

Anti-Catholic

**BAPTISTS ARE
ANTI-CATHOLIC**

John M. Finley

Baptists and Roman Catholics have had a rocky relationship over the past 400 years because they approach Christian faith in very different ways. Baptists strongly believe in the sole authority of the Bible, personal conversion, simplified worship, local church autonomy, and the separation of church and state. Catholics, by contrast, approach religious authority through the Bible and tradition, and they place value upon sacramental faith, liturgical worship, and hierarchical church governance.

Candidly, Baptists at times have been anti-Catholic and Catholics have been anti-Baptist. Thankfully though, in many circles today those harsh prejudices have fallen like another Berlin wall. Many examples of positive Baptist-Catholic relationships built over the last generation happily disprove the myth that all Baptists are anti-Catholic or that all Catholics are anti-Baptist.

Vatican Council II

The greatest stimulus toward Baptist-Catholic conversation was undoubtedly Vatican II, the ecumenical council called by Pope John XXIII. The council met from 1962 to 1965, and among its statements were two documents promoting greater ecumenical and interfaith conversation: *Nostra Aetate (In Our Age)*, a declaration on relations between the Roman Catholic Church and non-Christian religions; and *Unitatis Redintegratio (The Restoration of Unity)*, a decree on ecumenism, which begins: “The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council.”¹

Although the Executive Committee of the Baptist World Alliance chose not to accept a Vatican invitation to send observers to the council, a few Baptists from the United States did attend as guests of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. These included American Baptist Stanley Stuber, Southern Baptist James Leo Garrett, Jr., and the President of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., Joseph H. Jackson. Southern Baptist church historian W. Morgan Patterson served as an unofficial observer in September 1965.

American Baptist Convention

American Baptists were the first Baptist denomination to respond to the new ecumenical climate fostered by Vatican II. Eight Catholics appointed by the Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA) and six American Baptists who served on a Commission on Christian Unity met April 3-4, 1967, in DeWitt, Michigan. This was the first in a series of dialogues which extended from 1967 to 1972 and covered such themes as Christian freedom and ecclesiastical authority, grace and salvation, the layperson’s view of the church, and the theology of the local congregation. Subsequently, the major papers from these dialogues were published in the American Baptist journal, *Foundations*.

Leading American Baptists in these dialogues were Robert T. Handy, L. Doward McBain, Robert G. Middleton, George W. Peck, Lloyd M. Short, and Robert G. Torbet, who served as executive director of the Division of Cooperative Christianity, and, later, as ecumenical officer.

The Ecumenical Institute, Wake Forest University

Coinciding with the start of American Baptist-Catholic conversations was the founding of The Ecumenical Institute at Wake Forest University in 1968. The Institute primarily was the creation of four persons: James R. Scales, university president; Claude U. Broach, pastor of St. John’s Baptist Church, Charlotte; Brooks Hays, former member of Congress; and Judson Allen, professor at Wake Forest. From its beginning, the institute attempted “to celebrate and witness to the unity of the Church through scholarly research, publication, interfaith dialogue, and understanding.”²

The first conference sponsored by the institute was held at Wake Forest in May 1969, with participants representing the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Two similar conferences were held in the spring of 1970 at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Covington, Louisiana, and at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, with Jewish participants also in attendance. Belmont

Abbey College became a co-sponsor of the institute in 1974, while Furman University and Mepkin Abbey were added in 2002. Directors have included Brooks Hays, J. William Angell, Claude U. Broach, Jerome Dollard, Oscar Burnett, Bob Spinks, and Carlton Mitchell.

The institute continues to sponsor dialogues between Catholic and Baptist clergy, ecumenical courses at Wake Forest and Belmont Abbey, and study abroad opportunities for students. Baptist recipients of its annual ecumenism award have included Claude U. Broach, James R. Scales, J. William Angell, C. Brownlow Hastings, Thomas Hearn, E. Glenn Hinson, and Carlton Mitchell.

Interfaith Witness Department, Home Mission Board, SBC

In 1966, the Home Mission Board, SBC, established a Department of Work with Non-evangelicals to coordinate efforts with Catholics, Jews, sectarian groups, and world religions. Joseph R. Estes became the first director of the department, and William Burke, a former priest, was in charge of leading Southern Baptists to respond to the new ecumenical climate created by Vatican II. Four years later, this section was renamed the Interfaith Witness Department (IWD), and C. Brownlow Hastings became director of Baptist-Catholic relations. He was succeeded by Richard W. Harmon, who served as director of American Christianity from 1981 to 1987, and by William A. Gordon in 1988.

The Southern Baptist-Catholic conferences which had begun under the aegis of The Ecumenical Institute were taken up in 1970 by the Home Mission Board and assigned to the IWD. Eventually, five regional dialogues were held in conjunction with the BCEIA at Daytona Beach (February 1-3, 1971), Houston (October 16-18, 1972), Marriotsville, MD (February 4-6, 1974), Menlo Park, CA (October 27-29, 1975), and Kansas City (November 28-30, 1977). These regional gatherings typically involved 20-25 clergy and laypersons from each denomination who gathered for worship, conversation, and fellowship.

The IWD and BCEIA together published the papers from several of the dialogues under the titles *Issues and Answers*, *The Church Inside and Out*, *Conversion to Christ and Life-Long Growth in the Spirit*, and *The Theology and Experience of Worship*. Seven state-level dialogues were also conducted in 1978-1979, and on the local level, a number of two-congregation dialogues. In 1979 alone, over 4,000 persons participated in these local gatherings.

Regional, state, and local conferences were followed by a series of national dialogues jointly sponsored by the BCEIA and the IWD. These events involved Southern Baptist and Catholic scholars who explored views on scripture, salvation, spirituality, the Church, missions, evangelism, eschatology, and other topics. The first round of these National Scholars' Conversations began in April 1978; they followed a pattern of two-and-a-half-day sessions meeting twice per year for three years. Three rounds of conversations were completed by 1987.

Southern Baptist seminary professors participating in these national dialogues included Bob E. Adams, Francis M. DuBose, William L. Hendricks, E. Glenn Hinson, Fisher Humphreys, Doran McCarty, Frank Stagg, and John E. Steely. Papers from the national dialogues were later published in the journals of three SBC seminaries: *Review and Expositor* (1982), *Southwestern Journal of Theology* (1986), and *Theological Educator* (1987).

From 1975 to 1985, Glenn A. Igleheart served as national program director for the IWD, which, at the height of its effectiveness, consisted of eight full-time staff members, the largest interfaith office of any Protestant denomination.³ Regrettably, however, the SBC had a theological change of heart and mind beginning in 1979 which ultimately produced near-fatal consequences for its ecumenical and interfaith relationships. As agencies of the SBC were redefined along fundamentalist lines in the 1980s, the IWD was assigned, tellingly, to the Evangelism Section of the Home Mission Board. A fourth series of national talks began in 1990 and continued on uneasy terms until 1999 when new SBC leadership abruptly ended

all discussions. Yet, for one brief but shining generation, Southern Baptists had been at the forefront of promoting greater understanding between Baptists and their Catholic counterparts.

Baptist World Alliance

The national dialogues between Southern Baptists and Catholics expanded into a series of international conversations from 1984 to 1988 jointly sponsored by the Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Inter-church Cooperation of the Baptist World Alliance and the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. These gatherings were the first international conversations between the two bodies and were held at West Berlin (July 18-21, 1984), Los Angeles (June 24-30, 1985), New York City (June 2-7, 1986), Rome (July 13-18, 1987), and Atlanta (July 18-23, 1988).

Topics were explored in these conferences relative to common witness, and included evangelism, Christology, conversion and discipleship, ecclesiology, and religious freedom. The Baptist representatives in these international conversations were David T. Shannon, Pablo Deiros, Richard W. Harmon, E. Glenn Hinson, Paolo Spanu, G. Noel Vose, Michael Zidkov, and Glenn A. Igleheart.⁴

Recent Advances in Baptist-Catholic Relationships

In more recent years, positive Baptist-Catholic relationships have continued on several fronts. The American Baptist Churches in the USA and the National Baptist Convention, Inc. both have participated in dialogues with Catholics. Largely, this has been accomplished through the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches of Christ and the World Council of Churches.

The Ecumenical Institute at Wake Forest has recast itself in recent years as a leading facilitator of Baptist-Catholic dialogue. Newer Baptist groups, such as The Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, show every sign of continuing the legacy of progressive ecumenism prompted by Vatican II. Through special conferences and work-

shops, these groups continue the positive spirit formerly alive within the SBC.

Beyond the “institutional” facets of improved Baptist-Catholic relations are a host of “personal” ones, more difficult to document, but just as crucial to the ongoing goodwill between the denominations. These include the many examples of shared worship, social ministries, political interests, as well as blended marriages and friendships where Baptists and Catholics invest their lives in meaningful ways.

Baptists are now welcomed as speakers in Catholic circles while Catholics are invited to preach in Baptist congregations. Warm personal relationships have begun between clergy and laity of both churches. Where once it was hard to imagine Baptists reading any Roman Catholic writer, now it is difficult to imagine Baptist seminarians studying the Gospel of John without the insightful commentary of Raymond Brown or exploring spirituality apart from the writings of Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen. In fact, the emphasis upon “spiritual formation” that has developed within Baptist theological education over the last twenty years is a direct result of Baptist respect for Catholic spirituality.

All such efforts, personal as well as institutional, dispel the myth of Baptist antipathy toward Catholicism and build stronger relationships based on mutual respect and the common elements of our Christian faith.

John M. Finley is Senior Minister, First Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia.

1. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Vatican Council II, 1965

2. *Constitution and By-Laws* of The Ecumenical Institute.

3. For a more detailed account, see Glenn A. Igleheart, “Southern Baptist Relationships With Roman Catholics,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, 25 (July 1990): 35-42.

4. See the overview in “Summons to Witness to Christ in Today’s World: A Report on the Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversations, 1984-1988,” published by the Baptist World Alliance.

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Editor

Doug Weaver

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Walter B. Shurden

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Baptist History and Heritage Society
3001 Mercer University Drive
Atlanta, GA 30341
bhhs@baptisthistory.org