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Intermarriage

C. BROWNLOW HASTINGS AND ROBERT A. DALTON

Nowhere is the breach between Baptists and Roman Catholics felt more keenly than in intermarriage. Scholars may dialogue at length and come away with both new respect for the other's faith and deepened commitment to their own. Pastors are trained in human relations that enable them to deal constructively with people holding clashing opinions. Denominational leaders may submerge deep-seated differences for a time to promote ecumenical programs of justice and charity in society. On the other hand, two young people who contemplate intermarriage are vulnerable to forces they may barely recognize. They have inherited many centuries of bitter conflict without realizing the heavy cultural baggage each brings to their proposed union. They know that their churches warn of the pitfalls of intermarriage. They feel the pain of parental discouragement. In their idealism, however, they insist on following love and not logic. Unfortunately, they must live with differences not of their own choosing.

Every true marital union is a uniting of more than two human beings into one flesh. It is a merging of two extended families, and this sometimes results in a blending of diverse cultural and traditional heritages. In spite of all the progress that has been made in ecumenical relationships in the past two decades, it is here that the inadequacies are revealed. For at the grassroots our peoples have barely been touched by the pronouncements of councils and dialogues. The young people themselves may be fully committed to the ecumenical ideal only to find that parents

and grandparents continue to express age-old prejudices and oppositions.

Strictly speaking, we should use "interfaith marriage" only for those unions of members of the major world faiths: Christian, Jewish, Moslem, and so on. Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic letter of 1970, called marriages within various Christian traditions "*Matrimonia Mixta*." An orientation booklet published in 1987 by the National Association of Ecumenical Officers (NADEO), a Roman Catholic organization, speaks of "Ecumenical Marriage," following the lead of The Association of Interchurch Families (AIF) in England. For Catholic-Protestant marriages, many still use the term "interfaith marriage"; this is done, for example, in a widely distributed pamphlet by the Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board and by the Diocese of Cleveland in 1985.

In this paper we do not attempt to be exhaustive, for the material is quite extensive (see the bibliography in Dean R. Hoge and Kathleen M. Ferry, "Empirical Research on Interfaith Marriage in America," Publications Office, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., 1981). We will reflect chiefly upon issues that were raised in the discussions of the Baptist-Catholic scholars dialogues. Robert Dalton, at the meeting of the Dialogue in Burlingame, California, October, 1987, presented "Some Aspects of Marriage from a Catholic Perspective." It was followed by lively discussion of issues that will be noted below. On another occasion the group agreed that the nature of our dialogue, made up largely of theologians, caused us to focus on theological issues and leave pastoral problems to those who work primarily with the laity. We will try to set the context and indicate something of the concerns for ministering to young people and their families in intermarriage.

Hard statistics are difficult to come by, but trends are easy to establish. The Institute of Pastoral and Social Ministry of Notre Dame University issued a "Study of Catholic Parish Life (1981-88)." With reference to intermarriage of Catholics it found that 17% of Roman Catholics in the nation are married to other Christians. Of those 50 years of age and over the percentage was 14%.

It increased steadily until doubling (28%) for those in their twenties. In addition to this documentation, Hoge and Ferry estimate that fully one-third of all such mixed marriages do not appear on parish records (p. 4).

It is easy to understand that intermarriage for Catholics increases greatly in areas where the Catholic Church is in the minority of population. There has been a decline of Catholic youth enrolled in parochial education to less than one-third of the total Catholic youth today. This figure is even less for students in secondary schools. This greatly increases the opportunities for interfaith relations in public (and other private) schools.

Increasing cross-culturation in the United States as a result of a more mobile society contributes to the growing incidence of intermarriage. Since Vatican II the Catholic Church in America has taken a more open stance toward other Christians, who also have been influenced by the ecumenical pronouncements of their churches. Added to this have been the various forms of youth movements since the sixties with much evidence of reaction against authority, both of the church and the home.

The Jewish sociologist, Albert I. Gordon, seeks to classify youth who enter into mixed marriages into four types:

1. The emancipated, those whose religious and cultural ties are weak and who are attracted by their mutual pursuit of freedom of choice and of a new humanism.
2. The rebellious, those who are expressing their independence of parental control and their reaction to a strict and often legalistic religious rearing.
3. The reluctant, those with real ties to their religion and culture and many misgivings about their prospects, who nevertheless are drawn by a love for each other they cannot reason away. They simply hope for the best and fear the worst. They often compromise by choosing a third religion they can both accept.
4. The nuclear, those with complete commitment to their respective faiths. These may go either way. Their long-range intention may be to proselytize. Some, more purely motivated, may work out a way of life that respects and supports the faith of the other. Either way, the religious education of the children is

more critical here than in any of the first three (Albert I. Gordon, *Intermarriage*, (Boston, Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 66–67).

Hoge and Ferry, as a result of their studies, make the following observations among others: for every marriage that remains mixed one other will have a spouse that converts to the religion of the other. Where formerly most converts were from the Protestant spouse, the trend now has about evened out. Usually the religious life of the wife is the stronger influence, but the strength of devoutness of the spouse is largely determinative. The researchers point to “lack of companionship and disagreement over children’s religious upbringing” as the main, continuing problems in intermarriage (pp. 1–2).

ISSUES IN INTERFAITH MARRIAGE

1. Marriage as a sacrament or as a civil contract with religious blessing. There is basic agreement between Catholics and Baptists with regard to the biblical teaching of the sacredness of marriage. Both would agree with the statement by the Interfaith Commission on Marriage and Family Life in 1966:

We believe and unite in affirming that God the Creator of the Universe and the Father of all mankind did create us male and female and did establish families as part of His divine plan. Because of our understanding of this plan, we believe and unite in affirming that our sexuality is a wondrous gift from God to be accepted with thanksgiving and used within marriage with reverence and joy.

We believe and unite in affirming that our understanding of God’s plan for marriage ideally calls for life-long commitment in fidelity to a continuing supportive relationship in which each partner helps the other to develop to fullest capacity. We are united in our belief that God is an active partner in sustaining and enriching the husband-wife relationship in marriage. (Quoted in James T. McHugh, *Mixed Marriages: New Directions*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1971, pp. 11–12).

Roman Catholic teaching holds that matrimony is one of the seven sacraments established by Jesus Christ for the permanent use of the church. As such, it is an external sign which confers grace upon the recipients. It is precisely because marriage is considered a sacrament of the church that the church insists upon a religious ritual for the marriage. As a sacrament of the church, marriage is celebrated within a liturgical setting, often including a eucharistic celebration. Normally the marriage ceremony of Catholics is to take place in the presence of a priest or deacon and two official witnesses, although permission can be obtained to celebrate the wedding in a different setting.

Marriage is the only sacrament which is not administered ordinarily by a priest or bishop. Each partner, when he or she makes the marriage vow, administers the sacrament to the other. The priest is there as a witness of the church.

There are factors in the Roman Catholic concept of marriage beyond that of its sacramentality. In recent years there has been a renewed recognition of the universal call of the laity to a life of service and holiness. This wider renewal movement within Catholicism has brought a fresh awareness of marriage as a vocation, or call from God, to a unique form of holiness. Marriage is no longer considered secondary to the vocation to celibate commitment in religious life. Marriage is a call to the couple to be channels of Christ's redeeming love to one another. Increasingly, marriage is seen as an equally demanding call to holiness involving a spiritual life of sacrificial, faith-filled and fruitful love.

There has been a shift in recent years from seeing marriage in the legal terms of a contract to the more biblical concept of a covenant. The bond of marriage is permanent and indissoluble precisely because the bond between Christ and the church is a permanent and indissoluble covenant of love (see Ephesians 5). This shift from contract to covenant terminology signals a new point of departure for Catholic discussion of marriage. The language now is not predominately canonical and legalistic, but is more biblical and theological and is responsive to human experience.

Every marriage between baptized persons, even those who are not Catholic, is considered a valid marriage, since the Catholic

Church holds that the natural and civil contracts are inseparable from the sacrament,

so that two baptized persons cannot marry each other validly without receiving the sacrament of marriage. It makes no difference whether those persons are Catholics or non-Catholics, whether or not they realize that Matrimony is a sacrament—in any case, a valid marriage between them is a sacramental marriage . . . in reality the Church teaches that every marriage of two baptized non-Catholics free from matrimonial impediments is just as truly a sacrament as the marriage of two Catholics celebrated before a priest (*Mixed Marriages*, p. 175).

On the other hand, Baptists do not regard marriage as a sacrament. They do not accept the classic definition of a sacrament as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” They hold that grace is primarily that character of God which prompts him to deal mercifully and in forgiveness with undeserving people. Therefore, it is not something that can be bestowed by any ritual act.

Since God instituted marriage from the beginning of the human race, Baptists hold that it belongs to the order of natural law rather than to ecclesial control. As the basic institution of society, the state rightfully exercises some control over marriage. Civil marriage is the basic contract, but religious ceremonies are to be encouraged. The act of pledging themselves to each other in a religious ceremony dignifies and deepens the couple’s act of sanctifying themselves to each other. The minister, however, acts as an agent of the state and not the church when he performs the ceremony. Ordinarily a Baptist pastor has no church or denominational rules he or she must follow in making decisions about weddings or in performing them.

More and more, Baptists are holding that marriage is a sacred covenant, a moment of grace, but not a means of grace. They would agree with Catholic teaching that marriage is for procreation, for human fulfillment, and for safeguard of moral life, but they would not make procreation primary. The notion of the

family as the "domestic church" would seem to have the same practical implications in both Catholic and Baptist Christian life.

2. The issue of premarital pledges. Since 1970 in America pledges have not been required of the non-Catholic spouse. He or she must be informed of the pledge of the Catholic party made orally or in writing in the presence of a priest or deacon. The usual form is: "I reaffirm my faith in Jesus Christ and with God's help, intend to do all in my power to share the faith I have received with our children by having them baptized and reared as Catholics." In addition the non-Catholic is asked to give evidence of his Christian baptism.

3. This involves the further problem of the religious education of the children. Baptists believe that both marriage partners should be on an equal basis in this regard and that children in an interchurch marriage should be free to choose their own religion. The Baptist ideal is to give primary emphasis to the child's personal discipleship to Jesus as Savior and Lord and only secondarily to his denominational affiliation. The Baptist Covenant is commonly used by churches in defining the mutual obligations of members to each other. This pledges them among other things "to religiously educate our children." This is thought to be fulfilled when the children are educated in discipleship to Jesus and urged to make their own personal commitment.

This is an area that calls for much more pastoral ministry to the couple, both during the premarital period and at the time of the birth of the child. Neither Catholics nor Baptists would approve of neglecting the religious education of children, and few would be strong enough to choose the so-called democratic way of participating equally in the education provided by both churches.

4. Certain moral decisions. The official teaching of the Catholic Church condemns all forms of artificial birth control. Although it is commonly known that many Catholic couples choose to disregard this teaching, it does not lessen the responsibility of working through this difficult problem to a decision of conscience which each individual is able to accept. There is no official Baptist position on birth control. Most Baptists prefer to

trust the enlightened conscience of the couple. They generally find that the papal arguments against artificial birth control are unconvincing.

Both Baptists and Catholics decry the increase in divorce, especially among Christian couples. The practice of annulment, however, is a problem; most Baptists do not comprehend the moral and spiritual reasonings by which a Catholic tribunal declares a marriage annulled. They would agree that every marriage ought to be entered into with the highest of ideals, intentions, and commitments, but they would not trust the judgment of others, even of an ecclesial body, to determine its validity. They would generally agree with the civil courts' definition of annulment, based upon cohabitation and sexual consummation.

There is increasing evidence of agreement among both Baptists and Catholics of the dangers of abortion, euthanasia, and genetic control. On abortion, Southern Baptist resolutions in recent annual conventions have tended more to the absolutist position of the Roman Catholic Church.

5. The issue of proselytism and witness. It was significant that in the same Burlingame dialogue in which Robert Dalton's paper was given, the next paper was entitled "Evangelization vs. Proselytism," led by Tom Stransky. For a long time Baptists who were coerced into accepting the marriage pledge felt that they were being proselytized in an unfair manner. On the other hand, Catholics have felt that the prejudice of Baptists that all Catholics are lost makes them fair game for witnessing. It is true that most sociological studies indicate that the majority of mixed marriages do involve the conversion of one spouse to the religion of the other.

Here is another moment in the marriage when great pastoral care needs to be exercised. The converting spouse needs to have honest and open counseling by both minister and priest to insure that, as far as humanly possible, the decision is well informed and authentic. There also the pastors can render a valuable ministry to the parents of both spouses. In any successful interfaith marriage, the wholehearted support and understanding of the families is essential.

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

There are no easy answers for either the couple or the ministers who are counseling them. Here are a few suggestions that successful couples have found helpful:

1. Each partner should remain active in his or her own church, while building a base of solid respect for the decisions of conscience of the other.
2. Classes and dialogue sessions together can provide learning opportunities about the other's faith. This builds respect for the other, and respect is better than mere toleration.
3. Practical Christian service in community affairs without regard to denominational sponsorship can strengthen bonds of unity.
4. Praying together, using classical traditional prayers from both denominations as well as spontaneous prayers, should be encouraged.
5. Let love and patience rule in relationships with in-laws.
6. Worship together whenever common worship is possible.

Obviously these suggestions cannot resolve all of the difficulties that arise from differences in the religious convictions of persons in interfaith marriages. Fortunately, faith in God is often effective where human efforts seem doomed. The "Decree on Ecumenism" has a statement which can be wholly affirmed by Baptists as well as Catholics:

[We] must joyfully acknowledge and esteem the truly Christian endowments from our common heritage . . . nor should we forget that whatever is wrought by the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of [each of us] can contribute to our own edification. Whatever is truly Christian never conflicts with the genuine interest of the faith; indeed, it can always result in more ample realization of the very mystery of Christ and the Church ("Decree on Ecumenism," 4).

