

EMBODYING THE

An interview with James W. McClendon

by Ched Myers

JAMES WILLIAM MCCLENDON, Jr., was born in Louisiana in 1924. Raised and ordained in the Southern Baptist tradition, he liked to call himself a “small ‘b’ baptist” theologian. McClendon has taught theology for 46 years at a variety of public universities and theological seminaries. These included the University of San Francisco (where he was the first non-Catholic theologian in the U.S. to belong to a Catholic theology department), Stanford, Temple, Goucher, Notre Dame, St. Mary’s Moraga, Baylor, and Fuller Theological Seminary. His pioneering *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Abingdon, 1974, Trinity Press, 1990) helped launch the narrative theology movement. He recently completed the last of his three-volume work in systematic theology: *Ethics* (1986), *Doctrine* (1994) and *Witness* (2000). Jim became my teacher in the late 1970s at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, and remained my theological mentor and friend over the years. McClendon passed away on October 30, 2000.

— Ched Myers

Ched Myers: As one of the pioneers of, and consistently articulate voices in, recent narrative theology, could you give a sketch of how this movement grew during the 1960s and 1970s?

James McClendon: These past decades have seen so many kinds of theological styles and trends: “death of God theology,” the theology of play and so on. They had their day and then faded away. To many, narrative theology was just one more technique for doing the same old thing. But for others of us, the deeper concerns had to do with a growing awareness that in the course of the Enlightenment there had been a consistent attempt to de-narrativize the content of religion.

Enlightenment thinkers spoke of narratives as myths, by which they didn’t mean anything complimentary. Their idea was to have a theology that was rational, based upon firm, self-evident philosophical foundations, and quite free of the stories that the Bible told. Those stories might illustrate the true theology, they might even exemplify it, but they couldn’t be it. So

the Enlightenment was a time in which the narrative character of human existence was reduced to secondary status. For example, John Locke doesn’t make anything of the story of his own life or anybody else’s life.

In the 1960s there was an increasing sense that the Enlightenment, for all its virtues, had let us down theologically. There was a strong casting about for other modes of doing theology and, in particular, a return to Scripture. It dawned on some of us that the Enlightenment’s suppression of narrative was not a good thing, and that the only honest way to talk about God was to talk about the story of the world and God’s relation to it. So there should not be such a thing as “narrative theology”; there should only be ordinary theology that ordinarily has narrative content.

Around this time (1970-71), while at Goucher College, I began work on *Biography as Theology*. It occurred to me that the only kind of religious experience that was distinctive and worth talking about was narrative experience — that is, life stories. So I researched lives of outstanding 20th-century Christians. I was particularly interested in those who were not trained theologians, such as the diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld and the composer Charles Ives, as well as Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Baptist radical Clarence Jordan, both of whom did have theological training but who were not professors. I was just trying to show how there is theology present in every life, including those of Christians in the 20th century. In their life stories I was able to find content that could speak to the main concerns of recent Christianity. Because humans are so story-engaged, I felt that narrative theology is not a popular fad, but something that is just as enduring as Scripture itself.

CM: What do you mean by “small ‘b’ baptist theology”?

JM: I was raised in Baptist churches in the south. When I went to teach at the Episcopal divinity school in Berkeley (Church Divinity School of the Pacific), they were fond of saying that they were both Catholic and Protestant. Since I had taught in both Catholic and Protestant schools I thought,

"Well, I'll have no trouble fitting in." But I found I did have trouble fitting in as the ecumenical guest; there was a gap there between them and my lingering Baptist convictions and nature. I tried to think what that gap amounted to and decided that perhaps the thing was that Baptists were neither Catholic nor Protestant, but some sort of third sort of Christian thing that wasn't identical with the other two.

Soon after I got to CDSP I read John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus*. It was a transformative experience that completely changed my life, because Yoder brought to the surface the things I had believed in as a Baptist and made me confront them. My efforts at ecumenism to that point had been to try to seem more Protestant rather than to be who I am. So I seized upon the idea of baptists with a small "b." This refers not just to those who label themselves as Baptist, but Christians of any sort (including Episcopalians) who see the radicals of the 16th century — the so-called Anabaptists — as their spiritual forbears, even if not direct progenitors.

As I tried very hard to spell out in *Ethics*, the "baptist vision" has two mottoes: first, "This is that"; and, second, "Then is now."

Each needs some explanation. "This is that" is taken from the King James Version of Acts 2:16, where Simon Peter on the day of Pentecost reads from the prophets and then says to the audience, this — in other words, what his listeners see here today — is that. It's what the prophet was speaking about. So the right way to read prophecy is not just as historical record of the past, but as a disclosure of the meaning and significance of the present. In a sense, the first century (the New Testament period) is the 16th century, and the Reformation (and especially the radical Reformation) is our own century.

"Then is now" tries to do the same thing. The "end times" about which we read in Scripture is not just information about how things may come out in some remote distant time. It's information about what is of final importance here and now. Eschatology is what comes last, but it is also what lasts, because it is enduring.

The thing that strikes me about the radical reformers is that they were so varied. There

is no one person that baptists look to as their founder, no Luther or Calvin. And this is not accidental: there were so many leaders of such different sorts. For example, Menno Simons was indeed an important figure, but Mennonites would still be Mennonites without Menno. Hans Denck, Hans Hut, Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, Conrad Grebel — these were each different people with different concerns. What they had in common was this baptist vision that shaped their lives and often caused their deaths, because they were a martyred people. Indeed they believed that the story of the cross is the story of every Christian's life.

CM: In *Ethics* you state that "theology discovers and renovates its own narrative voice." Thus theology is a conversation not only with Scripture, but also with hymns, liturgical content and ministry practices. This is very different than simply being in dialogue with philosophers.

JM: Yes. It helps to distinguish between primary and secondary theology. Primary theology is the church trying to think out its own convictions, and this gets expressed in sermons, prayers, hymns — the sources of its ongoing common life. Eventually, primary convictions by which it tries to live get written down in creeds and confessions of faith or expressed afresh in new hymns and new sermons or simply lived out in the lives of existing members of the community. Secondary theology, which is the main thing that universities are concerned with, is theology about theology. It tries to take a step back from primary theology and ask questions about justification, truth, legitimation, and the significance of primary theology. Very often it forgets that there is primary theology and simply ends up talking about its own justification, truth, and verification, which is a regrettable lapse, a diminishing.

CM: One thing I and so many others have appreciated is that you help us understand some of the great theologians not only as secondary theologians, but also as primary theologians. Your dramatic lectures on Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a human being as well as theologian really fired my imagination, for example. And you include in your

writing the biographies of non-theologians such as Dorothy Day as well. This seems to function to reclaim theology as an ordinary Christian "practice," and not just a profession.

JM: A primary practice, yes. Because to think about our convictions is already to be engaging in some degree in primary theology — whether my primary convictions are about God or something else.

CM: Your work on theology as a "science of convictions," as in *Understanding Religious Convictions* (with James Smith, University of Notre Dame Press, 1975) and *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism* (Trinity Press, 1994), was closely related to your work as an ethicist who was very much part of the emerging movement of "character ethics." Could you tell us a little about that?

JM: This does bring up a funny little story. When I went to teach at CDSP I had taught at a number of other places, but never had been assigned the duty of teaching ethics. Fortunately, in the interview there I was asked whether I could teach ethics — not if I had taught ethics. So I said, "Yes." And, sure enough, I could. I guess it's like discovering that you can play the violin — you pick it up and you get a sound. I've cast about for various ways to teach ethics. I was much influenced early on by Karl Barth, who scattered his ethics through the volumes of *Church Dogmatics*. I was then much influenced by my contacts with Stanley Hauerwas; it's really Stanley to whom we Christians owe the language of the ethics of character and virtue. He was laying claim to elements that he thought had been missing from Enlightenment ethics, just as I thought there were elements missing from Enlightenment theology. He and I gradually came to share the view that ethics and theology were not two things but one thing. Character and virtue were then picked up by others who were much more philosophical in their approaches, such as Alasdair MacIntyre.

CM: One of the many themes you were ahead of the curve in discussing was the concept of "embodiment" and of the body

— both the individual body and the corporate body — in ethics. This has become quite popular in theological discourse in the 1990s.

JM: In the original edition of *Ethics*, I spoke of ethics as a three-stranded cord — the cord wouldn't be itself if all the strands weren't there. One of those strands was the strand of embodied selfhood. In the revised edition I link this with what my wife, philosopher Nancy Murphy, calls "physicalism." Human nature is not found in the old Cartesian dualism between mind and body, but rather in the identity of body and spirit. I found "embodied selfhood" in the 18th-century lives of Jonathan and Sarah Pierpont Edwards. He, in particular, is thought of as just a "talking head," a kind of detached intellect. But if you study their shared life you find that they had very rich emotional and physical lives and that what they had to say theologically was inseparable from those riches. So I used their lives to illustrate "body ethics," just as I used the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to illustrate social ethics and the life of Dorothy Day to illustrate resurrection ethics.

CM: You've written that narrative in many ways bridges the gulf between experience and Scripture that was opened up by 19th-century theology. In *Doctrine* you go so far as to say that the Bible is best read by paying attention throughout to character, setting and episode, as well as to who is doing the narration and who is doing the hearing. This narrative approach to Scripture has begun to carry the day in biblical studies, though only belatedly. Yet there are still many who say you can't speak of a plot of the Bible; it's just a collection of random notes and moral traditions and so on. But you are very clear from a theological perspective that one can trace a plot throughout and pay attention to the various settings and thereby grasp the story of God and the story that God wants us to participate in.

JM: Yes. I refer to this sometimes as the Great Story, the big Bible story of which all the smaller stories are component parts. I don't know that we have any infallible way of telling the Great Story. I tried to para-

phrase it in *Ethics* and *Doctrine*. In the Great Story, God creates in love and God's loved ones rebel, but that doesn't end the story for God. In a way it only begins it, because God loves the sinner, which leads to all of these God-initiated overtures, which in turn climax (for Christians) in Jesus and his cross. That's a kind of a plot and it issues in what Ralph Wood would call a comic or happy outcome. And the comic outcome is in the rest of the New Testament and the rest of our lives.

CM: Do you feel that your embrace of a narrative way of doing theology, history and ethics has something maybe to do with how and where you were raised?

JM: Oh, I'm certain of that. I grew up in Louisiana. My father was a Methodist — the Methodist Episcopal Church South it was called. My mother was a Baptist — Southern Baptist it was called, but we just said Baptist at home. I was taken along to the Baptist church so that's the one I ended up in. And I think that the way the Bible was taught in Sunday School and in my home did emphasize the stories — probably emphasized the parts more than the great story, but that came up also. I'm sure it shaped the way I thought about the Bible.

CM: You are well aware of the ambivalence — even suspicion — that many philosophically trained theologians and historically trained biblical scholars have had toward what you call in *Ethics* (in G.M. Rophins' words) the "counter, original, spare, strange" character of the biblical salvation stories of Abraham and Jesus. Those old stories sit so uneasily with the modern mind and yet you insist on building theology around them.

JM: I don't have any quarrel in principle with the scientific, historical, critical approach to the Bible, but I don't think it's the most helpful approach. At the end of *Doctrine* I have a section on the temptations that face people who try to read the Bible. One of them is the historical-critical temptation: to try to penetrate through the Bible to find the alleged facts behind it and in doing so missing what the Bible itself has to say.

There is, of course, historical or concrete reality behind the Bible — it's not all just fiction. But we don't get closer to the Bible if we get past the text and focus on our projection of the concrete reality.

CM: Why does this way of thinking and being — the narrative voice, the narrative mind, narrative discourse — continue to be seen by scholars as a second-rate way of knowing, when most human beings for most of history have lived and continue to live out of it? This seems to me another interesting case of the majority being ruled by the minority.

JM: I think that's still the heritage of the Enlightenment with us, and I don't think it will last forever.

CM: It's interesting that as a baptist theologian you conclude in your *Biography as Theology* that the role of saints needs to be revisited by Protestants. Subsequently there's been sort of a renaissance in interest in the lives of saints.

JM: Well, we all have saints, whether we're Episcopalians or Pentecostals. There is in every church some figure or figures who are perceived as larger than life, as more authentically displaying the way that we're all trying to follow. And when these figures pass into the past, they get posted on the wall of the church or on a marble monument or something like that and all the more are they treated as saintly. I think that's a good thing — the more local the better. Perhaps one of the mistakes that Roman Catholics make is to try to press too hard for universal saints and thus pay too little attention to the flexible possibilities of local saints. So I'm for saints and for sainthood, because it is just biography as theology. It represents the Christian life lived out in a given time and place, with all of its faults and flaws — and saints have always got those as well as the glories and hopes. ●

Biblical scholar *Ched Myers* is a former contributing editor of *The Witness* who lives in Los Angeles.