

NOT

**BAPTISTS ARE
NOT
PEACEMAKERS**

Paul R. Dekar

Imagine a world in which all children realize their identity as children of God; imagine a world with justice for all; imagine a world free of the things that make for war; imagine a world free of war; imagine Earth restored.

That which we can imagine, we can build. The dream of God for us is shalom. The coming commonwealth of God will be a time when swords are hammered into ploughshares and nations do not learn war any more (Isa. 2:4); when the proud are scattered, the mighty pulled down, lowly ones lifted up, and the hungry filled with good things (Luke 1:51-53); when every tear is wiped away, death is no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore (Rev. 21:1-4).

The great Martin Luther King, Jr., longed for an end to three scourges: racism, poverty, and war. He sought realization of God's dream, saying that one day youngsters will learn words they will not understand. Children from India will ask, "What is hunger?" Children from Alabama will ask, "What is racial segregation?" Children from Hiroshima will ask, "What is the atomic bomb?" Children at school will ask, "What is war?" You will answer them. You will tell them these words are not used anymore. Like stagecoaches, galleys, or slavery, these words will no longer be meaningful. That is why they have been removed from dictionaries.¹

Baptist Peacemaking: An Oxymoron?

Not all Baptists follow King in his witness against war and injustice. Many Baptists accept as legitimate the use of the sword by the magistracy. Others object. Many Baptists accept the necessity of taking up arms when called to do so. Others refuse. In some contexts, Baptists have called for insurgency to achieve change while others have repudiated the call to revolution. Throughout Baptist history, many

Baptists have sanctioned violent means to fight for justice. Some have sought non-violent means.

A perusal of Baptist sources may lead one to conclude that "Baptist peacemaking" is an oxymoron. "In recent years," observes Nancy Sehested, "Baptists in my part of the world have been more identified with brawls and battles than with peacemaking."² Her incredulity is well placed. Yet, over the past 20 years, a number of small streams of Baptist peacemaking have converged into a movement. The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America brings together Baptist peacemakers in Canada, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the United States. An Asian network exists. To date, Baptists from around the world have gathered to discuss peace issues at four meetings: Sweden (1988), Nicaragua (1992), Thailand (1996), and Australia (2000). Movements rarely emerge without important connections to formative antecedents. Such is true of contemporary Baptists.

Formative Antecedents in Baptist History

In revolutionary seventeenth-century England, Baptists did articulate convictions about non-resistance and radical suffering. General Baptists repudiated bearing arms in "A Brief Confession or Declaration of Faith" (1660). Particular Baptists petitioned King Charles II from prison, "We do, without any deceit, promise to live peaceably under thy government, and in case any thing should be by thee commanded in spiritual matters, wherein we cannot obey, we shall not then take up any carnal or temporal weapon against thee or thy authority, but patiently suffer such punishment as shall be inflicted on us for our consciences."³

In the United States, many Baptists have abhorred violence and sought to actualize God's commonwealth of justice by peaceful means. Roger Williams (1603-1684) opposed violent pacification of North American Indians. In the eighteenth century, most Baptists took

up arms as the United States sought to free itself from British rule. But some did not. During the nineteenth century, prominent Baptists such as Henry Holcombe (1762-1824), Francis Wayland (1796-1865), Adoniram Judson (1788-1850), and Judson's stepson George Dana Boardman (1828-1903) joined peace societies and served as officers. Some wrote in peace journals. Some (notably Judson) mediated in specific war situations. In the United States, where antislavery advocacy divided the peace movement and Baptists denominationally, Baptists expressed concern for peace in a variety of ways: opposing war, even as a last resort; caring for victims of war; and supporting the original call for a Mother's Day as a day of peace.

Peacemaking in the Twentieth Century

Early in the twentieth century, English Baptist John Clifford (1836-1923), arguably the foremost figure in what has been called the non-conformist conscience, led Baptists in opposing British military intervention in South Africa and Belgian military intervention in the Congo. Not an absolute pacifist, Clifford supported Britain's entry into World War I (WWI) but rejected the draft.

In the United States, Baptist peacemaking emerged from the ecumenical and social gospel movements. Baptists generally supported their country during WWI, but there were many exceptions. Baptist pastors, such as Muriel Lester (1883-1968) in Britain and Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) and Howard Thurman (1900-1981) in the United States, offered leadership in forming an international Fellowship of Reconciliation, which helped scattered members resist war fever, assisted conscientious objectors, and protested militarism. On both sides of the first and second world conflicts, some Baptist conscientious objectors went to jail as a part of their resistance to war.

After WWI, some Baptist denominations passed resolutions favoring the League of Nations. Baptist war

resister Shorty Collins joined the staff of the Fellowship of Reconciliation to organize working-class folk. This ecumenical body birthed Baptist pacifist groups on both sides of the Atlantic.

One pacifist group was the Baptist Pacifist Fellowship which was created during World War II. The BPF recognized that the church identified too much and too often with the nation state. The BPF sought to raise a voice of faith that was more than an echo of culture. Church peace missions sought to strengthen opposition against war among the churches and support for transnational bodies such as the World Council of Churches and United Nations.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Baptists numbered prominently in struggles against apartheid, colonization, oppression, and war. In the 1980s, for example, Baptists around the world demonstrated for peace. The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America organized friendship visits to the former Soviet Union. Translations of Martin Luther King's sermons circulated in East Germany. It is impossible to assess the extent these and other actions influenced the collapse of the Soviet empire. Baptists did contribute.

Another arena of activity was the campaign against weapons of mass destruction and the trade in arms. The United States is the largest arms dealer in the world. Far too often, as in Iraq and Afghanistan, United States troops faced enemies whose weapons were supplied, when they were pawns against previous enemies, by the United States government. During the 1980s, the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America joined other religious peace bodies in pushing the United States government to cut off such sales.

For the past decade, Baptists have monitored the activity of the United Nations. In many countries, Baptists have worked alongside international agencies and have supported international instruments such as

the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the United States, Baptists have called upon their country to sign and ratify the treaties that it has refused. These include the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (signed but never ratified) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (signed but not ratified).

“Just Peacemaking” in the Twenty-First Century

Historians have generally classified Christian attitudes towards war and peace through pacifism, just war, or revolution and crusade. Recently, Baptist scholars have proposed a new model, “just peacemaking,” that moves beyond the pacifism/just war divide.⁴ Three themes—love, justice, and walking humbly with God—correspond to a prophetic triad (Mic. 6:8) and the Gospels. The model identifies ten normative practices that enable living with hope in accord with God’s dream for humanity.

Walking Humbly with God

1. Support nonviolent direct action.
2. Take independent initiatives to reduce threats to one’s enemies.
3. Use the techniques of cooperative conflict resolution.
4. Acknowledge responsibility for conflict and injustice and seek repentance and forgiveness.

Doing Justice

5. Advance democracy, human rights, and religious liberty.
6. Foster just and sustainable economic development.

Loving and Building Community

7. Work with emerging cooperative forces in the international system.
8. Strengthen the United Nations and international efforts for cooperation and human rights.
9. Reduce offensive weapons and the weapons trade.
10. Encourage grassroots peacemaking groups and voluntary associations.

Conclusion

A practical dreamer, Martin Luther King, Jr., was often given to despair. In the brief period of his leadership in the United States, the powers and principalities sought to bring him down. Spiraling injustice, violence, and ecological disaster threatened to destroy his movement. Yet, he was not paralyzed by fear. King and others enable us to distil a paradigm for twenty-first-century Baptist peacemaking. As Baptists, we are called to live, love, and build a more just and peaceful society. No worthier model of Baptist identity could exist than this in the twenty-first century as we seek to claim our place among the historic peace churches and thereby become a partner in God’s mission to the world.

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1. Martin Luther King, Jr., quoted in *Reconciliation International*, 6 (Spring 1991): 2.
2. Paul Dekar, *For the Healing of the Nations* (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 1993), Preface.
3. Edward Bean Underhill, *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience and Persecution 1614-1661* (London: J. Haddon, 1846), 307; see also William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (rev. ed.; Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 234.
4. Glen Stassen, ed., *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

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