

## guest commentary

# Jesus Christ, the fullness of God

By Curtis W. Freeman

**A**t the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Memphis, in a breakout session titled “The Changing Shape of Our Salvation,” John Killinger dismissed traditional understandings of Jesus as *passé* and announced: “Now we are re-evaluating and we’re approaching everything with a humbler perspective and seeing God’s hand working in Christ, but not necessarily as the incarnate God in our midst.”

Killinger’s penchant for controversy is well known, but this was even a bit more outrageous than usual. It matters little that nothing he said was original. He simply recycled old ideas and rehashed dated scholarship.

And no one I talked with seemed to be persuaded by his fantastic conjectures, presented more to inflame than inform. So why are a lot of Baptists concerned about what he said?

There are few things more unbaptistic or more likely to get under our Baptist skin than someone claiming to speak *for* us.

If Killinger had simply said, “I am re-evaluating ...” most observers would have happily cut him some slack. After all, he’s entitled to his views on these matters, even if they are out there.

But his use of the plural “*we*” left many folks wondering who was being included in the group that shares this revisionist Christology. He spoke so confidently, as if he were an oracle of the *Zeitgeist*.

Still I wondered. Who are these eminent and all-knowing others? Are they the Jesus Seminar and fellow travelers, or Dan Brown and *The DaVinci Code* enthusiasts? Was he implying that this revisionism is widely held in the scholarly academy or among the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and other moderate Baptists?

My sense is that Killinger was really speaking for himself. I cannot think of a single one of my colleagues at Duke who has suggested anything remotely similar to what

he proposed. Neither do I suspect that his views are representative of the scholarly guild.

What he opined is certainly not indicative of Baptists who for four centuries stand in the historic stream of orthodox Christology as represented by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which affirmed that “our Lord Jesus Christ [is] truly God and truly man, consubstantial with the Father in Godhead and the same consubstantial with us in manhood.”

My guess is that all the folks who agreed with Killinger’s revisionist Christological speculations in Memphis could have comfortably ridden back with him to the airport in his rental car.

Baptists have had their fair share of folks that chose against the way of orthodoxy — such as Matthew Caffyn, a 17th century English General Baptist minister who denied the essential divinity of Christ, or Elhanan Winchester, the 18th century American Baptist pastor and evangelist who founded the first Universalist church in Philadelphia.

When on Nov. 8, 1820, Richard Furman issued his historic *Call* for South Carolina Baptists to unite in the causes of ministerial education and missions, he sounded a warning that even among Baptists, “Unitarianism is exerting itself with ingenuity, vigor and address, to make proselytes and acquire permanence.”

George B. Foster, a Baptist theologian at the University of Chicago Divinity School in the early 20th century, was so wary about saying that “Jesus is God” that he turned the phrase around, asserting instead that “God is like Jesus.” But these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

Whenever Baptists have thought deeply together about faith in Christ, they have

echoed the language of orthodoxy. *The Second London Confession* (1677/1688) of English Particular Baptists affirmed of Jesus that he “is very God, and very Man; yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and Man” (VIII.2). Similarly, *The Orthodox Creed* (1678) of the English General Baptists declared that though the Son of God possesses “two natures” he “is one Christ, God-man, or Imanuel, God with us” (VI).

*The Articles of Religion of the New Connexion* (1770), drafted by an evangelical group of English General Baptists that emerged out of the Wesleyan revival, stated: “We believe, that our Lord Jesus Christ is God and man, united in one person ... in a way which we pretend not to explain, but think ourselves bound by the word of God firmly to believe.” It is clear from the historic confessions of faith: Baptists affirm the mystery proclaimed since the days of the apostles that in Jesus Christ “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19).

In February of 1719, the ministers of the nonconformist denominations in London gathered at Salters’ Hall to debate the ordination of Presbyterian James Pierce who refused to affirm the deity of the Christ. In the end, all but two of the 16 Particular Baptists and only one of the 15 General Baptists voted to require an orthodox confession of faith for ordination.

Not surprisingly, “the cankering error” of Unitarianism proved terminal, not only for Presbyterians in England, but also for the General Baptists who died out. The Particular Baptists who held firm to their confession flourished.

Cooperative Baptists would do well to recognize that their *generosity* toward revisionist challenges is safe only as long as the *orthodoxy* of their confession is secure. **BT**

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