



NETWORKING THE BAPTIST FAMILY TO IMPACT THE WORLD FOR CHRIST

## ATLANTA COVENANT

***The Atlanta Covenant, which arose out of the International Baptist Summit Against Racism and Ethnic Conflict, held in Atlanta, Georgia in January 1999, is a comprehensive statement on the BWA's stance against racism/ethnic prejudice. It is also a call to the worldwide family of Baptists to work to stop these evils and to observe a Decade to Promote Racial Justice.***

A Call to Baptist Churches to oppose racism and ethnic conflict and to actively work to establish a united witness for Christ and His Kingdom.

### Preamble

As delegates to the Baptists Against Racism Summit at the historic Ebenezer/Wheat Street Baptist Churches, center of civil rights struggles in the USA and related to the ministries of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Atlanta, Georgia, January 8-11, 1999, and,

- a. having heard the pain and consequences of systemic racism on individuals and peoples on all continents,
- b. having being confronted again with the urgent and biblical call to justice and racial harmony
- c. recognizing our failure through apathy, silence and hostility to address consistently the issue of racism and ethnic conflict.

We resolve to affirm the provisions of the Harare Declaration, which states:

We acknowledge that:

Racism is rooted in the sinfulness of humankind and is evident where a group or groups of people:

- a. Assert that by heredity and by nature they are superior to the rest of humanity
- b. Oppress others through economic and political means to find security and self-acceptance, privilege and power
- c. Project onto another group or groups their own anger, hostility, hatred and failures in order to rationalize feelings of superiority.

Therefore:

We covenant, with God's help, through a ministry of reconciliation,

1. To promote social justice through efforts to eradicate racism and confront ethnic conflict.
2. To seek for reconciliation between people, restoration of relationships, and in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. "to bring forth the beloved community."

The purposes of this international summit are outlined as follows:

1. To challenge Baptist Unions and Conventions around the world to actively confront issues of racism and ethnic hatred within their areas;
2. To seek to ensure that every individual who attends this Summit returns home committed to work for racial and ethnic reconciliation;
3. To make a positive statement to the Baptist world, the wider Christian community and the secular world that Baptists are totally committed to oppose racism and ethnic conflict in the name of Christ.

### **The Biblical Basis for Reconciliation between Nations and Races:**

#### **1. The God we worship is a God of Liberation and Freedom:**

- "To proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prisons to those who are bound..." (Isaiah 61:2, Luke 4:18)
- "For freedom Christ has set us free..." (Galatians 5:1)
- "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (II Cor. 3:17)

Therefore, as Baptist followers of Jesus Christ, who has come to liberate all humanity, it is incumbent upon us to proclaim this freedom to all people. The Gospel call to freedom is above nationality and race and gender. It is a call to work and actualize the Kingdom of Christ both in individuals and in society. The Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who has faith (Romans 1:16)

#### **2. Humanity is in the Bondage of Sin and Alienation:**

- "But the Lord called to man and said to him, 'Where are you?' And he said, 'I heard your voice in the garden, and I was afraid, ...and I hid myself.'" (Gen. 3:9-10)
- "And they made their lives bitter with hard bondage." (Ex. 1:14)
- "So with us we were in bondage to the elemental spirits of the universe..." (Gal. 4:3)
- "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)

Because of humanity's sin, humankind is alienated from God and from one another. The form of this alienation is common to all nations and races. Wars, treachery, slavery, economic exploitation, pride, the lust for power, greed all come from the heart of sinful man. Ethnocentrism and racism are a sign of this sin and alienation. The power of sin expresses itself in many ways. When one nation or race thinks it is better than the other it is living in sin. Indeed racism is sin. It is part of the bondage under which unredeemed humanity lives.

#### **3. Racism and Ethnic Conflict are contrary to God's Word: Jesus Christ is the Power of God that enables Racial and Ethnic Peace!**

- "Do not mistreat foreigners who are living in your land. Treat them as you would an Israelite and love them as you love yourselves. Remember that you were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 13:33,34)
- "I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Those who fear him and do what is right are acceptable to him, no matter what race they belong to. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, proclaiming the Good News of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all." (Acts 10:34-36)
- "So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one union with Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendents of Abraham and will receive what God has promised." (Gal. 3:26-29)

- *“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Rev. 7:9-10)*

The call of Christ is a call to all humanity. It is a call to all nations and races, to all peoples and tribes. Racism and ethnic conflict are a denial of the Gospel and a hindrance to mission and evangelism. It denigrates the individual created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and denies the universality of the Gospel. Those men and women who practice racism or harbor racist thoughts, not only deny the Gospel of Christ but put their own fellowships in danger for they neglect the Christ of the Gospels and deny the unity for which Christ died.

**1. A Call to Baptist Churches for Action against Racism and Ethnocentrism: What we must do now! The Call of the Gospel requires Christ’s Followers to be Agents of Reconciliation:** *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”* (II Cor. 5:19)

**2. A Call for a Renewal of Worship and for Cleansing:**

With the Prophet Isaiah we proclaim that solemn assembly and iniquity is not endured by the God of Scripture (Isaiah 1:13): *“When you spread forth your hands I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.”* (Isaiah 1:15-17)

Segregated and homogenous unit worship engenders separation and often prevents racial and ethnic reconciliation. Baptist conventions and unions are encouraged to work towards structures that encourage the unity for which Christ prayed (John 17).

**3. A Call for Commitment to Holistic and Interracial Mission and Evangelism:** Jesus’ prayer for unity was missiological in nature: *“That they may all be one;...so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”* (John 17:21) Our lack of unity is a hindrance to evangelism. In the face of the unbelieving world, separate worship and church life contribute to inflexible structures which prevent the love and unity of Christ to be visibly expressed in the world. The reconciling Gospel unites Christians in worship and is a prophetic judgment over against secular prejudice and racism!!

**4. A Call to Work for the Elimination of Unfair Trade and for a Just World Economy:** The world economy tends to be divided between the rich North and the less affluent South. The less affluent South predominately includes people of color and different ethnic units. Traditionally the rich North has been viewed by the world as “Christian”. We deplore the fact that in our day secularism has captured the former “Christian” nations only to make them more nationalistic, ethnocentric, and greedy for power and money.

We call upon our Baptist brothers and sisters worldwide to continue in their life and witness the incarnational mission of Christ who commented on his followers: *“...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”* (Matt. 25:35-36). In so doing they shall be encouraged to be a witness against a materialistic and godless culture of hedonism.

Love must express itself in the administration of just and equal laws for all. Baptists churches are encouraged to unite together to combat government systems that enhance and perpetuate racial and ethnocentric prejudice.

## **5. A Call for the Protection of the Rights of the Aboriginal and Tribal Peoples:**

Often the land of indigenous peoples has been taken over by either internal or external immigrant groups. Racial and ethnic prejudice prevents them from being fully integrated into the larger society. Economic deprivation and historical prejudice have often led to segregation in tribal areas. Today these tribal areas are very often under attack and have become an excuse for governments not to allow freedom and interdependence. In addition, economic restraints have prevented the full citizenship which others enjoy.

We must not allow our silence to be interpreted as affirmation of the status quo. Such silence has often made evangelism more difficult and even has hindered the proclamation of the Gospel. We must continue to share the Gospel as an inherent right of these peoples.

## **6. A Call for the Study and Affirmation of the Relationship between the Gospel and Culture:**

The prophetic call of Christ is one of redeeming culture and yet affirming culture. The Biblical view in Revelation of all nations and peoples coming to Christ (Revelation 7) is not a call for the denial of culture, but rather an affirmation of the awesome spectrum of God's grace expressed in so many different languages, ethnic groups, and nations. The Christian faith necessarily affirms culture as the vehicle of people's identity and tradition. Where culture is contrary to Scripture, we must be witnesses of that light and salt of Christ.

Therefore, there is necessarily a prophetic protest of the Church over against unredeemed culture. At the same time we must affirm that positive and historic reflection of God's glory among the cultures of all peoples. This applies to all cultures, North and South, East and West.

Too often colonialism brought culture and not Christ, thus denying the power of the Gospel and creating a syncretistic religion devoid of Christ and His power. Jesus said, "*When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all humanity to myself.*" (John 12:32) Let us exalt Christ among the nations and in all cultures. Let us not fear the varied cultural expressions of the Christian Faith but affirm the Good News of Christ taking form in that culture!

## **7. A Call to Repentance:**

Scripture affirms that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Racism and ethnic conflict is not limited to one race, culture, or ethnic unit. However, it is a blot on the so-called Christian nations of the North, that often being white, they have fostered and engendered racism in their treatment of nations. We rejoice that unjust structures such as *apartheid* in South Africa have been defeated. We confess that in North America and Europe many churches remain segregated and that in the former "Christian West", racism and ethnic conflict is still too often prevalent.

Where there is division and hatred, we call upon our churches to work for reconciliation and peace.

## **Resolutions**

### **1. We resolve to be committed to racial justice as an integral part of proclaiming Good News in Jesus Christ.**

- a. To witness to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in ways that ensure that the Good News will impact every area of life.
- b. To recognize that our proclamation of the Gospel has not always included the need for repentance from sin, especially the sin of racism.
- c. That our proclamation of Good News and promotion of racial justice must be intentional, sincere and undertaken with integrity.

- d. To affirm that because all humankind is made in the image and likeness of God, every person is important and has the potential to be a new person in Christ; we must work for reconciliation and justice for all.
- e. To ask the BWA to continue to expand its ministry of reconciliation in specific areas where Baptists are in conflict.
- f. To declare the notion that church life based on racial homogeneity reduces the ability of people to understand each other's worth.
- g. To both share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others and be willing to also receive it from those of another ethnic background.

**2. We resolve to promote Economic Development as a way forward towards racial justice.**

- a. Support the biblical meaning of Jubilee 2000 initiatives as outlined in the 1998 BWA General Council resolutions.
- b. Affirm the creativity and programs of indigenous people; empower their leadership.
- c. Call Baptist churches to create within our own institutions models of economic justice and to develop alternative economic models in efforts of economic globalization.
- d. Call Baptist churches (poor and rich) to participate in cooperative economic initiatives in the communities they serve for the economic development of their community. This must be partnership without paternalism.
- e. Educate all Baptists in the issues and dynamic of economic literacy.
- f. Encourage Baptist churches in developed countries to partner economically with churches in developing countries. Initiate transformational trips to establish relations, to create environments for partnering to being, for mutual discovery of resources.
- g. Secure church focus on the most vulnerable in society, encompassing the economics of survival and the economics of liberation.

**3. We resolve to understand the universality of Jesus Christ as a way to address issues of racial justice.**

- a. Recognizing that each individual and culture experiences Jesus Christ in their own context, no one of these can fully represent the historical Jesus as a first century Jew.
- b. We recognize that the almost exclusive use of white images of Jesus has limited our understanding of and witnessing to the incarnation.
- c. Therefore we recommend to our unions and churches that:
  - they request their publishing ministries to use multi-racial images and idioms throughout their worship and education materials
  - distribute and use each other's ways of worship
  - encourage churches of different races and ethnic groups to celebrate significant events and communion together
  - promote times of personal spiritual reflection and repentance upon our own racism and encourage the BWA day of prayer
  - ask the BWA to produce major visual worship resources reflecting our diversity for use in our churches

**4. We resolve to call the churches to develop a program of *Education* to promote a Christian lifestyle that demonstrates just and racial harmony.**

We therefore recommend the following:

- a. All ministers and church leaders be encouraged to undertake training in racial justice, reconciliation and re-distribution of resources.
- b. All churches seek to use the rich diversity of art and music to teach and celebrate racial harmony.
- c. Develop a community education program.
- d. Promote positive role models from all cultures in all education material.
- e. Observe Racial Justice Sunday.

**5. We note with appreciation the rich heritage of Baptist communities to international mission. Notwithstanding the noble intentions, sincere motives and significant contributions in the area of education, health, church planting; we note that racism has often tainted these efforts, and expressed itself in the form of paternalism, and the manipulation of resources has caused much pain and frustration.**

- a. We strongly encourage the continuing movement of Baptists towards a mission philosophy that empowers all Baptists to evangelize and disciple all people groups around the world.
- b. We ask all mission agencies to:
  - Intentionally include the recipients of the gospel in the development of strategies, expenditure of resources, approval of mission personnel and development of policies.
  - To jointly adopt policies and strategies, to expand resources and appoint missionaries.
  - To present the Gospel in the context of the receiving culture without compromising the core of the Gospel.
- c. We call with a sense of urgency for an International Summit on mission, comprising all Baptist mission agencies and partners to address, explore and develop a comprehensive, coherent, global mission strategy.

**6. We resolve to discover and hopefully increase resources and support by:**

- a. Encouraging Baptist churches, conventions and unions to inventory their resources (both human, financial and in-kind) to determine ways they are willing to contribute to and support the decade to promote racial justice.
- b. Calling individuals within the Baptist family whose vocation concerns eradicating racism and battling ethnic conflict to regional meetings to discuss ways to create a networking of support for those directly affected by racism and ethnic conflict and to accomplish the goals of this Summit.
- c. Exploring alternative sources of funding for supporting and increasing emphasis within the Baptist World Alliance for promoting racial justice and ethnic reconciliation.
- d. Designing ways to collect and communicate the stories of individuals and peoples who have experienced racism and ethnic conflict in order to capture the imaginations of hearts and support of Baptists everywhere.

**We therefore call Baptist unions and conventions to:**

**A DECADE TO PROMOTE RACIAL JUSTICE (2000-2010) by:**

- a. efforts to eradicate racism wherever it emerges
- b. engaging in the struggle against ethnic conflict.

**Finally**, brothers and sisters, we admonish one another with the words of Scriptures:

*“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...and the God of peace with be with you.” (Philippians 4:8-9)*

It is our prayer that we who have met in Atlanta will return to our churches and Baptist conventions/unions with a new vision, and empowered by the Holy Spirit will be ministers of racial and ethnic reconciliation and peace through Jesus Christ our Lord! **To God be the glory, great things He hath done!**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Atlanta Covenant," *International Summit of Baptists Against Racism and Ethnic Conflict*, January 8-11, 1999, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, USA.