

A Rancher's Ruminations, August 28, 2009

UNITY FOR THE CAUSE OF CHRIST

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Unity has been hard to come by for Baptists. From the beginning, Baptists have stressed cooperation – but have also fought for the freedom of individual believers and the individual local church. Throughout our history, there have been those – like the Fundamentalists of the past 30 years – who have sought to divide us by adding to the list of fundamental, or essential, beliefs that define us, and excluding any who disagree on one of their favored beliefs or biblical interpretations.

As Texas Baptists, we have worked very hard to make everyone an important part of our convention. BGCT churches are free to give to the SBC, CBF, or both – as many do. On the other hand, the North Carolina state convention – controlled by Fundamentalists – has stopped accepting gifts to CBF. Texas Baptists follow the Baptist way of freedom. North Carolina follows the unBaptist way of control.

Texas Baptists are unique in having over 1,200 Hispanic churches that relate to the BGCT and over 800 African American churches that relate to the BGCT. We have celebrated that relationship by being very intentional in seeing to it that those churches have a significant voice in our convention and are well-represented in positions of leadership. We can certainly do better, but we are working on it.

We have worked hard to honor historic Baptist principles and practices, recognizing the freedom of churches to call as pastor whomever they choose and to give to whichever mission causes they choose.

Yet some still try to impose their will on others, dividing us instead of unifying us – something I cannot understand, with a lost and dying world all around us, needing to hear about Jesus.

It has been very exciting for me to be a part of the New Baptist Covenant movement and help plan two of the meetings – the national meeting in Atlanta in January 2008; and the midwest regional meeting in Norman, Oklahoma, earlier this month. These meetings are supported by over 20 Baptist denominations and conventions across racial lines. At every meeting – national and regional – the theme has been cooperation and unity in fulfilling the purpose that Jesus declared in *Luke 4:18-19* – “to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (NIV)

Every speaker in Norman delivered a challenging and inspirational message. You can read four of these speeches on our Web site (www.txbc.org) as well as watch video of Mitch Randall’s speech at our TBC Breakfast. You can watch video of all of the General Session speeches on the New Baptist Covenant Web site at www.ok.newbaptistcovenant.org.

It is always a highlight for me to be around President Jimmy Carter. This time, we had a little personal time and visited about the ranch.

I have received several letters of criticism about President Carter, which baffles me. I realize that some of you disagree with some of the political stances he has taken, and I understand that and respect your opinion.

But people apparently misunderstand President Carter's purpose in the New Baptist Covenant. Although his faith has certainly shaped his politics – as I hope it does for all of us – he has not brought his politics into these Baptist meetings. His purpose in Baptist life doesn't have a thing to do with partisan politics.

Please give your attention to a few of the remarks he made to our New Baptist Covenant meeting in Norman. His message was really a personal testimony, focusing on the importance of Christians uniting to witness for Christ.

Here are a few quotes from *The Oklahoman*, the Oklahoma City newspaper, published the next day. As you read them, please keep his main point in mind – Baptist freedom and unity. It would be easy to get bogged down in the individual issues – and your own views on those issues – but President Carter's point is that Baptist believers and churches should be free to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, and that our disagreements on these issues should not be allowed to divide us and distract us from sharing Jesus.

"How many of you believe women should serve as deacons, pastors and military chaplains or do you believe women are supposed to be submissive to their husbands and are not allowed to be leaders and teachers of men?"

"How many of you believe homosexual Christians should be treated with respect and accepted into our congregations or that the sin of homosexuality is paramount above all other sins and warrants their complete exclusion?"

"How many of you believe that the Supreme Court ruling on Roe v. Wade (legalizing abortion) was appropriate and should remain unchanged or that all abortions should be prohibited?"

"How many of you believe we are saved by the grace of God through our faith in Jesus Christ?"

"How many of you believe we should put aside our personal differences and work beside each other for Jesus Christ? Despite our inevitable differences, under this simple banner we Christians must stand united. . . . Let's pray together that we Baptists and Christians can come together in unity in a spirit of freedom, peace and love."

Now what is President Carter trying to say as he raises these very controversial and even emotional subjects? He is trying to say that, although these issues are important, they should not take our mind off the main thing, which is cooperating together as Baptists and Christians. He is encouraging unity in the midst of our diversity. His constant theme – on each of the three occasions on which I've heard him speak – is unity among Baptists for the sake of sharing Christ with a world that needs Him.

After listing these difficult issues, President Carter concluded, "I do not want to minimize the importance of these controversies . . . but we are acting in ways completely the opposite of the One we profess to worship."

I am sure that some of these issues are very emotionally and biblically important to you as they are to me, but let me ask you this: Are any of them more important than TexasHope 2010? Not as far as I'm concerned. How about you?

President Carter is challenging Baptists of all stripes, opinions, and theological perspectives to unite behind our conviction that "we are saved by the grace of God through our faith in Jesus Christ" and to work together in carrying out the Great Commission. Those of you who are my age and older remember the great promise of Bold Mission Thrust – a promise never realized because of the divisions created by the events beginning in 1979. This was a tragedy – how many people around the world missed the opportunity to hear about Jesus because we were too busy arguing and fighting among ourselves? The New Baptist Covenant is an opportunity to refocus our energies and passions on Jesus, who is the only one who can unite us.

As Texas Baptists, let's unite around the main thing – sharing Christ – and agree to disagree on the rest in mutual love and respect. As Wade Burleson, a Southern Baptist pastor, reminded us at the New Baptist Covenant meeting, it is by our love for each other that all people will know we are Jesus' disciples.