

# **AN APPRECIATIVE AND CRITICAL REVIEW OF CONTESTING CATHOLICITY: THEOLOGY FOR OTHER BAPTISTS (1)**

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Curtis Freeman's *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* is an amazing *magnum opus* with special emphasis on the *magnum*. It is a large work in many senses of the term and clearly represents significant time, energy, and passion that culminated in a major monograph for our consideration. Frankly, the book compels us—at least it compelled me—to confront issues of theology, history, tradition, language, and footnotes—massive, head spinning footnotes—that few studies directed primarily toward the Baptists do. It is a decisive research tool now and into the future, not only related to Freeman's well-articulated thesis. I really mean this: the documentation alone is worth the price of the book, because it takes us into sources from the Patristic/Matristic period to the present. In fact, there are times when I think Freeman has left almost no bibliographic stone unturned. Whatever the response to "Other Baptists" from readers, all will benefit from this one volume bibliographic resource on theologies Christian, Catholic, Protestant, Free Church, Baptist, ancient and modern, postmodern, post liberal, post fundamentalist, pre Christian, post Christian and mid-Christian.

I found a response difficult to develop since the breadth of the text sent me thinking in so many directions, pulling together, or pushing apart ideas that I have confronted or that have confronted me for a long time. I had difficulty putting it down, it made me think in so many ways and directions, but I would have to let it go and return back again because my head just could not keep up with the ideas across the pages. Curtis: It is an amazing accomplishment and I celebrate the publication of a work that obviously took years of research and writing before you ever pushed "print." I also commend Baylor University Press for publishing a book this size in these days of increasing word limits for publications. Frustrated as to where to focus when you make me think in so many directions, I would briefly raise the following issues, some in basic statements, some in simple interrogatives.

First, reading the text, particularly as you describe what it means to claim the nomenclature "Other Baptist," I recalled the first edition of Robert Torbet's, *A History of the Baptists*, in which he set forth three prominent theories of Baptist origins: the Jerusalem-Jordan-John approach of Baptist Restorationism and Landmarkism (what I have called "history in the neighborhood of make-believe" when our daughter grew up on Mr. Rogers); the Anabaptist Spiritual Kinship Theory that drew something of a dotted line to connection with the Mennonites (a line my great teacher/mentor W. R. Estep and my late beloved former colleague Glen Stassen sought to make less dotted); and the English Separatist Theory (advocated by other

of my teachers, Robert Baker and Leon McBeth, and my early colleagues E. Glenn Hinson and Morgan Patterson). To those I would add the “Other-Baptist-explicit-catholicity-implicit-Reformed” theory that you set forth. That is not a way of pigeon-holing it, I hope, but acknowledging its significance among multiple approaches to being, believing, and acting in a Christian way that informs and is informed by what I have called elsewhere “Baptist *ways*.”

Another way of saying all this, Curtis, is that if we had a while longer—and I hope we will—and perhaps had a bit of “light libation” as the great Contesting Catholicity Heretic James Dunn would say, I might suggest that from the beginning most Baptist groups and movements began as, or conceived themselves to be “other Baptists” too—movements that moved beyond the status quo to new ways of thinking about God, the gospel, and the world outside the norms of their day.

Second, that sense of the general otherness of Baptists leads me to suggest that the more I think about your thesis and your superb documentation, it seems to me you are promoting something of a Baptist Restorationism of Catholicity. As theories go I still need to be convinced, or at least keep perusing your massive materials before I draw too specific conclusions.

Third, you reinforce for all of us the affirmation that most theology is reactive. Let me quickly add that there is nothing wrong with reactive theology—we sometimes call that the prophetic—Amos saw the poor being sold for a pair of shoes and could not stay silent. You see what you believe to be theological/creedal “bastardization” aplenty—here I am combining Freeman and Marney language and you offer a historical-theological-prophetic response. But your viewpoints, like Amos et. al. are clearly, at least to me, grounded in historical context—writ large in the Southern Baptist Convention. The denomination and its bastardized fundamentalism and liberalism camps are the focal points of your most prophetic declarations. That approach is not good/bad, pro/con, but is certainly both/and. You rightly tag many of the theological foibles of the denominational establishmentarianism, conversionism, staticism (I made that word up), and culture captivity represented in the SBC, but you do not really get too far beyond that idiom of Baptist identity when you discuss Baptists in American in the post-colonial period. At points when I read you I cannot tell if you are heading us to the future or warning us of dangers we have either gotten past or developed immunity to, or just left behind, old battles and old remedies among predominately Caucasian, Baptists in the American South.

As far as I can tell, you give little or no attention to the way African American Baptists would have or did respond to the issues you raise. I would be delighted to know why, particularly since I have a few suspicions of my own—none of them sinister, just historical question marks.

Fourth, and I think this is my strongest concern, at least right now—as I have said, your book deserves/demands multiple readings—my strongest current concern is that I wish you had paid more attention to the nature of early Baptist religious experience, conversion yes, but religious experience too, before you got to making it so decisively individualistic. You do this a bit in the early section, but you move away from that and I wished you would have carried it through the way you did other ideas. I found that particularly evident in the later section when you spend a page or two on the Daniel Featley-Dipper debate of 1660, published 1664/5. I confess it is easy to overlook the depth of the treatise in terms of its insights

into early Baptist identity, belief, and religious experience. I did that for years until a lecture at Baylor this March forced me to read the whole treatise, and I was and remain undone. Here is what I found that I had never seen before.

As the debate intensified Featley said the Baptists had no business discussing theology and putting forth their heretical views because they were ignorant of the original languages of Holy Writ and thus had to use translations that were in no way guaranteed to be inspired. At that, Baptists moved the discussion from the external to the internal knowledge of Holy Writ, noting: “though we cannot prove the letter to be well translated, that matters not much, for the letter of the Scripture is not Scripture. . . . The letter of the word of God is not Scripture, without the revelation of the Spirit of God; the Word revealed by the spirit is Scripture.” Featley then asked: “How prove you the Bible to be God’s Word?” The Baptists answered: “By experience. For, whatsoever is written in the Word of God cometh to pass, concerning Christ and Antichrist; experience is the best Doctor that teacheth us.” Featley then charged the Baptists with blasphemy. Nevertheless, the Baptists had made clear the experiential nature of their faith as it impacted biblical interpretation. Here is where Featley labeled Baptists “an illiterate and sottish sect,” whose members had stepped well beyond their stations in church and society. Perhaps you would too, Curtis, since they claim an inner authority that neither you nor Featley might want to give them. But here is my point: Baptists do not start with individualism, they start with salvation; they start with a church where, as you note, faith has not been coerced by government or religious establishment. They associated Rome and Papism with establishmentarianism, and the creeds were part and parcel of the enforcement package. Since they rejected real presence in communion they, and the Puritans who birthed them, had no way to know how the objective truth that God loved the world in Christ, could become subjective in individual sinners—they no longer ate his flesh and drank his blood. So conversion became experiential transubstantiation.

The book you have written is the book you have written, and I do not like it when people ask authors to write another kind of book than the one they wrote—but, if you want to know where I think your argument lags, as tight as it is already, it is with the absence of a serious look at the transformative nature of religious experience that the Baptists sought as a way of offering salvation.

Fifth, I have to ask for Christians in general and Baptists in particular, how would you propose to inculcate the intricacies of your Trinitarianism in church folk? My sense from the sources is that as the question of salvation swept across Reformation Protestantism, amid plagues, infant mortality, and short life spans, often the best regular sinners could do was simply find their way to Jesus. They just did not have time to get to the Trinity in the fullness you prefer. In a real sense I wish they had, but they could not/cannot. And I would welcome insights into how to get faith communities where you want them to be in Trinitarian theology, piety and orthodoxy. Perhaps at the very least, people like John Killinger will open doors for that kind of dialogue and exploration. *Ad Majorem Dei Gloria.*

Sixth, now some concluding “popcorn” points:

- Perhaps you should consider whether you might have confused elements of what you label individualism, with varying right/left of centre expressions of Baptist dissent.

- If you want to challenge conversionistic individualism do not blame E. Y. Mullins as harshly as you blame D. L. Moody. What if Mullins was offering an experiential corrective to revivalistic transactionalism?
- Your survey of Carlyle Marney's ornery theology is an outstanding content of the text. I would simply add that Marney had more Baptist otherness than any of us can appropriately systematize. I have little doubt he would take your assessment of his beliefs apart, not necessarily because they were incorrect, but because he had already become another kind of other Baptist, small o, right before your eyes.
- On page 138, you say prosaically that "other Baptists have been more open to the use of creeds when not employed to bind the conscience." Yet when I read you elsewhere in the text, that is exactly what it sounds like you want them to do for us. Which is it?
- By chance I have read Roland Bainton's *Yesterday, Today and What Next?* (1978) and Harvey Cox's *The Future of Faith* (2009) and both remind us that the Nicene Creed makes no reference to the kingdom of God, the cut-to-the-chase gospel Jesus sent out the twelve and then the 70/72 to proclaim. You do not reference God's New Day either, at least it is not indexed. Why not?
- Nonetheless, I find your book haunting and controversialist in the best sense, save at least one personal caveat. Blessings and congratulations.
- Finally, a point of personal privilege. Over forty years of teaching introduction to Christian history I have always wondered: what if the Arians had won? They almost did, you know. Their great leader, Eusebius of Nicomedia, even baptized Constantine on his death bed. So the Emperor had to face the judgement with a Unitarian baptism. What if they and/or the Nestorians had won the day? That is why I am wary of creeds, I guess. And because I have listened to the Separate Baptists for too long.
- Nonetheless, this is an important work and Curtis is to be commended for such thorough research.