

How Interfaith Dialogue Is Consistent with Baptist Principles

Can interfaith dialogue can be congruent with Baptist and Christian convictions? Several Baptist principles, taken to their natural conclusions, signal that Baptists should be among the forerunners of interfaith relations. Baptist emphases of soul competency, religious liberty, and a commitment to missions are relevant for a Baptist theology of interfaith dialogue.

Soul Competency: How the Baptist Understanding of the Individual Supports Interfaith Dialogue

“Soul competency” describes an individual’s God- given freedom and responsibility in personal matters of faith. Throughout their history, Baptists have insisted upon soul competency because of their understanding that faith, by its very nature, cannot be coerced or manipulated.

The Baptist conviction of soul competency should lead Baptists to embrace interfaith dialogue. A belief in soul competency implies an openness to God’s work in various ways among all peoples. It suggests that all persons, regardless of faith tradition, can contribute their spiritual experiences and insights in the spirit of dialogue and cooperation.

Religious Liberty: How the Baptist Understanding of the Community Supports Interfaith Dialogue

Baptists have been revolutionary in promoting not only their own right to believe and practice faith but in advocating for full religious liberty for all people. Because of their origins as a minority group, Baptists have affirmed religious liberty both for the majority and the minority, Christian and non-Christian. John Leland, Baptist proponent of religious liberty in the eighteenth century, spelled out this idea:

Let every man speak freely without fear, maintain the principles that he believes, worship according to his own faith, either one God, three Gods, no God, or twenty Gods, and let government protect him in so doing, i.e., se that he meets with no personal abuse, or loss of property, for his religious opinions...[1]

The Baptist witness has proved clear on the basis of the idea that unless every person or group is afforded religious liberty, no one is truly free.

The Baptist belief in religious liberty should not end with the right for all peoples to believe and worship freely. Baptists must not only tolerate others, but should engage them in relationship so that all may contribute toward the common goals of faith, understanding and service.

Missions: How the Baptist Commitment to Evangelism Creates a Need for Interfaith Dialogue

Baptists believe through missions that lives can be changed and social conditions can be improved. Historian William Brackney has argued that in every case where Baptists have “pioneered” a mission field, they have first demonstrated the need for religious liberty to be established there, because “evangelism and discipleship cannot take place until, from a human standpoint, the political and social contexts are free.”[2]

Interfaith dialogue does not pose a threat to the historic Baptist commitment to missions; rather, interfaith dialogue provides a means to fulfill that mission with integrity in a world filled with diversity. Baptists can provide a unique voice, giving witness to the work of God through Christ and inviting all persons to deeper relationships with God and humanity.

1. John Ledland, *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable* (1791), in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. H. Leon McBeth (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 180

2. William Brackney, "Religious Liberty: Gift and Opportunity," in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: Religious Liberty*, ed. Walter B. Shurden (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1997), 42

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