

Vatican Council II Opened Door to Ecumenical, Interfaith Dialogue

There are many persons of goodwill who continue the important work of mutual understanding and cooperation, but more than any other factor, it was Vatican Council II that opened the door to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. If you want to thank someone, thank a Roman Catholic.

For the better part of 400 years, Baptists and other Protestant groups maintained a certain antipathy toward Roman Catholic Christianity. Differing views on the Bible as the sole authority for faith and practice, the role of the sacraments, the necessity of personal conversion and the forms of church government often led to antagonism and even outright hostility.

Southern Baptists living in the late-19th and early-20th centuries often viewed Catholics as being marginally Christian at best. Much of the suspicion was fueled by differences in theology coupled with a Baptist disdain for liturgical worship and hierarchical church government, as well as nagging concerns about the separation of church and state.

Just as one example, the foreign mission reports given at the annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention during that period often included news from “papal” as well as “pagan lands,” as if the missionaries had their work equally cut out for them whether they were preaching in remote areas of China or downtown Rome.

Such views may well have predominated among Baptists in the South at least until the time of World War II. Yet, the post-war 1950’s brought greater contact between all denominations as America became an increasingly mobile society, and as Catholics, Protestants, and Jews began to intermarry with more and more frequency.

The stage was set for the landmark changes that would occur as a result of Vatican II, the ecumenical council called by Pope John XXIII, which lasted from 1962 to 1965. Two of the documents which emerged from the council had profound and lasting effects upon ecumenical and interfaith relationships.

The first was *Unitatis Redintegratio*, or The Restoration of Unity, a decree on ecumenism dated Nov. 21, 1964. The document opens with the following statement:

“The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. However, many Christian communions present themselves to men as the true inheritors of Jesus Christ, all indeed profess to be followers of the Lord but differ in mind and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided. Such division openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world, and damages the holy cause of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”

The statement goes on to declare that, despite these differences, there was a growing movement within the larger Church, fostered by the Holy Spirit and deeply interested in Christian unity: “This movement toward unity is called ‘ecumenical.’”

The second document was *Nostra Aetate*, or In Our Age, given by Pope Paul VI on Oct. 28, 1965. This declaration specifically addresses the positive relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions, and has had an enormous impact not only upon Roman Catholics, but on other Christian denominations as well.

While attending the third session of Vatican Council II, bishops from the United States formed a “Commission for Ecumenical Affairs” in anticipation of the sweeping changes that would follow the council. The commission met for the first time on March 10, 1965, in Washington, D.C., and was followed in rapid succession by a number of counterpart agencies among other denominations. These included Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian-Reformed and Orthodox (1965); Methodist (1966); Disciples of Christ, American Baptist and Southern Baptist

(1967); and later the Oriental-Orthodox (1978) and Polish National Catholics (1984).

The American Baptist Convention was the first Baptist group to respond to the new ecumenical climate by initiating a series of dialogues with Roman Catholics that lasted from 1967 to 1972. Key leaders who participated included Robert T. Handy, L. Doward McBain, Robert G. Middleton, George W. Peck, Lloyd M. Short and Robert G. Torbet.

Southern Baptists responded with the founding of The Ecumenical Institute at Wake Forest University in 1967-68. The Institute sponsored Roman Catholic-Baptist conferences beginning in 1969, and has been led by Brooks Hays, J. William Angell, Claude U. Broach, Jerome Dollard, Oscar Burnett, Bob Spinks and Carlton Mitchell.

The Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board took up these conferences in cooperation with the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs in 1970. There followed a series of regional, state and local dialogues (1971-1978), three rounds of National Scholars' Conversations (1978-1987) and a series of international conversations (1984-1988). Notable leaders have included Glenn A. Igleheart, C. Brownlow Hastings, Richard W. Harmon, William A. Gordon and a host of Southern Baptist seminary professors.

As the Southern Baptist Convention was recast as a fundamentalist denomination in the 1980's, interest in ecumenical and interfaith relationships waned. A fourth series of national dialogues begun in 1990 ended abruptly in 1999. Periodic references by SBC leaders to the papacy as "an unbiblical office" and to Judaism as a "deadly tumor" have had devastating consequences.

Nevertheless, moderate Baptists have continued the legacy of positive interchurch and interfaith relationships through the efforts of The Ecumenical Institute and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The Alliance of Baptists has been especially instrumental in adopting forward-

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thinking statements on Jewish-Christian relations (1995, 2003) and Muslim-Christian relations (2003).

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