RESPONSE TO STEVEN R. HARMON'S *BAPTIST IDENTITY AND THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE: STORY, TRADITION, AND THE RECOVERY OF COMMUNITY*

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The inside dust jacket of Steve Harmon's book sums up well my own experience as a life-long "little 'b'" Baptist and a ten-year "big 'B'" Baptist "convert," declaring that "Baptists tend to be the 'problem children' of the ecumenical movement." Having come to the American Baptist Churches as a seminary student disenchanted with my experiences as a woman pastor in the "non-denominational" Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, but still hopeful that local church polity (albeit, now, in tension with trans-local associationalism) could be fertile ground to join the Spirit's movements, I quickly found myself mired in the unsettling tension of a local church caught between ideologically-opposed regional associations. Having sat through fiery ordination councils (my own included), fight-to-the-death congregational meetings, regional association realignment, and the everyday "Baptist" battles over who is allowed to set foot in the church kitchen, I nod my head in agreement with the label of "problem child"—yet affirm the deep need for Baptists to find in our own narratives the impetus for pursuing this "receptive ecumenism" for which Harmon so eloquently and astutely advocates.

In the basic theology course I teach at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California, comprised mostly of "non-denominational" evangelical and Roman Catholic non-majors, I begin each class period with the communal praying of the Apostles' Creed. Then, being the "problem child," I take distinct pleasure during the second week of class of asking my students to raise their hands if they are uncomfortable with praying "the holy catholic church." Evangelical hands around the room sheepishly rise, opening what will become a semester-long conversation about what it means to be the church together.

Harmon's opening question, concerning the "why" of Baptist catholicity, lies at the heart of my students' discomfort: "why should Baptists embrace catholicity as essential to their identity? And by what authority would they do so?" (7). For Baptists in the "trenches," *contesting* catholicity is the *modus operandi*—or, more accurately, contesting "big 'C'" Catholicity. It is Harmon's distinction between *quantitative* and *qualitative* catholicity that, I believe, paves a productive way past this negative self-identification, particularly if Baptists can take seriously the task of *traditioning* ourselves along McClendonion/MacIntyrian lines. It is the distinction between quantitative catholicity (the easy sort for Baptists to swallow, given its *invisibility*) and qualitative catholicity that makes actual demands on Baptist practices of ecumenical engagement, liturgical life, trans-local associationalism, and more. It is precisely in this challenging distinction that Harmon's call for *receptive catholicity*, in which "dialogue is always an 'exchange of gifts,'" brings to light not only the deficiencies of Baptist ecumenical engagement, but also the opportunities for Baptists to more richly and

honestly locate ourselves in our own tradition as we bring our particular ecclesiological gifts to the ecumenical table.[1]

Indeed, it is exactly this image of ecumenical table fellowship on which I want to draw: not an image of the academic conference room table, but rather the more familiar image of a Baptist potluck—with tables groaning under heaping bowls of strange salads (crushed ramen on cabbage?), Jell-O of every colour with vegetables disconcertingly suspended in its gelatinous depths, the ever-giving pot of spaghetti, and the one lone box of KFC chicken supplied by the resident bachelor. Harmon has done a more than adequate job exploring Baptist practices of "denominationalism" (shedding helpful light for this American Baptist on the origins of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship), the Baptist "magisterium," and those aspects of our tradition that explicitly draw on the "great story" (most notably our hymnals and confessions); he reveals both the creative tension of Baptist ecumenism but also the Baptist traditions' many gifts to the "little 'c'" catholic, and specifically "big 'C'" Catholic, church. *Receptive ecumenism*, the give and take of ecclesial gifts, cannot move forward without creatively accounting for the Baptist potluck—the spaces and places in which the community table-fellowships and, notably, in which the women and bachelors who may have been kept off the stage and out of the council chambers are the members who nourish the bodies and souls of the community. While celery-imbued Jell-O has questionable nourishing or pleasing qualities, its preparation and contribution is indeed sacramental in nature.

It is precisely here that I wish to affirm Harmon's astute assessment of the "insufficiently catholic character of [our] own communities" (10) and to expand his insightful and necessary engagement of the Baptist "magisterium" ("pastors, teachers, authors, and confessions") (14). While Courtney Pace asked for a deeper engagement of "contextual" sources, I would like to ask for a deeper engagement of catholic faith stories. Harmon's discussion of McClendon's "two-narrative christology" provides six insightful theses for the church's way forward, one of which is that "the church's identity is the identity of Christ, which is the story of Christ, which is the story of all the members of Christ's body" (242).[2] It is this emphasis on the stories of the church, our "potluck sacramentalism," that I believe provides a real way for local congregations to enter into the gift-giving of receptive ecumenism—not only to embracing our own stories, but also embracing the stories of the little *and* big 'C' catholic church. This is a mutually constitutive understanding of the pot-luck table and the communion table, a table at which Baptists bring the ecumenical gift of "unfencing."

Loida Martell-Otero, constructive Baptist theologian at Palmer Seminary, defines the *charisms* in her co-authored book *Latina Evangelicas,* as the Spirit "going native" in the quotidian of the Latina faithful.[3] This "going native," which encapsulates the movements of the Spirit outside of the magisterial approved gifts

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[1] Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recover of Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 150. Quoting John Paul II, *On Commitment to Ecumenism* (*Ut Unum Sint*, May 25, 1995), § 28.

[2] For McClendon's development of "two narrative Christology," see James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 165–79.

[3] Zaida Maldonado Pérez, Loida I. Martell-Otero, and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, *Latina Evangélicas: A Theological Survey from the Margins* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013). For the discussion on the Holy Spirit "going native," see chapter 2, "Dancing with the Wild Child: *Evangélicas* and the Holy Spirit."

and in everyday of life, when held in tension with James Wm. McClendon, Jr.'s, systemic use of biography as a richly MacIntyrian understanding of tradition, perhaps encapsulates Harmon's assessment that one key Baptist gift is the "insistence that God's freedom to be God in the life of church not be constrained" (16).

So what is this *traditioning*, this "distinctive way of being Catholic" that locates us in our narratives? Let us briefly visit McClendon's early *Biography as Theology*, a book about which I have long been in friendly disagreement with McClendon's widow, the philosopher Nancey Murphy, concerning its value in his wider corpus. Despite Murphy's insistence that McClendon moved past *Biography*, a quick survey of the table of contents of his three-volume *Systematic Theology* shows McClendon alternating between doctrinal and biographical chapters—essentially, applying to theology the method of *Biography*. *Biography*, assigned to my undergrad students to be read during our opening week on theological methods and sources, causes them great consternation because they initially believe that McClendon leaves Scripture behind entirely, sourcing theology only in *individual experience*. While their quiz grades show that I have not entirely convinced them, McClendon's actual argument is that if the church is to do theology faithfully, it must do theology *communally*, deeply rooted in the ongoing and living tradition of the narrative community; namely, doing "Bible study in reading communities" (180). McClendon shows how the examination of "singular or striking lives . . . may serve as data for a Christian thinker," holding the church accountable to its living tradition in which Scripture can always give more of itself. [4] McClendon challenges his readers by showing that the "the only relevant critical examination of Christian beliefs may be one that begins by attending to lived lives."[5] Not only does McClendon's "own theological career [have] the character of pilgrim journey" (231), but his choice of biographies reflects this as well: Martin Luther King, Jr., Clarence Jordan, Dorothy Day, Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, and such oddities as Dag Hammarskjold and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

It is this this move toward the ecumenical future that Harmon and I believe Baptists must and can contribute. We Baptists ought to take seriously Harmon's closing statement that in this future Baptists and Catholics will be "strangers no longer but pilgrims together on the way to [God's] kingdom" (272). What Martell-Otero and McClendon show us is that this movement must include the charisms of the everyday, the biographies of "singular lives"; theology "must continually find fresh exemplars."[6] Perhaps one gift that Baptists bring to the table is the insistence that the stories of faith lives matter, that the story behind Grandma Lin's top ramen salad, despite the oddity of the dish, warrants its asked-for inclusion at the next pot-luck. But, beyond recounting our own stories, Harmon issues an important injunction, exemplified in McClendon's work: *the stories of the faith lives of Catholics must matter to Baptists as well.* Certainly Catholics bring to the table a rich hagiography that we Baptists lack, and from which we can learn, but they also bring the faith stories of the *quotidian* Catholic—the Catholic in the trenches of everyday life.

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[4] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 22.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 23.

The Los Angeles Roman Catholic cathedral, Our Lady of the Angels, completed in 2002, boasts a contemporary sanctuary whose walls are lined with intricately woven tapestries depicting 135 life-sized saints and blesseds, men and women, spanning the last two millennia.[7] While these tapestries incorporate the expected (Mary, Augustine, Anselm), they also incorporate the lesser-known (Felicitas and Perpetua, Philomena), as well as twelve unnamed faithful (many of whom are children), dressed in everyday garb, representing the unnamed faithful of the global Catholic Church. It is the stories of those unnamed Catholics, as well as the Catholics who live next door to us or who worship down the street, that we Baptists must invite to the pot-luck of receptive ecumenism. Not the Catholic-in-theory, but my Polish Catholic grandmother who proudly bedecked her picture of John Paul II with her yearly Palm Sunday frond, or the Catholic nun who taught my father and his brothers in elementary school in their poor North Portland neighborhood of Saint Johns, or the many Catholic faithful who practise their Christian faith in the *quotidian* of their days. In this way, we can help our own faith communities enter into the gift exchange of receptive ecumenism in a way that not only draws on our own strengths as a richly-storied and traditioned people, but also engaging our Catholic brothers and sisters in witnessing to the movement of the Spirit in their own everyday. The blessing of this is that it expands our pot-luck table in new and definitely catholic ways, enriching our own quotidian faith.

[7] For a description of the tapestries as well as a picture gallery go to http://www.olacathedral.org/cathedral/art/tapestries.html.