

Baptist leaders insist covenant offers chance to heal racial wounds

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By Greg Warner

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ATLANTA (ABP)—Advocates of the New Baptist Covenant championed by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton predicted it will help heal the racial divide that has separated Baptists in America since before the Civil War.

William
Shaw,
president of
the National
Baptist
Convention
USA, said a
New Baptist
Covenant
championed
by former
President
Jimmy
Carter holds
the potential
for Baptists
across racial
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Aimee
Jeansonne)

Speaking on behalf of 40 Baptist denominations and organizations in the United States and Canada Jan. 9, Carter and Clinton—two of the world’s most famous Baptist laymen—announced the groups had committed to put aside more than a century and a half of social and theological differences to

unite behind an agenda of compassionate ministry.

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The effort will begin with a Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant, a gathering set for late January 2008, which Carter called “one of the most historic events at least in the history of Baptists in this country, maybe Christianity.”

Baptist harmony was broken, at least in the United States, in the mid-1800s. That’s when divisions between Baptists in the North and South overwhelmed the missionary spirit that previously brought them together.

“Probably not since 1845 has this kind of effort been made to bring together Baptists black and white ... and of diverse theological and regional backgrounds,” said Bill Leonard, a Baptist historian and dean of the [Wake](#)

[Forest Divinity School](#). “And that means it is terribly historic.”

Most Baptists in the United States came together in 1814 to form a missionary society known as the Triennial Convention. Southern Baptists broke away over the slavery issue in 1845. Since then, Baptists have splintered even further.

“For the healing of the nation and the healing of the world, we as Baptists have to experience our own healing,” said Daniel Vestal, national coordinator of the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#). “And I think this represents a step, an effort, a commitment to bring healing between us, renewal between us—black and white Baptists, North and South Baptists, and, frankly, conservative and moderate Baptists. There is great power in that healing.”

In recent years, the four largest of the predominantly African-American Baptist conventions began meeting jointly. They plan to do so again in 2008 in Atlanta, then join with Baptists of many stripes a few days later for the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant.

“We could not do this in this way without the kind of commitment that the African-American Baptist groups have brought to the table,” said Leonard, one of the participants in the Carter Center planning meeting. “That’s what makes this historic.”

“There is a cry for healing,” said Roy Medley, general secretary of the [American Baptist Churches USA](#). The vision of Baptists coming together could encourage American Baptists soured by their denomination’s fragmentation over homosexuality, Medley said.

“For a lot of our young people, they are very disenchanting at the church breaking apart and splintering,” he said. “This is a chance for us to reach out to them and say this ideal of love that Christ has given us is something that we really want to be operative in the life of the church as well. And

that can help us bridge differences that are genuine differences.”

No one expects the convocation to produce a merger of the myriad Baptist groups in North America. But the prospect of collaboration around evangelism and social causes—as described by Jesus in Luke 4: 18-19—left many Baptists assembled in Atlanta Jan. 9 euphoric.

“This is an exciting time for us to be Baptist,” said David Goatley, current president of the [North American Baptist Fellowship](#)—a regional affiliate of the Baptist World Alliance. Goatley is also executive secretary of the [Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society](#), a historic African-American Baptist ministry. “We stand at the threshold of something unprecedented.”

“What you are seeing here today at the [Carter Center](#) is a historic demonstration of Baptist unity,” said Mercer University President Bill Underwood who, with Carter, spearheaded the initiative. “Baptists made an important decision here today, a decision to focus on issues that bind us together as followers of Christ rather than dwell on the differences that surely exist among us.”

Clinton told reporters that those who “did not have both the privilege and the burden to be raised in the Baptist church cannot possibly appreciate” how unique such cooperation is. “This is an attempt to bring people together and say, “What would our Christian witness require of us in the 21st century?”” he said.

“We will be addressing issues in nonpartisan ways but in prophetic ways,” said William Shaw, president of the [National Baptist Convention USA](#), one of the largest African-American denominations.

“We are looking for ways to put feet to our faith,” said Dewitt Smith, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, the African-American body founded by Martin Luther King and others.

“It is possible to be together and to differ on our opinions. When it comes to the things that will help humanity, we must take a prophetic stance—we must take a strong social-action agenda and make it work. I believe what is happening here today is an indication that this will work.”

“I was just glad to see Baptists do something together in a unified way and especially to set a positive image for who Baptists are,” said Emmanuel McCall, an African-American pastor from Atlanta and BWA officer who currently serves as moderator of the mostly white Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Daniel Vestal, national coordinator of the CBF, said the Carter initiative fills a need for “a broader Baptist witness that is committed to social justice as well as evangelism.”

The 2008 convocation will connect participants with ministries and resources on such topics as prophetic preaching, ecology, sexual trafficking, racism, religious liberty, poverty, HIV/AIDS, religious diversity, public policy, youth issues, evangelism with integrity, stewardship and the spiritual disciplines.

Leonard, the historian, said such collaboration for ministry “mirrors those (19th century) societies that the Baptists founded, where they chose to work not so much on the basis of how much they agreed but on what they wanted to do.”

While the Baptists who came together in Atlanta Jan. 9 were thrilled to have the support of two former presidents—both Democrats—they also recognized their movement will be limited if only moderate and progressive Baptists, and only Democrats, get on board.

Mercer’s Underwood told reporters at the Atlanta announcement that Carter and Clinton “are not here in their capacity as political leaders, they are not here in their capacity as Democrats. They are here today in their

capacity as Baptists. We anticipate that there will be many other Baptists participating in this endeavor who also happen to be public officials that happen to be Republican.”

McCall agreed: “I think it’s very important so that it doesn’t come off as a political thing. It would be easy to interpret, with the two Democratic presidents, that it was a political thing. I think it’s important to find other Republican Baptists and bring them into it.”

“If this is seen as a Democratic agenda, that won’t benefit any of us,” said ABC’s Medley. “And if it doesn’t do the pan-Baptist thing, then it will have failed. I hope we do have conservative folk there, as well as progressive and moderate folk. Regardless of where we may be in political parties and things like that, these are things that we’re committed to as the body of Christ, and that agenda is larger than a political agenda.”

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