

Baptists at the Crossroads Between Modernity and Postmodernity

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We Baptists have often imagined ourselves the possessors of a transcultural faith, clearly defined and self-identical in myriad settings all the way back to the apostolic church. The clearest exemplar of this tendency is the "Landmark Movement" which sprang up among Baptists in the south in the early twentieth century. But all of us are prone to fits of exclaiming such slogans as "We're people of the Book!" or "We have no creed but the Scriptures!", as if the biblical witness had no cultural context, or the act of reading scripture allowed us to automatically transcend our own cultural context. The fact is that we all read scripture through different cultural and ideological lenses which shape and color that reading, and value up certain parts of the Canon and value down others.

For example, reading scripture in the context of the sovereign Roman Empire post-Constantine valued up the elements of hierarchy and authority implicit in the pastoral and Johannine epistles and over time gave impetus to the emergence of the Roman Catholic Church. Reading scripture in the context of the neoplatonic philosophy so prevalent in the first centuries of the Christian era lifted up scriptural allusions to the eternal soul and devalued the earthiness and embodied spirituality of the Hebrew scriptures and much of the New Testament, so that "soul saving" and an ascetic ideal became widespread in various expressions of Christian faith. I dare not get into the myriad of culture and gender-specific hermeneutics which emerged in the late twentieth century. They are at least upfront about a reality traditional evangelicals often seek to obscure or deny.

Early Baptists emerged in the transition time between Renaissance humanism and the birth of a full-fledged modernity in the Enlightenment. I would argue that in spite of the primitivist elements in Baptist folkways and piety, our typical Baptist apologetic is *thoroughly modern*. Let me illustrate. One might describe the **modern mind** in terms of four characteristics:

(1) First, there is the identification of the **autonomous self** as the fundamental unit of value in the world and the arbiter of all value. In premodern societies, the group is primary, and the individual finds their identity and value in the context of the group. Gender roles, class and vocational status, and generational attributes are strictly

delineated. One need only think of the strictly defined identities and roles of priests and Levites in the Old Testament, or the interminable (to our mind) "begats" woven through both testaments. Foundational to the modernist understanding of the imperial self are the epistemology (knowledge theory) of Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and the ethics of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Descartes, in his famous *Meditations*, exercised a systematic doubt in which he imagined that all the deliverances of his senses and the common sense of his culture might be illusory, but at the utmost extremity of this exercise, he could not doubt that he, the thinker, was in fact the agent of this thinking and doubting. He then proceeded to reconstruct common sense and received wisdom on the basis of his own indubitable thought processes. The self reigns. Kant sought to base his ethics not on custom, creed, or tradition, but upon reason's construction of an ethical principle applicable in any and every situation, the so-called "categorical imperative". "So act", said Kant, "that you could desire the maxim [principle] of your action to be exercised universally". Again, the autonomous self reigns. Baptist preaching and teaching has lifted up from scripture those episodes where Jesus, Peter or Paul appeal to individuals for a response on faith. Jesus is the "personal Savior", not the herald of the Kingdom of God, and the heart of the Gospel is the appeal to the autonomous individual to exercise his or her sovereign power of decision to punch an individual ticket to everlasting wellbeing.

(2) Implicit in this lifting up of the autonomous self is the birth of the **critical consciousness**. Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus of Rotterdam debunked ancient pious forgeries and subjected scripture to the same canons of literary and historical criticism as any other documents. Ancient traditions were no longer received at face value or followed blindly. The autonomous self decided whether or not to honor and obey them based on rational analysis of their utility. The craft guilds in the emerging modern cities broke family monopolies on economic skills and activities and introduced the possibility of social mobility. David Friedrich Strauss' notorious "*Life of Jesus*" (1836) extended the critical consciousness to the activities, teachings and (especially) the miracles of Jesus himself. It is no accident that Baptist apologists both naive and sophisticated have responded by trying to demonstrate the reliability of scripture and the "evidence" for the most audacious claims of a supernaturalistic Gospel (*Evidence That Demands a Verdict*), enlisting archeologists, pagan historians and converted skeptics to battle the critical consciousness on its own turf.

(3) Both the sovereignty of the autonomous self and the exercise of the critical consciousness imply the **authority of reason** in modernity. Modern reason is not just a tool for managing and applying tribal traditions. Reason decides what can and cannot

be so. Reason demands that even sacred texts and traditions be, well, *reasonable*. Therefore Baptist apologists respond by presenting scripture as an axiomatic system of propositional truths (Carl F.H. Henry) which defeats competing systems and world-views in terms of its consistency, coherence and illuminating power. Such a system cannot exhibit any flaws in fact or in consistency, lest the whole system unravel; hence, "inerrancy". Frankly, I cannot imagine that any mind other than the modern mind could force the luxuriant variety of historical narratives, myths, poems, hymns, proverbs and occasional writings that comprise Holy Scripture into the straightjacket of a system, but we remember that faith's newly emerging competitor in modernity was the "scientific world view", so our apologetic became the mirror image of our competitor.

(4) Modernity's **scientific revolution** and its technological applications involved the turning of autonomous reason to a disciplined examination and manipulation of reality for the sake of knowledge of the natural world for its own sake, and the mastery of that world for humanity's comfort and wellbeing. It is no accident, given the striking success of the "scientific method" and its incalculable effects on our life styles, that Christian apologists would promote "creation science" where secular scientists threatened cherished convictions at the same time as they used the technological applications of science (computers, electronic media, etc.) unquestioningly to promote their ministries and ideological agendas. In response to modernity's creation of secular ideologies based on the deliverances of autonomous reason, Christian apologists have argued that our foundation is surer, and our "system" is more comprehensive, more useful for promoting the "good life" (e.g., "true love waits"), and finally, upon examination by an unbiased reason, "truer". But what if our emerging global culture takes a turn in which the existence of stable "foundations" of any sort is questioned, the stability and enduring identity of the self is called into question, and a sovereign reason gives way to multiple "reasons"? What then becomes of our apologetic reply to modernity? How do we respond to "postmodern" thinkers who reject all systems, foundations, comprehensive "truths" and even a unitary reason? Could it be that the narrative strain in traditional Baptist apologetics – "Tell me the story of Jesus" – will plot the way forward?

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