How Baptists, Catholics Have Pursued Common Ground - Part 1

Pope Francis characterized the act of preaching as a rejoining of a conversation that has already been going on for a long time in his 2013 apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (“On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World”).

“The homily takes up once more the dialogue, which the Lord has already established with [God’s] people,” he said.

Along the same lines, the latest meeting of the Baptist-Catholic International Dialogue Joint Commission, held in Rome Dec. 9-15, took up once more an already established dialogue in more ways than one.

It participated in a much larger conversation that has been going on between God and God’s people ever since Jesus prayed that his followers “may all be one” (John 17:21) and between God’s people and one another ever since it was reported to the Apostle Paul about the Corinthian Christian community “that there are quarrels among you” (1 Corinthians 1:11).

That conversation became more focused with the advent of the modern ecumenical movement, which had been birthed by the modern missions movement, and it became a much wider conversation in the aftermath of the Catholic Church’s Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Vatican II marked the embrace by the Catholic Church of the modern ecumenical movement, which began outside of the Catholic Church, as the work of the Holy Spirit, along with the recognition that non-Catholic Christians are “separated brothers [and sisters]” in Christ.

These developments in turn led the Catholic Church to initiate formal ecumenical dialogues with other Christian world communions, including the Baptist World
Alliance (BWA).

While the first international Baptist-Catholic dialogue did not take place until 1984-88, Baptists and Catholics acted more locally on these new developments soon after the Second Vatican Council.

In 1967, the American Baptist Convention (now the American Baptist Churches USA) began a national-level dialogue with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In 1968, Wake Forest University launched an Ecumenical Institute (later in partnership with Benedictine-founded Belmont Abbey College), which focused initially on Baptist-Catholic dialogue and later helped birth official “Scholars’ Dialogues” between Southern Baptist and Catholic theologians that began in 1978 and were suspended in 1999 in the wake of the conservative transformation of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Notable national-level Baptist-Catholic dialogues also have been held beyond the U.S. context, for example, in France and Germany.

The specific conversation that members of the Baptist-Catholic Joint Commission took up again in Rome earlier this month began in 1984 with Phase I of the international dialogue between the BWA and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, which is the division of the Vatican curia charged with relationships with other Christian communions.

Phase I of the dialogue focused on the theme of “Christian Witness in Today’s World.” After that series of conversations concluded in 1988, the dialogue published the report, Summons to Witness to Christ in Today’s World.

Rooted in the common commitments that the delegations recognized they had regarding Jesus Christ, the self-revelation of God as Savior and Lord, and the church’s commission to bear witness to the good news God has made known in Christ, the report identified some areas of difference needing further exploration:
theological authority and method, the shape of ecclesial koinonia, the relationship between faith and baptism and Christian witness, and the place of Mary in faith and practice.

The report concluded with this: “Conversations between Baptists and Roman Catholics will not lead in the near future to full communion between our two bodies. This fact, however, should not prevent the framing of concrete ways to witness together at the present time.

“Such cooperation is already taking place in a variety of ways: translation of the Scriptures into indigenous languages, theological education, common concern and shared help in confronting famine and other natural disasters, health care for the underprivileged, advocacy of human rights and religious liberty, working for peace and justice, and strengthening of the family.

“Baptists and Catholics could enhance their common witness by speaking and acting together more in these and other areas. A whole row of issues vital to the survival of humankind lies before us.”

It wasn’t until 2006 that Phase II of the dialogue re-entered this conversation, taking up the areas of difference needing further exploration identified earlier.

After the conclusion of that phase in 2010, it published a substantial report, The Word of God in the Life of the Church, detailing a surprising degree of convergence on these issues along with the manner in which Baptists and Catholics continue to differ regarding them.

Now Phase III, which began with a meeting hosted by Baylor University’s Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas, in December 2017, has re-entered this conversation by building on the convergences amid matters of difference reached in Phase II and returning to the challenge of Phase I to work toward “the framing of concrete ways to witness together at the present time.”

The overarching theme of Phase III is “The Dynamic of the Gospel and the
Witness of the Church.”

During the first four years of this series, we’re addressing four aspects of this theme: “Sources of Common Witness,” “Contexts of Common Witness,” “Challenges of Common Witness” and “Forms of Common Witness,” with year five reserved for work toward the report summarizing our findings.

*Editor’s note: This is the first of a two-part series. Part two is available here.*