

*John Marshall's Convention Message***Splintering Splinters, Not Glue**

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Preachers have long speculated that denominations were begun by three blind men Jesus healed. To heal the man born blind, Jesus "spit on the ground, made some mud from the saliva, and spread the mud on his eyes" (John 9:6). The healed man, feeling others could be healed only if each detail of his healing were replicated precisely, became an avid spittite-muddite-touchite.

A different blind man (Matthew 9:29), whom Jesus healed by only touching his eyes, also felt his experience had to be precisely duplicated. He became, after falling out with the man born blind, an antisplittite-antimuddite-touchite. Blind Bartimaeus was healed only by Jesus' pronouncement, "Receive your sight!" (Luke 18:42). After a heated argument with the other two blind men, he organized the antisplittite-antimuddite-antitouchite denomination.

Spittite-muddite-touchite, antisplittite-antimuddite-touchite, antisplittite-antimuddite-antitouchite denominations have disagreed ever since. Let's rewrite the fable to consider what could have glued the three denominationally.

Petty differences divided them. Vital commonalities could have united them. Rather than splintering over splinters, lesser things, the three could have been denominationally bonded by three important traits they had in common: one, a personal relationship with Jesus; two, God's Word; three, missions.

The first vital trait uniting them was their personal encounter with Jesus. He was real and authentic to them. We must never cease believing Jesus can change people through a new birth. May we always embrace Jesus' admonition to Nicodemus, "You must be born again." We need to live as if we have really been touched by Christ. Holiness matters most, and only Jesus can do this for us.

The second vital trait uniting them was God's Word. In all three healings, Jesus spoke: to the man born blind, "Go wash" (John 9:7); to the second man, "Let it be done for you according to your faith" (Matthew 9:29); to Bartimaeus, "Your faith has healed you" (Luke 18:42). All three yielded to Jesus' words. Their shared obedience to God's Word could have united them.

Thirty years ago, our denomination was blessed by leaders who decided spittite, muddite, and touchite were debatable, but God's Word was not. For a generation, we struggled to embrace one overarching truth: the Bible alone has ultimate authority. Southern Baptists decided: we are people of the Book. The Bible is God's Word: inerrant, infallible, immutable. Our adherence to its authority glues us together as a denomination. We adopted in 1925, 1963, and 2000, the *Baptist Faith and Message*, not to be authoritative, but to help identify us to ourselves and others by clarifying beliefs we hold in common.

If we want to make strong statements about moral issues, our Convention adopts non-binding resolutions. Many dislike resolutions, but they do let us take a stand on current cultural issues without trying to exercise authority over one another. We hereby protect our cherished belief in the priesthood of believers.

Burdened by the rapid moral decline around us, we Southern Baptists are often tempted to fall in the trap of enacting rules and regulations to enforce certain behaviors. We have to be careful here, lest we be guilty of trying to impose our cultural standards on others. If we do this, we cease being Baptist.

We must be especially careful about enacting rules the next generation will have to live with. We Baptists do not believe one generation should legislate to another. You may say, each generation of Baptists can reverse the decisions of former generations. True, but when did you last try to change a group of Baptists?

In matters of faith and practice, we want our children and grandchildren's authority to be God, not us. As a Baptist, I believe my children and grandchildren should search Scripture to find their way. I don't want them to blindly accept my interpretations of Scripture. If they yield to my views, they may someday accept someone else's Bible interpretation as authoritative, and it could be wrong. We Baptists want those who come behind us to submit to the Bible only.

Each generation of Baptists must beware the slippery slopes of liberalism and legalism. Southern Baptists learned the hard way, liberalism goes ever farther and farther afield, not knowing when to stop, where to finally draw the line.

Legalism does the same thing. It grows, not knowing where or when to stop. Legalism is prolific, spawning more and more rules. If we follow this trajectory, we keep sliding farther away from God's Word, the Bible. We move away from grace, we argue over lesser issues, splintering over splinters: muddite versus antimuddite, spittite opposing antisplittite, touchite against antitouchite.

Our manmade legalistic barnacles do not make God's Word stronger. They eat away at scriptural authority. The Bible is not helped by being propped up. Props weaken, rather than strengthen, Bible authority. I pray Southern Baptists will let God's Word unite us as a denomination. Let's trust it. It is sufficient. We stop liberalism and legalism by saying "Sola Scriptura"; Scripture only.

The third vital trait uniting the three healed blind men was missions. They witnessed for Christ. The man born blind told the Pharisees, "I was blind, and now I can see!" (John 9:25). The second blind man "went out and spread the news about Him (Jesus) throughout that whole area" (Matthew 9:31). Bartimaeus, healed by Jesus, "began to follow Him, glorifying God" (Luke 18:43).

We Southern Baptists need to do a better job of witnessing for Christ in the area of personal evangelism. Dr. Chuck Lawless, of Southern Seminary, says, "We have stood faithfully for a message that we have chosen to keep to ourselves." We have a story to tell; we have to tell the story.

We Southern Baptists need to do a better job of witnessing for Christ by starting more churches. Each year in the U.S.A., about 3,600 churches start, 3,200 churches close, a net gain of only 400 per year, barely a tenth of what we need. To keep pace with population growth, an annual gain of 3,900 churches is needed.

In 1900 there were 29 churches for every 10,000 Americans; in 2004 only 11. We need more Bible-based churches that can resonate with our culture. Southern Baptists know how to start churches. Thus, we must lead the way in this. Dr. Iorg, President of Golden Gate, says, "Our best and brightest leaders must be encouraged to pioneer church forms for this century without undue criticism simply because they are different, unique, or challenge the status quo. Theological soundness must be coupled with innovative methodology to lead us forward."

In today's economy, the institutional church model is too expensive for rapid replication. Land costs make traditional church planting in some cities impossible. We need infiltration strategies that use limited funds, uninhibited by outdated models that are building-dependent, program-centered, or staff intensive.

We Southern Baptists need to do a better job of witnessing for Christ by doing more in the area of missions. We need to start by overcoming a common misconception embraced by a vast

majority of Southern Baptists. The Great Commission is given not to institutions, agencies, mission boards, or even local churches. It is given to every individual believer.

Our people usually equate "Go" with "Go and stay," but the two are not the same. Very few are called to go and stay. All are called to go. Jesus emptied Himself and left His heavenly home to win the lost. Surely we can fill a suitcase and leave our earthly homes to do the same.

In the incarnation, God showed what should be done for sinners near and far. God had only one Son. He had Him go. Can we do less? (Oswald Smith). To have God's heart, all must pray, give, and go, joining God's bucket-brigade conveying living water to the thirsty. I was surprised when I saw an antique water bucket used in fire-bucket brigades. Its bottom was as round as a basketball, not flat. Each time I sat it down, it fell over, it wouldn't stand up.

After letting it drop three times, I got the message. When there's a fire going on, you don't put your water bucket down. Folks, an everlasting fire's going on. We need to be in God's fire-bucket brigade, delivering the water of life.

By praying, we draw power from God's well of anointing. By giving, we pass buckets hand-to-hand, conveying support to mission causes, extinguishing flames of lostness. After we pray and give, the whole fire brigade is useless unless we go and stand at the end of the bucket brigade and throw water on the fire.

There aren't enough full-time career missionaries to get this job done. We all must go, some short-term, some long-term, some to our city, some to our state, some to the U.S.A., some to the uttermost. There has to be contact with the people we seek to save. Someone has to deliver the Living Water in person.

Southern Baptists, don't let splinters splinter us. Let's not quibble over spittite, muddite, and touchite, but be glued together as Christ-following Bible believers on mission.

*—from the office of John Marshall*

## Part 3

### Ministry Reports to the Southern Baptist Convention

Part 5

