

COMMENTS ON "SUMMONS TO WITNESS TO CHRIST IN TODAY'S WORLD: A REPORT ON THE BAPTIST-ROMAN CATHOLIC CONVERSATIONS"

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I

1. *Baptist Self-Understandings*. A necessary condition of authentic dialogue is first to understand the partners as they understand themselves to be and only then to evaluate the others' self-understandings with criteria from one's own tradition. Because of this necessary first step, Catholics find it very difficult to understand Baptists as they understand themselves.

Most Baptists claim that their communal selves defy logical categories of creedal self-identification: "no Baptist can speak for another". Furthermore, since each Baptist local congregation is sovereign and self-governing no matter how many are their wider associations, the present variety of congregations which gather 35 million Baptists in 145 countries makes most generalizations awkwardly unrealistic.

Nevertheless, Baptists do see a cohesiveness in their heritage. It began in their 17th century explicit origins in England and in Holland, and in their prior roots in the "radical phalanx" or "left-wing" of the 16th century Reformation: the denial of infant baptism and acceptance only of adult "believers" (by immersion) to form regenerated church membership where all possess equal rights and privileges; civil freedom of religion and the separation of church and state as the best guarantees of liberty of conscience for every citizen. For Baptists, such beliefs are founded on their understanding of the authority and sufficiency of Scriptures; the priesthood of the believers; salvation as God's gift of divine grace received through a person's repentance and faith in Jesus Christ; and a zealous commitment to share this Good News through direct evangelism at home and abroad, in unquestioned obedience to the Great Commission of Jesus (Mt 28:19-20).

The combination of these beliefs and practices outline Baptist distinctiveness. They are found in many Baptist "confessions of faith", although Baptists would not sign a creed because of their stubborn concern for the freedom of the individual. "Baptists invoke the Baptist heritage as decisively as Roman Catholics cite tradition, usually disclaiming that it bears the same authority as Scripture but holding on to it vigorously nonetheless" (Report, 46).

2. *Baptist Relations with Other Christians*. Already in their first decades Baptist congregations were willing, even eager to reach out to other Christians, especially those in the "Free Churches", that is, other Protestant communities who also resisted civil or state-established ecclesiastical control. Their witness was to vindicate biblical truth and Christian life for the entire "holy, catholic church" of penitent and faithful Christians, "wheresoever they live, by what name so ever they have known". Such early unitive intentions, however, were limited to "all true Protestants" (General Baptist confession of 1678). For most Baptists, Roman Catholics, because of their creedal tenants, ecclesiastical structure, and sacramental practices, were people to be converted as objects of Baptist home evangelism and foreign mission programs.

But within the Baptist family there also developed separatist traditions, shaped by political, social, geographical and religious isolations which are joined to a high degree of self-sufficiency. Such isolations bolster separatist stances vis-à-vis other Christian churches and even other Baptists, and condition the present variety of understandings, evaluations, and practices of ecumenical involvement, including positions towards Catholics, and joining or not joining various councils of churches. For example, of the 138 Baptist conventions/unions, only 16 are members of the World Council of Churches (yet numerically these represent about 45% of the world's Baptists).

Many Baptists find difficulty with the very word ecumenism – the Report never uses the word! – because of

their understanding of its intentional direction or of their images of some ecumenical agencies. A former president of the Southern Baptist Convention (USA) observed, "We (Baptists) have no organic unity among ourselves; hardly would we seek it with others of a different doctrinal persuasion". More acceptable expressions are *cooperative Christianity, Christian unity but not union, interfaith witness, interchurch cooperation*; "seeking natural ways to express visible unity without pursuit of a grand scheme for reunion of all Christians into one structure" (E. Glenn Hinson). The Report introduces *common witness* a phrase frequently used only over the last two decades by Catholic and other Christian Communions and by ecumenical bodies (30).

But *mission and evangelism* indeed bring the Baptists together, so that today, next to the Roman Catholic Church, Baptists are the most widespread Christian tradition. Baptists say that if one wants "to feel the heart of a Baptist, then one must go to a missionary meeting" (H. Wheeler Robinson). In fact, "the father of modern [Protestant] missions" is William Carey (1761-1834), and some call him, "the father of the ecumenical movement" (Ernest Payne). Already in 1805 this Baptist missionary in India called for a world missionary meeting of "Christians of all denominations" for Capetown in 1810. Not until 1910 did his "pleasant dream" take place – the World Missionary Conference (Edinburgh).

In short, as the present general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), Dr. Denton Lotz, states: "Where there is need for cooperation for evangelism and mission, Baptists will be involved. Where there is a call for structural unity or doctrinal unity, Baptists, mindful of their heritage, are hesitant to join

3. The *Baptist World Alliance* was founded in 1905. It was largely a response to the need for some kind of world-wide fellowship which resulted from their 19th century prolific missionary efforts. The BWA's stated purpose is to express "the essential oneness of Baptist people in the Lord Jesus Christ, to impart inspiration to the fellowship, and to provide channels for sharing concerns and skills in witness and ministry. This Alliance recognizes the traditional autonomy and independence of churches and general bodies

Composed of 138 member bodies called conventions or unions, the BWA structures its work in five divisions: Baptist World Aid; Communications; Evangelism and Education; Study and Research; and Promotion and Development. The BWA has six regional fellowships of Baptist conventions: All-Africa, Asian, Caribbean, European, North American, and Latin American.

4. *The BWA and the Holy See*. After Pope John XXIII had approved the principle and details of delegated observers from other Christian Communions to Vatican Council II, Msgr. J.H.M. Willebrands, then secretary of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU), met with the general secretaries of world confessional bodies in Geneva, on April 3, 1962. He explained the details. Each secretary agreed to inquire if the respective organization would be willing to accept a formal invitation to delegate observers to Vatican II's first session that coming October. The BWA secretary was present. At its August 1962 meeting, the BWA executive committee discussed the pros and cons and agreed to disagree. The committee decided that it does "not encourage a formal invitation" from the SPCU, but the committee assured "the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church that the forthcoming Council will contribute to an increasing understanding of the will of God and the unity of his people". Some Baptist theologians did participate in Vatican II as *ad personam* guests of the SPCU.

The general ecumenical initiatives of the Catholic Church after Vatican II did effect, in some areas, greater mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation between Catholics and Baptists. Of special significance were the local and national dialogues in the United States, especially with the world's most numerous and influential Baptist body – the Southern Baptist Convention (its 15 million members in 37,000 churches form by far the largest Protestant denomination in the USA).

In the 1970s steady contacts between the BWA and the SPCU led in 1984 to the first of the five international conversations with the BWA's Commission on Baptist Doctrine and Interchurch Cooperation. The 1984-88 conversations resulted in this Report.

The above very brief descriptions may help to place the Report in context, and may assist in particular the Catholic readers to understand some of the assumptions which the Report does not so clearly state.

II

1. *Purpose and Authority of the Conversation*. The Report deliberately uses English words which would not inflate

the purpose of the meetings and the authority of the conclusions with more weight than the participants and their respective authorities intend. The “initial conversations” were for “mutual understanding of certain [not all] convergences and divergences”; for identifying new possibilities for common witness, as well as clarifying existing difficulties for such witness, including “existing prejudices” (Preface). The Report synthesizes the discussions and articulates the shared response of the participants “to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as this has been given to us in the Bible and in the faith and practice of our respective communities” (4). The participants hope that the achievements in the conversations will encourage “similar efforts at various levels in church life” (Preface).

2. *Theme and Themes.* *Witness to Christ* is the prism through which the Report reflects all the other themes. “Who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16:15) is the continual question which Jesus addresses to those who call themselves His disciples. And the Catholic/Baptist responses to that question directly influence the understanding of: “*witness to Christ*”; our “summons” to witness “in today’s world”; the “call to conversion” and discipleship (13-18); the “community of disciples of Jesus, always a community in mission” (17) or the church of Christ as “the *koinonia* of the Spirit” (19) who “is the ground of every dimension of the church’s life” by continuing “in the church the redemptive work God began in the Son” (22); the freedom of a person to be able to respond to God’s offer of grace (41); and the graced presence of Christ in the Spirit outside the visible boundaries of the Church (27-28).

III

In the context of world-wide Catholic-Baptist relations, the Report is only the beginning of the beginning, the first planks on that bridge which one prays can reach across the deep gulf that has been *separating* the two Christian Communions.

Beginnings are always causes for Christian celebration – praise and gratitude to God who has begun good things in us, and the commitment to move forward until the Spirit brings us to fulfillment. As a modest guide to a few new planks across the gulf, the Report lists some critical areas that need further exploration: theological authority and method (45-47); the shape of the church as *koinonia* in the Spirit “, especially in local congregations (48); the relationship between faith, baptism and Christian witness (49-51); the different forms of evangelism/evangelisation (54); and the place of Mary in faith and practice (56-57).

I offer a few complementary suggestions on these topics as well as a few elaborations on methodology, themes and practices which the Report broadly sketches. I add that the forthcoming revised *Ecumenical Directory* of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity will be of immense help to Catholics and to Baptists for understanding both the Roman Catholic teachings on ecumenism and the laws and disciplines, guidelines and suggestions on many of the Report’s offerings for future conversations and activities. Some topics in the *Directory*: on baptism; sharing in non-sacramental worship and in sacramental life, especially the eucharist; mixed marriages; catechetics and theological education; ministry in schools and universities, hospitals and health clinics; common witness in social and cultural life, peace and justice issues, and in the stewardship of creation.

1. *Methodology.* Experience has shown that outside of academic circles, dialogue about Scripture and theology usually threaten both clergy and laity if the conversations are restricted to the arena of teachings. But conversations come alive when one first shares the actual experiences and practices of each community in order to see how faith and beliefs in fact are functioning in the life of a community and its members. Local Roman Catholic/Baptist conversations become more engaged when each shares the other’s practices, not only what “*we do*” but also what “*I do*”. As examples:

a) *The practices of devotions and pieties*: the use of the Bible in the home, in bible study groups, in children’s catechisms, in the pulpit; favorite bible stories and passages; hymns one never tires of; holy men and women, living and dead, who are held up as examples; the Catholic experience and meaning of praying to and for the dead, and Baptist experiences on the occasion of another’s death, the funerals, and family remembrances of the deceased.

“*Devotion to Mary* has traditionally been an area of great difference between Roman Catholics and Baptists” (56). How and when does a Catholic pray with the rosary? What are the words in Marian hymns and church devotions? When and how does one think of Mary in the varieties of daily or unusual events. Favorite Marian images or statues in church or home or garden. What does a Baptist think when she or he reads Bible passages which refer to Mary’s life and thoughts? How is Mary presented in Baptist sermons, hymns, catechisms?

Why the particular shape and contents of a *church building*: its architecture, art, symbols, seating arrangements, Catholic confessionals and holy water fonts, etc.? Different *church calendars*, and the celebrations of major moments in the Christian year. The when’s, how’s and where’s of *baptisms*, and of the *Lord’s Supper* or *Eucharist*.

b) *The religious education of children.* There remain serious theological differences over the baptism of children and of adults (Catholic) or only of adults (Baptist) [18, 49-51]. How does this difference affect the religious upbringing of children in the family, churches and schools? How does a Baptist community discern that a child has now become so adult as to make an authentic response to the “call to conversion”? When and how did the Baptists in the conversations experience their conversions? How does a Catholic child understand and experience the sacrament of forgiveness?

2. *Common Witness and Proselytism.* Considering past very divergent Catholic/Baptist missionary understandings and practices, one rejoices in the Report’s consensus over the general “certain marks which should characterize the witness we bear to the world”; the negative aspects of that witness called proselytism, especially “some attempts... to win members from *each other*”; and the repentant acknowledgement of proselytic practices (35).

Nevertheless, in local contexts one can far better discuss the difference in understanding and practice between authentic witness and “proselytism in its negative sense”. Because this is a “delicate question” (33), such frank discussions presuppose a high level of trust. Of special import is understanding the criteria by which one judges people in this local area as “*unchurched*” or “*dechurched*” or “*nominal*” Catholics or Baptists. What is the pastoral care one exercises towards the more vulnerable church members, especially new immigrants or refugees from different religious *cultures*, e.g. Hispanic-speaking peoples in the United States, or firmly rooted Catholic or Orthodox Christians in the Middle East?

In the same context of witness/proselytism could be placed the pastoral care of Catholics and Baptists who are considering a *mixed-marriage* or who already are married (with children) especially where one partner is of a religious minority in the area.

In the local area also one could share the practices of *instructing adults* who are considering membership in the Catholic or the Baptist church; the ways of discerning whether the intentions are sufficiently worthy; and the rites of initiation, e.g. the different rites Catholics use for an unbaptised person and for one already considered baptised in another Christian Communion (The Catholic “Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults”).

In fact, a Catholic/Baptist dialogue could consider discussing the WCC text, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (in which some Baptists directly participated in the Faith and Order study), and the official Roman Catholic response and those Baptist responses to the section on baptism.

3. *Religious Freedom.* What are the ways in which both groups together can “exercise greater vigilance to ensure respect for religious liberty” (43) not only for themselves but for all, whether Christian, or not? And if there be complaints in some areas that such religious freedom is not being fully granted, e.g., “in certain traditionally Roman Catholic countries or in “some settings with a dominant Baptist majority” (43, 38), should there not be a structured channel of communication so that the Baptist or Catholic complaints may be heard and analyzed?

4. *Theological Education.* Briefly mentioned in The Report (58) is theological education, especially in the seminaries. Together Catholics and Baptists could study how each other’s histories are treated, as well as present teachings and practices. Competent people could be invited to lecture on specific topics which one judges to be more or less “misrepresented”. Because of the shared commitment to direct evangelism/evangelization at home and abroad, we can learn from those initiatives already undertaken in some centres, e.g., courses for foreign missionaries on home-leave or still in preparation.

5. *The Local Congregation in Mission.* Because of the Baptist high-view of both the local congregation and of mission/evangelization, a focal point for Baptist/Catholic conversations could be the missionary nature of each congregation/parish, and the ways each understands, practices, and programs its outreach to “the neighborhood”. Here ways of cooperation and reasons for noncooperation could be frankly discussed, and could reveal the commonalities and differences, strengths and weaknesses, in the shared commitment of Christians to proclaim the Good News in word and act.

6. *Remaining Theological Explorations.* I mention briefly only one area. The Report “uncovered no significant differences with regard to the person and work of Christ, although some did appear with regard to the appropriation of Christ’s saving work” (11).

I suggest that one cannot make such a separation. Differences between Catholic and Baptist understandings which clearly remain still are owing to the different *traditions* (not only Scriptural exegesis) of understanding *the Word Made Flesh in the Spirit* – the principle of the incarnation and of “sacramentality” of the church as such; its “historical existence and structure” (23); the sacraments or ordinances, including infant and adult baptism; “inculturation” (26);

and “salvation through other religions” (29). In short, most fruitful could be dialogue about the *development of doctrine* in Christian history, in the Roman Catholic tradition, and in the Baptist heritage, concerning the Incarnation as such (christology) *and* the Holy Spirit (pneumatology).

Recommended Reading: H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage*, Nashville: Broadman, 1987. Robert G. Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, Valley Forge: Judson, 1963. William Henry Brackney, *The Baptists*, Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1988. *Baptists and Ecumenism*, eds. W.I. Boney and Glenn Igleheart, Valley Forge: Judson, and *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1980. Denton Lotz, “The Baptists”, *Dictionary of Ecumenism*, Geneva: WCC, 1990.

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