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The Story of a Scholars' Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

How do two peoples, both claiming to be loyal to Jesus Christ, bridge the 400-year-old chasm that has divided them? The chasm has collected the historical debris of ignorance, fear, hostility, and sometimes persecution that was verbal or even violent. Even with the best of intentions, bridge-builders find themselves handicapped by differences in language and vocabulary, mind-set, and suspicion of motives. Nevertheless, these Christian peoples are awakening to a new sense of their stewardship by reason of their dominant size and the urgent moral and spiritual needs of the nation. Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics realize more and more that they cannot ignore each other in a culture that throws them together at so many junctures.

In the past ten years a group of Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic scholars has been meeting for three series of three-year conversations to make a significant contribution to bridge-building. At the close of these three and four-day biannual meetings, the consensus is that the participants have made much progress in understanding each other in our humanity and in appreciating the dedication each party has to its heritage. All agree, however, there is much remaining to be done. Even those three or four scholars who have continued through all three series recognize how long it has taken to plumb the depths of the issues which have historically divided us.

Two denominational agencies have been responsible for the planning and support of the dialogues: the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs in Washington, D. C.,

and the Department of Interfaith Witness of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta, Georgia. At least ten years went into the developments that led to the launching of the first dialogue in the Spring of 1978.

The Second Vatican Council, called by Pope John XXIII, began in 1963 and was concluded by Pope Paul VI in 1965. It brought vast changes in world Catholicism, prominent among which was a new openness to other Christian communions. The "Decree on Ecumenism" and the "Declaration on Religious Liberty" launched all kinds of new ventures in relations between Roman Catholics and Protestants at many levels. Formal dialogues, involving both scholars and national leaders, were begun in the first years after the council. It is to be regretted that the Southern Baptist Convention chose not to send official observers to the council as most mainline Protestant denominations did. A few Southern Baptists went at their own expense as visitors, but they had no standing and little support at home. Among them were Dr. Claude U. Broach, pastor of St. John's Baptist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Dr. J. William Angell, Professor of Religion at Wake Forest University, North Carolina, both of whom later became Directors of the Ecumenical Institute.

The Ecumenical Institute at Wake Forest University had recently been founded under the leadership of Arkansas Representative and former Southern Baptist Convention President, Brooks Hays. In 1969-1970 the Institute and the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (hereinafter "BCEIA") co-sponsored three dialogues: at Wake Forest University; at Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky; and at St. Joseph Abbey, St. Benedict, Louisiana, across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans.

In 1966 the Department of Interfaith Witness of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board was formed; Joe Dick Estes became Director and M. Thomas Starkes was the temporary liaison with Roman Catholics. They began some local conversations between Baptist and Catholic pastors and other leaders in Atlanta. In 1970 C. Brownlow Hastings came to the department as liaison with Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox.

ANTECEDENTS

Early regional conversations between church leaders of both communions laid the groundwork for the Scholars' Dialogue, which was still eight years away. A Southeastern Regional Conference was held at Daytona Beach, Florida, February 1-3, 1971. It was sponsored jointly by the Department of Interfaith Witness and the BCEIA, then directed by Monsignor Bernard F. Law. Fifty-one Baptists and 47 Roman Catholics, including five bishops, heard major addresses on "Salvation: Its Meaning and Relation to Christian Social Responsibility" by Bishop John L. May, of Mobile, Alabama, and Cecil Sherman, then pastor of the First Baptist Church, Asheville, North Carolina. In order to facilitate discussion, the participants met in small groups after hearing brief statements on three other issues: Salvation and Evangelism, Church-State Relations, and Civic Righteousness. Much time in the small groups was spent in recalling personal experiences that determined both stereotypes and favorable impressions of the others' communion. A Mass was led by four bishops, and a Bible and prayer service was led by Baptists.

This meeting was so successful that four other regional dialogues were held in succeeding years. The general format of Daytona Beach was followed in each, with opportunities made for the observance of authentic worship events by each communion where possible. The Catholic planners for these dialogues were Bishop Joseph A. Durick of Nashville, the official liaison of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to Southern Baptists; John F. Hotchkin, Director of BCEIA; and J. Peter Sheehan, staff representative of the BCEIA. They were assisted by the field directors of the Glenmary Home Missioners of Cincinnati, who were assigned by the BCEIA to work with Southern Baptists. In sequence of service the Home Missioners were Frank Ruff, Robert Berson, Will Steinbacher, Joe O'Donnell, and Robert Dalton. Planning on the Baptist side was done by M. Thomas Starkes, Director of the Department of Interfaith Witness; by his successor, Glenn Igleheart; and by C. Brownlow Hastings, Assistant Director.

The other Regional Conferences and their themes were:

Southwestern Regional: Houston, Texas, October 16–18, 1972: “Living the Faith in Today’s World.”

Eastern Regional: Marriottsville, Maryland, February 4–6, 1974: “The Church Inside and Out.”

Western Regional: Menlo Park, California, October 27–29, 1975: “Conversion to Christ and Life-long Growth in the Spirit.”

Midwestern Regional: Kansas City, Missouri, November 28–30, 1977: “The Theology and Experience of Worship.”

Following these five regional conferences the leaders of the sponsoring organizations realized that the conversations had progressed far enough to justify a long-range, in-depth dialogue by scholars from both communions. Two problems had to be faced. The BCEIA had previously sponsored scholars’ dialogues only when their counterparts were authorized by their judicatories. Southern Baptists have no such judicatory, and it was felt that the climate was not congenial to any other kind of official sponsorship. The second problem had to do with how the results of a dialogue would be published and used by the two communions. Certainly no agreements or resolutions could have any binding affect upon the communions.

The first problem was solved when the BCEIA graciously agreed to sponsor scholarly dialogues with Baptist scholars chosen by the Department of Interfaith Witness. The second continued to exercise the thinking of the participants in the dialogue until arrangements were made with the journals of three of the Baptist seminaries to publish the papers and the findings of agreement and disagreement of each of the three series of conversations.

THE FIRST SERIES

Planning for the first three-year series was done for the Roman Catholic side by Bishop James D. Niedergeses, the new bishop of Nashville and the official liaison for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to Southern Baptists; by John F. Hotchkin and Peter Sheehan of the BCEIA; and by Joseph O’Donnell, the Glenmary Regional Representative to Southern Baptists. The Department of Interfaith Witness was represented by Glenn Igle-

heart, recently elected Director, and by C. Brownlow Hastings. During the course of the ten years of scholars' dialogue Peter Sheehan was succeeded by Joseph W. Witmer and then by Thaddeus Horgan, SA. Joseph O'Donnell was succeeded on the planning team by Robert Dalton. At the Department of Interfaith Witness Gary Leazer succeeded Glenn Igleheart and Richard Harmon followed C. Brownlow Hastings. In spite of these changes in the staffs of the two agencies, the series was marked by a healthy continuity with plenty of input from the scholars participating. Early in the series the group became its own planning and directing force with the staff people serving as facilitators.

Each agency sought to enlist eight or ten scholars who would represent as broad a scope of theological disciplines as possible. The Baptists hoped to have representation from each of the six seminaries of the Southern Baptist Convention. Each came with the approval of his administration yet without an official appointment from the school. Claude U. Broach, Executive Director of the Ecumenical Institute of Wake Forest and Belmont College, was invited to participate.

At the end of this article you will find a full listing of the participants and the dates and places of meetings of the Scholars Dialogues. Though the demand upon their time and energy away from heavy school schedules was great and caused a few scholars to resign, all the participants felt great personal profit from participating in such a significant challenge. Those who were able to continue throughout the whole of the three series were, of the Roman Catholics, Bishop James D. Niedergeses, John R. Donahue, and Thomas F. Stransky; and of the Southern Baptists, William L. Hendricks, E. Glenn Hinson, Fisher Humphreys, and C. Brownlow Hastings.

On acceptance of the invitation these scholars were polled by the agencies to suggest agenda for the initial session. The choice of the majority was "The Church: Its Nature and Function," and that topic was addressed at the first meeting, held at Mercy Center, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 28-30, 1978.

Since most of the papers and findings of the entire series are available in the journals, and since evaluations of our experiences

are given in this book, the rest of this history will seek to point out pivotal events and changes of direction in the development of the dialogue.

Much of the first session was spent in getting acquainted with the background and experience of the scholars, together with their hopes for the dialogue. Two papers on the church delineated very ably the distinction in the two approaches to ecclesiology. Frank Stagg focused on "The New Testament Doctrine of the Church," while Jerome Dollard looked at the complex picture of "Experience of God in the Church: A Roman Catholic Perspective." Although it was understood from the beginning that each theme would be addressed by a scholar of each communion, the Catholics agreed that Stagg's paper was so acceptable in its exegetical approach that no Catholic paper on the biblical doctrine of the church was needed. Dollard's paper uncovered a broad range of issues that would exercise the minds of the scholars for several future sessions.

At the closing session a pattern of operation was established. Each side held a caucus and appointed two persons to meet and recommend the agenda and assignments for the next meeting. The need for further understanding of the story of the other communion in America led to assignments to David O'Brien for the Catholic history and Glenn Hinson for the Baptist history. Although the scholars had been invited for only two meetings initially, the group readily agreed to the offer of the sponsoring agencies to continue biannual meetings through three years.

At the second meeting, in November, 1978, also at Mercy Center, a new dynamic to the dialogue process began to assert itself. Each group was faced with the sensitive questions: How much of what I am saying reflects the broad consensus of my own communion and how much reflects my own theological position? How honest and fair am I in reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of my communion without giving unbalanced impressions? These issues frequently surfaced in the open discussions, and sometimes a member of one's own group would provide the counterbalancing observation.

An effort was made at the second meeting to look at local congregations as seen through the eyes of their counterparts, Joe

O'Donnell and C. B. Hastings. Suggested guidelines for evaluating the work of local congregations were presented by Doran McCarty and Thomas Stransky. These reflections pointed up two diverse trends: the principle of voluntarism in religion is becoming more and more prominent in contemporary Catholic strategy, and the American style of business management characterizes Southern Baptist administration of its programs, both in local congregations and in Southern Baptist Convention agencies.

The third session, held at Fusz Memorial in St. Louis, April 20–22, 1979, tackled the large issue of the understanding of salvation. Both the theology of salvation and its expression in the lives of believers were addressed, and formal responses were given to open the full discussions. At this meeting it became the custom of the dialogue to hold a service of Bible reading, prayer, and praise on Sunday morning. These did not follow the traditional forms of worship of either communion, but the scholars began to experience a spiritual oneness that transcended ancient differences.

By the end of the third session it became apparent that further direction of the dialogue was needed. The group asked Catholics Mark Heath and Richard Greene and Baptists Glenn Hinson and C. B. Hastings to meet and bring recommendations for future directions to the Fall meeting at Mercy Center, Cincinnati.

The review committee met at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville in July. Two observations were made in evaluating the first three sessions:

We recognize that there is so much diversity within each of our communions that we are often drawn together against common problems. We are in a new situation in this generation. Formerly we were suspicious and in total opposition. Now the world's crises throw us together in concerns that rise above our divisiveness. As scholars, we have an important reflective task to share with our two communions.

We noted that up to this point the dialogue papers have been directed more toward informing each other and for the most part were not actually engaging each other over the theological

or ecclesial issue addressed. Much of the papers reflected internal issues within a communion rather than those between the two.

The review committee recommended that the dialogue ask the editors of the *Review and Expositor*, a journal published by the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, to publish the papers and findings at the conclusion of the first series. Several theological issues were suggested for future papers. Each topic would be assigned to a scholar from each communion, and the scholars would be encouraged to correspond during preparation in order to engage each other more directly.

Mark Heath in his report summed up the growing understanding of the purpose of the whole effort thus:

The purpose was that dialogue was a model, a paradigm, a catalyst, an encouragement, a resource for dialogue at other levels between Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists, most typically for priests and ministers in local settings in the South or North.

The fourth session, again at Mercy Center in Cincinnati, in November, 1979, continued discussion on the theology of salvation as presented in a paper by William Hendricks, and also discussed a joint paper on the authority of Scripture in the Catholic tradition by John Donahue and Donald Senior.

Discussions on spirituality and on ministry occupied the agenda for the fifth session which was held at the Monastery of the Holy Ghost at Conyers, Georgia, in April, 1980. By this time much attention was devoted to planning the articles for the *Review and Expositor*. The sixth and final session of the first series was held at Laity Lodge in the hill country of Texas, where we were guests of the H. E. Butt Foundation. Much time was spent in polishing the structure and articles for the forthcoming publication. Frances DuBose and Bob Adams presented two papers on "Missions and Social Action." The articles were published in the *Review and Expositor*, Spring, 1982.

