AN APPRECIATIVE AND CRITICAL REVIEW OF *CONTESTING CATHOLICITY: THEOLOGY FOR OTHER BAPTISTS* (2)

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I suppose Glenn Jonas asked me to be on this panel because I am a Baptist historian who claims to have read a good bit of Baptist-Catholic material. I have probably only read enough to be dangerous. I suppose also that Glenn put me here because he knows that I am not a participant in the Other Baptist movement. Curtis and I read some of the same material but come to pretty different conclusions. Actually what I hope to do is make comments which Curtis thinks are fair, at least coming from me, then agree to continue good conversation after Baylor defeats Duke in some game, and then, fly home tonight, having practised contested but radical democracy—that is for you Curtis, I did read the book closely—because I leave for a ten day trip to Germany and Switzerland tomorrow. Perhaps it is fitting that I am going on a Protestant Reformation tour.

First, this is a great read. Curtis has done excellent research, and since it is inevitable that I offend some theologian today, I will just declare that Curtis simply writes in a very accessible manner, more accessible than I am used to seeing from theologians in their radically orthodox tomes. Second, this is a superb exposition of a perspective associated with the Baptist Manifesto, or with writings sometimes classified as Baptist Catholic or bapto-catholic. That Curtis intentionally avoids those self-identifiers for Other Baptists is intriguing since he does not mention, or I did not see, the phrase bapto-catholicism popularized by Other Baptists. Curtis's use of the Other is fascinating, and supports his purposes of offering an alternative vision to the sicknesses he sees in Baptist life.

Curtis's favourite contemporary theological sources are McClendon, Hauerwas, and Yoder. My view of Baptist identity is more compatible with the Leonards, Shurdens, and Dunns of recent years, or in short, the liberal or freedom-based Baptist identity that Curtis does not favour. I am barely literate when it comes to post-liberal perspectives that Curtis cites, but it is clear that McClendon's legacy lives on in distinguished fashion in Curtis. Mentioning these theologians reveals the obvious—this is a book of theology that offers engaging, sometimes provocative, analysis but also describes what Baptist life should be. Often the dominant practices in historic Baptist life have run amok in this narrative.

I like it that Curtis actually has read Baptist primary sources. I think it a tendency, once it is said that Baptists have not produced much theology, to just abandon Baptist sources. We often draw different conclusions, but he has studied the story. Bravo.

Let me offer one example of where we read an element of the Baptist story with different emphases. Curtis cites the Orthodox Creed of the late seventeenth century, which includes ancient creeds like the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, as a key example of how early Baptists used ancient creeds to assert catholicity and guard orthodoxy. The Orthodox Creed is cited often, even though Curtis acknowledges that it was not influential in its day. Because I am reading like a historian, I keep saying to myself, this is an over-emphasis of the confession. The fact that the Orthodox Creed is the only Baptist confession to include ancient creeds is best used in the opposite way—it is strong evidence that Baptists, as they confessed their faith, did so by relying on the Bible rather than post-biblical creeds.

Curtis's call for an ecumenism that both "gives and receives" is excellent. It has been my view, prior to reading this book, that ecumenical dialogue has been more about receiving than receiving and giving. Perhaps some will say our story is so deficient we just need to receive. I think we have much to give when it comes to freedom and individual conscience, and so on. We differ some, but in most places I thought he found ways to balance giving and receiving, particularly on the issue of contesting and on the significance of believer's baptism for the larger church. Kudos again.

The words ecumenism and catholicity do reveal another way we read sources differently. Cooperative relationship as part of the larger body of Christ is certainly a good thing, please do not hear me say otherwise. Early Baptists were, to use Curtis's phrase "naïve primitivists" but they were aware of their connection to the historic catholicity of the church. Curtis notes their ecumenicity stopped with infant baptism. My phrase—they were trying to restore the New Testament church and they thought other churches were false churches. It no doubt stopped at infant baptism, and it stopped hard. Often they took no prisoners; John Smyth said that infant baptism was the mark of the beast. Thomas Helwys, concerned about the true New Testament church, titled his book criticizing others *The Mistery of Iniquity*. I just need to qualify or nuance the use of ecumenical more, especially since believer's baptism was pivotal to Baptist identity and it often caused uncompromising conflict with other Christians. Catholicity for them, sure. But the goal was the New Testament church.

Speaking of baptism, I want to chase a quick rabbit. A recent story about a Baptist church in Dayton, Ohio involved a self-identified Catholic Baptist pastor who performed an infant baptism in his church. Will he be criticized? It seems this is an opportune time to have the Other Baptist movement decide about whether the Other Baptist focus on ecclesial Christianity can or should evolve toward this view. My reading of Curtis is that he would not approve of a Baptist church baptizing an infant. What I would like to hear is that Baptists, who want more meaning in the practice of baptism, to consider anew the rich symbolism, the reenacted participation of the new believer into the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in immersion of first time adult believers. And, moving away from believers baptism as the basis of a believers church makes me ask, why does the church remain Baptist?

Let me speak of two more issues about the church. First, Curtis does a good job of talking about the Baptist practice of interdependency. Vital material. Baptists forming an association of local churches in 1644 was the first of many. To push this point in a second edition, I hope that Curtis will be less wary of the concept of the independence of the local church. Curtis said, "The source of the Baptist vision is not

autonomy because "interdependence is the mark of the converted and "the search for independence was Adam's sin." This aligns with Curtis's theological perspective on how the church must embody interrelationship as do the Father, Son, and Spirit. I do not believe the historical record supports the contention that the modern Baptist focus on local church independence was primarily a move to have self-reliance or some Enlightenment absolute autonomy. Have some local churches done that? Sure, but most? No. My historical response is that the insistence on independence in Baptist life was there at the beginning alongside interdependency. Thomas Helwys declared that no church should have any prerogative over another. He was not alone in making an independency statement. We might be cynics about whether people practice what they preach, but Baptist literature has consistently said that the goal of independence was to be free to answer to the Lordship of Christ, not be self-reliant Adam. Among early Baptists, it was a declaration to answer to King Jesus alone, rather than an external church hierarchy and the state. Independence and interdependence is a creative tension in Baptist DNA, born of our freedom. We need both.

I believe we can all agree with Curtis that Baptists need to recognize that they are part of the larger church. This is a chief contribution of the book. Curtis's work in the BWA means he practises the catholicity he preaches. As a church historian, I do not simply appreciate the church's heritage but teach that we have been formed by it. There is, of course, a difference for many of us in how we appropriate that heritage. Curtis's overall argument is that the historic creeds should play a privileged regulative interpretive role in reading the Bible. The Bible alone is not enough to support the necessary Trinitarian centre of the faith. Curtis says canon and creed went together in the patristic era and we have separated the two. I would say the creed was in the canon, especially in the kerygma. And if creed and canon must go together, what is to stop some from insisting that Irenaeus's third part of safeguarding orthodoxy is necessary—the clerical hierarchy. Thankfully Curtis does not grant clergy special status, though at least a few Baptists are considering a more sacramental view of ordination which will at least lead to discussions in that direction.

I am much more at home with the historic Baptist practice that privileges the authority of the Bible and affirms the content of creeds because they are consistent with biblical insights. The focus on creeds certainly has not produced unity in more creedal faiths. Henry Denne (1659) contended the Scriptures were not granted authority because the church had bestowed them authority but they were accepted experientially through the "inward assurance of the Spirit." Historically, Baptists have claimed this experiential perspective like Denne rather than appealing to any external authorities.

Curtis also contends that without the creeds, I am at least vulnerable to a weak view of the Trinity or have a Biblicist functional Unitarianism that just has not got around to denying the Trinity yet. Our hymns are too Jesus oriented. I can say that I sang the doxology in every worship service from the day I could sing until the day I left home and am safely Trinitarian. However, I confess to being more historically Baptist "Jesus loves me" christocentric than Curtis prefers. My guess is that Old Testament scholars are in trouble too.

On the flip side on the role of creeds, while Curtis does not argue for a capital T authoritative tradition, I think the position that grants the Nicene Creed regulative privileged guidance is vulnerable to giving

patristic material too much authority especially by those less careful than he is. Does being a part of the one, holy, apostolic church necessitate patristic authority any more than it necessitates Reformation or Modern authority? Whereas I would reject Curtis's worry about the Trinity when the creeds are not privileged, I expect he would resist the vulnerability I suggest about Tradition. Fair enough. We have contesting in common!

There is so much rich material to comment on but I need to zoom in on one final topic. I think we would all agree that our biggest difference is not a focus on community—such is of course good—but on how the communal and the individual relate. One Achilles heel of the communal emphasis is bystander apathy where individuals follow and artificially conform when we highlight the group. Curtis distances himself from this pitfall of conformity with his efforts to highlight the priesthood of all believers and to include everyone in communal readings of Scripture. I have no problem with that practice and think it actually parallels E.Y. Mullins's consensus of the competent, his goal of congregationalism. However, communal reading is likewise often an elusive ideal—at the end of the discussion where everyone is invited to participate, people in power and privilege end up more often than not, deciding for the group. We in this room, educated as we are, might be most vulnerable to this. More importantly, the communal reading does not always allow for the mess of Baptist freedom—I know that is the point. But in the process, the role of individual conscience has just been scuttled too much. Baptist DNA is both communal and individual in creative tension.

If community is the most orthodox word today, then individualism is the most heretical. Curtis calls it a sin sickness individualism that is killing Baptists. One of his chief criticisms is that later Baptists make early Baptists sound like proto-liberals who espouse Enlightenment autonomous freedom as a natural right. But I find this picture to be a distortion. The Enlightenment was not monolithic. We can certainly agree that some Baptists were uncritical Jeffersonians but most Baptists were still supernaturalists while appropriating Enlightenment concepts and language. They did ride the saddle of the democratic focus on the individual but they were actually some of the pioneers that had bought the horses long beforehand. Baptists simply have not argued for autonomous agency in an anything goes fashion or in natural rights that are not rooted in being created by God in God's image.

Curtis creatively uses the writings of gadfly liberal, Carlyle Marney in many ways, but the dominant way is to highlight Marney's provocative denunciation of individualism. The view is summed up in the words of Shine who said that after conversion "you can live just like you want to the rest of the time." Curtis writes, "Shine is close to the creed of Christian self-sufficiency – Ain't nobody but Jesus gonna tell me what to believe." I don't think this reading of James Dunn is accurate. Dunn is not a parable of autonomous self-reliance void of God. It has always sounded to me that he is rooted in Baptist DNA—personal faith experience under the Lordship of Christ. And, the Jesus encounter is rooted in the standard of the Scriptures. Marney's most colourful line was that Baptists were infected by a bastard individualism. Curtis certainly did not call Baptists who like freedom bastards. But if Marney wants to call Dunn a bastard, I will take comfort in Will Campbell's reminder that we are all bastards but God loves us anyway.

I hope Curtis's second edition will consider more focus on the communal and the individual, so perhaps we can drop the ism off the individual. Early Baptists, as Curtis notes, gave soul liberty a negative or delimiting function—coercion of religion was wrong. But my research highlights a focus on the individual conscience in a more profoundly pro-active way. Christian identity was ultimately eschatological. Faith was certainly in community but sometimes over against it because ultimately faith was personal. For early Baptists, each individual had to have a personal, freely-practised faith that was responsive to the Lordship of Christ and the Scriptures over any corporate body, church or state. Why? Because each believer would individually come face to face with King Jesus at the Last Judgement. Thus, these early Baptists practised an eschatologically-informed ecclesiology that said the church was the body of Christ but preserved and allowed conscience for authentic, voluntary Christian identity. A typical example. New Englander, William Turner, being hounded by Puritan clergy, asked, "Where is the rule of Christ that we must follow the churches here farther than they follow Christ?" When Turner was accused of being divisive for his separation, hear his eschatological appeal: "Is it not a reasonable thing that every man have his particular judgment in matters of faith seeing we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ?" I have found this focus on the Last Judgement throughout the four hundred years of Baptist history. It might not work as well for a heaven-less Christianity in the present day, but Baptist DNA has insisted on an ecclesiology that nurtured individual faith that was free because Baptists knew that were going to meet King Jesus "one day."

Curtis rightly sees worship as the body of Christ in relationship with God. Again, I think Baptist DNA has a creative interplay of both communal and individual worship. For example, believer's baptism was the visible entrance to the congregation of faith, a communal act of incorporation into the visible body of Christ. But it was also a radical act of individual conscience and faith. British Baptist theologian, Stephen Holmes, affirms that "in Baptist theology, God deals directly with each particular human being summoning him or her to response in repentance and faith … Believer's baptism is an expression of this intensely individualist strain within Baptist theology."

Curtis's criticism of the focus on individual conversion without discipleship resonates with us all. Baptist theology can learn from its over-emphasis on transactional conversion but faith as a personal experience of the heart is deeply immersed in Baptist history. Readers of early Baptist pamphlets were exhorted to have an inner heart experience and enter into a "personal covenant with God." Thomas Collier (1648) said the law of the New Testament must be written in the heart. Samuel Richardson (1647) noted, "Because it is God's way, to have Religion free, and only to flow from an inward principle of faith and love."

At times this personal experience was described as the soul in direct communion with God. Long before E.Y. Mullins, focus on the soul fills all the pages of Baptist life to speak of the intimate personal experience of faith, not to the exclusion of corporate life. George Hammon (1661) wrote "that the soul of man should be free and acknowledge no master but Jesus Christ." With mystical flair, Thomas Collier (1647) proclaimed that, "the Lord Jesus with the free consent of the gracious soul, sets up his Kingdome in the heart so that when Christ sayth, My son, give me thy heart: Lord take my heart, sayth the soule, dwell there, rule there, set up thy Kingdom there: so that you see Christ doth not rule as tyrant in the soules of his

people, but with the free and full consent of the mind of the person in whom he reigns." Soul competency is a disputed phrase. Did it lead to an anthropocentric turn in Baptist theology? Perhaps some, though Boyce's Calvinism needed some turning. And even if Mullins's word competent was vulnerable to misunderstanding, he never abandoned nor does the concept abandon God's initiative or sovereignty. If he did, perhaps Hammon and Collier and other early Baptists had led the way.

And finally, the focus on individual faith was tied to being Spirit-led. As Geoffrey Nuttall has said about Baptists of the seventeenth century, spiritual authority came via personal experience. Samuel Richardson retorted to opponents, "why let us have Bibles if we cannot read them ourselves?" Citing Henry Denne (1659) again, the Scriptures were not granted authority because the church had bestowed them authority but they were accepted experientially through the "inward assurance of the Spirit." Risky stuff, I suppose, though when you get cancer, you need the church, desperately you need it, but you also are keenly aware that it is you and God face to face in the darkness of the night. Experience matters.

To sum up, my plea is that we take the risk and the freedom to highlight both the communal and the personal. We are the body of Christ and heaven rejoices when one sinner repents. Baptist literature does not say "anything goes." It says, Jesus Christ is Lord of the conscience, for the congregation and when necessary, to use Bill Leonard's phrase, for the lonely prophet, and I will add the lonely fool who is convicted in the depths of his or her being, that ultimate accountability lies with God, not the church or the state. To tweak a line from Harry Emerson Fosdick, if that is heresy, then please call me a heretic.

A final word: this is a significant book we must all read. If you are not an Other Baptist, you must read this in order to learn and to dialogue ecumenically. And if you are an Other Baptist, then this is the book that now sets the standard for your discussion. Set this volume right next to your Bible! Kudos again to Curtis!