

# EDITORIAL: Candles alight for new Baptist unity

February 15, 2008

Posted: 2/15/08

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Would you rather light a candle or curse the darkness?

At least 10,000 candles glowed in Atlanta, pushing back the cursed darkness of racism that enshrouded Baptists in this hemisphere for more than 160 years.

Those “candles” actually were people—Baptists who defied nay-sayers and doom-forecasters to attend the [New Baptist Covenant convocation](#). They brightened the bleak midwinter. They cast light toward a new spring, a time for thawing frozen feelings; a time for planting seeds of reconciliation, collaboration and infinite hope; a time for leaning into awkward trust, unproven optimism and untested love.



Nay-sayers did their best to dampen those candlewicks so they'd never

light. Doom-forecasters projected darkness for Atlanta, predicting polarization. They said the whole thing was cooked up by Jimmy Carter to promote a liberal Democratic agenda. They said the politicians would pollute the well of naive goodwill with partisanship. They said white attendance would be appalling and set racial reconciliation back five generations. They said Southern Baptist Convention-haters would leverage the platform to bash the SBC. They said Bill Clinton would campaign for his wife. In sum, they declared disaster.

They were wrong.

Yes, high-profile Democrats out-numbered high-profile Republicans, in part because Republicans declined to show. Sternly warned by Carter and caught up in the reconciliation spirit, the politicians behaved. The SBC is a non-issue for most of the participants, so it remained primarily in the background. Baptists of many races attended. And Clinton, whose only allusion to his wife was his role as an “unpaid campaign worker,” advocated understanding for and reconciliation with people of other perspectives.

Pilgrims to Atlanta testified this was the best Baptist meeting they ever attended. What could go wrong with preaching that gripped hearts, music that sent souls soaring, laughter and fellowship that warmed spirits, and breakout sessions that challenged and stimulated minds? One participant explained the positive nature of the convocation by noting a negative: “We never voted on anything. So, we never debated or argued. We just focused on fellowship, on healing our relationships and on serving others the way Jesus taught us.”

The Atlanta meeting was “political” in that participants focused on great public issues—poverty, racism, hunger, AIDS, illiteracy, justice, education, crime. But rather than fight over what or how much government should do, they focused on what Christians must do to serve “the least of these” in

society. By those standards, Jesus was the most potent political power of all time.

The Atlanta crowd headed home with a common question on each mind: Now what? President Carter has called a mid-March meeting to attempt an answer.

As wonderful as Atlanta was for the participants, it was like the Mount of Transfiguration—a vision of the possible, but not a place to build a temple. Maybe these Baptists will reconvene by the thousands again, but that should be the lowest priority.

The best mechanism for implementing the spirit of Atlanta is through the North American Baptist Fellowship, which already encompasses the 30 groups represented at the convocation, including Canadian and Mexican Baptists and the broadest range of U.S. Baptist conventions.

But the truest answer to “Now what?” will be revealed in villages and cities across the continent. We will know the New Baptist Covenant abides when it unites Baptists across all colors in their own communities. We will know it lasts when Baptists of all tongues become voices for love and harmony and service. We will know it is real when we don’t need a special occasion to sing and pray and worship and serve together. As one Baptist family.

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