

**AMERICAN BAPTIST
POLICY STATEMENT ON CHRISTIAN UNITY**

A primary purpose in creating the Committee on Christian Unity was "to engage American Baptists in a wider and deeper understanding of the meaning of Christian unity." The Committee was originated in 1967, the 450th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, in view of a growing awareness that American Baptists stood at a moment of opportunity to explore and rethink their ecumenical convictions in a day of expanding openness and creative possibilities. There was also a growing awareness that the necessary cleansing in the life of the church of the Sixteenth Century, which recalled Christendom to the authority of the Scriptures, the doctrine of justification by faith, and priesthood of believers, was accompanied by a process of division over a period of four centuries which has reached its climax in the fragmentation we see today. The Holy Spirit calls us to continuing reformation, leading us from this separationist trend to a quest for new expressions of the unity for which Christ prayed.

A most effective factor in this unifying trend up to the present moment has been the conciliar movement, as exemplified in the local, regional, state, national, and world councils of churches. We have the opportunity to continue and to enlarge our involvement in these cooperative efforts, helping them to become more effective instruments of the whole Gospel of Christ and through them learning from other Christians more about the inexhaustible riches of Christ and the whole Christian tradition. It may well be that the present trend toward greater openness between Christians of widely diverse traditions, Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic, in local communities offers us hitherto unexplored opportunities for a unity which embraces all who bear Christ's name.

We can also explore the Bible with others, seeking with them the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in an effort to discover more fully what is the will of God for God's people in this time and to determine the nature of the unity we seek and how we can manifest it. We must engage in fresh biblical studies based on a frank examination of the conscious or unconscious presuppositions with which Baptists have traditionally read and interpreted the Scriptures. We must avoid rigid stereotypes and seek to express our witness with an openness of mind and spirit. The Christian faith is centered in a person. It is not a legalistic code which forms our faith; it is the living Christ. Basic, then, to our task is the rediscovery of our genius as Baptists for religious liberty and freedom of opportunity for dialogue and discovery so that our faith may not be idolatrous but centered in God.

We can relate ourselves to those Baptists who will work with us in seeking to find the larger meanings of our witness as free churches, and how that witness can be expressed most effectively in our time. Cooperative endeavors such as the Baptist World Alliance, the North American Baptist Fellowship, and the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs should be encouraged. Because we, as American Baptists, are characterized by our ecumenical posture, any position which we take on unity involving other Baptist groups must not compromise our position concerning the whole church and our determination to be a part of the trend toward Christian unity.

We should recognize that the quest for Christian unity is a response to the Gospel of Christ, and that this quest may express itself in various ways such as: our public worship of God, our study of the Scriptures, our deeds of goodness, our search for justice, and the use of our minds to the glory of God

in the work of ministry. While we may be justifiably motivated in our search for Christian unity by a desire to avoid unseemly competition and wasteful inefficiency and to make a united impact on society, our fundamental concern must be our conviction that the followers of Christ are already one. We have the obligation to discover in what sense we are one, and to manifest this oneness more fully.

We must recognize that terms which are current today, such as "spiritual unity" and "organic unity" are often used in misleading ways. We need to clear away the emotional overtones of such phrases, and get to the heart of their deeper meanings. Such terms, when studied from a biblical and theological perspective, may actually prove to be complementary rather than contradictory terms. Indeed, spiritual unity may be without meaning unless it is manifested in some visible way, and organic unity may in turn be lacking in vitality without spiritual oneness.

We rejoice in the commitment of our Baptist forebears to such principles as religious freedom, the priesthood of all believers, and believer's baptism. Moreover, we are grateful to God that Christians of widely divergent traditions have most earnestly accepted religious liberty, that they are emphasizing the ministry of the whole church (laity and clergy together), and that they are giving fresh attention to the New Testament meaning of baptism. In addition, we recognize and are grateful for the particular witness of these other Christians who have had profound influence on our understanding of the fullness of the Gospel. We should, therefore, give serious thought to the way in which our continuing witness as Baptists can best be shared in this changed situation, whether it should continue to be given only in a free church context, or whether it should now be given from within a wider institutional expression of the church wherein personal and congregational freedoms are safeguarded.

Our basic concern is to achieve a continuous exploration of the possibility of Christian unity in all its manifestations and among all Christians everywhere. To do this, we must be willing to reexamine our basic traditions and practices in light of Scripture, history, and our contemporary situation. We must be prepared to ask of ourselves, and of others, what is of first importance in the achievement of God's will for our time.

In our quest, we must ever bear in mind the purpose of Christ's coming in the first place--that all persons may know and experience the redemptive love of God that is able to transform our warring and broken world into a new humanity bound together in Christian love. Unity, then, in any of its manifestations, is not an end in itself, but a means whereby the ultimate mission of God's redemption of the world may be accomplished. We are called to nothing less than a most earnest response to what we believe is the summons of Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, to unity, renewal, and mission to the world.

Adopted by the American Baptist Convention - July 1967
Affirmed by the Executive Committee of the General Board - June 1978
Modified by the General Board Executive Committee - March 2001
Modified by the General Board Executive Committee - March 2006
(General Board Reference # 7013:6/78)