

REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists. By Curtis W. Freeman.
Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014. xi + 466 pages. \$49.95.

FIVE PERSPECTIVES

I

I am especially pleased to comment on Curtis Freeman's book *Contesting Catholicity*.¹ Even though he may have known of me prior to that point in time, I personally met Curtis about ten years ago during a fall visit to the Duke campus. Ever since that visit, Curtis has served as an invaluable aid in my thinking through Baptist life and thought, as a mentor and even as a friend. All of these reasons made me excited to read his book and now make me equally eager to discuss it.

I write all of this not only to exchange some background, but also to provide context for one additional observation: I am an Other Baptist. I confess this at the outset because I think it is important to note that when I read the subtitle on this book's cover and the argument within its pages, I see myself addressed in it. In other words, I am one of those people who experience the dissonance between the old Baptist lines (sometimes called "distinctives") about the autonomy of the local church, soul competency, and even our particular ownership of the Reformation *sola scriptura* on the one hand and the depth of the Christian tradition and the pressing challenges of Christian existence today on the other. I sensed such things in my seminary training and continue to experience them (along with some of my perceptive students) in my current place of service. For all these reasons, I am glad to engage *Contesting Catholicity*, a book that helps to fill the gap identified in James McClendon's query about why Baptists have produced so little theology.²

1. *Summary and context*. In 1996, Freeman and five other Baptist theologians met alongside the College Theology Society (CTS) when it gathered at

¹ Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014). Subsequent references to Freeman's book by page will appear parenthetically in the text. The *Contesting Catholicity* book review symposium is the culmination of public discussions of the book that took place at the University of Dayton in March 2015 and at the Sixty-First Annual Convention of the College Theology Society at the University of Portland in May 2015.

² See James William McClendon Jr., *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 1:20–26.

the University of Dayton. The result of that assembly was a document entitled “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity,” though it has since gone by another name—the Baptist Manifesto.³ This text was framed as an opening in a serious conversation among Baptists, but also with others within the broader Christian tradition, aimed at the central themes of “freedom, faithfulness, and community.”⁴ In it, Freeman and his friends sought to move beyond a Baptist theological discourse that had been co-opted by the logic of modernity, the state, and the market. Needless to say, this conversation starter was not entirely well received and prompted numerous responses.⁵ Nonetheless, *Contesting Catholicity* can (and perhaps should) be read as Freeman’s full-voiced rejoinder to the opposition received by the Baptist Manifesto (even though some earlier forms of that response have appeared in Freeman’s previous articles).

In the first part of the book, Freeman discusses what he sees as “the sickness unto death” for contemporary Baptists—a fragmentation that has reshaped Baptists’ views of themselves and their relationships to other Christians. As Neil Sedaka sang, “Breaking up is hard to do,” and yet Baptists have become pretty good at it, even justifying it as a good for the church across space and time. Freeman declares that his aim is to challenge precisely this notion, or what he describes as “the teleology of progressive fissiparation from catholicity to sectarianism” (10). In the second part of the book, which seeks the “life that really is life,” he intends to hold onto traditional Baptist convictions such as the centrality of the Bible, believer’s baptism, and the priesthood of all believers, while reworking them within the context of and in conversation with the entire Christian tradition, at times (re)introducing Baptists to orthodox Christian notions such as Trinitarianism, the function of confessional statements and creeds, sacramentalism, and of course, catholicity.

In each case, significant (and sometimes lesser-known) Baptist voices are brought to bear on the argument, including McClendon, Roger Williams, Carlyle Marney, Blake Smith, and Warren Carr. One of the great benefits of this book is its historical texture, including the ways in which Freeman

³ For more on this history and its impact on the CTS, see Sandra Yocum Mize, *Joining the Revolution in Theology: The College Theology Society, 1954–2004* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 238–40, 286.

⁴ For the entire document, see Mikael Broadway et al., “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” *Baptists Today*, June 26, 1997, 8–10. Available at <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/faculty-freeman/reenvisioning-baptist-identity.pdf>.

⁵ See, e.g., Walter B. Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 321–40.

contests even where these figures are placed in the Baptist story. Such is the case with Marney, Smith, and Carr, Dixieland liberals who, in the typical progressive/liberal versus conservative/fundamentalist dualism of late twentieth-century Baptist historiography, are usually placed among the progressives.⁶ Freeman diverges from this reading, seeing these figures (and especially Marney) as people who sought a Baptist existence beyond liberal and fundamentalist (a positioning that strikes a chord with many Baptists, including some of my students).

In the end, this book fits with the methodology and aims of the careful historical work of twentieth-century Roman Catholic *ressourcement*, offering fresh (and more faithful) readings of traditional Baptist sites and figures (e.g., Roger Williams and Thomas Helwys). Freeman's goal in this work is to encourage Other Baptists to understand their ecclesial identity less in terms of denominationalism and historical necessity and more in terms of sociocultural location and historical accident. To do so will mean existing as "a radically reforming community of contested convictions within the church catholic" (389).

2. *Appreciation.* There are many things in this book that I appreciate, but I will limit my attention to two sections. Within evangelical Protestantism, the doctrine of the Trinity, a central mystery of the Christian faith, has largely lost its intelligibility. At best, it is held as a theological device detached from the liturgical life of the church: "an obscure teaching about an inscrutable mystery that must be simply believed" (175). This makes it seem abstract, perhaps archaic, and unrelated to the heart of Christian faith (i.e., for evangelicals, one's personal relationship with Jesus). Because of this, Freeman's detailed treatment of the Trinitarian shape of the Christian faith is not only important, but also relevant. He explores Baptists' peculiar engagement with this doctrine as well as the ways in which it dovetails with a bare biblicism that animates much nineteenth- and twentieth-century Protestant thinking.

Most interesting in this discussion was the case of eighteenth-century Christians and their opposition to a neo-Arian position that had arisen in England. While wholeheartedly against this heterodox view, two groups offered differing justifications for such opposition. Subscribers argued for a Trinitarian confession, while nonsubscribers thought that the Bible was sufficient. As Freeman points out, later generations of nonsubscribers, who were confronted with the loss of the Johannine comma (a textual variant of 1 John

⁶ See, e.g., David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).

5:7 that includes explicit Trinitarian language) from the biblical text, had significant difficulty maintaining their Trinitarian convictions (161).

More broadly, recent attempts to invoke the Trinity as support for particular agendas, such as the egalitarianism of a gender-neutral doxology (Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer) and the traditional gender roles emerging from the “Eternal Subordination of the Son” theology (wherein the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father places women in a similar position vis-à-vis men), suffer from improper Trinitarian understanding. Yet, as Freeman rightly states, these positions become possible because of the functional irrelevance of the Trinity in the first place. Thus, a quest for catholicity necessitates a return to the Trinity.

Another interesting discussion in *Contesting Catholicity* surrounds baptism. Baptists, for historical and theological reasons, have held to the practice of believer’s baptism. That is, only those who have consciously, actively, and personally linked their lives to Christ are initiated into the ecclesial community. The pressure of revivalistic fervor, however, and the ways that baptisms function as credentials for pastors have continually shifted the average age of baptism younger and younger (to as young as four or five years old) and led churches to embrace rebaptisms, threatening to make suspect some public declarations of believer’s faith. More important for Freeman, though, is not the potential for inauthentic subjectivity in baptism, but rather the way in which the practice of baptism becomes unintelligible in light of these developments, especially when set alongside a parallel (and antisacramental) rejection of other communions’ baptisms.

Freeman, with careful historical and theological nuance, addresses not merely the theological issues of this practice, its relationship to other forms of baptism, and its ecclesiological implications, but also the texture of one Baptist congregation’s habits. This congregation has not viewed infant baptism with the apathy of other Baptist assemblies in the South. Instead, when joined with confirmation, it understands baptism to fit within the ecclesial expectations and logic of believer’s baptism. While many Baptists would struggle to embrace this argument, Freeman persuasively presents infant baptism as a form of baptism derived from the normative pattern of believer’s baptism, a position also held by Catholic liturgical theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet.⁷ Moving in such a direction theologically and liturgically stands as

⁷ “Therefore, it belongs to the circuit of grace to elicit the gracious response of human freedom. . . . Among the many possible consequences of this reflection, we can note that the paradigm of the sacraments must never be, whether explicitly or implicitly, the baptism of infants, but that of adults” (Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* [Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 2001], 126).

a strong affirmation of the catholicity of the church, embodied in one baptism.

3. *Critical comments.* As I offer some observations and questions that occur to me after reflecting on this book, I should state at the outset that these thoughts are directed not only to Curtis Freeman, but to all Other Baptists, and perhaps to all Christians who inhabit the time and space called late modern America. I am not necessarily expecting these comments to receive direct answers. If Freeman's book teaches us anything, we cannot expect those sorts of statements in this post-Constantinian context. Instead, in discussing these questions, I am presuming that we will proceed "at an angle."⁸

First, what if Other Baptists remain other? That is, we began with "Other Baptist" as an optional box on a form, a specific choice in an ocean of possibilities for Baptist theology and practice, but the argument of *Contesting Catholicity* did not remain there. Instead, Freeman saw Other Baptists as a path to a greater sense of church unity and a more robust witness of the church in the world. This, as he argues, is not simply one option among many.

But is that really the case? What is preventing Other Baptists from remaining other, either as simply one marginalized voluntaristic option, or as another tributary of the Baptist river of diversity that is presented in several tellings of the Baptist story of freedom? I note this because Freeman is not the only voice calling for more substance and depth for Baptist existence today. Several scholars have approached this issue in the past year, arguing that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the network of Baptist churches in which both Freeman and I reside, needs to embrace and articulate more robust theological convictions.⁹ While I find Freeman's book far more

⁸ I am borrowing the phrase "at an angle" from Nicholas Healy's *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 10. For a discussion of why such an approach is fitting to the reigning cultural milieu, see Jonathan Tran, "An Atheistic Sense to Stanley Hauerwas's Theology," *Review & Expositor* 112, no. 1 (2015): 119–32.

⁹ See David Gushee, "What Will Ex-Southern Baptists Be When They Grow Up?," *Baptist News Global*, <http://baptistnews.com/news/item/28350-what-will-ex-southern-baptists-be-when-they-grow-up>; "Blurry Vision and How We Got Here: The Ex-SBC, Part II," *Baptist News Global*, <http://baptistnews.com/news/item/28413-blurry-vision-how-we-got-here-the-ex-sbc-part-ii>; "Where Do We Go from Here? The Ex-SBC, Part III," *Baptist News Global*, <http://baptistnews.com/news/item/28432-where-do-we-go-from-here-the-ex-sbc-part-iii>; "The 'Ex-SBC' Trilogy: A Response to My Respondents," *Baptist News Global*, <http://baptistnews.com/news/item/28515-the-ex-sbc-trilogy-a-response-to-my-respondents>; Roger E. Olson, "A Word from a Founder to All My 'Moderate Baptist' Friends," <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/02/a-word-from-a-founder-to-all-my-moderate-baptist-friends/>; "Another Great 'Moderate

compelling than their pleas, there is a certain resonance worth pointing out. In each case, though, these recommendations met severe backlash, including one commentator who stated that the church would be better to embrace a Christian faith “framed as mystery rather than orthodoxy.”¹⁰ For his part, Freeman admits that this type of response highlights the presence of a denominational reaction to the contestation of catholicity, describing such rhetoric as anti-Catholic (387).

I am inclined to agree with this evaluation, but my point in stating all of this is that the most prevalent Baptist voices seem dead set against the type of theological and ecclesiological reflection that Other Baptists cherish and seek. While I have recognized that some of my students are eager to join the quest for catholicity, undoubtedly their path goes uphill against the flow of Baptist rhetoric. So where does that leave Other Baptists?

Related to this is the question of the visible church. As Freeman points out, Baptist divisiveness is an illness that will lead to death. This is certainly true, and catholicity surely is a treatment for this ailment, but I wonder where and how questions of authority and structure play a role in all this. Our (small *e*) episcopal brothers and sisters ground at least part of the church’s catholicity in the presence and function of the ordinary. What does that mean for Baptists, whose congregations barely associate with one another, let alone stand under shared governing leadership?

For instance, it seems that the joint statement by the Baptist World Alliance’s Commission on Doctrine and Christian Unity and the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity is a great example of the ecclesial and ecumenical openness that Freeman desires (and he was a major part of the Baptist contingent in these dialogues).¹¹ What are we to make, however, of the engagement of these vastly different ecclesial structures? How do we know that Baptists and Catholics genuinely agree when one group has a hierarchy and clear set of discernment protocols and the other has a loose collection of churches full of disagreement? While I am hopeful

Baptist’ Leader on the Necessity of Doctrines,” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2015/02/another-great-moderate-baptist-leader-on-the-necessity-of-doctrines/>.

¹⁰ Bruce Gourley, “Baptist Identity and Millennials: Re-Imagining Church,” *Baptist News Global*, <http://baptistnews.com/opinion/commentaries/item/28839-baptist-identity-and-millennials-re-imagining-church>.

¹¹ “The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006–2010,” http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/Bapstist%20alliance/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20101213_report-2006-2010_en.html. See also *American Baptist Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2012): 94–96.

that an ecumenical agreement of substance is to be found there, I still think the epistemological hurdles are significant.

Moreover, does the lack of visibility (or the fleeting nature of such visibility) short-circuit attempts to (re)discover catholicity? Perhaps the better way to phrase this is to wonder what ecumenism looks like when catholicity is seriously contested. Cardinal Walter Kasper stated something of this sort when he wrote: "The ecumenical aim is not a simple return of the other into the fold of the Roman Catholic Church nor the conversion of individuals, even if this must obviously be mutually acknowledged when based on conscience. In the ecumenical movement the question is conversion to Christ. In him we move closer to one another."¹² In our context, this seems right, but even with this in view, what constitutes a move closer together? How can we tell?

Finally, while this book appears to be written for Baptists, and I have responded to it mostly from that place, as these last comments have indicated, the volume's significance is far broader than Baptists, so let me conclude by saying a bit about that. In 1983, historian Martin Marty stated that the American theological landscape had undergone "baptistification," an emphasis resting on "decision at initiation and decisive identity" over against what he called a catholic style that highlighted continuity across generations and transmission of the faith through a network of relatively stable institutions.¹³ While there are a number of ways that this description has been received by Baptists,¹⁴ it is also indicative of a sea change for the vast majority of Christians in the United States. In other places, this has been called the dissolution of the subculture that vouchsafed religious identities. In the absence of that subculture, we find the rise of the "Nones" (i.e., the religiously disaffiliated), the "spiritual but not religious" population, and pluralism at large. Even in Texas, the remnants of the subculture can be spoken of at best using Flannery O'Connor's phrase "Christ-haunted." Navigating these concerns is not simply a task for Baptists, or even Protestants. Indeed, as Freeman notes, the challenge to the church catholic is "imagining how to live faithfully in an increasingly confusing time" (20).

Freeman rightly frames this book as something of a *ressourcement*, a return to the sources of the faith in order to find ways to reenvision the

¹² Cardinal Walter Kasper, "Current Problems in Ecumenical Theology," *Reflections* 6 (Spring 2003): 64-65; quoted in Gerald Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 16.

¹³ Martin E. Marty, "Baptistification Takes Over," *Christianity Today*, September 2, 1983, 33.

¹⁴ Freeman offers a contrast to the triumphal celebration presented by some, noting that the two styles are "opposite, but complementary" (*Contesting Catholicity*, 8).

present and, in the words of Henri de Lubac, offer “explosive vitality.”¹⁵ In that way, as he speaks from the tradition in order to “lead Baptists to find their place within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church” (xi), he also speaks to *this* church in *this* time and place, offering resources for the broader and deeper contestation of catholicity by *this* church. For this reason, I find that the argument of Freeman’s book should be an encouragement to fellow pilgrims from the entire *ecclesia*. Indeed, as the church genuinely seeks catholicity through the particular and local, it finds deeper links with all participants in the whole mystical body of Christ.

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II

Many years ago, back in the 1990s, before the “Baptist Manifesto” of 1997, I was standing in a College Theology Society (CTS) cafeteria line with Curtis Freeman and a group from the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion (NABPR) Region at Large.¹⁶ We were meeting together. “Curtis,” I asked, “What kind of a Baptist are you?” “Bill,” he replied, in a Texas drawl I cannot imitate, “we are the catholic Baptists.” I am almost certain he said “we” and that he meant “catholic” with a small *c*. As a student of American religious history, I was not sure what to make of “catholic Baptists.”

Over the years since then, I have had the good fortune at Dayton to teach Baptist students who graduated from Truett Seminary at Baylor University. Though the name carries too much baggage for many of them to want to own it, they have greatly enriched my sense of who “catholic Baptists” might be. Having studied a curriculum based on Christian classics from the Apostolic Fathers to the Moderns, they are among the best-prepared doctoral students I have taught. At a recent dissertation defense, one of them explained that when he read the Fathers, Medievals, and Reformers, he felt like he was part of them and of their history. And yet reigning ecclesiologies failed to account for his part with them. In the book, Freeman refers to those who find themselves in such an ecclesial situation as “Other Baptists.”

One of the pleasures of reading *Contesting Catholicity* was meeting the Dixeland liberal Carlyle Marney. Freeman cites Marney’s 1961 address to

¹⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Paule Simon, Sadie Kreilkamp, and Ernest Beaumont (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 58.

¹⁶ Broadway et al., “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity”; *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 2, no. 3 (1997): 303–10.