

8187:6/91

AMERICAN BAPTIST RESOLUTION ON THE PROMOTION AND SALE OF TOBACCO BY U.S. FIRMS

Introduction

The use of tobacco today is declining among certain segments of the United States population, as government and private agencies work to increase public awareness of tobacco's harmful effects. At the same time, other population groups in the United States are being targeted for campaigns promoting tobacco use, and there is extensive pressure to export tobacco products and build sales in other nations. This is being keenly felt in the low income "third world nations." The results are tragic. "The Imperial Cancer Research Fund, Oxford, England,¹ estimates that each year tobacco claims the lives of 2.5 million people worldwide and that if current patterns of consumption continue, by the year 2025 the annual death rate will reach eight million." The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that the cumulative impact of smoking in the USA exceeds fifty-two billion dollars annually, primarily in increased health care, insurance costs and lost productivity. It estimates that 390,000 Americans die each year from diseases caused by smoking.²

The International Scene

In the Opium Wars of 1839-1842, England forced China to accept the importation of opium, a product previously forbidden in that nation. Today the United States is forcing an equally addictive substance on Thailand. During a hearing in September 1989, major U.S. tobacco companies petitioned our government to force Thailand to accept the importation of American cigarettes under pain of serious sanctions if they refused. The basis for such punitive action is Section 301 of the revised 1974 Trade Act which permits the United States Government to impose sanctions if convinced that U.S. exporters are experiencing unfair or discriminating trade restrictions abroad.

The cigarette market opened slowly in Asia because nations like Thailand and South Korea had bans on foreign cigarettes and Japan imposed high tariffs and restrictions on advertising. But by 1988, invoking Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act of 1974 and the threat of sanctions, the door was opened to Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, with resulting serious increases in smoking in these countries. Reports show that by 1987 tobacco had replaced food crops on 10.9 million acres of the world's farmable land, mostly in the third world.

Targeting Special Groups in the USA

We have recently experienced the outcry in the USA as tobacco firms, seeking to stem the drop in cigarette sales, have targeted black youth and women for special advertising campaigns. One report states that more than 3,000 teenagers begin to smoke each day. Sixty percent of smokers begin by age 14; ninety percent before age 21. It is estimated that more than one billion packs of cigarettes are purchased illegally by minors each year.

Smoking remains higher among Black and Hispanic men than among other racial or ethnic groups in the USA. There is also a long trend of higher smoking levels among blue collar workers (40%) than white collar workers (28%). Males in the USA are renouncing smoking more rapidly than women. Present smoking levels are 29% male and 23% female. By the mid 1990s it is expected that the number of men smoking may about equal that of women smoking and may continue to reduce further.³

In 1990, corporate responsibility shareholder resolutions have targeted three major U.S. firms with the request that they move into other lines of investment so that they will not be conducting any business dealings with tobacco related products within the USA or overseas after December 31, 1999. Such a request corresponds with the call of the U.S. Surgeon General for a smoke-free society by the year 2000.

Theological and Biblical Reflections

"And God said, 'I have given you every plant yielding seed. . . and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food'" (Genesis 1:29). "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). "So I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:28). Humankind has learned that some products of the land have nutritional or medicinal benefits, while others, used wrongly or in excess, may cause serious injury or death. The Apostle Paul speaks to behavior appropriate to the sanctity of the human body in I Corinthians 6:19-20 (NRSV), "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body."

Thus we see it as Christian responsibility to speak out against those who would seek profit and wealth by promoting the use of a substance shown to be destructive to health and life. In so voicing our opposition to such exploitation we identify with the Biblical prophets who denounced those who profited by injustice done to others, whatever their station in life. Likewise we see such a stance as obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ who came to proclaim God's will and to heal and save.

Resolution on Tobacco

In view of the serious health consequences posed by the use and promotion of tobacco products in the USA and worldwide, the General Board of American Baptist Churches, USA, resolves as follows:

1. We support the movements which are calling for a smoke-free society by the year 2000.
2. We commend the efforts of former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, and the former Secretary for Health and Human Services, Lois W. Sullivan, which have led to increased public awareness of the harm these products present to our society.
3. We condemn such practices in the production and marketing of tobacco products as the following:
 - a. targeting particular age, ethnic, gender, or income groups with advertising campaigns associating tobacco with style, fashion, success, athletic prowess, etc.;
 - b. the securing of land in third world nations by international tobacco firms to raise and market tobacco products, thus taking usable land out of food production and increasing tobacco consumption within those nations.
4. We urge U.S. Congressional legislation to change Section 301 of the Revised 1974 Trade Act in order to prevent punitive action from being taken against nations which restrict or deny the importation of tobacco by the U.S. manufacturers.
5. We call for action on the part of Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to plan for an end to the payment of direct subsidies to tobacco growers in the United States, and to mandate that any assistance or incentives to farmers be directed toward motivating their change to other crops that will be beneficial to the people and to their environment.
6. We urge that tobacco firms increase their current diversification of products to be able to eliminate all production and marketing of tobacco products at least by the year 2000.
7. We call for the inclusion of study resources in American Baptist curriculum that will assist youth to make choices in health and lifestyle that will be tobacco-free.

Adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches - June 1991
159 For, 0 Against, 1 Abstention

Modified by the Executive Committee of the General Board - September 1996
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Policy Base

American Baptist Policy Statement on Health Care
American Baptist Policy Statement on Hunger
American Baptist Policy Statement on Military and Foreign Policy
American Baptist Policy Statement on Human Rights

Supporting Positions

American Baptist Resolution on Economic Justice

It is the duty of government in all of its functions, as expressed in the Scriptures and in the Constitution of the United States, to place the protection of life, liberty and human welfare above the vested rights of prosperity and power; and we urge a steadfast resistance to any tendency in our legislation and courts to give primacy to the protection of property at the expense of life and human welfare.

American Baptist Resolution on Industry and Community

Resolved, that we affirm the sacredness of human beings and demand that the industrial system in its processes, motives and results be brought to the test of its contribution to human life and spiritual values.

In the American Baptist Policy Statement on Hunger (1975) our Board spoke to the matter of land use:

...we shall plan, support and encourage programs of agricultural development that are best suited to the food scarce nations...

We will support domestic programs which encourage maximum efficient food production within the limits of good uses of energy and ecological practice.

Also, the General Board has spoken in the matter of international business and trade from the perspective of the Christian faith as we understand it: International economic systems must transcend narrow national self-interests and provide a framework for global justice and peace.

1 Tobacco and Health: BEhind the Smoke Screen, from Contact, a publication of the WCC Christian Medical Commission, May, 1990.

2 Report released: Feb. 1990 by the Office on Smoking and Health of the U. S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, reported in IRRC Social Issues Service, April 3, 1990.

3 The Surgeon General's 1989 report: Reducing the Health Consequences of Smoking; quoted in IRRC Social Issues Services, April 3, 1990.
