

August 2009
Jimmy Carter: President and Humanitarian
(Sixth in a series on influential Baptists in history)

When Jimmy Carter was elected president of the United States in 1976 many evangelical and Baptist Christians rejoiced. He was an unashamed Christian, a fact that caused him much ridicule and misunderstanding. Remember how many people were confused when he said he was a “born again Christian”? He was both evangelical and ecumenical, and, on top of all that, he was a Baptist. His faith was profoundly personal, but it was not private. He was a churchman, a lay preacher and a serious student of Scripture.

Perhaps the highlight of his presidency was the peace deal he helped broker between Egypt and Israel. The Camp David Accords were signed by Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel. President Carter stood between them as they all clasped hands in peace and reconciliation. A Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian standing before the world in an embrace of peace was one of the high moments of the 20th century.

Evangelicals and many Baptists abandoned their support of President Carter in the 1980 election won by Ronald Reagan. President Carter had disappointed many in his handling of the economy, the Iranian hostage crisis, and emerging abortion debate.

Regardless of whether one agrees with President Carter’s political views and involvement, there is a humanitarian streak in his career that is an example of what most Baptist churches promote. He is still a Sunday School teacher at the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. He is a lay preacher who proclaims the Word of God in churches and other public places. He is the embodiment of a “hands-on missionary” working tirelessly as a volunteer with Habitat for Humanity and numerous Baptist disaster relief programs. When he leads a conference overseas to promote better health care or agricultural improvements, his team never simply “lectures and leave.” They stay and work in the local community in a “hands-on” demonstration of love and compassion for the local people. His social conscious is grounded in biblical faith: doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

In the Baptist world, President Carter has worked diligently for reconciliation between competing factions. He has made phone calls, led meetings with key Baptist leaders, and promoted conferences that dealt with issues and reconciliation and racial harmony. He is one of the most influential Baptists living in the world today, perhaps the most influential. When he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 he enhanced the witness of Baptist Christians around the world. So for all President Carter has done for Baptists and God’s Kingdom, I give thanks.