

Report on Sacred Scripture

Southern Baptist - Roman Catholic Conversation

September 10, 1999

Sixteen scholars and church leaders appointed by the Interfaith Evangelism of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops have been meeting in conversation for five years. The purpose of our conversation has been to understand one another better through honest mutual exchange, and to clarify our mutual understandings of the nature and authority of the Holy Bible.

This first report of our conversation is directed to Interfaith Evangelism of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. While we share a great deal in our Christian faith concerning the authority and truth of the Bible, this report is not intended as a confessional statement either for our churches or from the participants in the conversation. It is an account of the topics we have discussed, the processes we have followed and the clarification of terms at which we have arrived. While fully cognizant of our serious differences, our goal has been truth and clarity in charity. Our common and ongoing quest for the truth of Christ has deepened our appreciation for one another and strengthened our love for the Holy Scriptures.

Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics believe in the Triune God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and we confess the full deity and perfect humanity of Jesus Christ. We find these truths of faith in God's written Word, the Sacred Scriptures. While our two traditions differ with regard to the extent of the biblical canon, we cherish the Sacred Scriptures, use them regularly in our worship and devotion, and seek by God's grace to understand them more clearly. On the basis of these core convictions, we addressed important issues on which Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists have differed historically, including the inspiration and authority of the Bible, its inerrancy and infallibility, the role of the Church in the interpretation of the Scriptures, and the nature and significance of historical-critical approaches to the study of the Bible.

We have met at both Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist institutions, and at each gathering we have shared together in the reading of Scripture and in common prayer. In the context of patient listening and candid sharing with one another, we have each read and reported on documents in the two traditions that illustrate our points of agreement and disagreement. Among the documents we have studied are the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of the Second Vatican Council (*Dei Verbum*, 1965), *Baptist Faith and Message* (1963), the instruction of the Pontifical Biblical Commission *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), *The Chicago Statements on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978 & 1982), the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith* of the First Vatican Council (1870), and the *Report of the Presidential Theological Study Committee* (1993). Our sessions also included study and exegesis of selected biblical texts. Included in this document is a list of key terms that we formulated with a view toward clear articulation of our points of agreement, our points of disagreement, and issues still to be considered.

We have learned a great deal from each other. We will continue this conversation on other themes that concern our Christian faith. We hope that this report will be useful to teachers and students of our Christian faith, and thus contribute to better mutual understanding and deeper devotion to the Bible.

The List of Terms

The Bible

Revelation: God's free self-communication to the world. Both Catholics and Southern Baptists agree that God is manifested in nature (Ps 19:1-4), in the human heart (Rom 2:14-15), and reveals Himself in the books of the Old and New Testaments (2 Pet 1:20-21).

For Catholics, Jesus, the incarnate Word, is the revelation of God, Scripture contains revelation, while both Scripture and Tradition witness to revelation. Southern Baptists prefer to speak simply of Scripture as the revealed, written Word of God, which is inerrant.

Word of God: The expression "Word of God" is used in at least three senses. First, Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the Word of God incarnate. Second, God's message of salvation, made known in the story of Israel and reaching its fullness in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is the Word of God proclaimed. Finally, the Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is recognized as the Word of God inspired and written.

Inspiration: The belief that the biblical books were fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that God may be said to be the primary and ultimate author (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17).

Inerrancy: The conviction that the Bible is "without error" in what it affirms. But there are different interpretations of what this actually means.

For Southern Baptists, inerrancy means that the original biblical text was composed precisely as God inspired it and intended it to be because of God's superintendence: not just the thought comes from God, but every word with every inflection, every verse and line, and every tense of the verb, every number of the noun, and every little particle are regarded as coming from God. Scripture is "God-breathed," and God does not breathe falsehood, so the text is faithful and true in all it affirms, including the miracle accounts, the attributed authors, and the historical narratives. The 1978 and 1982 Chicago statements on biblical inerrancy are representative of this doctrine.

For Roman Catholics, inerrancy is understood as a consequence of biblical inspiration; it has to do more with the truth of the Bible as a whole than with any theory of verbal inerrancy. Vatican II says that "the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (Dei Verbum 11). What is important is the qualification of "that truth" with "for the sake of our salvation."

Infallibility: For Catholics, infallibility is a charism or gift of the Spirit which belongs to the Church for faithfully expounding the deposit of faith. Vatican I (1870) taught that the Church's

infallibility can be exercised when the pope speaks ex cathedra in defining a doctrine regarding faith or morals (DS 3074). Developing this, Vatican II (1964) said that the bishops united among themselves and with the pope can also proclaim doctrine infallibly. To such definitions the assent of the Church can never be wanting because of the activity of the Holy Spirit preserving the whole flock of Christ in unity of faith (LG 25).

Traditionally, Southern Baptists have understood "infallibility" to be equivalent to "inerrancy." That is to say, the Bible alone never fails to be God's perfect word. More recently, "infallibility" has been construed in a weaker and inadequate sense to mean only that the Bible accomplishes the purpose which God intended.

Canon: Refers to those books and writings recognized by the religious community or Church as being divinely inspired and thus uniquely authoritative for faith and practice.

While Roman Catholics and Protestants recognize the same New Testament canon, the Catholic Old Testament canon contains seven Jewish books (1,2 Maccabees, Tobit, Judith, Sirach, Wisdom of Solomon, and Baruch, plus some additional parts of Daniel and Esther) found in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures used by the early church. The Reformers rejected them in the 16th century since they were not included in the Palestinian Jewish canon drawn up after the fall of Jerusalem. Most Protestants call them "the Apocrypha," Catholics refer to them as the "Deuterocanonical Books."

Biblical Interpretation

Historical/historicity: Relating to or having the character of having actually happened in space and time, as distinct from myth, fable, story, or legend. Both Catholics and Southern Baptists hold that God's revelation takes place in history and develops through the biblical tradition. For example, both affirm the historicity of the gospel tradition but they differ about the extent to which each gospel story can be affirmed as historical.

Southern Baptists interpret as historical all biblical events which are clearly intended by the sacred authors to be taken as such.

Catholics believe that not all biblical narratives should be understood as historical, since the sacred writers also use narratives in a symbolic way to teach religious truths.

Historical-Critical Method: A method of interpreting biblical texts which seeks to discover the "literal sense" or historical meaning of a text, using historical and literary methods of investigation, e.g., form criticism (identifying various biblical literary forms such as sayings, parables, miracle stories, pronouncements, psalms, genealogies), source criticism, redaction criticism, textual criticism, etc.

Southern Baptists prefer to speak of the Grammatical-Historical Method in which these tools are employed with a commitment to biblical inerrancy.

Literal Sense: That which the inspired author intends to convey; the literal sense may be

expressed poetically, prosaically, or figuratively.

Literalism: An interpretative approach which focuses only on the surface meaning of the text, without reference to authorial intent.

Fundamentalism: An early 20th century movement among Protestants in response to liberal Protestant theology, first marked by subscription to such doctrinal "fundamentals" as biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and the second coming of Christ. In the mid 20th century, fundamentalism came to identify itself as strongly separationist. Outsiders came to identify fundamentalism with an anti-intellectual literalism and to extend the term to conservative non-Christian groups, such as "Islamic Fundamentalists." Because of the pejorative connotations, the Associated Press Stylebook appropriately suggests, "In general, do not use fundamentalist unless a group applies the word to itself."