

AMERICAN BAPTIST

POLICY STATEMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Our world is constantly being brought closer together. Expansion of the technology of communication and trade provides factors which lead to greater understanding and peace among nations. But at the same time there are strong negative forces at work among political, social and economic powers on national and international levels, producing conflict, isolation, and the deprivation of the rights of groups and individuals.

Particularly today, we see the effect of power exerted through wealth and the concentration of resources. Intimidation is being used in the name of freedom by small groups to deprive nations, groups or individuals of the means of freedom of choice and development. At the same time, we see a number of governments in the name of people's movements, or supposedly for reasons of national stability, depriving groups or individuals of basic rights even resorting to unwarranted arrest, imprisonment without charges, torture and deportation.

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 denominations 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.

The United States carries a particular responsibility in human rights because of its basic historical commitment to freedom and because of the power it wields in the world and the influence it has on other countries. It is important, therefore, in view of wide scale violation of human rights in our world today, even in our own nation, that American Baptists address a comprehensive statement of concerns to ourselves, our nation, and other nations.

BIBLICAL BASIS

Made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and set in a universe created by God (Genesis 1:1) humankind is the beneficiary of God's love and in turn is responsible to show that love to others and to God's creation. The Bible places human beings at the summit of creation and asserts the right of human beings to full humanity as children of God. It sets the beginning of life in a garden filled with the earth's resources, meant to be a place of joy and happiness for God's people to use and to nourish. The Bible declares that human beings are given the freedom to choose, yet this is a freedom that is not unlimited (Genesis 3:3). For we are creatures; only God is all powerful.

Sin has its beginning in the efforts of people to become God, thus bringing agony and frustration to the world. The Bible also teaches that with the gift of the resources of the earth goes the responsibility of stewardship for the nurture of the world and fellow human beings. Jesus emphasized accountability to the "Lord of the Vineyard," (Luke 20:9-15) as a trust which gives people purpose, direction, and meaning in life. The sin of God's creatures in neglecting the responsibility of stewardship is expressed in apathy, isolation and self-centeredness.

At the heart of Jesus' teaching was the command to love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Luke 10:27). Thus, Jesus ruled out differences in human status. In his concern for the weak, the powerless, the minorities of society, Jesus indicated his rejection of prevalent attitudes about predetermined physical, mental, or social positions. Rather he began his ministry with an attack on fatalistic attitudes and elevated human dignity when he said, "He hath sent me to proclaim release to the captives...to set at liberty those who are oppressed..." (Luke 4:18-19).

The Bible also presents images of community. The Apostle Paul's words, "For He hath made of one blood all the nations of the world to dwell on the face of the earth together," (Acts 17:26) are a reminder that nations are intended to live in community, that we should not turn away from the world but that nations and individuals have responsibilities toward the whole human community. Matthew 25:31-46 points out our responsibility to each other to be responsive to the poor, the imprisoned, the weak, and the hungry, for says Jesus, "As you did it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me." Thus, in the effort to identify with victims of injustice and oppression, pain and sorrow, we meet again the Christ of the cross, and we recognize that suffering continues in today's world in the struggle against principalities and powers as we seek to move toward God's purpose for the shalom of all humankind.

PERSONAL RIGHTS AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

We recognize that basic human rights are given by God, and that the rights of persons interact and are interdependent with social rights. At times personal rights and social rights will be in tension, for individual rights can be used to defend the privileged position of a few at the expense of many, and on the other hand, the rights of the majority of society may be used to trample on the rights of individuals or minorities. We must keep aware of this tension and support individual rights when unjust structures or societies threaten the rights of persons but we must also support majority or society rights when the few maintain control over the lives and futures of the many. In assessing these situations, it is important to understand the principles on which we stand and to make decisions based on those principles.

THEREFORE

As American Baptists we declare the following rights to be basic human rights, and we will support programs and measures to assure these rights:

1. The right of every person to choose a religion freely, to maintain religious belief or unbelief without coercion; the right for communities of faith to meet together to engage in public worship, to witness publicly to others, to speak prophetically from religious conviction to government and society, to live out religious beliefs, and to be free from governmental intrusion, coercion, and control in the free exercise of conscience and religion;
2. The right to the basic necessities of food, shelter, clothing, and health care;
3. The right to develop family structures, to build mutually satisfying human relationships and to nurture, train and educate children;
4. The right to a secure and healthy environment, clean air, pure water and an earth that can nurture and support present and future generations;
5. The right to grow in mind and self-fulfillment, to secure an education, to develop knowledge, to exchange ideas; and to receive, impart and have access to information;
6. The right to follow the dictates of conscience, to express dissent individually or in groups to prevailing ideas, governments and institutions;

7. The right to privacy in one's home, confidential conversation, and written communication;
8. The right to develop skills and abilities, to utilize these in economic, political, social, intellectual and religious institutions, and to receive a just return for one's labor;
9. The right to human dignity, to be respected and treated as a person, and to be protected against discrimination without regard to age, sex, race, class, marital status, income, national origin, legal status, culture or condition in society;
10. The right of ethnic or racial groups to maintain their cultural identity and to develop institutions and structures through which that identity can be maintained;
11. The right of citizenship in a nation, to participate in the political process, to form political parties, to have a voice in decisions made in the political arenas, to be secure from fear of deportation or expulsion, to emigrate and to have political asylum;
12. The right to organize into groups to bargain with structures or powerful persons, to seek redress of grievances or to promote particular concerns;
13. The right to be free from arbitrary arrest and detention and from torture; the right to a just and open trial with the opportunity to confront accusers and the right to humane treatment if incarcerated;
14. The right to a just process for the redress of a violation of a person's or group's human rights.

Adopted by the General Board of the American Baptist Churches - December 1976

Modified by the General Board Executive Committee - September 1992

(General Board Reference # - 7021:12/76)
