

## **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](http://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.”

### **Race Relations**

#### **How Do Baptists Treat Their Brothers and Sisters?**

**Pamela A. Smoot**

To understand the issues and struggles of race relations between white and black Baptists, one must revert to history. During the slave era, white Baptists and white Methodists had the greatest influence among slaves, because those denominations provided opportunities for worship and social discourse. Historian John Hope Franklin wrote, “They [black and white Baptists] sang together and shouted together, which amounted to interracial religious fellowship.”<sup>1</sup> Andrew Bryan, a slave, preached to white and black Baptists in Georgia.

White Baptists, by 1789, began to reevaluate their position on slavery, and part of their leadership declared slavery to be “a violent depredation of the rights of nature and inconsistent with the republican government.”<sup>2</sup> However, not all white Baptists agreed with the anti-slavery position, and many of those who owned slaves refused to emancipate them.

The issue of race complicated the already present conflicts within Baptist churches. Black Baptists were plagued by paternalism and faced exclusion from white Baptist congregations during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The increasing number of blacks attending worship services made many white congregants uncomfortable, and black Baptists were asked to leave or were subjected to such poor treatment that they left on their own volition. Situations such as this led to the emergence of independent black Baptist churches. For example, black members of a white Philadelphia Baptist church were dismissed in 1809 to form their own church.<sup>3</sup> In 1809, Thomas Paul established a black Baptist church in Boston. These instances marked the beginning of separate white and African American Baptist congregations.

W. E. B. DuBois stated, “The problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line.”<sup>4</sup> While this may have been true in numerous aspects of American society, the twentieth century also brought about racial conciliation among many Baptists. Initiatives by various entities within the Southern Baptist Convention, National Baptist Convention of the USA, Incorporated, American Baptist Churches of the South, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and others were instrumental in improving race relations by initiating the process of dismantling the walls of racism, racial inferiority, and fear and paternalism. By doing so, Baptists, regardless of race or ethnicity, began to work together in more unified ways. In other words, white Baptists began to treat their African American brothers and sisters as equals.

In the past, the exclusion of black Baptists was prevalent and marked by separate

conventions, churches, and publishing boards; and employment opportunities for blacks in white Baptist enterprises (with the exception of custodians) were non-existent. As white Baptists began to “recognize the moral imperative of racial equality,”<sup>5</sup> their former mistreatment of those who were different changed significantly. Black Baptists were employed by white conventions and boards as administrators and clerks; in addition, specific departments and committees were established to help meet the needs of African American Baptists such as the Advisory Committee on Cooperative Work with Negro Baptist Women (1932)<sup>6</sup> and the Department of Colored Work (1963).<sup>7</sup> Racially segregated Baptist conventions retracted their policies, thus allowing African Americans membership with all rights and privileges of white members.

The late Martin L. King, Jr., in one of his sermons noted, “Sunday morning is the most segregated hour,”<sup>8</sup> and this reality was certainly true when whites and African Americans attended their racially segregated churches. Today, however, black and white Baptists are sharing pulpits as invited guests, their church choirs are sharing choir stands, and church membership is crossing racial lines. Some Baptist congregations are now integrated. Regional differences still exist. Even though the number of blacks in traditionally white Baptist churches is small in some places, attitudes of increasing openness still signify a change from the past.

Race relations within Baptist churches were once strained because of racism and discrimination in the days of both slavery and freedom. Efforts toward improving racial conciliation have resulted in a solid relationship of support, shared responsibility, cohesiveness, and a great deal of respect among Baptists across racial lines and ethnic groups, including Native Americans and Hispanics. Individual Baptists, along with the efforts of several conventions to successfully improve race relations, have fostered growth and prosperity within the denomination and its churches. In addition, Baptist leaders continue to challenge all members of the church to embrace and build strong bridges connecting their brothers and sisters to the faith. After four hundred years, race relations among today’s Baptists are better than ever.

*Pamela A. Smoot is assistant professor of Black American Studies and History, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois.*

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<sup>1</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw-Hall, 2000), 154.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 113

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1903), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Harvey, *Redeeming the South: Religious Cultures and Racial Identities among Southern Baptists, 1865-1925* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 230.

<sup>6</sup> “The Negro Woman and Her Needs” (undated), 12. Una Lawrence Roberts Collection, Pamphlets/Publications/Programs (Negro), Box 4, FF 18, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel McCall, *When All God’s Children Get Together* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), 97-98.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with James W. Miller, president of Western Michigan University, and Martin Luther King, Jr. This interview occurred after King’s speech, “Social Justice and Emerging New Age,” delivered at Read Field House in 1963. King, in his speech continued, “. . . if not the most segregated hour in Christian America. I definitely think the

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Christian church should be integrated, and any church that stands against the spirit and teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness. But this is something that the church will have to do itself.”