



The Rocky Mountain American Baptist

A Newsletter of the American Baptist Churches in the Rocky Mountain Region

There is no denomination more suited to addressing the 21st century than the people called Baptist.

The Distinctiveness of Being Baptist

I have been a Baptist for about 45 years. I was converted through the ministry of First Baptist Church of Washington Park, IL. I have been a student of Baptist history for almost 40 years, having taken my first Baptist history course at Southwest Baptist College in the Spring of 1967. I began teaching Baptist history in 1972; participated in Baptist denominational organizations beginning in the early 1970s, and have been doing research and writing on Baptist history topics starting in the early 1970s.

During these years I developed a genuine passion for our Baptist heritage. Baptists are a distinctive people with relevant historical foundations. In recent months I have preached a sermon entitled "Is Being Baptist Relevant in the 21st Century?" I honestly believe that there is no denomination more suited to addressing the 21st century than the people called Baptist.

Let me begin by stating two generalizations which provide the foundation for Baptist distinctives: Baptists are a people of faith and a people of freedom. Our faith rests in the lordship of Jesus Christ, not upon theological convictions, ethical

principles, or political considerations. It is founded upon the belief that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, the Word incarnate, who came, lived, died, and rose again according to the Scriptures.

Faith in the lordship of Christ is the center of every important Baptist conviction. Baptist responses to the Bible, theology, polity, religious liberty and church and state issues, missions, evangelism, etc. are all rooted in the biblical conviction that Jesus is Lord. Faith requires us to look at these and all other issues through the eyes of Christ. Faith expresses itself in service and ministry in the contemporary world. The Baptist principles of soul liberty and the priesthood of all believers are rooted in faith in Christ.

Freedom is the result of faith. In Gal. 5:1 Paul wrote, "*For freedom Christ has set us free.*" Freedom is the response of our faith to the lordship of Christ in defining our important Baptist convictions through what we believe and the responsible practice of those beliefs. Faith and freedom have resulted in the formation all of our important Baptist distinctives. Let's examine some of them.

Inside Information

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Biblical Authority

Baptists, like so many other movements rooted in the Protestant Reformation, found justification for their views and practices in the Bible. From our beginnings, Baptists

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The Distinctiveness of Being Baptist

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have had great love and respect for the Bible. We use it to evaluate our faith, and to enhance our understanding of God, ourselves, and the world. All Baptists have a great love for the Scriptures. Interestingly, we have fought over the Bible throughout our history.

I remind each of us that regardless of differing interpretations, the Bible is a book of faith. It was written by pilgrims on a faith journey who were seeking to communicate their understanding of God, themselves, and the world in light of the culture of their time. As our knowledge of our world grows, our faith should grow with it. Our message continually must be that Baptists are free to study, interpret, and apply the Scriptures to life in the 21st century. We are free to discover new ways of ministry, new understandings of issues, and acceptance and support of new advances in all knowledge, including science, technology, and medicine.

Congregational Polity

The highest institutional authority in Baptist life is the local congregation. It is the local church responding to the lordship of Christ that determines who its ministers shall be, how its resources will be used, and what ministries and services will be supported. Church polity or government is congregational, not episcopal nor independent. Yet, Baptist congregations voluntarily work with other churches in regional and national organizations. Baptist churches also have the freedom to work with other religious communities and non-religious organizations as they seek to express their faith in terms of action.

Confessional Theology

Baptists are not a creedal people. Creeds are authoritative theological statements that all believers of all ages must believe. Creeds are a test of faith. Accept a creed and you are orthodox. Reject any part of a creed and you are a heretic.

Theology in the best sense of the word for Baptists should never be a test of faith. It should always be a result of a free faith.

Rather, Baptists are a confessional people. Every believer, every congregation, every generation has the responsibility to express their faith doctrinally. Theology in the best sense of the word for Baptists should never be a test of faith. It should always be a result of a free faith. Therefore, it always should be in a state of flux, growing, maturing, refining in light of a changing world to which our faith must respond. Baptists have collectively produced confessional statements throughout our history. If you study them carefully, you will see that they protect individual responsibility to confess one's faith; they reflect issues of their time; and they leave the door open for further understanding and communication of one's faith.

Religious Liberty and Church and State

The most important contributions of Baptists to the history of humanity are religious liberty and its corollary—the separation of church and state. When in the early 1600s some

Christians were calling for tolerance by established churches, the radical, lowly Baptists demanded religious liberty, not only for themselves, but for all people.

Thomas Helwys, one of the very first Baptists, in 1612 wrote that it was no business of the king or civil officials to punish anyone for their religious convictions, clarifying what he said by stating that “whether he be heretic, Turk, Jew, or whatsoever” it “appertaynes” (sic) not to the civil authorities to persecute anyone for his or her religious beliefs. To protect religious liberty, Baptists called for the separation of church and state, realizing that established religion corrupts both the church and the state.

Baptists never wavered on these important convictions until the late 20th century. Then many began promoting the Old Testament concept of a theocracy. They want to incorporate the theocratic ideal in our nation. We need to proclaim in the historic Baptist tradition that when church and state get too cozy, the church loses.

If Baptists are to have a prophetic voice in the 21st century, we must defend religious liberty and ferociously avoid excessive entanglement with politicians. Freedom means that every person, every movement, every denomination must stand or fall on the basis of its convictions and practices, not its relationship with government.

In a world of wars over religion, liberty is the highest ground. It opens doors of communication. It looks for common ground, common beliefs, and common goals. Rigidity in matters of religion results in conflict. Freedom results in respect, under-

standing and cooperation. It is the only message that will take us through the 21st century.

Missions and Ministries

Baptists historically are a ministering, serving people. International and home missions, evangelism, education, social ministries, medical missions, and other ministries are the response of a people of faith to the lordship of Christ in a changing world.

Sadly, too many Baptists today are known for what they oppose. They attack those who disagree with them on religious issues, ethical issues, and even political issues. We need to remind ourselves and others that the good in people far outweighs the shortcomings. We need to have a positive message in the 21st century that starts with our understanding of who people are, our recognition of

their potential, our appreciation for their good, and our awareness of their need for a sense of the spiritual found through faith.

Therefore...

We must proclaim and practice freedom to believe, freedom to contribute, freedom to be responsible. We must issue a call for people of faith who serve and minister to others. We must proclaim that together we can make the world a better place.

Baptists must offer to the people of the 21st century an opportunity to have a growing, relevant faith in a changing world. Baptists must offer freedom to be creative, constructive, responsible, and alive. Faith results in freedom. Freedom leads to a relevant faith. Baptists proclaim a relevant faith and responsible freedom to the people of the 21st

century. What could be more relevant than the message of faith and freedom in studying the Bible, in confessing our faith theologically, in defending religious liberty and separation of church and state, in congregational polity, and in missions and ministry? We learn from those who have come before us. But we are free to be responsible and relevant to the time in which we live.



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Down by the Riverside: A Beginners Guide to Baptist Faith by Everett C. Goodwin

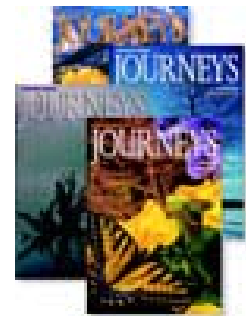
ISBN: 0-8170-1400-4
\$10.40
Published by Judson Press

Down by the Riverside is the answer for people who want a basic orientation to the nature of Christian faith as practiced by Baptist believers. Author Everett Goodwin includes an overview of Baptist history in the United States as a guide to understanding Baptist faith and identity. By revealing the essential principles and distinctions of Baptist belief and by providing information on the theological and historical origins of those beliefs, this new addition to the catalog of available Baptist resources is as the perfect orientation tool for young people and other new Baptists.



...by American Baptists for American Baptists... Judson Bible Journeys for Adults

Are you looking for an adult Sunday church school curriculum that is biblically based, educationally sound, and distinctly American Baptist as it highlights the important heritage of our mission together? Judson Bible Journeys draws adults of all ages into an exciting learning experience. Through a systematic study of Scripture, using the International Sunday School Lessons, participants learn about Jesus Christ and his importance in the lives of individuals and the Church today. Participants are encouraged to share their personal pilgrimages and find strength for the journey through thought-provoking exercises and discussion.



To order Judson Press resources, visit the Judson Press website:
<http://www.judsonpress.com>.

Southeast Cluster to Hold Prayer Breakfast

The SE Cluster will be having a time of prayer and fellowship Saturday, May 20, 2006 from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at the First Baptist Church of Colorado Springs. This event is open to pastors and laity.

Being Baptist Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: A Personal View

When, at age 14, I accepted Jesus and became a member of a large Baptist church in Georgia, I knew nothing about the history of the denomination or of Baptists in general. There was no effort, systematic or otherwise, to acquaint a generally indifferent congregation with the history of Baptists or with their distinguishing characteristics. Indeed, I was well into adulthood before I knew anything about these matters, and that knowledge came from my own curiosity and not from any church or denominational effort. Even after I became an American Baptist in 1967, I could not claim any adequate knowledge of Baptist history until I attended a seminar conducted by William Brackney in 1986 in Greeley.

We should not have to be reminded of the importance, even the necessity, of knowing where we came from and how we got to where we are today, so that we can move into the future as something more than a rudderless ship. We in ABCRM are blessed to have Slayden Yarbrough in our midst to teach us clearly and unequivocally those distinctive characteristics which make us Baptists. (See page 1-3 of this issue of *RMAB* to read Yarbrough's thoughts.) We need to remind ourselves that we have often failed dismally to live up to these distinctives.

Where are we Baptists today? Many times in our past we have faced challenges occasioned by changing ideas, historical, social and political conditions, and by simple human perversion, but it seems that these have never been more numer-

ous, profound, or threatening than they are today. We are constantly urged to meet these challenges by being innovative—by “thinking outside the box.” Unfortunately, the usual responses to these exhortations are all too timid. A change of tactics, while possibly marginally useful in the short term, does little or nothing to bring about a transformation in the societal conditions which threaten Christianity. Materialism, consumerism, and self-interest have long been with us; now add globalization (“McWorld”), the counterforce of fragmentation, and a greatly increased number of persons and groups willing to use otherwise legitimate religious issues to acquire power, personal advantage, or political gain. Rodney Clapp's observation (in 1996) about pre- and post-Constantine Christianity points up a continuing reality even more apparent today: The question is no longer “How can we survive and remain faithful Christians under Caesar?” but now becomes “How can we adjust the church's expectations so that Caesar can consider himself a faithful Christian?” (*A Peculiar People*, p. 26.)

To all of these considerations may be added the as yet unclear challenges, and perhaps opportunities, which may face us from what Philip Jenkins describes as “the next Christendom” now rapidly growing in the southern hemisphere.

Through all of this, I intend to remain a Baptist, having come to this position not merely by inheritance, but through conviction. But it is time for Baptists, and all Christians, to stop allowing ourselves to

be molded by the forces which surround us and start seriously and purposefully transforming the cultures which now dominate us. Undergirding this effort must be a renewed sense of ethics. It is likely that in the next decade there will be a realignment of denominations in which some may disappear, others may merge, and new ones may be formed. Despite current anti-denominational trends, it seems unlikely to me that the notions of interdependence and cooperation will entirely disappear. These changes, sadly, will almost certainly separate us from many persons with whom we had previously found some common ground. Despite the impending turmoil, I suggest that we can retain (or recover) our direction through a conscientious reassessment of the message of Jesus, rediscovering its essentials by looking “inside the box” where those elements, over the centuries, have been disappearing into black holes from which, we fervently pray, they may still be recovered. With the help of God and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, those distinctive characteristics which we proclaim to be Baptist can provide unity and direction in the stormy times ahead.



William Moseley
Coordinator of Missions,
American Baptist Church
of Fort Collins
Professor Emeritus,
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A Brief History of British Baptists

Baptists are radicals in the sense that they believe in returning to the roots of Christian faith (note that the English word “radical” comes from the Latin word *radix* meaning “root”). This means that they seek to root their life together in the biblical pattern of being the Church.

Over against the great state or national churches of Europe—Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed—Baptists have always emphasized the need for personal faith. Instead of baptizing infants, Baptists have reserved baptism for those who are able to make a personal confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior. In the 16th century when the modern Baptist movement was born, this emphasis on personal faith was perceived as a threat to the State Church, to which all were expected to belong, with or without faith. In 17th century England, Baptists refused to conform

and be members of the Church of England, arguing that Christ, and not the King (or Queen), was head of the Church. Having been described as dissenters or nonconformists, Baptists stand in the Free Church tradition.

Persecuted for their beliefs throughout the 17th century, Baptists at one stage developed into two streams of theological thought: The General Baptists believed that when Christ died on the cross, he died for everyone in general. The Particular Baptists, however, believed that Christ died for the elect, i.e., a particular group of people. Later these two streams came together to form the present Baptist Union of Great Britain.

Baptists in the UK grew significantly in the 19th century. This was the age of the pulpit giants. Charles Haddon

Spurgeon in London, for instance, and Alexander Maclaren in Manchester, drew congregations of many thousands. It was also during this era that Baptists such as John Clifford, in London, were deeply involved in the quest for social justice and were prominent in the fight against slavery and racism.

Like every other denomination in England and Wales, Baptists went through a period of decline at the beginning of the 20th century. However in the 1980s a new spirit of hope and commitment began to take root. Today, with some 2150 churches and a total membership of almost 160,000, the Baptist churches who form the Baptist Union of Great Britain represent a significant force for radical Christian discipleship.

*John Pipe
Retired AB Pastor
and former ABCRM Staff Person*

Why Am I a Baptist?

Modern Baptist groups were birthed by intense reform movements, not the least of which was the Anabaptist Movement. “Anabaptist” was a term coined by critics who objected to the Anabaptist practice of rebaptizing adults who had previously been baptized as infants. Anabaptists do not accept infant baptism as valid. Studying the Anabaptist roots helped me define, and put into words, my individual beliefs.

I strongly believe that individuals have not only the right, but the responsibility, to read, study, and interpret the Scriptures for themselves. I also believe each individual has the responsibility to enter into

his/her own personal relationship with God with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit. These beliefs among the Anabaptists were not only expressed in response to the Catholic Church, but also to the Protestant reformers who tried to impose definitive scriptural interpretation and requirements for salvation. Anabaptists did not believe that a firm set of rules provided the answers to the salvation question. Rather, the answer lies in one’s own personal relationship with God.

My personal God meets the needs I bring into the spiritual relationship, and requires that I change the things in my life that stand between me and my ability to reach and worship God. I do not know what needs someone else might bring into his/her relationship with God. I do

know, however, that I cannot judge another’s relationship with God or question someone else’s beliefs if he/she does not agree with me. It’s about the priesthood of the believer and soul freedom. This, to me, is the truest test of what it means to be Baptist.

So, as Baptists and believers, let us accept each other in love, and respect each other’s personal relationships with God, and our personal religious journeys with our personal God.



*Terry Langham
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It's About Family and Freedom



As long as I have been alive, I've been associated with an American Baptist church. I

was born to parents who grew up in the Gillette church, and my grandparents were members from the time of children at the same church. Although we don't have a chapel car incorporated in our building, our church was begun through the Chapel Car ministry.

Even though I was raised in the American Baptist denomination, I have worshiped in churches of other denominations with different styles of worship and different views of what God was saying, and I always ended up coming back to the Baptist way of life. When I decided to marry my husband, he was Catholic. I knew that I could not practice the Catholic rituals, so he joined the Baptist church. He was baptized by immersion at that time, because he heard God's call on his life. He was glad to be able to worship without being told what to say or do.

I like being a Baptist. We have freedom—freedom to worship God in the way that is fitting for us. We have freedom to be able to speak directly to God instead of through

another person, and freedom to let God tell us what God wants for us instead of a person dictating what we must believe. We can interpret the Bible with God's guidance and know that God is speaking directly to us rather than through someone else. We may not have the same views as others with whom we worship, but we have the freedom to agree to disagree.

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I appreciate our autonomy. We look for our own ministers, we decide our own policies, and set our own bylaws without interference from regional or national offices. We decide what our form of worship should be for our congregation and what curriculum to use for Sunday School classes.

I also enjoy being a part of the Baptist family. We pride ourselves as being an inviting and inclusive denomination. We enjoy getting together to worship and praise the Lord with songs, prayer, and reading of the Word. We also enjoy

being together to eat, play games, and fellowship. If someone is hurting in our church family, we are there to lend a shoulder to cry on or a helping hand. We are also there to rejoice in the happy times.

The ability to do great things for God comes from being a family. As one local church, we can support only so many missions, but as a larger family, we can reach out to all the corners of the earth as we do with our current missions program. We also have that mission outreach at the local level when we are called upon to help the citizens in our towns or cities, and if we need more help, we just ask.

Family and freedom keep me as a Baptist. I know I can be at one with God anywhere, but I choose to belong to an American Baptist church to help me in my walk. I encourage you to think about what it is that drew you to the church you are attending and look at the roots of that church to see what they believed when it was forming. The people you encounter as you fellowship and worship are an important part of your walk with God. Look for the family you can rejoice with and enjoy being a part of the fellowship.

*Cynthia Riggsby
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from the Wyoming Cluster*

ABCRM Camping at Quaker Ridge

Camp Scholarship and Registration Forms are available on the Region website at <http://www.abcrm.org/ministries/camping.htm>.

See the December, 2005 issue of the

American Baptist Quarterly



for more articles on Baptist Identity. The theme of the issue is **"Being Baptist in a New Culture: Identity Issues in Times of Transition."** The American Baptist Quarterly is published by the American Baptist Historical Society. To find out more, visit <http://www.abc-usa.org/abhs/>

Baptist by Choice



I was not raised as a Baptist; rather, becoming Baptist was a decision I reached as an adult.

For me,

being a Baptist primarily means being free. As Baptists, we have the right and responsibility to stand before God directly and make decisions about our relationship with God. Soul freedom lies at the heart of what makes us Baptists. Simply stated, for me it means my church will not say “It’s a sin to pray with others who belong to a different church, or “You can’t take communion unless you are a member of this church.” These are important issues to me.

I also believe strongly in the separation of church and state—another foundational Baptist view. I believe that the church maintains its purpose and integrity best apart from government involvement, regardless of whether a government is supportive or hostile.

I like the concept of the local church having autonomy while at the same time working together with sister churches in associations (now called “Clusters” in our Region), American Baptist Churches of the Rocky Mountains, and American Baptist Churches, USA. And I am pleased that our local church works with other local churches to help serve our community.

Of course, the crowning touch may be that I married a Baptist. I have been a member of American Baptist

churches for 40 years: Calvary Baptist in Denver and in Washington, DC, and First Baptist in Torrington, WY.

Being Baptist means, to me, developing close relationships with other Baptists. Since Marilyn and I became active in church, many of our closest friends are our church friends. Also, I’ve made many friends in many locations because of my involvement in camping ministries and other Baptist-related activities.

As a member of these three Baptist churches, I have had the privilege of being involved in church leadership. I serve on boards, sing in the choir, participate in Sunday church school, and help with the camping ministry. Even being on a search committee (as I am currently) is a distinctive challenge and privilege if one is a Baptist, because we choose our own pastoral leaders.

Being Baptist is also important to me because I know we care about others in the world. We are a mission-minded people. When I read about the work that our missionaries are doing around the world, I am glad that I can be part of a denomination that makes mission a priority.

Finally, being Baptist for me is being tolerant of the views of others in religious matters. However, I am very concerned that today many churches, even some ABC churches, are becoming more dogmatic and less tolerant in their views of the family of God. Diversity is—and always has been—a reality. Within our diversity, may we concentrate on the common bonds that draw us together and exhibit respect as we allow each other to voice our opinions.

Dick Glandt

Member, FBC/Torrington, WY

General Executive Council Delves Into Weighty Matters during April Meeting

The General Executive Council (GEC) meeting of the American Baptist Churches USA took significant steps in attempting to position the mission and ministry of ABC/USA for the 21st century. Desmond Hoffmeister, ABCMR Transitional Executive Minister and a member of the GEC, reported that this was a positive meeting during which significant progress was made. “A vision is being birthed and we are moving forward,” he said.

Internationally recognized facilitator, Trish Jones, led the GEC through the process of examining the operational system of ABCUSA. Jones assisted the group in identifying four critical areas for review: structure, leadership, the representative process, and relevance. These four areas represented common ground for the GEC participants.

A scheduled meeting in June will involve a brainstorming session to clarify solutions with a high level of specificity. The outcome will be distributed to a wider ABC audience for input. A September meeting will negotiate possible courses of action. This GEC meeting was imbued with a sense of hope as well as an element of urgency. Participants experienced movement and progress toward consensus, and the day and a half of discussions were high level and positive without conflict or confusion.



Most of the above article was supplied by the American Baptist News Service Valley Forge, PA

RMAB 4/30/06

Baptists and Creedalism

For four centuries (1605-2006) Baptists as a denomination have had a storied history—a history that defies definitive categorization. Persecuted in England by state church monarchs who demanded conformity or imprisonment, early Baptists like John Bunyan were cast in prison or forced to flee the country because of their non-conformity. Bunyan wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* during his 12 years in the Bedford prison. Others like Thomas Helwys, John Smythe, and John Robinson fled to the Netherlands to practice their faith in freedom. Robinson helped organize the first Mayflower voyage to America and found passage for some of his parishioners on that ship. They were joined by others from Plymouth, England for their flight to safe haven in the New World.

In New England the early Baptists were a minority among other settlers who wished to establish a State Church. Many Baptists experienced mistreatment in public stocks or jail or loss of vocational position because of their desire for real religious freedom in this new land. As other settlers arrived and moved south along the eastern seaboard, Baptists joined Congregationalists and others to lobby the newly formed framers of the American constitution to include a bill of rights and constitutional amendments separating church and state and guaranteeing freedom of religion in this nation.

Soul Freedom

From the outset in 1605-07, Baptists have maintained certain distinctives.

Baptists are not unique in maintaining these distinctives, but as a body, true Baptists have defended these principles from the beginning. Among these distinctives is the fundamental belief in individual conscience or soul freedom. Each individual is free to interpret scripture or determine one's own personal belief in all matters of conscience. Church members are encouraged to share their tenets of faith with other members of their local church, but each member of the local church body is free to finalize one's own personal beliefs under God. No higher authority, individual or connectional, can determine an ultimate belief system for the individual.

No written creed beyond the New Testament is accepted as authoritative for an individual or church body. Each soul is free to think, feel, and live in this world under God. Concurrently, true Baptists safeguard that same soul freedom for persons who do not believe in God. Atheists have the same privilege of conscience as theists. And at times Baptists, as believers in God, find themselves in the unique position of defending the right of nonbelievers to their privilege of soul freedom.

Separation of Church and State

In order to safeguard this four-century-old principle of freedom of conscience—as opposed to a written creed of imposed beliefs—Baptists have maintained a corollary principle of separation of church and state in all matters. This principle holds that the state has no right to interfere with matters of faith, and that the

corporate church has no authority over matters of the state. The state cannot levy taxes or assessments on church property used for church purposes, nor can church bodies (other than by the power of individual votes) dictate to the government. Government can not interfere with worship assembly, and the church cannot interfere with public schools and assemblies. Public education is the purpose and realm of the government, while religious education is the purpose and realm of the church. Learning from their former experience in both England and New England, Baptists hold that complete separation of church and state is necessary to guarantee individual freedom of conscience. Groups or bodies that call themselves Baptist, but who compromise this principle of separation, have actually forfeited their heritage and usurped the name Baptist.

Autonomy of the Local Church

A third four-century-old principle held by Baptists is the complete autonomy of the local church. While Baptist churches are connected voluntarily as participants in a wider fellowship known as a denomination (regional, national or world body), ultimate authority and power rests in each local church, not in the larger body. The larger body may reflect the image of local churches, but can not speak for, nor dictate to the local churches on any matter.

Once again, this principle is a corollary of the primary principle of freedom of individual conscience. Not even the larger corporate body can impose creedal positions or statements upon individual members of local churches.

As a result of this autonomy of each local church, matters of social conscience cannot be decided by the corporate church or connec-tional body, but must be left to each individual. When someone asks what is the Baptist position on any matter—marriage, divorce, definition of life, abortion, euthansia, homo-sexuality, politics, etc.—the only answer can be: “Which Baptist?” There can be no all-encompassing Baptist position on public issues, because there is no corporate authority, and there is no written creed for Baptists. There is simply complete freedom of conscience; and that individual freedom contin-ues in the larger, corporate body.

Further, because of this local church autonomy, licensing and ordination of religious leaders is conducted by the local church. Recognition of that ordination may or may not be recognized by the corporate body of the larger fellowship, but the local church maintains that privilege. Matters of open communion or open baptism, too, remain with each local church.

Thus, because of these basic principles, there is little call for a Baptist “position” on any social issue of our day or any era. If some Baptists find it difficult to live with complete freedom of conscience, and propose taking a formal “posi-tion” on any controversial matter, such a proposal immediately be-comes a dead issue because of the first principle of individual con-science and soul freedom. For the larger body to vote to adopt a formal “position,” such action negates the origins and principles cherished by Baptists. Practically speaking, common sense would further hold that regardless of any public corpo-rate vote on any particular issue, real application ultimately depends

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strictly upon each individual. If that be the case, why not leave matters of conscience to each individual as Baptists have held from the begin-ning?

Of the 400-year heritage of Baptist life, my own family has been actively engaged in establishing and serving in Baptist churches for 300 years in America. True to Baptist history and tradition, not one of those Baptist congregations has issued a written creed or list of imposed beliefs for membership. Our only creed has been the Spirit of Christ as revealed in the New Testament. I believe in freedom—freedom of speech, of public gathering, of religion, of soul under God. For those freedoms a great heritage has been provided and guaranteed by a group of people known as Baptists. May it long continue in God’s world and in our land!

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Eighth generation Baptist
in America 1710-2006*

A retreat for innovative thinkers sponsored by the American Baptist Churches of the Rocky Mountains

New Horizons: Thinking Beyond Our Patterns

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CHANGE your concept of how you are called to be different today

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CELEBRATE our spiritual relationships through meaningful worship, prayer and singing.

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Some Thoughts on American Baptist Identity



“American Baptists are a contemporary people.” This was the first descriptive feature of identity according to the Commission on Denominational Identity who worked and reported in 1984. The Commission was made up of a diverse group of theologians. Their long document, short document, and guide were approved by the General Board and recommended for distribution to the churches. As contemporary people we are dealing with a different world 20 years later. It is no surprise that American Baptists continue to struggle with contemporary—and perhaps divisive—issues today. That is a part of our genetics.

Imagine talking together about our heritage and what we think God is calling us to do rather than trying to agree on specific characteristics. Since we won't all hear exactly the same message for what to do, we had better be prepared to mimic Jesus and forgive those who disagree with us, listen to them with respect, and ask them to do the same. What ever divides us is not as important as what holds us together—our call to show the world that God loves us and Jesus paid the price for our sins.

The other identifying features described in 1984 are as valid today as they were then; however, what is under the headings is different because the world is different. We are still a **Missional People**, but we do mission in a different way today. There are fewer missionaries appointed, more volunteers, more support for indigenous leadership and a different way of relating to congregations and providing financial support. Evangelism here and around the world is carried out in whatever way seems appropriate and is as creative as those committed to tell the Good News.

We are still a **Worshiping People**, but the way we worship together each week is certainly more varied. Some worship contains mostly contemporary music and different instruments; yet preaching is still primary as we gather to praise God.

We are a **Redeemed People**, a fellowship of believers “who claim a personal relationship to God through Jesus Christ,” follow the Lord in baptism, gather as a believer's church, share in the Lord's Supper, honor the priesthood of all believers, and live our faith in the world.

We are a **Biblically-Based People**, seeing the Bible as the “bedrock of Christian life and practice” with every person having the right and responsibility to interpret the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We are an **Inclusive People** gifted by a variety of backgrounds, more diverse today than ever. We embrace a pluralism of race, ethnicity and gender and have differences of “convictions and theology.”

We are an **Interdependent People** within our own congregations and denomination, but work with others in clusters or associations to carry out our discipleship in a way we could not do alone. We bring to cooperative and ecumenical Christianity the free church tradition. I can't resist digressing to say the first woman from our Region to serve as President of the denomination was Lula P. Colwell from Loveland, Colorado, who right after a cancer operation, frail and not well, headed overseas to represent our denomination during the founding of the World Council of Churches. Her son reported that she came home invigorated and healthy.

I am proud to be an American Baptist and leave for God's judgment the areas of disagreement which inevitably will exist when we are free to interpret Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, hold to the priesthood of each believer, have a tradition of separation of church and state, and a strong respect for autonomy. With God's help, I seek to fulfill my witness to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord, that God's love, forgiveness, and continual presence is available to all, even me and you.



*Margaret Prine
Member, FBC/Laramie
Served as ABCUSA President in
1984-85 and appointed the Commission on Denominational Identity*

Differences that Blind

I believe that Huston Smith was right, in *The Way Things Are*, to admonish us to “beware of the differences that blind us to the unity that binds us” (36). While he was speaking to a much broader religious situation than minor differences within a single denominational family, he nonetheless described the recent meeting of eighteen Baptist leaders, representing over 20 million Baptists, at the Carter Center in Atlanta, GA. The Baptist leaders called their press release “A North American Baptist Covenant” (*see right sidebar*).

Why was the meeting significant? First, much of its significance lay in the man who called the meeting and sat at the head of the table. No other person in the world could have received the kind of positive response that President Carter received from these diverse Baptist leaders. President Carter tapped President-elect Bill Underwood of Mercer University as his point person, and Underwood performed golden work in setting up the meeting and serving as an associate co-chair.

Secondly, the significance of the meeting lay in the diversity of the Baptist groups sitting at the table. North and South! Black and white! Canadian and U.S.! Progressive, moderate and conservative! The one commonality is that each of the groups represented is a member of the Baptist World Alliance.

Thirdly, having no interest at all in creating a super Baptist convention, the individuals at the Carter Center nonetheless recognized the need for a new unified Baptist voice on issues that bind rather than on



differences that blind. What binds? Matthew 25 binds! Jesus’ call for action on behalf of the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner binds. As one of the leaders said of Matthew 25, “This is the sharing of the gospel!” What binds? A personal and public witness to the gospel binds. What binds? The historic Baptist passion for religious liberty and respect for religious diversity binds.

After the Carter Center Conference, what? I believe . . . that we will see for Baptists of North America a continuation of the fragile unity that binds. I believe . . . that the unity will manifest itself in many shapes and forms, large and small. I believe . . . that good people with passion for the cause are at the helm. I believe . . . that we must “beware of the differences that blind us to the unity that binds us.”

This article by Walter Shurden was first published in the April 2006 edition of the Baptist Studies Bulletin, a monthly e-magazine bridging Baptists yesterday and today. Reprinted by permission.

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<http://www.centerforbaptiststudies.org/>

A North American Baptist Covenant

Leaders of Baptist conventions and organizations representing more than 20 million Baptist in North America gathered at The Carter Center in Atlanta, GA on April 10, 2006, as guests of President Jimmy Carter to discuss and explore additional opportunities for fellowship and cooperation.

The gathering included leaders from the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, the National Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc., the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc., American Baptist Churches, USA, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Baptist General Association of Virginia, Canadian Baptist Ministries, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Mercer University, and Mainstream Baptists.

The leaders of these organizations affirmed their desire to speak and work together to create an authentic and genuine prophetic Baptist voice in these complex times. They reaffirmed their commitment to traditional Baptist values, including sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for public and private morality. They specifically committed themselves to their obligations as Christians to promote peace with justice, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and the marginalized, welcome the strangers among us, and promote religious liberty and respect for religious diversity.

They also agreed to plan for a convocation of Baptist people to celebrate these historic Baptist commitments and to explore other opportunities to work together as Christian partners.

ABCRM Department of Ministry to Offer AB History and Polity Class

The ABCRM Department of Ministry (DOM) will offer an American Baptist History and Polity Class on June 9-11 at the ABCRM office in Centennial, CO. There will be approximately 12 contact hours plus additional time spent learning healthy communication and spiritual practices. This class is a requirement for people seeking Region ordination and those who wish to have a non-ABC/USA ordination recognized. It is also open to others who are interested in the subject.

The instructor is Slayden Yarbrough, retired Professor Emeritus of Religion, Oklahoma Baptist University. Slayden is a prolific writer of both books and articles (*see also page 1-3 of this issue of RMAB*).

In addition to attending all scheduled sessions, reading assignments, and participating in class discussion, two written assignments will also be required. The primary text will be *Down by the Riverside* by Everett C. Goodwin (Judson Press).

The class will begin at 1:00 p.m. on Friday, June 9 and end with lunch on Sunday, June 11. Housing will be provided at the Candlewood Suites, located just across the street from the ABCRM office. The class fee of \$200 includes two nights' lodging, two lunches, and one group dinner in addition to the class experience.

For more information and to register, please contact DOM chair, Nancy Darnell (nrdarnell@fbc-boulder.org). If you do not have e-mail access, please call Wayne Dvirnak at 307-638-8247.

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