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Richard Crane

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EXPLOSIVE DEVICES AND RHETORICAL STRATEGIES:
APPRECIATION FOR STEVEN R.HARMON'S *TOWARDS
BAPTIST CATHOLICITY*

Richard Crane

The first edition of Karl Barth's *Romerbrief* was described as a bombshell on the theologian's playground. In similar fashion, Steven R. Harmon's *Towards Baptist Catholicity* issues a radical challenge to dominant interpretations of Baptist identity in North America.¹ To borrow a bumper-sticker cliché, Harmon is seeking to subvert the dominant paradigm. Harmon calls Baptists to retrieve "the ancient catholic tradition that forms Christian identity through liturgical rehearsal, catechetical instruction, and embodied ecclesial practice," leading to a renewed awareness that Baptists belong to "the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" (xix, 18). Harmon's theological project, following classical Faith and Order ecumenism, is "to call the churches to ... visible unity in one faith and *one Eucharistic fellowship*" (202). However, his implied agreement with Church Fathers such as St. Ignatius, who link full catholicity with communion with Rome, raises the question, is "Baptist Catholicity" the ultimate goal of "Baptist catholicity"? Such a proposal would indeed be an explosive device on the "Baptist

playground."

Rhetorical critics have long recognized a fundamental creative tension in all persuasive discourse. Arguments are designed to "move" an audience from point A, current beliefs and attitudes, to point B, the speaker's attitudes, beliefs, and proposed behaviors. A rhetor invites an audience to envision new possibilities, draw conclusions previously unrecognized, and act in new ways. To achieve this goal, however, the rhetor must first address the audience where they are. Classical rhetorical theory recognized that an orator must appeal to an audience's presuppositions or to widely shared opinions within some particular social context in order to persuade persons to rethink at least some of their current convictions.²

Harmon's rhetorical performance is impressive. Well aware that his proposal requires a dramatic transformation of Baptist life, Harmon envisions the movement towards catholicity as a lengthy process requiring patience, gentle persuasion, and gradual changes. His matching rhetorical strategy is one that emphasizes continuities and lines of smooth development. The recurring pattern within Harmon's persuasive discourse takes the form of these basic arguments: (1) these proposals are not alien to the Baptist tradition but are in *continuity* with the beginnings of the Baptist movement; (2) these proposals are more fundamentally in harmony than dissonance with the deepest wisdom and best instincts of the Baptist tradition; and (3) there are "openings" within current Baptist thought and practices for steady progress toward catholicity. A paradigmatic example of this rhetorical style is his critique of the radically individualistic *sola scriptura* hermeneutic most

Baptists profess to practice. Harmon suggests to his readers that catholicity is already implicitly present in their actual hermeneutical practices because (1) accepting the Bible as our sacred text is already the acceptance of a postbiblical tradition, and (2) Baptists actually read Scripture through the lenses of all sorts of traditions and make interpretive judgments within the matrix of a consideration of multiple, usually unacknowledged, sources of authority (43).

However, I will identify two issues around which Harmon's rhetorical approach might need supplementation with forms of persuasive discourse that more directly contest Baptist assumptions antithetical to his vision.

Harmon is aware that his proposal is most threatening to Baptist moderates, with their allergic reaction to any authority that would curtail the individual's liberty to believe as she or he sees fit.³ In articulating his vision for a future confession of faith, crafted as a Baptist exposition of the Nicene Creed, Harmon walks a rhetorical tightrope, opposing moderate tendencies toward doctrinal minimalism while simultaneously reassuring them that this confession would not function coercively "as an instrument of doctrinal accountability" like the 2000 revision of the Baptist Faith and Message, which served to eliminate from leadership those who did not "toe the party line" on matters such as women's ordination and biblical inerrancy. Harmon suggests an alternative understanding of the ancient creeds as concise narrative rehearsals of salvation history, a function in continuity with the historic Baptist appreciation for the telling of the gospel story in proclamation and personal testimony

(81-82). However, if the ancient Christian tradition is to have communally binding authority, I would suggest the need to contest the commitment of many Baptists to the absolute primacy of individual liberty by specifying how the creeds and confessions might indeed have some modest function as "instruments of doctrinal accountability." At the very least, this means we take seriously the task of holding each other accountable to make the case why our convictions count as expressions of the "faith of the church," in appropriate continuity with those convictions that represent strong ecclesial consensus during the period in which, Harmon notes, the church was the closest to a visible realization of one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship(204).

Many Baptist moderates fail to grasp how words like "doctrine" and "orthodoxy" might function in Harmon's catholic vision. Bill Underwood argues that "prevailing Christian orthodoxy" once defended a flat earth and slavery. Other beliefs, once firmly held as true, have been proven false—but, "we will not be able to test our beliefs if we accept what others have declared as orthodox without question."⁴ Underwood fears that deference to any communally authoritative norms will stifle debate and disagreement. But, as Harmon points out, the ecumenical creeds and councils do not settle the debate on the role of women in the life of the church or the inspiration of Scripture. The pivotal interpretive judgments made during the first five or six centuries of the Christian movement set broad grammatical parameters, a generous orthodoxy, within which significant theological disagreement, diversity, and contestation might flourish. Orthodoxy

in the catholic sense bears little resemblance to the "narrow little orthodoxies" Underwood fears. For example, the 2000 re- vision of the Baptist Faith and Message is *not* an instrument of *doctrinal* accountability but, rather, one designed to enforce conformity to a narrow *theological* agenda. In fact, Harmon appropriates Alasdair MacIntyre's description of living traditions as "socially embodied *arguments*" for the sake of *safeguarding* the Baptist emphasis on the liberty to dissent. However, the point of dissent is not to further the individual's autonomy vis-à-vis the Christian community but rather for the sake of the community's faithfulness; it is part of a communal process of seeking the voice of the Spirit in and through the voices of every member of the local community and through the witness of Christians through the ages.

The most intransigent obstacle to Baptist catholicity is the "quasi- Gnostic" soteriological imagination deeply entrenched in Baptist and evangelical circles. Baptists typically construe "salvation" as a private encounter between the individual soul and God, the "content" of which is the rectification of the individual's juridical relationship with God. The visible community of Christians, the sacraments, and acts of service are seen as secondary, merely external expressions of the "real" inward, spiritual reality where the individual has unmediated access to God. The church is seen as desirable as an aid to individual spiritual growth, but dispensable for salvation.

Harmon's rhetorical strategy needs to be supplemented by a different style of persuasive discourse designed to invite and facilitate something akin to a Kuhnian paradigm shift. And, since Baptists acknowledge the Bible's authority, a persuasive scriptural

argument might allow Baptists to "see" a different soteriological pattern. Texts such as 1 Cor 12 and Eph2 indicate that salvation is ecclesial. Incorporation into Christ, in Baptism, by the Spirit, is incorporation into Christ's body, the church. Ephesians 2:11-16 describes Christ's redemptive work on the cross as the creation of a new kind of human community in which Jew and Gentile are publicly and visibly reconciled. This community already participates in the eschatological new creation. The *gift* of salvation, to suggest a soteriological gestalt switch, is not primarily one's legal status before God, but a new quality of living described by St. Paul as "walking in the Spirit." This quality of life is inseparable from participation in that visible community that is itself called to participate in and perform publicly God's reign, through its liturgical and sacramental life, mutual forgiveness, reconciliation across racial and other boundaries, hospitality, shared meals, and active, delivering compassion for "the least of these."

Only a paradigm shift of this magnitude will make catholicity imaginable among Baptists. Only if we recognize that salvation is ecclesial, public, embodied, and communal will the unity of the body of Christ matter. Only then will the struggle for Christian unity be valued as the task implied in the gift of salvation.

1. Steven R Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2006).

Further references to the book will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

2. John Pouloukos, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric/" in *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, ed. John Louis

Lucaites and Celeste Michelle Condit (New York: Guilford Press, 1999), 30-31; David Cunningham, *Faithful Persuasion: In Aid of a Rhetoric of Christian Theology* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 16-17, 45-46; Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950).

3. The battles of the past twenty years in the Southern Baptist Convention have produced an impasse between fundamentalists and moderates, who have emphasized "soul competency/" the idea that religion is a personal matter between the individual soul and God, as the most fundamental Baptist distinctive. A hyperindividualistic appropriation of the Reformers' battle cry, sola scriptura, has led to the functional reduction of theological authority to the encounter of the private individual conscience with the biblical text (11-12,39-40).

4. Greg Warner, "Mercer President-Elect Decries 'Spiritual Masters' Who Limit Freedom," Associated Baptist Press, January 24, 2006, www.abpnews.com/786.article.