

BWA CONGRESS 2010: FOCUS GROUP 14
BAPTISTS AT 400: WHERE HAVE WE BEEN? WHERE SHOULD WE GO?
Thursday Session, 29 July 2010 – Karen O’Dell Bullock

Background

Last year, in 2009 the global Baptist family celebrated with great joy what God has done as we saluted our 400th anniversary! The four centuries of Baptist ministry has been interwoven with the stories of individuals and communities of faith from every corner of the world. For a year we re-told our family stories to our congregations, to our children, and to our children’s children once again, remembering the best of Baptist life together and linking the generations each to each in this marvellous heritage of faith.

Who were the first Baptists? And how did we become such a family? For our earliest Baptist brothers and sisters, the 17th century was a time of beginnings: first church, earliest declarations of faith, initial denominational structures, and the witness of suffering that, in part, forged a deep, passionate conviction of religious liberty for all.

Baptist Beginnings, 1609

As the 17th century dawned, England was an explosive country. Citizens were legally required to be members and adhere to the teachings of the state church which, at the time, was considered by some to be less than the true church. Refusing to submit resulted in fines, whippings, and imprisonments. Religious and political forces clashed violently with a new and growing conviction among many Christians that a truer expression of God’s Church could be found *by faith in Jesus Christ* and separated from restrictions ordained by state church systems. Many dozens of Christian brothers and sisters acted courageously in 1607 when, despite threats to life, home, and property, they fled their homeland and sailed to Amsterdam, Holland, one of the cities of refuge. More than anything else, they desired the religious freedom to search the Scriptures and worship according to the pattern they found in its pages. These believers were offered shelter and employment in the bake-house of Jan Munter, a Waterlander Mennonite, whose business lay close to the Amstel River near the present-day Rembrandtsplein section of the city. Here the English refugees, led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, worked, worshiped, and hashed out their theological convictions across cleared

supper tables lit by guttering candlelight. In just two years' time they had rejected infant baptism and founded a fresh expression of "Christian community."

In its first believer's baptismal service, Smyth first baptized himself and then the rest of the small congregation. Each person baptized was an adult who had confessed belief in Jesus Christ. Following the service, the tiny group formed a local church whose voluntary membership was based upon a personal confession of faith in Jesus, the baptism of obedience to signify the radical nature of New Birth and identification with Him, and a covenant as many wrote, both "*to walk in ways known and to be made known.*" This radical decision in 1609 marked the moment when these religious dissenters became the first Baptists. But theirs was not an easy road and challenges confronted each step.

As they wrestled with how best to relate to other communities of faith, Helwys returned home to England in 1611 with about ten members and settled at Spitalfields, just outside the northwest city wall of London. There they planted the first Baptist church on English soil. Helwys quickly published the first defense for religious liberty in the English language - *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612). He proclaimed that the English King had no right to control the religious beliefs or practices of his subjects; instead, regardless of religious belief, each individual must have the freedom to respond to his or her Creator and to read, interpret, and live according to Scripture as their consciences dictated. Persecution followed. Helwys was taken to Newgate prison, where he died. Yet within a generation, more than fifty-four Baptist churches thrived. Four hundred years later, Baptists number more than thirty-six million baptized believers in a global community of more than 110 million believers.

The Threshold

Today, this Baptist family is ten generations older, distanced from our forebears by both time and space. This year we stand in a doorway, pausing to look back and then around us before facing forward, melding in this moment our pasts and presents, even as we envision our next chapter, guided by the Spirit's whisper. Like our earliest Baptist brothers and sisters 400 years ago, we Baptists in the 21st century seek God's heart for our unfolding life together. **This historical synthesis probes past trajectories of Baptist witness, considers potential collisions in current contexts, hears concerns from regional Baptist leaders, and projects opportunities for our future life as the global Baptist family.**

The era in which the world's Baptists now live is characterized as much by complexity and diversity as it is by simplicity and commonality. No one can predict with certainty what the next 400 years hold for anyone, much less Baptists. But we strain our ears to hear careful scholars among us, whose proffered and collected observations, based upon history's trajectories and trends, are most insightful for us. Like Martin Marty, professor emeritus at the University of Chicago and friend of Baptists, who spoke on "The Future of a Denomination: Baptists in the Next 400 Years" at Baylor University's 400th celebration of the movement last year.¹ Marty characterized denominations—as distinct from a single state church—as a "four century-old Anglo-American invention" and noted that Baptists were "present at the creation." Today, Marty agrees in part with some who claim that denominations in their present form seem to be dying or dead, noting that "what is true for denominations *in general* undoubtedly would prove true for the Baptist movement." However, he suggested that "structurally, functionally, something will likely fill their roles" and cautioned against making confident predictions in favor of cautious projections describing alternative scenarios for life in the future.

Past Trajectories: Both Convictions and Challenges

Wisdom attends his words. Having been associated with the BWA Commissions for more than a decade (many of you for half a century and more), many of us could testify that Baptist historians, theologians, educators, ethicists, and ministry leaders from every region still wrestle with the essence of what makes Baptists "Baptist." The *experiences of being Baptist* across the world reflect the broader social and cultural contexts of our vast constituencies. Baptist expressions of Identity have been consistently varied. Although *we strive for unity, we are decidedly not uniform* (a concept with which Baptists have never been entirely comfortable). However, as we pause to catch glimpses of the trajectories from the past, a handful of glowing aspects appear to have traveled through the journey of Baptist life . . . glimmering courses consistently clarifying what it has meant to be the "Best of Baptists" along our 400 years. These seem to remain; although their future has never been guaranteed, for challenges, at different times and places, have accompanied these trajectories with the potential to deflect their paths. Perhaps it would be helpful to observe these four steady sets of Baptist convictions among us.

¹Martin Marty, "The Future of a Denomination: Baptists in the Next 400 Years," by Ken Camp reporting on Baylor University's 400th celebration of the movement held 17-18 January 2010; cited in Associated Baptist Press at <http://www.abpnews.com/content/view/4745/53/> last accessed 10 July 2010.

First Set of Identifiers – Scripture, Believer’s Baptism, Regenerate Church Membership: In the beginning, and throughout our history in general, the commitment to follow religious convictions, grounded in Scripture as we have perceived them, with the congruent individual and communal pledges to live these publicly (at whatever cost), has been foundational. We have been people of Creative Dissent, yes; but doing so most often in order to reach specific goals related to Scriptural values and teachings.

For four centuries, Baptists have consistently claimed Scripture as authoritative for faith and practice. Heading the hosts’ historical confessional statements has been the declaration that the Bible stands without equal as God’s self-revelation and that it is the record of salvation history. Committing themselves as a confessional people to understanding, interpreting, and applying the Bible’s teachings to individual and community life, and the determination to have no authority above it, Baptists have often affirmed what others have said – that Baptists are “People of the Book.” *How* Scripture has been used, interpreted and applied, however, has not only been an intense occupation for Baptists, but also a challenge to unity, for in each century Baptists have engaged in vigorous discussions, debates, and controversies surrounding the clarification, correction, or perceived threats to the Scriptures’ authority, interpretation, and/or teachings. Nevertheless, overall, a profound value of Scripture has been essential to the Baptist Way.

Out of that deepest commitment to the validity and self-revelatory nature of the Bible in general, and a preference for a New Testament ecclesial model in particular, came several identifying markers scarcely known elsewhere in the 17th century. At first, from the study of the New Testament teaching concerning apprenticeship to (and identification with) Christ, Believers’ Baptism by immersion and a regenerate church membership became bedrock convictions and, in time, became the most visible marks of being a Baptist, (even though Baptists shared similar convictions about, and the practice of, baptism with some Waterlander Mennonites). Baptists burned the emblem of Believer’s Baptism on their family shield from the beginning.

Today, many faith groups embrace Believer’s Baptism. Those most recent Christian movements that follow the New Testament pattern are often called “Baptistic,” (whether that is entirely appropriate or not is another question) when they travel the traces of early Anabaptists and Baptists, who viewed the church as a *gathered, called-out body of Believers whose mission, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to introduce the Kingdom of God to others in the world.* If Baptists are indeed an expression of the Christian church, then all

our acts have theological implications (either positively or negatively). Thus, as Marty noted about us, “if less attention is given today to the *meaning* of believers’ baptism among Baptists—particularly as it relates to the composition of the church, daily living in community with other believers, and personal and congregational ethics—than in some places and times, then we may well expect a decline in baptisms and a disengagement of members,”² even in congregations where attendance has increased. Much more biblical and theological significance attends the baptism of believers than the act itself, and Baptists at their best have both taught and practiced this rich understanding. Historically, the Authority of Scripture for faith and practice, Believer’s Baptism, and Regenerate Church membership have glowed as Baptist trajectories.

Second Set of Identifiers – Autonomy and Community: As individuals become Christ’s apprentices, they voluntarily join with other believers to live in community/communion. The Baptist view of congregational church polity grew theologically from the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.³ The Holy Spirit indwells the lives of men and women of faith and brings about in them moral conviction, holy living, scriptural understanding, empowering to Kingdom tasks, unity with other believers, and giftedness for the building up of the Church (among other results). The regenerate community of faith hears the Spirit and responds together. When the Church listens carefully to the Holy Spirit, whether from Scripture or the working of God in each believing member’s life, unity and guidance and powerful holistic ministry takes place.

Taken to an extreme, however, an emphasis upon individual freedom has and does present a strong challenge for Baptist life together. The danger lies in very *nature of individualized spirituality* if and when that individualism is disconnected from communal accountability. Living in community with other believers presupposes truths: that the body of Christ is a *shared* reality – each believer in communion with Christ and with each other; that the generous exercise of each believer’s gifts is essential for the health, growth, and mission of the Church, without whom it is impoverished; and that the gathered historical wisdom of the Church reflects the spiritual guidance of the Holy Spirit across the ages. Yet Baptists, particularly in the west, have often failed, given their penchant for pervasive individuality, to distinguish this precious communion between believers in Christ from “ecclesio-democratic” processes. To their deep detriment, the result has

² Ibid.

³ Political, social, and ecclesiastical forces also influenced early Baptist church governance.

rendered the Baptist family anemic, particularly in America, sometimes oblivious to the Holy Spirit's movement, and rife with discord, disunion, and isolationism.

David Goatley, of the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention and North American Baptist Fellowship, offered cautious words about a tendency toward disunion in Baptist life, *but affirmed the biblical calling toward "communion."* Perhaps, he said, "the centering role of denominations is no longer needed in the same way it once was." After all, a new age has dawned, inviting individual Christians, churches and denominations an "unprecedented capacity" to be involved with other Christians globally through communication technology. Denominational structures may no longer be necessary for information dissemination or to connect with mission opportunities globally through the intermediary of a denominational mission board. Indeed, "distance has disappeared." *Yet, new ways of looking at the structures may actually lead us to other purposes for the concept of denomination/communion (as Neville Callam has urged us). Rather than make a utilitarian argument for denominational entities ("We can do more together than we can do working alone"), Goatley suggests looking to the deep need for communion, stewardship, solidarity, and care. "There is a calling for communion, a call to be family," he said. "Denominations create the table around which we gather."*⁴

As we have refused to "gather" in our autonomous isolationism, some Baptists throughout our 400 years have insisted that Baptists are the only true expression of church in the world – that all others are but "social clubs" and that their partaking of the Lord's Supper is "naught but light refreshment."⁵ In contrast, Nigel Wright, principal of Spurgeon's College in London, has challenged Baptists to look further than trends to "the imaginable future" as projected by the biblical prophets and the heavenly vision in Revelation 7. That vision of a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language gathered to worship the exalted Christ means "everything about Baptist life is provisional," he says. "Baptists are not the last word, but just a step

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Taking autonomy to the extreme, Landmark Baptists insisted that no other churches were valid but the Landmark Baptist Church; see Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 450-61.

on the journey—a journey we share with God and with people of many communions.⁶ In March of 2003, BWA representatives met in Berlin to explore together the theological dimensions of ecclesiology. The Ecclesiology Symposium summarized its findings by saying, “The local Baptist church *is wholly church*, but it is not the whole church.” Baptist local churches and Conventions/Unions are participants in the one church that God has called into being as we anticipate, and participate in, the full revelation of the children of God.

Many global Baptists are calling for a “corrective ecumenism” that recognizes that the true church does not yet exist, but that the many Christian communions have insights they can offer to other members of the Christian family. While Baptists can learn from Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Christians something about the historical continuity of faith, other parts of the Christian family can learn important principles about aspects from the Baptist movement [like religious freedom or regenerate church membership]. Wright says that Baptists need to care about other parts of the church, because our future is bound up in their future. This desire to be in community, and caring for the souls of others, is at the heart of why Baptists at their best have also championed religious liberty for *all* persons; simply, that each individual has the God-given right to be free to respond to his or her Creator and to live in obedience with others according to the dictates of conscience. The seemingly paradoxical elements of autonomy and community have also been smoldering themes in Baptist life.

Third Set of Identifiers – Church and State: English Separatists took risks when they began to emphasize individual decision-making in matters of conscience and religion. Separatists who became the earliest Baptists took the concept further, defending the right of soul-liberty (soul-competency) from the beginning. Baptists have consistently championed soul-freedom. Knowing this, many Baptist ethicists, theologians and historians have observed with increasing alarm that of late, in some circles “long-held Baptist views on separation of church and state have appeared to be compromised, obscured, and even abandoned.”⁷ Because of moral, security, and pluralism crises, even some Baptists have been willing to call on the state to *help them do their work* – an authority which early Baptists denied the state any and all

⁶ See Nigel G. Wright, *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005) and *New Naptists, New Agenda* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2002). In this vein, see also Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Paternoster Press, 2005).

⁷Marty, Baylor’s 400th Celebration.

jurisdiction. While millions of individuals across the globe suffer daily repression and persecution due to sanctions against religious liberty, some Baptists seem to be content to abandon the role of advocating *for* religious liberty. How Baptists and Baptist-like traditions choose to voice responses to church-state issues in the future may have grave consequences for their witness in society. This championing of Religious Freedom has been one of the enduring historic and characteristic beacons of Baptist life.

Fourth Set of Identifiers: Holistic Mission: As Denton Lotz, former General Secretary of the BWA, and others have affirmed, "We Baptists are at our best when we are doing missions together." From the days of early paid preachers who left London to minister in the villages; to George Liele and Lott Carey, who left New England for Jamaica and Africa; from William Carey and Adoniram Jordon, who pioneered missions in Serampore; to present-day missions at home and abroad, Baptists have supported and participated in mission, evangelism, and church planting. However, the mission of the church is not evangelism alone. Baptists have known that preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God carries the accompanying actions that preach to the poor, proclaim freedom for prisoners, give sight to the blind, release the oppressed, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, attend to human rights, pain, poverty, social justice, and serve as caretakers of the earth, even as we worship and educate. The holistic mission of the church includes perhaps a dozen strategic ministries to the world's peoples and the earth itself. Our mandate is to preach Christ and share the Gospel in as many forms and varieties as possible. Sometimes, as our brother Frances said, "we must even use words." Across our 400 years, this burnished thread of holistic mission has appeared, woven through the story of Baptists, at times with greater intensity, as the peoples of the world gather in Honolulu this week can testify. But what is the state of the world as we turn our gaze to the present?

Present Collisions: New Christendom in a Postmodern World

Today, where 60% of the world's Christians live in non-westernized regions, freer expressions of worship characterize the Two Thirds World Christians as compared with their brothers and sisters in western climes. Holiness, spiritual development, and prayer are emphasized, even as healings, exorcisms, and spiritual warfare are gaining greater prominence. Holistic ministry has become the focus for evangelical groups. One example lies in the facts that evangelism and social ministry are joining hands as congregational ministry seeks to care for the whole person. As individuals are transformed and live in their communities, implications

for community transformation abound. But tensions between heart, head, and hands (between authentic belief and action) face Old Christendom as New Christendom rises; thus, fragmentation is also on the increase . . . and fragmentation is a word that describes our postmodern culture as well.

The present culture, in the midst of the ascending Millennial Generation (iY Gen, GenMe), poses additional considerations whenever the future course of Baptist life is discussed. One thing is certain. It will not continue as we have known it. Economic, political, social, and educational institutions are quickly deconstructing in the chaos, even as the intensive search for security, stability, peace, and justice escalates.

In a mere two decades, global regions will be governed by the youngest generation of leadership, many from countries where more than 65% of the population is below thirty years of age, and who are preparing to challenge present power, political, cultural, and religious structures. Indeed, culture pundits now predict that the coming global sea change will be driven more by generational variance than ideological, religious, or political differences – notwithstanding the deep divides between the middle east and west.⁸

Despite the plethora of generational studies (some of which are very helpful) that delineate categorical descriptors such as overwhelmed, over-connected, over-protected, and over-served, however, the newest generation will, in their own time, ask the same “meaning-of-life” questions posed by the Ancients, albeit in slightly different ways. They will come to ask: Who am I (and why am I living here now); What is wrong with the world (and why am I not happy?); and What is the remedy that will make life good for me (and make my life meaningful)? Baptists as a body soberly seek to embrace, enfold, help, help, and learn from this generation, as recent conversations from several tables have revealed.

The Global Body Speaks: Concerns from the Regions

As Baptists turn their gaze to look ahead, representative Baptists from every region have been gathering to express both hopes and concerns. What are Baptists doing well? Where may we achieve more together? What particular issues face Baptists as we proceed together? Last March, several regional spokespersons

⁸ See secular culture forecaster Richard Poplak’s *The Sheik’s Batmobile: In Pursuit of American Pop Culture in the Muslim World* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010). For a new economic outlook for Africa, see Oxford-educated international economist and Zambian Dambisa Moyo’s *Dead Aid: Why Aid is Not Working and How There is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009). For the “Youth Bulge” theory, see consultants to the US government Gary Fuller and Jack Goldstone, both political scientists predicting the need to watch regions where youth are gaining control; such as Afghanistan, Angola, and Uganda (median ages 17.6, 18, and 15, respectively). See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Population_pyramid and median-age population statistics by country at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_median_age; both last accessed 15 July 2010.

from around the world sat around a huge table – some in person, some by phone – to hear Baptist leaders express their thoughts about our most pressing issues. Here is capsule of concerns they voiced that day and, as one may readily see, the items are so interrelated that, when synthesized, comprise a mere handful.

Concern #1: The Need for Better Laity Training – The question of God’s grand narrative is: “What did Jesus come to do?” Answer: To inaugurate the Kingdom of God. If the church is Christ’s instrument that introduces people to the notion of the Kingdom of God, what is the church empowered to do and be? The way Baptists answer this question impacts all of the other topics. Congregations are empowered to live out the mission of God. What is the call, or holistic mission, of the church to the world? The Gospel shapes the church as well as the world. We Baptists have learned about things on Sunday but do not practice them on Monday, so how do we equip the people to be the Church all of the time?

Leaders noted a “dearth of knowledge in the pews; that is, our people cannot give an answer for the hope within them.” Theological language like “justification,” “regeneration,” “sanctification,” “doxology,” are admittedly terms that people do not use anymore. However, the more disconcerting fact is that many do not know the meanings either; they are not theologically literate, and do not understand what happens to them spiritually as they develop through the stages of faith. In many places, Baptist church members have disengaged from real Bible study, and many of the churches seem to be dying from starvation. What is the remedy?

People need to be around the Word of God where they drink deeply and feast richly and life can be shared . . . Where the Word can be studied together with brilliant, creative, and enthusiastic teachers who use their gifts to study through the week and stimulate life-giving discussion and application. Baptists need to encourage study in cell groups, “manuscript studies” (young couples are doing this in Canada), Sunday schools, and Bible conferences. They need to focus more on Bible studies for children and students of all ages than emphasizing books (however helpful) by other authors. The popularity of “grassroots-readings” of the Bible heighten when people gather over issues that concern them (affinity groups) where they create relationship-bonds with each other and with Scripture. Children and Students/Youth are far more apt to study the Bible if an outflow of that study translates into the Mission of the church.

Teachers must be trained and pastors must undertake this training, guiding the people of God to be on mission with God. Bible study should accompany us through all of life's journeys, even take place cyclically, for seasons of life often require reapplication. Dallas Willard has said that catalytic events shift people in their lives from the cognitive to behavioral (affective) domains.

In local Baptists churches around the world, people want to be disciples . . . they desire to be trained ("what people should do") to live as a Christian man or woman in the workplace where there are no other Christians. How/What do we teach/disciple people to live where there is no comfortable place for them? Leaders also called for consideration about how our methods of training people translate to illiterate world (in India, 40% of the people are illiterate) and places where the Gospel is closed to public usage (as in Malaysia, where we will be gathering next year for the 2011 BWA meetings).

Baptist would do well to focus on Christian formation and its transmission . . . using effective methods for all of our people. How best might we ensure that we are not producing Pharisees (their word) who have engaged in "*knowledge without understanding*" rather than the preferred "*application with understanding*." We must help men and women in the life-long process of faith maturation. The church's mission is simply not effective unless true and mature disciples, or Christ-apprentices, fill our pews. Where is this curriculum?

Concern #2: The Need for Adequate Training Institutions – Global Baptist leaders sensed that in our Baptist training centers for church leaders and educational institutions, sometimes there is often more interest in the academy or what accrediting agencies require than what our churches are mandating to our institutions (seminaries and training centers). May part of the problem be that Baptists have redefined the term *evangelism* to correspond with a brief, outlined verbal testimony alone, they asked? The concepts associated with both "Kerygma" and "Marturia" should relate to testimony . . . "We live for the Lord, and we die for the Lord. What is more difficult, to live or to die for the Lord?" The *evangelion* is both what we are *preaching* (content), and what we are *doing* (action). The best of our Baptist institutions train our leaders to motivate believers to this kind of integrity-living. Baptists have both too few training institutions, and some which fail consistently to produce leaders trained in strongly biblical and sacrificial transformational-leadership models. This point brought the conversation to church leaders and the next concern.

Concern #3: The Need for Effective Leadership – The leaders affirmed that Baptists have marvelous leaders around the world; brilliant, young and old alike. At the same time, many pastors have inadequate or poor leadership skills that prevent them from grappling with the pertinent issues with which the churches are facing in our culture today. Baptist conflict, denominational fractures, divisions, and in-fighting all signal this inadequacy. Deep disappointment and pain have resulted from the failure of leaders to exhibit Christ-like, servant-hearted, leadership.

At the same time, regional BWA spokespersons recognize that leadership paradigms are no longer what they were a decade ago. In many of our regions, the pastor is not THE minister, but one minister in a church full of ministers. These Baptist leaders call for a reconsideration of the Ephesians 4 model in the churches, where biblical gifts are affirmed and an expectation for gifts to be expressed in local church life is pervasive, regardless of ordination. A challenge for future Baptists will be to find a more inclusive model—particularly for racial minorities and women—and one more trusting of fellow Christians who may differ on emphases, worship styles, or church polity. Danger lies when church leadership either ignores, or refuses to give necessary attention to, the identification, development, and deployment of every believer’s spiritual giftedness within the local body, for the Holy Spirit himself has equipped each believer to do the work of ministry and it is the responsibility of church leadership to facilitate this process.

An ancillary movement in some Baptist circles is the reconsideration of ordination. T. B. Maston (Ethicist at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary for more than 40 years) followed Charles Haddon Spurgeon, both of whom *refused to be ordained*. A growing gap exists between who Baptists have been, who we are now, those who are prophetic, and the emerging church (even among all who are carefully guarding Baptist values). To retain a global Baptists identity is a challenge and the need for effective leadership seems clear. Interlaced through these complexities are strong voices asking whether the model of separate orders (clergy and laity) seems contra-distinct to our Baptist roots. Some question whether Baptist churches should formally-ordain the clergy at all. Is it possible for all mature believers in each local church around the world to hear the Spirit of God in a way that results in unity and power to carry out the church’s mission? How does this happen? Hence, the BWA’s theme of the week

Concern #4: The Need to Communicate What the Holy Spirit is Saying to the Churches – We are centered this week in Hawaii upon a specific theme: *Hear the Spirit*. The theme of the next five years will be *In Step with the Spirit*. It is admittedly difficult for the BWA to influence Baptist people at the grassroots level. Instead, the BWA's role perhaps should rather foster the listening to what the Spirit of God is saying to our churches around the world. BWA provides a place to gather and convey that information and guidance and wisdom to the rest of the Body; to hear the broken, give voice to the people who are showing the way, so that the "edges" of the church may be heard. Our collective role is to listen, hear, stimulate, provoke, and "broker," or work on behalf of, two or more groups of people to intercede, negotiate, and arrive at win-win solutions for all. Our communion should at the least result in positive outcomes between brothers and sisters.

Concern #5: The Constant Call to Unity – Our global leaders affirm that a visible Christian unity must go hand-in-hand with the churches' life together and ensue from its engagement of holistic mission. This is the theme of John 17. We also engage in open dialogue with other faith traditions, in part, to show the world that Baptists share the Gospel of Christ together with other Christian groups – a joint effort that Christians do together, all cultures, regions, and ages.

Concern # 6: The Critical Need to Link the Generations – One of the most pressing concerns is the desire to join the generations among Baptists and, as one might expect, the use of technology is imperative to this discussion. Baptists, with their children and grandchildren all over the world watch videos, play computer games, read stories, investigate and play and learn by computer. Baptist church leaders are encouraging their members and churches to become computer literate. How shall we link with them unless we do things together? We must learn the Bible together, read together, live on-mission together. We must foster connections with babies, students, youth, parents, and grandparents across generations. Baptist churches can provide wonderful ministries with Christian families to the many of our churches' families who are either non-Christian or hurting (unmarried, on drugs, divorced, addicted to porn, and others).

Varieties of ways to link with others using these tools exist. But there are deeper connections that must be made between generations as well. Youth and college and seminarians are asking hard questions and trying new solutions when it comes to living their faith; some even doing away with liturgy, forms, or expressions of faith altogether (baptism, communion, even local church membership). Even though this is

painful to observe, a deep commitment seems to pervade Baptist leadership globally with a willingness to find ways to help younger leaders make Baptist life their own. And some are doing just that. Many students (high school, college, and seminary) are choosing to identify with their heritage at the point of religious freedom, especially, because they desire a living faith, a visible church and, while less concerned with historic identity, see freedom and justice as valuable.

One thing is clear: they all want to see that what we do matches what we say. It is important that we harness this new voice and emphasize the “missional advantage” of Baptists’ roots. We are careful to say that the Baptist movement is indeed valuable, but that it does not franchise the church. We emphasize that the Baptist model allows each culture and context to develop its own identity, based around the framework of Scripture, believer’s church, holistic mission, and religious freedom, helpful categories for the youngest thinkers among us, who are questioning whether they will “be Baptists” as they mature. In many ways, the kind of questioning we hear is in the Baptist DNA, and find a way forward may be found together as we trust the One who keeps His promises. The current generation of leadership will, both now and in their own time, find ways to communicate the Good News that answers the ancient longings of human existence.

Concern #7: The Need to Rekindle the Baptist Legacy of Peacemaking – Despite claims to the contrary, Baptists are not merely a people who bear as our primary characteristic a penchant for dissent. There are many positive ways to understand our history and more hopeful perspectives for our constructive engagement for the future. Peace-bearing/Reconciliation is one of these positive themes that traces through the four centuries of Baptist witness, both reminding and challenging us to the continuance of this enduring legacy. Following World War II, Baptist minister James Henry Rushbrooke rewove the wounded tatters of European Baptist life as Christian individuals by nations had to face the pain, forgive each other, and learn to live in Christ together. In the later twentieth century alone, Baptists have woven peace in record numbers as they reconciled major differences in Angola, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Italy, South Africa, Thailand, Zambia, and the United States. Much more must be written and communicated about the Baptist Peacemakers in our heritage.

Eternal Verities Guide Our Future

While it is impossible to project a predictable future course from the trajectory of Baptist life, it still may be possible to ponder the likely directions of our life ahead. Baptists can move forward confidently, calmed by the biblical assurance that the Holy Spirit has determined to continue enabling the liveliness of the body of Christ. As Oden reminds us, "Only in a false hypothesis that says the Holy Spirit is in defaulting His role (the least likely premise in the Christian understanding of history), could the called-out people come to nothing. *Special forms and/or expressions* of the church are constantly coming to nothing, but not the body of Christ itself, being enabled by the Holy Spirit."⁹ Who but Christ can save from sin, or render life meaningful, or heal guilt, or arrest boredom, or liberate from idolatry? God alone in His three persons is our assurance; and His promises are in His self-revealed Word.

Reflection and Projection: Opportunities Abound

Four hundred years old, our Baptist family story is still the result of God's calling, gifts, and empowering. Baptists still uphold a New Testament Church model, preach the Good News of Jesus Christ, identify with Christ in believer's baptism, and practice inter-church cooperation and brotherly union. Baptists at their best have continued to affirm and defend religious freedom for all people embraced by our earliest brothers and sisters. Overarching all has been God's sustaining grace. Yet our work is not finished. We have not arrived.

In a generation drenched with the catatonic spirits of Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida, we can be transmitters of hope. Each generation can bear the stewardship which God has given to extend Christ's Kingdom. Today, Baptists can turn our faces ahead and hear the ticking of God's eternal countdown, and pledge to do what we can with what is in our hands today.

It is a time to share the Good News of Christ with every person on the planet, to re-explore how our churches may best reflect the New Testament patterns in both composition and community. It is a time to re-examine our identities and faith declarations and devise how these may be most effectively communicated in church and wider cultures. It is a time to celebrate our congregational polity and the exercise of spiritual giftedness through diverse and intergenerational leadership, and to use new forms of communication and networks to serve others with greater efficiency. It is a time to advocate for those who have no voice, to

⁹ Thomas C. Oden. "So, What Happens after Modernity? A Postmodern Agenda for Evangelical Theology" in David Dockery, ed., *The Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 185-8.]

work on behalf of righteousness and justice, to strive for religious liberty for all people, and to provide a safe haven for the hurting. It is a time to join hands with other believers in mission as we model unity in Christ, to be reconciled with God, and to be peace-weavers both between ourselves, fellow believers, neighbors, and strangers among us. It is a time to stand together as family, to sacrifice for the good of others, and to love unconditionally.

With great sensitivity, Baptists also need to face global challenges in the days ahead, including identity and doctrinal variations across our varied expressions of family life, how positive dialogue and biblical unity may be best expressed among peoples of other faith communions and world religions, and the dire necessity for holistic, transformational justice ministries within our local communities, states, and nations. Baptists must labor intentionally for the day when true intercultural and multi-ethnic communities will be normative, when missional-Kingdom-living becomes a conscious goal for each believer, and when the adoration of Christ accompanies maturing discipleship and a passionate, deeply-rooted biblical knowledge in every cell group, seeker space, worship center, house church, and sanctuary around the globe.

As we stand upon this threshold, shoulder to shoulder, the Baptist family thrives as grateful communities of faith. We bow our heads acknowledging our dependence on God, confess our need for reconciliation and healing, and pledge our renewed proclamation of Christ. We look into each other's eyes declaring our encouragement for the work God is doing in His various ministries. We commit to one another our prayerful and financial support for the work among us. We solemnly convene to seek and hear the Spirit's voice for continued direction, enabling, and empowerment as His work goes forth to accomplish His purposes. Under God's sustaining grace, may Baptists live expectantly, taking courage to walk the Jesus Way, both today and in coming generations.

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