

Baptist Talk

Introduction

Welcome to Baptist Talk. We are delighted that you have chosen to join us and we hope that you will benefit for the experience of Baptist Talk. This document is intended to serve as a set of “best practices” when engaging in difficult, courageous, or potentially divisive conversations.

Background

Baptist Talk grows out of our ABC Mission Summit Conversations (MSC) which were launched in 2013 at our ABC Mission Summit/Biennial in Overland Park, Kansas. The first national MSC drew over 1,000 people in attendance. For nearly a decade, ABC leaders had sought to develop a method for American Baptists to become more engaged in mission together and created the MSC as an avenue to accomplish that task. Unlike a traditional conference, the emphasis at the MSC is upon real-time conversation among the meeting’s participants rather than the conference speakers or experts in the room. MSC create the space for American Baptists to talk about matters of mission and ministry on a grand scale at our national gatherings. Out of these conversations as well as conversations at the ABC Mission Table have come a set of recognized ABC priorities. Our current list of ABC priorities, as generated by the MSC are:

1. Next Generation of Leaders
2. Anti-violence
3. Discipleship
4. Ending Poverty
5. Gospel in a Rapidly Changing Society
6. Women in Ministry
7. Innovative Models of Pastoral Ministry

Because the MSC participants appreciate the opportunity for dialogue (96% of the MSC participants indicated that the MSC have met or exceeded their expectations), Baptist Talk will draw upon many of the same principles that have shaped our MSC, but will allow for a broader range of topics to be discussed. While the purpose of the Mission Summit Conversations is to engage in topics that could become ministry priorities for the denomination, the purpose of Baptist Talk is increase our understanding and respect for one another as American Baptists.

Former ABCUSA president Don Ng advocated for the formation of Baptist Talk to the ABC Board of General Ministries and in June of 2016, The BGM created an ABC commission to explore the notion of Baptist Talk.

Rev. Ng’s advocacy included the following paragraphs

As Baptists who hold the beliefs of soul liberty and the priesthood of all believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in a community of believers, I wonder if we may identify a place in our Baptist life together that the new normal is being in a place we may call, "Baptist Talk."

Last September, the Rocky Mountains region's annual meeting theme was "Dangerous Dreams/Dangerous Conversations." Steve Van Ostran led the region to discuss racial prejudice and human sexuality. In August, the Massachusetts Multicultural Ministries and ABHMS will be sponsoring a conference entitled, "Bold Conversations and Prophetic Witnesses." They too will be addressing controversial topics facing our churches and faith today.

I wonder if it's possible for Baptists to engage in conversations with an attitude and behavior that are not like the rest of the society. Can we Baptists talk together without getting all polarized and hurtful? I think that after practicing "mission table conversations" in the past two biennial mission summits and the countless table conversations that have taken place around the country that we may be standing at the threshold when we have the skill set to talk again.

Rev. Ng is certainly not the first to call for something akin to Baptist Talk. Turn back the pages a bit to the year 1893 and hear the words of Clifford John.

The first friends of Christianity were never perfectly agreed as to its whole contents. Living men differ. It is the dead who agree. Poor shattered fragments that we are! Why, truth would have no chance at all on the earth if each man were nothing but the sibilant echo of his fellow...

[The four Gospels] are not echoes, but voices: each living and distinct in tone and timbre, quality and message; but all speaking in perfect harmony, and contributing to the sweetness and fullness of the majestic music ... Pluck the fruits of controversy from the New Testament tree, and you have not only stripped it of its most precious growths, but left the branches so bare that they cease to be a sheltering home for the wearied nations of the earth ...

God educates His Church, if I may say it, by the Socratic method. He forces us to face the questions that test us, and attack the problems that try our strength; and thereby brings the sleeping energies of His living words into wakeful and beneficent activity.

The Sphinx is one of our best teachers.

Out of our Baptist history, out of the MSC, and out of Rev. Don Ng's call, has come, "Baptist Talk." The Baptist Talk Commission members produced this document in order to provide

the necessary background for this initial event as well as establish a set of best practices for Baptist Talk.

Premises of Baptist Talk

1. We are all members of one household of faith.
2. We come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds that lead to differing ways of expressing ourselves. We need to learn to hear one another in their own language.
3. We must love another. It is through our love that we demonstrate our discipleship to the world.
4. We bring a wide range of perspectives and opinions to the table.
5. We must be committed to seeking the interests of one another. Discernment and understanding require all of our interests.
6. Creating safe space is what allows honest communication to take place. Such space enlarges the capacity of the participants to hear one another and express deeply.
7. There is a cost to our ABC family and our mission and ministry efforts when we do not communicate well with each other.
8. Practicing mutual invitation is one way of ensuring that everyone's voice is heard.

Additional Premises for Baptist Talk – What Makes Baptist Talk Baptist

1. We emphasize dialogue over debate. While other denominations tend to debate their positions; our Baptist conversations tend to focus more upon dialogue due to local church autonomy. No one person or group can speak for all of our congregations. Whenever a group must produce an outcome or a statement, the discussion often takes on a character of advocating for one's current position on the issue rather than hearing one's neighbor.
2. Baptist Talk lifts up the entirety of scripture during our dialogue rather than focusing upon a signed creed or previous statement. Everyone in the room is responsible for interpreting and expressing their wisdom in the context of community.
3. Baptist Talk is built upon the associational principle. Community is important and Baptist Talk is simply an extension of Baptist community into a national dialogue.
4. Baptist Talk includes both clergy and laity. Unlike the medical and legal fields, as well as many other denominations, our ordination and licensing councils include

dialogue among the ordained and non-ordained. Both clergy and laity are involved at the highest level of discernment in Baptist life.

5. There are many kinds of experts and we value all of them. Everyone at the table has something to contribute in a Baptist Talk.

Guidelines for Baptist Talk – Remember your ABC's

A: Acknowledge ambiguity. American Baptists come from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds, possess a diverse set of customs, and speak a plethora of languages. In order to have dialogue, we must acknowledge our differences and recognize that some of these differences will lead to ambiguity in our conversations.

B: Be a good listener. Pass the active listening test: Listen attentively enough to what is being said and how it is being said that you could recite the essence of what was just said to the satisfaction of the speaker. Listen to the whole person.

C: Confidentiality is important. Do not repeat personal stories or those of congregations and institutions. When reporting what happened, be careful not to attribute what was said to specific individuals.

S: Speak honestly and responsibly. Try to use “I” statements and own what you are saying.

APPENDICES

**Baptist Talk Meeting Agenda
July 2, 2017**

(Sunday 2:45 pm to 4:45 pm)

Introductions

Background of the Baptist Talk initiative

Review of the Baptist Talk Premises – practice mutual invitation here?

Review of the Baptist Talk Guidelines

An example of Baptist Talk – {Three persons would engage in Baptist Talk using the principles and practices just covered in the document. These would be three persons who interpret the overall question of, “What does it mean to be faithful to Jesus in the U.S., today?” in a very different manner, but can converse in a manner that is respectful to one another.}

Small Groups – see the small group guide

Baptist Talk Small Group Guide

Roles

- Each group should invite persons in their group to volunteer to take on the roles of facilitator and timekeeper for the conversation that is about to take place.

Getting Started

- Begin your time with prayer.
- Encourage the participants to wear their name badges if available.
- Ask each participant to briefly share their name and the name of their congregation.

Guidelines for Conversation – Remember your ABC's

- A: Acknowledge ambiguity
- B: Be a good listener
- C: Confidentiality is important
- S: Speak honestly and responsibly

Discussion Questions – “What does it mean to be faithful to Jesus in the U.S., today?”

- What Baptist do you admire for his or her faithfulness to God?
- What other institutions are modeling faithfulness today?
- What persons or corporate bodies are living out a heroic story today?
- Can you recall a time when it was difficult for your church or institution of which you are a part to model faithfulness to God? What made it so difficult?
- What is the greatest challenge associated with being faithful to Jesus in the U.S. today?
- In what ways do you wish that you had more courage to be more faithful yourself or to challenge your church or institution to be more faithful to Jesus in the U.S. today?

Wrapping-up the small group conversation

- Close your conversation by praying for the person on your right

MUTUAL INVITATION

One of the ways that we can model Baptist Talk is by practicing Mutual Invitation. A description of this practice, as detailed by Eric Law, is shown below:

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Who you invite does not need to be the person next to you. After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share.

If you are not ready to share yet, say “I pass for now” and we will invite you to share later on. If you don’t want to say anything at all, simply say “pass” and proceed to invite another to share. We will do this until everyone has been invited.

We invite you to listen and not respond to someone’s sharing immediately. There will be time to respond and ask clarifying questions after everyone has had opportunity to share.

Resources for Baptist Talk

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