

[MJTM 16 (2014–2015)]

BOOK REVIEW

Curtis W. Freeman. *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014. 478 pp. Hbk. US\$49.95. ISBN 978-1-4813-0027-8.

“Other Baptists are sick, and they know it. This sickness is terminal, and it is shared by others,” (23) writes Curtis W. Freeman, research professor of theology and director of the Baptist House of Studies at Duke University. Who are these “Other Baptists” and what is their sickness? “The Baptist vision emerged within a movement of radical protest intent on reforming the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. It resulted in the founding of a sect committed to maintaining its place at the top of the hierarchy of denominations. It is in danger of becoming, if it has not already become, a set of principles maintained by an affinity group of mystic individuals, determined by personal choice” (9). Thus, these are Baptists that do not neatly fit into the extremes of fundamentalism or liberalism, who are perplexed at their own state of difference from their fellow Baptists and other Christians, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. Some would see themselves as “post-conservative,” such as Roger Olson and Stanley Grenz (d. 2005), while others would see themselves as “post-liberal,” such as James Wm. McClendon Jr. (d. 2000) and Curtis W. Freeman. Either way, this problem of difference has become an incentive for relating critically to their own identity and hospitably toward other Christians. They have attempted to think about their Baptist faith in ways that move beyond the older extremes by reclaiming a deeper sense of existing within the wider church and its traditions. In short, they seek to recover “catholicity,” Freeman’s proposal being the most historically astute and theologically revolutionary to date.

What is “catholicity”? Piggy-backing off of the work of his

predecessor, James McClendon (yet by no means uncritical of his mentor), Freeman sees catholicity as the normative strategy for a church to attain the “fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13): “those apostolic qualities that make Christianity Christ-like” (390). For Freeman this means revising problematic Baptist convictions that are impeding the ability of Baptists to exist as a church among others. These revisions include the following: (1) Baptists should not see themselves as a recovery of the “true church” from fallen Catholicism, but rather as a contested identity existing *within* the greater continuity of the Church Catholic. (2) Baptists need to stand in a middle ground between the extremes of fundamentalism and liberalism. (3) Baptists should not be afraid to use the creeds as fallible yet essential regulative tools in order to provide a basis for theological agreement (a “generous orthodoxy”) with other Christians. Freeman points out that Baptists have in the past understood themselves with creeds such as the Orthodox Creed of 1679. This should by no means restrict theologians to past formulations, as Freeman notes the productive revision to Chalcedon’s two-natures Christology proposed by James McClendon, who argued for a “two-narrative” approach. (4) Where liberals have forgotten orthodoxy and fundamentalists have offered totalized outdated accounts of doctrine, Baptists should recover a robust Trinitarian heart to their theology. (5) Baptists must revise the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to emphasize the communal nature of faith as opposed to the pervasive tendency of individualism. (6) Baptists should be proud of their Free Church ecclesiology of believers voluntarily gathering in the Spirit, but this cannot (as it often does) lead to further division and fragmentation among churches. Baptists need to work toward tangible oneness of the body of Christ. (7) Baptists must recover figural reading of Scripture in a way that listens for “further light.” Freeman offers Baptist egalitarianism (specifically, ordination of women) as one such example where Baptists have felt compelled by the Spirit to practice something different from other churches. (8) Baptists should recover a stronger sense of sacraments in the life of their churches to enrich their worship. Finally, (9) perhaps Freeman’s most controversial revision, Baptists should stop insisting on rebaptism of

all non-immersed Christians and work towards more open communions. He cites important historic examples such as Henry Jessey and John Bunyan, as well as recent examples like Warren Carr, who argues that infant baptism plus confirmation should be regarded as equivalent to believer's baptism. While Baptists have pointed out the speck in paedo-baptists' eyes, Freeman observes, "Honest evaluation of believer's baptism reveals a theology and practice in serious crisis, no less than infant baptism" (372). Freeman notes that the baptismal practices of the early church were by no means uniform. Moreover, today, Baptist practices of immersion have failed to meet basic standards of discipleship. He cites a survey of the Southern Baptist Convention on baptismal practices that yielded the startling find that a third of all baptisms in the Convention were children, as young as four and five. Noting also that the other 60% of baptisms in the Convention are re-baptisms of mature believers from other churches, Freeman asserts, "it would seem to be time to ask . . . about whether the underlying baptismal practice is sufficiently missional" (369).

Freeman's arguments are not predominately exegetical. They resemble selective genealogical histories pointing out problematic tendencies as well as suppressed or forgotten Baptist voices that offer resources for positive change. While many might expect, for instance, an exegetical argument on baptismal practice, what Freeman offers is past examples of Baptists who have thought differently about the biblical teaching on that topic. He seems to be trying to get Baptists to think with greater historical consciousness and therefore in terms of how their theologies have formed (and have been formed by) traditions of biblical reflection. In this regard, this book could be seen as a sequel to or expansion of Steven Harmon's work in *Towards Baptist Catholicity* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2006), who makes that case regarding tradition. Yet, while Harmon seeks mere recovery of tradition for the present, Freeman seems to use tradition as a *ressourcement* for future revision and innovation. These traditions interpreted and applied the Bible in different ways in the past, so Baptists must also do so in the future.

There are obvious weaknesses to this historical approach as

many will still want exegetical arguments. His assertion that early baptismal practice was not uniform could have (and should have) gone into deeper exegetical detail to make his point. Because he has not done so, most readers will either be perplexed or prone to immediately disagree and dismiss. While appeal to figural reading for “further light” is a beautiful recovery of a lost practice, it is also still a recovery lacking concrete criteria for productive usage. Nevertheless, while some might find the discourse foreign, no one can argue against Freeman’s mastery of Baptist history. His command of early and modern Baptist writings is exceptional.

These arguments are not meant to offer an exhaustive account of how Baptist churches are to practice catholicity, but as a proposal for steps forward. While Freeman’s book stands on its own, it heavily presupposes the work already done by his predecessor James Wm. McClendon, Jr., particularly his trilogy, *Systematic Theology*, which has been recently reprinted (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2012). Freeman builds off of McClendon’s historical work on the meaning of “catholic” in early Christianity (a term that has several senses, thus its “contested” meaning today), his arguments for “baptists” small “b” (as he calls them, linking them to the Anabaptists) as a radical third mode between Catholicism and Protestantism within Christianity, his articulation of “this is that” figural reading, as well as his accounts of ecclesial practices of Baptist churches, all of which will fill out this account of catholicity. Together with others, McClendon and Freeman wrote the Baptist Manifesto (1997), which was meant to function as a confessional document for moderate Baptists, particularly those that broke off from the Southern Baptist Convention and formed the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991. Freeman’s arguments for catholicity expand many of the statements of this controversial manifesto. Altogether their work constitutes a small revolution within Baptist theology. While their voice is small and their arguments controversial, these “Other Baptists” offer formidable arguments for their proposals.

While the book’s arguments are of prime importance for any Baptist pastor wrestling with ecumenism, the interpretation of Scripture, baptism, and church membership, or merely their

place in the larger Baptist world, the manner of historical argumentation already noted will probably relegate the book to the readership of Baptist academics. Unfortunately, while the richness of this work (both in history and writing style) is meritorious, its consequent size might also function to limit the readership to Baptist history buffs. Nevertheless, this is an important book for Baptists that care about the future of the movement. Even if one disagrees with Freeman, it is obvious that Baptists face an uncertain future.

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