

AN APPRECIATIVE AND CRITICAL REVIEW OF CONTESTING CATHOLICITY: THEOLOGY FOR OTHER BAPTISTS (4)

FISHER HUMPHREYS

Beeson Divinity School

Alabama, USA

It has been a pleasure to read Curtis Freeman's *Contesting Catholicity*. I think it is a wonderful book. It is filled with important information and some great stories. Baptist leaders, even if they do not share Freeman's theological vision, should give attention to his diagnosis of problems in contemporary Baptist life and be aware of the therapy he is prescribing.

CONTESTING CATHOLICITY

So far as I am aware, the phrase *contesting catholicity* is original with Freeman. Instead of defining it, he provides an impressionistic sketch of it. My sense is that it is similar to what Paul Tillich called Catholic substance and Protestant principle. Freeman is not issuing a call to contest catholicity. He is issuing a call to embrace a catholicity that contests.

He uses the word *contesting* to refer to the project of dissenting from practices and beliefs found inside and outside the churches. He uses the word *catholicity* to refer not only to the universality of the church but to practices and beliefs that were operative in the life of the church in the patristic era and that remain operative in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox and other churches today. He does not express as much interest in the medieval church.

He argues that contesting catholicity is found also in some early and modern Baptists. Many early Baptists were sectarians, but enough of them were not that Freeman finds it plausible to describe their movement as one of "radical renewal within the church catholic rather than . . . a faction of dissent and separation" (241). This group includes Roger Williams, John Bunyan, Thomas Grantham, Daniel Turner, Robert Hall, Jr., and Andrew Fuller.

Many Baptists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been sectarians, but others have embraced at least some aspects of catholicity. In this group Freeman includes more than a dozen persons, of whom the three most important for this book are Carlyle Marney, Warren Carr, and James Wm. McClendon.

Freeman wants to retrieve the catholicity of these Baptists. He says that Baptists need catholicity if they are going to cope with a radically new situation in which the church is disestablished culturally as well as politically.

CONTESTING CATHOLICITY AS A PROJECT FOR RENEWAL

The book is a call to renewal by means of retrieval. Its message therefore has a place alongside other recent movements to renew Baptist life: the Pentecostal and charismatic movements, the resurgence of Calvinist and Reformed theology and life, the prominence of mega-churches and contemporary styles of worship, and the campaign for biblical inerrancy.

Freeman incorporates into contesting catholicity some theological themes from two mid-twentieth-century renewal movements, the biblical theology movement and the movement among English and other Baptists toward a sacramental theology.

OTHER BAPTISTS

Freeman's name for those who share his vision is "Other Baptists." They are *other* in that they are neither Fundamentalists nor liberals.

Freeman identifies several disenchanted liberals who have made the pilgrimage to contesting catholicity, especially Carlyle Marney, Warren Carr, and James Wm. McClendon. I do not think Freeman identifies any Fundamentalists who have moved toward contesting catholicity, but he does name some evangelicals who have done so, including W. T. Conner, Stanley Grenz, and Roger Olson.

PRACTICES AND BELIEFS OF CONTESTING CATHOLICITY

I want now to identify some of the catholic practices and beliefs that Freeman commends. He has chosen these carefully. We know this because there are conspicuous factors in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches that Freeman does not commend. Among these are devotion to Mary and the saints, the effort by churches to gain preferential treatment and even legal establishment in societies, sacraments such as Confession, Penance, and Last Rites, an all-male clergy, episcopal church order, and the Pope.

Here are seven of the catholic practices and beliefs which Freeman does commend:

First, a non-coercive apprehension of the ecumenical creeds that understands them as centred sets rather than bounded sets and that maintains the traditional Baptist emphasis on personal faith. He writes: "The historic Baptist insistence on a personal faith may not be as far as some may think from the ancient ecumenical creeds" (99).

Second, ecumenism. Freeman forcefully opposes separationism and sectarianism. He writes: "The ecumenical movement is arguably the single most significant development for the church in the twentieth century" (128). He believes that every gathered congregation is an outcropping of the whole church. He commends a "receptive ecumenism" which includes an exchange of gifts as well as of ideas (270–1). Baptists, for example, can bring to the other churches the gift of knowing how to flourish without constitutional

establishment. Catholic theologians should read Baptist theology in order to dispel their Constantinian presumptions.

Third, an understanding of the priesthood of all believers that subverts the individualism that Freeman calls “the sickness of Baptist life” (321). Freeman draws heavily on the liberal Baptist Carlyle Marney in support of this project.

Fourth, the practice of congregational reading of the Bible in gathered churches as a way of discerning the mind of Christ. Freeman cites Sunday school as a good example of congregational reading. But his best example—and it is a great one—is the story of how, fifty-one years ago, the Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, came to discern together that it was the mind of Christ for the church to ordain Addie Davis to the gospel ministry. Watts Street was the first Southern Baptist congregation to ordain a woman to ministry. Freeman is now a member of that congregation.

Fifth, the Trinitarian understanding of God.

Sixth, a richer theology of the church.

Seventh, a sacramental understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

In a moment I want to challenge parts of these last three, but before I do that I want to ask four clusters of questions about Freeman’s project.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF CONTESTING CATHOLICITY

First, as Baptists retrieve their birthright of catholicity, will their moral life become more mature? Will they become less violent and more peaceable? Will they be happier? Will they be better positioned to engage in service “to the least of these”?

Second, how will renewed Baptists stand in relationship to that factory for the manufacture of unbelief, modern science? Will they be equipped to minister in a world where more and more people assume that science is the most reliable source for understanding reality?

Third, will the embrace of a contesting catholicity have any effect on Baptists’ public and political life? Will they engage in politics more, or less? Will they be only an invisible leaven working secretly in society, or will they be salt and light?

Fourth, it is clear that embracing contesting catholicity will put Baptists in touch with the life of the great church across the centuries. Will it also put them in touch with reality beyond ecclesial life? In other words, does contesting catholicity help the church to know about God, or only to know about the church’s understanding of God? It has always seemed to me that this question was left unanswered by George Lindbeck in his great book *The Nature of Doctrine*, and it seems to me to still need answering.

CONTESTING FREEMAN'S CONTESTING CATHOLICITY

I am convinced that Freeman really means it when he says that he wants a catholicity that is contesting. In that spirit I want now to contest three of the things he has said in his book. They concern the Trinity, the church as a voluntary organization, and baptism and the Lord's Supper.

THE TRINITY

Freeman's chapter on the Trinity is a masterpiece. I suspect that Freeman has a more comprehensive knowledge of the history of the Baptist apprehension of Trinitarianism than anyone else in the world. His analysis of the various apprehensions—as problem, as proven, as inscrutable, and as living conviction—is brilliant. I am sympathetic to the positive things he writes about the Trinity, and I share his opposition to the perennial problems of tritheism, modalism, and subordinationism. I appreciate his scorching criticism of the claim made by conservative evangelical theologians such as Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware that the Son is eternally submissive to the Father. Freeman is, I believe, the first Baptist in our part of the world to say what needs to be said about this bizarre proposal: “This is not the Trinity. This is tritheism” (189).

Happily, Freeman supports the project of avoiding needless gender-specific language for God. However, he vigorously resists one recent instance of that project, and that is what I want to challenge.

One of the doxologies that is sung to the hymn tune Old One Hundredth concludes with the words “Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” In several hymnals this has been revised to read “Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost.” Freeman argues forcefully that this is “modalistic at best” (185).

I think he is mistaken about this, and for two reasons, one related to the Bible and the other to the Nicene Creed.

I can identify 115 passages in the New Testament in which the three persons² are mentioned together. The word most frequently used for the first person is *God*, and the word used most frequently for the second person is *Jesus*. Of the 115 passages, the word *Father* appears in only 22 and the word *Son* in only 15. The Bible offers no support for the claim that gender-specific language is the only proper language for the Trinity.

As for the creed, why should it be modalistic for the revised Doxology to identify the first person as Creator when the Nicene Creed identifies the first person as “maker of heaven and earth”?

A VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATION

Second, Freeman points out that describing the church as a voluntary organization does not do justice to biblical ecclesiology. The biblical teaching is that God creates the church. It is not enough to say that the church exists because people have voluntarily joined it.

² “Three Persons” is a phrase that probably is familiar to all readers, but it is not biblical. Neither the word “three” nor the word “persons” appears in the New Testament in connection with the Trinity. The phrase is familiar to us because of its use in catholic Christianity.

So far, so good. As Claude Welch once put it, in ecclesiology we must speak of God's *convocatio* before we speak of human beings' *congregatio*.

But Freeman does not stop with saying that God's action is prior to our voluntary response in the creation of the church. He denies our voluntary response altogether. Individuals not only do not create the church; they do not choose to join it. The trouble with Baptists, he writes, is that "they understand their assembly as just another voluntary association" (244). And he adds: "The church-as-voluntary-association model . . . conceives of the church as merely a human social group" (245).

I just do not agree. I think this is a matter of both/and rather than of either/or. We are members of the church both because God has called us and because we have voluntarily accepted God's call. In this sense the church is, I believe, a voluntary organization.

BAPTISM AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

Third, the sacraments. I welcome Freeman's affirmation of the real presence and activity of Christ in baptism and the Lord's Supper. I agree with him that it is lovely that many non-Baptists are waking up to the fact that the Baptists had a point when they called for believers baptism. I concur with him that it is regrettable that many Baptists lack any "sense that anything might be stirring in the [baptismal] water other than their own feet" (380). Like him, I am scandalized that some Baptists can affirm the Lord's presence throughout the world and then deny it in the bread and wine. I fully agree with Freeman—and with Warren Carr—that infant baptism plus confirmation is equivalent to believers baptism and that it results in a believers church as successfully as believers baptism does.

But then Freeman limits his sacramental theology. He briefly accedes to what Paul Fiddes has called the "historic Baptist rejection" of the doctrine of *ex opere operato* and contrasts his sacramental doctrine with it (371). I think we should rather embrace it. It is an important catholic principle.

And it is true. Baptismal candidates are not truly baptized because they or the officiants are holy; they are truly baptized by the performance of the act of immersion in water in the threefold name, as Christ commanded. Jesus is present in the Lord's Supper, not because the people are gathered or faithful or obedient, but because of the performance of the act of eating the bread and drinking the wine in remembrance of the crucified and risen Jesus.

I think *ex opere operato* is right to emphasize the real presence of Christ whenever these things are done, independently of who does them or how they are done. Jesus is present because he promised he would be present.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I agree with Freeman that Baptists need better theology. Many among us dislike and mistrust theology because we lived through a mean-spirited, destructive theological conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention. The feelings are understandable, but the dislike and mistrust are unnecessary, and unwise.

Theology is not unspiritual or irrelevant to life, and it is not intrinsically divisive. It is therapy for the mind of the church. We are unitary beings. What is in our minds matters, just as do what is in our hearts and what is in our hands. An anemic theology promotes anemic spirituality and anemic service.

In the past Baptists have produced many great Bible scholars and many great church historians, but not so many great theologians. I hope that Other Baptists will remedy that failing. I hope they will learn to treasure theology and to esteem their theologians. If they do, Curtis Freeman should be at the top of their list.