

REVIEWS

Steven R Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*. Studies in Baptist History and Thought vol. 27. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006. (275pp)

Studies in Baptist History and Thought seeks to discuss, examine, and explore the many dimensions of Baptist tradition in order to contribute to its ongoing intellectual vigour. With this in mind, Steven Harmon's monograph will prove to be one of the more important contributions towards this end. Harmon (Associate Professor of Christian Theology at Campbell University Divinity School in Buies Creek, North Carolina, USA) develops the thesis that Baptists have much to contribute to the Christian Church but must first learn from the Great Tradition in order for Baptist insights to be enriched and developed. He thus develops a postmodern Baptist hermeneutic. He formally contends that, 'the reconstruction of the Baptist vision in the wake of modernity's dissolution requires a retrieval of the ancient ecumenical tradition that forms Christian identity through liturgical rehearsal, catechetical instruction, and ecclesial practice' (pix). Harmon is a patristic scholar and thus looks to that era for the significant resources upon which Baptists should draw in order for them to become enriched themselves and also to contribute more effectively to the ecumenical endeavour.

The basic thesis which Harmon develops is the retrieval of tradition as a resource for constructive theology. He applies this to the academy, Baptist communions, and the local congregation. By 'catholic' Harmon does not simply appeal to the rather amorphous 'universal church' but more specifically to the sense of 'catholicity' created by an adherence to the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Harmon calls this a 'qualitative catholicity' (p204) which entails a call to 'visible unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship' (p202). This does not mean the dissolution of denominational identities but rather the acknowledgement of diversity within unity. Why look to a Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Christianity? Because all Christian communions can agree that Nicaea and Constantinople (and Chalcedon) express historic orthodox Christianity, and yet it does not enshrine any one denominational form of that Christianity; it is something to which all communions have a shared agreement on. Additionally, Nicaea-Constantinopolitan theology is dominated by the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology and it is

from this basis that Harmon believes real ecumenical endeavours can find success. For historical precedent for this Harmon appeals to the Oxford Movement and argues for a similar type of programme to exist within contemporary Baptist thought and life. He also surveys and notes the similarities to this programme within Mercersburg Theology, the Berneuchener liturgical renewal, and *nouvelle theologie*.

In several chapters Harmon appeals directly to church pastors and provides something of a practical 'how to implement this in church' strategy, while in other chapters he appeals directly to the academy and argues that if a Baptist catholicity is not taught it will not be caught. He provides some examples in other contexts from which Baptists may learn, most notably the methodology of Karl Barth. Barth presents a good case study in Harmon's opinion due to his respect for the Great Tradition, especially the patristic thinkers, and the fact that Barth ended up affirming the legitimacy of believer's baptism. In addition to these examples, chapter six uses the Book of Hebrews as a case study in how to read and apply Scripture when the interpreter draws upon the patristic thinkers for resourcement.

What Harmon explicitly suggests local congregations can do to practice Baptist catholicity includes observing the full Christian year, the adoption of a common lectionary, a movement toward celebrating communion regularly; weekly if possible, corporate recitation of the ancient creeds, patristic forms of prayer, confession of sin and declaration of pardon, the singing of the occasional patristic hymn, passing the peace, and a familiarity with the great lives of the saints (pp159-172). In short, Harmon appeals to implementation of the ancient practice of *lex orandi, lex credendi* in Baptist congregations. But why? Why must Baptists focus their attention on what the Christian Church holds in common and why must there be a return to a valuing of the *communio sanctorum*? Because only this can counter the contemporary dominance within Baptist congregations of the Enlightenment's antagonism to tradition which has resulted in the anti-traditional hermeneutic represented by the slogan often found within Baptist circles of 'no creed but the Bible'. As Harmon states: 'In consciously dispensing with the horizon of tradition, modern liberal and fundamentalist Baptists traded the deeply textured and richly variegated horizon of the historical Christian tradition for the comparatively flat and monochrome horizon of supposedly traditionless reason, itself a tradition of sorts, albeit a very thin one' (p5). Seven marks thus distinguish a catholic Baptist theology: 1) tradition as a source of authority, 2) a place for creeds in liturgy and catechesis, 3) liturgy as context for formation by tradition, 4) community as locus of authority, 5) a sacramental theology (including the retrieval of

all seven Roman Catholic sacraments!), 6) constructive retrieval and resourcing of tradition, and 7) a thick or deep ecumenism (pp7-17). Harmon's monograph is his effort to contribute to the resourcing of which he speaks.

While Harmon's work is invaluable to Baptists and simply must be consulted by pastors and teachers alike, it does suffer from a number of problems. Nine of the ten chapters in the work have been previously published as journal articles and edited as one monograph with the final chapter, "What keeps you from becoming a catholic?" A personal epilogue', the only previously unpublished essay. As such the work suffers from a high degree of repetition: the thesis of the work, the problems with contemporary Baptist thought and life, the recommendation of the retrieval of patristic sources, the appeal to Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan theology, and the 'no creed but the Bible' phrase appear all too frequently and tend to frustrate the reader. In trawling through Baptist creeds and confessions in order to show the continuity between Baptist thought and life with the Great Tradition the links are forced and the 'solution' Harmon wishes to suggest to the reader acts as the filter through which the tradition is passed. On closer inspection it would appear that the only tangible link between Baptist faith and life with the Great tradition, especially patristic theology, is found in seventeenth century Baptist creeds and confessions. And being the first generation removed from the Reformation that is entirely understandable. The fact that the evidence is extremely slim for patristic or reformational theology in post seventeenth century Baptist creeds and confessions may say more about the movement than the existence of this theology in the seventeenth century.

Harmon is a patristic expert and as such this aspect of the work is the richest and most suggestive. However, Harmon does make a few odd moves here and there. Harmon recommends the removal of the *filioque* clause, added to the Nicene Creed (AD 381) in AD589 and causing so much division since, but fails to interact with any of the literature on it or ecumenical proposals which have sought to find an acceptable solution, such as the one found between the World Council of Reformed Churches and the fourteen Eastern Orthodox Churches, in Geneva on 13 March 1991 (see T.F. Torrance, ed., *Theological Dialogue Between Orthodox and Reformed Churches*. Vol. 2 [Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1993], 219-226). A second area of concern is the lack of pneumatology in the volume. Harmon speaks often about the authority of the Word and the mediation of tradition but speaks very little about the role and authority of the Holy Spirit. This does tend to weaken his argument. This may be due to Harmon's apparent familiarity with early

Nicene theology as opposed to later Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan theology and the theology of the Reformation. On the latter Harmon appears to be particularly weak. This is evidenced, for instance, in his unusual treatment of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*. Harmon critiques this phrase and equates it with the Baptist sentiment ‘no creed but the Bible’ (what is really in effect *nuda Scriptura*), and in its place offers what he believes to be the correct term, *suprema Scriptura* (p32, 45, 86). The problem is *suprema Scriptura* is not a reformation phrase. For the magisterial reformers, *sola Scriptura* expressed the authority of the Word of God but was never considered to exist apart from the empowering presence of the Spirit of God. Harmon fails to make the connection between the Word and the Spirit here and thus tends to misunderstand the phrase and the theology of the reformers at this point. As far as I can work out; the phrase *suprema Scriptura* was coined by Bishop Colin Buchanan, an Anglican, to speak of the Scripture’s material sufficiency in an attempt to navigate a *via media* between Puritan and Roman Catholic doctrines of Scripture. The phrase was then developed by James Leo Garrett, Jr. (emeritus, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) in his 1990 work *Systematic Theology* volume 1, to argue for Scripture as the final authority as opposed to the only authority. Thus Garrett and Harmon confuse *sola Scriptura* with *solo Scriptura* and adopted *suprema Scriptura* as a solution. This misunderstanding of the tradition is unfortunate when a work like Harmon’s is attempting to construct ecclesial networks.

Despite these repetitive setbacks Harmon’s thesis is compelling and cogently made. He provides ample evidence to support his claims and leaves the reader in no doubt as to his intentions: to bolster Baptist identities and mission in such a way which respects Christ’s Church and seeks to contribute to its further advancement in a postmodern milieu. Harmon’s call for Baptist catholicity deserves a wide reader and an even wider acceptance. He joins a growing chorus of voices that are appealing to tradition as a way to advance the Christian Church, uppermost amongst them are Baptists such as D.H. Williams (Baylor University, Waco, Texas) and S.R. Holmes (University of St Andrews, Scotland). I am as convinced as Harmon is that this is the path to follow and if we do not it will be to our peril. Baptist pastors, and those teaching in Baptist academic institutions, must read this work and seek ways in which they can lead Baptists into the kind of catholicity Harmon speaks of.

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