

Annual Message
Hamilton County Baptist Association
October 20, 2009
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I Corinthians 12:12-27

I have mixed emotions about even reading this next passage because first, I am a t-totaller. I do not drink alcohol, never have, never will. For me it's not acceptable and because of the tens of thousands of lives it has adversely affected, I don't want to be a part of sustaining something that destroys so many lives.

Having said that, Jesus used this illustration and I will, too, though I certainly have no appreciation for that industry.

Matthew 9:14-17

The point He was making and that I am addressing is – change has come and change is coming in society, in the workplace, in the home, and in the church. And particularly in the church, my specific intent tonight, change is occurring and the old forms and structures designed to meet the needs years ago are not adequate today if we as the church want to have meaningful conversation with our community.

The change He was talking about was not a deviation from God's purpose and plan, but in light of Jesus, a new interpretation, new meaning for everybody, not just the Jews. He said, "I came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill or fill full it with the love and grace of Jesus." Change does not necessarily mean throwing away the old, lock, stock and barrel, and bringing in something totally new and unrelated to the past. He did not mean that, nor do I.

In fact, the only way to move successfully through change is to be well grounded, as it were, to know our roots, our foundation, our heritage so that we can correctly evaluate the present and future. It is when we don't know where we have come from or who we are that we can be so easily swayed or misguided. So, it is very important that we know who we are, from whence we have come.

Who are we?

We are Baptists! There is no apology. We are not perfect, but we are Baptists – and that reveals a lot about our foundation that influences our activities, devotions and principles of today. I am a historic Baptist – a Baptist that precedes the Southern Baptist Convention, even Baptists in America, back to Reformation days in the 16th century . . . and rooted in the New Testament of the first century.

Baptists are people rooted in the teachings of Jesus Christ and recorded in the Holy Scriptures “. . . inspired by God and worthy for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness” just as the Apostle Paul said in II Timothy 3:16-17.

We Baptists believe in the value of every person. There are not levels of value or worthiness – “for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) And “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) One term we use reflecting this is “soul competency.” Each soul, each person, is competent to relate to God through Jesus – and, in fact, must for himself or herself. We don’t have to go through anyone else and can not come to Christ or commit on behalf of someone else. Each person can call on Him, pray to Him, trust Him and stand before Him. That is also why we talk about salvation of believers followed by believer’s baptism. Only as a person believes can he or she be baptized, not as a passive infant, but as one who makes a commitment for himself or herself to Jesus Christ. This is closely akin to soul liberty, as well, which affirms each person’s freedom to believe or disbelieve. Belief can not occur by law or force or demand of the church or the state. The soul is at liberty to believe as God calls a person. Persons are also at liberty to refuse to hear and believe.

Out of this belief of individual competence comes the concept of Priesthood of believer. That says each of us, redeemed by Christ, is a priest. We don’t relate to God through a select number of earthly priests, but directly through our High Priest, Jesus Christ. I can talk with Him and He with me. He can lead me. I can discover His will for my life. I am competent. No one else has to tell me what God is calling me to do. God can tell me. We talk together.

But, also as a priest, I stand in the gap between others and God. I am His Ambassador. I can pray for others, comfort and encourage others on His behalf. I can be, even must be, a priest to others. That affects how I relate to others and treat others and view others because each one is precious in God’s sight and I am His priest to them. Everyone is to be seen by us as one of value for whom Christ died. I will act that way toward that person. So, who I am, a priest, affects how I view and treat others.

And you can easily see how this led Baptists to a congregational form of church government. We believe each person can seek and discern God’s will and then by voting we can reach agreement rather than having some person of hierarchy tell us what God wants. We can discover that individually.

And in turn, since we don’t have that kind of hierarchy, each church is free and independent – autonomous – to seek God’s guidance in her own ministry. No one can tell your church what you must do. No one has authority over your church to levy contributions or fees within this denomination.

The association has no such authority unless you grant it or ask. Only when invited can the association staff have input in the local church which even then is not binding on the church without church approval. It is the Lord’s church. He is the authority and members determine His leadership.

But Baptists have long seen the value of another principle that has made a profound difference in the impact of Baptists through the years. **We value voluntarily joining together to enhance Kingdom work – cooperation!** That is a big word for Baptists, too. We are not identical twins; we are brothers and sisters, but with common commitments to the eternally significant principles and truths, we work together for the Kingdom.

I have given you a brief description of who we are. We are Baptists. We are built on the strong foundation of Jesus Christ and a strong heritage of Biblically based truths. And you say, “Why in the world has David spent so much time talking about who we as Baptist are.” Well, it is because that serves as the foundation and basis for the remainder of what I want to address tonight. And frankly, I do not feel that many of our own people understand or have strong convictions about who we are. I feel strongly about these things that I am going to share with you because I have come from the strong historic background that I have described to you.

More than fifty years ago, the Baptist churches of Hamilton County decided to form an association of churches from the larger Ocoee Association. So out of that came the Bradley Baptist Association and the Hamilton County Baptist Association. Because we are Baptists, each church within this association reflects her own unique personality and spirit, but they enjoy mutual respect and appreciation from each other.

And for our association, cooperation still remains a strong word. We have voluntarily joined together to accomplish a ministry that would be near impossible by any one church alone.

The two most visible ministries led and operated by volunteers from a large number of our churches cooperating together are HaCoBACare Ministries and our English as a Second Language Ministry. For eight consecutive years, HaCoBACare has been the number one provider of emergency groceries in the city of Chattanooga through referrals from the city’s help line 211. That is possible because we are working together. Since the inception, more than 86,000 persons have received groceries through HaCoBACare and more than 3,200 conversions by direct one on one witnessing to those who come to the center. This past year alone, 9,384 persons received groceries, 3,410 of these were children in our city; 183 made professions of faith. No other organization that I know of gives as much groceries away and while doing so, shares the gospel of Christ. All of our churches need to be supporting HaCoBACare with groceries! And through HaCoBACare many others, as the report will show in the Book of Reports, receive medical counsel, reading glasses, clothing and nearly 800 children received bags of new toys last Christmas. (Report on p. 18)

We are Baptists. We are doing this together! – Cooperation.

Our English as a Second Language ministry has more than 100 volunteers who are teaching ten times a week. That report is found on pages 10 – 12. These students come from more than forty countries. We share the gospel, share Jesus videos in their own languages, and love them because they are living in our community and are persons for whom Christ died. We offer training twice a year as the work continues to expand, and we help other local organizations and missionaries that call on us for training in ESL.

And Disaster Relief, Resort Ministries, Scenic City Ministries, World Changers are other expressions of working together because each person has a contribution to make.

We are restarting the Baptist Builders which will work on local projects initially. We have been a part of four church starts across the last couple of years. We have worked with these new ministries in our city and with churches in distress that need encouragement.

We are offering information, resources, encouragement on a daily basis to many of our churches. That may relate to personnel matters, legal issues, taxes, deacons, conflict in churches, organization, various meetings, and dozens of other questions. In spite of the fact we are facing financial challenges, we are committed to providing continued ministry to our churches and expanding our ministries even while resources are being reduced.

I continually stand amazed at the host of hundreds of volunteers directly involved in associational ministries through the year in World Changes, HaCoBACare, ESL, special projects, disaster relief, training events, teams and committees. Without these, our work could not be accomplished. I am grateful for our staff at the Baptist Building. Glenna Smith and Linda Mauritzen are part time ministry assistants on alternating days. David Martin works part time with our website. Becky Witt is full time with finances, language and administrative responsibilities. Thank you for your service to the Lord through the association.

So, what about our future? There are challenges before us.

In all candor, our organization of this association is facing some great challenges.

I am going to mention the financial first. It is not the most important. You know we could have plenty of money and the ministry still be in conflict, or be ineffective, or be misguided. But without financial support, the ministry is greatly hindered or ceases.

Your Book of Reports shows the declining contributions of our churches to associational missions. The budget last year was cut to match projected giving based on the decline of the previous year. And for several years that has been our practice, look at the previous year, reduce the budget. In fact, in the last eight years, our budget has dropped from \$483,298 to \$300,000 for the year 2009-2010. Receipts have dropped from \$427,138 to approximately \$297,000. I am thankful for each person and church that faithfully contributes to our local associational mission program.

This year we took additional steps to live within diminishing means. We reduced the number of staff, reduced hours worked by hourly employees, and reduced Becky and my salaries, the only full time staff members. We have also cut other items as well. We are, however, giving our best to maintaining and expanding our ministries with limited resources.

Our operating budget is sustained only by the contributions from the churches of this association. We do not receive Cooperative Program money for operations. Your examining the giving records in the Book of Reports (pp.40-41) will point to the challenge we are facing financially. This is a great challenge. What is going to be our future? I am so grateful for our strong Baptist foundation and history upon which we continue to build, but where are we going? I have to raise the question with you who care about our mission effort, "How are we going to sustain the work together?"

Cooperation has been a key word for Hamilton County Baptists. The challenge to make cooperation workable is a never ending task. Because we stand for church autonomy, individual priesthood and personal freedom, working together is sometimes a challenge and a struggle.

We Baptist are not all alike and never have been. That is a part of our strength. And we have become more diverse by following the mandate of the Lord to share the gospel with all people of every nation, color and background. In this diversity, however, we do share and hold firm the common beliefs and faith, though we may differ in some interpretations and practices.

There is diversity among our churches – some differences are more significant than others. Most of them are rather temporal in nature. Differences between larger and smaller churches; the use of the Baptist Hymnal, no hymnal, red book; choir anthems from sheet music or anthems from a copied notebook; praise band or organ; choir robes or no robes; women ushers and greeters or only men serving in such positions; the annual call for a pastor, or the indefinite/permanent call; bulletins outlining the order of service, or no bulletin to impede the Spirit; deacons or elders or both; King James translation or any credible translation of scripture; seminary trained, called pastor or experience trained, called pastor; developed budget or no budget at all . . . and yet we are all Baptists and all are on the same grand mission of serving the Lord together.

Some challenges to our cooperation come because members are misinformed or uninformed; others present a challenge because they were born in the objective case and have only grown more so – “I object to that.”

Each generation must chose to cooperate. It is a choice and must be a deliberate decision year after year, generation after generation. Cooperation has to be nurtured and encouraged by our pastors and other leaders and by you who are here tonight.

So, what about our future? Please allow me to share some dreams and interests and concerns with you.

1. **A new HaCoBACare Ministry Center** of 10,000 – 15,000 square feet designed to assist our volunteers in ministering more effectively. We need a loading dock, witnessing rooms, processing rooms and store and shelving space for groceries. We need a safer entrance and exist without hazardous steps and narrow passages. We want to expand the ministry to include job search assistance or job corps and expanded computer training to assist persons looking for jobs, literacy and other programs.
2. **A restoration of strong financial support as partners in mission work together** not only on the national level and state level, but here in the association.

In our association, services and ministries of our staff meet a vital need of many of our churches. As financial contributions decline, so does the staff. I have already outlined what we have done this year in cutting staff, reducing hours of work for hourly workers and reducing salaries of full time staff members.

But with approximately 50 of our churches served by bi-vocational men and less than 50 in attendance, the associational staff members are a valuable resource that large churches often find within their own staff members. Seventy of our churches run less than 200; most likely, these may have a single staff member. Again, your association staff is often the resource they call on.

What is the resource when the association staff is no longer available to these churches? Who will they call and who will have time to respond? What could happen if we really did see that we are working together and that to provide assistance to a sister church through the association is a necessary responsibility of each part of the whole body?

Only through faithful contributions can the association maintain effective ministry among many of our churches with one staff or part time staff and with limited resources and continue to offer information and resources to our larger churches as well.

3. **We need a renewed commitment to work together.** While I applaud individuality and autonomy, I also believe we are all a part of the Body of Christ. Every church is an expression of His body with hands, feet, ears, eyes. But all of our churches together (and with other Christians) make up the body of Christ in this place.

Parts of our body are healthy; parts of not so healthy. If my ear is hurting, my whole body is hindered. If my finger is smashed, I hurt all over. If one church is not healthy or is in distress or hurting, the whole body in some mysterious, spiritual, kind of way that the Apostle Paul described, is limited no matter how each individual part may seem. It does matter about my neighbor church down the street or across the county. We must learn how to come along side each other to bring healthiness for the whole body. We are one body.

We must develop new models of cooperation that we have not known before. New paradigms must be followed if we are going to impact the county. We have to have structure; there must be the wineskins, but they must be functional and relevant today.

One way and one size do not fit all. We have choices: we can keep doing the same thing and get the same results, or we can keep doing the same thing harder with little change in results, or we can discover and develop a different course for a different time.

We value methods that are most effective in their context. But we can not be afraid to seek new paradigms and models.

We will likely have to identify new ways of relating to one another and defining what it means to be a part of an association or how we are a part of the whole.

When cooperation does occur among us Baptists, we know it is a gift of God. We need His help to rekindle the desire and energize our ability to work together.

4. **This leads to a need to clarify the definition of Kingdom.** Often the mega church is accused, but it may be the smaller church as well, that in action and attitude conveys she is a kingdom to herself and it does not matter about any other church or part of the body. "I will take care of my world and that is really all that matters," is the attitude conveyed by those who do not properly define the "Kingdom."

Remember . . . we are a part of the body. . . we are not all of the body. We are tempted to replace The Kingdom agenda with our own little kingdom agenda. We can be so busy doing a lot of good things that we neglect the thing Christ calls His body, the church, to do.

We must call out and empower every priest, every believer, to join Christ in the redemptive mission, making disciples, maturing believers and multiplying ministries.

Surveys reveal that many people are interested in spiritual matters, but they do not always equate that with Christianity. Many who claim Christianity and being spiritual do not see that connected with the institutional church of today.

I believe that if we are Kingdom minded, with the capitol “K,” instead of our own kingdom, the community will be drawn not only to Christ, but to His body, the church.

5. **We need a rebirth of or revival of some of our struggling churches.** I believe that will happened when we take seriously the body of Christ and Kingdom vision and have churches come along side each other to help, assist, encourage -- when they work along with each other to give renewed life and strengthen their witness in the community. This will call for yielding some personal preferences in light of the greater goal of advancing the Kingdom of God through leading others to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Some of our churches need to become neighborhood churches again, reflecting their community and some need to expand their ministry and witness, but they can not do it alone. “We have church; we have the steeple, open the door, but where are the people?” We need to share members to help rebound and set new directions. We need to find new ways to partner church with church – and the willing spirit to do so.
6. **What would happen if in the building programs, financial campaigns or capital improvement drives a part is always included for planting a new church?** If a church is raising one million dollars for a building, imagine what the tithes of that amount would do in planting a new mission --\$100,000 to plant a new church. Or five million, put \$500,000 into new churches. You could say to a mission pastor, “Here is ½ million dollars to begin your work.” Or if the goal is two hundred thousand, then you would have twenty thousand for a new plant. Just imagine what that would do!

Hamilton County Baptist Association is the Lord’s work. I am confident of that. He is able to provide, to sustain, to lead and to empower. We trust Him for that. And I know that “. . . we are laborers together with God.” We do what we must do; He does what only He can do. And He is able “. . . to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever.” (Ephesians 3:20-21) Perhaps we have not yet imagined what God wants to do through the Hamilton County Baptist Association and churches. But let’s give ourselves to that pursuit.

Thank you for the privilege of serving the Lord in this place the last 25 years. I look forward to what God is going to do in the future as we serve together. I ask you to continue to pray and work, work and pray -- pray even as the Lord taught us, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Amen.