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

In this book on Baptist ecclesiology, Curtis W. Freeman, Research Professor of Theology and Baptist Studies at Duke Divinity School, starts with the diagnosis that Baptists are sick and the root cause of their sickness is their alterity—their determination to maintain a sectarian denominational identity. He suggests that the cure is a rediscovery of a lowercase ‘catholicity’ that recognizes that the church as the body of Christ is ultimately one or it is not the church at all. He proposes that Baptists should identify as ‘contesting catholics’: catholic, as they reclaim the early Christian creeds as a part of their own identity, but also contesting, as they claim space for their distinctive theological commitments as a legitimate part of the Christian tradition.

In Part I of the two-part volume, Freeman proposes a third way beyond two types of Baptist theology: a fundamentalist-evangelical spectrum and a liberal-moderate spectrum. He argues that both are limited by their desire to accommodate theology to modernity. In contrast, he embraces a postliberal theology as an alternative that moves beyond the liberal-conservative divide. He locates his work in continuity with Baptist theologians like Carlyle Marney, Warren Carr, and James McClendon, Jr., whom he identifies as “Other Baptists,” since they each argued in their own ways that Baptist theology is strongest not when it is isolated but when it is in critical conversation with the wider Christian tradition. Building on their work, Freeman’s third way reclaims threads of Baptist theology that connect it to the early Christian creeds and by extension to all churches affirming the creeds.

The author’s argument hinges on convincing readers that Baptist theology is congruent with creedalism, even though he acknowledges that many Baptists are noncreedal. He is convinced that only the ancient ecumenical creeds can “provide a kind of rule of faith that effectively regulates and guides the reading of interpretive communities” (136) and offer common ground for engaging in genuine ecumenical conversation. Affirming the creeds offers Baptists a way beyond individualism, fundamentalism, and biblical criticism “toward the bedrock of catholicity” (138).

After working to establish the validity of creedalism for Baptists in

Part I, Freeman then uses the creeds as a basis for interpreting the catholicity of the Baptist tradition in Part II. He engages in a theological *ressourcement* (return to the sources) of the Baptist tradition, focusing on a trinitarian theology of God, anthropology, ecclesiology, biblical hermeneutics, communion, and baptism. With each theme, he presents a wide diversity of perspectives in the Baptist tradition. His historical study helpfully shows the origins and influences of current Baptist beliefs and practices, and highlights untapped theological resources to propose a more ‘catholic’ Baptist theology. He hopes that his interpretation of ‘contesting catholicity’ will offer a bridge for Baptists from a sectarian exclusivism to a more inclusive theology.

Although Freeman intends to cure Baptist alterity, I am left with the impression that he doesn’t offer a solution to sectarianism as much as he widens the sectarian circle. While it may be outside the scope of this book, it is still surprising that he only hints at essential questions about the relationship of the ‘church catholic’ to an increasingly pluralistic society. In an age of post-Christendom, he looks forward to focusing “on the proper business of asking what it means for the church to be the church without worrying about what the world may think or say” (391). Yet he affirmatively quotes McClendon, who observes that “the line between church and world pass[es] right through each Christian heart” (35). If this is so, then the church can never be the church without worrying about what the world thinks.

*Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* gives serious attention to curing ecumenical rifts within the church, but this is just a first step. The sickness of alterity that the author describes has already metastasized into in the wider ‘church catholic’ in the United States. The further challenge is for churches and theologians to engage generously, not just with one another but with the interreligious, national, cultural, and political worlds in which Christians live.

Overall, the author’s search for a third way is timely and commendable for imagining an alternative to the intractable theological-political divisions in many churches today. Besides those interested in Baptist ecclesiology and post-liberalism, his book is a useful conversation partner for anyone concerned with the tension between theological dissent and ecumenism.

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