

# Associated Baptist Press

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## Jimmy Carter drafts declaration to bring Baptist factions together

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Former President Jimmy Carter, renowned for diplomatic initiatives around the world, has convinced Baptists with often opposing viewpoints to sign a declaration of mutual respect and cooperation.

Carter, who as president negotiated a framework for peace in the Middle East, convened two meetings recently aimed at improving relations among Baptists in the United States.

Carter told Associated Baptist Press even he was "pleasantly surprised" with the outcome of the meetings. "I never did really have any confidence that we could get a group this prominent -- and leadership positions that are quite often in contention -- to agree on substantive issues," he said March 30. "I am very pleased with it."

Following the meetings, moderate and conservative Baptist leaders signed a declaration pledging cooperation in efforts for racial reconciliation and against religious persecution.

In signing a "declaration of cooperation" the Baptist leaders acknowledged "there are unresolved issues among us" but expressed a "wish to overcome differences that may impede our mission, which is to bring about a spiritual awakening in our nation and around the world."

The Baptist leaders pledged to "reach out to all of our neighbors in a spirit of racial reconciliation." They called on "every Baptist church to form a partnership with a church of a different culture or ethnic group."

They also covenanted to "exert our maximum efforts to end religious persecution in all nations and to encourage unfettered religious liberty for all peoples."

Carter said he convened the meetings because he was "concerned about a need for increased understanding among Baptists." The purpose of the meetings was "to discuss differences among Baptists on historical, theological, philosophical and organizational issues."

Moderate and conservative leaders met separately at the Carter Center in Atlanta. Moderates met with Carter in November and conservatives in February. Later, Carter drafted the statement designed to "encapsulate what we considered to be a consensus of the two meetings" and submitted it to participants for suggestions and ultimate approval.

Carter described the exchanges as frank but "all positive in nature, with never a word of criticism of anyone not present."

Among "many suggestions made for common efforts," Carter said, advocacy for racial reconciliation and opposing religious persecution "seemed to be practical and most likely to have broad support."

In addition to agreement on those issues, the leaders also pledged to "treat each other with mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ" and to "demonstrate this commitment in our personal devotions and public acts."

The signatories agreed to "seek other ways to cooperate to achieve common goals, without breaching our Baptist polity or theological integrity, in order that people may come to know Christ as Savior, and so that God may be glorified in ever increasing measure."

The statement also called "all believers to a common prayer effort in a spirit of Christian love." The Baptist leaders pledged to "pray for one another and adhere to Paul's beautiful admonition, 'Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.'" The quotation is from Ephesians 4:32 in the New Testament.

"We call on other Baptists to join us in accomplishing the goals set out in this declaration and in adopting the same attitude of forgiveness, Christian love and a willingness to treat each other with respect," Carter said. "My hope is that it will be possible in the future to arrange common efforts to work together, perhaps on the issue of racial reconciliation."

Participants in the meetings were "predominantly Southern Baptists," Carter said, but also included representatives of the Baptist World Alliance and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., as well as African-American and Hispanic Baptist leaders.

Signers of the document included Tom Elliff, current president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and Morris Chapman president of the SBC Executive Committee. Also signing was Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group formed as an alternative to the conservative-dominated SBC. Another signer was Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, who is credited as a mastermind of the "conservative resurgence" which captured control of the SBC during the 1980s.

Carter, a Southern Baptist, said when he first approached people he knows on both sides of the SBC's conservative-moderate controversy about conducting a dialogue, "they were all somewhat doubtful about potential success."

Carter said participants did not try to resolve deep divisions over theology, philosophy or organizational style.

"A highly representative Peace Committee was formed a few years back whose success was minimal," Carter said. "We decided not to recapitulate that."

He described the meetings as "an exploratory thing" with a goal to "find some common ground" despite those differences.

Carter, who has traveled to 110 foreign countries, told Associated Baptist Press it is "embarrassing to us" that Baptists have developed a reputation for contention, argumentation and divisiveness. "I think it hurts our missionary work overseas. I think it hurts our personal testimony," he said.

Carter pointed to the New Testament example of Peter and Paul, who disagreed sharply over the issue of circumcision of Gentile believers. "Even in the early church days there were sharp differences on theological and even organizational matters, but they worked side by side in the name of Jesus," Carter said.

"I will always be a Southern Baptist and I teach a fairly conservative Sunday school lesson," Carter said, "but I still have friends in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I reach out both ways and have a very easy and close relationship in both directions."

"I think 95 percent of individual Baptists deplore the differences that have arisen and would like to work toward common goals," he said.

Other signatories were Jimmy Allen, the last moderate to be president of the Southern Baptist Convention; Dan Arial, pastor of Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., where Carter attends; Patricia Ayres, a past moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; Lawrence Edward Carter Sr., dean of the chapel at Morehouse College in Atlanta; Mark Corts, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C.; David Dockery, president of Union University in Jackson, Tenn.; Jimmy Draper, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board; James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee; Timothy George, dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School; Kirby Godsey, president of Mercer University; former SBC president Jim Henry; Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest Divinity School at Wake Forest University; Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance; Reginald McDonough, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia; Dellanna

O'Brien, executive director of Woman's Missionary Union; Omar Pachecano, president of Hispanic Baptist Theological Seminary in San Antonio, Texas; Elaine Smith, president of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.; Deen Day Smith a Southern Baptist from Atlanta; Charles Wade, pastor of First Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, and past president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and Daniel Weiss; general secretary of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

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