

Baptists & Catholics Together?

Making Up Is Hard to Do

Curtis W. Freeman

A few years ago I stood in front of a class of divinity students and announced that a prominent religious pundit had recently made the following statement: “I’ve got more in common with Pope John Paul II than I do with Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton.” Then I asked, “Was it (a) Stanley Hauerwas, (b) Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, (c) Richard John Neuhaus, or (d) Richard Land?”

The class rightly suspected this was a setup, yet most of the students failed to identify Richard Land as the source of the quote. And who could blame them? What’s the world coming to when a prominent Southern Baptist suggests, even playfully, that he is more comfortable with the pope than with two of the country’s most visible Baptists?

The line about religious boundaries in the United States used to be that Jews don’t recognize Jesus as the Messiah, Protestants don’t recognize the pope as head of the church, and Baptists don’t recognize one another at the liquor store. It expressed the more nuanced typology put forth in Will Herberg’s classic book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. But with the changing of the religious landscape in the United States, the old map is less useful than it once was. Many Jews now regard Jesus as a great teacher, which is more than some “Christian” theologians seem to be saying these days. Catholics and most mainline Protestants now regard one another as “separated brethren.” And some Baptists even make eye contact when they spy one another buying a bottle of wine.

As a participant in a December 2007 round of conversations between Baptists and Catholics in Rome, I was reminded how much things have changed. The joint international delegation was cordially welcomed by Benedict XVI. In his address to the group, the pope expressed hope that the conversations would “bear abundant fruit for the progress of dialogue and the increase of understanding and cooperation between Catholics

and Baptists.” Quoting the Lord’s priestly prayer “that they may all be one...so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21), Benedict reminded the audience that, in the words of Vatican II’s decree on ecumenism, *Unitatis redintegratio*, a lack of unity among Christians “openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and harms the most holy cause of promoting the good news to every creature.”

L’Osservatore Romano declared the conversation, the second in a series of five with representatives from the Baptist World Alliance, to be a step forward in Catholic-Baptist relations. Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity that hosted the week-long gathering, described the discussions as “very fruitful” and expressed pleasure with “the atmosphere of friendship that has developed” among the members of the joint commission. Indeed, four centuries ago, who could have imagined that such an exchange could be carried out “in a spirit of openness, mutual respect, and fidelity” to the gospel?



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The Baptist movement was born at a time when harsh rhetoric was common. *The Second London Confession*, signed by thirty-seven Baptist ministers in 1688, declared that the pope is “that Antichrist, that Man of sin, a Son of perdition, that exalteth himself in the church against Christ, and all that is called God; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming.” That all but the last phrase was borrowed almost word-for-word from *The Westminster Confession* of 1646 indicates that the Baptists were probably as much impelled to demonstrate their agreement with fellow Puritans as they were interested in expressing their animus toward Catholics. Nevertheless, shrill caricatures like this one became entrenched in the doctrinal tradition.

These old anti-Catholic spirits were conjured up anew when R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, intoned on March 22, 2000, for *Larry King Live* that the pope holds a false office, leads a false church, and teaches a false gospel. And Mohler was far from alone in his view. B. H. Carroll (1843–1914), the founding president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, defended a position—held by many of the earliest Baptists, from John Smyth to Roger Williams—that identified the Catholic Church with the whore of Babylon in the Book of Revelation.

The Baptist proclivity for anti-Catholicism comes out in less obvious ways too. The historic Baptist stance of religious liberty has often been a thin disguise for attack rhetoric. The May 16, 1920, address by George W. Truett, delivered from the east steps of the Capitol in Washington, D.C., is widely cited as a classic statement on Baptist identity. One of the most respected voices in Baptist life at the time, Truett defined the Baptist position by invoking oppositional rhetoric. He asserted that while Baptists defend the full liberty of conscience, the Catholic Church thrusts “all its complex and cumbrous machinery between the soul and God, prescribing beliefs, claiming to exercise the power of the keys, and to control the channels of grace,” adding that “all such lording it over the consciences of men is to the Baptist mind a ghastly tyranny in the realm of the soul and tends to frustrate the grace of God, to destroy freedom of conscience, and to hinder terribly the coming of the Kingdom of God.”

So when in 1971, Southern Baptists passed a resolution calling members “to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother,” who could doubt Alan Wolfe’s suggestion they were guided by the conviction that if Catholics were against abortion then Baptists should probably be for it?

Still, even latent anti-Catholicism is not merely an unfortunate historical footnote. Many rank-and-file Baptists, especially in the conservative South, remain suspicious of Catholics. When two Southern Baptist denominational executives signed the 1994 statement “Evangelicals and Catholics Together,” they were pressured to remove their names from

the list of signatories almost before the ink was dry. A vocal minority of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention went on record as strongly rejecting the suggestion that Catholicism was “a legitimate form of discipleship.”

It is not surprising, then, that the Southern Baptist Interfaith Evangelism Department recently sponsored a seminar on Catholicism titled “The Roman Road: Sharing the Gospel with Roman Catholic Friends.” The conference was offered alongside seminars on other “non-Christian” groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Wiccans, and Muslims. “The Roman Road” was no reference to the primacy of Rome, but rather to an evangelistic strategy that uses selected verses from the New Testament book of Romans to lead the lost to salvation in three simple steps: “All have sinned” (Rom 3:23). “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ” (Rom 6:23). And “Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:13). The point is clear: Catholics are lost and must be led to faith in Christ.

If Baptist anti-Catholicism is still alive, how is it that a delegation of Baptists traveled to Rome for a week of theological conversation? This development might mistakenly be dismissed as an accommodation by a group of dissidents, but these meetings are part of a larger story of conversations between Catholics and Baptists that began shortly after Vatican II. From 1967 to 1970, a joint delegation representing the American Baptist Churches and the Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs met annually. Though they lacked a common theological language, it became clear to the participants that they recognized a genuine faith in one another that was often closer than they could find words to express.

Despite this, large areas of agreement did emerge in these initial conversations, beginning with the recognition of their shared faith in the Triune God as the source of authority and in God’s unique self-revelation in the Scriptures. They surprisingly came to common ground about the belief of salvation by grace through faith and a sense of urgency to take the good news to the whole world. Even more to their amazement, both Catholics and Baptists discovered that they shared mutual concerns for religious liberty and freedom of conscience, as well as the desire for both communions to seek fuller realization about the meaning of the church. They delineated areas of divergence on the meaning of the sacraments, magisterial authority, church membership, and the nature of righteousness that they hoped to explore in further study and conversation. The papers from these meetings were published in issues of the American Baptist journal *Foundations* from 1967 to 1973.

The ecumenical success of their fellow Baptists above the Mason-Dixon Line, from whom they had been separated since 1845, encouraged Southern Baptists to begin their own independent conversations with Catholics. Former Southern Baptist Convention president Brooks Hayes had been present for many of the deliberations at Vatican II. As director

of a newly established Ecumenical Institute at Wake Forest University, Hayes hosted a conference in 1969. The joint statement issued at the close of the meeting declared: "We have lived our faith commitments in relative isolation for so long, that we are in need of time to discover one another as brothers in Christ." The Interfaith Witness Department of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Catholic bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Religious Affairs took up the challenge and promoted a series of regional meetings that continued throughout the 1970s. These gatherings brought together Baptist and Catholic leaders for worship and conversation. Local dialogues drew more than four thousand participants in 1979 alone.

In the wake of these local conversations, Southern Baptist and Catholic scholars met in a series of three three-year semi-annual dialogue sessions. The first series was held between 1978 and 1980. The format included the presentation and discussion of formal papers and participation in joint worship. The first triennium considered the American experience, Scripture, salvation, spirituality, ecclesiology, evangelism and missions, and eschatology. The proceedings were published in the spring 1982 issue of the *Review and Expositor*, a theological journal associated with the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The initial series was followed by a second (1982–84) and a third (1986–88). The papers from those meetings were published under the themes of "the life of grace" (*Southwestern Journal of Theology*, Spring 1986) and "toward a mutual understanding" (the *Theological Educator*, Spring 1989). A concluding report, reflecting on the decade-long discussions, affirmed that, despite very real differences, "we do share a basic understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ by the grace of God."

These national conversations stimulated a series of five international meetings from 1984 to 1988 sponsored by the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (PCPCU). The Baptist delegation included several members who also participated in the scholarly dialogues in the United States. The overall theme was "Christian Witness in Today's World." In a concluding statement to the BWA–PCPCU conversations, the joint delegation affirmed their common witness as Catholics and Baptists to Christ, to conversion, to the fellowship of the Spirit, and to a world mission. They also identified areas in need of continued exploration, including theological authority and method, the shape of *koinonia*, the relationship between faith, baptism, and Christian witness, and the place of Mary in faith and practice. There was no expectation that these conversations would lead to full communion between Baptists and Catholics in the near future. But participants expressed hope that further study of the statement might frame the discussion about concrete ways in which Catholics and Baptists might speak and act in concert and so move toward the realization of the prayer of Jesus "that they may all be one...so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21).

When the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church" in June 2007, some Baptists...pronounced ecumenical conversations with Catholics to be "dead in the water." Others portrayed the CDF document as evidence that Benedict XVI was intent on undoing Vatican II.

The Southern Baptist–Catholic conversations didn't resume until 1995. By then, the neoconservative winds that swept through the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s had steered the denomination in a decidedly antiecumenical direction. The new meetings between Southern Baptists and Catholics in the United States took up the theme of biblical authority, which had become the defining issue between moderates and conservatives in the SBC during their two-decades-long struggle. A concluding report, released in 1999, did more to clarify differences among Catholics and Baptists than to spell out areas of agreement. The two delegations met again in September 2001 to discuss the theme of salvation, and the Southern Baptist representatives included three seminary presidents. But a month later, the co-chairs abruptly announced the termination of conversations. When asked for a reason, one of the SBC seminary presidents explained, "We're not ecumenists. We're Evangelicals."

The Southern Baptists are not alone in their struggle to find a way forward. Other Catholic-Baptist conversations have recently met a similar fate. For twenty-five years a joint Baptist-Catholic committee convened in France. In 2006 they published *Du Baptême à L'Église (From Baptism to the Church)*, a book which summarizes current agreements and disagreements on baptism, the supper-Eucharist, and the church. The conversations sought an approach beyond mutual misunderstandings and caricatures, and they called for further dialogue. Yet the document concludes with the pessimistic assessment that the Baptist and Catholic positions, especially with respect to the sacraments, are irreconcilable.

Italian Baptists seem to have reached a similar impasse. In November 2007, only a month after signing a joint agreement with the Catholics on pastoral care for intermarriages between members of their churches, the Italian Baptist Union joined the Synod of the Waldensian and Methodist Churches to approve a statement titled "Churches, Society, and Culture in Today's Italy." The document alludes to the "climate of weariness and resignation" that pervades the state of Protestant-Catholic relations. It cites Catholic intransigence on

the issues of ecclesiology and social ethics as reasons for the ecumenical stalemate.

Popular reception of past conversations has been uneven, but on the whole they have done much to overcome the Baptist belief that Catholics worship Mary, discourage Bible study, cannot disagree with the pope, believe in sacramental magic, and think they will be saved by good works. These important gains deserve celebration, but it remains to be seen whether the current conversations signify, as the Vatican put it, a step forward beyond initial progress and recent stagnation. The Baptists, for example, are not yet to the point of participating in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* approved by Catholic, Lutheran, and Methodist communions. Yet there is little of a substantive nature in the document that would preclude Baptist participation. Indeed, in December 2003, at an informal gathering of Catholics and Baptists in Rome, two Baptist theologians, one of whom is participating in the current BWA–PCPCU conversations, gave their personal endorsements to the document with a caveat about its baptismal language. And there are other hopeful signs on the horizon.

In the recent book *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, by another of the BWA participants, Steven R. Harmon contends that any hope Baptists have of moving forward during what many consider to be the waning of modernity “requires a retrieval of the ancient ecumenical tradition that forms Christian identity through liturgical rehearsal, catechetical instruction, and ecclesial practice.” Harmon sees Baptists as a pilgrim community of dissent. Yet he envisions this community within the church catholic as a seedbed for renewal of radical catholicity. He admits that this approach demands a qualitative fullness of faith and practice that includes, among other matters, Trinitarian orthodoxy and a fuller sense of the sacramental. Here Harmon confesses that some aspects of Baptist faith and practice are insufficient in terms of this fuller catholicity, but negotiating the way on the road to this fullness is both the goal and the task ahead for Baptists who think of themselves as radical catholics.

As both Baptists and Catholics seek to move forward with such an ecumenical approach, they face significant challenges. Catholics are often left to wonder *whom* they are in conversation with, given that no one speaks definitively for Baptists. Baptists struggle with *how* to interpret the subtle nuances found in Catholic documents. For example, when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church” in June 2007, some Baptists joined other Protestants in decrying the notion that their congregations were “ecclesial communities” rather than churches in the proper sense. Some pronounced ecumenical conversations with Catholics to be “dead in the water.” Others portrayed the CDF document as evidence that Benedict XVI was intent on undoing Vatican II.

What such reactions failed to take into account was that

the “Responses” echoed earlier papal teaching in *Ut unum sint* that envisioned the possibility that “the church of Christ is present and operative in the churches and ecclesial communities not yet fully in communion with the Catholic Church, on account of the elements of sanctification and truth that are present in them.” “Responses” further reiterated language of Vatican II’s *Unitatis redintegratio*, that while separated churches and communities “suffer from defects” (chiefly the absence of historic apostolic episcopacy and valid Eucharistic worship), they are nevertheless “deprived neither of significance nor importance in the mystery of salvation,” and that “the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation.”

By acknowledging that Christ may be genuinely present elsewhere, and that the Spirit may be sanctifying work not under Catholic control, the CDF offered language for which Baptists can be grateful. For Baptists to receive such admonition from their Catholic brothers and sisters, they must recognize that their tradition of dissent is not self-sufficient and thus rediscover their place within the larger catholic whole. But such reception cannot be asymmetrical. It demands that Catholics, likewise, be humble enough to embrace the corrective embodied in the communal witness of their Baptist conversation partners. Is it conceivable to understand the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults as one possible example of such humble receptivity?

In all honesty, Pope Benedict’s hermeneutic of continuity—which insists that new statements must be understood in coherence with existing teaching—has its limitations. Vatican statements are often so subtle as to prove inscrutable to most Baptists. When, for example, “Responses” considers the teaching of *Lumen gentium* that “the church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church,” it seemed to suggest a return to a pre–Vatican II ecclesiology. No doubt there are those who would wish to push toward greater exclusivity. But if Jared Wicks is right (in *Ecumenical Trends*, July/August 2007), the CDF was actually making the reverse move by quietly distancing itself from several recent revisionists who argued that “subsist” entails full and exclusive identity between the church of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. This bit of welcome news eluded most Baptists. As Wicks suggests, only a more sophisticated hermeneutic of reform, one that accounts for a process of development and reformulation and includes both *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*, can enable readers to detect such subtle nuances.

Though Baptists are happy to receive insight from this method, too few of us possess the theological and historical resources to employ it wisely. Catholics might ask how they can help their Baptist sisters and brothers (and their other ecumenical conversation partners who are not so attuned to the intra-Catholic theological debates) to become more discerning readers. Catholics might also ask if they are prepared to receive the gifts and challenges offered by Baptists. Maybe then we can take two steps forward without taking one step back. ■