Restorative Racial Justice and Flourishing Freedom: Themes for Today’s World

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Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
Historian, Baptist World Alliance

Who are we?

There are several ways to appreciate the history, life, and mission of the Baptist World Alliance. We could review our history chronologically, highlighting significant events and milestones, key leaders (and we have had many), or major challenges and ministries. A ten-minute presentation can scarcely do justice to such an approach, but fortunately the book Baptists Together in Christ 1905-2005 has handled that task admirably, even if it requires updating.

Alternatively, we can review the major themes that have drawn our attention. With more than 400 resolutions and statements throughout our 117-year history, there is scarcely an issue the BWA has not addressed in whole or in part. Peacemaking and War, Environmental Care, Human Rights, Poverty, Church and State, Ecumenical and Inter-faith Relationships, and Moral and Ethical Concerns are just some areas of study and ministry.

Throughout its entire existence, the themes of racism, human rights and liberty, social justice and freedom (political, religious, individual and collective) have repeatedly commanded the BWA’s attention. Justice is mentioned in over 120 resolutions and statements, while Freedom concerns can be found in over 90 documents.

Back in 1923, the 3rd World Congress in Stockholm declared: “We believe that the simple message of the Baptists, with its union of gospel and ethics, of faith and practice, with its note of freedom, democracy, spirituality, will find an answering chord in this new world.” (1923 BWA World Congress Message)

In 1950, the Eighth World Congress addressed racism and social justice in a creative and especially for its time, inclusive manner:

**The Resolution on Race Relations** of the Commission on Social Justice and Human Rights stated:

WHEREAS, The Baptist World Alliance in 1934, 1939 and 1947 condemned racial discrimination;
WHEREAS, The question of race relations is world-wide in scope and is one of the most serious and baffling problems confronting mankind today;
WHEREAS, This problem manifests itself in several unchristian ways such as discrimination against Jews in many lands, the Apartheid Movement in South Africa, the discrimination against orientals and Mexicans in some areas, and the segregation by law of Negroes in the United States;…
The Baptist World Alliance, a World Fellowship of Baptists, therefore: Urge our Baptist churches to examine their interracial practices and policies with a view to removing from their worship and fellowship all forms of segregation and discrimination based on race, color or culture;…
(BWA World Congress Resolution 1950.4 Resolution on Race Relations)

Meeting in Nairobi, Kenya in 1982, the evil of apartheid was revisited. This General Council linked racism, social justice and freedom in a resolution titled “Fundamental Freedoms”:

Ever since the Baptist World Congress in Atlanta in 1939 the Baptist World Alliance has spoken out with regularity on behalf of religious freedom for all persons, and in more recent years on behalf of civil liberties generally…
We proclaim once more that the God who gave us life called us to liberty. We are committed to the teaching of the New Testament concerning the importance of freedom as well as its source (John 8:36; Galatians 5).
Meeting as we are on the Continent of Africa, we are acutely conscious of the need for further progress toward the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, particularly where governments restrict the fundamental freedom of one or more races within their jurisdiction. We appeal to all governments to promptly abolish restrictions of a racial nature including the evil called apartheid and those which restrict freedom of expression freedom of association and freedom of movement.
(BWA General Council Resolution 1982.3 Fundamental Freedoms)

In 2022, the General Council is being invited to add to the ongoing dialogue on racism, social justice, and freedom. The Birmingham Statement, approved by the Executive Committee this weekend, introduces new descriptors of foundational themes: restorative social justice and flourishing freedom.

In 1989, this Council passed a resolution on “Human Rights” which urged Baptists to pray for “the restoration of the free exercise of speech and assembly, in particular, for the end of repression of students and youth in China and Burma” (BWA General Council Resolution 1989.2). It also called on Baptists across the globe to “Exert our influences through industry, business, agriculture, government and as persons to protect and restore the delicate balance of nature” (BWA General Council Resolution 1989.1 Stewardship of the Earth).

In 1997, we affirmed that “efforts in support of human rights depend upon God’s initiative to protect and restore human dignity in a broken world” (BWA General Council Resolution 1997.1 Human Rights). The 1999 Atlanta Covenant called for “reconciliation between people, restoration of relationships, and in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. ‘to bring forth the
beloved community.” The General Council in 2013 linked restorative social justice to the Gospel, when it said:

The General Council…
RECOGNIZES the church’s role in the mission of God, who intends the restoration of all things in Christ Jesus;
ACKNOWLEDGES the church’s vocation to bear witness to the Gospel in word and deed;...and
CALLS UPON all Baptists to ensure that, as they embrace a holistic approach to mission, their proclamation is relevant to the realities of the local context and culture.

In many respects, restoration is synonymous with the older term “reconciliation”. However, restoration emphasizes the regaining of that which had been lost. “Flourishing” on the other hand, when linked to “freedom”, reminds us of what we hope to enjoy in a just world – a life filled with purpose, meaning, and peace (shalom) and harmony with God and others, through Jesus Christ.

Most of the references to flourishing in our past statements are found in contexts of turmoil. In 2012, the Council thanked God for “the churches in Myanmar that have flourished and persevered in bearing witness to Christ since the planting of the gospel in their midst by the Judsons” (BWA General Council Resolution 2012.3 Global Baptist Mission). The next year, the Council expressed gratitude for the ministry of George Liele and others, who “worked for the flourishing of the cause of Christ among the Jamaican people” (BWA General Council Resolution 2013.2 Gratitude for Life and Ministry of George Liele”). In 2019, the Council called upon global Baptists to “REPENT from the teachings and practices through which we have prevented women from flourishing as human beings created in the image of God and full members of the body of Christ” (BWA General Council Resolution 2019.1 Resolution on Recognizing and Affirming the Calling of Women in the Church).

“Flourishing” was linked explicitly to “freedom” in the Executive Committee’s statement in March 2022 on the war in Ukraine: Baptists should support the “Pursuit of peaceful and free societies that flourish on the basis of ongoing commitment to uphold freedom of religion, belief, and conscience and negotiated agreements that establish holistic security. As Jesus said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus’ words bridge the themes of restorative social justice and flourishing freedom. Love is the spiritual and ethical mother to justice and freedom, in which people may encounter and be transformed by restoration and the flourishing life we anticipate will be actualized in God’s Kingdom, and approximated in our own time. As Jesus said, “I have come that they [his sheep] may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10b).