

## **We Are Fellowship Baptists**

By Daniel Vestal

*A message delivered at the CBF Virginia Luncheon on Nov. 17, 2009*

Many of us have experienced something of a deconstruction in Baptist life, while at the same time we have experienced a reconstruction. It has gone on at the same time and continues to this very day. Perhaps this is true in other parts of the Body of Christ and even in the wider culture but I can testify to this reality within our part of the Baptist family. It is no wonder then that there has been confusion about Baptist identity and it is no wonder that such confusion has impacted the effectiveness of mission.

The presupposition of my remarks today is that in the past twenty years God has acted in grace to create a movement of renewal within the Baptist family. In the midst of death and deconstruction, the Holy Spirit has quickened, awakened, aroused and empowered Baptists to dream, act and organize in creative new ways so as to give witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The results of this movement of spiritual renewal are legion but the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is one of them. There are many, many results, so many in fact that I will not try to name them. However, I will say that the Holy Spirit continues creating relationships, opportunities, networks and resources within this movement of Baptists.

And since this “new wine of the Spirit” doesn’t fit the “old wineskins,” we have struggled in knowing how to identify ourselves and how to communicate to others. We’ve called ourselves “moderate Baptists,” “free and faithful Baptists,” and “traditional Baptists.” All of these express some truth but don’t quite capture our identity. We have said that we are not a convention of churches or a union of churches or a denomination of churches, rather a fellowship of Christians and churches.

All of this has been complicated by the fact that within this Fellowship there are all kinds of geographical, organizational and historical identity markers. There are those in this Fellowship movement who self-identify as “Virginia Baptists,” or “Texas Baptists,” or “American Baptists,” or Alliance Baptists,” and yes, even “Southern Baptists.” What we are discovering is that all of these designations are in some sense inadequate.

Just as our world is post-America and our culture is post-modern and Christian culture is post-modern, so in the Baptist culture we have come to the place of being post-fundamentalist and post-moderate. The old designations simply do not describe or define us as they did in the past. If the New Baptist Covenant event in January 2008 did anything, it showed us new possibilities and new configurations that we hadn’t even thought of before.

What I would like to do today is focus our attention on the one word in the name of this renewal movement that is biblical. Then I would like to argue that it is indeed the work of the Spirit and the most life-giving characteristic and description of what God has done in

the past twenty years and continues to do to this very day. And of course that word is "FELLOWSHIP." Fellowship is not only the noun that defines how we want to live together in an organizational structure but fellowship is the adjective that defines what kind of Baptists that we are. We are Baptists who believe that a relationship with God is inextricably tied to a relationship with one another. We are Baptists who believe that life in Christ is a shared life with others. We are Baptists who believe that the communion of the Spirit is communion in community. WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS.

This is a rich word full of meaning and mystery. You, of course, know the Greek designation "koinonia" which means a "sharing in", "partaking of" and "participating with." It's a word that speaks of closeness and intimacy. It's primarily a New Testament idea as opposed to an Old Testament idea. The Greek word "koinonia" or the Hebrew equaliviant "Chabar" is not used in the Old Testament to describe a relationship with God. Although some in the Old Testament surely experienced it, as evidenced in the Psalms, the sacrificial meals and some of the prophetic writings. The emphasis in the Old Testament is on distance between God and human beings. God is holy and "other," therefore, relationship with God is in terms of covenant and service, with a kind of inequality. But in the New Testament, the scene changes and the word fellowship emerges central. Because of Christ and because we are in Christ, we experience a communion with God that can actually be called "sharing in," "partaking of" and "participating with." We share in God's grace...

in the Gospel,  
in the promise,  
in the glory that shall be revealed,  
in the Body and Blood of Christ,  
in the Holy Spirit.

We even share in the sufferings of Christ. Because of the miracle of the incarnation and sheer Grace of God, we have fellowship with the Holy One.

But this fellowship is not only vertical but is also horizontal. Because we are in Christ, we share with one another the benefits and blessings, the joy and love, the oneness and unity that we experience personally. One of the amazing ways that this word "koinonia" is used to describe relationship with others is the way it is joined with other words to show how we partake of and participate with one another in Christ. We are described as being...

fellow workers,  
fellow servants,  
fellow prisoners,  
fellow citizens,  
fellow soldiers,  
fellow members,  
fellow partakers,  
fellow heirs.

On other occasions, Scripture speaks of our being imitators together, elect together, laborers together. This idea of fellowship is so rich and full of meaning that it shapes our understanding of the Gospel and of what kind of Baptists we are. WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS.

When we are baptized into Christ, we are also baptized into Christ's body. When we come to the Table and eat the bread and drink the cup, we do not eat or drink alone, but in a communion of the Saints. We cherish freedom because when one person's freedom is violated, we are all violated. We are ecumenical because we believe that even when we disagree with one another, we belong to one another. We are evangelical because we desire others to have fellowship with us and "truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ." We have a biblical view of justice and reconciliation because we seek the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in Heaven, an "an eschatological koinonia." We value women in ministry because we believe that in Christ there is no male or female. We are missional because we believe that God is on a mission to reconcile the world to himself and make all things one.

I heard the story of a certain monastery that was declining and all of the monks were growing old. One day the abbot went into the near-by village to seek counsel from a wise rabbi. After he told the rabbi the predicament, the rabbi said, "I have a prophesy to give you, the Messiah is among you." The abbot returned to the monastery and told his fellow monks of the prophesy. Each began to ponder what it meant. They thought among themselves, "Brother Thomas couldn't be the messiah, he is too dull." Or, "Brother John couldn't be the messiah, he is too extroverted." Or, "Brother Sabastian couldn't be the messiah, he's too tedious." But in their pondering they began to see each other differently and treat each other differently. They showed respect, trust, kindness and compassion. It wasn't long before visitors and outsiders began to notice a difference in their behavior and the character of their community. Their reputations spread. People began to come to the monastery just to be close to the monks. They would picnic on their grounds and speak in hushed tones as they watched them. They began to seek counsel from them and guidance in their own lives. It wasn't long before Initiates joined the order and the monastery grew. The message of Jesus was spread, and indeed the prophesy was fulfilled. The Messiah was in them and among them.

The word we use more than any other to describe the mystery of fellowship is "relationship." We speak of having a personal relationship with Christ and personal relationships with each other. This is a good word but it is not a biblical word and it really doesn't capture the full meaning of "koinonia." "Koinonia" means even more than a relationship. It means a participation in Christ, a partaking of Christ and a sharing with Christ. "Koinonia" means participation in one another, partaking of one another and sharing with one another. The closest analogy that we have to this mystery is marriage where the Scripture says the relationship between a man and a woman is so intimate and close that the two become one. So it is in the church. We are more than a collection of individuals. We are more than a voluntary association that shares affinity with one

another around some common ideas. We are surely more than an organization. We are the living, breathing and mystical Body of Christ.

How many people in our churches really understand this? I don't know. I'm reminded of the story about Pope John XXIII when he was asked, "How many people work in the Vatican?" He responded, "about half of them." How many people in churches believe in the presence of Christ within them and among them that creates "koinonia?" I don't know. But it is this reality that makes the church, the church.

Now let me be very clear, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is not the church. But we give witness to the Church, serve the Church believing that it is a divinely created "koinonia." And as a human organization, CBF seeks to reflect that understanding of the church in our functioning. WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS.

WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS who are rediscovering the Gospel of the present, coming Kingdom of God. I grew up in a culture where the Gospel was primarily about getting to Heaven when you die. The most important question was, "If you were to die tonight, where would you spend eternity?" But we are discovering that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not just about getting to Heaven but about getting heaven to earth. The Gospel is more grand and glorious than what it does in the lives of individuals. The Gospel is about the goodness of God, the faithfulness of God, the character of God, the purposes of God and the reign of God on earth.

WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS who are rediscovering the mission of God in the world. I grew up in a culture where we saw missions primarily as a human activity. Missions was something that we "do." But now we are coming to realize that missions doesn't begin with us. It begins with God. God is on a mission to reconcile the world to himself through Jesus Christ. God invites us to participate in that mission. Hence the idea of "missional Christians" and "missional churches," because we not only discern God's mission but participate in it.

WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS who are rediscovering that the priesthood of every believer not only means that each can go directly to God, but each can represent God to others. I grew up in a culture where the doctrine of the priesthood of believers was primarily about individual rights. Now we are coming to realize that it is also about individual responsibility. There is a discontent in churches with the old ways of mission and an almost palpable and visceral desire for hands-on involvement. And though that creates great challenges for organizations like CBF, I am one who believes that both the discontent and desire are evidence of the Spirit's work among us.

WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS who are rediscovering the centrality of prayer and worship in Christian discipleship. I grew up in a culture where we were afraid to learn from Catholics, Orthodox or Quakers about spiritual practices. I never heard anything about contemplative prayer, "appophatic" or "kataphatic," spiritual reading, spiritual

direction, journaling, recollection or silence. Probably the most heated debates were about whether Charismatic were even Christians. Now we are learning from the many traditions of the Church about how important it is to pray and be formed in our experience of prayer.

WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS who are rediscovering the global church and how much we have to learn. I grew up in a culture where we really thought we were, “God’s last and only hope” as Baptists. We were provincial and narrow in our perspective of ministry. But now the days of colonial missions and western missions or even American missions is past, and a new day has dawned characterized by the words of Samuel Escobar, “The Gospel from everywhere to everyone.” The growth of the global church is changing the way we think about mission and the way we understand the nature of the church.

WE ARE FELLOWSHIP BAPTISTS who are rediscovering the joy of community beyond the local church that’s not based upon a program or a human structure. I grew up in a culture where we distinguished between an independent church and a cooperating church by whether or not the church participated in a program. Now we are discovering the value of fellowship because of sharing common values and vision and believing in a community beyond our own local congregation because it is biblical. Many of us have come to love this fellowship Baptist movement because it has become a part of our Christian discipleship and our Baptist identity.

My deep conviction is that the wind of God’s Spirit is blowing across the Fellowship Baptist Movement, of which CBF is an organization, is strategic and significant. As we plan to celebrate our 20<sup>th</sup> gathering in Charlotte, North Carolina, (2010) and our 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in Tampa, Florida, (2011) I believe it is important for us to acknowledge and rejoice in what has happened in the past 20 years.

Many of the least evangelized have heard the Gospel because missionaries have been sent and supported. Churches have been renewed in their ministry and mission. Young people have been called into vocational ministry and graduated from new seminaries and divinity schools. Lives as well as systems have been changed in the 20 poorest counties in America. Students have been shaped and formed through ministries like Passport, Student.Go, Global Service Corp, Current and ministry networks. People in prisons and hospitals as well as in the military and hospice have been blessed by Chaplains endorsed by this Fellowship. New churches have been started and much, much more has happened.

When I think of this Fellowship Baptist Movement, I’m reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul when he spoke about his feelings for the church in Philippi,

“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you because of your sharing of the Gospel from the

first day until now. I'm confident of this that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ."