

“What Experiences of Christians
Living in the Early Christian Century
Led to the Christian Doctrines
of the Divine Sonship of Jesus,
the Virgin Birth, and the Bodily Resurrection”

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During King's second year at Crozer Theological Seminary, he took a two-term required course in systematic theology, Christian Theology for Today, with George W. Davis.¹ For the first assignment of the first term, Davis asked his students to use George Hedley's The Symbol of the Faith, an examination of the Apostles' Creed. In this essay, King follows the book's structure and argument closely. When

1. George Washington Davis (1902–1960) earned his B.A. at the University of Pittsburgh in 1924, his B.D. (1928) and Th.M. (1929) at Rochester Theological Seminary, and his Ph.D. under the direction of Douglas Clyde Macintosh at Yale University (1932). Davis was the pastor of churches in Calais, Maine, and Columbus, Ohio, before becoming professor of Christian theology at Crozer Theological Seminary in 1938, where he taught for the remainder of his career.

23 Nov
1949

he discusses the "probable" influence of Greek mythology on Christian thought, Davis prods, "Is there any doubt about it?" On balance, King shows himself willing to abandon scriptural literalism, remaining confident that this would not undermine the "profound foundation" of the Christian doctrines. Davis commented, "Well done," and gave the paper an A -.

In order to understand the meaning and the significance of any doctrine or any creed it is necessary to study the experiences of the individuals that produced them. Doctrines and creeds do not spring forth uncaused like Athene sprang from the head of Zeus, but they grow out of the historical settings and the psychological moods of the individuals that set them forth. All ideas, however profound or however naive, are produced by conditions and experiences that grow from the producers' environment.

In this paper we shall discuss the experiences of early Christians which lead to three rather orthodox doctrines—the divine sonship of Jesus, the virgin birth, and the bodily resurrection. Each of these doctrines is enshrined in what is known as "the Apostles' Creed." It is this creed that has stood as a "Symbol of Faith" for many Christians over the years. Even to this day it is recited in many churches. But in the minds of many sincere Christians this creed has planted a seed of confusion which has grown to an oak of doubt. They see this creed as incompatible with all scientific knowledge, and so they have proceeded to reject its content.

But if we delve into the deeper meaning of these doctrines, and somehow strip them of their literal interpretation, we will find that they are based on a profound foundation. Although we may be able to argue with all degrees of logic that these doctrines are historically and philologically untenable, yet we can never undermine the foundation on which they are based. As Dr. Hedley has so cogently stated, "What ultimately the creed signifies is not words, but spirit."*

The first doctrine of our discussion which deals with the divine sonship of Jesus went through a great process of development. It seems quite evident that the early followers of Jesus in Palestine were well aware of his genuine humanity. Even the synoptic gospels picture Jesus as a victim of human experiences. Such human experiences as growth, learning, prayer, and defeat are not at all uncommon in the life

* George Hedley, The Symbol of the Faith, p. 7.

23 Nov
1949

of Jesus.² How then did this doctrine of divine sonship come into being?

We may find a partial clue to the actual rise of this doctrine in the spreading of Christianity into the Greco-Roman world. I need not elaborate on the fact that the Greeks were very philosophical minded people. Through philosophical thinking the Greeks came to the point of subordinating, distrusting, and even minimizing anything physical. Anything that possessed flesh was always undermined in Greek thought. And so in order to receive inspiration from Jesus the Greeks had to apotheosize him. We must remember that the Logos concept had its origin in Greek thought. It would {was} only natural that the early Christians, after coming in contact with the Greeks would be influenced by their thought.

But by no means can we designate this as the only clue to the rise of this doctrine. Saint Paul and the early church followers could have never come to the conclusion that Jesus was divine if there had not been some uniqueness in the personality of the historical Jesus. What Jesus brought into life was a new personality and those who came under {its} spell were more and more convinced that he with whom they had walked and talked in Galilee could be nothing less than a divine person. To the earliest Christians this breath-taking conviction was not the conclusion of an argument, but the inescapable solution of a problem. Who was this Jesus? They saw that Jesus could not merely be explained in terms of the psychological mood of the age in which he lived, for such explanation failed to answer another inescapable question: Why did Jesus differ from many others in the same setting? And so the early Christians answered this question by saying that he was the divine son of God. As Hedley laconically states, "the church had found God in Jesus, and so it called Jesus the Christ; and later under the influence of Greek thought-forms, the only begotten Son of God."* The Church called Jesus divine because they had found God in him. They could only identify him with the highest and best in the universe. It was this great experience with

* Hedley, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

2. George Hedley, *The Symbol of the Faith: A Study of the Apostles' Creed* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 34: "The first three Gospels portray [Jesus] as growing, learning, contending, suffering, being defeated: all of which are universal human experiences."

23 Nov 1949 the historical Jesus that led the early Christians to see him as the divine son of God.

The second doctrine in our discussion posits the virgin birth. This doctrine gives the modern scientific mind much more trouble than the first, for it seems downright improbable and even impossible for anyone to be born without a human father.³

First we must admit that the evidence for the tenability of this doctrine is so shallow to convince any objective thinker. To begin with, the earliest written documents in the New Testament make no mention of the virgin birth. Moreover, the Gospel of Mark, the most primitive and authentic of the four, gives not the slightest suggestion of the virgin birth. The effort to justify this doctrine on the grounds that it was predicted by the prophet Isaiah is immediately eliminated, for all New Testament scholars agree that the word virgin is not found in the Hebrew original, but only in the Greek text which is a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for "young woman." How then did this doctrine arise?

A clue to this inquiry may be found in a sentence from St. Justin's First Apology. Here Justin states that the birth of Jesus is quite similar to the birth of the sons of Zeus. It was believed in Greek thought that an extraordinary person could only be explained by saying that he had a father who was more than human. It is probable that this Greek idea influenced Christian thought.⁴

A more adequate explanation for the rise of this doctrine is found in the experience which the early Christians had with Jesus. The people saw within Jesus such a uniqueness of quality and spirit that to explain him in terms of ordinary background was to them quite inadequate. For his early followers this spiritual uniqueness could only be accounted for in terms of biological uniqueness.⁵ They were not unscientific in

3. Hedley raises the same objection in *Symbol of the Faith*, p. 39: "To our minds it seems improbable in itself that anyone should be born without a human father."

4. Davis underlined "probable," wrote a question mark above it, and asked, "Is there any doubt about it?"

5. Hedley, *Symbol of the Faith*, pp. 45-46: "[Jesus] was so extraordinary a person that ordinary backgrounds seemed for him quite inadequate. The character of Jesus stands out, quite separately from this ancient attempt at explaining it, and surviving that attempt without loss of any kind. We shall not try to account for Jesus' moral uniqueness by a theory of biological uniqueness; but the moral uniqueness of Jesus stands, and still defies our own attempts at its explaining."

23 Nov
1949

their approach because they had no knowledge of the scientific. They could only express themselves in terms of the pre-scientific thought patterns of their day. No laws were broken because they had no knowledge of the existence of law. They only knew that they had been with the Jesus of history and that his spiritual life was so far beyond theirs that to explain his biological origin as identical with theirs was quite inadequate. We of this scientific age will not explain the birth of Jesus in such unscientific terms, but we will have to admit with the early Christians that the spiritual uniqueness of Jesus stands as a mystery to man.

The last doctrine in our discussion deals with the resurrection story. This doctrine, upon which the Easter Faith rests, symbolizes the ultimate Christian conviction: that Christ conquered death. From a literary, historical, and philosophical point of view this doctrine raises many questions.⁶ In fact the external evidence for the authenticity of this doctrine is found wanting. But here again the external evidence is not the most important thing, for it in itself fails to tell us precisely the thing we most want to know: What experiences of early Christians lead to the formulation of the doctrine?

The root of our inquiry is found in the fact that the early Christians had lived with Jesus. They had been captivated by the magnetic power of his personality. This basic experience led to the faith that he could never die. And so in the pre-scientific thought pattern of the first century, this inner faith took outward form.⁷ But it must be remembered that before the doctrine was formulated or the event recorded, the early Christians had had a lasting experience with the Christ. They had come to see that the essential note in the Fourth Gospel is the ultimate force in Christianity: The living, deathless person of Christ.

6. Hedley, *Symbol of the Faith*, p. 75: "Easter symbolizes the ultimate Christian conviction. The Easter message is that he who was born of a woman, he who died on Calvary, became the conqueror of death: . . . When, however, we enquire into the documentary evidence for the resurrection faith, we are beset at once by intricate literary, historical, and philosophical problems."

7. Hedley, *Symbol of the Faith*, p. 80: "For those who knew him, he could never die. His moral imperatives were immortal, his gentleness triumphed over the brutality of the cross, his love lived on without reference to his body's death. He could not die: that certainty was at the beginning. Out of it came the assurance that still he lived. By the necessities of symbolic expression, and especially in the terms of first-century thinking, the faith took outward form in an increasingly objective way of expression."

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

23 Nov 1949 They expressed this in terms of the outward, but it was an inner experience that lead to its expression.

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