

**BAPTISTS, CATHOLICITY, AND MISSING VOICES: A RESPONSE TO STEVEN
HARMON**

COURTNEY PACE

Memphis Theological Seminary
Tennessee, USA

I am grateful for the invitation to this plenary panel, which is considering Steve Harmon's challenge to Baptists toward ecumenical fellowship across the body of Christ. For context and to situate my remarks, let me offer a snapshot of my Baptist upbringings. I was raised in a fundamentalist Southern Baptist church, unbeknownst to me until I started exploring seminaries. My feminist awakening began at George W. Truett Theological Seminary, thanks to an exceptional professor who challenged me to see the Bible with fresh eyes. In the first year of my PhD program at Baylor, I was ordained in a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship church. I currently belong to a fully inclusive CBF church (one which could just as easily be in the Alliance) and serve on the faculty of an ecumenical seminary. Coming up as a Baptist minister, I found Baptist pulpits mostly closed to me, and UCC pulpits wide open. As a church historian and as a woman called to ministry, I have had to wander beyond the Baptist fold to negotiate my own identity, and was delighted to take part in Harmon's exploration of this path for Baptists in general.

A number of aspects of Harmon's project are commendable. His inquiry originated from both scholarly research and personal experiences in international and ecumenical dialogues. His work rests on the genuine hope of finding common ground across the body of Christ, ideally even the recovery of a cooperative Christian community that could see itself as part of one body, even as many denominations.

Harmon also offered some important nuances of the eccentricities of Baptist life, the kinds of things you can only know by living within a tradition: (1) Baptists tend to honour an unofficial magisterium of voices most trusted, such as denominational leaders, officers of the church, and seminary professors; (2) Baptists tend to be most afraid of the imposition of others on individual conscience; and (3) Baptists tend to be most motivated and inspired by fresh revelation bringing us back to the heart of the text. It is important that Harmon acknowledged that these things work in Baptist life because they are voluntary. Just because they tend to be the case does not mean they can be taken for granted.

Having sat through my fair share of Sunday school chit chat, I have heard plenty of laity engagement with "What them folks is sayin'" versus "What the Bible says." I have heard dialogue, nuance, support, and disavowal. I have served in churches with a near 1:1 deacon to non-deacon ratio, and in churches with two deacons—one for each of the two ruling families. I have seen every single decision be vetted through and domineered by the deacons. I have seen deacons that do absolutely nothing but meet regularly. I have seen deacon recommendations defeated by a popular dissenting vote. I have seen people stay in churches which voted for something they opposed, and I have seen people leave churches that passed votes they supported. So, yes, there is an unofficial magisterium in Baptist life, but it is voluntary. Even using "the M word" feels inappropriate because it only has authority if people want it to.

Harmon was also right that increased attention to political and social changes has led to increased divisions, though I would counter that this is but one way to view this. People at both ends of the spectrum have united across denominational lines in support of common values. Denominational loyalty has declined in value, and I have found people are more likely to collaborate if they have similar views on abortion, homosexuality, and social services, than if they are of the same denomination. I'll confess that I often feel more comfortable talking to progressive people of other faiths than I do talking to some Baptists.

My understanding of Harmon's ideal is as a tree of fellowship, in which each branch offers gifts to and receives gifts from the others. For instance, Baptists are strong in prioritizing scripture and rejecting overly realized eschatologies, but can learn from other traditions. He likens this model to brands of monasticism within Catholicism, that Benedictines or Franciscans or Jesuits are various ways of being Catholic.

While the analogy does clarify his intention neatly, I struggle with the possible result of such a model. Monasticism began on the margins of Catholicism, in some sense seeking imitation of Christ, and in another as a protest movement against the institutionalization of the church. And as its popularity increased, there was a concerted effort to bring monasticism under the authority of Catholicism, which happened with tremendous success. And with that came all of the trappings of that institution, namely patriarchy. Women pursued monasticism in obedience to God's call, since they had been marginalized from leadership during institutionalization, but as Catholicism tackled anti-clericalism and medieval political chaos, it became unapologetically patriarchal, bringing respected abbesses under male authority without due cause and forcing other female orders to close altogether. While I understand what Harmon is getting at, this analogy leads me to my primary critique of Harmon's work.

It does not address race or gender. This is a book about Western men and the institutions they've built arguing with each other across time and space. This book is privilege talking to privilege, with very little concentration on the people of faith. Women are the backbone of every church, and that is certainly the case for Baptists. You cannot discuss Baptist faith without discussing laity, and you cannot discuss Baptist laity without discussing women. Out of 272 pages, this book devotes one paragraph to the "experiential theologies" that are supposed to represent liberation theologies, feminisms, womanisms, mujerista theologies, and other theologies of the people. What is Baptist faith if not hermeneutics by the people? It is inappropriate in the twenty-first century to publish on this subject without giving *significant* consideration to race and gender.

Harmon has responded to my critique of his work's centre-focus by mentioning that the Faith and Order gatherings which are so prominently featured in his work were interracial. This fact is important, but why was this detail not included in the manuscript? If diversity is important, the author should have demonstrated diverse voices in his methodology and research. I know Steve Harmon to be a strong supporter of women in ministry. I am not accusing the author of not being concerned for these issues. But his concern for these issues is not a prominent part of his quest for Baptist catholicity, and it should be.

One of the reasons why most churches are in decline is because the most visible aspects of the church in society have tended toward respectability politics and institutional stability rather than openness to the

biblical text or the voices of the people. The most visible elements of the church tend to be belligerent against what specialists have learned about things like sexuality, the environment, and family dynamics. In some cases, that reflects a particular hermeneutical commitment, but in most cases, it has indicated a focus on maintaining the authority and coffers of our institutions instead of humble discernment between holiness and profanity.

As we think about needed renewal in Baptist life or Catholic life or Christian life in general, it is critical that we include discussion of why churches have been declining, why churches have separated and turned against each other, why people seek peace and justice outside of the church. Our discussion of possible interchurch reconciliation cannot succeed without this perspective, or without the humility to genuinely listen in these conversations, even and especially, when what we hear might make us uncomfortable or compel us to change.

Harmon positioned his work as part of a historic tradition of seeking unity across theological divides. But as I have understood these historic conversations, as much as they have been about reaching consensus, they have also been about maintaining authority and institutional stability. These councils and meetings tend to be called in response to crises, and the quest for institutional stability undermines relationships every time, as we have clearly seen in Baptist life.

Catholicism is not without its internal drama. Some organize to ordain women, knowing they will surely be excommunicated, while others genuinely believe that women are made for breeding only. Some reject women in ministry because women insufficiently resemble Christ, yet turn the other cheek when male clergy abuse innocents. I could say the same thing about Baptists.

Some moderates seek unity with both poles, but those who have been victimized by the far right—women, people of colour, people who are LGBTQ—may reasonably hope for repentance to accompany any suggested reconciliation with their oppressors. As a survivor of domestic and spiritual abuse, I mean this sincerely. Justice issues matter. When we gloss over issues of justice, we beat the battered again and again with our complacent silence. Those on the right might respond that morality matters and that we cannot gloss over issues of piety. One at the expense of the other is *not* a unified body.

I appreciated Harmon's analysis of post-Vatican II Catholicism, specifically ways that Catholics have sought to be more inclusive in their decision making, such as creating a kind of clergy-laity collaboration in discernment. Maybe we can say they learned from Baptists. But ultimately, the power structures have maintained their virtually unchecked power. There may well be strong numbers among Catholics who want to affirm the priesthood of women, but what hearing do women receive when all of the deciding voices are men? This reminds me of a recent Amy Schumer sketch about the congressional committee for women's health, comprised exclusively of men who were ignorant of and repulsed by women's health issues.

There are a number of external Catholic groups that have retained the name Catholic and are “smells, bells, and whistles” Catholic, but are fully inclusive of women and LGBTQ persons in membership and leadership. Baptists know that road as well. Honestly, if I am thinking of reconciling across the Reformation divides, I am more inclined to begin conversations with some of these marginal groups rather than the official institutions. The Alliance of Baptists has made some progress in this regard in its relationship with

the UCC and Disciples of Christ. CBF Georgia and a branch of the Progressive National Baptists reached a covenant of action modeled after Dr. King's beloved community. This kind of progress tends to happen among those on the margins, not starting from the centre.

Baptists have always been a people of the margins. Our prophetic strength is in our marginality, our freedom to hear the word and proclaim it, our detachment from formal institutions that might interfere with individual conscience. I understand Harmon has gone to great lengths to argue that seeking communion with catholicity does not diminish Baptistness, and I was greatly moved by the vision he has for human harmony. Oh that we could all sit at one table, many yet one. But what he wants cannot be found in the centre. It can only be found on the margins.

Pope Francis has taken action for those on the margins, namely the poor. His efforts are noble and commendable. But what has he done for women, except tell them to bear their cross silently and be thankful? He made a statement recently about being more hospitable to divorced and LGBTQ people, but it was little more than "hate the sin, love the sinner." This way of thinking still separates as 'other' and 'broken' what is neither other nor broken. When churches tell battered wives to stay with their husbands, to pray that God will make it better, we give these sisters an impossible choice. Every time the church tells an LGBTQ person to deny their very DNA and just not be sexual at all, we give that dear soul an impossible choice.

Until our dialogue about reconciliation gives those ideas full hearing, until our dialogue is *as* concerned about women, people of colour, poor people, and LGBTQ people, among others, as we have previously been about institutions and creeds, we are failing to be people of the biblical text. Those on the margins of society are at the centre of the biblical text. And they should be at the centre of our conversation.