

AN APPRECIATIVE AND CRITICAL REVIEW OF CONTESTING CATHOLICITY: THEOLOGY FOR OTHER BAPTISTS (3)

ADAM C. ENGLISH

Campbell University Divinity School
North Carolina, USA

There is a westward migration amongst Baptists and a slow bend of dusty wagons in search of a new and “better country.” What shape will this new territory take and will it welcome strange creatures like Dr. Curtis Freeman who identify as post-liberal, post-evangelical, post-individualistic, post-modern, post-denominational? Freeman envisions this country in terms of “a desire to confess the faith once delivered to the saints, not as a matter of coercion, but as a simple acknowledgment of where they stand and what they believe; a recognition of the Trinity as the center of the life to which they are drawn; a longing to be priests to others in a culture of self-reliance ... [and] ... a yearning for the fulfillment of the Lord’s Prayer that the church may be one” (26).

These passionate and convictional words from Freeman represent more than a heavenly vision of Baptist paradise, they express the heart cry of all Christians.

Freeman fears the good name of Baptist is “in danger of becoming, if it has not already become, [identical with] a set of principles maintained by an affinity group of mystic individuals, determined by personal choice” (9). Eroded by time and stripped by misfortune of its other distinctive virtues and convictions, the label “Baptist” might now be synonymous with “individualist,” by which is meant, as one character in a Carlyle Marney anecdote put it, “if you get right with the Lord, you can live just like you want to the rest of the time” (192). Freeman does not wallow in the ills of individualism any more than he pines nostalgically for some golden age of Baptist history long lost to time. He does not theorize who the “real Baptists are or were,” but instead attempts to “imagine how Baptists might understand themselves in continuity with historic Christianity” (18).

This seems to me a decisive statement and one that names the basic thrust of Freeman’s entire project—“how Baptists might understand themselves in continuity with historic Christianity.” A fitting subtitle to his book. Not that Freeman neglects the Baptist heritage. It looms like a large and colourful family portrait over his writing desk, leaning out from the wall on a bent nail. He attends to the Baptist portrait in order to bring some unfamiliar faces to the front, like Carlyle Marney (1916–1978), while allowing others to recede to the back (like Marney’s contemporary W. A. Criswell (1909–2002)). The purpose is not to narrate the grand lineage of the Baptists, but to find the “Other Baptists.” Freeman uses this term to describe himself and those who stand broadly within the historic Baptist river but often find themselves outside the main stream of that river. “Other Baptists” constitute minor tributaries, to be sure, but ones that

nevertheless issue from the most primitive Baptist font. These sources Freeman searches out and re-appropriates.

In Dr. Freeman's skilful hands, even familiar Baptist forebears suddenly appear in new light. Thomas Helwys's 1612 classic, *Mystery of Iniquity*, provides one example of Freeman's reassessment. Typically interpreted as "a plea for religious liberty for all" (*à la* Leon McBeth), Freeman shows it was in fact no such thing. Put briefly, the main question of Helwys's text was not liberty but: What must the church teach and practice in order to be faithful (68)? The church must answer this question before Christ the true Judge, and consequently, not before the authorities and magistrates of the state. For Helwys religious liberty constituted a theological doctrine about the nature of the church and Christ's lordship, not a legal mandate based on individual rights. "The freedom of the church is established only by the gospel of Jesus Christ, not by powers and authorities (including the state) from which believers are freed" (72).

Early Baptists like Helwys, Isaac Backus, and Roger Williams justified liberty of conscience on biblical and theological grounds. However, those justifications tended to stretch, morph and dissolve during the course of the nineteenth century as the democratic language of rights for all people (regardless of religion) permeated the discussions. John Leland (1754–1841) provides a snapshot of this change. Leland argued passionately for liberty and disestablishment, but unlike previous generations he appealed primarily to natural rights and the role of voluntary associations, not to the Bible and to the discipline of the church.

To give another example, as part of their zealous defence of religious liberty early Baptists opposed forced subscription to creeds with the battle cry, "No creed but the Bible." In the confused atmosphere of the nineteenth century, however, Baptists began to identify creeds, not coercion, as the object of protest. Freeman confronts this deeply ingrained but misplaced aversion to creeds and attempts to rehabilitate the use of historic creedal statements like the Apostle's Creed in worship and church practice. For "Other Baptists," creeds can and should serve as "centred sets" that draw us toward the centre of our faith and help us name the terms of the gospel. "Without the arc of the Christian story outlined in the creeds, it is questionable whether readers will see Scripture as the unfolding narrative of the triune God. Yet to read the whole of Scripture as something other than the gospel story is to misread it. Canon and creed are mutually reciprocal. Both canon and creed are needed to protect the church from distortions of the gospel" (135). Creeds possess no authority independent of Scripture and any authority they claim comes from the biblical story witnessed in their words.

Throughout *Contesting Catholicity*, Freeman visits various sites of contestation—such as the Trinity, the priesthood of the believers, Scripture, baptism, and Lord's Supper. When handling these topics, Freeman does not retreat into parochial isolationism or self-righteous individualism but looks for ways that Other Baptists might share in and contribute to the broader Christian communion. "Other Baptists see the gathered community of believers not simply as a congregation with a connection to the larger denomination of Baptists, but as the local manifestation of the one church of God" (246). Freeman insists that "where two or three are gathered in my name" (Matt. 18:20), there is *the* church, not simply *a* church.

Of all the topics Freeman addresses, "catholicity," the catchword in the title of the book, is likely to draw the most attention. By "catholicity" Freeman means something other than or more than "Roman

Catholic.” Indeed, at certain points he is sharply critical of Roman practice (see pages 228 and 248, for example). With the help of McClendon and Yoder’s typology, Freeman identifies three uses of the term “catholic” (255). First, catholic can refer to the quality of being whole, typical, or ordinary. Catholic is equivalent to orthodox belief and practice. Secondly, it can serve as a synonym for ecumenical, naming what is shared by all Christians. Thirdly, it can refer to the ecclesial organization of the Roman Catholic Church. Baptists are not, of course, catholic in the third sense, but Freeman nevertheless claims catholicity for Baptists in the first sense—that of whole, typical, and ordinary—and argues for the second sense—that of fully ecumenical and universal—at least as a goal toward which we are striving.

Admittedly, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox critics have grounds to challenge Freeman’s claim that Baptists are catholic in any sense whatsoever. Since Baptists are out of communion with both the Roman bishopric and the Byzantine, Orthodox communions, *can* they (or should I say “we”) legitimately call ourselves “catholic” in any of the three senses, even the first? Are our congregations whole, typical, or ordinary? Can we claim to represent the whole, typical, or ordinary tradition of the Christian church in the areas of liturgy, ecclesiology, or doctrine? In terms of liturgy, Baptists do not adhere to the Eucharistic rites and formulas of the Roman or Orthodox traditions. In terms of ecclesiology, Baptists follow congregational, not episcopal polity. In terms of doctrine, Baptists differ sharply with the historic Roman and Byzantine teachings on baptism, the Mother Mary, the process of salvation, and so on.

Freeman compares the Baptist church to the church of Antioch described in Acts 11. Although not founded by one of the apostles, it proved in word and deed to be empowered by the Holy Spirit, just like the apostolic churches (256). The term “catholic,” as Freeman uses it, reminds us that the church is gathered by God’s Spirit, not by human volition. It reminds us that no one chooses to be a member of the church in the way that one chooses to join a volunteer organization. God in Christ adopts us into the family of God and names us joint heirs with Christ. Members are made for the church—not just a particular Baptist church, but the whole church. “For either Baptist churches are expressions of the church catholic or they are not the church at all” (390).

In his reflections on catholicity, Freeman captures the spirit of many contemporary theologians who have been identified as “Bapto-Catholics,” a term which Freeman neither embraces nor rejects. He prefers his own term—“Other Baptists.” Lee Canipe at Chowan, Kimlyn Bender at Truett, Steve Harmon at Gardner-Webb, Philip Thompson at Sioux Falls, Beth Newman at Richmond, to name a few who have put their views in writing on the subject, all signal a shift in the *terra firma* of Baptist theology. It will not do to call them crypto-papists or Roman Catholics in disguise. These so-called Bapto-Catholics hold degrees from Baptist schools and teaching positions at premiere Baptist institutions. It will not do to say they represent a few outliers. These professors are shaping the next generation of pastors and ministers. And what they seek to recover is the ecumenical and liturgical body of Christ—its history, heritage, colour, and character, and not only for Baptists but for all Christians. These Bapto-Catholics or Other Baptists demonstrate a twin readiness: a readiness to leave behind the modernist disputations over foundationalism and individualism and a readiness to move ahead theologically and explore other vineyards of the Lord.

Perhaps one reason Freeman does not make habitual use of the term “Bapto-Catholic” is that it suggests that his concern is limited to dialogue between Baptists and Roman Catholics. Freeman’s interest extends to the whole body of Christ. As he has said in a recent interview in *Faith and Leadership*, “What’s at stake is the future of the mission of the church of Jesus Christ. Not the future for Baptists. Presbyterians and Methodists need the Baptists, but the Baptists also need them. ... It’s about seeing yourself as a whole church.”¹

Permit me some questions for immediate reflection and future research: one on missions and the other on worship. Historically, missions have played a major role in the collective identity of Baptists. Missions have functioned as the *raison d’être* for Baptist association, the principle reason to form conventions and associations and for individual congregations to contribute money to those conventions. We can join hands and cooperate on international mission efforts even if we cannot reach consensus over divisive theological topics. The old slogan, “Doctrine divides, missions unite” comes to mind. And so, perhaps one way to get at post-denominational catholicity is to de-emphasize points of doctrinal distinctiveness and give more emphasis to concrete actions and efforts—the work of social justice, of international evangelism, of charity and humanitarian relief.

Is this as a viable way of expressing catholicity? Or, do you see dangers in this kind of approach?

I am wondering about another slogan, “Politics divide, worship unites.” A few years ago our church took a mission trip to the Dominican Republic. The day after our arrival, we met the pastor as well as members of the church in the town of San Francisco. We were there to partner with the church in a joint Vacation Bible School program. I have to say, for about five minutes, there was some real cultural awkwardness. Our Spanish skills proved to be as poor as their English. But, as soon as we began singing and worshiping together, all those differences faded away. A warm feeling of brotherhood and sisterhood spread across the room. Although we came from different places, we were one family in Christ. We sang with one voice as one people. Our unity in worship transcended all other differences, ... at least for a moment.

Within two days of conversation some deep theological, social, and political differences emerged. The Dominican church held sharp gender distinctions and the pastor espoused literalist and foundationalist readings of Scripture that created theological quandaries for me and our church members. More concerning still: the pastor and the church expressed an undisguised distaste for Haitians. A longstanding tension exists between Haitians and Dominicans that is rooted in historic, cultural, and ethnic prejudices. How should we, the American guests, have responded? For the sake of the trip and out of a common courtesy, should we keep silence for a week?

So permit me to ask the pessimist’s question: is the “common faith enacted by Word and sacrament” (as Freeman says on page 392) enough to create and maintain real unity in the global Baptist community?

¹ Interview with Curtis Freeman, *Faith and Leadership*, [accessed 24 February 2015]. Online: <http://www.faithandleadership.com/curtis-freeman-other-baptists-and-contesting-catholicity>.

I submit these two questions, about missions and worship, as food for thought. But let my last word be one of commendation. Not to sound overly dramatic, but *Contesting Catholicity* is the most significant development in Baptist theology since Jim McClendon's *Systematic Theology*. This work stands for me as a milestone in the road, marking the journey thus traveled and prospecting the one yet to be. And so, the westward procession of Baptists moves on. I, for one, have my bags packed and the wagon loaded and am ready to follow Freeman forward into the wilderness.