

AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

*Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer*  
*General Secretary*

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Dear ABCUSA Family,

The recent terrorist attacks in England, the apparently politically motivated shooting that took place in Virginia, ongoing debates over how to treat immigrants and visitors to our country, and the struggles of another Baptist denomination to take a clear stand on issues related to white supremacy remind us all that we are living in a violent and divided world that desperately needs to overcome every form of social and political discrimination and search for more just ways to live in harmony. In 2017, American Baptists gladly and forthrightly reassert our fundamental Baptist convictions regarding individual liberty, dignity and respect for all people, regardless of their racial or ethnic heritage, political or religious beliefs, or any other factor. In 1976, the General Board affirmed a policy statement on human rights, which said:

“Baptist history is rooted in concern for conscience and for freedom of individual beliefs, for choice, and for unregimented living whether by religious dogma and institution or by social and political structures. John Bunyan in prison and Roger Williams driven from Massachusetts, reflect commitment to these ideas, as did Martin Luther King, in his witness to human dignity and the rights of minority groups. Resolutions by the American Baptist Churches over the years have particularly sought to reflect the denomination’s basic principles of freedom of thought and belief, the right of dissent, the responsibility to speak prophetically to church and society and support for human dignity and social justice.”

In the past, American Baptists have expressed these convictions in resolutions and statements, which make clear we have consistently opposed every form of racism and discrimination. For example, in 1983, the ABC General Board declared,

“We, as American Baptists, believe that all people are made in the image of God and that the right to human dignity, to be respected and treated as a person without regard to race, is foundational to our faith... Racism, whether individual or corporate, is a sin against God... We affirm the diversity of races and cultures as distinctive aspects of our denomination. We accept each person as a full participant and each race and each culture as valid expressions within the life and witness of the ABC family.”

The statement rejected manifest destiny as “a form of white racism which has affected the way the United States views its role in the world and views immigrants to this country. As American Baptists, we will seek to create a new image for this nation in which the cultures, the contributions, the insights and the abilities of all racial groups are valued.”

We also have clearly stated in the past that American Baptists reject violence as a means of achieving one’s social, religious or political goals. In a Convention resolution opposing racial segregation adopted in 1964 and reaffirmed by the General Board in 1985, we urged our members to engage in “programs of nonviolent direct action” and made clear that only “Christian means must be used to obtain these desired ends.”

With such a rich and diverse set of resolutions and statements, how should we as American Baptists respond to the challenges we face in today's troubled and fractured society? I suggest we not only re-affirm the statements of the past, but resolve to live them out in practical and consistent ways in our individual and congregational spiritual journeys. Martin Luther King Jr. stated, "One of the great tragedies of life is that men seldom bridge the gulf between practice and profession, between doing and saying" (*Strength to Love*, 37). To bring our thoughts and actions in line with our expressed convictions, we must re-engage Scripture and let its message take control of our beliefs, attitudes, emotions and actions. Please consider these as a starting point in such a transformational journey:

*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for a person's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires...If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:19-20, 26-27)*

*If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13:3-7)*

As I reflect on these Scriptures, I glean the following challenges to help us all hold fast to our Baptist convictions while also contributing to a more harmonious American civic life:

1. Commit to listen more graciously and with an open mind, especially when we are in conversation with people who hold different views than we do.
2. Reject anger, rudeness, hatred, arrogance, and egotism in our dealings with others. Being prophetic is not compatible with being obsessive, abusive or insensitive.
3. Do not forget that people we disagree with are still human beings, and desire respect, grace and acceptance. The Golden Rule still applies to human relationships.
4. Be patient before responding to situations and people; oftentimes, first reports of an event do not convey the whole truth. Knee-jerk reactions are seldom helpful.
5. Do not assume that one's own position on an issue is the only Christian response to which all others must subscribe. We know only "in part," as Paul says.

As American Baptists, may we, through our words and actions, "let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good deeds" (Matthew 5:16) and be drawn to Jesus Christ, our Lord!

Yours in Christ,



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