

[MJTM 19 (2017–2018)]

BOOK REVIEW

Steven R. Harmon. *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016. 359 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-6025-8570-6. \$59.95.

While it is perhaps not surprising that Baptists—whose founding identity was defined by their dissent—might be described as the “problem children” of the ecumenical movement, it is no less disquieting. Baptist ecumenical theologian Steven R. Harmon has written *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future* in an effort to reverse this designation. He argues that while many Baptist churches have accepted quantitative catholicity (invisible unity of the church), it is necessary to work toward a qualitative catholicity (*visible* unity of the church), which, he contends, is a much clearer representation of the image of unity found in John 17. In order to restore this kind of catholicity, Baptists must be willing to engage the wider ecumenical movement both by offering and being receptive to distinctive theological and ecclesiological gifts from other Christian communities.

This volume comes a decade after Harmon’s *Toward Baptist Catholicity* (Paternoster, 2006), in which he highlighted the historical elements within Catholicism from which Baptists might benefit (or have already). In this earlier book, he suggested that these elements might function as a means toward future ecumenical cooperation and may in fact revitalize the Baptist community. Harmon continues along a similar trajectory in *Baptist Identity* but reframes the issues as a conversation between Christian communities. He approaches the topic in four sections. In the first (“The Baptist Vision and the Ecumenical Moment”), he notes that visible unity is contingent upon genuine interest in exploring the “particularities” (or perhaps *peculiarities*) of each

tradition with a willingness to accept corrections. Harmon maintains that for Baptists, this involves reconsidering areas of theology in which they may have an incomplete grasp or otherwise require modification, such as the Trinity, tradition, baptism, Eucharist, and church order.

In the second section (“Baptists, Biblicism, and Catholicity”), Harmon establishes a foundation for ecumenical dialogue by identifying areas of “differentiated consensus” (much like the approach taken between Lutherans and Catholics in the 1999 *Joint Declaration on Justification*) between Baptists and Catholics. He begins with their shared views of Scripture, namely its authority, its authorship, its coherent story, and its value for communal and individual purposes. Similarly, Harmon suggests that the ways in which Catholicism has articulated its faith (e.g., Council of Trent) find parallels in the Baptist tendency towards dissent in the sense that each derives from an effort to preserve biblical truth. Where Baptists and Catholics tend to diverge, however, is in the former’s emphasis on the Scriptures (“no creed but the Bible”), which historically has undercut effective use of tradition. Harmon challenges Baptist objections to tradition by arguing that Baptists recognize tradition as authoritative on at least two fronts: They reject ancient catholic heresies (such as Docetism and Arianism), and they accept the canonization of the New Testament by the early believers. Instead, as Harmon concludes, Baptists should acknowledge the gift of tradition, while also offering the larger movement their “radical biblicism” (i.e., their emphasis on it as the “norming norm” of the faith [132]).

Harmon opens the third section (“Baptist Identity and Receptive Ecumenism”) by arguing that offering such gifts is the sole purpose of denominationalism. This “receptive ecumenism” prioritizes what each community has to offer the other and ultimately orients both toward becoming the full body of Christ. In addition to pre-Reformation understandings of orthodoxy, historically Baptists have received gifts also from separatists and Anabaptists. Today, Baptists should continue to receive gifts, including those related to a more liturgical worship style or to the spiritual disciplines. Among those that they might offer the wider community are soul liberty, covenant community, and “their

healthy aversion to overly realized eschatologies” (163). Harmon suggests that the Baptist ecclesial authority to give and receive these gifts comes from what he identifies as the “magisterium-hood of all believers” (177). Within this structure, Harmon notes that Baptists should draw inspiration from resources outside of their own tradition, including various creeds, confessions, and catechisms.

In the final section (“Baptist Theology and the Ecumenical Future”), Harmon observes that these ecumenical issues are not simply ecclesial, but rather, are also doctrinal and require adept systematic analysis. Harmon defines classic systematic theology as that which is comprehensive, coherent, and constructive; but he laments that modern forms of theology are not truly comprehensive in the sense that they are often limited to one tradition. Indeed, theologians need to draw intentionally from various thinkers across the denominational spectrum throughout history in order to help bring the church toward a more visible unity. The “pilgrimage” of theological discovery, wherein Christians become open to gifts from other communities, takes place in the tension between current division and the promise of future unity; however, it is necessary because the church’s “story is the story of Christ” (242).

Harmon closes with an impressive list of instances of Baptist participation in the ecumenical movement, which shows that his proposal is not merely an academic exercise; but is instead a real, possible future for the Baptist identity. (Given my Canadian context, it is perhaps worth noting that various Baptist communities here have expressed their dedication to the pilgrimage toward greater catholicity, such as the Canadian Association for Baptist Freedoms.) Harmon urges his Baptist brothers and sisters to be receptive to cross-denominational dialogue and to prayerfully consider their role in the ecumenical future.

Harmon’s work is a strong addition to the Baptist ecumenical conversation. By focusing on what Baptists can contribute to the larger movement, he effectively plays to the sense of triumphalism often inherent within the pursuit of Baptist identity: Baptists will feel encouraged to have something to offer other Christians. It is clear that this is a deeply personal work for the author. The

refined and clear line of thought pairs well with the autobiographical detail, and shows that he did not compose the volume hastily, but instead meticulously reflected upon it. Moreover, in that same spirit, the depth of research in this volume is impressive and evident in the sometimes-protracted footnotes (which contribute significantly to the page length).

Despite its strengths, this volume contains two areas that require further assessment. First is the lingering question of denominational authority. Because Baptists maintain the autonomy of the local church, there is no central, governing authority by which to encourage or enforce these ecumenical ideals. As noted above, Harmon's approach revolves around what he calls the "magisterium-hood of all believers." Moreover, he recommends introducing ecumenical ideals through theological educators and other spiritual leaders. To Harmon's credit, this approach is perhaps the only viable suggestion within Baptist polity; however, from a practical standpoint, it does not completely solve the issue, for it rests the matter solely on the conscience of those individuals. Without a larger net of influence, moving forward, Baptist involvement in the ecumenical conversation may be limited to the same pockets in which it currently exists. This is an area in which Baptist ecumenists have yet to supply a satisfying solution and, I expect, will continue to be an important talking point moving forward. Second is the history of division among Baptists themselves. Harmon's place in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (which split from the Southern Baptists in 1991) highlights an uncomfortable reality: Baptists have difficulty working within their *own* religious communities. For many interested parties it will be necessary to bridge this gap before conversation within the larger Christian context can take place.

Harmon follows in a growing line of influential Baptist ecumenical theologians, including Paul Fiddes and Curtis W. Freeman. It remains to be seen whether or not this kind of thinking will take hold within the intended circles and actually come to characterize the Baptist future; however, as the West moves further into post-Christendom, the prospect of visible unity will no doubt become increasingly attractive.

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