

S O U T H E A S T E R N

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Contesting *Contesting Catholicity*: Some Conservative Reflections On Curtis Freeman’s Theology For “Other Baptists”

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Union University

Introduction

Longtime Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary church historian William Estep once argued “the Southern Baptist historical experience can best be understood as a search for identity.”¹ Many scholars would agree with Estep’s assessment. Southern Baptists seem perennially interested in defining, debating, and defending their respective identities. This remains true of Baptists in other locales as well. In fact, Baptist scholars all over the English-speaking world seem interested in matters of Baptist identity, as evidenced in the number of books and essays devoted to this topic over the past quarter century.² Southern Baptists and self-

¹ W. R. Estep, “Southern Baptists in Search of an Identity,” in *The Lord’s Free People in a Free Land: Essays in Baptist History in Honor of Robert A. Baker*, ed. William R. Estep (Fort Worth, TX: Evans Press, 1976), p. 145.

² A general sampling of such titles would include Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993); Charles W. DeWeese, ed., *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twenty-First Century* (Nashville, TN: Providence House, 1996); R. Stanton Norman, *More Than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2001); Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2003); R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2005); Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2006); Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne and Anthony R. Cross, *On Being the Church: Revisioning Baptist Identity*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008); David S. Dockery, ed., *Southern Baptist Identity: An Evangelical Denomination Faces the Future* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009); Jason G. Duesing, Thomas White, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III, eds., *Upon This Rock: The Baptist Understanding of the Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010); Bill J. Leonard, *The Challenging of Being Baptist: Owning a Scandalous Past* (Waco, TX: Baylor Uni-

proclaimed “moderate” Baptists affiliated with groups like Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists seem especially concerned with matters of Baptist identity. This is in part a result of the way their differing visions of Baptist identity have shaped denominational controversies within the Southern Baptist Convention during the latter half of the twentieth century.³

Since the mid-1990s, Southern Baptist identity debates have normally boiled down to four recurring, sometimes overlapping issues: 1) the resurgence of Calvinistic soteriology among Southern Baptists; 2) evolving ecclesiological practices, especially those related to church polity and leadership; 3) the difficulties in affirming a full-throated denominationalism in an increasingly post-denominational and even post-Christian era; and 4) shifting paradigms for both mission work itself and interchurch cooperation for the sake of mission. During this same period, moderate Baptists have also wrestled with many of the newer trends related to church polity, denominationalism, and mission. Moderates have also debated some issues that are less applicable among conservative Southern Baptists, including the place of women in pastoral leadership and the integration of practicing homosexuals into the life of the church. However, the moderate identity debate that has probably inspired the most written material during the past two decades has been the question of Baptist catholicity—what is often called

versity Press, 2010); Brian C. Brewer, ed., *Distinctively Baptist: Proclaiming Identity in a New Generation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011); Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology*, *Doing Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012). This list does not include individual articles, contributed chapters, symposia, surveys of Baptist theology or theologians, or the introductions to various histories of the Baptists, all of which are venues wherein Baptist identity has been defined and debated.

It should be noted that white Baptists have published nearly all of the recent writings related to Baptist identity in the English-speaking world. North American and European Baptists of African, Hispanic, or Asian ethnicities have been less interested in debating Baptist identity, at least in print. This is a topic worthy of further consideration.

³ I reflect on the debates over identity in the “post-Controversy” Baptist South in a forthcoming essay. See Nathan A. Finn, “Debating Baptist Identities: Description and Prescription in the American South,” in *Mirrors and Microscopes: Historical Perceptions of Baptists*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, forthcoming).

the “Bapto-Catholic” movement.⁴ This latter debate provides the focus of the present essay.

In this review essay, I engage with the most important book yet written in defense of Bapto-Catholic identity: Curtis Freeman’s *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists*.⁵ Freeman serves as Research Professor of Theology and directs the Baptist House of Studies at Duke University Divinity School. He is also one of the longest-running participants in the Bapto-Catholic conversation. My engagement with Freeman is intended to be appreciative, though critical—at times, perhaps pointedly so. I hope that it will also be constructive, suggesting some alternatives to Freeman’s proposal from a more conservative fellow traveller who shares many of his concerns about contemporary Baptist identity in the (mostly) American South. I will contest *Contesting Catholicity* because, like Freeman, I too hold out hope for a more catholic future for Baptist Christians, albeit one that differs in some important ways from Freeman’s “Other Baptist” identity.

I. The Bapto-Catholic Movement⁶

Before engaging with Freeman more directly, it might be helpful to provide a brief overview of the Bapto-Catholic movement. At its core, Bapto-Catholicity is an attempt to offer a *via media* between Southern Baptist conservatives and the majority of post-SBC

⁴ The Bapto-Catholic movement has also been called the “catholic Baptist” perspective by some of its proponents. However, I agree with Cameron Jorgenson’s contention that “Bapto-Catholic” is the right term to capture the movement’s ethos. He argues, “Not only is the compound word grammatically flexible, but its awkwardness captures the unusual nature of the project, constructing a Baptist identity that is influenced by the whole of the Christian tradition by way of the ancient creeds, liturgical practices (e.g., the church calendar), and theological concepts (e.g., the sacraments).” See Cameron H. Jorgenson, “Bapto-Catholicism: Recovering Tradition and Reconsidering the Baptist Identity” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2008), p. 3. To date, Jorgenson’s dissertation is the best scholarly overview of the Bapto-Catholic movement.

⁵ Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

⁶ For an extensive survey of Bapto-Catholic thought, see Jorgenson, “Bapto-Catholicism,” pp. 75–148. See also William H. Brackney, *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), pp. 59–61.

moderates. Bapto-Catholic moderates are animated by at least two major concerns. First, they believe that both conservative and mainstream moderate understandings of Baptist identity are overly informed by Enlightenment modernism, an intellectual center that Bapto-Catholics believe no longer holds in the postmodern West. They are particularly critical of E. Y. Mullins, whose doctrine of “soul competency” they blame for the excessive individualism among Baptist conservatives and mainstream moderates.⁷ Bapto-Catholics draw upon the insights of Yale University postliberal theologians George Lindbeck and Hans Frei and Scottish virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre in mounting their critique of modern Baptist theology in both its conservative and moderate varieties. In addition, Duke University moral theologian Stanley Hauerwas, whose thought weds postliberalism and virtue ethics, has cast a particularly long shadow over the Bapto-Catholic movement.⁸ Other influences include Karl Barth, John Howard Yoder, and Radical Orthodoxy.⁹ Within the Baptist tradition, the late postliber-

⁷ The classic introduction to Mullins’s view of Baptist identity, including his doctrine of soul competency, is E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith*, ed. C. Douglas Weaver (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2010). The book was first published in 1908. Mullins’s views have remained a source of debate among post-Controversy Baptists. For conservative reflections, see the thematic issue “E. Y. Mullins in Retrospect,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3/4 (Winter 1999). Moderates have dedicated two thematic issues of journals to advancing their interpretation of Mullins. See “The Mullins Legacy,” *Review and Expositor* 96/1 (Winter 1999) and “E. Y. Mullins and *The Axioms of Religion*,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 43/1 (Winter 2008). For a mostly descriptive introduction to Mullins’s life and thought, see Fisher Humphreys, “Edgar Young Mullins,” in *Theologians of the Baptist Tradition*, eds. Timothy George and David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2001), pp. 181–201.

⁸ See the thematic issue “Hauerwas among the Baptists,” *Review & Expositor* 112/1 (February 2015). Contributors include Bapto-Catholics Mark Medley, Mikael Broadway, Ralph Wood, Elizabeth Newman, Barry Harvey, and Curtis Freeman, among other contributors.

⁹ For an example of how Radical Orthodoxy informs some versions of Bapto-Catholic thought, see Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008).

al theologian James William McClendon (1924–2000) might be considered the intellectual godfather of Bapto-Catholic theology.

The second major concern of the Bapto-Catholics, as evidenced in their frequent usage of terms such as *catholic*, *catholicity*, and *ecumenism*, is to promote (they would say recover) a robust sense of Christian unity among Baptists. Bapto-Catholics are troubled by the pervasive sectarianism they believe has characterized much of the Baptist tradition, especially in America. While Landmarkism might be the most noteworthy example of Baptist sectarianism, Bapto-Catholics are concerned that even non-Landmark Baptists have adopted what I would term a “Bapto-centric” vision of Baptist identity that overemphasizes Baptist distinctiveness to the detriment of Christian unity. In their efforts to overcome perceived Baptist sectarianism, they engage widely with other Christian traditions, especially the ecumenical creedal tradition of the first five centuries of Christian history, modern ecumenical documents, and post-Vatican II Catholic proponents of *ressourcement*. Within the Baptist tradition, they look to the deeper sense of catholicity among seventeenth-century General and Particular Baptists, as well as the insights from postwar and contemporary British Baptist sacramentalists. Several of the Bapto-Catholics have contributed to the Baptist sacramentalism discussion, including Philip Thompson, who co-edited two collections of essays devoted to Baptist sacramentalism.¹⁰

The roots of the Bapto-Catholic movement are evident in the writings of McClendon, especially his three-volume systematic the-

¹⁰ See Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2003), and Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism 2*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008). For a historical overview of the Baptist sacramentalism movement among British Baptists, see Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 1–155. Malcolm Yarnell correctly argues that the Bapto-Catholics and Baptist sacramentalists are “transcontinental partners [who] share a concern for ecumenism and a revisitation of sacramentalism.” See Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), p. 72.

ology.¹¹ However, the Bapto-Catholic vision became a matter of public discussion following the 1997 publication of a statement titled “Re-Envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America.”¹² This document, often referred to as the *Baptist Manifesto*, provoked several responses over the next decade, most of which were written by moderate Baptists who were either critiquing or defending the statement.¹³ Following the publication of ecumenical theologian Steve Harmon’s 2006 book *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, the neologism “Bapto-Catholic” began to

¹¹ See James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1986–2000). Baylor University Press republished these volumes in 2012 with a new introduction by Curtis Freeman. See idem, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012). Volumes 1 and 2, published in 1986 and 1994, pre-dated the formal beginnings of the Bapto-Catholic movement.

¹² Mikael N. Broadway, Curtis W. Freeman, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClendon Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip E. Thompson, “Re-Envisioning the Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24/3 (Fall, 1997): pp. 303–10.

¹³ Moderate critics include Bruce Prescott, ‘Reaffirming Baptist Identity’, *Baptists Today* (June 25, 1997), available online at http://www.mainstreambaptists.org/mob4/re-affirming_identity.htm (accessed 7 May 2015); Walter B. Shurden, “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 25/4 (Winter 1998): pp. 321–40; Robert P. Jones, “Re-visioning Baptist Identity from a Theocentric Perspective,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26/1 (Spring 1999): pp. 35–57; Doug Weaver’s editor’s introduction to Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion*, pp. 24–26; Scott E. Bryant, “An Early English Baptist Response to the Baptist Manifesto,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 38/3 (Fall 2011): pp. 237–48. Defenders, excepting Freeman (who will be discussed later), include Philip E. Thompson, “A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking A Catholic Spirit Among Early Baptists” *Pro Ecclesia* 8/1 (Winter 1999): pp. 51–72; Philip E. Thompson, “Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: Historical, Theological, and Liturgical Analysis,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27/3 (Fall 2000): pp. 287–302; Mark S. Medley, “Catholics, Baptists, and the Normativity of Tradition: A Review Essay,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28/2 (Summer 2001): pp. 119–29; Elizabeth Newman, “The Priesthood of all Believers and the Necessity of the Church,” in *Recycling the Past or Researching History? Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, eds. Philip E. Thompson and Anthony R. Cross (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 50–66.

gain greater currency as the best descriptor of those postmodern moderates who were sympathetic to the *Baptist Manifesto's* vision of Baptist identity.¹⁴ Mainstream moderates continued to reject the Bapto-Catholic proposal as insufficiently baptistic and, at least potentially, a dangerous step toward “creedalism,” a derogatory term many moderates employ to refer to the more prescriptive use of confessional statements common among Southern Baptists and other more theologically conservative Baptist traditions.¹⁵

Curtis Freeman has emerged as the most vocal proponent of the Bapto-Catholic vision. Freeman embraced postliberalism while a graduate student at Baylor University, during which time he became familiar with both Hauerwas and McClendon.¹⁶ Like McClendon, Freeman published works that anticipated the *Baptist Manifesto* and, along with McClendon, Freeman was among the original drafters of the *Baptist Manifesto*.¹⁷ Freeman has been arguably the most consistent defender of the *Baptist Manifesto* in print and,

¹⁴ Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2006). *Towards Baptists Catholicity* compiles a number of Harmon's previously published essays, many of which positively reference the *Baptist Manifesto*. Harmon's forthcoming book will further expand upon his particular vision of Baptist catholicity. See idem, *The Baptist Vision and the Ecumenical Future: Radically Biblical, Radically Catholic, Relentlessly Pilgrim* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁵ For a mainstream criticism of Bapto-Catholicism which includes several links to like-minded bloggers, see Bruce Gourley, 'Bapto-Catholics Move Into the Spotlight in North Carolina', *A Baptist Perspective* (September 10, 2010), available online at <http://baptistperspective.brucegourley.com/2010/09/bapto-catholics-move-into-spotlight-in.html> (accessed May 7, 2015).

¹⁶ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 32. See also idem, "A Theology for Brethren, Radical Believers, and Other Baptists," *Brethren Life and Thought* 51/1-2 (Winter-Spring 2006): p. 115.

¹⁷ Curtis W. Freeman, "The 'Eclipse' of Spiritual Exegesis: Biblical Interpretation from the Reformation to Modernity," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 35/3 (Summer 1993): pp. 21–28; idem, "A Confession for Catholic Baptists," in *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision*, eds. Gary Furr and Curtis W. Freeman (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 1994), pp. 83–96; idem, "Toward a *Sensus Fidelium* for an Evangelical Church: Post-conservatives & Postliberals on Reading Scripture," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals and Postliberals in Conversation*, eds. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), pp. 162–79.

in turn, perhaps the most vocal progressive critic of mainstream moderate Baptist identity in the years since McClendon's death in 2000.¹⁸ Freeman has consistently maintained that he is an "Other Baptist" who is uninterested in either returning to the more rightwing Southern Baptist Convention, or, like many mainstream moderates, simply casting himself as a center-to-left recovering Southern Baptist or Southern Baptist in exile.¹⁹ *Contesting Catholicity* combines and expands upon many of the themes he has written on over the past quarter century.

II. Freeman's "Other Baptist" Proposal

Freeman begins *Contesting Catholicity* with a short preface. Like other Bapto-Catholics, he confesses that he is striving for a third way in the aftermath of the Inerrancy Controversy that rocked the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 1990s. Unlike the conservatives and moderates who engaged in that imbroglio, both of whom were captive to modernist assumptions, Freeman is an Other Baptist who is recovering from a background in liberalism

¹⁸ Curtis W. Freeman, "Can Baptist Theology be Revised?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24/3 (Fall 1997): pp. 273–310; idem, "E.Y. Mullins and the Siren Songs of Modernity," *Review & Expositor* 96/1 (Winter 1999): pp. 23–42; idem, "A New Perspective on Baptist Identity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 26/1 (Spring 1999): pp. 59–65; idem, "The 'Coming of Age' of Baptist Theology in Generation 'Twenty-Something,'" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27/1 (Spring 2000): pp. 21–38; idem, "Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Communion Ecclesiology in the Free Church," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31/3 (Fall 2004): pp. 259–72; idem, "God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 33/3 (Fall 2006): pp. 323–44; idem, "Roger Williams, American Democracy, and the Baptists," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34/3 (Fall 2007): pp. 267–86; idem, "Alterity and Its Cure," *Cross Currents* 59/4 (December 2009): pp. 404–41.

¹⁹ See Jonathan Goldstein, "A Third Way: Curtis Freeman's Journey as an 'Other Baptist,'" *Divinity* (Spring 2006): pp. 12–15, available online at <https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/faculty-freeman/Thirdway-freeman.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2015). This article, written for Duke Divinity School's alumni magazine, focuses on the role that Duke ethicist Stanley Hauerwas played in Freeman's theological journey.

by way of a baptistic version of postliberalism.²⁰ Freeman then moves into his introduction, which frames the rest of the book. Freeman believes most Baptists in America have become too sectarian and individualistic, a departure from the earliest Baptists who were “a movement of radical protest intent on reforming the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”²¹ In response to this individualist sectarianism, whether of the conservative or progressive variety, *Contesting Catholicity* provides a more churchly account of the Baptist story as a renewal movement within the church catholic. According to Freeman, “the aim is to provide a theologically constructive narrative of a contesting catholicity based on retrieval of sources from the Baptist heritage and in conversation with the wider church.”²² His intention is not to defend “the Baptist way,” but to offer his thoughts on a “better Baptist way” amidst the numerous “Baptist ways” that are currently being practiced among post-Controversy Baptists in America.²³

Freeman’s first true chapter is organized around the concept of *alterity*, or otherness—the sort of otherness that defines Bapto-Catholics and presumably other contemporary Baptists who do not wish to be defined by the conservative-moderate debates of the late-twentieth century. He introduces many of his key conversation partners in constructing an Other Baptist identity. Freeman hearkens back to the “Dixieland liberals” whom he interprets as the Other Baptists of the pre-Controversy era of Southern Baptist life, including Carlyle Marney, Blake Smith, and James William McClendon (W. T. Conner and Warren Carr emerge in later chapters). Freeman looks to McClendon in particular, as well as John Howard Yoder, for assistance in rooting Other Baptist identity in both the church catholic and the Free Church tradition. Roger Williams’s version of colonial baptistic alterity provides a historical role model for contemporary Other Baptists. Freeman is clear that

²⁰ Freeman uses the phrase “Other Baptist” to describe his version of Bapto-Catholic identity. Because Other Baptist identity is a species of Bapto-Catholicism, I will use both terms when referring to Freeman’s vision.

²¹ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 9.

²² Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 18.

²³ The language of various Baptist ways is drawn from Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2003), and Norman, *The Baptist Way*.

Other Baptist identity should not be equated as simplistically progressive or even postliberal. Rather, “being an Other Baptist involves confessing the ancient apostolic faith, not in a premodern or uncritical way, but in a postmodern and postcritical way.”²⁴

Chapter two attempts to define Bapto-Catholic identity as an alternative that transcends fundamentalism and liberalism. Freeman argues that the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the early twentieth century were a product, in part, of Constantinianism. Unlike the earliest English Baptists, who understood Christian freedom within the context of an overarching commitment to Christ’s rule, American Baptists since the days of Isaac Backus and John Leland had emphasized personal autonomy, private judgment, and voluntary religion. This individualistic reading of freedom reached its apex among Baptists in E. Y. Mullins and his doctrine of soul competency. Drawing on the insights of postliberalism, Freeman contends that post-Enlightenment Baptist individualists, regardless of where they shake out on the trajectory between fundamentalists and modernists, were beholden to foundationalism—they were “siblings under the skin.”²⁵ Like Karl Barth, W. T. Conner, and McClendon, Bapto-Catholics reject “fundamentalist overbelief and liberal underbelief” in an effort to retrieve a postmodern, postcritical Baptist orthodoxy.

Freeman’s third chapter draws upon the Dixieland Liberals (and especially McClendon) to commend a “generous liberal orthodoxy as expressed in the ancient ecumenical creeds.”²⁶ Unlike many mainstream moderates, Freeman is comfortable with ascribing a ministerial authority to the catholic creedal consensus and at least appreciates confessional statements drawn up by Baptists and other traditions. He strongly rejects the anti-creedalism that has mistakenly been attributed to the Baptist movement, especially by moderates. However, he remains suspicious of more prescriptive uses of creedal statements by conservatives, lest they become coercive and bind one’s conscience. Freeman prefers that creeds provide “regulative guidance” by describing the center of consensus rather than

²⁴ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 34.

²⁵ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 86.

²⁶ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 96. This chapter echoes and complements many of the same concerns raised by Freeman’s fellow Bapto-Catholic Steve Harmon. See Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*.

providing tight boundaries for Baptists.²⁷ The more Baptists echo creedal orthodoxy, especially its emphasis on the Trinity and the identity of Christ, the better they will win over liberals who at times stray to far in their creativity and evangelicals who at times are too narrow and minimalist in their orthodoxy. Freeman's vision of Baptist confessionalism also attempts to cut through a-historical accounts of Baptist history by emphasizing greater continuity with catholic Christianity, again closely drawing upon McClendon's "mystical and immediate" solidarity with the primitive church coupled with his commitment to a broader catholicity.²⁸ This will lead to a greater sense of ecumenical responsibility among Baptists as well as healthier balance between Scripture and tradition in Baptist life.

In chapter four, Freeman addresses the crucial topic of Trinitarian thought.²⁹ He argues that periodically throughout history the Baptist penchant for biblicism coupled with an emphasis on liberty of conscience has at times led to sub-Christian articulations of the Trinity. The Matthew Caffyn and Salter's Hall controversies in England loom large in this chapter, along with periodic outbursts of Unitarian thought among various English-speaking Baptists. However, Freeman's larger concern is what he calls "an incipient unitarianism of the Second Person" of the Trinity, especially among Baptists in America.³⁰ For Baptists (and other evangelicals), classical Trinitarian has often been an afterthought, far less important for doctrine, piety, and liturgy than the person of Jesus Christ. Freeman suggests that when the Trinity has been discussed, it has often been as an abstract, propositional doctrine to be affirmed rather than an explanation of the nature of the living God; this interpretation reflects his postliberal assumptions about the nature of doctrine. For Freeman, many Baptists are at least potentially "unitarians that simply have not gotten around to denying the Trinity."³¹ Freeman points to McClendon and evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz as Other Baptists who rightly valued Trinitarian-

²⁷ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, pp. 106–07.

²⁸ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 128.

²⁹ Much of this chapter is an expansion of Freeman's earlier article "God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity." See note 18 above.

³⁰ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 175.

³¹ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 181.

ism. However, he strongly criticizes conservative Baptist theologians who affirm the eternal subordination of the Son as a buttress for their complementarian view of gender roles. Whether or not eternal subordination is biblical or not is debated even among complementarians. However, Freeman's accusation that the position represents "a new version of the old tritheism" seems strained at best.³²

Chapter five focuses upon the doctrine of the royal priesthood or the priesthood of all believers, a position historically championed by Baptists and one that has proven controversial in recent years.³³ Freeman challenges the stridently individualistic reading of soul competency, attributed to E. Y. Mullins, that has colored the mainstream moderate interpretation of the priesthood of all believers. Following Marney and John Bunyan, Freeman draws upon earlier Reformation and Baptist accounts of the royal priesthood, which were concerned more with congregational confession of sin and the doctrine of vocation. He argues, "For Other Baptist pilgrims, the journey is about practices, not just principles; convictions, not merely concepts; communion, not individualism."³⁴ He also presents a Christo-centric account of the believer's priesthood, arguing Christians "are priests to one another by participating as ministers in the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant."³⁵ Freeman's critique of Baptist individualism, whether conservative or progressive, lies near the center of the Bapto-Catholic vision. It shows great promise as a key point of intersection between Bapto-Catholics and more conservative Bap-

³² Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 188.

³³ In 1987, moderate church historian Walter Shurden argued for a more individualist account of the royal priesthood in his book *The Doctrine of the Priesthood of Believers* (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1987). The following year, Southern Baptists, now led by conservatives, adopted a resolution that argued the priesthood of the believer, rightly understood, is neither a license for theological heterodoxy nor does it contradict pastoral authority. See "Resolution on the Priesthood of the Believer," available online at <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/872/resolution-on-the-priesthood-of-the-believer> (accessed June 10, 2015). Timothy George offers a more scholarly defense of the conservative position in his article "The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity," *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1989): pp. 283–94.

³⁴ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 209.

³⁵ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 223.

tists who are likewise concerned with certain forms of individualism.

The following chapter addresses the covenantal nature of church membership, a theme that has been championed in recent years by Baptists across the theological spectrum.³⁶ Drawing deeply from the English Separatist and subsequent Baptist traditions, and using his own church, Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, NC as a recurring example, Freeman argues, “a church is a community of disciples gathered in a common confession of faith in Jesus Christ.”³⁷ Though he affirms a believer’s church and congregational freedom, Freeman does not argue for an isolationist or protectionist view of local church autonomy. Rather, he argues “the early Baptist vision [was] a movement of radical renewal within the church catholic rather than purely a faction of dissent and separation.”³⁸ Drawing upon earlier Baptists and the Free Church theologian Miroslav Volf, Freeman contends local churches are contextual embodiments of the one universal church called into existence by the Triune God: “To put it simply ... the local church is wholly church but not the whole church.”³⁹ He pushes back against several Catholic understandings of the local-universal question on the one hand, while also rejecting Baptist anti-Catholic sectarianism on the other hand. Freeman draws upon the insights of McClendon and Yoder to suggest that Baptist congregations are true churches, albeit dissenting churches within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Other Baptists strive for church unity, even while recognizing full unity is an eschatological reality. For Freeman and other Bapto-Catholics, a distinctively Baptist vision of catholicity admittedly remains a work in progress.

The seventh chapter focuses upon the Baptist understanding of the Bible, making much of the theme of “new light” from the Biblical revelation. For Freeman, “What distinguishes Baptists is not so

³⁶ For example, see Charles W. Deweese, *Baptist Church Covenants* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1990); Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 13 (Wipf and Stock, 2006), pp. 21–47; John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2005), pp. 114–29.

³⁷ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 231.

³⁸ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 241.

³⁹ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 242–43.

much a doctrine of Scripture, much less a theory of inspiration, but rather a standpoint and a conviction that the church now is the apostolic community and the commands of Jesus are addressed to *us*.⁴⁰ This quote evidences Freeman's preference for McClendon's bibliology over more evangelical Baptist approaches to Scripture. Freeman and Other Baptists are more concerned with a doctrine of Scripture reading than they are the doctrine of Scripture itself. Freeman argues that Baptists historically valued communal Scripture interpretation far more than individual interpretations of Scripture. Freeman is nervous about the plain sense reading of the Bible, assumed by Baptists, but allegedly based on a misunderstanding of the Reformation doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity. Following postliberal theologians Lindbeck and Frei, Freeman argues Other Baptists affirm a post-critical, communal approach to Biblical interpretation as a balanced middle between liberal hyper-critical readings and conservative hermeneutical naïveté, both of which are grounded in modern individualism. For Freeman, "The church meeting thus becomes a liminal space where participants in the conversation of discernment are invited to journey from old ways of thinking toward new hermeneutical horizons of understanding."⁴¹ Though he does not use the language, Freeman is really commending his own progressive Baptist approach to the "theological interpretation of Scripture," an ecumenical movement that transcends ecclesial and even theological commitments.⁴² As a case study, Freeman makes a biblical case for an egalitarian understanding of women's ordination, a minority view among Baptists but one that, to Freeman, represents new light from Scripture.

In chapter eight, Freeman discusses the aforementioned topic of Baptist sacramentalism. He begins by arguing for a more sacramental account of the Lord's Supper over against more recent ultra-Zwinglian interpretations of the Eucharist. He argues the earliest British Baptists affirmed a sacramental view of the Lord's Supper that echoed in various ways the *Book of Common Prayer* and Calvin's understanding of spiritual presence. However, despite early

⁴⁰ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 274.

⁴¹ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, 282.

⁴² For an accessible introduction to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

Eucharistic sacramentalism, Freeman suggests “sacramentalism has rarely been a live option among subsequent generations” of Baptists.⁴³ Nineteenth-century Baptists focused on the “remembrance” aspect of the Lord’s Supper and focused on obediently (and intermittently) celebrating the Eucharist more than articulating a coherent doctrine of God’s activity during communion. Employing the clever term “real absence,” Freeman suggests Baptists diminished their own doctrine of Christ’s omnipresence in a quixotic attempt to avoid all sacramental language.⁴⁴ With a nod to the majority Reformed tradition, Freeman argues that Other Baptists affirm an evangelical sacramentalism wherein the Lord’s Supper is not understood to confer grace *ex opera operato*, but rather is seen as a sign that confirms God’s prior grace through faithful participation in the sacrament.

In his final full chapter, Freeman focuses on the doctrine of baptism. He again engages the history of Watts Street Baptist Church (among others) to argue for an open membership policy as the practice that best preserves a Baptist approach to catholicity. He concedes that a closed membership requiring believer’s baptism, normally by immersion alone, is the dominant practice in Baptist history, albeit one periodically challenged by a noteworthy open membership minority. He also critiques approaches to open membership, such as that of Bunyan, that make baptism a matter of private conscience rather than a churchly sacrament and/or rejects, in principle, the validity of all infant baptisms. However, Freeman saves some of his strongest criticisms for Landmarkism, which rejected all non-Baptist baptisms (even credobaptisms) and often influenced mainstream Southern Baptist baptismal theology. He suggests that the “large majority” of Southern Baptist churches still reject so-called alien immersions and practice “re-baptism,” a sweeping claim he fails to document.⁴⁵ He also criticizes the dominant Southern Baptist practice of requiring member candidates who were sprinkled as babies to submit to believer’s baptism. For Freeman, Southern Baptist baptismal theology is incompatible with a serious commitment to ecumenism. He raises concerns about the rebaptism rate among Southern Baptists and argues, as with the Lord’s Supper, for a more sacramental view of believer’s baptism

⁴³ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 319.

⁴⁴ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 331.

⁴⁵ Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity*, p. 363.

as a grace-confirming sign of God's saving action that is closely connected with the sealing the Holy Spirit. In a surprising turn for a Baptist, Freeman argues that Other Baptists should accept infant baptism, not out of a sense of Christian charity, but as a valid baptism, arguing that conversion and initiation can be embodied through a variety of practices in an ecumenical age. In a brief conclusion, Freeman revisits his major arguments and gives a final commendation for his Other Baptist vision of a contested catholicity.

III. Contesting Freeman's *Contested Catholicity*

I am grateful that Freeman has written *Contested Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists*. Though we identify with different ecclesial traditions in the post-Controversy Baptist South, I am sympathetic to many elements of his version of Bapto-Catholicism. For example, I agree with Freeman that many Baptists, especially in the American South, have often embraced a Bapto-centric sectarianism as a result of an unhelpful understanding of individualism that "baptizes" (pun intended) American expressions of liberty and democracy far more than it reflects the more catholic spirit of the earlier Baptist tradition. I, too, long to see contemporary Baptists recover a healthy sense of Christian unity. I also resonate with Freeman's appreciation for the ecumenical creedal tradition, a more robust Trinitarianism among Baptists, and a deeper sense of liturgy. In fact, I would argue that these are not unique concerns among Bapto-Catholics. Many younger Southern Baptist pastors and theologians also desire to see Baptists recover a more robust sense of catholicity.

Second, when it comes to the Scriptures, Freeman rightly pushes back against an over-emphasis on the private interpretation of Scripture and helpfully calls for a rediscovery of communal Bible reading among Baptist churches. This is a needed word for Baptists of every stripe. Freeman also correctly sees more theological readings of the Scriptures as a helpful form of *ressourcement* from the Christian past and a path forward through the hermeneutical ruins left in the wake of the Enlightenment modernism. Again, I think many conservative Southern Baptists and other baptistic evangelicals would argue similarly to Freeman. The fact that numerous Southern Baptists scholars are involved in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture movement, champion canonical hermeneutics, or identify with redemptive-historical biblical interpretation

demonstrates that conservative Baptists and Bapto-Catholics have similar, if not identical, concerns about the best ways to read the Scriptures as faithful new covenant followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Finally, certain aspects of Freeman's ecclesiological concerns resonate with me and with many other conservative Southern Baptists I know. As mentioned above, Freeman's call for a more covenantal understanding of local churches as communities of disciples closely intersects with the desires of a growing number of Southern Baptists. If anything, Freeman's championing of this perspective makes him far more like European Baptists or—dare I say—conservative Southern Baptists than he is like most of his fellow moderates in this regard. On a closely related theme, a growing number of Southern Baptists would also share Freeman's concerns about the culture of "rebaptism" in Baptist life, at least in respects to those who have been previously immersed. I would challenge Freeman's assertion that most Southern Baptists continue to reject "alien immersions" from other traditions; the evidence on this is mixed at best and the momentum seems to clearly be in the direction of those who would be more flexible than less flexible in this regard.⁴⁶ Many Southern Baptists, myself included, would also appreciate Freeman's critique of what might be called a "mere memorialism" view of the Lord's Supper. However, it is difficult to know how many Southern Baptists are open to a more (Reformed) sacramental understanding of communion similar to that of most earlier generations of Baptists.

These sympathies notwithstanding, I do not believe that Freeman's Other Baptist identity offers the way forward for conservative Southern Baptists who share many of his concerns. I would suggest this is a classic case of having the (mostly) right diagnosis while offering the (often) wrong prescription. Freeman's postliberalism is still too progressive for Southern Baptists who never wandered into the woods of modernism and later progressive developments in the first place. This is especially true in our doctrine of

⁴⁶ For example, the Southern Baptist International Mission Board recently voted to rescind its controversial policy rejecting most alien immersions. See David Roach, "IMB to Align Missionary Requirements with BF&M," Baptist Press (May 15, 2015), available online at <http://www.bpnews.net/44772/imb-to-align-missionary-requirements-with-bfm> (accessed June 11, 2015).

Scripture. Simply put, conservatives can embrace theological interpretation, communal interpretation, and sensitivity to contextualization, while also believing that inerrancy is a valid contextual articulation of the doctrine of biblical truthfulness and holding to the analogy of Scripture as a check against interpretations that contradict divine revelation. Bapto-Catholics are building on a shaky foundation because of their refusal to embrace a fully trustworthy Bible that provides within itself the only fully authoritative boundaries for faithful hermeneutics and theological formulation.

Because of our differing understandings of Scripture, conservative Baptists will also reject several of Freeman's interpretations. Southern Baptists have spoken clearly through our confessional tradition and rejected an egalitarian understanding of gender roles, an open membership accommodation of pedobaptism, and a sacramental view of believer's baptism. While all three perspectives have some historical roots in the Baptist tradition, most conservatives would argue that none of these perspectives ought to be embraced because to do so would entail either rejecting clear biblical texts or requiring some form of "hermeneutical gymnastics" that would ignore the analogy of Scripture and make some texts say something different than they seem to say. Contra moderates of all varieties, whether Bapto-Catholic or mainstream, this does not represent a coercive use of creeds and confessions, but rather is simply recognition that such standards have a ministerial authority insofar as they accurately summarize the biblical witness. Freeman comes close to arguing for this sort of authority for the Patristic creeds, but like other moderates he bristles at the idea that denominational confessions actually articulate prescriptive boundaries rather than merely speaking to consensus.

Freeman's Other Baptist identity remains too progressive in that it attempts catholic unity while simultaneously rejecting apostolic doctrine. Jesus's prayer for the church to be one (John 17:21) presumes affirming a truthful word from the Lord (17:17). Fortunately, Southern Baptists and other evangelical Baptists need not embrace postliberalism and advocate progressive doctrines in our own journey toward a more catholic identity. Instead, I would argue the way forward includes articulating a view of Baptist identity that adequately accounts for the various theological sources that have contributed to our ecclesial DNA. As third-generation Protestants, Baptists have inherited the wider catholic tradition's view of core Christian beliefs such as the Trinity, Christology, crea-

tion, and new creation, along with the Magisterial Reformers' basic understanding of Scripture and soteriology. As Free Church Protestants in particular, we have inherited an anti-Constantinian ecclesiology that privileges a regenerate church membership, credobaptism, and congregational freedom. As evangelicals, we have inherited a spirituality that is Bible-driven, cross-centered, and mission-minded. We Baptists are at our best when we understand ourselves to be simultaneously catholic, reformational, radical, and evangelical. When one of these components is left out, the result is a malformed Baptist identity. Freeman rightly points out that the catholic component has often been lacking, and that is a serious problem. Unfortunately, Freeman's Other Baptist paradigm presents us with its own problems.

Freeman and other Bapto-Catholics have the right instincts, but they also suffer from a malformed Baptist identity. Rather than fully embracing the evangelical renewal that influenced almost all Baptists in the eighteenth century, the Bapto-Catholics, like other progressives, have inherited theological traditions that moved on from evangelicalism into modernism, then Neo-Orthodoxy, and finally to movements like postliberalism or Radical Orthodoxy. These latter movements are valuable insofar as they offer trenchant critiques of modernist unbelief, but they reject evangelicalism, are rarely influenced by Free Church views, and redefined core Protestant and even catholic ideas. The result is that progressive accounts of catholicity such as the mainline ecumenical movement are insufficiently evangelical and aberrantly Protestant. The Bapto-Catholic vision suffers from a similar, more explicitly Baptist version of this progressive malady. Bapto-Catholics must embrace more consistently evangelical views if they are to ever be more than simply fellow travelers and occasional dialog partners for conservative Baptists who desire a greater sense of catholicity. Simply put, Southern Baptists and other evangelical Baptists have a better pathway toward a biblically faithful catholicity than Bapto-Catholics; the latter have introduced too many unhealthy mutations into their ecclesial DNA.

Conclusion

Contesting Catholicity makes a significant constructive contribution to Baptist theology, an important addition to recent discussions of Baptist identity, and represents the most sophisticated articulation of the Bapto-Catholic vision that has yet been published.

Curtis Freeman is a creative theologian who always asks good questions, even when his answers are worth contesting. Mainstream moderates will likely continue to debate the merit of Freeman's challenge to the progressive account of soul competency, as well as his positive assessment of historic creeds. These emphases in Freeman's thought (and Bapto-Catholicism in general) represent a direct challenge to moderate Baptist hyper-individualism.

Though Freeman also challenges conservative Baptists, we should respond differently. On the one hand, many of his critiques of Baptist sectarianism and individualism should be received. On the other hand, Freeman's progressive theological positions should be rejected. Freeman offers us a helpful example of how to think about catholicity from a creative perspective that is distinctively Baptist. Our response as conservatives should be to wrestle with the same questions, but from a perspective that is sufficiently evangelical and more faithful to the best of the classical Protestant and Free Church traditions. My hope is that a rising generation of Southern Baptist theologians will engage these vital issues from a better starting place than Freeman and his Bapto-Catholic colleagues.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ A model for this sort of engagement, written from a confessionally Reformed perspective, can be found in Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015). Convictional Baptists committed to catholicity would do well to consider the proposals of Allen and Swain as we attempt to articulate an evangelical Baptist catholicity.