

SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION 1996

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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"The Southern Baptist Convention:

Disintegration, Stagnation or Revitalization?"

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, one of our American submarines went down off the New England coast. Divers attempted to rescue those on board. In Morse code, they picked up the following message: "Is there any hope?"

Is there any hope for revival, for renewal, even for the future of the Southern Baptist denomination? Lyle Schaller, noted author and church growth analyst, says that nothing short of a "new Reformation" will halt the declining influence of religious denominations. Daniel Weiss, the General Secretary of the American Baptist Churches in the USA, in a recent meeting to assess the future of denominations, says that today's churches have become "so organized, categorized, systematized, and homogenized that we often become paralyzed. The organization is often seen as an end in itself rather than a means to an end." Peter Wagner, professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, says that there has never been such a widespread change in the sights and sounds of Christian churches in all parts of the world since the Protestant Reformation, and we are looking at what he calls "Post-Denominational Churches."

In one sense, there seems to be the sounds of Disintegration. Then, there's the deadening silence of Stagnation. It has happened to denomination after denomination and though it gives the appearance of life, it is slowly dying. It no longer teems with real life, but is only a shadow of its former self. The insidious danger is that it can be happening without denominations realizing it--or even recognizing it--and doing nothing about it.

Churches, homes, nations, institutions and denominations constantly stand in one of three positions: disintegration, stagnation or revitalization. Recently, ABC News did a week long series of interviews with a cross-section of the American people. It underscored the growing concern of many Americans about the unraveling of the spiritual and moral fabric that has held us together. One man stated it eloquently when he said that we were like a big quilt made up of many patches, and it seems each patch has its own identity apart from the rest of the quilt. Somehow we need to find that common thread to hold us together.

We must discover that counter force that builds up, rather than tears apart. Martin Luther King called for America to become "the Beloved Community." Paul called us the "family of believers." Peter called us "the family of God." John Gardner, a former government official, wrote an essay entitled "Building Community"¹ which addresses the development of a strong, cooperative community. The factors he pointed out are amazingly similar to those possessed by believers who had been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and who began to build a dynamic force that gave them community, cohesiveness, and common purpose. Acts 9:31 summarizes that regenerative family of faith. *"Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord"* (Acts 9:31, NIV).

In building family, in building nations, in building churches, in building denominations--these factors are the realities which make for revitalization. I call Southern Baptists to consider these today.

I. WHOLENESS INCORPORATING DIVERSITY

"All the believers were one in heart and mind..." (Acts 4:32a, NIV).

With the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the church in Acts 2, and the response to Christ from those of Jewish lineage, to the conversion of Gentiles in Acts 10, the fledgling Christian community found itself a diverse people quickly. They had to make major adjustments realizing the body was a whole made up of diverse parts which was the sum of its varied parts. It was not the whole splintering into diverse parts, but rather diverse parts uniting to form the whole.

The early church did not agree on everything. There were individual and corporate clashes; however, they were mature enough in the Spirit of Christ that they allowed these and stayed together in the pursuit of God's agenda for a lost world.

We, as Southern Baptists, are a diverse people. This is a source of our richness, but this is also a source of challenge for us as a denomination. To succeed and be revitalized, we must have more than tolerance and sympathy. We must appreciate and appropriate this diversity for the common good.

Our challenge is that there are some among us who seek to pigeon hole all of us into their pigeon holes, but we Baptists flocks do not fit into them very well! There must be a clear rejection of this legalistic and narrow spirit, which one writer notes, is marked by the "weaknesses of intolerance, hasty judgments, inflexible to constructive change, intimidation by others' evaluations of them, and tending to such separation from mainstream Christianity that they become almost isolated."² In our spirit, we must always seek to be like Jesus, who was full of Truth and grace.

In any society, church or denomination there are extremists. There are also some who are, as one writer describes, "fanatical." "A fanatic is someone who has lost his way and redoubled his effort. He makes up for his spiritual emptiness with noise and activity. He is as dangerous as he is insensitive. Get close to one and like the drowning man in the lake, he's liable to pull you under."³ Southern Baptists need to steer clear of this spirit or we'll all be pulled under. It is a type of rigid "boundary marking" mania that goes beyond the bedrock doctrines and principles of the Word of God.

It reminds me of a story that comedian, Emo Philips tells about this mentality. "In conversation with a person I had recently met, I asked, 'Are you Protestant or Catholic?' My new acquaintance replied, 'Protestant.' I said, 'Me too! What franchise?' He answered 'Baptist.' 'Me too!' I said. 'Northern or Southern Baptist?' 'Northern Baptist,' he replied. 'Me too!' I shouted. We continued to go back and forth. Finally I asked, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879 or Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?' He replied, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912.' I said, 'Die, heretic!'"⁴

“Almost 40 years ago the editors of *Look* magazine posed a question to a young Baptist evangelist about to lead a large crusade in New York. When they asked if he was fundamentalist or liberal in theology Billy Graham replied, ‘...if by fundamentalist you mean ‘narrow,’ ‘bigoted,’ ‘prejudiced,’ ‘extremist,’ ‘emotional,’ ‘snake handler,’ ‘without social conscience’--then I am definitely not a fundamentalist. However, if by fundamentalist you mean a person who accepts the authority of the Scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ, the atoning death of Christ, His bodily resurrection, His second coming and personal salvation by faith through grace, then I am a fundamentalist. However, I much prefer being called a “Christian.” The terms liberalism and fundamentalism have arisen in modern days. Neither is found in sacred scripture.’”⁵

“Wholeness is not a kind of monolithic sameness in which individuals lose identity, but the Bible sees it as fellowship within the family...the whole family fellowship is much larger than any particular element in it.”⁶

II. SHARED VALUES

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...” (Acts 2:42a, NIV).

Diverse parts are brought together by shared values and beliefs - the diversity becomes a university: united under one God, one faith, one baptism.

“To require a people [of God] to agree on everything would be unrealistic and would violate our concern for diversity. But it has to agree on something. There has to be some core of shared values. The values may be reflected in written laws and rules, in a shared framework of meaning, in unwritten customs.”⁷

The core for us is centered in the Bible:

- *its authority* (that is, its God-breathed inspiration as *God’s Word*),
- *its inerrancy* (that is, its truth as *God’s Word* without any mixture of error), and
- *its infallibility* (that is, because it is *God’s Word* it is not able to have any error).

The major values of our lives, our families, our churches, and our denomination flow from this biblical centrality. B.H. Carroll, founding President of Southwestern Seminary, stated it for us: "We are entitled to no liberty in these matters. It is a positive and very hurtful sin to magnify liberty at the expense of doctrine."⁸

"During Howard Stern's recent appearance on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, the obnoxious display by American radio's leading bad boy far surpassed his typical egocentric shtick. By the time Stern got off his bawdy bits and started hawking his book, no doubt Leno had already lost many family-oriented viewers. The host was obviously uncomfortable with his guest's actions and assertions. At the risk of alienating his audience, Leno took an unexpected stand.

To support the claim that his new tome is 'the fastest-selling book in the history of books,' Stern held up a Bible and announced, 'The Gideon Company is now putting *my* book in the place of Bibles in hotels.' An incensed Leno responded by holding up the Bible his guest brought as a prop and saying, 'Howard, something horrible is going to happen to you... This book will strike you down as you go down the road. It will go through the windshield and pierce your heart.'

'I am sounding like an evangelist now, but I predict that's what will happen-- suddenly, all that is in this book is making perfect sense to me,' Leno concluded, still holding up the Bible."⁹ This Book does make perfect sense. It is the golden thread which weaves our lives together, and which must be preached, taught and lived. Failure here means ultimate failure--not only denominationally, but personally.

Those who ignore its truth become ecclesiastical Kevorkians, assisting those around them to commit spiritual suicide. I learned only to live by the Golden Rule which is nothing without Salvation."

If we stay true to this Book, we will not fail. We will not have to have study committees meeting for years to discuss if same-sex marriages are acceptable, if priests/bishops/ministers who marry them are heretics, if abortions are permissible, if suicide on demand is a right to choose, if racial discrimination is optional, if gambling is a social benefit to our communities, if poverty is tolerable. Like Jay Leno said, "all that is in this Book is making

perfect sense to me.” These shared values are not only good for us, but they reap tremendous benefits to all who accept them and believe them.

III. CARING, TRUST, TEAMWORK

“...but they shared everything they had” (Acts 4:32c, NIV).

As a family and a church provide a climate of trust and care, we as a denomination must also be an umbrella to those in our Baptist family, to insure the accomplishment of our group purposes.

Somehow we must find a way to help our pastors and staff members, who--by their own moral choices, emotional burn-out or by church conflict--have been forced to the sidelines. Nearly everyone of us can say, “I lost a friend recently” because of one of those reasons. Not only are they leaving the ministry, but some are leaving this world. In the last few months, several of our brothers took their lives leaving bewildered and heartbroken families, churches and communities.

Tragically we are seeing forced resignations at the rate of 125 every month. Dr. Jimmy Draper reported that at a recent meeting of representatives of Southern Baptist agencies, it was determined that those agencies receive 40-50 calls from pastors or staff members who are ready to quit or change positions--every day!

We must help pastors and churches in a more cohesive way. We are in this together. What weakens one, weakens all--what strengthens one, strengthens all.

“August 3, 1992, the Summer Olympics in Barcelona: Deric Redmen finished dead last in the 100-meter sprint. His time was probably the worst ever. He received no gold, silver or bronze medal. Yet as Redmen ran the course, the grandstands erupted with applause. Many people stood to cheer him on, not because he was the fastest, but because he finished the race.

You see, shortly after leaving the starting blocks, the runner from Great Britain pulled a hamstring and fell to the ground in obvious pain. Medical help rushed onto the track to help him. Nobody would have thought anything of it had he been carried off the track. We would not have thought any worse of him for failing to finish; after all, he was injured.

Surprisingly, Redmen refused the medical help, struggled to his feet and began a painful journey to finish the course. His father came to his side, and they slowly, painfully made their way. One medic came to convince them to stop. The father and son both refused and continued on. They crossed the finish line, the applause thundering from the grandstands. Deric Redmen--the hero--simply because he finished the race.”¹⁰

We must help each other finish the race. We must have the same commitment to each other that Stu Weber, pastor of Good Shepherd Community Church in Portland, Oregon, had as a celebrated U.S. Army Ranger at one time, and wrote about in *Leadership* magazine. He said that while he was in Ranger school, he learned the Ranger “theme”: *You go out together, you stick together, you work as a unit, and you come in together. If you don’t come in together, don’t bother to come in!* What a great statement!

Desmond Hoffmeister, General Secretary of the Baptist Convention of South Africa says, “There is a beautiful African word, *ubuntu*, which means my humanity is bound up with your humanity. I cannot be human if you are not human and you cannot be human if I am not human.”

IV. EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION

The words “*all*,” “*everyone*,” “*anyone*,” and “*together*” are rampant in the book of Acts. The strength of the church and our denomination is the dispersal of leaders throughout every segment of the organization. “Beyond that wide network of identified leaders, there will be, in a vital community, a large number of individuals voluntarily sharing those leadership tasks ... members of that well functioning community must communicate with one another. Much conscious effort is needed to maintain a free flow of information among all elements of the system, and to combat the we-they barriers that impede the flow.”¹¹

One of our most daunting challenges is to see that there is a sense of participation, information and opportunity for all of us--without compromising our biblical principles.

We have a small lake on our church property. Several years ago we placed a pair of swans on the lake. The Florida State Wildlife Commission informed us that the lake could handle another set. We selected two and placed them with the previous two inhabitants. You would have thought there would have been a hearty welcome; instead there was isolation and rejection.

There is a sense in which we have ignored some swans on our denominational lake--particularly the growing number of ethnics and the huge number of godly and talented women among us. They look like swans, swim like swans, talk like swans. They are us! We're all in this lake together. Failure to take advantage of this valuable resource would be a tragic waste. We should not ignore them or pay lip service with low visibility and narrowed opportunities. While we're making progress in this area, we must continue to press forward. "Affirmative action" and growing inclusiveness should not be debatable in this matter.

As I've been intensely immersed in our denominational life the last two years, I've had opportunity to observe us at close range from coast to coast. We are making strides in widening the participation level across a wider range of our Southern Baptist family, but there are a few who demonstrate a need to continually manipulate the procedures for denominational service and control beyond the call extended to Southern Baptists several years ago to return us to biblical authority. That call was a unifying factor for us, and that noble intention we salute. But to carry it beyond this, as a few seem determined to do, cast suspicion on the original intent. If the original intention is to be honored, these brothers need to be like Cincinnatus, (for whom Cincinnati, Ohio was named), who in 458 B.C. was appointed dictator at Rome in order to rescue a consular army which was surrounded. At the time of his appointment he was working on a small farm. He is said to have defeated the enemy in a single day and celebrated a triumph in Rome. He maintained his authority only long enough to bring Rome through the emergency. He then resigned and

returned to the farm! If return to biblical authority was the original intent, I appeal to our brothers to emulate Cincinnatus. That will clarify the purity of the call to arms. If it exceeds the original intent, let us expose this for what it is--political manipulation that freezes the work of the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ. It is a shadow on the soul of Southern Baptists, and if it lengthens, it has the potential to be more damaging than our struggle for the Bible. One extreme kills the letter of the law; the other kills the spirit of the law.

There are those who have "the Peter-John syndrome." Who will sit on the left hand and who will sit on the right hand? To serve at a trustee or committee level or as a captain in state or denominational politics, appear to be the ultimate achievement; and principles and integrity can be sacrificed on the altar of accommodation and blind loyalty to a temporal kingdom under the mask of continuing the conservative resurgence. From time to time, we hear rumors of starting state conventions within state conventions. I urge Southern Baptists not to go down this road of secession. It will only lead to the Balkanization of the SBC--more resources poured into structures, more legal entanglements and more diversion. If it happens one place, and is recognized, it can happen in another. It is not beyond imagination, to have two or three "conventions" within a state, all vying for resources, churches and representation on SBC boards. The long term effect will not be healthy, and we will see the demise of our SBC as we know it.

Does that mean we are to acquiesce our biblical principles when those principles are not being upheld at the local or state level? Definitely not! It does mean that resources are redirected, and voices of opposition are raised. In time, the existing structure can be revitalized and redirected as our own SBC has been.

But gratefully, by far, the great mainstream of Southern Baptists assume the foot-washing position of Jesus, and their mode of operation is the mode of Paul whose first prayer was, "What would *You* have me to *do*?" They assume the quiet place or the public place. They go quietly about the King's business unless tapped for service. Their agenda becomes what is the best for all of us, and how and who can best accomplish those tasks without any thought to repaying favors, prior political commitments, or sitting on the right or left hand of those in power positions. Of such is the Kingdom of God and is the great heartbeat of Southern Baptists. May your tribe increase.

The kind of participation that builds trust must be of genuine *agape*--that is, when we see each other, not as people to be manipulated, but family to be cherished and included as equal partners in our mutual purposes. We must talk with each other...State Convention Presidents, Executive Committee, laity, denominational leaders, Convention elected leadership, board and-agency heads. If we do not, we will become isolated from each other and in time, we all will lose. To put it in the words of Benjamin Franklin, speaking to our nation's forefathers as they faced a critical moment in their decision to go forward in becoming a nation and their very lives lay on the line, "if we do not hang together, we will surely all hang separately!"

One of the prime motivations as your president, was to reach out in making my appointments. The criteria was (1) Bible (2) support (3) Cooperative Program and (4) new people. I remind these appointees and those that they nominate to be true to your promise to God, to His Word and his people.

There is another area of exclusion that we must make effort to remove and that is the sin of racism. We're making progress. Last year in Atlanta, we took a giant step on our historic vote on "The Resolution on Racial Reconciliation." We're not there yet. Ancient strongholds are not easily dismantled. This has been clearly demonstrated in the rash of fires demolishing dozens of black churches in recent months. We deplore these acts of blind hatred. We urge every resource available to be marshaled to bring the guilty to justice. Evil must not triumph.

We, as Southern Baptists, stand prayerfully with our comrades in the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ. I urge this convention to pass a resolution reiterating our position of support. In further evidence of our compassionate concern, tomorrow night we will pass the bucket and we are going to give a gift of money to underscore that we back up our words with action. I know that our Baptist Builders, volunteers with building skills, have been notified by our Brotherhood Commission to be ready to move into communities who have lost their buildings and be participants in rebuilding these churches. I urge our pastors and church and state convention leaders to go home and take collections and free up resources to assist in rebuilding. In the past we have been too quiet when these things have happened. Those days are history. Out of the smoldering ruins of those houses of worship, new buildings will rise, but also a new message - built on our common bond of fellowship in Jesus Christ:

that message to you is that we no longer say "you shall overcome", but say with you "We shall overcome."

"We're to experience *koinonia* in which each Christian participates in the wholeness of the body and life of Christ. It is not the sharing in which each individual acquires a fraction of the whole --- like dividing up an estate or cutting a watermelon or pie --- it's like a group of people on a hot summer day plunging into the same swimming hole. Each one does not monopolize a certain fraction of the water, but all enjoy the wholeness of the stream or pool."¹²

V. AFFIRMATION

"...Barnabas... *Son of Encouragement!*" (Acts 4:36b, NIV).

"...they met with the brothers and encouraged them" (Acts 16:40c, NIV).

"A healthy community reaffirms itself continually. It builds its own morale. It may face up to its flaws and tolerate criticism, but basically it has confidence in itself."¹³

We, as Southern Baptists, rejoice in those areas where we can measure some of God's grace and blessings upon us. In this past year...

- We saw baptisms nationally and internationally take an upswing, baptizing nearly 700,000 people last year.
- We saw the second highest number of new church starts in our history-- nearly 1,600.
- We saw record numbers of our people serve as volunteers on mission projects.
- We saw our Baptist schools reach record level enrollments and four of our six seminaries increased enrollments over the previous year.
- We saw new levels of generosity as we lent assistance to those stricken with natural disasters and community disasters such as the Oklahoma City tragedy. We, as Southern Baptists, were there!

- We saw record giving in our mission offerings and Cooperative Program. Those offerings continue to be critical in terms of what we are able to do in supporting our missionaries, seminaries, and church starts. It is the life support system. Withdraw it or cut it back and life is jeopardized.

“Bishop McManus compared the need for Catholic schools with a story of a mother superior of a religious order who liked milk. ‘The mother superior was suffering from cancer and at one point, when she needed rest, the other nuns put a couple of teaspoons of brandy in her milk,’ he explained.

‘They kept on and on until one day they put in two jiggers of brandy. She later gathered the nuns together anticipating her own death and she said, “Whatever you do, don’t kill the cow.”’¹⁴ Our Cooperative Program is not a sacred cow, but ‘ol Bossie sure has delivered lots of gospel milk which has nourished the greatest missionary-sending, seminary-preparing, gospel-preaching denomination in history! Let us make no apologies for challenging our churches to be unapologetically supportive of our Cooperative Program. They also have the right to expect those in leadership to lead by example and to call us to a growing faithfulness in this pipeline of life.

Also, let us make no apology for the name, “*Baptist*.” That name is usually respected and appreciated around the world where we now number between 80-100 million members and worshippers. This is illustrated by an experience that Fletcher Allen, editor of Tennessee’s Baptist and Reflector, had with a tour group of journalists in Israel some time ago. He reported that “soon after landing at Elat, two Israeli military officers whisked me off to the back little room, with no more than a curt, ‘Come with us.’

I did not think I looked like a spy, nor could I remember any suspicious activity. I rationalized that they were talking to the wrong guy. I began to feel uneasy when the questioning began. They were polite, but thorough and very serious.

Something they said sparked my memory. I was carrying two cameras, a tape recorder, and several note pads. In short, I looked like a journalist. I also remembered that I had taken photos from the air over Sinai. I later learned there were several Israeli army bases in the area.

They let me go when I mentioned that powerful word, ‘Baptist.’ Connecting Baptist with journalist helped my case considerably. ‘We know Baptists,’ they said, ‘They seem to be everywhere.’ I thought about their remarks after I boarded the plane again. I have thought about the incident many times since.”¹⁵

We must give room to each other when a sister church feels it does not need the Baptist “tag” to reach their community. We must, however, never hang our heads in shame because of that name.

Recently, while in California one of our Southern Baptist pastors shared an interesting observation with me. In recent years, some churches that had dropped the Baptist name were putting it back on their signs because “people are coming to understand what that name means and stands for--and it tends to draw, rather than repel, people.”

The Hyatt Regency doesn’t say “a hotel” nor does Mercedes-Benz say “non-car.” They don’t need to because their names are synonymous with a quality product. Fifteen-and-a-half million folks in 46,000 churches and missions can rejoice in God’s blessings upon us.

VI. LINKS BEYOND THE COMMUNITY

“The sound community has seemingly two contradictory responsibilities; it must defend itself from the forces in the outside environment that undermines its integrity, yet it must remain open, constructive, and extensive relationships with the world beyond its boundaries.”¹⁶

“While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2, NIV).

What was that work? It was a work of evangelism, church planting, discipling, and confronting a pagan world with the truth for Jesus Christ. We must do a better job of producing Christians who can see the world through the eyes of Christ. Jesus saw the world through God-sized eyes.

“Our churches must be an outpost of the Kingdom of God, operating on the frontier of human need.”¹⁷ That need is a personal relationship to Jesus Christ. The fields are white unto harvest. People are more open to Christ today than any time in my 36 years of pastoring. We must get back to soul-winning.

David Bryant, in his book, *In The Gap*, says that every Christian experiences a three-part conversion: *a conversion* out of the world to Christ, *a conversion* out of self into the body of Christ, and both tied into *a conversion* with Christ and others back into the world.”

Once again, evangelism must become our magnificent obsession, for we can hear the footsteps of “dead men walking” all around us. “*For you were dead in your transgressions and sins*” (Ephesians 2:1, NIV).

We can’t do this job alone. We should consider joining our spirits and voices with others who share our vision, our values and our commitments. We can forge a stronger voice in our nation by developing these relationships and implement appropriate ways to link our concerns and influence. The time is now ripe. We must look at some kind of relationships with groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals. Perhaps we can find a common ground in reaching a lost nation and speaking together on those issues that effect the moral and social concerns of our day. Further, it removes us from an isolation mindset and keeps us a dynamic force in the mainstream of the evangelical community.

VII. DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE: *Evangelizing and Discipling the Rising Generation of Youth and Young Adults*

Paul “*came to... Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived... Paul wanted to take him along on the journey...*” (Acts 16:1a,3a, NIV).

“Any community that seeks to ensure its continued vitality will not only enable these young people to develop to the full, but will prepare them for their future roles, instilling the values fastening commitment to shared purpose, and teaching them to preserve and renew the common heritage.”¹⁸

That translates for us --

(1.) *Evangelizing our youth:*

- In 1972, 31% of those we baptized were 12-17.
- In 1994, 23 % of those we baptized were youth.

Since 1972, no other age group has had a greater decline in the percentage of total baptisms. By the year 2025 there will be 43 million young people between the ages of 10 and 19. We cannot miss evangelizing this generation and the one rising behind it.

(2.) *Educating our students and young adults:*

In preparing our future leaders to develop to their fullest, we must do a better job of mentoring and preparing them for the job challenges they will face. Perhaps, it could be something like an intern program before they receive their degree, where they can learn excellence from the veterans of the faith of excellence. I believe we would lower our casualty list and raise our leadership to a new level.

(3.) *Engaging our young people in denominational life:*

The freshness of their approach, the dynamic and insights they can bring, the enthusiasm and energy they can give, must be captured. This generation is more interested in making war on the devil than in our denominational civil war. The reason they don't attend many of our programs and meetings is because we are too often out of touch with their mind set, and they tune us out. We can lose this vast resource if we do not intentionally engage them at every level of our life together.

VIII. A FORWARD VIEW

"During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' After Paul had seen the vision, he got ready at once to leave for Macedonia..." (Acts 16:9,10 a,b, NIV).

"A healthy community should have a sense of where it should go and what it might become. If it drifts, it may have changes forced upon it, that it would not have chosen. Today, change is a given -- for good or ill. So the

question becomes “where will these currents of change take our community if we fail to act?”¹⁹ The protecting of what “is” often sabotages what “could be.” All too often on the long road up, leaders become servants of “what is,” rather than shapers of “what might be.”

Robert P. Meye, Professor Emeritus of New Testament studies comments, “Every new generation of Christians and Christian agencies has to be ‘born again.’ The challenge is to reinvent the church/agencies while not compromising the gospel.”²⁰

“Around the turn of the century, I understand there were two companies formed. Both had to do with moving people from one place to another.

The first company was Browning Buggy Whip Company. Since horses were the main source for moving people, Browning put his whole future into developing all kinds of buggy whips of every size, shape and color. The other company was called Ford Transportation Company. It also was engaged in moving people from one place to another.

It is not surprising the Browning Buggy Whips have long since gone out of business, but the Ford Transportation Company became the Ford Motor Company. Both were dealing with horses--the basic means for moving people. The difference is that Browning Buggy Whip saw horses as an end in themselves. Ford saw horses only as a means to their main objective--transportation. Horses went out of style - transportation is still important today.”²¹ The methods (horses) change; the message (transportation) never changes.

“The Covenant For A New Century” is a step forward in our denomination’s looking to the future. It is a change from horses--for more effective transportation--but it is not the ultimate solution for revitalization. Rick Warren--in a recent prophetic and insightful address--was on target when he said, “restructuring will not be enough--you must also have revitalization.”

Revitalization is of the heart. It occurs in the prayer closet, in seasons of fasting, in experiencing God in our personal walk. This “power walk” will in turn have a positive impact on our churches, homes, communities and denomination. The God of yesterday and today is also the God of tomorrow, and you cannot walk with Him without walking forward.

CONCLUSION

Disintegration, stagnation or revitalization? The choice is in our hands and in our hearts. We cherish that--in our past--which has made us what we are. However, to be the shapers of what might be and to be "the beloved community," "the family of believers," we must keep experiencing God--the same yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Several years ago, my home church, First Baptist Church, Nashville, underwent a renovation program in which they decided to tear down the old auditorium and replace it with a new one. I had many memories tied up in that old one. It was where I was baptized; where I sat on the left side of the balcony with my mom, dad and brother; and where I heard Dr. W.F. Powell, (preaching in a white suit), tell the Good News. Teachers, friends, mentors who had life-long influence on me walked those corridors of my mind, and I had trouble releasing this fixture from my past.

I went downtown to make some pictures and taste my memories the week before they began tearing it down. I slipped into the church, sat in our old balcony seats and wept. No one else was in the church. Then the organist came in and, not knowing I was there, began to rehearse the music for Sunday--and this is what I heard thundering across the empty auditorium like a thousand drum rolls:

*"Oh, God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!"*

I went away glad in my heart. First Baptist was not disintegrating when those walls came down. It was not stagnating, but rather, living in the memories of yesterday, it was being revitalized in the order to live for a brighter future ... and so can we as Southern Baptists!

Then, God's promise in Isaiah 58:11-12 can be ours: *"The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings."*

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- ¹ John Gardner, "Building Community," *Celebration Journal*, (Celebration, FL: The Celebration Co.), Spring 1996, pp. 6-15.
- ² Craig Skinner, *Ties that Bind* (San Francisco: Christian Universities Press, 1993), p. 64.
- ³ Jamie Buckingham
- ⁴ Paul Kroll, "'Boundary Marker' Christians," *The Plain Truth*, August 1995, pp. 20-21.
- ⁵ Craig Skinner, op. cit., quoting "Billy Graham....," *Life*, 1956:49, p. 63.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 65.
- ⁷ John Gardner, op. cit., p. 11, brackets mine.
- ⁸ Timothy George, *Baptists and Their Doctrines*, p. 139.
- ⁹ A. Larry Ross, "Tonight Show Prophecy," *Christianity Today*, 5 February 1996, p. 13.
- ¹⁰ Jim Reimer, "From My Heart," *Sharing Love with Springfield*, Second BC, Springfield, MO, 15 November 1992.
- ¹¹ John Gardner, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
- ¹² Staff writer, *The Vision*, FBC, Emporia, Kansas.
- ¹³ John Gardner, op. cit., p12.
- ¹⁴ fr. *Florida Catholic*, March 1996.
- ¹⁵ William Fletcher Allen, "One Word More," *Baptist and Reflector*, 13 September 1995.
- ¹⁶ John Gardner, op. cit., p.12.
- ¹⁷ Caesar Clark, *Baptist Standard*, 8 January 1969, p. 13.
- ¹⁸ John Gardner, op. cit., p.12.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p.12.
- ²⁰ Neil Earle, *The Plain Truth*, n.d., p. 5.
- ²¹ John Ed, "Leadership," *Frazier Memorial Messenger*, Frazier UMC, 4 February 1996.