately, its basis in Scripture is slight. Thus I see my search for a nontrinitarian christology as a “scriptural” questioning. While there may be valid reasons for preferring a Trinitarian formulation, on grounds of Scripture alone a nontrinitarian formulation may be equally well defended.

Having realized, exegetically, the problematic nature of Jesus' divinity, two types of theological response are possible. First, one may accept the truth of historical critical study but give it only limited theological significance. It is no longer the man Jesus who is central to the Christian faith; instead it is the community and its response to him that is central. Jesus is the launching pad of the Christian community, but his life does not limit his significance. The classic statement of this position was given by Bultmann.

The critical historian Bultmann knows who Jesus was:

The proclamation of Jesus must be considered within the framework of Judaism. Jesus was not a "Christian," but a Jew, and his preaching is couched in the thought forms and imagery of Judaism, even where it is critical of traditional Jewish piety.¹⁴

In fact, Bultmann believes Jesus appeared as a traditional Jewish religious figure: “But it was not as a king, but as a prophet and a rabbi that Jesus appeared—and, one may add, as an exorcist.”¹⁵ Given this somewhat uncomfortable situation for the Christian theologian, there are two major constructive responses to be made. First, one can fully accept, and theologize from, the Jewishness of Jesus. This is the path that I shall develop in this paper. Second, and this has clearly proven to be the most popular response of the 20th century, one may take Bultmann's approach and while accepting the historicity of Jesus' Jewishness, deny it all theological significance.

Not a little fancy footwork is required to accept Jesus as lord and savior while at the same time denying significance to the details of his life. The method by which Bultmann has accomplished this feat is in many ways the foundation of contemporary critical scholarship. The watchwords of this faith are the following:

¹⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity and its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R.H. Fuller, London: Thames and Hudson, 1956, 71-72.

¹⁵ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Kendrick Grobel, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 27.

THE MESSAGE OF JESUS is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself. . . . But the fact that Jesus had appeared and the message which he had proclaimed were, of course, among its historical presuppositions; and for this reason Jesus' message cannot be omitted from the delineation of New Testament theology.¹⁶

It is hard to conceive of a less ringing endorsement of a lord and savior. He is a "presupposition."

Bultmann's position has proven the most fruitful theological path of this century. The focus on the response of the community to the Christ event has been given nuanced development by Brevard Childs, David Tracy, and Shubert Ogden, among others. These thinkers, while quite different in many respects, are united by their acceptance of critical thought while still holding to a Trinitarian position.¹⁷

In focusing upon Jesus' Judaism another important issue arises: the relation between Judaism and Christianity. Lack of space keeps me from considering this issue in depth, but I must make one comment on it. Above, I implied that there was an either/or choice between the Jewish Jesus and the "Bultmannian" Jesus. I believe that it is necessary to put the issue so starkly.¹⁸ As Trocme has put it so nicely:

If the New Testament should be demythologized, it should not be done with the help of our modern myths but with the assistance of the Old Testament. The more the strict monotheistic faith in the God of Israel is exalted, the more visible becomes the thought of Jesus Christ. . . . Nothing can be lost by rejudaizing Christianity.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ See the following: David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, New York: Crossroad, 1981; Schubert Ogden, *The Point of Christology*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981; and James P. Mackey, *Jesus, the Man and the Myth: A Contemporary Christology*, New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

¹⁸ Why Judaism and Christianity pulled so decisively apart despite their common heritage is given an excellent treatment by Raymond E. Brown in his *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind*, chapter 7, 102-124.

¹⁹ Andre Trocme, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, trans. Michael H. Shank and Marlin E. Miller, Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1973, 12. Contrast with this view that of Kasemann: "I saw the reduction of the Gospel to the Jesus of history as by no means a remote possibility when I entered into controversy with my teacher. I should consider such a reduction to be a relapse into an Ebionite Jewish Christianity; and it seems to me urgently necessary that, in the face of many remarkable dialogues with Israel and of still stronger Judaizing tendencies in theology, we should today be very well aware of this danger" (Ernst Kasemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W. J. Montague, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969, 51). Kasemann puts the issue fairly. As I will argue

Jesus came as the messiah of Israel. This is an extremely particular title. It is severely limited in its scope. It forces us to confront the Judaism of the intertestamental period if we are to know Jesus. Even more, if we are to follow him it invites us into this very specific history. If we lose sight of this particularity, even for a moment, we risk dissolving Jesus into a speculative phantom. Such a phantom can then mean anything to anybody at any time. Certainly this has happened at certain times in Christian history. The non-Jewish Jesus was able to be co-opted by whatever philosophical school was in charge and made a handy symbol of truth. Only the strange Messiah of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, can keep us from this path. In the second part of this paper I shall devote major space to the identity of the church. The church comes to know itself in its particularity, a particularity that rests upon the history of the people of Israel and of that group within it that came to its self knowledge through the one they called Messiah.

Thus it is extremely important that we keep the issue of Jesus' Judaism to the fore. It is to his credit that Gordon Kaufman has realized this, although his answer to the problem I believe is a totally wrong one. Kaufman notes:

Perhaps a word of explanation for the omission of what is probably the preeminent title of the New Testament, "Christ" (or "Messiah"), is in order, . . . The principal difficulty with this term as a contemporary symbol, of course, is that it is not drawn from discourse directly meaningful to modern men but is a technical term presupposing the Jewish first-century context in which it was applied to Jesus. . . . In our own day, to attempt to use "Christ" as explicatory of the meaning of Jesus, would be, on the one hand, to adopt the position of the "circumcision party" (cf. Gal.) that one must become a Jew in certain respects before one can become a Christian, . . .

²⁰

But my argument is precisely that one must become a Jew "in certain respects" to be a Christian. Contrary to Kaufman's position, one can find ample evidence in Paul to support this type of Judaizing. Paul invited

at the end of chapter two, he is right. Ebionitism does more justice to the historical Jesus than does traditional Trinitarian Christianity. Unlike Kasemann, though, I feel that Ebionitism is a viable Christian position. David Tracy too, for all his pluralism, has very little place for Ebionitism (see *The Analogical Imagination*, 290).

²⁰ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968, 192, n. 2.

Gentiles into the new people of God; they were thus “engrafted” on the ancestral stock. This does not mean that they were not Jews, in that through Jesus they became followers of Yahweh and members of the people of God. Paul’s polemic was against the Law and its application to Gentile believers because Jesus had done away with the Law. Jesus though did not do away with the people of God, he merely redefined its constituency. Much of Paul’s thought, i. e., his apocalypticism, is as foreign to us as the term messiah; but this does not mean that we should ignore Paul. Rather it means that we must change our presuppositions so that we may live as the people of God and followers of the lord and messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Kaufman’s position is almost identical to Bultmann’s notion that Jesus is a presupposition; for Kaufman the presupposition becomes a “technical term . . . presupposing the Jewish first context.” But this technical term and its context reveal both the identity of Jesus and the identity of the fellowship that follows him; to ignore it is to ignore the particularity of the church.

A similar point has been made by F.C. Grant. In his discussion of antisemitism in the New Testament he notes:

But I am sure that, taken at their best, Judaism and Christianity are not two religions but one. And if it be argued that this is to ignore the doctrine of the Incarnation, which is central for Christian dogma, I would reply that the essential element in this doctrine might also have been accepted long ago—not in its Greek formulation, but in one more natural to Semitic thought—by Christian Jews had it not become the watchword of partisans and persecutors. At the same time, let us add, the doctrine of the Incarnation might have been stated in terms less rigid, less mechanical, less materialistic if it had retained closer contact with history and revelation, both of which were the heritage of Judaism.²¹

This taken in concert with Grant’s discussion of Mark’s christology, offers a strong foundation for a nontrinitarian position, as well as pointing the way to the positive implications of such a christology.

In arguing against the Bultmannian position we face one major problem: Bultmann’s kerygmatic Christ, being a product of faith, can speak to the heart of the believer. Can the critically reconstituted Jesus of Nazareth be said to do the same?

²¹ F.C. Grant, *The Earliest Gospel*, 225-226.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL GROUNDS FOR ADOPTIONISM

We are in many ways brought back to the beginning of this century when debates over the historical Jesus were in full force. The question is now as it was then formulated by Troeltsch; “Is it still possible to speak of any inner, essential significance of Jesus for faith?”²² Can the Jesus reconstructed for us by critical study speak to us theologically? This is the central 20th -century problem: as the naive picture of Jesus’ divinity has vanished can it still make sense to be a Christian? Troeltsch gave the classical formulation of the question:

The problem only makes sense for those who accept the wholehearted historical criticism of and research into the gospel narratives, and at the same time wish to preserve Christianity as redemption through faith’s constantly renewed personal knowledge of God. . . . In a word, they apply only for those who recognize modern thought and at the same time see in Christianity religious powers which should not be given up. The writer of these lines gladly and resolutely includes himself in this group.²³

All of us involved in academic theology are involved in this quest. It is my argument in this thesis that Troeltsch’s dilemma is best answered by an adoptionist, as opposed to a Trinitarian, trajectory of faith.

As the theological paradigms change we are forced radically to reconsider our relationship with our religious forebears. It is no longer clear that we are of the same religion as our ancestors.²⁴ We are modern in a

²² Ernst Troeltsch, “The Significance of the Historical Existence of Jesus for Faith,” in *Writings on Theology and Religion*, trans. and ed. Robert Morgan and Michael Pye, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977, 182.

²³ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

²⁴ Maurice Wiles makes this point very nicely: “But before embarking on that process I must take the full measure of the contingency of my standpoint in faith. For there is not only a geographical but also a historical contingency about it. I was born not only in a particular place but at a particular time. . . . For religions differ not only from other religions at the same time; despite the conservative tendency which is a general characteristic of religion, they differ also from earlier manifestations of themselves. . . . What are of greatest interest and of greatest difficulty to trace are what I would call changes in the basic apprehension of Christian faith, in the root sense of what it is to be a Christian believer. Of course there is a measure of continuity down the ages, but I am convinced that there have also been important changes at the level of fundamental feeling” (Maurice Wiles, *Faith and the Mystery of God*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982, 5-6). The emerging adoptionism that I am describing in this paper both reflects and aids such a fundamental feeling.

profound sense and if religion is to survive and be meaningful in this context it too must change. John A. Miles perceives that this is the problem facing the exegete:

The idea of history then, as including all conceivable changes and charting all provisional stabilities for as long as they obtain is our largest, most inclusive idea. As such it is nothing less than an alternative revelation. Perceiving it as that, we can appreciate the difficulty that faces any contemporary critic who would amend the Bible text on religious grounds but by historical methods; viz., if history taken as a whole is an alternative revelation, then when an editor uses the methods of the historian to improve the Bible, he corrects one revelation by the methods of another. One need not deny that his correction is possible or even, subjectively, a devout act. One must insist, however, that the religion it serves is not the religion that the original editors served.²⁵

The critical text is the foundation of a new type of theology, one with radically different epistemological presuppositions. Having said this, I believe that this new form of Christian theology is better able to appreciate the historical Jesus. To this extent it may be seen as a basically conservative phenomenon.

In what way, then, can this Jesus have religious significance? It is here that the particularly modern notion of history comes in. History is found in community and it is this need of community that forces Christianity to deny the purely kerygmatic Christ and accept the historical Christ. Thus, Troeltsch notes that the kerygmatic option

can ignore anything which connects all believers to historical archetypes and authorities, and so can rid itself of the whole problem of history, and live simply in what is present and personal. But in doing this it renounces whether consciously or unconsciously ALL forms of community.²⁶

Indeed, history represents that means by which a community comes to know itself. To speak of a group that has an identity, such as the Church, is to speak of a group that has a history. For the Church the anchor of its

²⁵ John A. Miles Jr., "Redaktionsgeschichte and the Aesthetic of Willed Confusion," in *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Jon D. Levenson, Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1981, 194.

²⁶ Ernst Troeltsch, "Significance," 194.

history is the historical Jesus. Adoptionism is then the christological option best suited for maintaining a strong link with this historical Jesus.

For Troeltsch the community must be formed around an historical core. That core is the historical Jesus. We see the great difference between Troeltsch and someone like Childs. For Troeltsch the one overriding methodological issue is history. Troeltsch, like Miles, is willing to accept an alternative revelation that gets behind canonical Scripture.²⁷ For Childs, on the other hand, the Scripture of the community is the bedrock.²⁸

Can the historical Jesus be enough for a functioning community of faith? For as we begin to deny the sanctity of the canon and subject Jesus to the rigors of historical criticism, do we not destroy a fundamental function of religion in that it is to religion that we look for the certainty that history denies us? While indeed a certain degree of stability is lost, a tremendous amount of vitality can thus be gained. The vitality can be seen when we change the focus of our theological quest from the transcendental fact of Jesus to the ongoing "history" of the community that remembers him. This realization and the subsequent redefinition of christology that it entails is one of Troeltsch's great contributions to theology:

Against this even the primitive church's faith freed the spirit of Christ from his appearance in history and saw it as a principle capable of development. But this development is found not so much in ideal consequences and systematic conceptions of life as in a broader succession of strong religious personalities which have drawn from him and produced new things from his spirit, just as the spirit of the prophets was at work in Jesus himself producing new growths from this prophetic seed. So it is not the absolute uniqueness of the redeemer which matters but the centre around which all the preparations and effects of the Christian and prophetic type of belief cluster. These receive a unitary interpretation from this centre.²⁹

The implications of the above statement for my christological position are as follows: Jesus is a prophet and his place in the religious history of Israel

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁸ For the best statement of Brevard S. Childs' approach see his *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979. For two excellent critiques of his position see James Barr's *Holy Scripture: Canon, Authority, Criticism* and John Barton's *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984.

²⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, "Significance," 203.

is as a prophet. Certainly Jesus was a particular type of prophet, but all prophets had radically different styles. In Jesus we find a particularly eschatologically-oriented prophet, who by virtue of the resurrection was called the Messiah. Cannot a theology develop around such a prophetic core? There is no obvious reason why not. While orthodox tradition did not develop in this way, there is no reason why such a heterodox position cannot be developed in light both of our changed worldview and our increased knowledge of Jesus. Certainly Troeltsch left the way open for such an approach:

Similarly, Troeltsch detects in the ancient christology an understandable effort to determine the relationship of Jesus to God, and so to furnish a metaphysical grounding of his person. But he himself is content to keep close to the historical data and to inquire only after Jesus' meaning for faith. "Lord" he finds an acceptable title, but he shows a marked reserve about "Cosmic Redeemer."³⁰

Jesus was the possibility of redemption. The actual redeemer remains God. . . . For us personally, this is how things stand: we keep to what is within reach. We place ourselves under the spell of this personality and acknowledge in him our mystical head. Anyone who in good conscience is able to move beyond the psychological significance, should do so. He will then find it easier to make the connection with orthodoxy, since he will be able to speak (in a certain sense) of the "deity" of Christ. With respect to metaphysical interpretations, we owe one another nothing except toleration.³¹

It is precisely such a "Lord" christology that seems to be an important part of the current theological discussion.

In our use of Troeltsch as the theological foundation for a christology of the human Jesus, we have thus far neglected the most telling criticism of his position. Brian Gerrish, speaking of the centrality of the historical Jesus for Troeltsch, notes:

Here, it seems, Troeltsch makes an unwarranted move. He insists that a religious symbol must be rooted in history, and from this he infers—

³⁰ B. A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays On the Reformation Heritage*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982, 227, referring to Troeltsch, *Glaubenslehre*, Munich and Leipzig: Verlag von Duncker & Humboldt, 1925, 116-117.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

invalidly, I think—that faith therefore needs assurance about the historical Jesus. In so doing, he identifies the historical anchorage of the symbol with its (putative) historical origins. But, surely, the very fact that the symbol is embedded in the life of the community gives it the concreteness and factual givenness which Troeltsch desires.³²

What Gerrish says is true if one chooses to put the primary weight upon the tradition. My argument is that one need not do this. Christianity can stand on its own with a factual anchor in the historical Jesus. Certainly it will be a different type of Christianity—nontrinitarian—but it will still focus upon Jesus.

How then is one to make this choice between the primacy of the tradition as opposed to the primacy of the historical Jesus? In this paper I am not arguing that one can decide this issue but simply that one must be clear upon which side one wishes to live and then to give adequate reasons for such a position. There are weighty reasons for taking Gerrish's position, primarily that it allows us continuity with the tradition that we have come to know as Christian.

Troeltsch himself was troubled over just this question. In breaking with orthodoxy, Troeltsch realized that he was making a dangerous move, dangerous because his liberal christology did not seem to have the potency of traditional orthodoxy. Thus Robert Morgan notes:

Troeltsch saw that it was this christology and the idea of the church which made "the religion of the people" more potent than his "religion of the educated." He saw the perpetual need of the latter for blood transfusions from the former. But he saw no way of combining the two and producing a version of Christianity which is both intellectually viable and religiously effective in the modern world.³³

Troeltsch's dilemma could be said to be the basic problem of contemporary theology. How one answers his question will define the shape of one's theology. For there are two ways to go with Troeltsch: one may either accept his radical christology and apply it, or one may attempt to accept its insights but to mediate them through a more traditional christology. Thus Robert Morgan argues for the latter approach:

³² *Ibid.*, 242.

³³ Robert Morgan, "Troeltsch and Christian Theology," in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, 43.

Troeltsch's conviction was the traditional affirmation of the divinity of Jesus Christ as the second person of the immanent or essential Trinity is incompatible with a historical method and world view. That is open to question. If this conclusion can be resisted, Troeltsch's method can be carried even further than he himself took it without the cessation of a specifically Christian theology.³⁴

The present thesis, on the other hand, exists to argue that we not "resist" Troeltsch's conclusion, but instead accept it and attempt to make it more practical.

Still, what positive effects might such a study have? The metaphysical Christ has certainly spoken to the needs of believers; can a much more limited historical Christ do the same? Again Troeltsch comes to our rescue. If historical criticism has anything positive to offer, it is in its picture of the communities that believed in Jesus. These communities were also central for Troeltsch as he sought to replace the metaphysical Christ with a more historical presence. As we study the literary remains of these communities through critical Bible study, we may come better to appreciate their faiths, and thus to take our place as a similar community committed in our day—using our own language—to the man of God, Jesus of Nazareth.³⁵

Troeltsch is significant because he attempted to define christology in the face of the historicist epistemology of the 19th century. He continues to be relevant because he did not complete the task. His questions were soon to be overwhelmed by the Barthian neo-orthodoxy of the early 20th century. Yet his questions remain, questions that I believe may be answered through a radically adoptionistic christology. For the Trinitarian Christ was based upon a prehistoricist epistemology, one of substance and space. The christology of the Jesus of history is based upon an epistemology of time and history.³⁶ Adoptionism allows us to utilize such

³⁴ Morgan, "Introduction: Ernst Troeltsch on Theology and Religion," *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁵ James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980, 124-125.

³⁶ As christology becomes more historical it has a tendency towards adoptionism. This can be seen in the thought of the father of historical theology, F.C. Baur. In defending the centrality of the historical Jesus, he wrote: "The more highly faith esteems these writings, the more it is incumbent upon it that it hold nothing as the Word of God which does not allow itself to be established historically as the word of God. . . . the Protestant distinguishes himself thereby from the Catholic in that he not only believes in nothing other than the Word of God but also gives account of the grounds of his faith" (Peter C. Hodgson, *A Study of Ferdinand Christian Baur: The Formation of Historical Theology*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966, p. 179, quoting Barr in a

an epistemology while at the same time being faithful to our biblical roots.

II. ADOPTIONISM AND THE MENNONITE PERSPECTIVE

The question remains: What then is the point of adoptionism? Put somewhat crudely, Trinitarianism had a simple one/two punch: Jesus is God; he brings eternal life. While people in the Church mean a variety of things by the affirmation that Jesus is God and that he brings eternal life, this core statement describes the faith of many in the Church. Such a statement of belief is relatively simple, with little theological obfuscation involved. Yet, as we have noted throughout the paper, such a theological formulation has ceased to be relevant for many people.

A good example of this can be seen in the recent article by J. Denny Weaver. His rethinking of the theory of atonement is parallel to my rethinking the subject of christology. Both act to historicize dogma. I believe that my thoughts on christology are best supplemented by a theory of soteriology like Weaver's. Similarly, I believe his ideas cohere better with an adoptionist christology than with classical Trinitarianism.

Gutachten of December 20, 1835, U.B.T., Md 750, V, I). As we might expect, such a position forces Baur to a nearly Ebionite position: "Anything less than the full yet untranscended copresence of divine and human in Jesus Christ represents a diminution [sic] of the Church's claim in faith, which means that Baur actually tends very slightly toward a different sort of Christological heresy—not a docetism which vitiates the humanity but an Ebionitism which vitiates the divinity of Christ, by withholding the idea from full and absolute ingreience in this one instance" (Hodgson, 106). Baur remained true to this "heretical" bent by refusing to identify Jesus totally with God. Jesus was as close as we have yet come to perfect God-consciousness, but he was still human: "If the finite is to be absolutely one with the Infinite, then it can only disappear into the Infinite and exist in it docetically. . . . If the idea once succeeds to its absolute existence in a single, definite individual, then it is not merely the drive but also the possibility of actualizing itself in other individuals is taken away from the idea. . . . However, no matter how highly in other respects one may place this individual, in virtue of the idea of this unity which comes to consciousness in him, he must still stand in a subordinate relationship to the idea; and a God-man in the sense of ecclesiastical doctrine embraces in itself an irresolvable contradiction" (Hodgson, 104-105, quoting Baur, *Die Christliche Lehre Von Der Dreieinigkeit und Menschwerdung Gottes in Ihrer Geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, vol. 3: *Die Neuere Geschichte Des Dogma, Von Der Reformation Bis in Die Neueste Zeit*, Tubingen: C.F. Osiander, 1843, 996-999). As we saw above with Robert Morgan's treatment of Troeltsch, Hodgson similarly tries to deal with Baur from a more conservative position. He tends to read Baur through the lenses of 20th century neo-orthodoxy, particularly Barth (see Hodgson, 175). Needless to say, I think that this is a profound mistake.

Weaver implies his openness towards an alternative christology in the following statement:

Put another way, traditional christology does not deal in a central way with more than half of the Gospels' material about Jesus, and the material neglected is precisely that which would compare his life with other human lives. The creeds which preserve the traditional christology jump directly from Jesus' birth to his sacrificial death. This gap leads to a second observation, namely that ontological christology has no direct application to ethics.³⁷

Adoptionism remedies both problems cited by Weaver.

The move to a more historicist paradigm by means of an adoptionist christology allows the direct application to ethics that Weaver seeks. Furthermore, such a move would allow theology more effectively to use the results of critical Bible study.

With the demise of the credal and objectivistic paradigm of traditional christology space would be created for a theological epistemology that is focused upon the identity of the church community. The knowledge that the Church would have of Jesus would no longer be quasi-scientific knowledge but would instead be a moral knowledge that shapes the character of the community.³⁸

The primary concern of theology, in this view, is no longer the ontological status of Jesus. Instead, theology seeks to explore the question of the identity of the church community that witnesses to the life of Jesus. Where once, so to speak, we knew Jesus in the flesh (as miraculous event), we now know him through faith. But this faith is no longer faith in an event: it is not assent to the miracle of the fleshly Jesus. Instead it is a community building faith that expresses itself through the moral witness of the community. The normative image that sustains this witness is the Church's memory of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth: a memory that is best kept alive through a christology of adoption.

Samuel Terrien traces the type of movement that we have described, from the naturalistic to the moral, back to its ground in the Hebrew Bible:

The tradition of Elijah on Mt. Horeb (I Kings 19) offers a dramatic turning point in the Hebraic theology of presence, for it closed the era of theophany

³⁷ J. Denny Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 2, Fall 1984, 195.

³⁸ I am of course indebted to the work of Stanley Hauerwas for this insight.

and relegated it to the realm of the unrepeatable past. At the same time, it opened the era of prophetic vision, where miracles of nature became miracles of character.³⁹

To call Jesus Messiah is to live in a particular way. This then is the payoff for the common believer: the nature of the community in which he or she lives. That community will live in a particular way. It will have a particular identity. It gains this identity from the story that it tells: the story of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified Messiah. In this way the naturalistic paradigm is overcome and the moral paradigm takes over. What was once an exterior event is now an interior event; not interior in the reduced sense of a mere feeling on the part of the believer but interior in the full sense of H.R. Niebuhr's internal history, the meaningful response. Indeed, I believe that the radical nature of the Mennonite witness extends to its implicit epistemology, an epistemology that will become more important if the traditional epistemology that supported the mainstream churches declines.⁴⁰

C. Norman Kraus has suggested an interpretation along these lines. In a section of an essay headed *The Unfinished Theological Agenda*, he notes:

The theological models of Protestant Orthodoxy presented systems of rational explanation of the various creeds which were in turn based on the Bible. . . .

The Mennonite brotherhood, however, was not a creedal church, and since they did not make the practical equation of faith and orthodox belief as Protestant Orthodoxy had, one might have expected a different approach to theology and a different role for it in the church. This question remains largely unexplored to the present time.⁴¹

From the beginning the Mennonite attention to discipleship has offered a more practically oriented theology. As contemporary theology moves

³⁹ Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, 229. The statement of this problem in the terms of phenomenal versus moral is of course taken from the foundational work in the modern epistemology of Immanuel Kant. Brief summaries of this philosophical point can be found in the following places in Kant: *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956, 43-51.

⁴⁰ Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist vision," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy F. Hershberger, Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1957, 43.

⁴¹ C. Norman Kraus, "Toward a Theology for the Disciple Community," in *Kingdom, Cross, and Community*, ed. J.R. Burkholder and Calvin Redekop, Scottdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1976, 109.

to a more practical orientation such a focus on discipleship can become extremely important. Adoptionism, with its focus on the suffering “discipleship” of Jesus, offers christological support for such a theology of discipleship.

Kraus notes that the Mennonite Church offers an option to years of unfruitful debate between fundamentalists and liberals:

A Mennonite theology as a theology for the disciple community could make a real contribution at this point in history to the ongoing discussion. Such a theology should grow out of and be related to the life of the grass-roots church—the *koinonia* or *gemeinde*.⁴²

This focus on the community then can be the ground of a different type of theological epistemology, one that focuses on the practical import of theological statements. Theology then ceases to be a propositional system and becomes instead a “practical” discipline:

Theology should describe and point to a present reality and not present theory, past experience, or eschatological prediction. When it deals with past reality it is for the sake of the present life of the Church. When it enunciates theory it is to provide a framework for understanding experience.⁴³

An important consequence of this position is a radical rethinking of the role of Scripture, a rethinking that allows a thoroughly critical reading of Scripture:

If we put this same point in terms of the doctrine of inspiration, we would say that the authority of the Bible is derivative. It does not have an independent or autonomous validity or authority of its own, such as a logically argued essay or a technical scientific work describing empirical data. Its derivation from and dependence on the Holy Spirit is, I take it, the fundamental idea in the concept of inspiration.⁴⁴

The church community is then the focal point of salvation. Scripture and theology serve this community in its search to bear faithful witness:

To do theology as salvation theology grounds it in the present activity of

⁴² *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

God—the new creation which is in process. It gives it an immediate standing place in a visible community of salvation which is sign and witness to the new creation. It makes incarnational categories of *agape*, righteousness, and reconciliation primary for ethics.⁴⁵

Such a view of community allows a redefinition of salvation. Where previously salvation pointed to the notion of eternal life, now salvation is an ongoing experience of the community: the new creation is a reality in the Church. This is the final outworking of a theory of internal history, for such an experience of the new creation is the triumph of an internal over an external history. Thus such a view gives us what we have been looking for: a theory of salvation to replace the traditional, propositional one. Robert Friedmann has called such a theology “kingdom theology.” In the following he describes the difference between such a theology and what I have called a more “naturalistic” orthodoxy:

The kingdom theology is concerned with the concrete, the life in the here and the now, although in a dimension other than the material. By no means does it teach that the kingdom is found in heaven only, and attainable only after death. This is a post-New Testament interpretation. Kingdom theology does not mean merely a glorious expectation of life after death to be reached by the pious and the ascetic; it means a radical turn in life itself, the breaking in of a new dimension into the physical existence of man.⁴⁶

Indeed the Mennonite “two kingdom” theology is another way of stating the internal/external distinction developed by Niebuhr.⁴⁷ Certainly Niebuhr had a greater interest in the “external” than has Mennonite

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁶ Robert Friedmann, “The Doctrine of the Two Worlds,” in *Recovery*, 113.

⁴⁷ In a later essay, “The Essence of Anabaptist Faith. An Essay of Interpretation” (*The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 41, January 1967, 5-24), Friedmann notes that part of the difference between the mainline of the Reformation and the Anabaptist development stems from the lack of influence that Augustinianism had on the Anabaptists. This is particularly interesting in light of the current re-evaluation of Paul in which scholars are arguing that Paul should no longer be read with Augustinian presuppositions (see Beker above). As scholars like Beker and Stendahl re-evaluate Paul they are coming to an increased appreciation of the role of apocalyptic in Paul’s thought. Apocalyptic of course is another name for what Friedmann sees as the “essence” of Anabaptist faith: a two-kingdom theology.

theology, but in terms of church life I do not believe that the two visions are irreconcilable.⁴⁸

John Howard Yoder has noted this practical aspect of Scripture. He believes that the function of language is not to give certainty; rather he suggests:

. . . that instead of continuing to ask the timeless philosophical question, “how can we have a perfect knowledge which would free us from the limitations of our finitude?” we should rather put the question from the other end and ask how God has chosen to use our human weakness, including the weakness of our linguistic and literary tools, for his purposes.⁴⁹

Once again, a major interest of Trinitarianism was to free us from our finitude. As this concern ceases to be relevant, a more finite christology naturally follows. The diversity and uncertainty of Scripture reflects this epistemological situation. It tells not of eternal truth but of finite truths that the sinful community learns over time. Thus Scripture is a learning tool: “We have already to do with an immeasurable bulk of words about God. What we need Scripture for is not to give us information but to correct and to clarify and to catechize within what we already know.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ A problem in Mennonite theology, I believe, has been its failure to take the liberal option seriously enough. John Howard Yoder continues this line of thought in criticizing H.R. Niebuhr’s position in *The Meaning of Revelation*: “It is not possible in any of these systems, as far as I can see, to affirm with any kind of clarity, to say to oneself, or to let it be said to oneself, or to say to one’s brother or one’s church, ‘This is something which we must listen to, accept, be guided by, live by because it speaks with authority.’ Each of these positions gives various ways for NOT taking it that way. We still can respect them of course. None of them is like “modernism,” simply setting the text aside. All of them are respectful and many of them are spelled out with great personal piety and respect for the historical working of the church with Scripture. . . . But there is at least no clear speaking whereby the church could be governed, renewed, reprimanded, informed in a way that rises above regular human possibilities” (Yoder, *A Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method*, Elkhart: Goshen Biblical Seminary, 1982, 264). The liberal vision, as seen in the works of H.R. Niebuhr, is primarily concerned with epistemology. I can see no reason why such a vision cannot lead to the type of disciplined community that Yoder seeks. Much could be gained if Mennonite theologians like Yoder would concentrate upon utilizing the liberal position where that position would be helpful, i.e., in the areas of epistemology and methodology, and then correcting that position in areas where the Mennonite vision is clearest—in areas of ecclesiology and discipleship.

⁴⁹ John H. Yoder, *Preface*, 279.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

But it is precisely at this point that the christological problem becomes evident. Adoptionism looks at Jesus as a man “adopted” by God. This expresses the radically historical nature of the church. The truth of Jesus is not an “eternal” truth but is a particular truth found within a particular history, that of Israel and the Church. To understand Jesus in this way is to realize that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel and not the God of Israel.

The article above was first published in The Conrad Review and is used with permission. We deeply appreciate the insights contained in the article, but its publication in this journal does not imply agreement at every point – eds.