

EDITORIAL: A time and place for healing wounds

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If you could watch a wound heal, would you do it?

If so, plan to travel to Atlanta in just about a year. Baptists of all races and ethnicities from across Canada, Mexico and the United States will convene to [celebrate a new covenant](#) of committed, compassionate cooperation. Participants will spiritually and emotionally mend a wound that has disfigured the body of Christ for generations.

About 200 years ago, missions fervor compelled Baptists in America to cooperate so they could spread the gospel across the continent and around the globe. By 1845, however, their differences over slavery tore them apart—a denominational precursor to the Civil War.



So, for at least 162 years, Baptists have divided over race. To some extent,

our churches and even conventions have integrated. But the wound inflicted by slavery has not healed enough so the four dominant African-American Baptist conventions and Anglo Baptists far and wide could come together for common passion and purpose.

That's about to change.

In early 2008, Baptists from across North America will gather to demonstrate that their past, marred by conflict, has given way to the present, marked by compassion. As many as 20,000 Baptists of all races from all over the continent are expected to meet in Atlanta for the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant, tentatively set for Jan. 30-Feb. 1.

The gathering reflects the inspiration of Jimmy Carter, a Baptist and son of the South, whose lifetime of influence has restored relationships around the world. Now in his ninth decade, President Carter has committed himself to doing the same for racially and ethnically divided Baptists in North America. The power of his persuasion, combined with the considerable legwork and logistics of Bill Underwood, new president of Mercer University, has brought a spectrum of Baptists to the table. They're all affiliated with the North American Baptist Fellowship, the regional chapter of the Baptist World Alliance. They include the four National Baptist (African-American) conventions, as well as predominantly Anglo groups, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and state Baptist conventions in Missouri, Virginia and Texas, as well as American Baptists and Canadian Baptists, and Baptist groups representing Hispanics, Japanese, Laotians and Russian-Ukrainians.

The magnet pulling them together is ministry. Rather than rally around a creed, they will coalesce around a covenant that will focus them on fulfilling the mandate Jesus outlined in his first sermon—"to bring good news to the poor. ... to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the

Lord's favor has come." Rather than debate theology (or, as erroneously reported in some daily newspapers, create a convention), they will get together to figure out how they can work together to do exactly what Jesus described—help the very people Jesus called "the least of these" in the world.

Unfortunately, as with most great ventures, adversaries want to shoot the covenant and the convocation down before they get off the ground. Some Baptists have opposed the endeavor because of the involvement of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. Several notes on opposition: (1) Whether you agree with Carter's politics, he is a world leader in reconciliation and a foremost advocate for the poor, who are the focus of the covenant. (2) Baptists do not endorse Clinton's admitted failing, but what is the statute of limitation on shame? (3) If you came upon a burning building, would you require total agreement with every rescuer, or would you band together to save lives? (4) As one observer said, "It's stupid to oppose working with people who love Jesus."

The covenant presents a broad and encompassing agenda—big enough for Republicans as well as Democrats; for Canada, Mexico and the United States; for every race and tongue; even for Southern Baptists, who will be welcome as they decide a compassionate cause is more compelling than a creed.

For too many years, Baptists have been known by what we are against instead of what we are for. To our shame, that "against" list often has included racial fellowship and harmony, justice and equality, and wholeness and opportunity for all people. Along the way, we have wounded our reputation as loving, Christ-like people. We have wounded our sisters and brothers and others whose skin color is not our own. We have wounded sensitive spirits who have expected more from people who claim profound faith. Now is the time to bind the wounds and look to Atlanta as a place of healing.

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