



A Pastoral Letter from ABCUSA General Secretary Lee B. Spitzer

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“Hate and Violence Cannot Defeat Love and Faith”

A Pastoral Letter to the American Baptist Family

By Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer, ABCUSA General Secretary

This is what the LORD says: “Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.” (Jeremiah 22:1-3)

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

In the past six months, American synagogues in Pittsburgh and Poway have been attacked and members killed by hate-filled gunmen. In both cases, anti-Semitism was a motive. In New Zealand, two Muslim mosques suffered horrendous loss of life at the hands of a white nationalist, while in California a driver intentionally targeted Muslims and has been charged with eight counts of attempted murder. In January, a bombing of a Catholic church in Jolo, Philippines, killed twenty people. On Easter morning, hundreds of Christians were murdered and injured in a coordinated set of

bombings throughout Sri Lanka. Since March 26, three African-American churches have been burned down in Louisiana.

In response, we “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). As American Baptists, we stand in sincere sympathy with all people who suffer violence, injury and harm, regardless of religion, race, gender, culture or ethnicity. We oppose terrorism, violence and hateful ideologies. The Gospel of love surely shall triumph over evil.

Yet, as a committed follower of Jesus Christ, I confess that my heart feels troubled and unsatisfied with mere expressions of sympathy to those who have suffered loss of life, injury and heartache. My soul yearns for wisdom regarding how I as an individual, the Church as the body of Christ, and our wider society might creatively and constructively work to prevent future tragedies of the sort we have been experiencing. Recognizing that all violence will not be eradicated until the culmination of human history, we nevertheless remain committed to living out the virtues of the reign of God in prophetic anticipation of the coming Kingdom of Christ.

What can we do to make our world more resistant to anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-Christian and racist prejudices?

As Baptists, we may begin with the bold re-assertion of a core theological conviction that has characterized our spiritual movement for four centuries. Based on the Biblical understanding that all human beings have been made “in the image of God” (Genesis 1:27), we assert that all people are living souls, and thus everyone’s life is of infinite worth. Paul preaches about this in Athens, saying that God “gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one ancestor God made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth” (Acts 17:25-26). The human race is united, even in our ethnic and cultural diversity. Accordingly, no ideological agenda that promotes hate or violence can be compatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. From a Baptist perspective, the affirmation of the infinite value and dignity of every individual necessarily leads to our promotion of individual freedom, social justice, and political equality.

Based on this core conviction, Baptists (as well as other people of faith and good-will), have a right and a responsibility to expect – and indeed demand – that our religious, cultural and political leaders promote and model the ideals that make for a free and safe society. The gradual acceptance of anti-Semitic discourse, such as the shameful *New York Times*’ cartoon that was published last week, emboldens those who may act on that ideology through violence. In the United States and Europe, leaders from both the political left and right have made anti-Semitic assertions. The political establishments have tolerated such hateful statements and these offenders suffer few if any punitive consequences. Indeed, I am amazed at how silent religious leaders have been in this regard; some may criticize political opponents, but strangely rationalize the same hateful discourse when the politician or leader shares their political viewpoint or party. Followers of Christ risk betraying our faith principles when we offer excuses or vote for politicians who make anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-Christian or racist assertions.

On all levels, inter-religious friendship and co-existence needs to be strengthened. People from all religious backgrounds should take responsibility for how their own actions may unwittingly or intentionally contribute to the rise of hatred and prejudice that we see across the globe. Some

individuals and terrorist organizations seek to justify their acts of violence and hate on religious grounds and they hope for support from people that share their religious views. I believe religious leaders from all faith traditions have the responsibility to repudiate all forms of terrorism, and to make it clear that people and groups that pursue terrorism cannot gain the support of our faith communities. Furthermore, we can affirm that even though we may not agree with one another on theological matters and doctrine, we are committed to living alongside each other in peace, harmony, mutual respect and freedom.

In 1935 in London, Rev. Dr. J. H. Rushbrooke, the general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, rejected anti-Semitism and offered the “hand of sincere friendship” to the British Jewish community. His words served as a powerful repudiation of Hitler and Nazism. Today, as American Baptists, I hope that we all might embrace similar opportunities to reach out to our neighbors who come from other religious backgrounds; let’s offer our “hand of sincere friendship” to them as a demonstration that hate and violence cannot defeat love and faith.

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Dr. Lee B. Spitzer
General Secretary, American Baptist Churches USA