

To Understand Each Other

1989

Agreed Statement of Southern Baptist-Roman Catholic Scholars

Introduction

In our discussions over the past decade, we have come to realize that despite the different vocabularies we use in presenting and explaining our beliefs and despite very real differences which remain, we do share a basic understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ by the grace of God. We do not claim to speak either for all Southern Baptists or for all Roman Catholics nor do we attempt to cover all aspects of our respective beliefs. We recognize that considerable diversity of thought exists within both communions.

We reflect the discussions held over the past decade on issues which we felt are important for Christian witness today. We have seen how the gift of faith and the experience of God's grace have shaped our personal lives and the lives of people in our churches. Though we list below primarily doctrinal points of agreement and divergence, the most profound experience of unity occurred in those times when we told the stories of our journeys in faith and when we gathered to hear the word proclaimed and to offer our prayers to a loving God. We not only confessed but experienced "one Lord, one faith and one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). Our hopes and prayers are that the gifts of mutual understanding and respect, along with love and friendship, which we received in a decade of dialogue may be shared by other Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics.

On Scripture

We 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 in the revelation of God in Scripture. We concur that the self-disclosure of God in Scripture is to effect a redemptive relationship between God and creation (both humanity and nature). We both affirm that the Bible is the inspired word of God, authoritative for faith and practice, and that the Bible is to be at the center of public worship and of the spiritual life of individual believers.

We also value tradition and heritage as an interpretative and shaping source for understanding Scripture. Southern Baptists, while recognizing the implicit authority of tradition, affirm that all tradition must be tested against the explicit authority of Scripture and hold to the right of individual interpretation of Scripture. Roman Catholics affirm the necessity of individual appropriation of Scripture, but affirm that any interpretation of Scripture must be measured against the manner in which Scripture has been proclaimed and lived by the whole church in its tradition and teaching.

On Salvation

Both Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics agree that salvation is God's free gift of grace, unmerited by any human works or righteousness, and that this salvation was accomplished for all through the life, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We also agree that the proclamation of the offer of salvation to all peoples is the prime mission of the church.

Southern Baptists stress the experience of salvation when, in faith, a person accepts Jesus as his or her personal Savior. Catholics tend to emphasize the work of Christ and the way in which the effect of the redemption by Christ is made available to the faithful through faith and the sacraments in the church.

On Spirituality

The gift of salvation is expressed in Christian life. Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists describe this in different ways: "spirituality," "discipleship," "spiritual growth," "growth in holiness," "sanctification," "devotional life" and "Christian witness." We both set the highest priority on seeking a conscious relationship with God in this life and on striving for the ultimate goal of living in glory with God in heaven, and we affirm that our love for God is best achieved in a close relationship with Jesus, coupled with a Christ-like love of neighbor.

Catholic practice places great emphasis on communal participation in and celebration of the sacraments. While Southern Baptists stress the complete sufficiency of a direct and personal but non-sacramental relationship to God, their spirituality is also church related with a stress on face-to-face fellowship in the local church.

The Bible has always been at the center of Southern Baptist life. Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholic spirituality has also become strongly biblical. The proclamation and exposition of the Scriptures are central to the Sunday liturgies, and the celebration of every sacrament is to be accompanied by reading from the Bible. Reading, prayer and study of the Bible are central to both Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist practice.

Over the centuries devotion to Mary and the saints has been a source of division and misunderstanding between Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists. While Roman Catholics affirm with Baptists the sole mediatorship of Christ, they also honor the Virgin Mary as the mother of God and affirm with the Second Vatican Council that she is "inseparably linked with her Son's saving work" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 103, in *The Documents of Vatican II*). They invoke or pray to Mary and to the canonized saints as an aspect of their belief in the communion of the saints (heavenly, earthly and in purgatory).

Southern Baptists honor Mary as the mother of Jesus Christ and emphasize the communion of saints as primarily a present reality among Christians, but they do not address prayer to Mary or to deceased Christians lest such infringe the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ.

Since Vatican II, devotion to Mary has undergone significant changes among Roman Catholics. Mary is described in more biblical terms as the model disciple whose life is one of devotion to Jesus and who stands at his cross. Mary is seen also as an advocate of the poor and oppressed when she rejoices in a God who exalts the lowly and puts down the mighty from their thrones (Lk. 1:46-55).

Devotion to Mary and the saints is an area where significant differences between Baptists and Catholics remain, but where great progress has been made in mutual understanding and respect. Catholics have come to appreciate the sincere problems Southern Baptists have with Marian

devotion, and Southern Baptists have come to feel the depth of devotion and affection for Mary among Roman Catholics.

Because of theological, historical and cultural factors, Catholic and Southern Baptist experiences of communal worship differ significantly in tone and style. Catholic worship centers on the Sunday eucharist and the liturgical seasons. Various devotional practices also play a part. The texture of Catholic experience is shaped as well by the use of statuary, art and other religious symbols such as incense, holy water, oil and liturgical vestments.

Southern Baptist Sunday worship centers on preaching, choral singing, communal prayer and the study of Scripture. Church architecture is usually characterized by simplicity; use of religious symbols is restrained.

Both Southern Baptists and Catholics share a strong commitment to communal worship and to the importance of deep religious experience within the context of public worship.

Although our two communions differ significantly in their approaches to worship, there are significant convergences in fundamental attitudes. Both groups have a strong sense both of human sinfulness and of God's love even amid our sins and failings; both stress strong family life and sexual morality; both stress active engagement in church life.

On Church and Ministry

We both affirm that the church is at the heart of the New Testament and of Christian life. In the New Testament the church is a community of people bound to Jesus Christ and to one another with the bonds of faith and love, acceptance and commitment. One major image found there is that of the church as the people of God (Heb. 4:9; 11:25; 1 Pt. 2:10), which describes an understanding of church in both our communities. As Jesus called disciples to follow him, so people today are divinely called to the church. We both affirm that the church must be obedient to the word of God in Scripture and proclaim and witness to it in its daily life.

Most distinctive of Southern Baptist theology is the stress that "the visible church" is "a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel" (from the Philadelphia Confession of 1742). Both Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics affirm with the New Testament that the church is the body of Christ and includes the redeemed of all the ages. For Southern Baptists the primary meaning of church is the local congregation. Southern Baptists stress fellowship in this congregation as a manifestation of that faith which leads to baptism and joining the church.

Roman Catholic theology describes the church in several different ways, for example, as "people of God," "the mystical body of Christ," "the household of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22; see also the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 6, in *The Documents of Vatican II*), and a visible society or institution. Most fundamentally the church is a mystery comprising the union of God with men and women in community effected by the saving work of Christ, and the union of the members among themselves through baptism. Catholics affirm that just as Christ is at work in the celebration of the sacraments, he is also at work in the church, which is often called the fundamental sacrament of the divine-human encounter. For Catholics the local congregation,

called a parish, is one community which, with others, makes up a diocese. Catholics use the phrase local church to refer to a diocese headed by a bishop in communion with all other bishops under the leadership of the bishop of Rome.

Both Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics recognize the multiplicity of ministries that characterized the church of the New Testament. On the basis of the New Testament, both communions also recognize a clear distinction between ordained and non-ordained persons.

In practice, the ministry of a Baptist pastor and a Roman Catholic pastor exhibit many similarities, although they are not identical. For Roman Catholics, the primary functions of the priest/pastor, often assisted by permanent deacons, are preaching the word of God, presiding at the celebration of the eucharist and administering the other sacraments of the church, and pastoral care and administration. For Southern Baptists, the preaching task of the pastor is central, especially the role of evangelist. No less important, however, is the day-by-day pastoral care of the congregation and the administration of the church as an organization.

While Southern Baptists recognize an important difference between ordained and non-ordained persons, they also emphasize the ministry of the laity. There is an increasing emphasis on the ministry of the laity in the Catholic Church, where there are emerging ministries of lay people acting as campus ministers and chaplains (in hospitals and other institutional settings such as prisons) and pastoral associates (assistants officially appointed for the direction of a parish). One becomes a pastor in a Southern Baptist church by virtue of an invitation or call by the congregation. Tenure is at the pleasure of the congregation. In Catholicism, a priest is ordained by a bishop and receives his assignment to a parish or other ministry from a bishop or other church authorities.

On Grace

We Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists agree upon the normative role of the Holy Scriptures in coming to an understanding of grace. Even so, in both our traditions we acknowledge post-biblical influences affecting our language and doctrine respecting grace.

Among Roman Catholics there is a tendency to connect the grace of God with the goodness of creation as well as with salvation-history, whereas among Southern Baptists there is a tendency to understand grace primarily in relation to human salvation from and divine forgiveness of sin.

We stand in the heritage of the grace/favor of God which was manifest to the people of Israel, and we affirm together that the supreme manifestation of God's grace occurred in the birth, life, teaching, healing, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

We agree on the universality of sin and on God's gracious provision through the atoning sacrifice of his Son for the remission/forgiveness of human sins. Whereas Southern Baptists tend to emphasize the individual and personal aspect of sin and grace and Roman Catholics tend to stress the ecclesial and social dimension, both groups struggle to maintain a balance between the two. Roman Catholics, unlike Southern Baptists, teach that the Virgin Mary was without sin through the grace of her son Jesus Christ.

For Roman Catholics the grace of God in Jesus Christ is normally mediated to human beings through the church and the sacraments. For Southern Baptists the grace of God in Jesus Christ is normally mediated through the experience of repentance, faith, regeneration, justification, forgiveness and so on. Roman Catholics do not deny the personal reception of grace, and Southern Baptists do not deny that grace is normally received through Scripture, church, preaching and witness.

Both Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists agree that the Christian baptism of believing persons testifies to the grace of God and that it is God's grace that leads one to faith and baptism.

Roman Catholics believe that baptism, which is to be performed only once, is a sacrament and means of grace which unites the believer to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. It may be administered in different ways (immersion, affusion, aspersion) to infants as well as to adult converts. The present Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults notes that the initiation of adult converts into the faith provides the norm for a Catholic understanding of baptism.

Southern Baptists baptize only professed believers, by immersion only, and believe that baptism is a symbol of Christ's death, burial and resurrection and also a testimony that God's grace has been received by the baptized.

Both Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists agree that the eucharist or Lord's Supper is a memorial of Jesus' passion and death and an anticipation of his return for the gathering of the faithful into glory.

Roman Catholics believe that the eucharist is the sacrament wherein, by the words of institution and the power of the Holy Spirit, the body and blood of Jesus Christ become really present under the form of bread and wine. Thus Jesus is uniquely present to the recipients and invites them to offer themselves in union with him.

Southern Baptists believe that the Lord's Supper was ordained by Jesus as both obedient testimony to and proclamation of his death and an occasion of communion, following self-examination, with him and with fellow Christians.

Both Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists agree upon the obligation and significance of discipleship in the life of grace. With variant patterns of Christian obedience and of spirituality, they nevertheless can together emphasize the personal commitment, essential to discipleship and explore the greater usefulness of the term "community of disciples" as an ecclesiological theme.

Both Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists believe in God's graciousness and base their hope for salvation upon it.

Southern Baptists believe that once a sinner has received the grace of God through repentance and faith, there is normally certain assurance of this gift, and therefore they express their confidence in "being saved." They also believe that through the promises, faithfulness and keeping power of God, and despite the doubts, temptations and backslidings of genuine believers, the latter will certainly attain final salvation. Roman Catholics, while trusting in God's

grace to help them to persevere, believe that it is still possible to fall from grace through serious sin and that only when God moves the sinner to repent is it possible for grace to be restored. They therefore tend to speak with less assurance about "being saved."

On Mission and Missionaries

Both Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists speak of the mission of the church in the sense of the vocation of the church to witness to the saving love of God and to proclaim God's redemption in Jesus Christ in order that men and women may experience grace and salvation. We also use *mission* and *missions* in the sense of fulfilling the command of Jesus "to preach the Gospel to all peoples" (Mk. 13:10) and to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt. 28:19).

Roman Catholics use the term evangelization for that dimension and activity of the church's mission of proclamation which presses to offer every person the valid opportunity to be directly challenged by the explicit Gospel of faith in Jesus Christ. Southern Baptists prefer the term evangelism for proclaiming the Gospel and leading people to a decision of faith in Jesus.

Among Christian denominations, Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists have been notable, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, for missionary activity among peoples who have not yet heard the Gospel. Both Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics have combined explicit proclamation of the Gospel with other works of charity such as health care and education.

Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists agree upon the ecclesial and Christian mandate to proclaim the Gospel of God's grace to all peoples and all nations, but Roman Catholics tend to be more confident than Southern Baptists in affirming that God's saving grace may be efficacious apart from specific confession of the name of the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus. Catholics also speak of the "evangelization of culture" or of a "mission to social structures" and in some areas practice Christian presence rather than explicit proclamation.

In practice, Southern Baptists have stressed the importance of doing missions through and under the direction of the denomination rather than through outside or parachurch missionary organizations. The intent of the missionary activity has been to establish independent indigenous churches in mission areas.

Roman Catholics also stress the responsibility of the local diocese for both home and foreign mission, but they understand that no local church is completely independent but is always in communion with all other local churches, which have similar missionary responsibilities. For Roman Catholics, the whole church is in mission through all the local churches in mission.

Both Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists reject a distorted witness or proselytism which involves improper attitudes and behavior in the practice of Christian witness and does not respect the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters. We also recognize the tensions in attempting to be faithful witnesses of the Gospel and in proclaiming the Gospel to others.

In predominantly Roman Catholic countries, Southern Baptist missionaries and local Baptists have sometimes suffered legal and social discrimination. At times, Southern Baptist missionaries

have labored among Roman Catholics without respecting their faith and beliefs. When competition and conflict emerge in missionary activity, our efforts to share the Gospel which we proclaim and which sustains our lives can become a stumbling block to those who have not heard the Gospel.

On Eschatology

In Roman Catholic theology the term eschatology has traditionally referred to teaching about "the four last things," namely, death, judgment, heaven and hell. Under the impact of recent biblical studies, it has taken on the richer meaning of teaching about the destiny of human history and its relation to the kingdom proclaimed and enacted by Jesus. Roman Catholics affirm that those individuals who die in a state of friendship and union with God (the state of grace) will be happy with God for all eternity.

Catholic theology strongly affirms the existence of hell and that an individual who freely rejects God's offer of love and grace and chooses to live in conscious enmity to God and hatred of the neighbor can lose eternal salvation. While Catholics await the second coming of Jesus and the general judgment, they affirm the judgment of the individual soul after death. Purgatory, or the stage of purification from the effects of earthly sinfulness prior to the fullness of happiness with God, is a firm part of Catholic teaching and remains a point on which Catholics and Southern Baptists disagree. In attempting to speak of the end of one's own life and of history as a whole, one stands before the mystery of God and the mysterious relation of time and eternity, so all language is inadequate.

Southern Baptists emphasize the leading themes of Reformation eschatology, that is, death, resurrection, second coming, last judgment, hell and heaven. Such teaching normally implies a conscious intermediate state, distinct from soul sleeping and from purgatory, and carefully avoids both the belief that all persons will be saved (universalism) and the belief that unbelievers will be annihilated. In the 19th century Southern Baptists began to be influenced by pronounced differences regarding the timing and sequence of end-time events (especially concerning the 1,000-year reign of Christ) and the meaning of the kingdom of God. In the late 20th century such differences have contributed to denominational tensions.

Roman Catholic doctrine and practice have in general not been open to different forms of millennialism. However, more and more ordinary Catholics are being caught up in contemporary popular apocalyptic movements.

Conclusion

This chapter is a summary of what we at the Roman Catholic/Southern Baptist Scholars' Dialogue concluded about how we agree and differ. More detailed information about our agreements and differences may be found in other chapters of this book. But this common statement, reviewed and amended in plenary session, gives testimony in a special way, we think, to the fact that Baptists and Christians share many fundamental convictions, including our Christian faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.