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A Primer on Religious Authority

J. WILLIAM ANGELL, MARY AQUIN O'NEILL, RSM,
JUDE WIESENBECK, S.D.S., JOSEPH WITMER

Is there any agreement among Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists on the question of the authority of the Bible?

Both Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists agree that the ultimate authority and object of faith is the triune God and that the primary source of our knowledge of God is the revelation of God found in Scripture. Both also value tradition and heritage as an interpretative and shaping source of the understanding of Scripture.

But don't Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics differ on the question of tradition?

While recognizing the implicit authority of tradition, the Baptist approach affirms that all tradition must be tested against the explicit authority of Scripture. In consequence of this Baptists affirm the right of individual interpretation of Scripture. The Catholic community affirms the necessity of individual appropriation of Scripture but affirms that any interpretation of Scripture must be measured against the tradition and teaching of the Catholic Church.

Is this emphasis on biblical authority a recent development in the Catholic Church?

The Second Vatican Council exercised a decisive role in bringing about the renewal of biblical authority in the Roman Catholic Church by acting as a catalyst for converging currents, particularly the emergence of biblical studies as an independent and respected branch of Catholic thought, the renewal of liturgical

life within Roman Catholicism, and the emergence within Catholicism of the ecumenical movement. The authority of the Bible permeates all aspects of the Council. The constant citation of biblical texts gives the Council documents a flavor of biblical language and is implicit recognition of the authority of biblical text. Older categories and ways of thinking and speaking give way to biblical images.

Just what is, then, the Roman Catholic understanding of the Bible?

Four aspects of Sacred Scripture are basic to Roman Catholicism's understanding of the Bible. These are as follows: 1) revelation, 2) Scripture and tradition, 3) inspiration, inerrancy, and the interpretation of Scripture, and 4) Sacred Scripture in the life of the church.

What is understood by revelation?

Revelation is primarily God's self-disclosure in nature and in history, especially in Jesus. It is dialogic and personal; that is, it is an invitation to enter into conversation and communion with God. Revelation occurs in both word and deed which have an inner unity. The fullness of God's self-disclosure is in the sending of the Son, the eternal Word. Jesus, as THE WORD of God in his teaching, ministry, and especially in his death and resurrection, is thus both the content of God's revelation and the agent; he is both revealer and revealed, word and act.

Is tradition, then, the handing on of doctrines and practices?

If revelation is primarily God's self-communication in the events of Israel's history and in Jesus, then tradition cannot simply be the handing on of a series of doctrines or practices contained in the unwritten tradition of the church. Tradition is the ongoing witness to the Christ-event expressed in language and other aspects of the church's life. It is virtually identical with the faithful continuity of church life through history in response to God's self-disclosure. And in handing on the record or objectification of that self-disclosure, the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, God's self-disclosure in Scripture takes place within liturgical celebration and through interpretation by the Catholic Church.

What is meant by inspiration?

Very simply stated, by inspiration the Roman Catholic Church affirms that God is the author of Scripture and that this authority extends to the whole of the canonical writings. No particular theory of inspiration (dictation, prophetic, or ecclesial charism) is imposed upon Catholics; theological debate on the HOW of inspiration remains open.

What role does the Bible play in the ordinary life of Catholics?

The Sacred Scriptures are regarded by Catholics as a principal source of spiritual nourishment for the faithful people of God. Scripture is no less the bread of life than the eucharist. The faithful are fed not from two tables but from the one table of the Word of God and the body of Christ. Scripture for Catholics, therefore, is an exclusive norm of belief; it is a medium and a witness to the presence of Christ in the church. It is a norm and a medium and a witness (hence authoritative), however, as proclaimed in the Catholic Church with its teaching authority vested in bishops and the pope.

What about Southern Baptists and Sacred Scripture?

Southern Baptists, who have not formally adopted a belief system nor a prescribed liturgy for their worship, nevertheless share with Roman Catholics the centrality of the Scriptures as the primary norm of belief and practice. Although the Authorized Version Bible is used by the majority of Southern Baptists, the Revised Standard Version, the Living Bible, the New International Version, Good News for Modern Man, and Kurt Aland's latest editions of the Greek New Testament and its Hebrew counterpart of the Old Testament are all used by various groups of Southern Baptists.

Are there documents that Roman Catholics should know about in order to understand the Baptist attitude toward Scripture?

The centrality and authority of the Scriptures have been repeatedly stressed in confessions adopted by Baptists dating back to the London Confession of 1644 and as recently as the 1963 Southern Baptist Convention. Scripture is said to contain all things necessary for the salvation of men and women, to be the

infallible word of God, the only rule of faith and practice, to have God as its author, to be the supreme standard by which all human conduct and belief is to be judged, and to have “truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter.”

Do Southern Baptists believe in the infallibility and inerrancy of Sacred Scripture?

The meaning of infallibility and inerrancy have become widely and intensely discussed topics among Southern Baptists. How far do infallibility and inerrancy extend? To all scientific, historical, and scribal matters? To all areas of opinion, or only to matters of faith and doctrine? To all matters addressed in the Bible either directly or indirectly?

Are there any guidelines for the interpretation of the Bible?

Those who teach in Southern Baptist colleges, universities, and seminaries or who prepare teaching materials for the instruction of children and adults alike, are usually well-educated and are generally familiar with various principles of interpretation. Southern Baptist scholars widely affirm reverential attitudes toward Scripture and its inspiration while applying scholarly methods in studying the composition of Scripture and in developing hermeneutics for the explanation and application of Scripture. There is, however, no central and supreme teaching authority among Southern Baptists comparable to the Roman Catholic concept of the magisterium. Baptists more frequently speak of being led by the Holy Spirit in interpretation.

Could it be said that differences between Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics pertaining to the way in which the Scriptures are a source of authority are related to their differences regarding the nature of the church and its authority?

Yes.

How do Roman Catholics look upon the Catholic Church?

For Roman Catholics, questions related to church such as authority, ministry, and sacraments—especially the eucharist and baptism—have become the central theological and ecumenical questions of our times. Once again, this is as a result of developments preceding and coming to fruition in the Second Vatican Council. It is commonly emphasized that the Catholic Church is a mystery. As such, it can be neither easily grasped nor ade-

quately represented by simple or individual concepts and terms. The church is spoken of as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant—to name but a few of the numerous models used in attempts to capture the reality of what is understood by church. Some of the images used of church are people of God, new creation, fellowship of faith, body of Christ, and kingdom of God. Each of the models and images says something true about the church. None of them singly or in union with others adequately expresses the full reality. The church remains a mystery.

Of all these images, which are the most important?

After the Second Vatican Council, the most common and spontaneous name given to the church is “People of God.” This term reflects the revival of Catholic biblical studies. It also serves to turn away from a former tendency to think of the church primarily as residing in the hierarchy. And it is an easier image to understand than body of Christ, sacrament, or kingdom of God. Another advantage of this term is that it links the church with ancient Israel, the covenant people called by God, and affirms the communal nature of salvation. The covenants that God has made and renewed have been with his people rather than with individuals; and it is the people who become the instrument of salvation for all.

In the context of the people of God imagery, Christ is placed at the mid-point of history, and the church belongs to the last things without being the last thing. The people of God is reality in history rather than merely a group of individuals moving through time. As a truly historic people, the church is, in God’s intention, co-extensive with the whole of humanity. All are called to its membership, and all have a certain affinity to it. This image also supports the hierarchical organization of the church and its magisterial or teaching functions. The gifts of God to his people are found within this entity. They include the Scriptures and the power/authority to interpret the Scriptures.

Another familiar and popular image of the church is that of the body of Christ, derived directly from the writings of St. Paul. It is a complementary image and in some respects more adequately expresses certain beliefs: life through membership or incorpora-

tion into this body; a diversity of functions for different members; the headship of Christ; the active presence of the Spirit in the body. Once again, this image supports the concept of the universality of the church and the exercise of a variety of functions within the church.

What does the church mean for Southern Baptists?

The Southern Baptist orientation to the question of church is different and consequently leads to other emphases. For Southern Baptists, church in its primary meaning refers to the local congregation. There is also, however, a well-established tradition among Southern Baptists which understands church in a more inclusive sense. Again, this tradition extends back at least as far as the London Confession of Faith in 1644 and finds expression in succeeding statements up to and including the "Statement of the Baptist Faith and Message" of 1963. These statements speak of a universal church, and of the church as the body of Christ including all of the redeemed of all ages.

Church, then, is primarily a local body of baptized believers. In this, Southern Baptists believe they have recaptured not only the spirit but also the form of the church as it existed in the first generations of Christian disciples. This understanding of church is derived from and explicitly based upon the New Testament in all respects: its mission; its gifts, rights, and privileges; and the identification of officers of the church. The authority for the Southern Baptist conception of church is the New Testament, understood not as one or the other particular passage but as Scripture in an inclusive sense. All that is sanctioned, and only that which is sanctioned, by Scripture, qualifies as normative. For Baptists, no authority extrinsic to Scripture, such as a hierarchy or a clerical caste, can replace Scripture as the final teacher in these matters.

How does one become a member of the church?

Membership in the church, according to Baptists, is strictly through personal choice issuing from an individual's personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord. Baptism is the outward expression of this commitment. But this entrance into a church is not merely or primarily a private matter. It implies the notion of covenant, which is sometimes expressed in writing. It is a solemn

commitment to take one's place within the community of faith, walking together with others in a spirit of family love, exercising care and watchfulness, praying, sharing joys and sorrows, and generally bearing one another's burdens.

Membership in the church means membership in a local congregation, not in a denominational body. There is no such entity as the Southern Baptist Church, thought of as a worldwide institution. Nor are Southern Baptists required to be members of the geographically nearest congregation, although that is the usual practice. One remains a member of the church of one's baptism until this is officially and deliberately changed.

If there is no Southern Baptist Church, does that mean there are no authority figures comparable to bishops and the pope?

There is no ecclesiastical authority at any level beyond the local level. The local congregation has the right, and indeed the obligation, to conduct its own work, to monitor its own life, to identify its members, and to perform the ministries that lie within reach of its talents and other resources. Associations and conventions exercise no real authority over the local congregations; rather, they have as their purpose the work of education, missions, charity, and other forms of service beyond the scope of the local congregation.

Within the local congregations there is recurring stress upon democratic procedures. The democratic concept is based upon the conviction that the leadership of the Lord is more reliably discerned when the responsibility for finding and implementing it is placed upon the entire community rather than in the hands of a few. All the members of the congregation without regard to age are eligible to vote in any matter that may come up for the congregation's decision. Although many responsibilities are delegated, it is the entire congregation which delegates and which in principle retains the privilege of ultimately deciding all important matters.

How is the relationship of members to each other looked upon?

The relationship of church members to each other is regularly referred to as fellowship. This implies not only a strong sense of

participation in the work and decisions of the congregation, but also a sharing in the lives and experiences of other members. There is a strong sense of belonging to a community in which brothers and sisters are concerned for the others who share their faith and calling. The content and mode of worship itself expresses this sense of fellowship.

Is the Southern Baptist missionary zeal related to the understanding of church?

A sense of mission permeates the Southern Baptist concept of church. The conviction prevails that the church is called by God's grace to bear witness to God's purpose, and that church members must seek to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Fellowship is not an end in itself but provides the nourishment needed to sustain a missionary spirit. Missionary organizations enable the numerous congregations to accomplish together what would be impossible when acting as individual churches.

What role does the minister play in all this?

Ministers function at the behest of the church, where the authority resides. They do not exercise any authority in their own right. Ministers are not necessary for the essence of the church. The primary function of a minister is to lead in public worship, in which preaching is the central element. It is also true, however, that the minister is the chief administrator of the congregation as well as the leader in religious education, counseling, and public service. He or she is most frequently designated "pastor" because it is his or her responsibility to shepherd the flock. Many congregations employ a staff of ministers to carry out the various functions of the church's work, under the direction of the leading or "senior" minister.

4.

God's Gift of Salvation

ELJEE BENTLEY

“Salvation” is a word common to all Christians. It is found in the Bible and in statements of basic Christian beliefs. We might assume that it is a term around which Baptists and Catholics could unite, and in its definition they do share a large area of faith and thought. But at the same time they differ in their understandings of its meaning and in what they emphasize about the nature of salvation. These differences reveal the edges of doctrine, or ethos, or spirit that distinguish Baptists from Catholics and finally separate them.

AGREEMENT

Both communions agree that salvation is God's free gift, a grace, unmerited by any human works or righteousness. This salvation was accomplished for all humankind through the works of Jesus Christ, through his life, teachings, suffering, death, and resurrection. Salvation is received by faith; and it ought to be accompanied by baptism, a good moral life, and active membership in the community of shared life, love, and forgiveness called the church.

Church life is characterized by proclaiming the gospel, celebrating the sacraments or ordinances, and taking responsibility for the faith of others. Begun in this life, salvation is fully realized (consummated) in the eternal life to come.

Baptists see salvation as the primary Christian doctrine, talking about it far more than they do the doctrines of God, Christ,

