

**COLLEGIALITY FOR SUCH A TIMES LIKE THIS--  
“LIKE JESUS, AS BAPTISTS AND FOR LIBERATION AND  
INCLUSION”**

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Presenter: Rev. Juan Ángel Gutiérrez Rodríguez

**INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the not-incorporated territory of the United States, a.k.a: the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico. I hope that you are enjoying your time in the archipelago of Puerto Rico. It is an honor to be here. It is always a blessing to be among friends and colleagues. I want to thank the national leadership of the Ministers Council for the invitation to share with you this morning and to be able to reflect on our commitment to each other, to the ABC body and with the world at large.

I must start by pointing out that everything I say and share with you this morning is my position and has nothing to do with positions on these issues or any other issues of the Iglesias Bautistas de Puerto Rico or the Concilio de Ministro de Puerto Rico. Although I have discussed the content with my wife and mother, this content is my sole and absolute responsibility.

I will share some thoughts, ideas, concepts about our theme today. They are not God’s word, they are not written in stone, but I want to share them with you with an open heart and sincere spirit, so that we can have an honest and open dialogue about who we have been, who we are and what we want to be.

As we meet this mornng, in the United Nations Decolonizing Committee a diverse group of Puerto Ricans are denouncing our colonized conditions. For the last 41 years every year in the month of June, Puerto Ricans denounce our colonial condition. Every year the decolonizing committee takes our case to the General Assembly in October. Every year the General Assembly condemns our situation as a violation of human rights and asks the USA Government to decolonize Puerto Rico. For 41 years the USA

Government has not made any effort to promote a legitimate and democratic process of decolonization and liberation of Puerto Rico.

This is a unique opportunity for me. For my dad, who was a Baptist pastor for over 50 years, this was his favorite theme: pastoral ministry. I have been carrying with me for the last several years several writings of my dad, most of them about pastoral ministry. I am amazed that reading some of his work, some of which dates 40 years ago, we are still dealing with the same issues: how to be a Baptist family in the mist of our differences. I could have easily read some of his work right now and you would not have noticed that it was written 40 or 35 years ago.

Knowing that makes me wonder if I am wasting my time today. If someone in 40 years reads this paper, I hope it will not say where we went wrong and that we are still in the same place. But that is what it means to be a Baptist: struggling every day to be faithful to the Gospel and to our principles and working to shape our lives, churches, denomination, and society to the *identity of Christ*.

I am a Baptist. I was a Baptist when I was conceived. I was a Baptist when I was born. I was a Baptist as I grew up. I was a Baptist when I was baptized. I was a Baptist when God called me to ministry. I was a Baptist when I was called to pastoral ministry. I have Baptist blood running throughout my veins. My DNA is IBPR. My blood type is Bp. My fingerprints are an IBPR symbol. Even my political views align with my Baptist principles. And I will die Baptist. For me being a Baptist is a way of life. I do not see Baptist principles as mere theological doctrine or denominational affirmation. I do believe that if we, Baptists, would be willing to commit to live the Baptist principles in our everyday lives, our society, our world, would be different. I am a Baptist and proud of it

But I am also a Puerto Rican Baptist. My nation (yes, my *nation*) is the oldest colony in the world. We have been a colony since 1493. That's 530 years of colonialism. Next July 25, in a month, we will remember the 125 years invasion of USA military forces in PR after the bombardment of San Juan by USA military forces. We are totally and completely dependent on Congress will. We can be transferred, sold even given away by the USA Congress to any other nation without ever consulting the Puerto Rican people. Since 2016 we have a Financial Control Board, a non-elected official, appointed by the USA Congress, that acts as Military Junta. They have the last word in

any matter that our elected official decides in the local Congress. Just to be clear we do not have democracy in this beautiful place that you are standing on.

## **COLLEGIALITY**

Let me start asking some questions:

I ask myself how we can talk about “collegiality” when our relationship, ABC-USA and Iglesias Bautistas de Puerto Rico, is based on a military invasion and a colonized relationship. Three months before the invasion the main Protestant denominations met to decide what part of the country will be “evangelized” by whom.

I also ask myself how we can talk about “collegiality” when my brother Pastor Michael wants to go out to ride his bike in the city of Chicago, and is afraid that some one, especially a police officer, can just come in, arrest him, or even hurt him.

I ask myself how we can talk about “collegiality” when my sister Pastor Kathryn goes out in the street of the city of Chicago and is concerned that someone might sexually harass her, or is afraid or not able to follow or keep her ministry because someone questions her pastoral calling.

I also ask myself how we can talk about “collegiality” when someone question my brother Madison's pastoral call because he is queer and has been afraid. Because he is queer he can be a target of physical, emotional, and spiritual violence in his community and the church.

What is this main question? ***How we can talk about collegiality in a world of injustice? How we can talk about collegiality when we live in a very divided world? How we can talk about collegiality in a society where the idea of diversity is being questioned in every corner?*** How we can talk about collegiality in a society where a group (male, white, heterosexual, Christian, fundamentalist, capitalists) believe and behave as if they are superior and exclude most of the members of society from their rights. I do not have answers to these questions but it is our responsibility to struggle with these issues as a Ministers Council.

Since I joined the ABC Ministers Council Metro Chicago, the best region of the Ministers Council in the world, and have been part of the group that have been working with the Code of Ethics Learning Guide, I have been concerned about how little consideration Baptist principles have been given in some of our pastoral, ministerial and

even ecclesiological conversations. Yes, we have tried to quote Bible verses everywhere that are possible and pertinent. But being a Baptist is more than quoting the Bible. Being Baptist means to struggle with our principles in every decision that we make.

My brother Jonathan Malone wrote a very interesting book called *A Peculiar Church: Practicing Baptist Theology*. I encourage all of you to read it. In the book brother Jonathan says, "We speak of "doing" theology because what we "do" informs, shapes, and is our theology" (p.7). That is our most powerful testimony to the world, to live what we preach. And that is what I would like to do now. To think about collegiality *from a Baptist perspective*. I will just give some general ideas that I hope to lead our conversation and our understanding of what "collegiality" among Baptist ministers.

Just let me start by saying collegiality is not a biblical theme, a theological doctrine, or a Baptist principle.

Any thought about collegiality needs to start from a very important Protestant theological affirmation: the priesthood of all believers. As my brother Jonathan states in his book "all Christians are called to ministry and leadership in one way or another... the idea that all believers are priests to each other supports an egalitarian understanding of the congregation" (p.9). This must be our point of departure for a healthy and liberating collegiality -- "no one person is above another". This theological affirmation should lead us to affirm a church and society where diversity and distinctiveness is a blessing and not a curse. Where everyone is not only welcome but accepted, encouraged, and protected.

I do believe, as most of Baptist theologians, that the principal distinctiveness of Baptists is soul freedom and freedom of consciousness. This distinctiveness affirms -- as brother Jonathan Malone points out -- that "each individual has the freedom to say "yes" to Christ and to understand the working out of his or her salvation in their own way... it rests on the notion that each individual is responsible for determining the nature of their own relationship with Christ; there is not an institution or authority that can tell someone if they are or are not saved or a follower of Jesus Christ" (p.9)

These two distinctives are essential for our understanding as Baptists of a *pastoral call*. A pastoral call is a personal experience. That call should not be

questioned because of our different understandings and interpretations of the Bible. To question someone's call to pastoral ministry is to question one of our most precious and valuable distinctives: the priesthood of all believers, soul freedom and freedom of consciousness. It also questions God's will and the work of the Holy Spirit in people's life.

Another of the Baptist distinctives to take into consideration for our "collegiality" understanding is the principle of the autonomy of the local church and congregational life. Autonomy of the local church states, as brother Jonathan Malone writes, that "each church has autonomy from other churches; it is the congregation that makes decisions for each church, not the pastor or bishop or any other governing body... each congregation is free to live as a community of believers in a way that is right and authentic to that community" (p.9). Each church has the freedom and liberty to choose its leadership, its rules, its theology, and its pastor.

From our Baptist perspective the pastoral call is personal, but the church has the responsibility to confirm, support and develop that call. When a person or an organization questions a pastor's call they are also questioning the autonomy of the local church.

Let's recap. Our "collegiality" should stand in our belief that everyone is called by God and led by the Holy Spirit, and that the local church has the freedom to call as minister and pastor the person that it feels is better for the community. Therefore, our collegiality must be based on accepting our diversity in all its forms and shapes.

Our "collegiality" not only means accepting our colleagues as they are but also should mean that we as a body, Ministers Council, should be committed to change and transform the society and the denomination to make that diversity not only acceptable but possible. A place where each member of our community can become fully what God wants for that person's life. Our collegiality should take the form of a prophetic voice to protect and to give voice to those who have been oppressed or excluded from our ecclesiastical structures and society.

Let me make a confession: I voted against our current Covenant and Code of Ethics because one of the items in the Code fails to be prophetic. Item 3 of the collegiality section states that "I will work to gain greater awareness and sensitivity to

colleagues who experience discrimination on any basis in order to discern and undertake my obligations for support”. For such a time like this I think this was the place where we should have taken a strong and prophetic stance against all types of discrimination and condemn it as a sin. We should have shown an unwavering and clear support to all colleagues that suffer some type of discrimination in the church, the denomination and society.

In his book, brother Jonathan provide us with a new way of thinking about Baptist principles and practices. I agree with my brother on the need to go to people and evaluate how we do things and to be able to talk about our Baptist principles and identity. But we also need to think how our Baptist principles and identity affect our relationship with society. This is a good time to review our approaches to our principles. This new time in which we live compels us, urges us, with a new reflection on what we have been and what we are. What does it mean that the Bible is our only rule of faith and practice, when we can have and *do have* diverse approaches to biblical hermeneutics and exegesis? What does freedom of soul and conscience mean in relation to personal and collective biblical interpretation? Can we live together with various biblical interpretations on various issues without having to hold an official denominational position? What does it mean to affirm religious liberty in a world that is becoming religious and fundamentalist? What does it mean to proclaim the separation of church and state when the lines between them are becoming blurring and confusing? What does it mean to be prophetic in a very political society? We need to rethink our Baptist principles because they are not doctrine they are a way of life to show the world the love and grace of God.

## **SCRIPTURE**

I cannot go on without mentioning the Bible. I think it is healthy to look at Jesus’ example in relationship with his disciples. There are four basic elements in Jesus’ approach to “collegiality”: love, acceptance, compassion, and forgiveness.

For Christians everything must start with love. Martin Luther King, Jr. used to say that you may not like the white oppressor, but you must love them. Jesus washed the

feet of Judas and Peter; both betrayed Jesus in the most crucial moment of his ministry. You do not need to like someone to love them. You just need to love them the same way God loves you. We should remember Jesus' words in John 13: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end".

Love must take us as individuals and people to acceptance. Accept persons and communities the way they are and the way they are called by God to be. We often want to accept people in our midst to change and transform them into *our own image*. No. We accept the other, the one that is or thinks or acts differently from me, because he, she or they are created in the image *of our loving God*. Jesus accepted everyone who came close to him. He may have criticized some of them, but he never rejected anybody. When a group of males asked him to reject a woman he stood up at her side. At this moment I stand by my Southern Baptist female colleagues pastor and ministers.

Love and acceptance should lead us to compassion. Yes, to compassion, not to "I told you so". I am not talking about pity. We are all human beings with our best and our worst. With our highs and lows. With our successes and failures. We need to learn to be compassionate with each other. We need to be the grace and mercy of God to our colleagues in many moments and situations. Not because we are better, or superior, or even right. We are compassionate because we, each one of us, has experienced the unlimited love and grace of God. Jesus was able to be compassionate with Thomas when he was not willing to accept the testimony of his resurrection. Jesus allowed him to come close and touch his wounds. Let us help each other to stand when we fall. Let us help each other to heal when we are hurt. Let us help each other to be the image of Jesus.

Compassion should take us to forgiveness. We need to learn to forgive each other. We all know the power of forgiveness. Jesus forgave Peter for his betrayal and gave him a commission. We live in a world that need desperately to experience forgiveness.

We can summarize Jesus "collegiality" by remembering his words in the Last Supper in John. "When Jesus had washed their feet and put on his outer robe, he sat down again and told them, "Do you realize what I've done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right<sup>(a)</sup> because that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher,

have washed your feet, you must also wash one another's feet. I've set an example for you, so that you may do as I have done to you. Truly, I tell all of you<sup>13</sup> emphatically, a servant isn't greater than his master, and a messenger isn't greater than the one who sent him. If you understand these things, how blessed you are if you put them into practice!". Our love, acceptance, compassion and forgiveness can be resume in "serve on another".

Let me finish with what I started -- Puerto Rico. How can we develop a healthy and honest "collegiality" when we live in an unjust and sinful relationship? I want to be clear in what I want to tell you: My people -- the Puerto Rican people, not only in this archipelago, but also the ones living in the USA -- deserve to be free of a colonial relationship that has destroyed our environment, has hurt our economy, has disfigured our political life and has diminished our social life. We need to be free of the sin of exploitation and domination. We as a society and a nation want -- *deserve* -- to be able to live a fully and abundant life. And you, my brothers, sisters, and siblings, can play an important role in it. We as ABCUSA should not only recognize our individual rights of self-determination but you should ask for *our freedom and liberation*. Our political reality, colonialism, should be declared a sinful relationship and call for our immediate liberation of that sin. As Dr. King used to say, "I am not only working for the salvation of my people of the sin of racism and colonialism, but I am also working for your salvation liberating you of you sin of oppression and exploitation."

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## CONCLUSION

I would like to end my talk by sharing with you some thoughts on collegiality by paraphrasing some of my dad's words from at least 30 years ago. They can help us to build together a better Council, a stronger denomination, and a liberating and just relationship with one another.

"If we are going to be colleagues, we must be willing to pay the price of our commitment. We must be aware that everyone who responds -to Christ's call- becomes a member of our Christian family with all the rights and responsibilities. We must be willing to do all we can to make it possible that everyone who comes to our midst feels at home and accepted".

"If we are going to be colleagues, we must be willing to pay the price of our convictions. We believe and teach many things that we know are the will of God but circumstances, our personal interests and our culture do not allow us to be obedient to our convictions. We are held accountable for our teachings. We are called to be faithful to our convictions... Justice has no national boundaries and there are no second-class believers and that we all ride on the front seat".

"If we are going to be colleagues, we must be willing to pay the price of confrontation. As long as we try to live up to our commitment to Jesus Christ and our Baptist conviction of the equality of all believers, we are going to face confrontation... If you confront me concerning my faith in Christ, my faithfulness to the Christian life or my commitment to this denomination, you are saying that I am part of the family. But if you challenge me because of my color, my kinky hair, my Spanglish, my culture, my sex, my gender, my sexuality, you are saying that you do not want me as a full member in the community of believers but only as a beggar at the door of the house of the family of God".

"If we are going to be faithful to our "collegiality," we must be willing to be true to our commitment to Christ, to our convictions as Baptist, and face our confrontations as part of our growth as Ministers Council, American Baptist Churches, Iglesias Bautistas de Puerto Rico and a community that God is molding and do it in forgiving and creative spirit."

My father ends his talk giving us a clear path for collegiality “diversity is not an option, but a mandate. The other alternative is death.”

We have been called for a such a time like this to be obedient to the Gospel, to be faithful to our principles and to be light and salt on earth. Let us make it a reality, let us go forward with the grace of God, the love of Jesus, and the strength of the Holy Spirit.