

Editorial: Longing for revival after rupture, realignment

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During such a remarkable and often deeply concerning time in the history of our nation and our world, it was refreshing to get away from the turmoil for a few days. Though that's not what I thought I was going to do.

The Ascent gathering last week in Alexandria, Va.—just outside Washington, D.C.—was a reprieve not only from the troubles of worldly politics. It was also a break from troubling religious politics.

I wasn't expecting that. I was there to work, to learn more about a developing cooperative mission effort. I was there to observe, not to be ministered to. I kept waiting for the business that attends every religious gathering like this. Business wasn't avoided entirely, but it took a back seat to ministry.

The Ascent gathering brought together pastors and ministry leaders from several Protestant denominations for the purpose of connecting with, encouraging, learning from and ministering to one another. It was celebrative and refreshing. It felt like revival.

You and your church need to know there are vibrant efforts like this taking shape around evangelism and missions. And there's welcome at the table.

Rupture

Chris Backert, senior director of Ascent, described the movement's origin and future in three words—rupture, realignment and revival.

Protestant Christianity, known for its lifelong divisions, has undergone a

new season of rupture reminiscent of its beginnings 500 years ago. The Southern Baptist Convention and its affiliated state conventions offer a prime example.

The Southern Baptist Convention was birthed in 1845 through division from Northern Baptists over the issue of slavery. Almost 150 years later, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship split from the SBC in 1991 over a different set of issues.

Within a few years, Baptist state conventions in Virginia and Texas also ruptured. The more conservative Southern Baptist Convention of Virginia split from the more moderate Baptist General Association of Virginia in 1996. The more conservative Southern Baptists of Texas Convention split from the more moderate Baptist General Convention of Texas in 1998. You may notice a pattern there.

Baptist groups aren't the only ones fracturing. Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist and other denominations have undergone their own ruptures over the last few decades.

Realignment

Many, including myself, saw these ruptures as causes and/or results of denominational decline. Indeed, interest in and knowledge about denominations has all but evaporated among the average churchgoer in recent decades. For many, a denominational label is a liability.

More recently, what I and others have observed is what I started calling "a realignment" across denominations. For example, we noticed polity and particular doctrine becoming less important for cooperation than stances on social issues or missions.

In the case of Baptists, some pastors and churches increasingly are finding

more in common with some Methodists, Assemblies of God and other Protestant traditions than they do with fellow Baptists. And, no, this does not mean those Baptists have given up being Baptist.

Some Baptist churches, having been voted out of their historic national “home,” find themselves looking for a new one. They are finding options outside historic Baptist connections.

Ascent is one place where the denominationally disenchanted or disaffiliated can find a national “home”—a place to partner with other like-minded Christians, particularly those interested in evangelism and missions.

Revival

One thing drawing different churches to Ascent is its focus on re-evangelizing North America. While denominational bodies feud over women in ministry, sexuality, money, power and bureaucracy, Ascent is singularly focused on what needs to be done to reintroduce North America to following Jesus.

Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Pentecostal and other churches can work together through Ascent to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ, and without giving up their respective denominational distinctives.

This doesn’t mean Ascent is a better collective than <insert-name> denomination, and less still that Ascent is perfect. It does mean people and churches from very different Christian traditions and polities are already supporting and celebrating one another’s efforts to carry out the Great Commission in North America.

Their shared hope is, just as revival followed previous eras of rupture and

realignment, revival will follow the rupture and realignment happening now. Rather than wallow in mourning diminished prominence, churches can celebrate and lend their hand to what God is doing now. This is the posture of Ascent I observed last week.

Like others in the room, I found this joyful and refreshing. And if that's not revival, I don't know what is.

Finding our place

Realignment is happening not only among churches. It also is happening politically, culturally, socially, economically, globally. It's a disconcerting and destabilizing time. We know what the old connections are and what the expectations used to be. But everything seems up for grabs now. It's no wonder anxiety is up and that it's infected the church.

Follower of Jesus, we are to remember we are citizens of another kingdom. The stuff of this world comes and goes while our one allegiance remains the same. Our one allegiance is to Jesus Christ. Our unchanging obedience is to his commands. Our duty, then, is to find our place in his mission.

More and more I find, the people and places who keep Jesus' mission front and center are the people I want to know and the places I want to be. Because there is life there. And enlivening purpose. I suspect you desire the same.

Ascent is still forming. There are still questions that need to be answered. Those who feel more comfortable within a formalized structure may want to wait to partner with Ascent, while keeping the collective in consideration.

Those looking for distinctly Baptist connections as alternatives to historic connections on a national and global scale can consider [GC2](#) and [Baptist](#)

[World Alliance](#), respectively.

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