

*Anti
M*

**BAPTISTS ARE
RACISTS**

Pamela R. Durso

Racism is rooted in the belief that one race is intrinsically superior to all other races.

Racism uses economic, social, and political power to define, devalue, and dominate those considered inferior. For hundreds of years, Baptists have supported pervasive forms of racism. Therefore, one might conclude that all Baptists have been and are racists, but the truth is that in every generation there have been Baptist men and women who have spoken out against racial injustice and discrimination. The voices of such Baptists represent hundreds of other Baptists who have supported and worked for racial equality. The following will highlight a few of those Baptist voices.

English Baptists and Abolition

Baptists were among those in England who voiced concern about and then fought to end the institution of slavery. Robert Robinson, an influential Baptist leader in Cambridge, preached and wrote against slavery. In 1788, he helped to frame an early resolution to Parliament against the practice. Four years later, Abraham Booth, a Baptist pastor in Nottinghamshire, published a treatise that forcefully condemned slavery as a violation of the teachings of the Bible and as a deprivation of the natural rights of humankind. Booth called slavery an “outrage on the sacred rights of liberty” and denounced the slave institution as “barbarous and savage.”¹

William Knibb, an English Baptist missionary to Jamaica, ardently defended the rights of blacks. His passionate speeches were instrumental in leading the English people to call for the abolition of slavery. After Parliament outlawed the practice of slavery in 1833, Knibb assisted blacks in adjusting to their new opportunities and freedom.²

American Baptists and Abolition

Antislavery sentiment expressed itself among

Baptists in America as early as 1785 when the Baptist General Committee of Virginia pronounced slavery to be “contrary to the word of God.” Five years later, the General Committee again voiced its opposition by adopting a resolution written by John Leland, a Baptist preacher and strong advocate of political and religious freedom. Leland’s resolution called slavery a “violent deprivation of the rights of nature, and inconsistent with a republican government; and therefore (we) recommend it to our brethren to make use of every legal measure, to extirpate the horrid evil from the land.”³ Although the resolution was adopted, many Baptist associations in Virginia strongly resisted it.

A more significant antislavery movement emerged among Kentucky Baptists. In 1784, David Barrow, an outspoken Baptist in Virginia, became convinced that slavery was wrong and freed a considerable number of slaves. He encountered much resistance and eventually moved to Kentucky, where he joined with Baptists who were working to end slavery. Barrow’s views promoting abolition caused great dissension in the North District Association; in 1807, he was forced out of the association.

With other Baptists, Barrow organized the “Baptized Licking-Locust Association, Friends of Humanity” with its distinctive feature that members would have no fellowship with slaveholders. Several Baptists from this association later moved to Illinois where slavery was no longer legal. Among these Baptists was Thomas Lincoln, whose son Abraham most likely heard many antislavery sermons in Friends of Humanity churches.⁴

Post-Civil-War-Era Baptists in America

Following the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves, African Americans who were members of Baptist churches in the South left the white-controlled congregations and formed their own

churches. Most white Southern Baptists gladly embraced this new segregation.

One prominent Southern Baptist missionary, however, spoke out against the callousness with which whites dismissed their former slaves. This missionary, while on furlough in 1903, asked, “Why send missionaries to Africa if you will not go into the miserable homes of our colored brothers and sister to uplift them?”⁵ The missionary also called for Southern Baptists to appreciate the Chinese people and their culture. She stated, “The Chinese people are fully equal in intellectuality to any.”⁶ Her understanding of racial justice also led her to insist, “It is time that the followers of Jesus revise their language and learn to speak respectfully of non-Christian peoples.”⁷ This missionary was the much-loved Lottie Moon.

Twentieth-Century Baptists in America

In the late nineteenth century, few Baptist voices called for racial justice; but in the early twentieth century, the number of those voices grew. One such Baptist was Walter Johnson, a native of North Carolina who did denominational work for two state Baptist conventions. In the early 1930s, he began to speak and write extensively about racial injustice in the South. In the 1940s, he began holding interracial retreats intended to be spiritual laboratories. Invited to the retreat held in 1944 at Mars Hill College were a small number of Native Americans along with a few African Americans, and Johnson insisted that “we are going to treat them all as brothers, neither our inferiors, nor our superiors, but utterly our equals in the fellowship of Christ dwelling in us.”⁸

Johnson’s message was that the local church must focus its attention on the ethical teachings of Jesus and stay away from the corrupting influence of the culture that promoted racist behavior. This message proved to be influential among some Baptist seminary professors,

Southern Baptist leaders, and Baptist State Convention of North Carolina officials.

Following the end of World War II, attendance at Johnson’s retreats declined and his influence decreased significantly; but his voice continued to be heard through Baptists such as Clarence Jordan, graduate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 1942, Jordan built Koinonia Farm, an interracial agricultural community in Sumter County, Georgia. To make the farm a viable agricultural operation, Jordan hired African-American farmworkers. He worked alongside them in the fields and ate alongside them at the dinner table.

In 1950, the Rehoboth Baptist Church expelled the Koinonia members for violating southern social customs and for bringing non-Caucasians to worship services. Violence and persecution soon became a daily part of the lives of the Koinonians. They withstood firebombs, bullets, Ku Klux Klan rallies, death threats, property damage, and economic boycotts, but they continued in their work. Koinonians organized international children’s summer camps, led interracial worship services and social gatherings, and taught poor sharecroppers techniques for producing larger quality crops without exploiting the land. Koinonia Farm became for Jordan a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God.”⁹

In Texas another Baptist voice was calling for an end to racial discrimination. That voice belonged to T. B. Maston, professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1922 to 1963. As early as 1927, he addressed the need for racial justice. In 1932, Maston wrote curriculum materials published by the Baptist Sunday School Board that called for racial reconciliation. He also published three books on race relations.

Maston summed up his views in his 1959 book, *Segregation and Desegregation: A Christian*

Approach: “The Christian ideal would demand the elimination of all segregation, by law or custom, based on class or color. This is true because segregation, which inevitably means discrimination, is contrary to the spirit and teachings of Jesus. It violates the very heart of the message proclaimed by the churches. That message says that God is the creator of all, that Christ died for all, that God is no respecter of persons, and that man as man is of infinite value.”¹⁰

Perhaps the most notable Baptist to work for racial reconciliation was Martin Luther King, Jr. King was ordained in 1948 at age nineteen in a Baptist church. He pastored several churches and then served as co-pastor with his father at Ebenezer Baptist Church (National Baptist Convention), Atlanta, from 1960 until his death in 1968. Early in his ministry, King began working for racial justice. His first public leadership role was as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that in 1955 organized a 381-day bus boycott to protest the law requiring black citizens to ride in the back of the city’s buses. Following the boycott, King became the leader of the Civil Rights Movement. He was arrested thirty times for participating in civil rights activities.

In his best-known speech, “I Have a Dream,” King shared his vision of a new day in America: “I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character . . . [and where] little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with the little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”¹¹

King had a dream for churches as well. His dream was that the Sunday morning worship service would no longer be the most segregated hour of the week.

While some progress has been made, Baptists still have much work to do in the area of racial

reconciliation. But just as there have been in the past, there will continue to be Baptist voices in the future calling for racial justice.

Pamela R. Durso is Associate Director, Baptist History and Heritage Society, Brentwood, Tennessee.

1. Abraham Booth, *Commerce in the Human Species* (London: n.p., 1792), 4-5. Quoted in H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 198.

2. John Allen Moore, *Baptist Mission Portraits* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), 151-63.

3. H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . : Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 48.

4. McBeth, 384.

5. Catherine Allen, *The New Lottie Moon Story*, 2nd ed (Birmingham: Woman’s Missionary Union, 1980), 239.

6. *Ibid.*, 199.

7. *Ibid.*, 202.

8. David Strickland, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999), 33.

9. *Ibid.*, 39.

10. T. B. Maston, *Segregation and Desegregation: A Christian Approach* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959), 163.

11. Martin Luther King, Jr. “I Have a Dream,” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 219.

Jointly Published by the
Baptist History and Heritage Society
The Center for Baptist Studies of Mercer University
William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society



**The Center for
Baptist Studies**
Mercer University

The WILLIAM H. WHITSITT

BAPTIST *Heritage* **SOCIETY**

This is one of eleven pamphlets in the “Baptist Myths” series.

Editor

Doug Weaver

Associate Editor

Charles W. Deweese

Associate Editor

Walter B. Shurden

For information about other Baptist heritage
resources, visit www.baptisthistory.org.

Baptist History and Heritage Society
3001 Mercer University Drive
Atlanta, GA 30341
bhhs@baptisthistory.org