

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.

Readers of these articles are urged to print copies for themselves and even to duplicate copies for distribution and study. Please include the following permission statement: “Used by permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and its website (www.baptisthistory.org), Atlanta, Georgia. Because the articles are produced by free-thinking Baptists, the BH&HS staff and board may or may not agree with the content of each article.”

Baptists and Ethics: What Issues Are Most Important Today?

Robert Parham

Bitter controversy surrounded the death of Terri Schiavo, a woman in a persistent vegetative state and at the center of a protracted court battle. Southern Baptist leaders were among those who supported a U.S. Senate bill that sought to overturn a court ruling to remove Schiavo’s feeding tube. After her death, a Southern Baptist Convention vice president told a nationally televised audience that “she was murdered by a combination of an adulterous husband, a corrupt court and a medical establishment with no conscience.”

When Schiavo’s autopsy found that she had irreversible brain damage and was blind, those who claimed she could communicate and recover became silent. The harsh condemnation of the courts and the medical establishment ended.

While the death of Schiavo sparked a needed national discussion about the right to die and living wills, the event within Baptist life underscored a deeper issue: *the relationship between faith and science*.

Few issues cut across more ethical issues than how people of faith engage people of science. Too many Baptists seem to wage a war on science. They battle stem cell research. They fight the teaching of the theory of evolution in science classes, arguing that Intelligent Design has scientific credibility and using evolution as a reason to attack public schools. They wage war against the science of climate change.

What is urgently needed within Baptist life is a thankful spirit about science and a constructive moral framework to engage scientists. Rather than seeing clergy and scientists set against one another, we need to appreciate the truths both bring to the public square.

As such, Baptists need to listen to the scientific community’s virtual consensus about *climate change*. Many of the consequences of global warming—rising sea levels, intensifying storms and spreading diseases—harm most often the global poor, the very ones for whom we have a moral obligation to protect the earth.

The Bible is surely God’s green book. From the obligation to guard the Garden of Eden to the naming of the animals, from the instructions about species preservation in Deuteronomy and environmental restoration passages in Exodus to the Psalmist’s proclamation that the earth

belongs to God, the pro-environment message in the Bible has mostly been ignored in Baptist churches.

Baptists must rehear the biblical witness about *the environment*. When Jesus taught us to love our neighbors, he surely included our neighbors across time. And the only way to love them is to leave them a decent place to live.

Of course, love for neighbor has multiple applications, one of which presents a profound challenge for Baptists: How do we relate to Muslims?

Interfaith dialogue and work stretches Baptists to move beyond the comfortable one-note tradition of conversion. Yet in a shrinking pluralistic world we must find ways to advance the common good with people of the Islamic faith. We do not have to compromise theological convictions in order to treat Muslims kindly, to speak respectfully about Islam, and to work together.

As the letter, “A Common Word Between Us,” from Muslim religious scholars and leaders to Christian religious leaders said, if Christians and Muslims are not at peace, the world will not be at peace.

Indeed, members of the world’s largest religion, Christianity, and members of the world’s second-largest religion, Islam, must find ways to seek peace and to work to alleviate hunger and health care problems. After all, the deadly mosquito attacks both Muslims and Christians indiscriminately, as a Baptist mission leader noted.

Within the United States, one of the entrenched problems is *encoded racism*—racism that lives in our institutions. The criminal justice system, inadequate funding for public education, predatory lending, poverty and immigration are a mixture of race and economics.

Yet within many white Baptist churches the biblical teaching about social justice is seldom heard.

What are today’s most important ethics issue? They are more than can be referenced briefly. A few include the dynamic relationship between faith and science, environmental stewardship, interfaith engagement and encoded racism.

Robert Parham is executive editor of EthicsDaily.com and executive director of its parent organization, the Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tennessee.