

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS.

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Baptists, the Economy, and Violence: What Is Happening and Why?

David P. Gushee

American society has been characterized for some time by dynamic economic growth and a disproportionate propensity to violence. It appears to many economists that deep structural changes in the American economy, and not just a short-term contraction, are coming our way. If this is the case, there are reasons to be deeply concerned that our national tendency toward violence will spike disastrously as desperate Americans use their guns even more often on one another.

Many Americans have grown accustomed to a lifestyle in which quality education and professional training opened the door to wide-ranging career options, jobs yielding good salaries, health care tied to employment, lifestyles filled with recreational consumerism, a secure retirement, and the realistic hope that the next generation would do even better. For many, these amazing good gifts were taken for granted as simply part and parcel of life in America. But such prosperity is guaranteed forever to no people. Rising powers such as China are jostling for their slice of the pie. Meanwhile, structural problems such as personal debt, poor schools, gridlocked government, and selfish, short-sighted, and often corrupt business decisions have slowly rotted our prosperity at its foundations. It seems quite possible that fewer and fewer Americans will ever have a realistic shot at the lifestyles and levels of security that we once took for granted.

That’s bad news enough. But it may intersect with the preexisting violence of our society in some truly terrifying ways. Ours is a nation that invests heavily in violence—with the largest military in the world, a massive arms industry that sells weapons around the globe, a domestic culture deeply wedded to guns, and an entertainment industry that sells violence as a staple.

Economically desperate people with guns in their hands—this is not a happy prospect. It seems that we can hardly get through a week without someone shooting and killing large numbers of people, whether in a high school, a business, a church, or a bedroom. The NRA solution—more guns, always more guns, in everyone’s hands, in every location—hardly seems like the path to true security.

Baptists have resources to offer to our society as we come near the brink of this precipice. I suggest the following three are the most important:

- 1) We believe in a transcendent God who holds everyone accountable, and a loving Savior who comforts those in distress.

The sturdy resources of our faith's core theological beliefs are needed today. We need to inculcate both the fear and the love of God in all who will listen. Fear, yes: a sense of eternal accountability for the actions that people take in this life might help us quite a bit right now. Love, even more: many people have made it through times of desperation and despair through the felt love of Jesus Christ.

- 2) We have a heritage that knows something about economic ethics.

Reform is needed, not just of the arcane details of our nation's financial and banking systems, but of the lifestyles of excess and debt that have come to characterize the citizenry of this nation. Baptist pioneers like Walter Rauschenbusch helped lead the way in calling Christians, and Americans, to support legal reforms leading to greater economic justice. Meanwhile, our roots in rural, small-town, and generally humble economic circumstances provide us the resources to remember how to live much more simply than we have in recent decades. Our faith has always taught us that treasures on earth matter far less than treasures in heaven. Our churches need to help us figure out how to make the transition to a life that matches those values.

- 3) We have a peacemaking heritage that we must mobilize.

We follow Jesus, who taught peace, exemplified peace, blessed peacemakers, and died to make peace between God and the world. Baptists like Clarence Jordan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jimmy Carter, and Glen Stassen have been among our nation's leading peacemakers. Our churches need to dig deep into their legacy, and our own heritage, and teach Baptists and whoever will listen that solutions to our personal, social, and national problems will not come out of the end of a gun.

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