

## **New Baptist Covenant Sermon**

A Pastoral Reflection by  
Dr. Don Y. Gordon  
Yates Baptist Church, Durham, NC  
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In Martin Luther King’s prophetic “I Have a Dream” speech he said that “one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood.” I am here today testifying to you, that this past week, on the red hills of Georgia, I have sat at the table of brotherhood with sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners. I returned to Durham yesterday from Atlanta, having attending the New Baptist Covenant Celebration, the largest gathering of Baptists from diverse racial backgrounds in the history of the Baptist movement in America. I joined close to 20,000 Baptists from 30 racially, geographically and theologically diverse Baptist groups in North America to bear witness to the world of the unity we have in Jesus Christ. These 30 Baptist denominations represented 20 million Baptists in North America. The four largest historically African-American Baptist groups in the United States were present—the National Baptist Convention, USA, the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the National Missionary Baptist Convention of America. The meeting also included smaller ethnic groups such as the Laotian Baptist Churches in America and Japanese Baptist churches in America, just to name a few. There were Baptist political leaders present from both Democratic and Republican parties, but the meeting was noticeably non-partisan, in the sense there were no endorsements of individuals or particular bills in either branch

of congress. Walter Shurden, perhaps the most noted Baptist historian living today, said of the New Covenant, “This is the most significant Baptist gathering I have ever witnessed.”

On a more local note, I want to inform you that the sanctuary choir of First Baptist Church Rome, Georgia sang Thursday evening. Following the service I made my way to them to ask them if they knew Rosie Hampton. Several of them quickly smiled and informed me they did know her. So I gave them my church card, on which I had scribbled the words, “Rosie, We miss you at Yates and love you always. Don Gordon.” I trust those words have made their way to dear Rosie, one of the dearest matriarchs of Yates Baptist Church.

I also met Roger Harris and his wife, an African-American Baptist pastor in Union City, Georgia and learned about his church Harvest Community Baptist Church where he has served the last 3 years of his 40 year ministry. I bring you greetings from him and the members he represents.

Having been born a Baptist, baptized in a Baptist church, nurtured by Baptist lay men and women as a youth, educated in a Baptist college, a Baptist seminary, having written a history of the Baptist Convention in North Carolina which was distributed to 3800 Baptist churches, and served in Baptist churches for 23 years, I have a heart for Baptist Christians. They are my people. Some of you have been Baptist longer than I have been alive, and this church has been a Baptist church for 129 years. I borrow a phrase to say, “I was Baptist born, I am Baptist bred, and when I die, I’ll be Baptist dead.” I care about the Baptist witness in our country and around the world,

so today, I want to share with you what I see happening in the Baptist world, based on my experiences this week at the New Baptist Covenant Celebration. I don't do this often, but on occasion I want to speak to you about the rock from which we have been hewn, the 400-year-old Baptist movement.

What I see happening is change. Everybody today seems to be talking about change. We are living in changing times. Some of those changes are good like increased agricultural productivity and technological advances in medicine. Some of those changes are bad, like the escalation of casual sex and violence we see on our televisions. I want to tell you what changes I see in the Baptist world, changes you will see for yourselves, if you are paying attention. They are already impacting our church and they will continue to impact our church in the future.

### **I. More humble Baptists**

The first change I see is that Baptists are becoming more humble. Many of you are new to a Baptist church and to the larger Baptist movement, but some of you remember something called "*Bold Mission Thrust*." It was announced at the SBC in Kansas City in 1976. Bold Mission Thrust was the driving vision of the SBC to share the gospel with every person in the world by the year 2000. Every person in the world by the year 2000.... And we would do it by ourselves! We would solely take on the evangelism of the world without notice of what Catholics, Presbyterians, or Methodists were doing, much less other Baptist denominations in our country or in another country. We alone would carry Christ to the world. In retrospect, we almost have to chuckle to believe we could do something like that, or cry that we

would dare try without consultation with others. Much of our missionary effort which followed displayed this arrogance, when we would go into a small village in a small country where there was a thriving evangelical church doing good ministry. Without consulting them or asking for their input in any form, we would set up shop across the street. We would plant a Baptist church in direct competition to the already established evangelical church. It did not matter that people were being won to Christ. They needed to be won to our Baptist way of doing things. It was a sign of arrogance we couldn't see because of our myopic view of the world.

Notice what the Bible says about Jesus' missionary movement to earth. Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, "*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.*" (Phil 2:5-7)

Baptists are becoming more humble and that's a good thing. There's an increasing awareness that the problems in our nation and world are so great that we can only solve them by working with other Baptists and other Christians under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. World hunger is too great for one denomination to solve. One in seven people around the world will go to bed hungry tonight. 400 million of those people will be children. Sharing the gospel with the world is too great for one denomination. Only 1.5 billion of the world's 6 billion people are professing Christians. If we're going to share the gospel with all of them, we had better mobilize every Christian, not

just our kind of Baptists from the south to do it. Sharing the gospel and feeding the poor is too much for us alone. We must work with others, and that means we can't tell everybody else what to do. We must learn to listen. We've got to be humble enough to listen to the 1.4 million American Baptist Churches in the USA, the 6 million members of the National Baptist Convention, the largest African-American Baptist denomination of the world. But we'll also need to listen to the Laotian National Baptist Fellowship and the Czechoslovak Baptist Convention of the USA and Canada, the Vietnamese National Baptist Fellowship, and many others who are needed to solve the problems of everyone hearing the Gospel and everyone having enough food to eat.

The New Baptist Covenant was a tangible effort for Baptists to display a more humble spirit, a willingness to work with a larger number of Baptist groups, and to recognize as brothers, sisters, and partners, Christians from other denominations. We have repented of our arrogance and asked God to help us see our brothers and sisters in Christ as our partners, not our competitors.

## **II. More Local and Global**

A second change I see happening among Baptists is that we are becoming more local and global, all at the same time. What do I mean by that? I'll tell you. On Thursday I listened to Naw Blooming Night Zan. She was so short they had to give her a footstool to stand on so she could see over the podium. Naw Blooming Night Zan was born in Burma in 1954, spending the first 4 years of her life hiding in the jungle with her family as they tried to

escape the Burmese military regime. For the past 50 years her country has been engaged in a devastating civil war. By the grace of God, her family escaped and she went to school in the port city of Syriam. She became a nurse, and then she heard God calling her to seminary so she enrolled in the Burma Institute of Theology established by the Baptists. She became a Sunday School teacher and later was elected as the leader of the WMU of the Karen people. This organization has 30,000 Karen women working as development and relief agents in refugee camps on the Thai border. She shared her personal knowledge of human rights abuses in Burma, how Karen women are raped by members of the military, and how young children as young as 5 years of age leave refugee camps every morning to collect wood all day, to make money for their families. 40,000 Karens are still in the jungle, oppressed, tortured, and denied basic human rights.

As I was listening with a broken heart to the plight of the Karen people, the very next day, some of the wonderful church members of Yates Baptist Church were picking up a young Karen family at the RDU airport and driving them to the apartment you have furnished with your generous spirit. A family that has spent almost their entire lives in a U.N. refugee camp is now safely living in Chapel Hill, and freely worshipping without threat of persecution with other Karen Baptists in the area. God has heard the cries of the Karen people and He is opening the Red Sea of international apathy and red tape, so they might enter the promised land of freedom and opportunity.

My question for you is this: Is this local or global missions? I sure don't know!

Baptists are becoming more local and global. There are global problems, persecution among Christians throughout the world, one of the worst places being Burma, or Myanmar, as it is called today. The global problem of persecution, displacement, and military oppression is being met by local Baptist churches. We no longer think of missions as merely sending our money to a missionary agency so a missionary can be flown overseas to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are changing from a “go, go, go” mentality to a “receive, care, and share” mentality. We don’t have to go to the Karen people to share the gospel, because they are coming to us. 150 years ago Adoniram and Ann Judson travel to Burma, the first Baptist missionaries to any foreign country. We took the Gospel to the Burmese, and through the miracle-working power of the Holy Spirit, the Gospel took root. And now, the Karens are coming to us, and we are now being called to “receive” them as brothers and sisters in Christ. The global call of evangelism has morphed into the local call of partnership.

And that is just one example. Similar stories could be told about the Laotians, the Vietnamese, the Japanese, and dozens of other ethnic groups. Our own mission work to Haiti is a wonderful example of the local-global change among Baptists. We have begun a work among the Haitian people that is greater than the work of one man. There is a building interest and movement among us to meet the global needs of the people of Ranquite, Haiti with the local resources from Yates Baptist Church. Ukraine is on the docket for 2008. In 2009 we hope to send a mission team to India. We are going to carry the Gospel and we are receiving those who have come because of the Gospel. This is a paradigm shift we are riding like a wave. It’s true

for Yates Baptist Church and the larger movement of Baptists in America. The ministry of Baptists, including Yates Baptist Church, is becoming more local and global at the same time.

### **III. More Diverse**

There's one more change among Baptists I want to bring to your attention this morning. This one is so prevalent and pervasive there is almost no need to mention it. Yet, it is so fundamental to how we see ourselves and our place in the world it needs to be clearly spoken. We are becoming a more diverse people. On Wednesday night at the Georgia World Congress center, I sat in a worship service as a minority. There were more people of brown color than my more olive color. There were more women than men. I heard singing and I sang in Spanish. The preacher for the evening was Dr. William Shaw, the president of the National Baptist Convention. There was more clapping and more feedback from the congregation than I'm used to. You know, the black preachers get a lot help from their congregations, that's why they are so much better than us white preachers. Do you hear what I'm saying? If you want a better preacher, you're going to have to help me. Black people call out to the preacher, "Go on. Help'em Jesus." White people look at their watches and say to themselves, "When's he gonna stop?"

The diversity continued throughout the week. On Thursday night I heard Julie Pennington-Russell, the female pastor of the historic First Baptist Church of Decatur. This is not some liberal, out in San Francisco, hippy, fringe church. This one of the most traditional, established Baptist churches in the nation. They didn't call her as their pastor to make a statement. They

called her because they believed she was the right shepherd for their congregation today. It wasn't until Friday morning that I heard a white male preach a sermon. On Friday evening, I heard the electric and exceptionally sophisticated Morehouse College Men's Choir, dressed in navy jackets, red ties, and gray slacks.

The striking point of Dr. Russell's sermon was her clarification of our call to "respect diversity." This is an important feature in civil society, but it's not our call as Christians. We are becoming a more diverse people. Our nation is becoming a more diverse nation. But our call as Christians is not simply to "respect diversity." That's the politically correct thing to do, but it's not the Christian calling. We are not called merely to "respect diversity." We are called to love people of all kinds. We are called to love because God first loved us. Isn't that what the Bible teaches us?

For God so "respected the world."..... No, God loved the world.

Dear friends, let us "respect one another."..... No. Let us love one another.

And now these 3 remain: faith, hope, and respect. And the greatest of these is respect..... No. The greatest of these is love.

My brothers and sisters, respect is a nice thing to do. I want my children to respect their elders, respect their teachers, respect people of other religions, but more than anything I want them to love other people. Love and respect are quite different. You can respect someone from a distance. Love requires engagement. You can respect someone without a relationship. Love calls for personal relations.

Most of you remember Derek Carter, our ministerial intern from a year ago. After Derek visited our church for the first time we had lunch together at Piper's Deli. I talk a lot of theology at Piper's Deli. Derek, whose church in Houston, Texas was very racially diverse, asked me, "***What are you doing to promote racial diversity in your congregation.***" I told him "***Nothing.***" I'm not doing anything to promote racial diversity, because my goal is not to have a church that is racially diverse. My goal is to have a church where everyone loves people like Jesus loved people. I'm going to do two things every week. I'm going to preach the gospel, number one. And I'm going to try to love the people, number two. Loving people means loving everyone who walks through these doors on Sunday morning, while reaching out to our community to love those who may or may not ever come through these doors. If we do that, we will inevitably become more diverse, because our world is becoming more diverse. If we don't do that, we might as well put up a sign in front of our church, "Gone out of business."

Paul wrote to the racially and culturally diverse churches in Galatia, "*For all of you who were baptized in Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Gal 3:27-28).

The Bible has always promoted the idea of welcoming all people into the community of faith because that's what God has done for his people. And if you pay attention to the last judgment scene as recorded in Matthew, you learn something very important about Jesus. In Matthew 25 we have a scene of the last judgment. Jesus is on the throne. The cherubim and seraphim are flying above his throne. The nations are gathered before him.

He is no longer the suffering servant. He is the sovereign Lord. There are no longer nails in his hands or a crown of thorns on his brow. He is robed in glory and clothed in righteousness. And when all the people pass before him and he gives his judgment about whether they should be counted among the sheep or goats, he announces a list of things he has observed. It's something that could be understood by a genius or Joe six-pack, by a Barth of Germany or Bubba from Alabama.

He says "I was hungry and you fed me....

I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink"....

And then Jesus, the Sovereign Lord, the King of Kings, the 2<sup>nd</sup> person of the Trinity, the Son of Almighty God says,

"I was a stranger,..... and you welcomed me."

Jesus, .....a Stranger, was welcomed.

Jesus was the **Karen family** in a refugee camp, and he was respected. No! Welcomed and Loved.

Jesus was the **black man** from across the street, and he was respected. No! Welcomed and Loved.

Jesus was the **newly divorced white mom** with 2 kids and he was respected. No! Welcomed and loved.

Jesus was the family just moved from Louisiana, Nevada, Charlotte, San Diego, Mexico, Burma, Bangkok,....and he was respected because he was

different. No, he was welcomed because God is always welcoming strangers, and we are God's people doing God's work.

All of us will be strangers sometime. But when you come here, you won't be a stranger anymore.

That's what God is doing through Baptists.

That's what God is doing through Yates Baptist Church.

God is making us more humble.

God is mixing the local and global together in our midst.

And God is calling us to respect, .....No!

God is calling us to welcome and love the great diversity of the world that is moving into our region of the world.

God is doing an amazing thing among Baptists, and among Yates Baptist Church. Don't blink, you may miss something, something new and bold,...something only God could do.