

“Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future”

How does the church respond to the growing trend of popular protest against certain effects of globalization? What is the proper role of theologians?

These questions reflect why it can be said that Steve Harmon’s recently published book, “Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community” (Baylor, 2016) has appeared at a most opportune time.

The book becomes available when many people are crumbling under the weight of certain consequences of globalization and are retreating into their comfort zones, which are bordered by narrow ethnocentrism or destructive nationalism.

Harmon argues persuasively in favor of the one church of Jesus Christ spread across the world - a church not hemmed in by cultural or national borders - eagerly seeking to live into the unity that God gives, wills and demands.

“Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future” is addressed to both Baptists and other Christians. It reminds Baptists of some of the treasures they bring to the life and thought of the wider church family.

Harmon includes among these Baptists’ “pilgrim aversion to overly realized eschatologies” together with their “radical commitment to discerning the rule of Christ by means of the Scriptures.”

Harmon also reminds Baptists of the “radical catholicity from which the Bible is inseparable” and he endeavors to nudge them to appreciate the invaluable riches that inhere also in the other Christian World Communions (CWCs).

Baptists have a history of receiving these riches in many areas of their life, including their confessions of faith and traditions of biblical interpretation, and in their worship patterns and practices, including their hymnody.

As CWCs continue to harvest from each other, based on “one sacred story” that is heard and believed, read and confessed, a new ecumenical spring could break forth.

Harmon celebrates the blessings of dialogical engagement between Baptists and other CWCs in which the partners are ready to learn and receive from one another aspects of their understanding of the faith. He believes this can herald a new and vibrant ecumenical future.

Harmon calls for the kind of receptive ecumenism without which the church can hardly be fully the church. He has a clear vision of a time when the full visible unity of the church is on display.

Yet, he does not dismiss denominationalism which does not pretend to be an end in itself, but is open to the interconfessional exchange of gifts.

Many discerning readers will welcome not only the vision of the ecumenical future that Harmon espouses and commends, but also what Harmon's excellent book implies and actually states concerning the proper work of theologians.

The project Harmon undertakes is done in the service of faithfulness to the Lord of the church. Harmon writes primarily as one who is dedicated to the service of the church and its unity.

His is not a fascination with theological ideas for their own sake. His articulation of the vocational dimension of a theologian's work is as clear and impressive as that offered by another outstanding contemporary Baptist theologian, Molly Marshall.

In richly documented chapters crafted by a competent Baptist ecumenical theologian, Harmon deals with a number of issues which Baptists may need to rethink in the light of the long and rich history of the one church of the living God of which they are a part.

Readers will appreciate the clarity that marks Harmon's book - a clarity that is born in a profound understanding of the issues themselves and also in enviable communications skills.

"Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future" should be required reading for Baptist leaders.

Coming so soon after Curtis Freeman's highly consequential work, "Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists" (Baylor, 2014), Harmon's work is in the tradition of a number of published works over recent decades that seek to assist

Baptists to retrieve parts of their own tradition that many are inclined to forget.

I am referring to works by Anthony Cross, Philip Thompson, Stanley Fowler and John Colwell, who are among a group of theologians, biblical scholars and church historians enriching and invigorating the Baptist family.

They do so by engaging in rigorous reflection on the sacraments and by making the fruit of their research available and accessible to the wider family of Baptists.

What is particularly illuminating about the current state of affairs in the development of Baptist theology is that our writers do take seriously the foundation of our faith in the biblical story and the history of the church, and many see no need to abandon or to idealize the specific Christian World Communion that has formed and shaped them spiritually.

The stewardship of our Baptist theologians is becoming comparable to that of our Baptist church historians.

This gives us reason for celebration; it also leads us to applaud the contribution God is enabling servants of the church who are in academia to make to the faithful and responsible living out of our faith among the family of Christians called Baptists.

✘ *Neville George Callam, a Jamaican, has been serving as general secretary and chief executive officer of the Baptist World Alliance since his election in Accra, Ghana, in 2007. A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Callam's [blog](#). You can follow BWA on Twitter [@TheBWA](#).*