Baptists and Racism

Baptists have a long and storied history on the issue of race and racism.

The Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 largely over the issue of slavery. Northern Baptists favored the abolition of slavery, whereas Southern Baptists supported it.

White Baptists in the South were also slow to oppose lynching and to support desegregation and civil rights. Nevertheless, days after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down school segregation in 1954, leaders in the SBC named A. C. Miller and J. B. Weatherspoon made support for the Supreme Court’s decision part of their report to the convention’s annual meeting. They said the court’s ruling was in harmony with the Christian principles of equal justice and love for all men. They persuaded the SBC to adopt their controversial report on race.

White Baptists in the South were mostly absent from the Civil Rights Movement, despite the fact that a fellow Baptist, Martin Luther King, Jr., led the charge.

In 1995, the SBC issued an apology for slavery. Its non-binding resolution pledged Southern Baptists to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry. Nonetheless, things remained basically the same.

In 1999, the Baptist World Alliance held an international summit in Atlanta under the banner, Baptists Against Racism: United in Christ for Racial Reconciliation. Global Baptists pledged to develop a program of education to address racism, yet no real educational program ever emerged.

In 2007, some 400 Baptists met at Cape Coast Castle, a slave castle on the coast of Ghana, during the annual Baptist World Alliance gathering. They prayed and pledged to fight racism. The service’s symbolism was replaced the next day with a substantive decision to elect unanimously the first non-white general secretary in the Baptist World Alliance’s 102-year history. A descendant of Africans, whose
ancestors came to Jamaica on slave ships, became the BWA’s new general secretary.

The following November, the Baptist Union of Great Britain apologized for ‘their share in and benefit from’ the nation’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade.


Many hope that a fresh breeze is blowing through Baptist life from outside of Accra to downtown Atlanta that will create racial unity and deepen a commitment to seek justice.

In 2008, EthicsDaily produced a DVD entitled Beneath the Skin: Baptists and Racism. As it shows, racism is far from eradicated-inside or outside the church. Yet many Baptists are working together in proactive ways to break down the racial and ethnic walls of division and to be faithful to the Bible’s moral vision.

Beneath the Skin won best documentary award at the International Black Film Festival of Nashville in October and Cine-Fest Motion Picture Expo in Louisville, Ky., in December. It was accepted for screening at the Black Film Festival of San Diego and has been nominated for the best documentary award at the Texas Black Film Festival.