DESCRIPTION, PRESCRIPTION, AND THE ECUMENICAL POSSIBILITIES OF BAPTIST IDENTITY: READING STEVEN HARMON'S *BAPTIST IDENTITY AND THE ECUMENICAL FUTURE*

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I have been interested in Dr. Harmon's proposals since I first encountered his work in 2007, when I read *Towards Baptist Catholicity* for review in the *Review and Expositor*. I write, first, as a person who is, in the main, "on board" with Harmon's proposals as they were laid out in that first book and with more specificity in this one. Dr. Harmon and I share a concern for moderate Baptists' relative inattention to ecumenical matters, and I accept his basic contention that the only way for us to meaningfully encounter the ecumenical movement is through the kind of catholicity he lays out here. By training, I am a historian and not a theologian; my questions about the book grow out of my training in that field.

First, I'll offer my impression of the book's basic contentions. As he did in *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, Harmon here asserts that while Baptists contend that the Bible is their only authority in matters of faith and practice, Baptists actually do attend to tradition as a sort of secondary authority; Harmon is still asserting that without the guidance of tradition in some form, it would be impossible for Baptists to derive some of their typical ideas from Scripture. In this volume, Harmon leverages this assertion about Baptists' implicit acceptance of tradition as a source of authority as a point of contact with other Christians, particularly Roman Catholics. Pointing to the results of years of dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church, Harmon asserts that significant common ground between these two groups does exist and that Baptists must make a commitment to engage these kinds of ecumenical dialogues in order to be the people that they must be to be faithful to the call of Christ.[1] In fact, Harmon comes right out and tells us that the *only* reason for a Baptist denomination to exist *at all* is to offer an institutional, ecclesial dimension to the tradition that in turn makes ecumenical dialogue possible.[2]

In response to this, I want to offer two thoughts. First, Harmon has done something in this book that he did not do in *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, and that is give us a positive reason to be Baptist. This book is rich and thick, but I believe this may be the most important contribution of the book. In *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, Harmon explains that despite his commitment to the Great Tradition, he will remain a Baptist because he grew up a Baptist, because they nurtured him as he trained for ministry, and because the cause of ecumenism is not served by Christians running to-and-fro seeking a more congenial fellowship.[3] Instead,

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[1] Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition and the Recovery of Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), ch. 3 passim.
[2] Ibid., 149.
[3] Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006), 201–202.

Harmon notes that Christians seeking to serve the cause of ecumenism "must first go deep within their own traditions in order to recover elements of catholicity that once characterized their own churches but have been subsequently neglected and in order to identify the sources of the present barriers to a mutually realized catholicity."[4]

Ten years later, Harmon shows that he has done just this; in fact, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* could be read as a working out of this form of Baptist ecumenism. For Harmon, ecumenism proceeds as communions enter dialogue with each other and offer each other "gifts" growing from their own traditions; this "receptive ecumenism" is the means by which various bodies offer their own understandings of Christian faith and practice to other groups while accepting gifts that other groups bring, all undergirded by the understanding that communions that lack these gifts lack something in their own catholicity.[5] In other words, Roman Catholics, no less than Baptists, are less than fully catholic to the extent that they lack the insights that Baptists and others bring to them. For Harmon, Baptists and other free church Christians offer to the wider church a resistance to "overly realized eschatologies of the church," instead seeing themselves as a "pilgrim people" who know that they are not yet what they should be.[6] In other words, Baptists do have a distinctive identity, and their ecumenical involvement is an embrace and offering of that identity, rather than an abandonment of it. This is a new turn in Harmon's work, and one that benefits his agenda, if I may call it that, because it tacitly rejects the nineteenth century idea that Baptists best serve the cause of Christian unity by standing pat and waiting for the rest of Christendom to come around to the Baptist way of thinking and doing. Instead, Harmon stresses that the heart of Baptist identity is our very unwillingness to claim that we have it all right, even as we can rest assured that the Baptist tradition holds in trust insights that the church needs. In other words, Harmon articulates a vision of Baptist identity that makes ecumenical involvement the only legitimate outworking of that identity. This is subtle, quietly resting on an assumption that lists of "Baptist distinctives" that feature in classroom treatments of Baptist history, such as adult believers' baptism and congregational autonomy, are actually just secondary issues growing out of a primary resistance to "overly realized eschatologies of the church" and our commitment to being a pilgrim people. Some of us will accept this assertion more easily than others, but it must be granted that Harmon has articulated in this volume a positive identity for the Baptist tradition which also leaves the door for ecumenical engagement wide open.

Second, when Harmon notes that ecumenical engagement is the only reason for Baptists to have Baptist denominations, I immediately remember that most Baptists say that their denominations are about cooperative efforts and, especially, missions. Local churches are too small to send missionaries or build colleges and seminaries or do so many needful things, so Baptists set up denominations to cooperate. Is this legitimate? I hope it is, since Dr. Harmon is very explicit about putting responsibility for developing Baptists' ecumenical conscience directly upon theological educators. For Harmon, these are the people responsible for inculcating young ministers-in-training with a sense that ecumenical involvement is important, leading

[4] Ibid., 202.
[5] Harmon, *Baptist Identity*, 150.
[6] Ibid., 16.

them to encourage their future congregations to study ecumenical documents congregationally, as this is the *only* way that they can have any meaning at the local level. It may be that Harmon can articulate everything that our denominations do, including church planting, general benevolence, and education, as moving us either forwards or backwards in terms of our ecumenical awareness and engagement, but he has not articulated this in his book. Perhaps it's unfair for me to think that he should have.

I do have some further questions for Dr. Harmon—friendly questions that grow from my fiduciary concern with his theological project. First, and this is the part where I believe I may be a naïve historian, doesn't this whole book slide imperceptibly between descriptive and prescriptive claims, often without really being clear about which is being made at any particular time? For instance, Harmon notes that "Baptists . . . locate the communal interpretation of scripture in the ecclesial community, but primarily in the form of the gathered local congregation."[7] The footnote here points us to Philip Thompson's dissertation and to the Baptist Manifesto. My point is not that these are things that shouldn't be in a footnote, but that these are sources that still remain hotly contested among the theological educators that are the target audience of this book. Harmon makes this statement like it is settled, when, in fact, it is not.

Has Dr. Harmon resigned himself to the fact that some Baptists will never get on board with post-liberalism? Maybe he is writing to an audience that can accept this claim as settled and therefore as descriptive; but I doubt that this is the case. How am I supposed to read these numerous claims that are stated as fact when I know that many readers will contest them robustly?

Second, Harmon notes that in the posture of "receptive ecumenism," Baptists give of themselves to other communions who need our insights in order to more fully realize their own catholicity, while we receive insights from other communions for the same reason. This is welcome and a point well-taken, but I find that it sparks a nagging question. What if the Baptists, throughout their first difficult decades and centuries, were right about their unqualified rejection of infant baptism? What if, at least on this one point, our job is to give this gift to the rest of the church, and the job of the rest of the church is to receive it? The clear trajectory of the Faith and Order stream of the ecumenical movement (and thanks be to Dr. Harmon for defending and vindicating Faith and Order ecumenism during its darkest hour) is towards mutual recognition of believers' baptism and infant baptism. Is there room in Dr. Harmon's proposal for more conservative Baptists that are interested in a broad reception of the Great Tradition but still think that we have it right on baptism or perhaps on some other key contested issues?

Third, Baptists are diverse. To paraphrase George Orwell, some Baptists are more diverse than others. There are, for instance, Baptists that affirm that only Baptists will be a part of the Bride of Christ at the eschaton; these Baptists assert that other Christians, while saved, will occupy some lesser, subservient position at the wedding supper of the lamb throughout eternity. In other words, these Baptists identify their own churches completely and uncritically with Christ's inner circle to be revealed at the end of time.[8] If that is not an "overly realized eschatology," I don't know what is. What am I to do with these people? Should I

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[7] Ibid., 87.

[8] For instance, see Roy Mason, *The Myth of the Universal Invisible Church Theory Exploded*, ch. 12 passim, http://www.pbcofdecaturalabama.org/RMason/myth8.htm#Chapter%2012

write them off as "not really Baptist?" I find that distasteful. Should we condescend to them and tell them that we know better than they what constitutes their *true* theological identity? I have to admit that at times, in reading Harmon's book, I felt like Dr. Harmon was telling Baptists who they really are, as if Baptists need professional theologians to articulate their identity not only for them, but *to* them.

This leads to one final observation about a point that is rather central to Harmon's argument. Again and again, Harmon reminds the reader, quoting Alasdair MacIntyre, that a "living tradition is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition."[9] Harmon uses this assertion to remind Baptists that an emphasis on tradition necessarily includes the kind of contestation that leads to better ecumenical understanding, but what he never asserts and may not realize is the extent to which this definition may well position Baptists as the most "traditional" of all American Protestant denominations. In his seminal *Religion in the Old South*, now almost forty years old, Donald Mathews noted that when Regular and Separate Baptists confronted each other in the backwoods of North Carolina and Virginia in the 1760s, the ensuing doctrinal debate was conducted on a "solid theological platform"; Baptists preferred to define themselves using "theological symbols" refined through "prolonged theological discussion," as Regulars finally accepted the Separates' rather rigid definition of what constituted proper baptism. The onlooking Methodists, on the other hand, "seemed to have . . . found the endless controversy over who we are, what we shall be, and what we believe a lot of nonsense."[10] For Mathews, early Methodists were people who couldn't stomach Baptists' constant bickering "about the goods which constitute that tradition." Harmon has done Baptists a service in offering us an understanding of tradition which frames it as an invitation to conversation and an opportunity to grow. If we are to believe Donald Mathews' account of what made frontier Baptists unique among their evangelical competitors, the ideas in Harmon's book build a sturdy bridge between Baptists' fractious past and an ecumenical future.

[9] Ibid., 49–50.
[10] Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 32.